CHAPTER XVII

RETROSPECT

The godly seed fares well,
The wicked's is accurst.—THEOCRITUS.

But as it is in Nature, where from the seed is first produced the blade, then the green ear, and lastly, the ripe corn, so national virtues sprout up first in lesser excellencies, and proceed by an easy gradation. . . . I am no prophet, nor the son of a prophet; but considering the necessary connection of causes and events, and upon seeing some links of that fatal chain, I will venture to pronounce that if ever the ancient great and beautiful taste in painting revives, it will be in England; but not till English painters, conscious of the dignity of their country and of their professions, resolve to do honour to both by piety, virtue, magnanimity, benevolence, and industry, and a contempt of everything that is unworthy of them.—RICHARDSON (1792).

DIFFERENCES of blood cannot be ignored either in literature or art. Nations may gain much in emulative competition one with the other; but the vertebral effort of each should be on native lines, and while reaching forward to perfection, it should cast away what to highest judgment proves unworthy. The opinion I formed on my first visit to Paris in 1849, that study for an English student in the French schools was nearly always disastrous, resulting in destruction of the power to develop the British instinct, has since been confirmed; indeed I have found that most men once possessed of Parisian sentiment seldom recover their native strain. Brown was a rare exception to this rule. The French School when led by Ingres and Delaroche was richly and powerfully endowed,

and it exercised becoming restraint; this justified high respect for its influence; but now that the foreign schools (I enlarge my term advisedly, since all Continental schools have now adopted the Parisian example) have become thoroughly unbridled in the rejection of humility, and treat ignorance and carelessness as a proof of masterliness, evil is a hundredfold increased. Drawing from the life in Paris is undertaken without due preparation from the antique, and habituates the eye of the novice to forms of poor type disfigured by the wearing of artificial clothing, and the weak developments of town life, to which evil is added the deadness of long-continued heavy posings, so that all ideas of grace or motion are permanently eradicated from the mind, and all ethereal ideas, the very soul of art, are eliminated. I cannot ignore a growing prejudice in favour of an artist being labelled as of a "School," using the word as identical with "Shoal"; this happily is not native to British art, and should be guarded against.

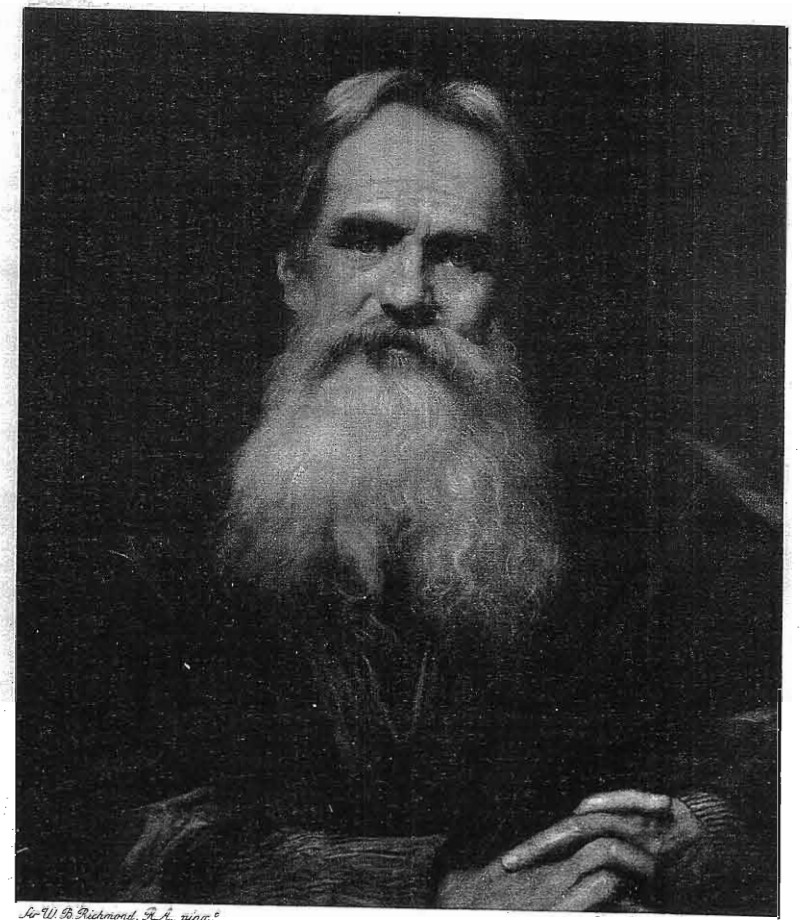
Independence of mind is evinced, both in graphic art and in literature, by manly scruple against sickly vicious story even more than by marked individuality of outward form. Of late years continental taste has been asserting itself injuriously amongst us not only in art and literature, but more disastrously upon the stage; and themes based upon moral turpitude, which our standard fathers of the drama rejected, escape the censors' veto, and are presented in spectacular form (that readiest in power of appeal to the people), making familiar and commonplace what else was outlandish and abhorrent to the inheritors of healthy and sturdy English tradition. Some writers indeed seem stirred by emulation to attract the idle-minded to new excitements, by magnifying latent horrors in life as bequeathed by ancestors, overtaking helpless and innocent persons, and forming a pursuing destiny to the inheritors, in the destruction of mind and body, contriving by the way to insinuate their silly arguments against the sacredness of marriage. To tolerate

infraction of social laws adopted to keep a nation innocent and happy, easily leads to the assumption that all bridling of natural impulse is but social convention, and man is told by dealers in modern materialistic fantasy that he is a creature above whom rules a blind fate that will make virtuous effort on his part simply futile; that the inevitable destiny of heredity will make drunkards, or lead men to criminality; and that the forces of the outside world will overrule resolutions formed by a healthy sense of responsibility and self-control.

