

INSTITUTE BOOKLETS: 20

AESTHETICS OF ROMAIN ROLLAND

By

S. K. NANDI, M.A., LL.B., D.PHIL.



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A keen student of philosophy and aesthetics and author of several books in English and Bengali, Dr. S. K. Nandi is at present Senior Research Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla. He was formerly Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Presidency College, Calcutta, and was for some time Professor and Head of the Department of Philosophy, Krishnagar College, Dt. Nadia, before he took up his present assignment at Simla last April. 'Aesthetics of Romain Rolland' was the theme of three lectures he gave at the Institute in September, November and December 1962, and was published in the September 1966 number of the Institute's *Bulletin*. It is here brought out in our Institute Booklets series in commemoration of the birth centenary of Romain Rolland during the year 1966.



AESTHETICS OF ROMAIN ROLLAND

ROMAIN Rolland's preoccupation with the idea of social unity, and its acceptance as the *summum bonum* in the context of human society, largely determined his aesthetic ideas. Following Tolstoy, he identified the beautiful and the good, and unity in society was their principle of verifiability. The good and the beautiful necessarily united man and woman in a larger social context, and what was evil and ugly necessarily created division and discord in the society. Aesthetic value was then pragmatically determined by Rolland; for he was a humanist at the first instance, and then an artist. He was largely influenced by Tolstoy, and his outlook on life and art bears testimony to such influence. Rolland regarded social service to be the first duty of every man and he wanted art to serve such an end. An artist having nothing to do with other people's welfare is no artist worth the

theatres with the aim of tutoring public mind and of initiating them in the higher standards of morality and ethics. Art, to be worth the name, should help the people in their moral regeneration and cultural upliftment. As Plato wanted to banish amusement art from his Ideal Republic to save the people of Greece from moral bankruptcy, so Rolland wanted to make art serve the end of social service, for he wanted to eradicate selfishness from the hearts of the men of his time and thus help them love each other. The creed of universal brotherhood and love of mankind as propounded by Tolstoy was accepted by Rolland, and he assigned to art such aims as the propagation of fellow feelings amongst the people of all classes. This was the result of Tolstoy's influence.

HIS DOUBTS REGARDING MISSION OF ART

If aesthetic response were looked upon as the response of the total being in man, as the reaction of the entire physiological-psychological complex, we need associate and identify the aesthetic response with the total response that a man was capable of while confronted with an aesthetic situation. Aes-

ing in the sphere of intellect has given proof of his vocation. But one who frees himself from the moral obligations to other individuals and under the pretext of his taste for science and art takes to the life of a parasite would produce nothing but false science and false art.'

DIGNITY OF LABOUR VIS-A-VIS ARTISTS

Thus we find that manual labour is not incompatible with the vocation of a true artist which the then continental artists wrongly supposed. Tolstoy wanted to remove the taboo of manual labour from the minds of the fashionable artists and art connoisseurs of his time. He never questions the utility of what he calls 'Real Science' or 'Real Art', and 'it is impossible and useless either to prove or to disprove them'. Why art degrades itself and plays the role of false art is a question of great importance for Tolstoy, and for Rolland as well. Tolstoy writes to Rolland: 'That science and art play a false role in our society is the result of the fact that the so-called civilized people, headed by the scholars and the artists form a caste of their own, privileged like the priests.

This caste has all the defects of other castes, lowering and degrading the very principles under which they organize themselves. So we do not get a true art.' Art thus loses its universal appeal. It becomes an instrument of play and privilege to a particular class and imbibes the spirit of sectarianism. This is the main contention of Tolstoy; and Rolland, in his early youth, was initiated to such teachings of Tolstoy.

