

LEARNING
AND
OTHER ESSAYS

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LEARNING.

AN expert on Greek Art chanced to describe in my hearing one of the engraved gems in the Metropolitan Museum. He spoke of it as 'certainly one of the great gems of the world,' and there was something in his tone that was even more thrilling than his words. He might have been describing the Parthenon or Beethoven's Mass,—such was the passion of reverence that flowed out of him as he spoke. I went to see the gem afterwards. It was badly placed, and for all artistic purposes was invisible. I suppose that even if I had had a good look at it, I should not have been able to appreciate its full merit. Who could?—save the handful of adepts in the world, the little group of gem-readers, by whom the mighty music of this tiny score could be read at sight.

Nevertheless it was a satisfaction to me to have seen the stone. I knew that through its surface there poured the power of the Greek world; that not without Phidias and Aristotle, and not without the Parthenon, could it have come into existence. It carried in its bosom a digest of the visual laws of spiritual force, and was as wonderful and as sacred as any stone could well be. Its value to mankind was not to be measured by my comprehension of it, but was inestimable. As Petrarch felt toward the Greek manuscript of Homer which he owned but could not read, so did I feel toward the gem.

What is Education? What are Art and Religion and all those higher interests in civilization which are always vaguely held up to us as being the most important things in life? These things elude definition. They cannot be put into words except through the

interposition of what the Germans call 'a metaphysic.' Before you can introduce them into discourse, you must step aside for a moment and create a theory of the universe; and by the time you have done this, you have perhaps befogged yourself and exhausted your readers. Let us be content with a more modest ambition. It is possible to take a general view of the externals of these subjects without losing reverence for their realities. It is possible to consider the forms under which art and religion appear,—the algebra and notation by which they have expressed themselves in the past,—and to draw some general conclusion as to the nature of the subject, without becoming entangled in the subject itself.

We may deal with the influence of the gem without striving exactly to translate its meaning into speech. We all concede its importance. We know, for instance, that the admiration of my friend the expert was no accident. He found in the design and workmanship of the intaglio the same ideas which he had been at work on all his life. Greek culture long ago had become a part of this man's brain, and its hieroglyphs expressed what to him was religion. So of all monuments, languages, and arts which descend to us out of the past. The peoples are dead, but the documents remain; and these documents themselves are part of a living and intimate tradition which also descends to us out of the past,—a tradition so familiar and native to the brain that we forget its origin. We almost believe that our feeling for art is original with us. We are tempted to think there is some personal and logical reason at the back of all grammar, whether it be the grammar of speech or the grammar of architecture,—so strong is the appeal to our taste made by traditional usage. Yet the great reason of the power of art is the historic reason. 'In this manner have these things been

expressed: in similar manner must they continue to be said.' So speaks our artistic instinct.

Good usage has its sanction, like religion or government. We transmit the usage without pausing to think why we do so. We instinctively correct a child, without pausing to reflect that the fathers of the race are speaking through us. When the child says, 'Give me a apple,' we correct him—"You must say, 'An apple.'" What the child really means, in fact, is an apple.

All teaching is merely a way of acquainting the learner with the body of existing tradition. If the child is ever to have anything to say of his own, he has need of every bit of this expressive medium to help him do it. The reason is, that, so far as expressiveness goes, only one language exists. Every experiment and usage of the past is a part of this language. A phrase or an idea rises in the Hebrew, and filters through the Greek or Latin and French down to our own time. The practitioners who scribble and dream in words from their childhood up,—into whose habit of thought language is kneaded through a thousand reveries,—these are the men who receive, reshape, and transmit it. Language is their portion, they are the priests of language.

The same thing holds true of the other vehicles of idea, of painting, architecture, religion, etc., but since we have been speaking of language, let us continue to speak of language. Expressiveness follows literacy. The poets have been tremendous readers always. Petrarch, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Goethe, Byron, Keats—those of them who possessed not much of the foreign languages had a passion for translations. It is amazing how little of a foreign language you need if you have a passion for the thing written in it. We think of Shakespeare as of a lightly-lettered

person; but he was ransacking books all day to find plots and language for his plays. He reeks with mythology, he swims in classical metaphor: and, if he knew the Latin poets only in translation, he knew them with that famished intensity of interest which can draw the meaning through the walls of a bad text. Deprive Shakespeare of his sources, and he could not have been Shakespeare.