Once talking with Sir William Gull of the force of heredity in disease, he reasoned that however strong this might be, there is a counterbalancing action in nature which throws off the taint and works for perfection; otherwise the transmission of disease would have destroyed the human race, and all creation, ages ago. I commend this scientific teaching to authors inclined to inculcate pessimism and revolt against moral law, and note further, that were we overruled by the habits of our grandfathers, the cultivated classes of to-day would not have escaped the vice of deep drinking, or be as temperate as they undoubtedly are.

Wild revolt shows itself in the art of our day in the form of Impressionism.

The name of Impressionist as representing a class of modern artists is, it must be owned, a widely bewildering one, for in a collection of works to which artists thus designated contribute, are to be found productions of very varying types. The term might have been applied to every artist even in my earliest youth, for no one ever dismissed any part of his work without self-inquiry whether his achievement gave the "impression" of the object represented, but then the quality was only considered to be of value after many other excellencies had made a foundation for the redeeming grace to form colour and expression. When we Pre-Raphaelites were charged with exaggeration in our key of colour, and were told that our pictures had all the hues of the rainbow,



Sir W. B. Richmond. R.A. pinxt. Swan Electric Engraving Co. Sc.

W. Holman Hunt.

we replied that the brown shadows of old professors did not give the impression of open-air effect which we had been surprised to discover while searching for the truth before Nature herself. We registered prismatic hues because we found that each terrestrial feature mirrored the blue sky and the tints of its neighbouring creations; and we maintained that while a part of our picture by itself might appear over-coloured, it was consistent in the impression it gave of truth. I cannot understand the correctness of the term Impressionist as representing the paramount end of art. Undoubtedly many of the works classed by the public as impressionistic have no evidence of sober common-sense; they are without perspective, correct form, or any signs of patient drilling and scholarship. They suggest suspicion that the workman never duly submitted himself to persistent tuition or patient practice, and not seldom on inquiry it will be found that he took up the pursuit of art so late in life as to prove that he had no natural call from her; and he covers his inability to conquer the besetting sins, which every tyro must eradicate from his uncultivated disposition, by fine names and theories. In any case as a beginning to an art career such practice is most damaging, and even at the best it is liable to lead capable manipulators to a system of work representing the outside of things only, and to the immortalising of accidental points tending to caricature, so that the soul of a subject is lost. Whether it be right to catalogue the hideous canvases often appearing in exhibitions in recent days, chaotic in form, of sullied pigment plastered on offensively, both as to tint and texture, as "Impressionist" and to class as "Impressionist" sculptures of evil-proportioned humanity displaying a series of monstrous developments in lieu of heavenly-designed muscles, I will not determine; but their makers are now the nucleus of an obtrusive party in the art world, and being a standing peril to honest and honourable art, it behoves us to find out from what source their degrading pretensions arise. Such art is the product

solely of modern days, for all previous students were taught to be reverent and careful in their beginnings. The new growth has professedly come from Paris, which, as we all recognise, in earlier days produced art justly eliciting admiration for its able workmanship, its dramatic genius, as also for the reflection it gave of the noble qualities of the nation at large. Seeing that an artist must by his work represent the nature dear to his own heart, it is incumbent upon all lovers of true art, having the interest of students in mind, to investigate the question how this poisonous influence is fostered, and what is the environment which tends to form the character of those exposed to it. No independent evidence collected from sources undeclared would be taken as without animus; opportunely we are supplied by an independent witness with an appreciative testimony on all the phases of student life in the French metropolis. This is stated in a book,[1] giving the professed experiences of two American friends studying in Paris. That the testimony is far from veiled sarcasm may be judged from the concluding rhapsodical passage of the volume which I cite later.

The Academy routine begins with the reception of a student at the Beaux-Arts. After the official enrolment, two orders of students are spoken of, the "anciens" and the "nouveaux." The writer describes his friend as electing to enter Gerome's studio. Among the new students were a Turk, a Hungarian, a Siamese, an American, and five provincial Frenchmen. "Five-and-twenty francs were demanded for the incidental expenses of the school and for the *drink*." "The Turk refused, explaining that he only had thirty francs for his month's living, but menacing stools and sticks opened his purse." "With the money collected they retired to a café, and sang songs fit only for the studio."

Coarse horse-play was conducted on the part of the "anciens" against the "nouveaux." The Turk was seized

[1] *Bohemian Paris of To-day*, by W. C. Morrow, from notes by Edouard Cucuel. London: Chatto and Windus, 1899.

and bound, a mock branding being enacted upon him. Brutal threats and force were used against all those who refused obedience to the stupid and cruel whims of their persecutors. The Turkish victim, being left tied up on a lofty shelf, was found in the morning by the porter, having developed an illness of long and dangerous continuance.

Particulars are given of the career of poor models, who, beginning modestly, inevitably engaged in a reckless life as the mistresses of successive artists, and ended their days in suicide.

The author states that one of these, famous for her beauty, became the cause of a "students' riot in 1893, which came near to ending in a revolution." But she also at the last was driven to desperation, and ended her life violently, and "Paris laughed!"

