

THE FREETHINKER  
LONDON, ENGLAND  
31 MARCH 1929  
(pages 202-203)

**A Letter to a Distinguished Artist.**

My Dear Frank,

For more than thirty years we have been intimate friends; so that there is not much chance of your misunderstanding me. I'm going to unveil myself in this letter; to an extent that may, by fools, be mistaken for egotism. That I must risk. Frankly, I don't much mind what may be thought of me, so long as I get home with my message. Why should I? My conscience will be untroubled about it, and unsympathetic critics may think what they will.

You know me, and have known me most of my life—all my mature life, anyway—as a fellow-student, as a transcendental philosopher, as a lyric poet. And you are rather hurt, shocked, disappointed, that I should descend from Parnassus and Olympus, to take a turn in the Theological Cockpit.

You, an ultra-refined, super-sensitive artist, an accomplished musician, a *laissez-faire* philosopher, a distinguished "interpreter," are confounded that one who was—may I say?—at one time your master-in-thought should write controversially and, to the "orthodox," offensively, when he ought surely to be creating beautiful verse-forms and "philosophic" prose.

Your nervous, Epicurean lips curl at the idea of a philosopher troubling to assail cheap journalists and religionists in cheap papers. You, the aesthetic, clean-fingered, mentally-exclusive Modernist, fling—figuratively—Lao-Tse and Buddha at my head. "Why trouble about fools?" you say in effect. "You do no good. Let them carry-on in their own way. What do you imagine Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater would have thought about such things? It is no true wisdom to dally and dispute with the uninitiated. Socrates, my dear Victor; Schopenhauer," . . . and so on. How well I know!

There we are! Artists, dons, the whole crowd of aesthetes would be horrified. "You write vulgar, cheap, slashing articles in unfashionable, unpopular newspapers. Why? You know better; yet, knowing the higher, you deliberately choose the lower."

Really now! Do I? Are you quite sure, mine aesthetic positivist? Which *is* "the lower"? Have you no doubts as to your wisdom? Are aesthetes always right? Possibly; but I take leave to doubt even that. I am an incurable and irritating sceptic, I know. Forgive me! I cannot help it.

If I really be guilty of choosing "the lower," I prefer my robust guilt to your own delicate innocence. "Guilt" and "innocence" are relative and variable. From a purely human standpoint my taste for life, with its apparently-unending struggle and its rare victories—in my own case artistic (pardon the word)—leads me to prefer completely the rough-and-tumble philosophy, the rude laughter, of my adored Rabelais to the "refined" lamentations of Jesus, and the rapturous negations of Buddha.

Deliberately I choose to write and to say things (as you know!) that the dons and the professors, excellent fellows, call "bad form." "Really, my dear Victor, it is not *done*. It is 'impossible.' "

Nevertheless, despite my well-meaning, respectable, kid-gloved critics, my dilettante, amateur-quietist friends, it is one of my numerous ambitions to make it "possible." That is how our old friend, the Platonic "Idea," takes me.

Of set purpose I turn away from the marriage-feast of Philosophy and Art, whereto, as a poet, I have been invited. I quit the artists' conclave, to wrangle with far less exalted souls about Theology. I leave the Platonic Banquet to swill "bitter" with boors in a pub. There are times when I prefer bread-and-cheese to ambrosia, and beer to nectar. Life has broken and exalted me so completely that I have no time for the eccentricities of my "intellectual" youth. Out of my shameless Philistinism however, I am evolving an aesthetic that is worth while. That, I hold, is how life works.

In the midway of this life-journey I occasionally turn aside from the refinements of Maeterlinck, the subtleties of Debussy, the innovations of James Joyce; filled with a longing for the ordinary, common, vulgar things, according to South Kensington standards. But, 'twixt you and me and the gate-post, dearest Frank, South Kensington is not very much nearer to the sun than the Old Kent Road is.

Not for a moment do I blame you for being an orthodox and conventional aesthete; I think your attitude towards life an admirable one—for you. I am merely trying to get at the fundamental difference between us. The difference, I fancy, is this: *you* tend to regard beauty as an end-in-itself, and *I* regard

beauty as a permeative, elusive, subtle quality, imperceptible often even to aesthetes and artists, when it is obvious (in an almost mystic sense; grosser and worldlier people like myself.

O fortunate one! You are immersed in an artist's sea of beauty all the time; Beethoven, in his large Summery way, enchants you; you adore the profound quietistic aphorisms of Lao-Tse (your latest love!), you are a believer in the transcendentalisms of Socrates. . . . Listen.

A few years ago a dear Friend of mine died; he died as a result of cancer of the stomach, which he acquired as a direct consequence of wrong diet and lack of exercise during his imprisonment. You see how things "work" sometimes? Let me continue with "the chain of causes." According to orthodox standards this man was a criminal; he was jailed for "blasphemy," a crime not unconnected, let me whisper, with the honourable careers of your friends Socrates and Jesus Christ. This man used to edit, at one time or another, certain vulgar papers, *The Truthseeker* and *The Jerusalem Star*. No one in Chelsea or Montparnasse, probably, ever heard of these obscure sheets, but poor Gott—that was my friend's name—managed to get into trouble for them, and he died for them. A perfectly ridiculous sacrifice, according to worldly standards.

