

## ART AND PRUDENCE<sup>1</sup>

COMPARING his own book with M. Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, Mr. Adler says of the latter that it is "for me the best analysis of fine art." He continues: "The scope of that is more general than this. I am concerned primarily with one problem and, moreover, with that problem as it occurs in the special case made by the cinema as a fine art. The attempt to apply everything that is relevant in the intellectual tradition to this contemporary problem necessarily requires some interpretation and extension of the basic texts I have relied upon. To this extent, and only to this extent, my work has been constructive." These words of the author fully outline the scope and nature of his work, but not I feel, with the right emphasis.

The book, with its seven hundred pages of texts and notes, may be only "an interpretation and extension of basic texts," but the result is almost of a different order to the sources of his texts. Without wishing in the least to underestimate the importance of his sources, it would be more accurate to see in this a work of a different kind, and something of equal importance.

In keeping alive an intellectual tradition, there are two things to be considered: content of ideas, which of itself is the lifeless part (a mohammedan could be more agile in the theology of the Holy Trinity than a canonized saint), and the power to recognize those ideas in actual facts.

The tradition that began with Aristotle was one primarily of obedience to fact. When it reached a moment of synthesis in the thought of St. Thomas it was through severe reverence for the same principle. To carry on that tradition it is not sufficient to hand on a parcel of ideas, to restate them in the idiom of the day; they must be recognized over again in the new set of facts. Otherwise the tradition is beached high and dry and becomes a matter of the reason only, while in practice events swing from extreme idealism to extreme materialism.

The great value of this book lies in its obedience to fact. Avoiding doctrinaire philosophy, the author has approached

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<sup>1</sup> *Art and Prudence* by Mortimer J. Adler. (Longmans, Green & Co., New York. \$5.00.)

near to the true spirit of Aristotle and given to his work great appeal.

Mr. Adler has two things to help him: his own scientific bent of mind, and the limitations of his particular problem, that of the control of the cinema as part of the life of the State. To do this he "applies everything that is relevant." He draws upon two main sources: what has been said in the past, and the existing conditions to-day. Without appealing in the void to what should be, he is able with detached and penetrating analysis to trace the course of the problem of the censorship of the arts from its source in the conflict between Plato and Aristotle, and to build up from the subsequent history of the problem a positive position, made all the more secure by being built upon skilful suggestion rather than upon theoretic analysis, culminating in the thomism of M. Maritain. Against this background he then examines the present position, and is able to make a very balanced judgment on what has become an issue of major importance for those concerned with the welfare of social life. It is significant that his conclusions, which he rightly claims to be made as part of an intellectual tradition, have an air of deeper thought and greater dignity than many of the pronouncements made on the subject.

To use his own words:

"In proportion to their extraordinary popularity, motion pictures have aroused, during their relatively short career, contemporary Platonists of all sorts, Churchmen who are Platonists as well as Christians, politicians who are Platonists as well as democrats, parents who are almost always Platonists about their own children. The Platonic position about the arts, about drama, about the movies, cannot be answered by aesthete who talk about art for art's sake, or by liberals who worship liberty as if it were the only good or even a good in itself. It is met, in sound controversy, only by Aristotelians. The issue about the movies must be understood, whether or not it is practically solved, in terms of Aquinas against Bossuet, Dewey against Rousseau. We have surveyed the great moments and turns in this dialectic about art and prudence in order now to be able to analyse the contemporary controversy in such a way that we can at least formulate an intelligible practical problem; in order to reduce a huge field of ill-expressed and rhetorically exaggerated opinion to the few simple, clear points which can be made; in order to discover what knowledge we have that justifies action and what knowledge we need to act more intelligently and hence more prudently."

As must be inevitable in a work of this kind, it makes very uneven reading. The average reader will find tedious the long and detailed summaries of evidence. Other parts are just as crisp. It might even be advanced as a criticism of the book that its various sections are really different books bound within the same cover. Certainly the main merits here noted would have been more spectacular in a more generally discursive and shorter book. But it would have been a different book, not serving the author's present purpose at all.

It might be argued too, that he reads a little too much into Aristotle. I should think it fairly certain that Aristotle would not himself have been quite so articulate about the full meaning of his "imitation" and "catharsis" as is here implied. But it would be pedantic to make that point and leave the matter there. The very ingenious interpretation he puts upon those passages of Aristotle are the last word in aesthetic theory. Once understood they are seen to be inevitable. It does not really matter very much how conscious Aristotle was of the full meaning of his words. The main point is that the meaning is in his words, because he was analyzing fact and not speculating on hypotheses. A full account of the human body would more than imply the soul. What is started on the right lines can never be proved by subsequent development to be wrong.

However, we shall find the *Poetics* disappointing, and lamentably jejune as an aesthetic treatise, if we expected to find any of the jargon and tenseness to which we have become accustomed. Nevertheless, it is deeper, more accurate and nearer to reality.

Aristotle begins from fact. He is not primarily concerned with the abstract rightness or wrongness. The basis of his quarrel with Plato was that he objected to a clean sweep and an attempt to say what should be, without reference to what is and to what had been. Art begins from the human desire to imitate, and, analysing that word, and its correlative, purgation, we have the structure of a theory of artistic creation and intuition of the beautiful, though set in what Kant would have deplored as the lower reaches of the subject. Instead of talking in terms of the intuition of being, he speaks of the purging of the passions. No wonder Mr. Adler regrets that we have neglected the *Poetics*. And with what obvious harm to ourselves. A little appreciation of

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the importance of passion-purging might have averted so much. Think of all the public statuary, of all the dull acres of wall-space in public buildings, of the vast amount of "serious" verse, that would never have been made had we remained, in our artistic tradition, purgation-conscious. There would never have been any "high-brow" tradition.

Indeed, Aristotle was quite consciously aware of that point. He clearly wanted to talk about the art that belonged to man, and not to the best men. And he begins by remembering his own words that "all men delight in coarse pleasures." There is only sense in which a Brandenburg Concerto is higher art than Mr. Groucho Marx. The unfortunate thing is that art theories, made on strictly Brandenburg lines usually, imply by silence the non-existence of Mr. Marx. Aristotle, however, began with him; and that, after all, is being aware of the more obtrusive fact.

At root, there is a deep metaphysical principle involved; that both matter and form have rights. Both are principles and exercise control over being. It means having respect for what has been called "the mystery of matter that comes up from below." Not to have it leads to facile generalisations, to the divorce of thought from reality, to complete preoccupation with what should be and growing blindness to what is, with the result that the dialectic of events proceeds untroubled by such thought. It is precisely this misunderstanding that is avoided in this book.

MARK BROCKLEHURST.