THE ART OF BERNICE AND AGATHA: BY
WALTER A. DYER

Once upon a time there were two sisters named Bernice and Agatha. They were both excellent persons with the desire in their hearts to reach up to better things and to be of some service to their fellow creatures. They were unmarried and lived together in a little white house on High Street. Their modest wants being supplied by the income from a small inheritance, they were relieved from the necessity of spending their lives in the quest for daily bread, and they had outgrown sordid aims and youthful follies. They were very excellent ladies, with clear consciences, a healthy appetite for those things which bring satisfaction to the soul, and a refined appreciation of beauty.

Now Bernice and Agatha were much alike in the fundamentals of life, but they sought soul food in different directions, just as the humming-bird and the robin differ in their methods.

Bernice had developed ideals of culture that led her into a Literary Circle. After many hours spent in the town library she read a beautiful paper on Robert and Elizabeth Browning before the Circle.

Agatha, on the other hand, admitted that she didn’t enjoy Browning; she preferred to stay at home and read the novels of George Eliot, in which she found interesting things about real folks.

Bernice took up arts and crafts with enthusiasm (she pronounced crafts with a very broad a) and did stencil work and hammered brass in Art Nouveau designs.

Agatha made the most perfect buttonholes in the county.

Bernice’s room was decorated in a close harmony of grays and greens, and she permitted only goldenrod and white roses in her Wedgwood vase.

Agatha’s room was decorated in chintz effects—chintz looked so old-fashioned. And she kept in her vases asters and sweet peas, and anything she liked.

By and by the tastes of the two sisters grew very far apart. Bernice became so artistic that Agatha’s homely ideals seemed very uncultured to her.

“Agatha, dear,” she would say, “I wish you would put that atrocious old painting of the lighthouse up in the garret. I will give you a mezzotint reproduction of Corot to take its place.”

“Put it away!” cried Agatha. “Why, it was Father’s!”

“I know,” expostulated Bernice, “but it is horribly out of drawing. The perspective and composition are faulty, and the colors are far too intense.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” retorted Agatha. “I only
know that I like it. And if I like a thing, it's good enough art for me."

Bernice sighed and assumed the attitude of a Pre-Raphaelite maiden gazing out of the window.

Agatha scowled, and started a hem.

Matters went from bad to worse. Bernice gorged herself with art. She went to Boston and enjoyed a week's dissipation at the opera and among the art galleries. She met some tremendously clever (not to say queer) people. Agatha stayed at home and won a burnt-wood Indian's head at a whist party, and hung it on the parlor wall.

When visitors came, Bernice started aesthetic conversations on genius, art and modern German drama; Agatha, out of pure stubbornness, changed the subject to strawberry preserves and spring housecleaning. Bernice became so extremely artistic that she actually grew thin; Agatha remained domestic and stout. Bernice felt that her sister lacked all refinement of taste; Agatha considered Bernice silly, affected and wanting in common sense.

Finally Uncle John came to visit them. Now Uncle John was so wise and good that both sisters looked up to him, and each anticipated a sort of justification of her mental attitude. Uncle John saw at once that something was wrong, and it didn't take him long to find out what it was.

One evening before he left, he undertook a little fatherly advice. "You girls must get over this nonsense," said he. "You are both to blame. Agatha, you are troubled with fatty degeneration of the soul. You ought to wake up and get acquainted with more of the refinements of life. Beauty is a physical property and not altogether a matter of taste. It is governed by laws, and the better you understand those laws, the more you will appreciate beauty. And the sooner you come to the full appreciation of beauty, the better it will be for your soul. Bernice, you are suffering from a bad case of fiddleticks. You have acquired a superficial smattering of art talk. You have learned the patter of the cult. You have been hovering around some lofty truths and never getting at the honey. You have fallen into the common error of supposing that queer, one-sided people are children of genius, and therefore more to be desired than the great mass of mankind. You consider human nature bourgeois. Agatha thinks that art is foolishness; you think that it is everything, and neither of you knows what art is."

Then he delivered a brief lecture on art, at the close of which the sisters arose coldly, said "Good night," and went to their rooms. After Uncle John had departed, neither of the sisters alluded to
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what he had said. Bernice went obstinately on her way and steeped herself in artificiality; but Agatha took Uncle John’s words to heart and pondered them. She began to study into the meaning of it all, and struggled to get her eyes open. She went and stood before the Indian’s head and looked at it a long time, until she discovered that it did not belong with the simple Colonial furniture of the room. So she took it down and quietly put it away.

One day she discovered that the various hues of the phlox in her garden did not harmonize, and although her mother had planted them, she uprooted the offending plants and transferred them to the other side of the garden, beyond the larkspurs.

