

THE ART OF JOSEPH EDWARD SOUTHALL*

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ABSTRACT

Joseph Southall (1861–1944) was an artist distinguished in his field, a political activist of considerable stamina and a Quaker greatly loved and honoured by some Friends, albeit not by all. His political involvement as chairman of the Independent Labour Party in Birmingham from 1914 to 1931 afforded an opportunity for witness that was in harmony with his religious affiliation. But his profession as an artist was pursued against a climate of ambivalence toward the arts within the Quaker community, which was diminishing in the early twentieth century but had not altogether disappeared. This paper illustrates the traditional disapprobation of the arts by Quakers and identifies elements of a Quakerly aesthetic (defined for the purpose of this paper as 'a set of moral principles constraining the production or appreciation of a visual image'). The paper is an attempt to trace the emergence of such an aesthetic in the art of Joseph Southall. In particular, this paper examines Southall's alignment of art with craft, observes moral restraint in the painting of portraits and explores Southall's use of narrative themes in art as ministry.

KEYWORDS

Joseph Edward Southall, Quaker, Birmingham School, aesthetics, tempera, artist craftsman

Toward a Quakerly Aesthetic

There are, paradoxically, few Protestant values that are more complex than simplicity. At one level it is seen as an innocent beatitudinal virtue

* I am grateful to Vera Massey and Arthur Massey for their recollections of Joseph Southall and for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

and a means of achieving inner perfection. At another it is a symbolic expression of worldly rejection and detachment from established Christian traditions. In different contexts simplicity is expressed in the denial of dancing, music, literature, cinema, marriage, computers, electricity, cut flowers in the house, fashionable clothing and cosmetics. From North Carolina Yearly Meeting (Conservative) comes a formulation of the ethic of simplicity that is expressed more in terms of an inner quest than as a series of regulations and taboos:

The heart of the Quaker ethic is summed up in the word 'simplicity'. Simplicity is forgetfulness of self and remembrance of our humble status as waiting servants of God. Outwardly, simplicity is shunning superfluities of dress, speech, behaviour and possession which tend to obscure our vision of reality. Inwardly, simplicity is spiritual detachment from the things of this world as part of the effort to fulfil the first commandment: to love God with all of the heart and mind and strength (London Yearly Meeting 1994: 2).

It is, however, as a disapproval of the arts that the ethic of simplicity combines with other virtues to impact upon visual expression. In the United States the Quaker sculptress Sylvia Shaw Judson (1982: 2) recognizes that Quakers 'have traditionally held art in distrust' and attributes this to the norms of representation in the formative years of Quakerism when Englishmen wore ruffs and these were included in their effigies cast in stone. In England there has been a similar aversion to art and ornament and an inhibition of Quakers who, in spite of the exclusion of art and music from the curriculum of Quaker schools, discovered in themselves talents in these pursuits. One such was Samuel Lucas of Hitchin (1805–70):

Drawing and colouring were to him the natural mode of expressing the feelings nature awoke in his mind and his life's bread-winning taken this direction he would probably have risen to distinction in artistic circles... [However], no career as an artist was in the days of Samuel Lucas' youth thought desirable for their sons by consistent members of the Society of Friends...and his support came from an elder brother and a cousin in the family business at Hitchin of brewers and maltsters (*Biographical Catalogue* 1888).

Barnes (1984: 7) reminds us that as late as 1906 the Book of Discipline severely condemned all the vain pursuits of the arts. The historical background to the persistent tradition has been well documented. For example, in the early nineteenth century pictures and portraits were taboo in the orthodox Quaker home. Thomas Clarkson visited many Quaker

homes and the only pictures he ever saw were a painting of a slave-ship, another of William Penn's treaty with the Indians and a plan of Ackworth school (Clarkson 1807: 292–94). This said, there were in the London Friends Institute in 1888 engravings, oil paintings, drawings, woodcuts and photographs of over 200 Friends as well as pictures of schools, meeting houses and meetings, of which a fully annotated catalogue was produced (*Biographical Catalogue* 1888).

Rejection of the established order in this context is expressed as a disdain for fashion. It implies a detachment for its own sake from the habits of the world as vices in themselves, such as vanity or superfluity. In the words of the contemporary observer Thomas Clarkson (1807: 290) 'the adoption of taste instead of utility in this case, would be considered as a conscious conformity with the fashions of the world'.

