

which may require an even more venturesome and spiritual man to reach: the heights of that vision of pure light, which Dante reaches, or of those muted, lovely scenes of rebirth which Shakespeare dramatizes in the final plays, or of that similar scene in which after "some natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon," Adam and Eve wind their way toward a new life, or of those ethereal notes of the "Pastoral Symphony" by which Handel defines in *The Messiah* the peace of the morning of birth — or of that even more ethereal moment in which Christ pronounces the single name "Mary" to her who has thought Him the gardener, a single word at once annunciation and benediction, at once defining both himself and her, at once defining both an old and a new and utterly ineffable relation between them and between Him and all mankind.

In such moments as these the market place is left absolutely behind. In such moments the spirit feeds in both height and depth. Such moments proclaim the enrichment of the life of the spirit as a supreme value. In such moments the eye of the spirit proclaims the identity of art and religion as ministers to the life of the spirit.

THE DICHOTOMY OF ART AND RELIGION

R. A. Christmas

It is easy to sympathize with Dr. Marden Clark's essay, "Art, Religion, and the Market Place" — too easy. We are all, I suppose, concerned about the relationship of religion and art, and on the surface Clark does have some valuable things to say about how that relationship can be improved, and the reasons why it should be — for example, his statement that "each [art and religion] can know more of itself, its own deepest nature, through the other." In making his points, however, I think Dr. Clark tends to misrepresent the history, and in a way, the nature of art; and all too often he lapses into glittering generalities and semantic handstands which may produce an approving nod of the head, but do not add up to a consistent or realistic philosophy of art.

In his first paragraph, Dr. Clark tells us that the "fundamental distrust" between art and religion is "hard . . . to understand," and he suspects that this distrust is based primarily on "jealousy." Hard to understand it may be, but it happens to be an historical fact with more basis than mere jealousy. Sir Philip Sidney probably sums up the reasons — past and present — as well as anyone in his *Defense of Poesy* (1595):

Now then go we to the most important imputations laid to the poor poets; for aught I can yet learn, they are these:

First, that there being many other more fruitful knowledges, a man might better spend his time in them than in this.

Secondly, that it is the mother of lies.

Thirdly, that it is the nurse of abuse, infecting us with many pestilent desires . . .

And lastly and chiefly, they cry out with open mouth, as if they had overshot Robin Hood, that Plato banished them out of his commonwealth. Truly this is much, if there be much truth in it.

Sidney is talking about literature, but the "imputations" have all been applied to the other arts as well. In fairness, it should be said that these views are not the sole property of religion, nor were they held by all the religious men of Sidney's time; but they do represent the general attitude of religion toward art down to our own day; and they are still very popular opinions. Great artists, as we shall see, have not taken them lightly; and to sum them up as mere "jealousy" is an evasion. There may not be "much truth" in them, but there is some — enough to make Dr. Clark's appeal for a "merger," "re-merger," or "fraternity" of religion and art seem like semantic wish-fulfillment. Sidney, by the way, makes no such proposal in his *Defense of Poesy*.

None of this should come as any particular surprise, especially if we recall our own experiences with the arts. Clark himself states that "art has generally proclaimed as its province the whole of experience." Isn't this enough to create a constant division between art and religion, the assumption that art has the right to explore every aspect of human experience (even the innermost life of religion itself — and its leaders), and even to speculate, on its own, about divine experience? How, for example, is the novelist to live with St. Paul's injunction to the Ephesians that "it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret" (v. 12)? What is the satirist to do, face to face with the scripture, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1)? Anyone who is or has been deeply involved in religious experience, particularly the organized variety, should see the problem: there are some things that one doesn't talk about or criticize, there are experiences that one avoids — many times, of course, for the better. Art, considered generally, has not so limited itself. Artists have reserved — and have had to fight for — the right to entertain without an eye constantly cocked on the salvation of the audience. In another direction, the symbols employed by the arts cannot be off-handedly compared with the symbolism of religion. Sidney writes, "But the poet, as I said before, never affirmeth; the poet never maketh any circles about your imagi-

nation to conjure you to believe for true what he writeth." Isn't this enough to indicate that the methods of art and religion are irreconcilable? The rhetoric of religion, it seems to me, is faith, and its aim is truth; the rhetoric of the artist is doubt, and his aim only probability — as Sidney puts it, "not laboring to tell you what is or is not, but what should or should not be." Henry James has written one of the most accurate, and most just, definitions of the work of the artist, through his character Dencombe, in "The Middle Years": "We work in the dark — we do what we can — we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task." This is not to say that art is somehow greater or braver than religion, but only to point out that art and religion are different, that they are likely to remain that way, and that their mutual mistrust and criticism — so "deplored" by Dr. Clark — may actually function for good.