The book goes on to give a description of a Saturnalia of the "Quat'z Arts," with proceedings too outrageous to transcribe here. The whole night was spent in an orgie in which all sense of honest fun was drowned in debauchery and blindness to that responsibility which every sane man owes in his dealings with his fellow-men. The wild crew, more or less mad, issued from their den of riot in the early dawn.

> The deserted Rue Blanche re-echoed the wild yells of the revellers. The rows of heaped ash-cans that lined the way were overturned one after another, and the oaths and threatening brooms of the outraged concierges went for nothing. Even the poor diligent rag and bone pickers were not spared; their filled sacks, carrying the result of their whole night's hunt, were taken from them and emptied. A string of carts laden with stone were captured near the Rue Lafayette, the drivers deposed, and the big horses sent plunging through Paris, driven by Roman charioteers. Within the court of the Louvre was drawn up a regiment of the Garde Municipale going through the morning drill, but when the mob of Greek and Roman warriors flung themselves bodily upon the ranks of the guard, ousted the officers, and assumed command, there was consternation; the drill was turned into a farce; the officers, furious at first, could not resist the spirit of pure fun, but took their revenge by kissing the models and making them dance.

The story goes on to describe this student life as the acknowledged preparation for the artistic career, and the writer's friend seems to have taken part in all the Saturnalia and misrule with zest, without a thought of his being answerable for his share in the inferno which consigned so many human lives to infamy and despair. Speaking of one student, it is said :—

> He came to Paris thirteen years before to study, with an allowance from his father of 100 francs a month. The young man studied diligently for a while, but soon found the easy life of the café, with the models for companions, more fascinating than the dull grind of the school. It was much pleasanter to enjoy the gaiety of the nights and sleep all day than drone and labour at his easel. He fell deeply in debt, and gave more heed to absinthe than to meals. For a whole year his father was in total ignorance of his son's conduct; but one day a friend laid the ugly story before him. He instantly stopped the remittances and disowned his son, but there was his mistress always faithful to him; she shared her small earnings with him. He had just gone the way of many and many another, and others are following in his steps, deluding self-denying parents and setting foot on the road which, so broad and shining at the beginning, narrows and darkens as it leads nearer and nearer to the rat-holes under the bridges of the Seine.

Passing by record of entertainments whose attractiveness consists in the mockery of all the most sacred and deepest interests of life, we come to the concluding passage in the book, which proves the author's undisturbed conviction that the life described is the perfect preparation for the artist's career :—

> Dear old Paris! wonderful, bewildering Paris! alluring, enchanting Paris! Our student years are now just ended, and Paris is already so crowded with workers who cannot bear to leave it, that we must seek our fortune in other and duller parts of the world. But Paris has ineradicably impressed itself upon us. We have lived its life; we have been a part of its throbbing, working, achieving individuality. What we take away will be of imperishable value, the salt and leaven of our hopes and efforts for ever.

We put down the book recognising it to be a sufficient explanation of the source whence issues the bare idea that art is only admirable when severed from moral ideals, and is alone worthy to be wildly extolled when the artist, degraded in mind and crippled in all his powers of representation and expression, has produced on his canvas or in his clay the inevitable result of idleness, dissipation, and corrupted taste. The critics trained under the same libertinage naturally ridicule the creed that art should perform a wholesome and divine service to humanity. In England, whatever misleading spirit has exercised itself, no such corrupting influence has hitherto been poisoning the art student's ideals. The standing misfortune in England is that our Governments treat the pursuit as but of trifling importance, and deserving inadequate protection for the artist's property in design, which costs much more time than the mere painting of the surface, or the shaping a solid mass into a sculpturesque form. Invention in art is a very sensitive vitality, and will soon cease if it be left open to the piracy of chance photographers and conductors of illustrated periodicals. When the goose which laid the golden egg was killed, the greedy slaughterers were not the last to suffer.

Public men speaking on the subject generally assume that England has little pretension to eminence, and they say this in the face of the fact that she has to show, notwithstanding meagre encouragement, a richer array of inspired artists than any other modern country has produced.

With this established prejudice it is natural that journalistic correspondents abroad, hearing of some luminary that has appeared on their horizon, should hastily accept the report and transmit it as of celestial importance, while, in fact, a more accurate investigation may prove that the "luminary" is only a poor bonfire. Of the inferiority of native talent, and the assumption that English patronage is sufficient for all applicants from abroad as well as, and in preference to, those at home, they have no doubt whatever. The love on the part of the public of a new surprise, and the traditional inclination

in favour of any alien genius, causes a quick response in England, and in a short time his works are brought here, which often in his own country are stamped as of inferior grade. This in the course of my experience has had a very mischievous effect, although the stranger's reputation thus established has generally lasted but a short time, yet before its close it is succeeded by a new "light," which again dazzles the eyes of fashion to the degradation and confusion of our national taste.[1]

