

IX.

*ART AND LABOR.*

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To any one living in a working-class district of a great city to-day, the question must arise whether it be at all worth the cost to try to perpetuate art under conditions so hopeless, or whether it be not the only rational or even possible course to give up the struggle from that point, and devote every energy to "the purification of the nation's heart and the chastisement of its life." Only by re-creation of the source of art can it be restored as a living force. But one must always remember the hungering individual soul which, without it, will have passed unsolaced and unfed, followed by other souls who lack the impulse his should have given. And when one sees how almost miraculously the young mind often responds to what is beautiful in its environment, and rejects what is ugly, it renews courage to set the leaven of the beautiful in the midst of the ugly, instead of waiting for the ugly to be first cleared away.

A child of two drunken parents one day brought to Hull-House kindergarten and presented to her teacher a wretched print, with the explanation, "See the Lady Moon." The Lady Moon, so named in one of the songs the children sing, was dimly visible in an extreme corner of the print otherwise devoted to murder and sudden death; but it was the only thing the child really saw.

The nourishment to life of one good picture to sup-

plant in interest vicious story-papers and posters; of one good song to take the place of vulgar street jingles, cannot, I believe, be estimated or guessed. A good picture for every household seems unattainable until households can produce, or at least select, their own; but certainly a good one in every schoolroom would not be unattainable, if the public should come to regard it as a matter of moment that the rooms in which the children of the land spend their most impressionable days be made beautiful and suggestive, instead of barren and repellant.

Mr. T. C. Horsfall, of Manchester, England, who has developed a system of circulating collections of pictures in the schools <sup>1</sup> of that unhappy city, says that the decision as to whether art shall be used in education is, to modern communities, a decision as to whether the mass of the people shall be barbarian or civilized. Assuredly it has a direct bearing upon the art-producing possibilities of the communities in question.

Let us consider what is the prospect for an "art of the people" in our great cities. And first let us admit that art must be of the people if it is to be at all. We must admit this whether we look into the life of the past or into our own life. If we look to any great national art, that of Athens or of Venice or of Florence, we see that it has not been produced by a few, living apart, fed upon conditions different from the common life; but that it has been, in great part, the expression of that common life. If it has reached higher than

<sup>1</sup> The principles and plan of Mr. Horsfall's beneficent work may be found in his papers entitled, "The Use of Pictures in Schools," "Art in Large Towns," and "The Work of the Manchester Art Museum." J. E. Cornish, St. Ann's Square, Manchester.

the common life, it has done so only by rising through it, never by springing up outside it and apart from it. When Florence decked herself with reliefs of the Madonna and the Infant, the life of Florence was a devotion to these shrines. Giotto and Donatello only expressed with a power and grace concentrated in them what all the people felt; and more than that, had not the people felt thus, there could have been no medium for that grace and power.

If we are to have a national art at all, it must be art of the people; and art can only come to a free people. The great prophet of art in our day, John Ruskin, has said that "all great art is praise," showing man's pleasure in God's work; and his disciple, William Morris, expresses another side of the same truth when he says that "to each man is due the solace of art in his labor, and the opportunity of expressing his thoughts to his fellows through that labor." Now, only a free man can express himself in his work. If he is doing slave's work, under slavish conditions, it is doubtful whether he will ultimately have many thoughts worth the name; and if he have, his work can in no wise be their vehicle. It is only when a man is doing work which he wishes done, and delights in doing, and which he is free to do as he likes, that his work becomes a language to him. As soon as it does so become it is artistic. Every man working in the joy of his heart is, in some measure, an artist. Everything wrought with delight in the work itself is, in some measure, lovely. The destructive force of the ugly is its heartlessness. The peasant's cottage in the Tyrol, built with its owner's hands, decorated with his taste, and propounding his morals

and religion in inlaid sentences under its broad eaves, blesses the memory with a beauty but half obliterated by daily sight of dreary parallelograms and triangles, joylessly united, which make up the streets of our working-people. The streets of Venice, of Verona, of Rouen, were built by men working in freedom, at liberty to vary a device or to invent one. They were not built by lawlessness or caprice, but under a willing service, which alone is perfect freedom.

The same men who built so nobly the cathedrals and council-halls of Rouen and Venice, built as harmoniously, though more simply and modestly, as was fit, their own dwellings. Had they been capable of making their own houses ugly, they would have been incapable of housing beautifully the rulers of their city or the King of kings.

This is the fatal mistake of our modern civilization, which is causing it to undo itself and become barbarous in its unloveliness and discord. We have believed that we could force men to live without beauty in their own lives, and still compel them to make for us the beautiful things in which we have denied them any part. We have supposed that we could teach men, in schools, to produce a grace and harmony which they never see, and which the life that we force them to live utterly precludes. Or else we have thought—a still more hopeless error—that they, the workers, the makers, need not know what grace and beauty and harmony are; that artists and architects may keep the secrets, and the builders and makers, not knowing them, can slavishly and mechanically execute what the wise in these mysteries plan.