Good poetry is the echoing of shadowy tongues, the recovery of forgotten talent, the garment put up with perfumes. There is a passage in the *Tempest* which illustrates the freemasonry of artistic craft, and how the weak sometimes hand the torch to the mighty. Prospero's apostrophe to the spirits is, surely, as Shakespearian as anything in Shakespeare and as beautiful as anything in imaginative poetry.

“Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves;
And ye, that in the sands with printless foot
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him,
When he comes back; you demi-puppets, that
By moonshine do the sour ringlets make,
Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastime
Is to make midnight mushrooms that rejoice
To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid
(Weak masters though ye be) I have bedimmed
The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,
And 'twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault
Set roaring war: to the dread rattling thunder
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak
With his own bolt: the strong-bas'd promontory
Have I made shake; and by the spurs pluck'd up
The pine and cedar: graves at my command

Have waked their sleepers; oped and let them forth
By my so potent art.”

Shakespeare borrowed this speech from Medea’s speech in Ovid, which he knew in the translation of Arthur Golding; and really Shakespeare seems almost to have held the book in his hand while penning Prospero’s speech. The following is from Golding’s translation, published in 1567:

“Ye Ayres and windes; ye Elves of Hilles and Brooks, of
Woods alone,
Of standing Lakes and of the Night approach ye every chone.
Through helpe of whom (the crooked banks much wondering
at the thing)
I have compelled streams to run clean backward to their
spring.
By charmes I make the calm seas rough, and make the rough
Seas plaine.
And cover all the Skie with Clouds and chase them thence
again.
By charmes I raise and lay the windes, and burst the Viper’s
jaw.
And from the bowels of the Earth both stones and trees doe
draw.
Whole woods and Forestes I remove: I make the Mountains
shake,
And even the Earth it selfe to grone and fearfully to quake.
I call up dead men from their graves: and thee O lightsome
Moone
I darken oft, though beaten brasse abate thy perill soone.
Our Sorcerie dims the Morning faire, and darkes the Sun at
Noone.

The flaming breath of fierie Bulles ye quenched for my sake.
And caused their unwieldie neck the bended yokes to take.
Among the Earthbred brothers you a mortell war did set
And brought a sleepe the Dragon fell whose eyes were never
shut.”

There is, and is to be, no end of this reappearance of old metaphor, old trade secret, old usage of art. No sooner has a masterpiece appeared, that summarizes all knowledge, than men get up eagerly the next morning with chisel and brush, and try again. Nothing done satisfies. It is all in the making that the inspiration lies; and this endeavor renews itself with the ages, and grows by devouring its own offspring.

The technique of any art is the whole body of experimental knowledge through which the art speaks. The glazes of pottery become forgotten and have to be hit upon over again. The knack of Venetian glass, the principle of effect in tiles, in lettering, in the sonnet, in the fugue, in the tower,—all the prestidigitation of art that is too subtle to be named or thought of, must yet be acquired and kept up by practice, held to by constant experiment.

Good artistic expression is thus not only a thing done: it is a way of life, a habit of breathing, a mode of unconsciousness, a world of being which records itself as it unrolls. We call this world Art for want of a better name; but the thing that we value is the life within, not the shell of the creature. This shell is what is left behind in the passage of time, to puzzle our after-study and make us wonder how it was made, how such complex delicacy and power ever came to co-exist. I have often wondered over the *Merchant of Venice* as one wonders over a full-blown transparent poppy that sheds light and blushes like a cloud. Neither the poppy nor the play were

exactly hewn out: they grew, they expanded and bloomed by a sort of inward power,—unconscious, transcendent. The fine arts blossom from the old stock,—from the poppy-seed of the world.

