

## What is Loyalty to America?

<http://www.aestheticrealism.net/tro/what-is-loyalty-to-america.html>

# The Right of Aesthetic Realism to Be Known

A PERIODICAL OF HOPE AND INFORMATION

NUMBER 1502.—January 16, 2002

Aesthetic Realism was founded by Eli Siegel in 1941

## What Is Loyalty to America?

Dear Unknown Friends:

What it means to love America, *really* to love America, is an urgent matter. I have written on it recently and continue to, because Aesthetic Realism explains that love for country is a matter of ethics and aesthetics—in keeping with this Aesthetic Realism principle: "All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves." The great 1968 lecture we are serializing has that principle at its basis. In *It and Self* Eli Siegel shows what no one before him saw: the central likeness between art and science. Both, he shows, put opposites together. Chiefly, both art and science are a oneness of a self and an *it*—of a person expressing what he or she is by being fair to an instance of the outside world.

We need to give to America the justice which both science and art give. And so I am going to comment on a statement which has been felt to stand for American patriotism: the Pledge of Allegiance, recited in the classrooms of the land and at other gatherings of Americans. I am not discussing the controversies around the Pledge, though they are important: There is the question of whether it should indeed be a school fixture, with every child compelled to proclaim his or her loyalty each day. There is the phrase "under God," inserted during the McCarthy era—in violation, many believe, of the First Amendment and of the separation between religion and state so crucial to American democracy. What I look at here are the words of the Pledge, because doing so provides a chance to ask how we should see our nation.

## What Is Loyalty?

There is the very familiar first phrase: "I pledge allegiance." That means: I promise to be loyal. What does it mean to promise loyalty? What is loyalty?

The horrible mistake people make about loyalty—whether to a person or a nation—is to make loyalty equivalent to going along with whatever the person, or whatever those running the nation, want to do. Let us say we have a friend who wants to cheat somebody, or who gets drunk and wants to take his car on the highway anyhow. For us to be loyal to this friend would be for us to *object*—not agree. If we agree with a person's desire to be unjust, we're not loyal to the person: we're a collaborator in his being untrue to himself, in his doing something that will make him uglier and weaker. That kind of spurious loyalty does go on often between people, and it makes the collaborating people despise each other.

And in the field of American history—it is now felt that the people who disobeyed the Fugitive Slave Law were the truly loyal Americans. It was the law in, let us say, 1855, to inform on a slave attempting to escape to Canada, and have him returned to his Southern master. If you obeyed the law and had a black

man who had reached New England sent back to Alabama and slavery, were you showing real allegiance to America? Or were you hideously disloyal to what America truly is, even though millions of people seemed to agree with you? A person like Henry David Thoreau, who helped slaves escape, was a lawbreaker. But it was he, and not the passers and obeyers of the Fugitive Slave Law, who was faithful to America.

## What We Have to See

In order to be loyal, we have to see what the person or thing to whom we're loyal *most deeply is*. And that is not the same as what he, or it, may be doing at a particular moment.

The largest purpose of everyone, Aesthetic Realism explains, is to like and see rightly the world itself. That purpose in a person is the thing to which we need to be loyal. Allegiance to a person is to encourage the person's care for the world, fairness to the world. Certainly, it is to want to counter anything—from the outside or from the person himself—which hurts him and makes him weaker.

True allegiance includes a state of mind like this: "I am faithful to you, my dear friend, and therefore I tell you that the way you spoke to that person yesterday was unjust. You yourself don't like yourself for it. The way you acted is against who you really are, who you most want to be. I want to encourage the *best* in you—I care for you that much!"

The "allegiance" that says, "You're my buddy, so whatever you do, I'm for. Even if you're wrong, I'm with you"—is *contempt*. Mr. Siegel showed contempt to be the most dangerous, hurtful thing in each of us. Contempt is the making of ourselves—and what we associate with ourselves—better than the rest of the world, and the feeling we "have the right to see other people and things pretty much as [we] please."\*

What is true about loyalty to a person is true about allegiance to a land. The question of what it means to be loyal to America is a beautiful question. America is not the same as the policies of someone running America. America is not the same as the results of some opinion poll. America is a certain relation of earth and humanity, which, in its rich particularity, was meant to be exact about all earth and humanity. There is terrible contempt in feeling, Because this person—or family—or gang—or country—is connected with *me*, he or it must be right, and superior to all others.

All this concerns the Pledge of Allegiance and America now. If the Pledge is to be said, the people saying it, of whatever age, should be encouraged to look deeply and exactly at the meaning of every word. Otherwise it becomes an ego caress, or a contemptuous routine—with contempt for the statement itself, for America, and for the world.