The results should long ago have taught us our mistake. But only now are we learning, partly from dismal experience of life barren of beauty and variety, and partly from severe but timely teaching from such prophets as Ruskin and Morris, that no man can execute artistically what another man plans, unless the workman's freedom has been part of the plan. The product of a machine may be useful, and may serve some purposes of information, but can never be artistic. As soon as a machine intervenes between the mind and its product, a hard, impassable barrier—a non-conductor of thought and emotion—is raised between the speaking and the listening mind. If a man is made a machine, if his part is merely that of reproducing, with mechanical exactness, the design of somebody else, the effect is the same. The more exact the reproduction, the less of the personality of the man who does the work is in the product, the more uninteresting will the product be. A demonstration of how uninteresting this slavish machine-work can become may be found in the carved and upholstered ornamentation of any drawing-room car—one might also say of any drawing-room one enters.

I have never seen in a city anything in the way of decoration upon the house of an American citizen which he had himself designed and wrought for pleasure in it. In the house of an Italian peasant immigrant in our own neighborhood, I have seen wall and ceiling decorations of his own design, and done by his own hand in colors. The designs were very rude, the colors coarse; but there was nothing of the vulgar in it, and there was something of hope. The peasant immigrant's surroundings begin to be vulgar precisely at the point where he

begins to buy and adorn his dwelling with the products of American manufacture. What he brings with him in the way of carven bed, wrought kerchief, enamel inlaid picture of saint or angel, has its charm of human touch, and is graceful, however childish.

The peasants themselves secretly prefer their old possessions, but are sustained by a proud and virtuous consciousness of having secured what other people have and what the world approves. A dear old peasant friend of Hull House once conceived the notion that the dignity of his wife—whom he called “my lady”—required that she have a dress in the American mode. Many were the mediatorial struggles which we enacted before this “American dress” was fitted and done. And then, by the mercy of Heaven, her courage gave out, and she never wore it. She found it too uncomfortable, and I know that in her inmost heart she found it too ugly.

Could men build their own houses, could they carve or fresco upon casing, door, or ceiling any decoration which pleased them, it is inconceivable that, under conditions of freedom and happiness, they should refrain from doing so. It is inconceivable that, adorning their own dwellings in the gladness of their hearts, they should not develop something of grace, of beauty, of meaning, in what their hands wrought; impossible that their hands should work on unprompted by heart or brain; impossible then, as inevitable now, that most men’s houses should express nothing of themselves save a dull acceptance of things commercially and industrially thrust upon them.

A workingman must accept his house as he finds it.

He not only cannot build it, he cannot buy it, and is usually not at liberty to alter it materially, even had he the motive to do so, being likely to leave it at any time. The frescoed ceiling to which I have referred, as the only example within my experience of any attempt at original decoration, was in a cottage tenement. If the author had any affection for the work of his hands, he could not take it away with him. He would probably not be permitted, were he inclined, to carve the doorposts; and the uncertainty of tenure would deter him from yielding to any artistic prompting to do so. It would be disheartening to find one's belongings set into the street, and be obliged to leave one's brave device half finished.

A man's happiness, as well as his freedom, is a necessary condition of his being artistic. Ruskin lays it down as a law that neither vice nor pain can enter into the entirely highest art. How far art can be at all co-existent with pain, ugliness, gloom, sorrow, slavery, concerns very vitally the question of an art of the people.

No civilized and happy people has ever been able to express itself without art. The prophet expands his "All great art is praise" into "The art of man is the expression of his rational and disciplined delight in the forms and laws of the creation of which he forms a part." A rational and disciplined delight in the forms and laws of the creation of which a denizen of an industrial district in one of our great cities forms a conscious part, is inconceivable. Some of the laws which govern its conscious life may be traced in their resultant forms.

Its most clearly manifested law is "the iron law of wages." Of the workings and products of this law in



squalor, deformity, and irrecoverable loss of health, many examples are given in the accompanying article on Child-labor.

Of the law of love manifested in the harmonious life of the universe, these little toilers know nothing. Of the laws of healthy growth of mind and body by air, sunlight, and wholesome work, neither they nor their children can know anything. Of the laws of heredity they know bitterly, and of the law of arrested development.

It is needlessly painful to say here in what forms these laws have made themselves known to them, and to all who look upon them. It is equally needless to say that they can have no delight in these forms, no wish to reflect and perpetuate them. Need it be said that they can have no art?