YOUNG ROLLAND'S SEARCH FOR AESTHETIC TRUTH

Alex Aronson describes the intellectual atmosphere of Rolland's early days (see *Rolland*, p. 10). The young artist could not find answers to his questions and he in vain searched for them in Shakespeare and Beethoven. 'And neither Shakespeare nor Beethoven could give an answer to the pressing problems of the time. Thus only Tolstoy remained.' The Tolstoy of *Iván Ilych*, with his insistence on the problem of death and human misery, remained, and also the Tolstoy of *What Is to Be Done*, with his pronounced indictment of art and of such master artists as Beethoven and

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in art and such falsity, according to him, characterizes the works of those artists 'who constitute a privileged caste like the priests'. This caste of the artists has all the vices of other castes, which, according to Tolstoy, results from a sectarian outlook on life and society. Such false arts have the vice of lying heavily upon the masses and 'over and above, of depriving them of what they pretend to propagate'. Rolland here, for the first time, found to his satisfaction the definition of an artist 'in terms of human conscience'. In a subsequent letter written to Tolstoy in 1897, Rolland writes that Tolstoy was not against art as such, but he was leading a crusade against the artists of the day who made art a mere profession. There is no more the old antagonism of art and morality in Rolland's mind.

ROLLAND'S CRAZE FOR SOCIAL SERVICE

Rolland is convinced of the mission of art that it should do good and moral service. He writes: 'I dream of nothing more than to do a little good to men and draw them away from the nothingness that kills them.' Rolland took art to be a living force, acting

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and creeds that tend to create divergence in men. 'The People's Theatre shall be open to everyone who is of or for the people. Let us construct in Paris an epic for all Europe.' (While Rolland wants the drama to act in the service of humanity, he at the same time lays down that it must not depict the collision of forces and must prepare only for harmony, smoothness, and absence of conflict of all sorts. He forgets that conflict is the very soul of dramatic representation and to the extent that a drama succeeds in representing the clash and collision of forces leading to a climax, and perhaps also in addition to an anti-climax, to that extent it is the highest form of dramatic art.)

OTHER SIMILAR VIEWS

This type of deontological and didactic theory of art is not peculiar to Rolland alone. To justify the ways of God to men, to sharpen and deepen the appreciation of nature and natural beauty, or to enhance, refine, and spiritualize human life and relations are ends to which poetry and painting have often been harnessed. Shelley writes

ART AND LIFE

'Life', Rolland tells us (*The People's Theatre*, Introduction, p. 5), 'cannot be linked with death and the art of the past is more than three quarters dead.' (And yet a reflective philosopher will say that life is perpetual dying and renewing of itself, and that unchanging eternal life is the blank or emptiness of death.) Art, to be living, should have a constant communion with the life around, and when art ceases to commune with life, it is dead. The art of the past did not satisfy Rolland, and he considered its effects to be detrimental to the society at large. The first requisite to a normal healthy existence is that art shall continually evolve together with life itself. That is why he detested all sorts of fetishism in art. He could not understand why classical mummies should be preserved in the art gallery to influence the younger generation of artists. Why should there be so many precedents to follow? He writes (*ibid.*, Introduction, p. 6): 'I do not know whether the society of today will create its own art, but I am sure that if it fails to do so, we shall have no living art, only a

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another, to appear monstrous anachronisms. Rolland here ignores the universality, the eternal immutable element in all true art. Even if art has value as representing or otherwise suggesting the ideals relevant to a particular age or place, yet such art has value as befitting expressions of the inner spirit and motif of the particular age or place which becomes thereby a value to be enjoyed for its own sake *in all times and places.*

ANACHRONISM IN ART: THE VARYING TASTES

Rolland here follows Tolstoy. One of the dangers of art, Tolstoy points out, arises from the fact that the forces of another day, when brought into an epoch where they do not belong, occasion serious disorders. It is not only in the domain of ethics that a 'meridian decides the truth' and 'a river fixes the boundary'; it is the same in art. (This is also a gross misrepresentation of the unconditional moral imperative of ethics. It is no doubt true that no code of conduct is obligatory in vacuo and that every duty has application

an average, more or less applicable to the people of our own time.

