

Towards the Golden Age

by A. R. D. FAIRBURN

I HAVE been pondering very deeply on the problem of doing away with subject-matter—in the arts and sciences, and even in politics. I am sure it would be all for the best. We should be ever so much happier if life could be made completely meaningless, instead of just mainly meaningless as it is at present. If that sounds rather callow, let me put it in another way. It is not so much a question of getting rid of meaning, as of finding a new meaning, one that is purely aesthetic.

Some progress has already been made along this path. For well over a century the influence of aestheticism has been steadily gaining momentum. De Musset raised the banner aloft when he said, "Rien n'est vrai que le beau," and recruits have flocked to it in increasing numbers. It is the poets and painters who have made the most notable advances in dispensing with subject-matter in the interests of pure and joyful expression—if we except a few inspired politicians who have been far ahead of their times. Poetry today has reached the blessed condition of being about hardly anything at all, but very mellifluous to read. Its images hang in clusters like grapes. Its symbols, obscure but agreeable to the palate, are packed in as tightly as peanuts in the best quality peanut-rock. Relieved of the burden of thought, the reader can relax and just enjoy himself. In painting, too, the most progressive artists have already achieved an oblivion of thought coupled with a Nirvana of sensuous delight—although football fans and others of coarse sensibility have not yet awoken to the joy that can be theirs

for the asking. The escape from subject-matter is, thank Heaven, almost complete in these departments.

A word of warning at this point. In dealing with these matters the detached investigator would commit a serious error of judgment if he were to follow the normal, and usually quite safe, procedure of finding Russian influence at work. One must proceed cautiously. As Confucius said—not thinking especially of Mr. Dulles, I suppose—"Rush in fools where fear to tread angels." The Russians, as can be seen at once if you glance at their painting, are anything but given over to aestheticism. No, the process is one for which we ourselves are fully responsible, except for a little assistance we have had from the French.

"La manière est l'homme même." Or as somebody, probably Buffon, said, "It ain't what you do, it's the way that you do it." The greatest enemy of humanity is the logical proposition, the sentence with a verb in it. Trouble always begins when somebody asserts something, in propositional form, as being true or right or just. This practice has gone on for centuries, and the outcome has never been anything other than bloodshed and misery. Only in our own age has the opposing doctrine of aesthetic joy as an end in itself, of art for art's sake, shown any promise of eventually destroying the fictitious world of the logicians.

But this is old stuff. Everybody who has ever attended an Adult Education course on "The World We Live In" knows the issues involved. The only question of any consequence is, how can we bring to bear on the situation? How can we extend the influence of aestheticism in other fields where it has so far made less progress than in the arts?



In painting the escape from subject-matter is almost complete

Nothing if not helpful, I offer some comments and suggestions covering a few of the more important of these fields:

Science: There are developments here that hold out quite radiant hopes. In nuclear physics especially there is evidence of an aesthetic awakening among top-flight scientists who have witnessed atom bomb experiments. Remarks such as, "The blast was terrific," "An indescribable spectacle," and "What a big bang," show that these scientists at least don't have their noses too close to the grindstone, and are not blind and deaf to the beauty that is born when man and nature work together in inspired harmony.

The rapid development of the cosmetics industry, which claims the services of many of our leading chemists,

also bears witness to the fact that many scientists are human, and are not indifferent to the claims of Beauty.

Journalism: Here one would like to have something nice to say, but the truth is that old and ingrained habits persist. Obsession with logical and grammatical forms is still very general. To paint an accurate picture, I must go on to say that these forms are used in a corrupted way, for purposes of distortion in most cases. The situation is indeed so bad that the reader can never rely on what he sees in print being anything other than complete and utter nonsense. (EH? What's that?)

A clean break with the past is what is really called for. Newspapers could be printed in a new and specially-designed type-face, highly decorative but completely illegible. They would then become a joy to read.