The early uprising of English art was destroyed in the time of Richard II. by internecine war, and this barrier continued until the English Reformation, when the dread of image worship caused limners to be regarded as little different from servants of the Evil One. When at last a lull occurred in the religious struggle, the affluent desiring works of art (since the simplest excellence cannot be developed under at least a generation) had to welcome artists from the Continent to paint their portraits and carve their monuments. Notwithstanding the greatness of Holbein and Antonio Moore, they found yet an honest, if unfashionable, rival in Butte, the Englishman, and he could scarcely have been alone. The progress of the Reformation and the iconoclasm it produced kept any native school from developing; but the steady art instinct in our race stirred the hope to obtain recognition, as was seen a generation later by the works of Oliver, Cooper, Dobson, and Walker; these men struggled not ingloriously while Rubens and Vandyke were holding the field. In the opportunities exclusively given to Lely and Kneller to supply the fashionable world with likenesses there was continuing proof that British artists were altogether at a discount, so that at the commencement of the eighteenth century there was no open sign that any strong English art existed. But Hogarth, Reynolds, Raeburn, Gainsborough, and Romney were too strong to be suppressed, and they produced an art that was pre-eminently altogether in unison with the spirit of British poetry, healthy, robust, and superior to maudlin sentimentality and vice glamoured over with fevered tears. In our youth wholesome ideas of conduct still survived, although often weakened by indulgence in cheap display. Certainly at this time there was a strong reason to feel the desperateness of the struggle for any young artists like ourselves. To attempt art reform with any immediate reliance upon the judgment of the wealthy would have been blind indeed; it was soon too apparent that they had no thought that art could have power to perpetuate the vitality of a nation; indeed art patrons were seldom independent enough to avoid the influence of the passing fashion.

[1] In stating the general case it would be wrong not to make certain exceptions, as, for instance, that of M. Lanteri, whose services, as head of the Sculpture School at South Kensington, are above praise.

In fact, they regarded their taste as an idle fancy which needed excuse, and did not invite patriotic judgment, lest this should remind them of past evils denounced as idolatrous by the reformers.

The true British distinction of art must not be impaired, and the energy of its leaders to keep it pure must not be frustrated. It is gratifying to single out an example of those in authority valuing the importance of national art. At the opening of the Exhibition at Delhi, Lord Curzon took occasion to speak from his vice-regal seat on the Decline of Indian Decorative Art as follows:—

> Since I have been in India I have made a careful study of the arts, industries, and handicrafts of the country, and have lamented their progressive deterioration and decline. . . . Being conscious that taste was declining, and that many of the modern models were debased and bad, we have endeavoured to set up alongside the products of the present standards and samples of the past. This is the meaning of the loan collection, which has a special hall where you will see many beautiful specimens of old Indian art-ware. . . . Many of these objects are beautiful in themselves, but we hope the Indian workmen here, and also the patrons who employ them, will study them, not merely as objects of antiquarian or artistic interest, but as supplying them

with fresh or rather resuscitated ideas which may be useful as inspiring their own work in the future. This may be laid down as a truism that Indian art can never be revived by borrowing foreign ideas, but only by fidelity to its own. . . . All that is inevitable, and in an age which wants things cheap and does not mind their being ugly, which cares a good deal for comfort and not much for beauty, which is never happy unless when asserting its own models and traditions, and running about in quest of something foreign or strange, we may be certain that a great many old arts and handicrafts are doomed. There is another symptom that to my mind is even more ominous. I am one of those, as I said, who believe that no national art is capable of continued existence unless it satisfies the ideals and expresses the wants of the nation that produced it. No art can be kept alive by globe-trotters or curio-hunters alone. If it has got to that point it becomes a mere mechanical reproduction of a certain fashionable pattern, and when the fashion changes, and it ceases to be popular, it dies. If Indian art, therefore, is to continue to flourish or is to be revived, that can only be if the Indian chiefs and aristocracy and people of culture and high degree undertake to patronise it. So long as they prefer to fill their palaces with flaming Brussels carpets, Tottenham Court Road furniture, cheap Italian mosaics, French oleographs, Austrian lustres, German tissues, and cheap brocades, I fear there is not much hope. I speak in no terms of reproach, because I think in England we are just as bad in the pursuit of anything that takes our fancy in foreign lands, but I do say that if Indian arts and handicrafts are to be kept alive, it can never be by outside patronage alone. It can only be because they find a market within the country, and express the ideas and culture of the people. I should like to see a movement spring up among the Indian chiefs and nobility for the expurgation, or at any rate the purification of modern tastes, for a reversion to the old-fashioned but exquisite styles and patterns of their own country. Some day I have no doubt it will come, but it may then be too late. If these are the omens, what then is the aim of the Exhibition, and what purpose do I think it will serve? I can answer in a word. The Exhibition is intended as an object lesson. It is meant to show what India can still imagine and create. It is meant to show that the artistic sense is not dead amongst its workmen, but that all they want is a little stimulus and encouragement. It is meant to show that for the beautification of an Indian house, or the furniture of an Indian home, there is no need to rush to European shops in Calcutta or Bombay, but that

in almost every Indian state or province, in most Indian towns and many Indian villages, there still survives Art, there still exist artificers who can satisfy the artistic as well as the utilitarian tastes of their countrymen, and who are competent to keep alive this precious inheritance which we have derived from the past.

The principle so ably expounded by Lord Curzon is one which it is needful to apply to our art at home.

Another healthy sign of discriminating taste in this much confused day is given by the German Emperor, who refuses to follow the present craze in the fatherland for startling materialistic art and other unpoetic effusions in painting and sculpture, and directs the painters and sculptors to an ideal of elevating character. If our rulers, while there is yet time, will deign to recognise art as of national value, they will soon see that its preciousness depends upon inventive design, and that representation devoid of inner spirit descends in value according to its mental emptiness, and that since inner life in art costs its creator incalculable deliberation and devotion, it is essential that this energy, translated into personal property, should be protected by the State. The weakness of the present law of copyright in its protection of invention at this time threatens the speedy extinction of design; the object of legislation should be to encourage that work which enshrines a cardinal idea and graces it with attendant imaginings, all echoing and intensifying the main subject, so that the mind of the observer may wander about all the lines and hues of the picture, with a pleasure resulting from awakening recognition that each bears evidence of the exercise of subtle judgment, and of a sovereign mind in selection.

