

**IS SYMBOLISM  
SUITED TO THE  
SPIRIT OF THE AGE ?**

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Is symbolism suited to the spirit of the age ? by William White

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**WILLIAM WHITE**

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# IS SYMBOLISM SUITED

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## THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE?

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" Yet Nature is made better by no mean  
But Nature makes that mean : so, o'er that Art  
Which you say adds to Nature, is an Art  
That Nature makes."

WINTER'S TALK.



BY

WILLIAM WHITE.

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141. b. 239.

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## PREFACE.

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THE tints of Nature with their endless variety and unceasing change, from the brightest glow of summer to the dullest gloom of winter, are not more various than the minds of men. The rich wood and the leafless plain do not present a contrast more striking than that which is continually seen between different members even of the same community. In Nature all is beautiful, and much of her beauty arises from diversity and contrast of tone and hue. Where her most brilliant hues are relieved by masses of dark shade, or her grey mantle is lighted up with bright gleams, there is her greatest beauty found; it is not in the dull monotony of middle shade, though so much of middle shade does enter into the composition of every scene. Amongst men it

is the same. One man is as it were all spirit—visionary, unpractical, blind to what is going on around him in the world, he lives in a world of his own; to him the earth and things of earth are but mere shadows:—another is taken up wholly with the visible world, and what is generally called “plain matter of fact,” to the exclusion of all that is spiritual—he seems to regard creation as consisting only in those things which his hands can handle and his eyes can see, and to look upon such things as appeal to the imagination or inner perception of man as imaginary and unreal. Yet every one occupies his own appointed place, and like “each little drop by leaf and flow’ret worn,” helps to form one beautiful harmonious whole.

And as in Nature, so in Nature’s imitator, Art: without diversity and contrast any life-like and vigorous effect is unattainable, and we should instinctively turn from the dull picture, in which a neutral hue pervades the whole landscape, to that in which the glories of the setting sun are enhanced and brightened by a dark rocky foreground, or the grandeur of the storm increased by the contrast of the rainbow arch against the black thunder-cloud.



But Nature not only furnishes enjoyment to almost every one, of whatsoever temperament he may be, but also softens and subdues him, by calling into action those faculties and affections which place man above the level of the brutè creation. So also Art makes some provision for all, according to the diversity of their several dispositions and habits of mind; and she, like Nature, not only accommodates herself to the likings and needs, but also elevates and refines the minds, of all. Still, as there are some to whom Nature even in her outward aspect is a dead letter, so there will ever be found those who, caring neither for expression nor spirit in works of Art, will regard the study of *any* of its principles as the pursuit of a vision or a dream. It is not, of course, for these that the following pages are intended; but rather for those who, having a love for Art in itself, and taking delight in the scientific principles upon which it rests, already view it as a means of intellectual and moral elevation; and who doubt whether it might not also be made an instrument for teaching the truths of Revelation and for addressing the inner spirit of the Christian. They are meant too for those persons who themselves believing in the possibility of this, and

seeking after all fit and proper aids towards realising the existence and presence of things unseen, would wish to make out how far such a system is either necessary or expedient for those who live in such an enlightened and inquiring age as the nineteenth century.

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It seems to be generally taken for granted by those who write about Symbolism, that Symbolism is true and good in itself, and that there must of necessity result from its study and use, a large amount of practical benefit. In these inquiring days, however, men are not disposed to take upon trust any teaching or theory which is supposed to have originated in the mere caprice or opinion of men, however implicitly they may have done so in a more ignorant or illiterate age. This is especially the case with Symbolism; for whilst some attach to it great value and importance as containing within itself a deep fund of religious teaching, others regard it as altogether vain and fanciful, and likely to lead men to materialism and superstition. And if, in the course of our inquiry, it should appear that Symbolism had its rise in fancy and passing opinion, or that it rests upon these as its foundations, we may safely conclude, that whatever advantages it may have had