The rejection of habits for their worldliness endorses the development of plain taste. Ornament itself was offensive and Friends were disturbed to discover it in the homes of their own kind. In the early 1690s Joseph Pile of Cork and his cousin Samuel Randall were appointed to inspect homes for gospel order: they began by purging their own of all excesses:

As to our own clothing we had but little to alter, having both of us been pretty plain in our garb, yet some things we did change to greater simplicity. But my dear cousin, being naturally of a very exact and nice fancy, had things in a more curious order as regards household furniture than I had. Our fine veneered and garnished cases of drawers, tables, stands, cabinets, escritaires, &c, were put away or exchanged for decent plain ones of solid wood without sumptuous garnishing or ornamental work; our wainscots and woodwork we had painted of one plain colour...Our curtains, with valences, deeply fringed that we thought too fine, we put away or cut off; our large looking-glasses with decorated frames we sold or made them into smaller ones (Braithwaite 1919: 507).

From the middle of the eighteenth century Friends notice and regret among their number 'a declension from the simplicity of truth':

It is matter of exceeding grief and concern to many of the faithful among us, to observe, how far that exemplary plainness of habit, speech, and deportment, which distinguished our forefathers, and for which they patiently underwent reproach and contradiction, is now departed from, by too many under our name (London Yearly Meeting 1802: 134).

Southall's own drawing room in the 1930s (Crawford 1984: 69) might be held to attest to the rehabilitation of cumber. The settee, easy chair and foot-stool in a rich floral design are arranged around the fireplace

with art nouveau tiling. The carpet and rug are richly coloured. Behind his beloved spinet hang three paintings including *Sigismonda* and the *Artist's Mother*, their brightly gilded frames being of his own design and of his wife's execution. Under the cornice is a decorative frieze of birds and foliage painted by himself. And the central light is a candelabrum. Southall had in his home some valuable pieces of furniture. This home shows no sign of being dressed down. Nor was his sartorial style moderate: he was in a somewhat archaic way immaculate, even to the point of flamboyance and the spectacle of him and his wife, sitting as still as in a Friends' meeting while waiting for the train at New Street, fascinated and drew the crowd (Massey 1993). Gone were the days of Friends visiting the homes of members and asking questions: Southall was allowed his own style and was not criticized for it.

In such disparate utterances may be discerned the foundations of a Quakerly aesthetic which survives in the twentieth century not as a dogmatic rejection of art but as a moral restraint. Vanity, self-aggrandisement, ostentation, the celebration of personal wealth and the improper stewardship of time and resources were offences to which the arts were particularly prone. Art was seen to be an element of 'cumber' and Friends counselled themselves to avoid it.

Joseph Southall was a Quaker of deep and enduring convictions and scrupulous attention to detail: not all Friends appreciated the timing of his contributions just as minutes were being agreed at Monthly and Yearly meetings (Massey 1980). Notwithstanding the security of his Quaker affiliation and his respect for order, his tastes in art, music and furniture were conspicuously un-Quakerly. Southall takes account of these moral principles without rejecting the art in which they were thought to be inherent. On the contrary, he used his art as social critique, he rejoiced in colour as an aspect of the beauty of the created world and he undressed his portrait images of such vain trappings as had tended to cumber the genre.

Joseph Southall

One of the common habits of art historians, critics and curators is to arrange the oeuvres of particular artists in terms of explicit themes. By this procedure groups of paintings which take biblical subjects as their text are classified as 'religious works'. The catalogue of Southall's 1980 exhibition (Birmingham 1980) which stands as the principal secondary

source on Southall was organized in this way. Such a principle of classification has particular limitations in Southall's case since it suggests that some paintings are religious and some are not. In fact Southall uses non-religious subjects as allegories to achieve a spiritual or moral insight. Whatever the narrative base of his work, religious meanings may be inferred. It is therefore more appropriate to survey Southall's work in terms of his didactic method than its superficial subject matter. Southall recognized art and craft as the expressions of a spiritual being:

Art is a language of the soul, and who shall forbid the artist to express what is in him or limit the source of its inspiration? There remains, however, the truth that great painting and sculpture are something much more than illustration of a literary theme and that they convey something over and above the verbal narrative on which they are based... There are pictures that are not narrative illustrations but are expressions of feelings or ideas that have no corresponding or parallel expressions in words. These are to be regarded rather as we accept instrumental music that does not attempt to tell us any story nor even to describe to us any person or thing, but awakens in our souls a sense of beauty, awe or wonder, solemnity or joy (Southall 1925: 137).