Let me reiterate, inventiveness does not necessarily mean insistence upon moral purpose. Titian's "Bacchus and Ariadne," for instance, has no ethical preachment in it. Pity even for the forlorn Ariadne is only reflected as an interest of the past. To understand the inventiveness of Titian, we will imagine him wandering in spirit, invisibly haunting this hollow grove, when still unpeopled, delighting

in the calm freshness of the early morning as it quickens the sylvan solitude, breathes over the neighbouring town on the promontory beyond, furrows the sea and fills the sails of the dancing boat as it ploughs its way towards the horizon.

Into this peaceful scene a damsel intrudes, sighing over her false departed lover; the whole landscape responds to the mournful note of her bereavement, and would seem responsive only to this. Her attention is erewhile startled by distant notes, which grow into clamorous music. With clang and clatter Bacchus and his blithesome crew come in. The worship of Dionysos had found justification in the thought that antique poetry and philosophy were overburdening the world with sorrow. In the progress of human speculation upon the mysteries of life, all races felt the need of rebound from dejection at the woefulness of fate, and every great people imagined means of alleviation. Before the approach of Bacchus the fate of Ariadne was one of profound melancholy, as all poets dealing alone with her story have left it.

The Greeks interpreted the call to renunciation of overbearing distress, in such unbridled fashion, that at many festivals of Dionysos they indulged in the maddest excesses. Titian, true to Catullus, depicts the votaries as free from extravagance, if we overlook signs of deep potations of the blood of the grape. The Mænads, Satyrs, Fauns, and Bacchantes are intoxicated with joy, leaving no beings present quite sober except the ass bestrode by Silenus and the leopards in the car of the god. The nymphs are marking time with tambourine, horn, and cymbals, while the fauns are carrying portions of the sacrifice for their feast. In this meeting with the god of revelry the heaviness of soul felt by the erewhile hapless Ariadne is transformed into lightness of spirit. Looking around at the jovial care-chasing crew and their merriment, she has become somewhat transfused into responsiveness.

Each follower adds his testimony to the joys of life, all are in mad, careless frolic, and even the trees seem to dance their leaves in tune to this jocundity of spirit, while the heavens display Ariadne's crown of stars.

The bridegroom himself bounds forward as one who might swim the air without fear of falling.

The happy combination of parts making up the picture proves the artist's exercise of judgment as to forms, just as the orderly juxtaposition of hues and the refined perfecting of tones witness to his fastidious sense of colour, excellences which could not be attained without patient devotion of a consummate inventor; thus the painting is exalted above all representations which are only of prosaic ambition. It is essentially a work of mighty fancy offering refreshing delight to man.

In old time the idea in a picture was prized as much as that in a book. In the variety of the artist's choice he in turn treated subjects uncomplicated by dramatic story, yet all his work remaining to us which "time cannot stale," bore evidence of having passed through the alembic of the author's mind; thus they were his property and claimed defence, as all personal possessions do.

The English legislature has given protection to ideas only in a half-hearted way, and inventive art is decaying, as, twenty years ago,[1] I predicted it must do under non-protection. When a Government boldly extended its hand for the encouragement of art by inviting contributions of subjects for a cartoon competition at Westminster Hall, the public manifested surprising interest in the collection brought together, and it may be said that the influence of the act was of far-reaching importance, perhaps more than it is possible fully to estimate. Recent governments have exercised generosity in the extended education of art, but this has been so directed as to attract to the profession many uninspired youths who might have been more appropriately employed in other pursuits, seeing that when trained to their highest manipulative power they are still

[1] *Nineteenth Century Magazine.*

destitute of inventive faculty, and can have no beneficial future as artists.

Our rulers should certainly guard the possibilities of those few who, battling against great difficulties, have at last proved their power to maintain the glory which, since Hogarth, English painters have wrested from the maws of ignorance, indifference, and shallow self-confidence. To stultify frequent assertions that Pre-Raphaelitism only valued designs which incorporated symbolic ideas for the enforcement of the higher life, the expression of my admiration for Titian's Bacchanalian masterpiece will suffice. It must be admitted that we often indulged our invention in didactic purpose, and therefore the characterisation of our view as *narrow* has been somewhat accepted. Let me plead in extenuation that we were never given free scope to put in practice our fullest ambition, but we distinctly enforced our æsthetic aims in the themes we treated, selecting beautiful objects for fastidious discrimination in their portrayal.