ART AT THE RISK OF SALVATION

There is a serious distortion of art history in Clark's discussion of "the divorce between religion and art," which apparently began with the "romantic identification of nature or the inner self with God" and must end with a "re-merger" if we are to have art that enriches "the life of the spirit." This, again, has a superficial appeal. It is fashionable these days to blame the romantics for our esthetic quandaries. It is fashionable to praise the theocentric Middle Ages and the "unified sensibility" of the Renaissance. "Not in Dante, not in Milton, not even in Swift or Doctor Johnson," says Dr. Clark, do we find religion and art looking at each other with "a suspicious eye" — a popular but quite misleading opinion. True, Milton is never critical of religion *per se* — if this is what Dr. Clark means by "suspicious" — but it does not follow that religion and art were "merged" in Milton's time. Milton himself (and Sidney) knew just the opposite. *Paradise Lost*, for example, is not a reflection of unity; it is rather a huge — and only partly successful — attempt to overcome the dichotomy. Milton's epic form, latinized verse, much of his imagery, and his dramatic techniques are basically secular (the older word is pagan), and they constantly distract readers from his literal aim: to "justify the ways of God to men." To cite only one example, the Romantics considered Satan the real hero — a theory pooh-poohed in this century of faith, but one with a lot of textual and aesthetic support, as A. J. A. Waldock points out in his book, *Paradise Lost and Its Critics*. Dr. Clark is emphasizing one quality at the expense of too many others. He wishes to promote religious art, and Milton is a good general example, probably the best we have. But

even *Paradise Lost* is no proof that the methods of art and religion are compatible. It aspires to the status of scripture, but falls short to the extent that art differs from religion. It justifies nothing; it is simply great art.

What Clark is really ignoring here is that these artists — and one could find parallel figures in the other arts — stand at the beginning and end, more or less, of a movement within Christianity that fought against considerable odds for the right to deal with secular subjects and art forms, a movement commonly known as “Christian humanism.” I have already mentioned the opinions that these humanists fought — and are still fighting — against.

Clark’s implied “marriage” of religion and art was by no means a settled assumption of Western society up to the romantic period. There was a lot of religious art, to be sure; but art as we now understand it was resisted by religion in various ways all through these centuries. We need only turn to Boccaccio’s *Genealogy of the Gods* or the *Gesta Romanorum* to see how careful artists had to be to justify the reading of something other than scripture and sermon. Boccaccio, for example, must defend the pagan myths partly on the grounds that they may allegorically shadow forth Christian truths and that the “gods” may be perhaps angels misunderstood by the pagans for lack of revelation. The conscience of the medieval or renaissance artist was by no means as quiet as Dr. Clark’s thinking would imply. Chaucer, now revered as a great Christian artist by many, renounced all but his explicitly didactic works in his “re-tracciouns.” He repented his *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Book of the Duchess*, and *The Parliament of Fowls*, works in which many readers today find what appear to be profound religious truths. We cannot afford to pass lightly over this paradox. If we wish to understand the relationship between the artist and his religion, we must recognize that in a sense Chaucer risked his salvation in order to create his marvelous art. We must recognize also that from our standpoint, and his, it was well worth the risk. Another point here is that artists like Milton, Swift, and Dr. Johnson, for all of their so-called religious subject matter and assumptions, would simply not have been possible if the work of justifying the arts had not gone on before. Many of the laborers, like Chaucer and Boccaccio, faltered, or had second thoughts we might say, because they recognize that art is not wholly compatible with the religious life. It is not compatible because it embraces the *Miller’s Tale* as well as *Pilgrim’s Progress*; art is both frivolous and devout, prophetic and irreverent — satirical, kind, bawdy — we could string adjectives along forever because all language, all sights and sounds are the province of art.