PEOPLE'S THEATRE: ARTIST'S PREDICAMENT

Rolland, a convert to the ideals of Tolstoy, wanted to formulate rules for a People's theatre. People's theatre, according to him, should represent the fundamental problems of life in a simple and intelligible manner. His craze for doing good to the masses and for making art an agent for the upliftment of the people at large led him to lower down the artistic level to the intellectual standards of an uncultured populace. He turned towards the past and rejected almost everything as unsuitable for satisfying the needs of his generation. He even rejected his own idols, those whom once he regarded as truly great artists. Shakespeare and Wagner were rejected outright. Rolland writes (*The People's Theatre*, p. 40): 'What profit can the people derive from the abnormal sentimental complications of Wagner, the excessive eroticism, the metaphysics of Valhalla, Tristan's death-scented love, the mystico-carnal torments of the Knight of the holy

is why) we have progressed so much in the realm of art. But this does not imply the total rejection of the classics. There is a universal element in all true art which even today makes acceptable to us the works of Shakespeare and Goethe, Milton and Kālidāsa, Picasso and Rembrandt, and others of the kind.

ROLLAND'S IDEA OF DYNAMISM IN ART

Rolland, like Bergson, was a worshipper of *élan vital*, i.e. life-force. He seemed to feel its pulsation everywhere, in art, morality, and religion. Nothing shall be dead and everything will breathe life and vigour. This was the fond expectation of Rolland. He wanted dynamism in art and that is why he was even prepared to let go all the accumulated classics of the world literature and art. This dynamism, the movement to newer avenues of creation were for him a perennial source of joy, and this joy born of spiritual activity was, in his view, the essence of artistic creation. As Goethe says: 'If the poet is ill, let him first of all cure himself; when he is cured, let him write.' (Here I may point out that vigour and

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tender to enjoy significant roughness, lest in the end your enfeebled feeling should be able to endure nothing but unmeaning smoothness. They try to make you believe that the fine arts arise from our supposed inclination to beautify the world around us. That is not true. Art is formative long before it is beautiful and yet it is then true and great art, very often true and greater than beautiful art itself. For man has in him a formative nature, which displays itself in activity as soon as his existence is secure.'

The wholeness of life includes its rough visibility; and art, reflecting this wholeness, necessarily reflects this seamy side of life as well. Health means the propulsion which takes us through, and this 'health' is abundantly reflected in our art-activity.

UNIVERSALITY IN ART: ARTIST'S PERSONALITY

The foregoing discussion may lead one to think that Rolland did not admit of universality in the field of art. It appears as though Rolland thought of art as essentially acceptable to a particular class of people and of a particular time. If art,

time the other, is the denizen of the world of aesthesis. We should not try to give our best in the work of art; rather we should try to give in the best way possible.

ARTIST'S WILL TO CREATE: THE CONFLICT

Rolland, in his first book on Beethoven, published in 1903, describes the act of artistic creation as a continuous struggle between contradictory forces. This conception of creation was indeed in opposition to everything the French have thought or said in the past about the creative process. This emphasis on the dualism in the creator's soul, his passionate striving for self-expression, and the necessity he finds himself in 'to subdue the form to his will' leaves no place for the conception of a 'divine inspiration'. Rolland thus made a restatement of values. In thus revolting against the accepted French traditions, Rolland was largely influenced by Nietzsche. His books on Beethoven remind us again and again of Nietzsche's conception of a superman, of him who perishes because he wanted more from life than the mediocrity of self-satisfaction. Just as Nietzsche conceived

an experience. 'For only when the medium of art has been subdued to the will of the creator, has the raw material of life been transformed into a work of art.' Only when reason gains the upper hand, has life been fulfilled. It is in such a way that the créator marches from fulfilment to fulfilment and, more often than not, this fulfilment means death; and after every death the artist is reborn again, stronger than ever and ready for a new sacrifice. 'He is the masculine sculptor who dominates his matter and bends it to his hand, the master-builder with Nature for his yard. For anyone who can survey these campaigns of the soul from which stand out the victories of the "*Eroica*" and "*Appassionata*", the most striking thing is not the vastness of the armies, the floods of tone, the masses flying into the assault, but the spirit in command, the imperial reason' (Romain Rolland: *Beethoven the Creator*, pp. 27-28).

THE ARTIST AND HIS AUDIENCE

Rolland further explains this creative process in his book on Beethoven. He calls the common multitude the 'herd'. Com-

we share the feelings of these master artists, though they expressed only their 'age', according to Rolland. So I do not accept Rolland's explanation of the universality in art.