## What Republic Means

The next phrase is "to the flag of the United States of America." We have that important thing in mind and art: a symbol. Obviously, the flag as cloth, color, pattern, is not what one should be faithful to. The flag stands for something. What it stands for is in the next phrase: "and to the Republic for which it stands."

The flag, then, stands for a republic, which means—from the Latin *res publica*—public thing. And the significance of *republic*, the difference between a republic and, for instance, a monarchy, is a terrific matter in history. If we look at what the Pledge says, we see that allegiance to America involves the meaning of a republic: we are pledging allegiance to a *public thing*. That is, we are saying we will be loyal to a nation designed to be governed by the people as such, by *all* the people. If our pledging allegiance doesn't include our wanting to make sure everything in America is in keeping with its being a real Republic, we should know that we are hypocrites and liars as we pledge.

## How the Author Saw

The author of the Pledge of Allegiance was Francis Bellamy. He was a socialist, and a Baptist minister. He worked for the popular magazine *The Youth's Companion*, which was a sponsor, in 1892, of a celebration by the American public schools. The children were celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of America. And Bellamy wrote the Address for that occasion, and also a Pledge for the children to say while saluting the flag: this was the Pledge of Allegiance.

Francis Bellamy's cousin was the noted reformer Edward Bellamy, an intense opponent of capitalism, founder of a movement called Nationalism. This was a movement to have the industry of the United States nationalized, owned by the people as such; and Francis Bellamy agreed with his cousin and was of that movement. The nationalizing which the Bellamys were so passionate about is in keeping with the meaning of the word at the center of the Pledge: *republic*. Francis Bellamy wanted the children to love the idea of a republic—an America that belonged truly to the people—and to give their allegiance to that idea. *Republic* would mean, and Bellamy knew it, that *every* person, every child, should own America, including her industry.

The next phrase in the original Pledge is "one nation indivisible." The Civil War had been won less than 30 years earlier. The fact that the US was not something that could be divided, was a tremendous victory for justice over ego and contempt. The Southern states had felt, We want to own other human beings, and if the US doesn't go along, we're leaving. They were not permitted to, and that fact was beautiful! Bellamy's phrase "one nation indivisible" is both a proud statement of the fact, and a resolve, which he felt Americans should have, that the fact continue. In 1954, "under God" was inserted in the midst of that phrase.

## What about "Liberty and Justice"?

We come now to "with liberty and justice for all." So much hinges on the meaning of this phrase in relation to the rest of the pledge. Is it a saying that "liberty and justice for all" is what we fully have now; or that a "Republic...with liberty and justice for all" is what America was meant to be and what we pledge to go after, make real?

As a socialist, Bellamy was quite aware that there *wasn't* liberty and justice for all. He was quite clear about the fact that when some people are poor and others are rich, there is not justice, or liberty either. Persons have recited that phrase routinely, smugly, as part of the Pledge, but to do so is entirely against the intention behind it. Bellamy knew that little children were working in factories; people were living pained, diseased lives in slums; men and women were working in sweatshops for wages that couldn't feed their families.

In the Address he wrote for a representative young person at each school to say during that 1892 celebration, in company with the Pledge of Allegiance, Bellamy makes plain that liberty and justice were things still to be sought. These are words from the Address, and the future tense is clear: "We, the youth of America,...pledge ourselves...that America shall mean equal opportunity and justice for every citizen, and brotherhood for the world."

Every strike, every demonstration, so much legislation has been a saying, There is *not* yet liberty and justice, and our purpose is to get these! The idea of having a child who was deprived of breakfast come to school and say the America in which she now lives has liberty and justice for all, is viciously ludicrous. No. Bellamy knew that "liberty and justice for all" are what America, in her governmental structure, stands for, and to be loyal to America is to work to have that liberty and justice really be.

So if we do say the Pledge of Allegiance we should feel we are saying: "This flag stands for a republic with liberty and justice for all. The Declaration of Independence does. The US Constitution does. And we

have to make sure that that republic comes fully into being. We owe it to you, America, to have you be what you truly want to be, and were designed to be: a nation fair to everyone."

Eli Siegel, as I have said in previous TROs, loved America with a deep, wide, exact, and critical love that I have never seen surpassed, or equaled. America needs his beautiful honesty and knowledge in order to be truly herself: in order to be strong, kind, and safe.

**—Ellen Reiss, Aesthetic Realism Chairman of Education**