Politics: Ideas crowd in upon me here, hardly allowing me breathing-room. I have space to deal only with the international field. Here it is agonisingly clear that, since the subject-matter of international politics consists almost exclusively of Bones of Contention, we should strike a great blow for humanity if we could get rid of it entirely. A difficulty presents itself. Statesmen cannot afford to appear to be saying nothing when they address the world. It is, I fear, impossible to abandon completely the pretence that their speeches contain subject-matter, but I think we can go quite a long way by rigorously subordinating the words they use to the mode of presentation. After all, we had some notable demonstrations, pointing more or less in this direction, in the days when diplomacy was diplomacy, and not an all-in dog fight on TV. In those times the art of wrapping an imposture or an insult in gold leaf was developed to a high level by professional diplomats; whereas all that is ever used nowadays—and that only by a few—is a low grade of cellophane.

If we must endure the vulgarity, and the perils, of open diplomacy, let us at least take steps to render it innocuous. Let us go even further, if possible, and give it a positive aesthetic value. The United Nations Organisation has a procedure whereby a speech in, say, Oxonian is rendered by a team of interpreters into the various languages of those present in the assembly, who listen with headphones. Now, if the services of Mr. Benjamin Britten and several other operatic composers could be secured, the whole of the proceedings could be conducted in opera form. The speaker of the moment—a lyric tenor, let us say, appointed to high political office because of his virtuosity—would present in recitative the views of his Government on, for example, the question of Indo-China. In order to preserve the fiction that something of importance was being said, a group of interpreter-tenors would sing the recitative over again, a few bars in the rear, in the various languages. The pure beauty of the music would capture the ears of everybody present, and conflicts of interest would in practice pass quite unnoticed. International amity would reign.

The adoption of this system, and its application in simplified form to the procedure of all governing bodies, would accomplish more than any other single measure in making aesthetic joy the universal criterion of value, and the sole preoccupation of the masses.

I must stop. But already the prospects for survival of the human race begin to take on a distinctly brighter hue.

(Solution to No. 702)

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R	O	P	E	S	P	R	A	N	C	E	R
I	O	Y	A	R	Y	R					
D	U	C	K	P	I	N	N	A	C	L	E
E	H	S	R	E	L	D					
S	M	O	O	T	H	O	R	M	O	L	U
C	N	A	R	S	P	C					
E	N	D	A	N	G	E	R	M	A	G	I
N	R	D	D	E	E	B					
C	O	I	N	A	G	E	P	E	D	A	L
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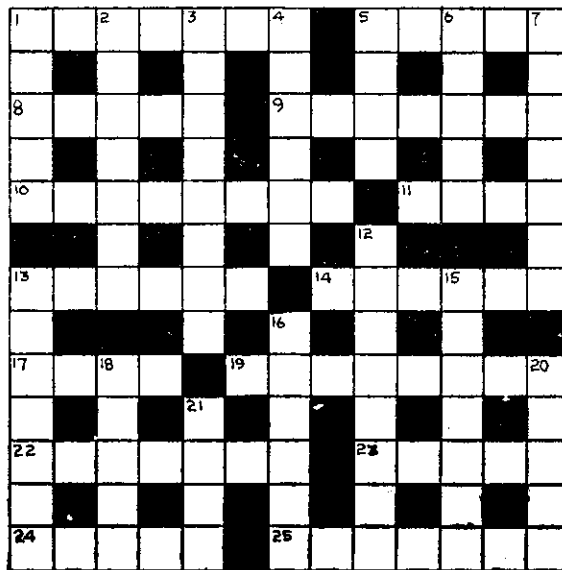
Clues Across

- The crate the motor car come in is apparently made of dead wood.
- Suitable dwelling for a Roman?
- Headstrong form of braid.
- Apart.
- The lists are out of order.
- Parched.
- In pots (anag.).
- "Music hath — to soothe a savage breast" (Congreve).
- Fire becomes prevalent.

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- "Oh, Wilderness were — enow!" ("Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam").
- Pleased, in a way.
- The white poplar.
- Procrastinate.
- Understatement intended to emphasise.
- Clothing from a minaret.
- Frequently seen on foot in summer.
- Weak.
- Pitchers.
- Catch sight of.

No. 703 (Constructed by R.W.H.)



Clues Down

- Mark of omission.
- Rodents swallow the baby's feeder and turn into a different kind of rodents.
- I add it on? (anag.). Naturally!
- Obliterated.
- She was invited to come into the garden.
- Lowest point.
- Red rose behind the altar.
- Ant-heaps (anag.).
- Foretell the finish of the harbour.