CREATIVE ACTIVITY: A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

Art critics often fail to notice the Psychology of creation, while judging a work of art. They lean on sensitiveness, and as such they do not see beyond the 'line'. The creator's mind remains sealed to them for ever. But Rolland always wanted to read 'between the lines', whether they were musical lines or the lines of colour or the printed word. He could very well see the difference between the statue of Michelangelo and a symphony of Beethoven. The difference was not only the medium employed; it was also an obvious difference in their approach to life and, not least of all, a difference of temperament. 'But while in the grandiose intellectualism of Michelangelo, the master workman, the line is dry, cold, and abstract, Beethoven's line is always full and moist with sap, like

tion of mind leads to a total blackout of all physical movements, and when such concentrations are long and endless, nature takes her revenge. A complete paralysis of some physical organ is the result. Such a thing, in the opinion of Rolland, happened to Beethoven. Rolland's diagnosis of Beethoven's deafness was supported by Dr. Morage. He wrote to him: 'Your comparison with Indian yoga appears to me to be very exact.'

ART AS PURPOSEFUL ACTION RECONSIDERED

Rolland agreed with Tolstoy that art must call men to purposeful action. His love of humanity prompted him to make art subservient to the ends of social service. He lamented the absence of this love in the contemporary artists. He writes (*John Christopher*, Vol. IV, p. 56): 'The artists of that time were far removed from that love. They wrote only for a more or less anarchical and vain group, uprooted from the life of the country, who pruned themselves on not sharing the prejudices and passions of the rest of humanity or else made a mock of them.' This sincere feeling for others is a

characterize this moral element to be the prius of its artistic excellence. There may be something bracing or morally energizing in a work of art, and it can help the reader to find out the way that he is looking for. But moral influence has nothing to do with the excellence of any artistic work. Both of them may be there without being dependent on each other in any way. They are something confused. 'Thus in art, we find that the opposites of aspiration and achievement, of beauty and utility, stand out in their bold antagonism when viewed in the abstract. Art is like the sun whence it is sprung. The sun is neither moral nor immoral. It is amoral. It is that which is. It lightens the darkness of space. And so does Art' (*John Christopher*, Vol. IV, p. 365).

ARTIST'S FREEDOM: HIS IDEA OF TRUTH

This conception of art, free from all extraneous considerations, was latent in Rolland, and he considered freedom to be an important factor. He detested all sorts of affected style, and working in a closed room was a sin in his opinion. He could never reconcile himself to the idea that artists

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language of any form of art. It supplies the 'occasion' and, as such, is a condition precedent of any artistic creation, according to Rolland.

APOLLONIAN AND DIONYSIAN ELEMENTS IN ART

The next important question with regard to Rolland's conception of art is whether there is any intellectual element in art. Authorities on art are not at one as to whether art should contain an intellectual element as a necessary factor of its essence. Sri Aurobindo is of opinion that art at its highest is possible only at the supra-rational plane of experience, whereas Kant held that there is an element of intellectualism in all true art. Rolland holds that want of intellectual training does not in any way hamper proper artistic appreciation. But he does not subscribe to any of the extreme views, and accommodates both feeling and intellectual elements as equally important in his theory of art. He tells us that an unsophisticated mind may conduce to a better appreciation of art, while knowledge dispels the mystery woven round the mind of the audience. At

circle. The harmony of the intellectual and emotional appeal, so much stressed upon by Rolland, is no more there. It is becoming one-sided. It is losing its 'warmth, life, and air', which emotion alone can give.

ROLLAND ON MICHELANGELO

In this context, it will be helpful if we could cite some cases of art-appreciation by Rolland himself. Let us refer to Michelangelo. That Rolland could very well think of purely aesthetic standards with his intellectual and emotional inhibitions is evident when he evaluates Michelangelo's 'Last Judgment'. To quote his words at length (*Michelangelo*, pp. 44-48):

'It is dangerous to attempt to describe the "Last Judgment"; it is indeed impossible. Analyses and commentaries have been multiplied, but they kill the spirit by taking it in detail. We must face the vision squarely and lose ourselves in the abyss of that spirit. It is terrifying and, if regarded calmly, incomprehensible—it must be hated or adored. It stifles and excites; there is no nature, no landscape, no atmosphere, no tenderness, almost nothing human; the symbolism of a

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