Gott had no trace of Oxford accent; on the contrary, he spoke with an obvious Yorkshire burr, acquired not at Eton, but in Bradford. He is now almost forgotten, except by a few eccentrics like myself. You have probably wept over the death of Socrates, so exquisitely enshrined in the "Apology"; you have sympathized with the long-spun-out martyrdom of Heine, dying of syphilis by inches on his famous mattress-grave; you have never heard of J.W. Gott, How should you? He was not a fashionable martyr, and there is a fashion, oddly enough, even in martyrs. If the Battle of Waterloo was won (as they say) on the playing-fields of Eton, the Battle for Free Speech was won in part on Woodhouse Moor, Bradford. In my Philistine, unfashionable way, I persist in regarding the latter contest as being of more importance to mankind than the former.

You, as I say, have never heard of Gott; yet I have never met a 'varsity man who, morally speaking, was fit to black Gott's boots. You will, I know, not misunderstand me here. I mean "moral," not in the stupid, narrow, English, sexual sense; but in its original wide ethical connotation.

Gott died in agony, a martyr for conviction's sake; as clear a case of death for a Cause as those of Socrates and Jesus, and he did not "grouse" at his fate, as did the latter. Morally speak-

ing, he is as great as either of the others. Indeed, he is greater in the judgment of any impartial ethicist. Socrates and Jesus died in the assurance of a continuation—Perhaps an eternity—of conscious, individual existence; Gott had no such glad certainty. Nevertheless, he gladly gave up his life for the sake of Humanity. In my view, odd as it must appear to you and the conventional “thinkers,” Gott was a far greater martyr than either Socrates or Jesus; his sufferings were far more protracted than theirs, and he was without the intuitions of salvation that they appear to have enjoyed. Somehow, there is often a touch of priggishness in your orthodox martyrs.

You, my ultra-refined, delicate-handed, mystically-minded artist, loll happily at the feet of the Chinese mystic and the Greek sage, rapt in a happy, easy quietism; as far removed as possible from the noisy brawling agora, the rude contentions of the schools. Delightful! would that the rays shed by the student-lamp reached to the ends of the world! But there is the strange spectacle, beyond that bright circle of light shed by self-contemplation, of poor old Gott dying of cancer of the stomach that you, and I, and the rest of us who are not entirely orthodox, might breathe a little more easily, and be enabled to express ourselves with a trifle more of freedom.

It is clearly not within the nature of things that you and I should successfully emulate Gott. We are both, I know, constitutionally unfitted for his work, and we have our own jobs to do. But when I remember all that we owe to my dead, almost-forgotten friend, I admit that I find your detached impatience with aggressive Freethought a little “precious,” and vitally ungrateful. For be this remembered: If anything be true “on all planes,” as we say, it is that these people, Gott and his composers, suffered and died (not under Pontius Pilate! But) that you and I and the rest of us might live mentally, and breathe more freely, and have the pleasure of expressing ourselves with perfect liberty, even if our ideas be hostile to the gods of the moment. That freedom has been won, and—mark you—every single time, without exception, by means of the ungrudging and infinitely noble sacrifices of time, work, money, happiness, health, life itself, by people who were charged with “rudeness,” “vulgarity,” “blasphemy,” “sedition.” Their accusers were the refined, cultured, highly-educated, artistic, vitally-ignorant, fundamentally-stupid critics of their day.

What do you and your artist-friends know of these heroes and their struggles for justice? Nothing at all. You do not even know their names, do you? What do you, and the inhabitants of

the Brompton Road, know of Peter Annet? of Richard Carlile? of Charles Southwell? of George William Foote? of Edward True-love? of James Watson? (Antiquarian researches into Free-thought lead one into the queerest, most delightful company!)

Your and your take-freedom-for-granted, what-does-Lao-Tze-say-about-it? friends sometimes make me a trifle impatient. The contempt of the self-conscious aesthete for the rude, strong, uncompromising, heroic pioneer sickens me. It is, indeed, the crudest intellectual snobbery. Beneath the swift, cutting brilliant, contemptuous speech of Nietzsche I cannot help hearing an undercurrent, the thick, drawling burr of J.W. Gott; for it was he and his like who made "Zarathustra" possible. Everyone has heard of Nietzsche; no one knows Gott, and yet where would Bond Street and Chelsea be, were it not for the forgotten fore-runners and heralds? Where they are, no doubt; but with all their distinctive tang lacking, bodies without souls. Does it never strike you to recall that saying of Blake's? "To create a little flower is the labour of ages." And do you not recognize how potent was the gardening of Gott and his friends? Their bodies lie beneath the earth-breast, but they made possible the coloured star-flowers of thought that are worn so proudly in South Kensington and the Fulham Road.

So, my dear Frank, that is why I sometimes annoy you, I know, when I turn away from the abstract, bloodless wisdom of your contemplationist masters, to consort with a warmer, more human crowd. I take leave to doubt, even, whether Percy Bysshe Shelley was a greater benefactor to humanity than Nicolai Lenin; and I sometimes prefer the society of J.W. Gott to that of Gautama Buddha, although I allow the latter to be the profounder metaphysician.

Forgive me! I am an incurable sceptic, even as regards human and aesthetic values, even towards philosophy and art.

Always sincerely and affectionately yours.

Victor