At last she devoted three days to a study of the painting of the lighthouse, and with tears in her eyes finally removed it.

Agatha came to learn that some things and some combinations of things are more beautiful than others, and she worked painstakingly to understand. Bernice had a good copy of a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Agatha studied it long and conscientiously until she discovered wherein it was better than the painting of the lighthouse. She read a little about art in the secret of her room, until at last she came to feel that she knew a few of the fundamental principles. She took no critic’s dictum as gospel, but allowed her judgment to be guided by those who knew better than she. She never got to the point of talking learnedly like Bernice, but she got her eyes open at last, and found herself examining all things with a view to discovering what beauty lay in them. She gained pleasure in beautifying her home and her garden, and her soul, she discovered, was nourished by a contemplation of things which her new judgment told her were beautiful.

When Uncle John came again, he found Bernice just the same, only a little sour at the majority of people, with whom she had lost patience. But in Agatha’s eyes he read a new happiness, as she showed him her house and her garden and her humble personal treasures, and talked with him simply of her quest for the beautiful.

“Blessed be thou, Agatha,” quoth he, “for thou hast accomplished something and thy soul hath grown.” Of Bernice, who had been talking ecstatically with him of Rodin and Sudermann, he said nothing.

IN MATTERS touching upon art, I find a large proportion of mankind—and especially womankind—divided pretty generally into two classes—those who gush and those who scoff. I am not speaking of those who have a sane and healthy knowledge of art, but of that vast majority who have but a little time to devote to its study.
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I believe that both classes are wrong in their attitude, because they both treat art as an intangible product of genius quite apart from life. They both treat knowledge as they treat clothes. One person dresses à la mode and feels therefore like a gentleman or a lady; the other dresses "for comfort," and scorns flattery.

The gushing class is amusing and irritating. Lacking a sense of humor themselves, they do not realize that their lofty vaporings seem ridiculous to the bulk of their fellows. Or, if they have a slight sense of this, they avoid it by herding with one another. Hence these groups of "clever" people who foregather to congratulate themselves that they are not as other men are.

The scoffing class needs scolding, like all who sit in the seat of the scornful. Their crass ignorance is often but thinly veiled beneath a sneer. An honest philistine I can sympathize with, but not the materialist who pities my poor enthusiasms.

These two classes are at opposite poles; they seldom get together on common ground, and that's a bad thing for men and women, for higher civilization will come only with tolerance, better understanding of each other and the destruction of unreasoning prejudice.

Therefore it has seemed to me worth while to look dispassionately at this question, and laying aside preconceived notions, to ask, What is art? and, What good is it, anyway? The effort is worth while, because, if art is good for anything, it should be a means of enriching life, and now that we have signed the emancipation proclamation of our souls, that is what we are looking for.

To go back to first principles, just a word as to the function of beauty in human life.

This is a beautiful world. Beauty is an attribute of nearly every natural object—of sky, of hills, of trees, of birds, of flowers. If we have eyes, we perceive beauty on every hand. Our first impulse upon seeing a sunset, a mountain lake or a rose is to exclaim, "Isn't it beautiful?" Their reasons for being, their utilitarian functions have no place in our first thoughts. Beauty is the great fact that we grasp. Beauty is one of the greatest facts in the universe.

There are those cold scientists who would prove that all beauty is utilitarian. The lily is beautiful to attract the pollen-scattering butterfly; the oriole is beautiful to attract his mate at breeding time. But I am inclined to think that the scientist would be sore put to it to explain all beauty on these grounds. Beauty, I believe, has small practical value in the world, from a material point of view. God gave us beauty for the delectation of our souls, and that's reason enough.

Beauty, therefore, is one of the most nourishing of soul foods, and
that soul is richest and gets the most out of life which contemplates beauty the most. Soul life is the ethical life. Would you learn life's most fundamental ethical truths? Consider the lilies of the fields.

Beauty is as necessary to the growth of the soul as water is to the body. Every time the mind dwells upon an unclean or ugly thing, the soul is injured; every time it rejoices in a beautiful thing, the soul is fed.

Now art, I take it, is man-created beauty. It can never surpass nature, but it can interpret nature to the soul, and it adds to the sum total of beauty in the world. Man must ever be making things. When he makes ugly things, he makes things that can injure the soul; when he makes beautiful things, he makes things that can enrich life, and that is art.

Art is the visible, tangible or audible evidence of man's relation to beauty. It is an uplifting mood crystallized.

Not everything that we call art is worthy of the name. If it does not touch life, if it fails to satisfy the soul's appetite for beauty, it does not fulfill its mission. I care not how excellent the technique or how startling the idea, I care not what the critics may say, if it fails in these functions it is not art.