The Greek was compelled by his joy in his own and his brother's beauty and strength to make it abiding, and a joy to all who should look upon it. It was a not unreasonable pride which offered to the gods as a religious act the feats of those strong and perfect bodies; and Greek sculpture smiles forth the gladness of the Greek heart blithely in its graceful runners and wrestlers, solemnly in its august deities, whose laws the people obeyed, and rejoiced in obeying. It may not be quite profitless, though altogether painful, to think sometimes of the weak, small, ugly frames produced by the life we force men and little children to live, and of which we would not dare make an offering to an offended God, whose laws we have neither rejoiced in nor obeyed.

Obedience to physical law results always in forms of

physical beauty; love of these forms and happy activity, in artistic expression. From disobedience to law follows physical ugliness, which inspires nothing but apathy or distaste, and results in no artistic utterance. A higher art is born of delight in spiritual beauty, consequent upon obedience to law above the physical. It remains to determine how far the disharmony of disobedience can have expression through art. Discord has place in music only as a negative, to give accent to the positive good. Variety is good, but the eye and ear crave occasional monotony in art-form to make the good of multiform life keenly felt. Beyond that need monotony and discord are both painful. This is the limit of the purely artistic use of these negative values.

The expression of the negative in art-form has, however, within limits, another legitimate use, which bears the same relation to art in its strict sense which pamphleteering bears to literature proper.

Against the infliction or willing permission of pain, there is a gospel to be preached; and for the effectual preaching of this gospel, literature, art, every language in which it can be couched, may be pressed into service.

"We're made so that we love  
First when we see them painted, things we've passed  
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;  
And so they are better, painted, — better to us,  
Which is the same thing. Art was given for that."

So it was, — to make us love the lovable. But if we are made so, too, that we hate for the first time as it deserves to be hated, and dread as we ought to dread it when we see it painted, the destruction of the lovable

and the beautiful by the impious hand of man, then art must descend from her altar service to that hard work of discipline.

As long as we inflict or supinely permit the wilful destruction of life by rapid process or slow, we need to be shocked into the realization of our guilt. But we cannot grow by a series of shocks; and only in so far as we are conceivably responsible for any measure of this woe, and most assuredly only in so far as the sight of it is awful and unbearable to us, can it be anything but harmful to us to see it. So far as it gives any pleasure it blunts or degrades. It is only the faith that God wills that not one of His children should perish, and that with Him all things are possible, in His eternity, which makes it endurable to look for one moment upon the starvation and degradation of mind and soul, the defacement of the image of God by man, in Millet's "Laborer." Strange that we can bear so constantly the sight of the real laborer; that the back bent, never to stand erect in the true figure of a man, the stolid and vacant face, should be looked upon with such equanimity and apathetic acceptance.

The pictures of Jean François Millet illustrate well the limit beyond which art cannot go into the realm of gloom and wrong. They are entirely true always. They reflect perfectly the life and work of the people he knew best, and of whose life he was part. They are beautiful and artistic, or painful and inartistic, just in the degree in which naturalness, the joy, the rightness, or the unnaturalness, severity, gloom and slavery of that life predominate. From the child carrying a lamb in her arms, and followed by the loving mother and whole

docile flock; the father stretching out his arms to his baby, graceful in his love through the clumsiness of his excessive toil; all the dreary distance to that heart-breaking image of man's desecration he passes, through every step of increasing backache and stolidity, fearless and, indeed, helpless. It is the awful record of a soul seeing things as they are, and recording them as he must in his art language, which ceases to be artistic, and becomes ugly, inartistic, inarticulate, and finally refuses to go farther into the discord of man's desolate, stifled, degraded life. Behind the laborer with the hoe stretch God's earth and sky. "With these open witnesses, you have done that, O man! What you have done in darkness, away from the face of these witnesses, my art cannot say." No true art can. Into the prison-houses of earth, its sweat-shops and underground lodging-houses, art cannot follow.

Whatever the inspiring motive of art, though there be in it pain and struggle, the result must be one of triumph, at least of hope. Art can never present humanity as overborne. It cannot let the hostile principle, pain, sorrow, sin, at the last conquer. Just where it begins to smother and snuff out the flame of life, art turns away.

When life reaches a point at which it can furnish no more material for art, we cannot look to it for an artistic people. If in all the environment of a man's life, there is nothing which can inspire a true work of art, there is nothing to inspire a true love of it, could it be produced. The love of the beautiful grows by what it feeds on; and the food must be the common bread of life. That which makes the art-loving people, makes the artist also. Every nation which has left a great art record has lived

an artistic life. The artist is not a product of spontaneous generation. Every Athenian, every Florentine boy, saw daily in the street the expression of the most perfect thought of his people, reflecting their thought of God; and he saw it, side by side with God's own thought, undefaced and undefiled. He saw column and tower and statue standing against a sky, the pure, serene, tender, infinite mirror of the divine intelligence and love; and hills, the unswerving image of divine steadfastness. He saw them unpolluted by the smoke, and undistracted by the din of commercial strife. Poor or rich, the best his nation wrought was his. He must be taught his art as a craft, if he were to follow it; and he did learn it precisely as a craft which must be honestly and industriously practised. But first and always he lived it, as a life, in common with the life of his nation.