I am here thinking of the whole body of the arts, the vehicles through which the spirit of man has been expressed. I am thinking also of the sciences,—whose refractory, belligerent worshipers are even less satisfied with any past expression than the artists are, for their mission is to destroy and to rearrange. They would leave nothing alive but themselves. Nevertheless, science has always been obliged to make use of written language in recording her ideas. The sciences are as much a part of recorded language as are the arts. No matter how revolutionary scientific thought may be, it must resort to metaphysics when it begins to formulate its ultimate meanings. Now when you approach metaphysics, the Greek and the Hebrew have been there before you: you are very near to matters which perhaps you never intended to approach. You are back at the beginning of all things. In fact, human thought does not advance, it only recurs. Every tone and semi-tone in the scale is a keynote; and every point in the Universe is the centre of the Universe; and every man is the centre and focus of the cosmos, and through him passes the whole of all force, as it exists and has existed from eternity; hence the significance which may at any moment radiate out of anything.

The different arts and devices that time hands to us are like our organs. They are the veins and arteries of humanity. You cannot rearrange them or begin anew. Your verse-forms and your architecture are chosen for you, like your complexion and your temperament. The thing you desire to express is in them already. Your labors do no more than enable you to find your own soul in them. If you will begin any piece of artistic work in an empirical

spirit and slave over it until it suits you, you will find yourself obliged to solve all the problems which the artists have been engaged on since the dawn of history. Be as independent as you like, you will find that you have been anticipated at every point: you are a slave to precedent, because precedent has done what you are trying to do, and, ah, how much better! In the first place, the limitations, the horrible limitations of artistic possibility, will begin to present themselves; few things can be done: they have all been tried: they have all been worked to death: they have all been developed by immortal genius and thereafter avoided by lesser minds,—left to await more immortal genius. The field of endeavor narrows itself in proportion to the greatness of the intellect that is at work. In ages of great art everyone knows what the problem is and how much is at stake. Masaccio died at the age of twenty-seven, after having painted half a dozen pictures which influenced all subsequent art, because they showed to Raphael the best solution of certain technical questions. The Greeks of the best period were so very knowing that everything appeared to them ugly except the few attitudes, the few arrangements, which were capable of being carried to perfection.

Anyone who has something to say is thus found to be in one sense a slave, but a rich slave who has inherited the whole earth. If you can only obey the laws of your slavery, you become an emperor: you are only a slave in so far as you do not understand how to use your wealth. If you have but the gift of submission, you conquer. Many tongues, many hands, many minds, a traditional state of feeling, traditional symbols,—the whole passed through the eyes and soul of a single man,—such is art, such is human expression in all its million-sided variety.

II.

I have thrown together these remarks in an elliptical and haphazard way, hoping to show what sort of thing education is, and as a prologue to a few reflections upon the educational conditions in the United States.

It is easy to think of reasons why the standards of general education should be low in America. Almost every influence which is hostile to the development of deep thought and clear feeling has been at the maximum of destructive power in the United States. We are a new society, made of a Babel of conflicting European elements, engaged in exploiting the wealth of a new continent, under conditions of climate which involve a nervous reorganization to Europeans who come to live with us. Our history has been a history of quiet colonial beginnings, followed by a national life which, from its inception, has been one of social unrest. And all this has happened during the great epoch of the expansion of commerce, the thought-destroying epoch of the world.

Let us take a rapid glance at our own past. In the beginning we were settlers. Now the settlement of any new continent plays havoc with the arts and crafts. Let us imagine that among the Mayflower pilgrims there had been a few expert wood-carvers, a violin player or two, and a master architect. These men, upon landing in the colony, must have been at a loss for employment. They would have to turn into backwoodsmen. Their accomplishments would in time have been forgotten. Within a generation after the landing of the pilgrims there must have followed a decline in the fine arts, in scholarship, and in certain kinds of social refinement. This decline was, to some extent, counteracted in our colonial era by the

existence of wealth in the Colonies and by the constant intercourse with Europe, from which the newest models were imported by every vessel. Nevertheless, it is hard for a colony to make up for its initial loss; and we have recently seen the United States government making efforts on a large scale to give to the American farmer those practices of intensive cultivation of the soil which he lost by becoming a backwoodsman and has never since had time to recover for himself.