In declaring the broad catholicity of views we entertained, I must ever insist that there are confines to sound principle within which only it can be said that art is an inestimable blessing to civilisation, wherein it should unite with other powers to promote orderly purpose, and should denounce the pride of irresponsibility together with that dissectional spirit which proclaims that art has no connection with morals. The eternal test of good art is the influence it is calculated to have on the world, and, actuated by patriotism, all propagandists will consider first the influence of their teaching upon their own nation. What the people are led to admire, that they will infallibly become. When a nation is fascinated by flippancy and mockery of innocence and sincerity, the men and women composing it will incontinently entertain disdain for serious conduct. Approval of crafty deception will ere long draw the onlooker into the whirl of cunning falsehood. Toleration of pride will bring its worshippers to haughtiness and contempt of honest simplicity. The

mocking of self-restraint will conduct the tide-driven to practical impurity, and if the principles of moral conduct are not honoured in art, it will encourage the ties of social life to be relaxed, and, leaving the force of heredity out of mind, children will grow up with loosened ideals of family honour. It is in following such seductive invitations that the foundations of a nation are sapped, so that it drifts to the cataract of destruction. Man sees other men in the mirror of his own character, and every unit has its power in society either to build up with integrity or to disintegrate with guile. It is in the spreading of personal irresponsibility that a nation becomes effete. Refusing one's own strength for combination to hold up the pillars of the State saps Society, until Cain's cry, "Am I my brother's keeper?" brings about its downfall.

We must not, as many have done, mock at the co-relation of consequences with the habitual complexion of our own thoughts.

The dissolution of a people's strength begins with sickly literature and base art. We may admit brilliancy in the genius that uses its tinsel to make men laugh at self-government and honour, and to encourage amusing reversals of justice, making disorder pass for the only gaiety of life. Of old with the philosophers there were sophists "who made the worse appear the better reason"; they were brothers to the prophets, prophesying smooth things.

We must judge trees by their fruits, never deluded by the enticing exterior of the poisonous night-shade or the gaudy hues of the deadly toadstool. Convincedly persuaded of its folly, we can afford with disdain to turn away from the profession of superiority which the teachers of a licentious and irresponsible creed assume. Beautiful design blossomed into the world to irradiate perfect creation, and its bane is the enemy walking behind the sower of corn, scattering poisonous seed that it may be reaped with the life-giving wheat, infallibly bringing death to the foolish eater.

Our national spirit as displayed by writers and artists is not straight-laced; they have been no repudiators of good-humour. Human nature in all its varieties has ever been dear to them; they have not scrupled to dwell on redeeming features in the worst characters, but from the beginning they did not tolerate mawkish sentiment for the vicious, whose crimes were committed shamelessly in defiance of natural honour. By such national renunciation our fathers gained rather than lost in power of gladness and humour, for those unwinnowing writers who traded on false sentiment, and the Regency sentimentalists who imitated them in unbridled licence, were a lugubrious crew, while the pure Briton has ever lightened his philosophy with brilliant scintillations of wit and healthy laughter.

Every man of us must eschew that which is worn out and obsolete, casting it away because death brings corruption. We are not here merely to echo the imaginations and sentiments of our forerunners; we have to collect something fresh for our children. Some tell us that we have no duties, as there is no master who will ever examine our toll of work. Let these be assured in the words of Addison, "We will do more than succeed, we will deserve success," and leave the issue to be what it may.

I must speak here more emphatically against servile mediævalism. Students should never be enticed to meander among the graves, piping resurrected strains, sweet though they may be, forgetful of their own life-battle. Columbus was the discoverer of a new world, and Vasco de Gama of new sea-roads. If you will have it so, the heavens were blank and careless as they looked down upon the little ships, resolutely tracking the pathless waters across the virginal sphere. If these mariners won nothing for themselves, they gained a world for its future children.

The name of the enterprising navigator is not always given to the continent which his courage helped him to discover; but this is of small moment in the long future; his object is gained in the discovery, in the

peopling and establishing of activity, in place of stagnation. We do not regard as discoverers men who now go the same voyage; we should only laugh at them if they made caravels of the fashion of those used four hundred years ago. Antiquity claims our high regard, and it demands our gratitude for the blessings which it left to us, but in its remains there is much that, having done its healthy work for its own time, is now devoid of vitality. Together with what is thus unprofitable to modern minds, there are relics of barbaric thought and creed, the revival of which can only make for evil. Take, for example, Dante's enforcement of the idea of eternity of punishment with all its horrors in the "Inferno," in which the painters follow him. We palliate the view in both as survivals of earlier time, but we must not excuse those who in the present day exhume such ideas. The spokesman of our race said—

> ". . . Or to be worse than worst
> Of those, that lawless and incertain thought
> Imagine howling: 'tis too horrible!"

It is a fatal betrayal of reverence when gratitude to forerunners leads men to slavish idolatry towards them; in their own time their freest thoughts formed ever-ascending steps on which after-comers could mount upwards.

The nineteenth century will be known as an age of "revivals." Literary mediæval resuscitations began first perhaps in England, but accentuated feminine development of the Italian Renaissance in graphic art came to us through a narrow section of the Germans. The gratitude of the world for the excellence of the productions of the past transiently endowed their modern imitations with a sweeter taste than unripened works with a new flavour are at first found to possess. The imitator's task being a pleasant and easy one, the resemblance of the work to its prototype gains for it a more impetuous welcome than is accorded to the less mature achievements of original inspiration.

These last, unfamiliar to the eye, are precluded by their strangeness from immediate reception. There is scarcely danger of shipwreck on the well-sounded waters of a tidal service, while there is frequent peril to a ship on an unknown sea. It has seemed to me right to warn the world against what may be called *servility* to antiquity, but our present danger is a cry of opposite tenor, that artists should begin their practice without the equipment which the teaching of their great precursors gives. He is only a quack who commences ministering to the sick in ignorance of those carefully tested experiments which have led to modern methods of healing, for while the traditions of the ancients must not be accepted as binding, all that they said and did demands thought from the attentive physician, an equal docility is called for from beginners in art. To be ignorant of the stages by which the great masters arrived at their pre-eminence, and to be indifferent to the studied training of the eye and hand which they underwent, is a besotted course.