Students of art locate Southall in the Birmingham group and distinguish him for his part in the revival of tempera painting (Vallance 1901; Hodson 1920; Farr 1978; Hartnell 1996). Indeed, his own contributions to his profession had much to do with aspects of technique (Southall 1928). The peculiar appeal of the tempera revival for an artist brought up in a climate ill-disposed to the visual arts may not have been apparent to his fellows in the Birmingham group. The process of tempera painting is a craft. 'Craftsmanship' was Southall's watchword. It was the loss of a participant sense of craft that left him unhappy in the architectural profession to which he was articed and which was a concern he shared with William Morris with whom he stayed at Kelmscott in 1893. Still more, tempera is not about enrichment but about colour and space. Though complex in its preparation, it is in its impact arguably one of the plainer, the more simple, the more innocent and restrained of the decorative arts. When his mother—herself a Quaker—took him to Florence, Rome and Venice in 1883 he was engaged not by the Baroque but by the early fifteenth century, by the frescoes of Giotto and the Italian primitives. It is a plain, restrained and Quakerly taste that prevails on a pilgrimage which few of his co-religionists would have undertaken.

A special dilemma besets the painting of portraits in general and those that are commissioned by the rich and famous in particular. Southall and

his patrons were not the first to face this. The rich Quaker Joseph John Gurney had been aware of the conflict between the standard of living associated with his economic position and the measure of comfort and visual appearance that would be condoned by fellow Quakers: he wrote in his diary on 8 July 1844, 'We are stepping a little forward in the way of clearing our delightful mansion, of those things which may be stumbling blocks to others—to wit, the looking-glasses' (Isichei 1970: 153).

A mirror, of course, is a stumbling-block not merely for its ornamental gilt frame but for the focus it affords upon the self (Isichei 1970: 183). If a looking-glass is the window of vanity, the portrait is the freezing of its image. Until the beginning of this century portraiture was largely disfavoured among Quakers and Southall was influential in softening the taboo. In that course he was himself the first of his subjects but he went on to paint prominent Quakers such as Charles Dickinson Sturge, Wilfred Southall and H.G. Wood and was commissioned by the Cadbury directors to paint the portrait of their chairman Barrow Cadbury. His portraits are not idols but memorials. His sitters are caught in reflection, barely posing or responding to the artist, always resolute in the Quaker way and sitting or standing against a biographical landscape: behind Barrow Cadbury we have the view from the chocolate factory, behind H.G. Wood we have the building of Woodbrooke College.

Talent, however, can have a corroding effect upon the convictions of a young man. Disciplined though Southall's upbringing had been and conscientious though he remained in his political principles, the effect of realizing his talent as an artist was to divert him somewhat from the Quakerly way. His public acclaim was not from his co-religionists so much as from artists of distinction. He was a frequent visitor to Burne-Jones and was excited by the words of encouragement he received there until his death in 1898 (Birmingham 1980: 13). Southall exhibited in Paris where, incidentally, he was so emancipated from his major influences such as the Italian primitives and Ruskin that his viewers could not be sure of his century or school (Hodson 1920: 7). In the 1920s his works were sought by Picasso (Sitwell 1950: 260-61; Birmingham 1980: 14). We have to consider the possibility that the practice of art had a corrupting effect upon his observation of human life, so that it was not upon the spirit within but the appearance without that his eye was to settle. In a letter from Croydon on 23 May 1909 he wrote of the women in London:

The thing to see in London this year is the women. Better and more wonderful than ever they are; such faces, such colours, such figures!... Some of them wrap their dresses round them tight like gloves and to see them move and glow with colour is simply indescribable (Birmingham 1980: 15-16).

Although his later portrait painting shows more evidence of a conscientious restraint than this letter, some of his early paintings are marked by a delight in colour and exuberance and an appreciative regard for the female form (*Sigismonda*, 1897; *Changing the Letter*, 1908; *Musie*, 1912; *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1912).