Therefore, it behooves us all to consider the fundamental truths of art, and not accept other people's opinions. That is the one great error of the superficial dilettante. He is a parrot. He does not trust his own judgment. He learns the names of painters, and sculptors, and poets, and composers. He talks learnedly of schools, and technique, and color, and composition. He looks down upon the man less learned than he. And all the time he misses the great truth. He goes to the opera, and if the opera has been pronounced great, he accepts it as such and deceives himself into thinking that he enjoys it. He raves over a monotone reproduction of some old master, and would scorn the criticism of a layman who found fault with the drawing, when the truth is that the original graced the wall of a cathedral, sixty feet in the air, and was loved because it was a masterpiece of color. Dilettantism is generally a self-deception and a curse.

And that really explains the raison d'être of the scoffer. Honest man, he hates the insincerity of all this superficial patter. But there he stops. Because the gusher has learned it all wrong, the scoffer considers it not worth learning at all.

If anything, I believe the ignoramus is worse than the dilettante. Let him consider a moment. How would he like to live in an artless world? Suppose there were no pictures. Suppose architecture were all based on the utilitarianism of the boiler shop or the chicken-coop. Suppose there were no music. Surely art has its place. He must
admit that some artistic creations give him pleasure. Then why not follow that lead and get more pleasure? There are more beautiful things to be brought to his soul’s attention than he has ever dreamt of in his philosophy.

That is the true, sane reason for studying art. Such a study certainly does open new vistas to the soul. The study of art on that basis is worth while. The study of art simply to make one seem accomplished or learned is despicable, like all other social pretenses. The sham art lover is not helping his soul a bit, and the worst of it is he very likely doesn’t realize that he is shamming.

It comes down to this, that neither the gusher nor the scoffer knows enough about the true meaning of art. Complete enjoyment of works of art, and the fullest benefit to be derived therefrom, depend upon understanding and genuine appreciation, and these come from study based upon a fundamental conception of the real meaning of art and beauty.

Now, by the study of art I do not mean courses in an art school, or wide reading on art subjects. I do not mean familiarity with names or the ability to classify types. If I did, there would be but small hope for the busy worker to whom circumstances have denied the time to indulge in these things.

There are beautiful things and ugly things on every hand. The processes of reproduction have been so perfected that the poorest of us need not be without pictures. But this same ease of reproduction has poured in upon us an ocean of pictures that are as far from art as the east is from the west. We must study into the truth of this matter and train the sense of observation and discrimination.

In this commercial age men have builded ugly temples to Mammon, which smite the eye in every city, but here and there has arisen a man like Stanford White, whose perfect sense of proportion and ability to visualize results have given us buildings whose beauty is a joy forever. We need not go to the Old World to see beauty in architecture.

Good music, too, is not denied us, and we have always at hand the soul-satisfying charm of good books—true poetry and smooth-running prose—if we will but lay down the latest novel and dip into them.

And then there are the homes we live in—houses and gardens. Here we may create beauty with our own hands. Here we may learn the value of simplicity and restraint, as the Greeks learned it long ago.

Yes, there is art enough and to spare for the poorest of us, but we shut our eyes to it and scorn it, either because we fancy that it is not
worthy of our exalted intellects, or because we consider the whole thing fol-de-rol. There is a means ready at hand whereby hungry and oppressed souls may find release and enrichment by opening the mind to the real meaning of beauty in art.

We are just workers, you and I, in the factory of the world. We have but little time to take a finishing-course in art; we have more important matters to attend to. We are busy making money, or acquiring some other temporal benefit. But what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul, or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

So let us think of the needs of our souls now and then. Let us not starve them. Let us feast our eyes, when we can, upon beauty in nature and art. When next we pass down the city street, let us raise our eyes from the shop windows and see if there be not some beauty somewhere.

Let those gush who will; let them scoff who will. We can afford to smile indulgently at those long-haired, be-sandaled ones who prate ravishingly of Ibsen and Whistler, and whose souls are as vigorous as a chocolate cream. We can afford to pity those who pass along the narrow rut and glean their spiritual nourishment from the Sunday paper. But you and I are truth seekers, and if there be any virtue in art, if there be in it any power to raise our spiritual selves to a higher plane of development, we mean to seek and find it.

WEEDS

TILL some one laughed at me and said
"They’re only weeds—they never live
Inside a well-kept garden bed,"
I thought that they were flowers.
I loved my roadside friends before,
But since I know they grow
Where no one cares, I love them more.
They are so brave to go
Where they may choose—just anywhere
That looks a pleasant place to be.
There’s nothing they’re afraid to dare.
And now it’s plain to me
That weeds are flowers who ran away
Because they like to be quite free
And never grow as people say—
They know the world was made to see.

AILEEN CLEVELAND HIGGINS

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