Present exhibitions of painting and sculpture, so full of productions that show disregard or defiance of the fundamental principles of sanity and reverence, supply proof that quackery is in highest favour ; and the timid spectator (dismayed at the abominations) is told by the adorers of such uncultivated outpourings that not to admire is to be a Philistine ; that the chaotic mass called a work of art is really the product of the most modern, and therefore the most advanced thought.

One stamp of great art in all ages was the artist's love and caretaking of the materials in which he expressed his meaning. In his hands common clay was impressed with sacred value, as with the seal of divinity. Marble under his chisel sang itself into the holiness of the image of the gods, and paint drawn from the earth, and the juices of perishing plants, by the artist's cunning became more entrancing than the precious stones that decorate a king's crown or a princess's robe. But the more ignorantly and recklessly the ductile stuff is handled by the irreverent

innovator, the louder he is hailed as the master and true apostle of modernity. From what wild caverns such spirit emanates is a question of vital importance, and search should be made, with the conviction that by discovery of its source must come deliverance for art. Assuredly if left unquestioned, the rioters of the profession will encourage the existing suspicion that the term "men of genius" is only another for those who suffer from an aberration of intelligence.

Artists of old continuously worked with the desire to satisfy the longing for the larger and nobler instincts of man—obedience to which is morality. Sir John Seeley,[1] with no better authority for his declaration than hearsay, states that "all artists are immoral men," and there may be doubt whether the verdict would generally create surprise in persons to whom the formula that "art has no connection with morals" is continuously proclaimed by art experts. Perhaps those persons who do not recognise the duty of progress in moral rectitude from generation to generation, are responsible for the judgment. It would certainly condemn our entrancing pursuit if to be geniuses we were called upon to follow Benvenuto Cellini's example of homicidal outrage, or if we looked upon Raphael's amours as justification for laxity of manners. The reader of the life of Galileo will find that it was still incumbent upon a brother to furnish dowries for the marriage of his sisters, and if he married himself the laws of society demanded of him that he should keep up a costly establishment ; the great astronomer having in his early life established an alliance with an esteemed woman, after his sisters were provided for, married her as the mother of his children. Raphael, had he lived, might have done this also; in any case customs of past centuries, sanctioned by the example of Popes and Cardinals, form no precedent for men in our own. It is often said that when art was at its highest, unrestraint had but little limit. The truth is that Italian art arose in a time of great

[1] See *Natural Religion*, by Sir John Seeley.

tribulation producing earnest humility of spirit, while even yet the Arabs were threatening Italy, and when the zeal of Francis of Assisi had newly kindled the spiritual life in the offspring of the Goths settled in Italy. Art had thus grown under trial and simplicity, and was earnest in vital expression. With more settled law came ease for daily life and greater leisure for those joys and beauties which form the vocabulary of the painter's language.

While this was tempered with truth, the gain was altogether admirable, and led to the glorious epoch of Italian art. It is difficult to mark where the tone of splendour in the work of the artist overstepped the line of pure restraint, it is certain that by sure stages pride in showiness and empty dexterity caused art to cease to be a living power, although it gained in applause from the general disintegration of high purpose in society. This juxtaposition of widely extolled art and corruption is used to support the axiom that "art causes a nation's fall." Every age has its special trial. Ours to-day arises from an unprecedented blight, which ignores the reflection of heaven's beauty in Nature.

Instead of adorable pictures of nature's face, we are offered representations of scenes that none but those with blunted feelings could contemplate, not stopping short of the interiors of slaughter-houses. The degradation of art is nothing less than a sign of disease in Society.

But enough of this humiliating topic! I must return to the defence of the Pre-Raphaelites. After fifty or sixty years, with full count of our disappointments as of our successes, it may be confidently affirmed that the principle of our reform in art was a sound one. With some remarkable exceptions, art in our youth had become puerile and doting, and it was high time to find a remedy. It stirred us to proclaim that art should interpret to men how much more beautiful the world is, not only in every natural form, but in every pure principle of human life, than they would without her aid deem it to be. If artists' work misguides men, making them believe that there is no order in creation, no wisdom in evolution, decrying the sublime influences as purposeless, we shall indeed be a sorry brood of men.

During my experience of the incessant difficulties barring the artist's path in modern days, I often doubted whether writers on art in their confident utterances realise the enormous influence they exercise upon its current fortunes. Any one who has read the foregoing history without bias will not be astonished to find here an expression of opinion that the possibilities of art were for a time repeatedly destroyed by the character of contemporary journalistic comment. Rossetti was driven from public exhibition by its hostility; Millais was treated more like a felon than a man with a noble purpose, and was never greeted with calm judgment until his position in the Academy secured for him the official respect to which his personal genius had entitled him from the beginning. Madox Brown from his first appearance at Westminster Hall claimed recognition as an artist of high standing and exalted promise, but though manly character appeared in every line of his work, he was met with contempt and prevented from gaining, not only his just due, but even the most modest livelihood. It will be remembered that I was upon the point of being driven from the profession altogether, and for many years general ridicule was so sure to be my portion that I was in self-defence obliged to avoid the treatment of new ideas, since these would on their first appearance have elicited a repetition of stereotyped denunciations and consequently long-retarded reward.

