

Should Christians Pursue the Arts?

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I re-skimmed George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* last week. It has had a startlingly deep affect on me over these days—searching far into caves of feeling, and engendering a few meditative walks. Its themes have turned my mind to consider why it is that I pursue things like literature, music, and other forms of art.



I have at least tentatively come to the following conclusion: We were created not only to do what is right and believe what is true, but to experience what is beautiful. My understanding of the innate yearnings of my own nature has driven me to this place. I also believe the Bible furnishes support. The God of the Bible is an entity to be loved, enjoyed, desired, and feared with the emotions and not just with the intellect or with outward actions. Every experience of truly beautiful things in this world is a conduit of an experience of God himself. So in Scripture, we are encouraged to experience God through poetry (so much of the Bible is poetry), music, physical nature (stars, mountains, trees) and the like.

This is nebulous, but true. It is important to *feel*.

That is why I pursue art. If I do not, I run the risk of starving my soul—of cutting it off from a means God has provided for experiencing Him. A life devoid of feeling is a life that is less than it was created to be.

And so it is not a waste of time to sit down and read a classic novel or work of epic poetry, to listen to a piece of music, or to view a painting—to *feel* them. The experience of beauty (inasmuch as it is the conduit of an experience of God) is an end in itself; and a worthy end.

Obviously, there is a correspondence between right experience and truth and obedience. There are many dangerous experiences that can be gained in some art. But when experience is linked with right actions and right ideas, something occurs that is truly honoring to God.

The Mill on the Floss is about Maggie Tulliver's pursuit of what is great and beautiful, such as books, poetry, and love. As she grows up, she despairs of finding what she desires and gives up the pursuit. Through reading Thomas á Kempis, she comes to think that happiness can be found in "doing her duty" and dying to these desires for beauty and experience. She cannot do it. She starves her soul. Eventually, she takes up the pursuit again and this time almost follows it to the point of breaking with relational fidelity, her conscience, and what is good. But she cannot do this either and she turns back.

Eliot would not quite argue for what I am arguing here, but the book brings out a helpful idea. We should not pursue what is right—our "duty"—at the expense of what is great and beautiful. It starves us and we become dry and inhuman. We also should not pursue what is great and beautiful at the expense of what is right, because beauty without goodness is not beauty at all.

So long as what we are experiencing is truly beautiful, we must pursue experiences of beauty.



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