Art as Craft

The testimony to Joseph Southall published upon his death by Warwickshire Monthly Meeting (Massey 1945) noted that he had been highly esteemed in the art world but did not much feature his professional activity among Quakers. It is worth examining the nature of his contribution to contemporary art, not least because his religious background has a bearing upon it.

Southall was a member of the Birmingham group which attracted national interest at the turn of the century. Arthur Gaskin and Charles March Gere were among his fellows there and he features them in his narrative painting *New Lamps for Old* in which Gaskin poses as the magic man. Southall derived encouragement from the approval of Burne-Jones. Southall and Gaskin journeyed to Italy with his self-portrait *Man with a Sable Brush*, an early example of Southall's revival of tempera with which medium the Pre-Raphaelites had not worked. Gaskin and Southall also visited William Morris.

The attention Southall commanded in his day and his abiding distinction, however, were for his part in the revival of tempera painting (Vallance 1901; Hodson 1920). Tempera had been universally used until the introduction of oil, which is normally attributed to the work of the Flemish painters Hubert and Jan van Eyck in the early fifteenth century. It is a medium in which the labour of preparation and the technique of execution needed to be rediscovered. Tempera is applied not directly to a board or canvas but to a layer of plaster or gesso that has been painstakingly prepared. The painting is done in several layers, each awaiting the drying of its predecessor. Painting in tempera is beset with hazards which Southall seemed to relish (Southall 1928), such as the problems of the variable water content of the egg with which the pigment is bound,

the consequences of flaking, water bubbles and mould, the need to apply the paint in successive layers and so on. He mixed the tempera to his own recipe and even collected and prepared some of his own pigments. Practitioners in the Arts and Crafts traditions set great store by having as full a control as possible over the whole process of their art: Joseph Southall was no exception and is said by his acquaintances to have kept his own chickens with the express purpose of ensuring a constant supply of egg yolks for his tempera (Crawford 1984: 66).

Southall not only prepared his own surfaces and colours but he lectured and wrote on tempera painting and was influential within the Society of Painters in Tempera. The preparation of the panels as well as the design and production of the gesso frames commanded his time and craft. The gilded relief frames are typically of foliage and fruits. Meticulous records were kept during their production and we know that a frame might take a month or so to make with an hour or so a day spent making the size, laying on the size and linen, making the gesso, smoothing the gesso, grinding the bole, burnishing the bole, gilding and burnishing (Birmingham 1980: 58). In due course Southall engaged his wife Bessie in these operations and the frames and panels were the product of their partnership.

It was the method and 'craftsmanship' of tempera painting that compelled Southall and he practised the method strictly according to the directions of Cennino Cennini whose famous treatise on tempera is the principle source for those wanting to emulate the practice of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. He spoke more often of his craftsmanship than of his art and his professional identity is that of 'artist-craftsman'.

Kenneth Barnes (1984: 7) explores the problem of integrity in art for Quakers as a matter of reaching one's inner being and observes ways in which 'craft' may be a more secure definition of one's creative endeavours than 'art': 'You were, in a sense, safe when you enjoyed building steam engines, but you put your tidy spiritual life at hazard when you entered the world of drama and music' (Barnes 1984: 8).

Art as Ministry

Southall was in his own term an 'artist-craftsman'. He studied and applied the principles of decorative effect but his religious paintings are not offered as ornaments. Nor are they even narrative. The key to Southall's religious art is to be found not in the norms of artistic expression but in the Quaker practice of 'ministry'. His subjects prompt

reflections, illustrate virtues, make allegorical statements of Quaker testimony. In its title and initial impact *St Dorothea and her Two Sisters Refusing to Worship the Idol* (1902) is about a third-century Christian martyr of Cappadocia who refused to bow down to the image of a (Roman) deity: the authorities engaged her two sisters to persuade her to comply but she converted them to the Christian faith and was made to watch their execution before her own. The painting is about conscience and the priority of principles over self-interest. It is about the effectiveness of personal resistance against organized authority, here symbolized by the Classical architectural framing of the picture surmounted by a pediment. It is about themes which transcend and survive the trials of Christians in the third century. Southall's choice of idol is evidently Mars, the god of war, and this is thereby a peace testimony. But still more, when it was painted in 1901–1902, Southall was much exercised by the imposition in the 1902 Education Act of a tax to subsidize the schools of the established church: this he persistently refused to pay, suffering the distraint of certain of his goods and buying them back in auction rather than paying the tax voluntarily and conventionally. His court appearances, at each of which he seized the opportunity for verbal ministry, continued for over 40 years (Massey 1945: 4). Thus *St Dorothea* triggers a cluster of contemporary concerns which are explored visually in the way that a spoken ministry might explore them verbally.