One cannot of course wish that the press, with its modern practice of comment on questions of all public interest, should abstain from making its reflections upon matters of general taste. Temperate judgments are of value; but the ambition of the writers, unhampered by any restraining influence, led them in our day far beyond temperate impartiality, until they dogmatised about

abstruse mysteries of our pursuit in a tone of finality which few practical men presumed to adopt. The truly initiated harden themselves against the forceful tide of contemporary prejudice, knowing it may sweep from a standing-place even the elect. The old masters worked untrammelled by such ignorant dogmatism. Hazlitt and Ruskin (as remarked by Mr. A. J. Finberg[1]) were, with all their eccentricities, elucidating critics, because they themselves in certain branches were practised artists, Ruskin being the most perfect in that to which he especially devoted himself in criticism. But the writers who became the mouthpieces of the cabal that sought to ruin Pre-Raphaelitism had scarcely even drawn a line, and they came to their task without understanding humility or restraint. It is devoutly to be hoped that writers determining the fate of future art will think seriously of the havoc wrought in the past, and of their own eternal responsibility for the judgment they exercise.

In conclusion let me warn the world that the threat to modern art, menacing nothing less than its extinction, lies in "Impressionism" as a dogma without any regard to its limitations. The word "Impressionism," as used for the main ambition of art, is mere cant, offensive to all who really have acquaintance with the profound subtleties of art practice, yet by blatant repetition and determined assurance trumpeted by idle writers, multitudes are cowed into silence, and become incapable of expressing the opinion which common-sense suggests to them as to the vacuous nature of such pretensions as the "modernity" of to-day reveals. The few better-educated artists who, perhaps by fellow-studentship, have been entrapped to figure as monarchs of a draggled herd do sometimes lend a redeeming grace to the pretensions of the school; but I must, in treating this subject, declare that as a rule the greater part of the work figuring under the name of "Impressionism" is childishly drawn and modelled, ignorantly coloured and handled, materialistic and soulless. Let it

[1] *National Review.*

be clearly known that it is so, in being destitute of that spirit of vitality and poetry in nature which every true master, ancient or modern, painter, sculptor, or architect, has given to his simplest work, this supermundane spirit coming instinctively from his responsible soul, whether he intended or not to teach any special lesson. Eager students, if stirred by a true ambition, are drawn forward by continued anxiety lest they should be found wanting in the saving graces by which their mighty precursors gained the grateful homage of the world. The example of successful elders is carefully noticed and followed by the young; it is therefore much more than the mere failure of the practitioner himself which is at stake when a passing vanity is made to figure as a sober canon of good taste.

For the consideration of those who come after us, ere I give up my record of our Pre-Raphaelite purpose, I must reiterate that our determination in our reform was to abjure alliance with re-classicalism, to avoid revived quattro- or cinque-centism, already powerfully represented in England, and to supplant the cramped dogmas founded on these fashions by devoting our allegiance to Nature, and to magnifying her teachings for further inspiration. We never refused admiration to Raphael nor to his still more prodigious elder contemporaries, Michael Angelo and Leonardo da Vinci, neither did we refuse whatever vital teaching there was in any ancient master or school. We may not in our youth have seen the extent of Reynolds's power; for it needed a more advanced experience to give full knowledge of the variety and richness of his harnessed genius. In principle, however, I maintain that we had justice on our side in thinking that his homage to the founders of Academies, such as the Caracci and Le Brun, led him to prescribe laws derived from them, which crippled the future development of art. The prophecy of Constable, extracted from Leslie, referred to in an earlier chapter, and which was first quoted by me in a short article on Pre-Raphaelitism in Chambers's

Encyclopædia, will show that our verdict was becoming inevitable. We must certainly bear the responsibility of arriving independently at Constable's judgment on existent art, but the wild experiments in artistic crotchets by later alumni, frightened at the treatment we received, and hopeful of approval from the enthroned arbiters of fate, proves that we only anticipated the inevitable revolt. Unimpassioned time will determine which protest was the more temperate and wise.

Let it be added that the triumvirate of art in Italy and the company of great English painters who founded the British School were too kingly and too daring in judgment, in their own work too strong in humility towards nature, to be bound by the rules which they of necessity prescribed for their pupils. The famous dictum of Sir Joshua that "rules were not the fetters of genius, but only of those who have no genius," we determined to construe with a more radical rendering than his pupils first gave it, for we decided that the result of its narrow interpretation by his followers had been paralysing, and that henceforth it should form no shackles to future investigation of truth. Had his remarks been limited to the observance of the sciences which form the base of graphic representation, such as the undeviating laws of perspective and the forms and proportions of human and animal creation, his dictum could never have been gainsaid, but Reynolds's dogma was accepted for the control of imaginative liberty; it was in that sense that we dared to rebel against it. If this scaffolding had been of use at first, it had done its work, and we required that it should be put aside as in no sense belonging to the permanent structure of art. The windows of the edifice should be opened to the purity of the azure sky, the prismatic sweetness of the distant hills, the gaiety of hue in the spreading landscape, and the infinite richness of vegetation. Nothing should henceforth be hidden from the enfranchised eye; we undertook to show that the rendering of new delights was not incompatible with

the dignity of the highest art. The purpose of art is, in love of guileless beauty, to lead man to distinguish between that which, being clean in spirit, is productive of virtue, and that which is flaunting and meretricious and productive of ruin to a Nation.

THE END

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