The boy of our great cities, rich or poor (we are so far democratic), has this common inheritance. He sees from his earliest years the mart; not the *mercato vecchio* of Florence, where the angel faces of Della Robbia looked down above the greengrocer's wares in the open booth, from out wreaths of fruit and flowers that vied with those below; but our *mercato nuovo*. He sees there walls high and monotonous; windows all alike (which he who built had no pleasure in); piles of merchandise, not devised with curious interest and pleasant exercise of inventive faculty, but with stolid, mechanical indifference; garish wares, and faces too harassed and hurried to give back greeting. These belong to rich and poor alike. But here the lots diverge. The poor lad goes, not to his sheep, like Giotto, nor to keeping his feet warm, like Luca, in a basket of shavings, while he

works cheerily at his art and saves fire; he goes home to the dreary tenement, not fireless, but with closed windows to keep its heat within, dingy plaster, steam of washing and odors of cooking, near discordant voices, loneliness of a crowded life without companionship or high ideals; and for view of hills and sky, the theatre bills on the walls across the street, and factory chimneys.

The son of the rich man goes home to his father's house. Through plate glass and lace curtains he looks across at his neighbor's father's house, with its lace curtains, — perhaps a little less costly, perhaps a little more. Up and down the street he compares the upholstery, the equipages, the number and formality of the servants belonging to the establishments which represent his social life. He has flowers in a greenhouse; he has fine clothes; he has books; he has pictures. Does he live an artistic life? Can we look to him for the great art of the future? Alas! "The life of the poor is too painful; the life of the rich too vulgar." Rather, is not the life of each both painful and vulgar to a degree which seems almost beyond hope? "The haggard despair of cotton-factory, coal-mine operatives in these days is painful to behold; but not so painful, hideous to the inner sense, as that brutish, God-forgetting, Profit-and-loss Philosophy and Life-Theory which we hear jangled on all hands of us, from the throats and pens and thoughts of all-but all men."<sup>1</sup> Happily, at least for art, there remains that "all-but" modicum, — the tenaciously impractical and unbusiness-like, the incorrigibly unconvinced as to the supreme importance of

<sup>1</sup> Carlyle, Past and Present.

"selling cotton cheaper." Else "vacuum and the serene blue" would, indeed, "be much handsomer" than this our civilization. For the children of the "degraded poor," and the degraded rich as well, in our present mode of life, there is no artistic hope outside of miracle.

There is one hope for us all, — a new life, a freed life. He who hopes to help art survive on earth till the new life dawn, must indeed feed the hungry with good things. This must he do, but not neglect for this the more compassionate and far-reaching aim, the freeing of the art-power of the whole nation and race by enabling them to work in gladness and not in woe. It is a feeble and narrow imagination which holds out to chained hands fair things which they cannot grasp, — things which they could fashion for themselves were they but free.

The soul of man in the commercial and industrial struggle is in a state of siege. He is fighting for his life. It is merciful and necessary to pass in to him the things which sustain his courage and keep him alive, but the effectual thing is to raise the siege.

A settlement, if it is true to its ideal, must stand equally for both aims. It must work with all energy and courage toward the rescue of those bound under the slavery of commerce and the wage-law; with all abstinence it must discountenance wasting human life in the making of valueless things; with all faith it must urge forward the building up of a state in which cruel contrasts of surfeit and want, of idleness and overwork, shall not be found. By holding art and all good fruit of life to be the right of all; by urging all, because of this their common need, to demand time and means for supplying it; by reasonableness in the doing, with others,

of useful, wholesome, beneficent work, and the enjoyment, with others, of rightful and sharable pleasure, a settlement should make toward a social state which shall finally supplant this incredible and impious warfare of the children of God.

Whatever joy is to us ennobling; whatever things seem to us made for blessing, and not for weariness and woe; whatever knowledge lifts us out of things paltry and narrowing, and exalts and expands our life; whatever life itself is real and worthy to endure, as there is measure of faith in us, and hope and love and patience, let us live this life. And let us think on our brothers, that they may live it too; for without them we cannot live it if we would; and when we and they shall have this joy of life, then we shall speak from within it, and our speech shall be sweet, and men will listen and be glad. What we do with our hands will be fair, and men shall have pleasure therein. This will be art. Otherwise we cannot all have it; and until all have it in some measure, none can have it in great measure. And if gladness ceases upon the earth, and we turn the fair earth into a prison-house for men with hard and loveless labor, art will die.