The American Revolution was our second serious set-back in education. So hostile to culture is war that the artisans of France have never been able to attain to the standards of workmanship which prevailed under the old monarchy. Our national culture started with the handicap of a seven years' war, and was always a little behindhand. During the nineteenth century the American citizen has been buffeting the waves of new development. His daily life has been an experiment. His moral, social, political interests and duties have been indeterminate; nothing has been settled for him by society. Is a man to have an opinion? Then he must make it himself. This demands a more serious labor than if he were obliged to manufacture his own shoes and candlesticks. No such draught upon individual intellect is made in an old country. You cannot get a European to understand this distressing overtaxing of the intelligence in America. Nothing like it has occurred before, because in old countries opinion is part of caste and condition: opinion is the shadow of interest and of social status.

But in America the individual is not protected against society at large by the bulwark of his class. He stands by himself. It is a noble idea that a man should stand by himself, and the conditions which force a man to do so have occasionally created magnificent types of heroic manhood in America. Lincoln, Garrison, Emerson,

and many lesser athletes are the fruits of these very conditions which isolate the individual in America and force him to think for himself. Yet their effect upon general cultivation has been injurious. It seems as if character were always within the reach of every human soul; but men must have become homogeneous before they can produce art.

We have thus reviewed a few of the causes of our American loss of culture. Behind all these causes, however, was the true and overmastering cause, namely, that sudden creation of wealth for which the nineteenth century is noted, the rise all over the world of new and uneducated classes. We came into being as a part of that world movement which has perceptibly retarded culture, even in Europe. How, then, could we in America hope to resist it? Whether this movement is the result of democratic ideas, or of mechanical inventions, or of scientific discovery, no one can say. The elements that go to make up the movement cannot be unraveled. We only know that the world has changed: the old order has vanished with all its charm, with all its experience, with all its refinement. In its place we have a crude world, indifferent to everything except physical well-being. In the place of the fine arts and the crafts we have business and science.

Business is, of course, devoted to the increase of physical well-being; but what is Science? Now, in one sense, science is anything that true scientific men of the moment happen to be studying. In one decade, science means the discussion of spontaneous generation, or spontaneous variation, in the next of plasm, in the next of germs, or of electrodes. Whatever the scientific world takes up as a study becomes "science." It is impossible to deny the truth of this rather self-destructive definition. In a more serious sense, however, science is the whole body of organized knowledge; and a

distinction is sometimes made between “pure” science and “applied” science; the first being concerned solely with the ascertainment of truth, the second, with practical matters.

In these higher regions, in which science is synonymous with the search for truth, science partakes of the nature of religion. It purifies its votaries; it speaks to them in cryptic language, revealing certain exalted realities not unrelated to the realities of music, or of poetry and religion. The men through whom this enthusiasm for pure science passes are surely, each in his degree, transmitters of heroic influence; and, in their own way, they form a kind of priesthood. It must be confessed, too, that this priesthood is peculiarly the product of the nineteenth century.

The Brotherhood of Science is a new order, a new Dispensation. It would seem to me impossible to divide one’s feeling toward science according to the divisions “pure” and “applied”; because many men in whom the tide of true enthusiasm runs the strongest deal in applied science, as, for instance, surgeons, bacteriologists, etc. Nor ought we to forget those great men of science who have an attitude of sympathy toward all human excellence, and a reverence for things which cannot be approached through science. Such men resemble those saints who have also, incidentally, been kings and popes. Their personal magnitude obliterates our interest in their position in the hierarchy. We think of them as men, not as popes, kings or scientists. In the end we must admit that there are as many kinds of science as there are of men engaged in scientific pursuits. The word science legitimately means an immense variety of things, loosely connected together, some of them deserving of strong reprobation. I shall use the term with such accuracy as I am able to command, and leave it to the candid reader to make allowance for whatever injustice this course may entail.