The distinctiveness of Southall's approach to the themes of conscience and self-sacrifice is illustrated by comparison with the earlier Pre-Raphaelite painting, *A Huguenot on St Bartholomew's Day Refusing to Shield Himself from Danger by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge*. The significant aspect of the context which John Everett Millais makes explicit in this snappy title is that it refers to the massacre of thousands of French Protestants on 24 August 1572 and the following days. Immunity to the slaughter was achieved by wearing a white cloth band over the arm which was taken to signify Catholic faith. Millais shows a Huguenot with his lady, presumably a Catholic, resisting her attempt to tie the band upon him. The empathy which Millais engenders in his spectator is prompted by the romantic dimension of the encounter. Its powerful, if not overwhelming, theme is the trial of youthful affection: we think of the prospect for the girl who will lose her lover as much as for the Huguenot who will lose his life. What Southall adds by the symbol of Mars is the application to contemporary circumstances and to his own testimony.

Southall's *The Mount of Olives* (1922) similarly takes a narrative, this time biblical, and from it makes an impassioned plea in the form of the peace testimony. The picture is one of harmony and composure. Jesus occupies the foreground; the gnarled olive tree and the sheep grazing safely celebrate the achievement of peace on earth. But it is in that sense that the painting is poignantly idealistic rather than realistic. This painting is to be found in the convent of Notre Dame des Anges in Fort Courtrai, Belgium, where it stands as a memorial to 92 men, women and children who were asphyxiated by poison gas. It is a statement against the effects of war. This inscription reads, 'This picture is dedicated in the hope that all who look upon it may be inspired to do everything in their power to prevent future wars, and to hasten the day when on Earth there shall be universal Peace among men'.

Southall's Portraits

It was partly for economic reasons that Southall turned to portraiture: the market turned against the kinds of romantic and mythological subjects with which he had worked in the first decade of the century.

The Quaker tradition into which Southall was born had mixed feelings about portrait painting. On the one hand, Elizabeth Fry, Samuel Lucas of Hitchin and others had in their childhood learnt to draw by sketching brothers and sisters. This was an acceptable and innocent occupation. The error of professional portraiture, however, was that of vanity and the fault was less with the artist than with the sitter in supposing so painstaking a record to be warranted.

Writing of Quaker lifestyles in 1807 Thomas Clarkson affirms on the basis of extensive visiting that his readers will not find any portraits in Quaker homes. The first Quakers never assented to the taking of portraits, he explains. If any such portraits existed, they would have been painted before their subjects became Quakers. 'As little better than dust and ashes, they had but a mean idea of their own images'. Further, the early Quaker abstention from portraits was 'their testimony against the vain and superfluous fashions of the world': better to preserve best actions and thoughts than a fleshly image (Clarkson 1807: 295-96).

The view of portraits as vanity persisted in the nineteenth century. The *Philadelphian Friend* quoted in a piece on 'Biographies' in *The British Friend* comments:

The whole matter of portrait-taking among Friends, is one which demands more serious attention than many of us are apparently willing to bestow. Sorrowful it is, that even some in conspicuous and influential stations, have actually 'sat' for their portraits, and this; not for the handy moment of the Daguerro-typist (questionable as even this prevalent indulgence is), but patiently awaiting the slow business of the linner. Shallow indeed must be the religion of him who knows not that it in himself dwelleth no great thing. We cannot suppose that our primitive Friends would for a moment have sanctioned so vain and weak an indulgence (*The British Friend* 1848: 78).

The British Friend remained vigilant of the habit of posing and when the Prince of Wales sat five hours for a photographic portrait for the international Exhibiton, it wryly remarked that it had not been informed how he spent the time (1862: 96).

By the time of Southall's death, and in the Warwickshire Monthly Meeting's testimony to him (Massey 1945: 1), there had been a change in the notion that there was nothing in human life to celebrate:

Although the achievement of his hands marked him out as an inspired and infinitely painstaking artist, for us in our testimony to his service among us, it is what he was rather than what he did which should emerge.