Sidney's sonnet "Leave me, O love which reachest but to dust . . . Eternal Love, maintain thy life in me" is certainly a "religious" work of art; but we need his *Astrophil and Stella* if we are to understand just what this "love which reachest but to dust" amounts to. Finally, it is doubtful that the artists Clark mentions, had they submitted plans for their work to a representative body of religion in their own times, would have received any encouragement. Eventually, as now, religion tended simply to leave the artist alone.

I hope I have said enough by now to indicate that the art of the pre-romantic period is not the result of a marriage or "merger" of religion and art as we now understand it but rather of just the opposite, a growing cleavage between them. At one point Clark states, rather offhandedly, that it is "hardly mere accident that the western world's two great ages of drama grew, independently, out of religious ritual." Indeed they did, but in the case of English drama, the only kind I feel qualified to discuss, the art left the Church and assumed autonomy. One of the reasons for this, obviously, is that the Church could never have permitted the broad and deep probings of character and situation of, say, Elizabethan or Jacobean drama. *Antony and Cleopatra* could hardly be performed in a sanctuary, although there are churches today that would stage it in their holy of holies just to prove some non-existent point about art and religion. Certainly nothing is impossible in churches which permit frugging in the aisles. But the play has almost certainly never been performed in the "cultural hall" of an L. D. S. Ward.

SEMANTIC LEGERDEMAIN

I am also troubled by the extreme generality and ambiguity of many of the key statements Clark makes. The semantic problem alone is formidable, and I will be able to indicate only a few examples. This relates to what I said at the beginning about phrases that produce an easy nod of assent, perhaps a nostalgic sigh, but little more. A phrase like "the enrichment of the life of the spirit" sounds very fine, but what, we may finally ask, does it mean? "No enrichment, no art," Dr. Clark tells us, and at another point he says that we must "broaden . . . the concept of the spirit to include truth and beauty, which the voice of Keats's urn assures us are already one." Now perhaps I am in the minority, but I am not so accustomed to taking my aesthetic "assurance" from Keats's urn — "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, — that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'" — one of the most cryptic and disputed passages in all of literature and aesthetics. Clark's use of the passage as an *ad verecundiam* is

astonishing; from a rhetorical standpoint it is lazy, and in a sense misleading. "Spirit" has been broadened and confused out of all meaning, and "enrichment" from the very first sounds more like something in cake flour than an accurate indication of what happens to us in the world of art. Will it stand for works of art which may humiliate or drive us to despair? I state this tritely and rather hyperbolically only because we often use a term like "enrichment" as a defense against works of art that disturb, that threaten our values and behavior patterns, works of art that may tempt us — perhaps not explicitly but through our personal reactions to them — to explore or accept the forbidden. Dr. Clark, I am sure, would agree that art which results in or contributes to a nervous breakdown might ultimately turn out to be an "enrichment"; but it is unlikely that his readers will sense this possibility through the sugary rhetoric.

A similar sort of semantic legerdemain is used on what Clark calls "the market place" — the black beast of the essay. He does limit "market place" "to exclude the legitimate function of supplying and distributing human needs," but in the same breath he extends "the meaning to include materialism in all of its various manifestations." By now the article, in terms of its generality, is in orbit — all that is lacking is a few swipes at Karl Marx, Hollywood, Madison Avenue, TV, and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, which we get. In a surprising passage Clark attempts to document the "running battle art has fought through history" with the market place; and although he does qualify this long summary of works that attack materialism in one way or another, by saying that "most of my examples involve more than that battle," one wonders what all of this is supposed to add up to. Art has fought battles with just about everything over the years, because of the very nature of art. Just because both Jesus and Ezra Pound attack moneychangers, it does not follow that religion and art should be a "fraternity," or that the *Cantos* are modern scripture. We could as easily draw up another list "proving" that artists and materialists should pool their talents simply because both attack religion. It is as if Pound's hatred of the "market place" somehow made him a significant artist, whereas actually it is his gift for language.

Clark's emphasis on the evils of the market place is thus a kind of evasion, whether intended or not, of the real reasons why we do not have more "religious" art today. Mere materialism, I would wager, does not have much to do with it. I am sure that there are historians or economists reading this page who could show that there is no absolute correlation between periods of great art and periods, if such exist, where — somehow — men were not obsessed