To begin with, we must find fault with the Brotherhood of Science on much the same ground that we fought the old religions, upon grounds of tyranny and narrowness, of dogmatism and presumption. In the next place, it is evident that, in so far as science is not hallowed by the spirit of religion, it is a mere extension of business. It is the essence of world-business, race-business, cosmic-business. It saves time, saves lives, and dominates the air and the sea; but all these things may be accomplished, for ought we know, in the course of the extinction of the better nature of mankind. Science is not directly interested in the expression of spiritual truth; her notation cannot include anything so fluctuating, so indeterminate, as the language of feeling. Science neither sings nor jokes; neither prays nor rejoices; neither loves nor hates. This is not her fault; but her limitation. Her fault is that, as a rule, she respects only her own language and puts trust only in what is in her own shop window.

I deprecate the contempt which science expresses for anything that does not happen to be called science. Imperial and haughty science proclaims its occupancy of the whole province of human thought; yet, as a matter of fact, science deals in a language of its own, in a set of formulae and conceptions which cannot cover the most important interests of humanity. It does not understand the value of the fine arts and is always at loggerheads with philosophy. Is it not clear that science, in order to make good her claim to universality, must adopt a conception of her own function that shall leave to the fine arts and to religion their languages? She cannot hope to compete with these languages, nor to translate or expound them. She must accept them. At present she tramples upon them.

There are, then, in the modern world these two influences which are hostile to education,—the influence of business and the

influence of uninspired science. In Europe these influences are qualified by the vigor of the old learning. In America they dominate remorselessly, and make the path of education doubly hard. Consider how they meet us in ordinary social life. We have all heard men bemoan the time they have spent over Latin and Greek on the ground that these studies did not fit them for business,—as if a thing must be worthless if it can be neither eaten nor drunk. It is hard to explain the value of education to men who have forgotten the meaning of education: its symbols convey nothing to them.

The situation is very similar in dealing with scientific men,—at least with that large class of them who have little learning and no religion, and who are thus obliged to use the formulae of modern science as their only vehicle of thought. These men regard humanity as something which started up in Darwin's time. They do not listen when the humanities are mentioned; and if they did they would not understand. When Darwin confessed that poetry had no meaning for him, and that nothing significant was left to him in the whole artistic life of the past, he did not know how many of his brethren his words were destined to describe.

We can forgive the business man for the loss of his birthright: he knows no better. But we have it against a scientist if he undervalues education. Surely, the Latin classics are as valuable a deposit as the crustacean fossils, or the implements of the Stone Age. When science shall have assumed her true relation to the field of human culture we shall all be happier. To-day science knows that the silkworm must be fed on the leaves of the mulberry tree, but does not know that the soul of man must be fed on the Bible and the Greek classics. Science knows that a queen bee can be produced by care and feeding, but does not as yet know that every

man who has had a little Greek and Latin in his youth belongs to a different species from the ignorant man. No matter how little it may have been, it reclassifies him. There is more kinship between that man and a great scholar than there is between the same man and some one who has had no classics at all: he breathes from a different part of his anatomy. Drop the classics from education? Ask rather, Why not drop education? For the classics are education. We cannot draw a line and say, 'Here we start.' The facts are the other way. We started long ago, and our very life depends upon keeping alive all that we have thought and felt during our history. If the continuity is taken from us, we shall relapse.

When we discover that these two tremendous interests—business and commercial science have arisen in the modern world and are muffling the voice of man, we tremble for the future. If these giants shall continue their subjugation of the gods, the whole race, we fear, may relapse into dumbness. By good fortune, however, there are other powers at work. The race is emotionally too rich and too much attached to the past to allow its faculties to be lost through disuse. New and spontaneous crops will soon be growing upon the mould of our own stubbly, thistle-bearing epoch.

In the meantime we in America must do the best we can. It is no secret that our standards of education are below those of Europe. Our art, our historical knowledge, our music and general conversation, show a stiffness and lack of exuberance—a lack of vitality and of unconscious force—the faults of beginners in all walks of life. During the last twenty-five years much improvement has been made in those branches of cultivation which depend directly upon wealth. Since the Civil War there seems to have been a decline in the higher literature, accompanied by an advance in the plastic arts. And more recently still there has been a literary

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