There is of course in this wording a residual detachment from the very world which acclaimed Joseph Southall as artist-craftsman.

The vanity of a subject who poses for a portrait painter and is convinced by his flattery is an effect of an attention to human form and surface that began to take hold in the late fifteenth century. A significant early work that represents this loss of idealized and mystical form is Fra Filippo Lippi's *Madonna* (1464) in the Uffizi: Vasari's story that the artist was physically attracted to the sitter Lucrezia Buti, herself a nun or novice, and that they eloped after the painting was finished, is at least plausible from the delight that the portrait affords as well to its viewer as to its painter. Other more mystical representations of the Madonna up to those of Raphael, had searched not for the delicacy of the surface but for what the apostle calls 'the imperishable ornament within' (1 Pet. 3. 4).

Southall's portrait painting is consistently governed by primitive principles. As far as possible his subjects do not appear to be posing for him. There is a remarkable contrast between the contemporary portrait of Barrow Cadbury and that of W.A. Cadbury by R.G. Eves which hangs with it in the Cadbury Room of the Bournville factory. William was chairman of Cadbury Bros while Barrow was chairman of the Chocolate

Company. It looks rather as though Eves has held his sitter in the chair for four or five hours. Barrow Cadbury, on the other hand, is caught, seemingly on his way to a meeting, sparing no more than a moment to glance at the artist: so subordinate is the person to the picture that a contemporary critic remarked that it had 'ended up as a study of Mr Cadbury's immaculate suit rather than of the former chairman of Cadbury Brothers' (*The Times*, 8 June 1945). Occupation with clothing may indeed have been a conscious diversion from the person. So Southall's portrait of his mother shows her intent upon something beyond the artist's shoulder while his focus is upon the lace cap on her head which Southall designed and she executed. Self-portraits over a period of many years (*Man with a Sable Brush*, 1896; *Self-portrait*, 1933) have Southall in the distinctive and distracting red fez which he wore for much of his life. And one of his female portraits celebrates the diversion in its very title *The Coral Necklace*. For the portraits of mother, wife and self, subjects are seen in profile, often captured at work or in some memorable pursuit. His portraits are biographical without being heroic: their focus is upon honourable achievement. The portraits at Bull Street Meeting, which are typically enclosed in Southall's crafted gesso frames and which include the 1933 *Self-portrait*, evidence Southall's capacity for reverent biography. They hang now in the upper room, not as works of art but as memories of faithful members of the meetings. The affectionate portrait of the elderly Samuel Price recalls the loving care which he and his wife devoted to their garden in Edgbaston; the portrait of Charles Dickinson Sturge, apparently painted in the library of the Birmingham Reading Society, contrives a view through the window of the former Bull Street meeting house. Similarly the portrait of H.G. Wood which hangs at Woodbrooke College where he was Director of Studies is simple, dignified and shows Wood in profile, as though thinking or in some way engaged other than for the benefit of his own image. To the right of the picture is sketched Woodbrooke College. It is a recollection as others would wish his academic leadership to be remembered, not a self-indulgence.

The habit of honouring a life instead of glorifying the person is not, of course, peculiar to Southall. But it is significant in its departure from a tradition that embraces the great painters of the eighteenth century such as Reynolds and Gainsborough as well as English naïve art. Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, for example, is not a testimony to the virtue of his subjects but a celebration of their standing in the material world. It

is about possession, the owning of an estate and the possession of a spouse. Mr Andrews can call upon the dutiful subservience of his dog on his right hand and his wife on his left. And it is about dominion over the land, a favoured theme not remote from the position that Britain then held in its empire (Berger 1972: 106-107; Dixon 1996: 110-11). Lesser known and even anonymous artists in the tradition of English naïve art are in a similar way occupied with the vanities of their patrons. The naïve artist may diminish the size of the farmer in his picture not to relegate him but to enhance him because his real glory is the bull or sheep or prize cabbage with which he has chosen to be portrayed. It is the break with the material world that renders portrait painting an agreeable genre for one with Quaker principles. The virtues that are celebrated in the tradition of Gainsborough glamour, prestige, possession—are conspicuously absent in the moral portraits of Joseph Southall.

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