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Especially with Reference to Architecture

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Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION.

PART I.

It is now nearly a century since J. J. Rousseau announced to the world the bold paradox, that the sciences and arts had served only to debase and corrupt mankind, and that almost all the vices incidental to a state of civilisation could be traced to their pernicious influence.

There was a boldness and originality in the attempt that roused the attention of thinking men, and a wild eloquence in the language in which it was enforced, that overawed his contemporaries, and convinced them, that if they were not listening to the logical deductions of a philosopher, what they heard was at least the inspiration of a high order of genius; and in an age of sceptical infidelity, when no man quite believed what he professed or wrote, and every one doubted the sincerity of the professions of those around him, it was no small pleasure to listen to one who, however wrong he might be in his conclusions, at least believed himself to be sincere in what he said, and urged his doctrines with all the eloquence that sincerity inevitably gives to the teacher. It was something, too, to listen to a man who saw through the vapid conventionalities of the age, and dared to think and feel for himself; and, more than this, dared to utter boldly, and from the bottom of his heart, what he thought and felt.

In that age, so vague and unsatisfactory was all that related to mental science, that it was in vain that men tried to appeal to the first principles of metaphysics, or political science, to refute the sophisms of the rhapsodist. There was not, and unfortunately is not even now, one well-established fact or principle in the whole range of these sciences on which an argument can be firmly based; and without well-established premises the argument was, and must remain, a mere war of words, in which the more skilful mystifier is sure of, at least, a temporary victory.

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The true secret, however, of the success of Rousseau's rhapsody lies in a principle of human nature from which no man, perhaps, was ever quite free; for men, almost instinctively, fly from the evils of their present state, or condition, to waste their time in unavailing regrets for a past they cannot recall, or in idle hopes for better things amidst the uncertainties of a future which they cannot foresee. The satiated man of the world, who before his prime has drunk the cup of life to the dregs, and exhausted every excitement, no doubt looks back on the days of his youth with unmitigated regret, their comparative innocence appearing to him times of purest happiness and bliss; the bullied and overtaken boy longs for the powers and privileges of manhood; the exhausted man sighs more fruitlessly for the immunities of boyhood. The truly wise and well-regulated mind knows that we cannot recall the past, and that the future, when it comes, will only be another present, and, acting on this knowledge, secures the greatest amount of enjoyment in the passing hour and of hope for the future.

In an age like that of Rousseau, when misguided science only led to doubt, and art proposed to itself no higher aim than pandering to sensual pleasure, and when unbridled license of thought and acts had brought corruption to the very core of society, it was little wonder that men listened with delight to a syren that promised to renew to them their youth, and that they heard with unfeigned, though with melancholy pleasure the rhapsodist descanting on the virtues and simplicity of the past. To the future they dared not look. They felt, like the exhausted *roué* of society, that they could never again enjoy what they had wasted; and they could not but instinctively feel that they were hurrying on to a future without hope, and contracting a debt that would one day become due: and how fearfully that reckoning has been exacted, the subsequent history of France too plainly tells. But it was because she neglected science, or misused it, and that she never knew what art really was, and degraded what little she possessed, that the retribution was so fearful. Had she cultivated science only for its truth, and art for its purifying influences, it must have been far otherwise with her.

As certainly as revolving years hurry the boy onward to manhood, so certainly does increasing population press a nation onward to a degree of civilisation without which large bodies of men cannot exist together. But neither men nor nations can stop their growth and stand still, however much they may wish it. A very thinly-populated country may support a nation of hunters in a state of tolerable equality, but a slight increase of

population forces some to become shepherds, some cultivators of the soil, and a further addition forces many to take to manufactures, as the soil will not support all ; and again, between these must spring up those who will exchange the commodities of one class for those of another, and perform the great task of capitalists in keeping society together. As population increases men must pack still more closely over one another—the world is not wide enough for a nation of equals, even if such were possible where no two men are either bodily or mentally alike. There must be the rich, and consequently in most cases the idle man, with his luxury and its concomitant evils ; and the poor, and, if idle, vicious man, to prey on his more wealthy neighbour. Still there exists in all societies an intermediate class, who, “fitted with an aim,” are forced either to bodily exertion to gain their daily bread, or to exert their mental faculties to maintain their position in society ; and in the healthful employment of these, they nourish those virtues which adorn the human race, and avoid those temptations to which the very rich and the very poor are exposed. We, as a nation, have reached that state of population and consequent civilisation which is open to those vices and those temptations so eloquently denounced by Rousseau. To avoid them, we cannot go back one step towards the past ; but we have the power of improving the present to an unlimited extent, and of cultivating every virtue which ever adorned humanity, and in doing this we may ensure a happy future ; but if we neglect the means at our disposal for doing this, it is only too true that our state may soon become one of unmitigated evil.

Even, therefore, if it were probable that any satisfactory conclusion could be arrived at by arguing the question, it would be difficult to find a more essentially idle one than the question, as to whether a state of savage simplicity or one of civilised refinement is, abstractedly, the best for mankind. It is easy to be eloquent on the vices of the one or the virtues of the other state ; one man may admire the patient endurance of bodily pain and fearlessness of death displayed by the savage, another the long-enduring search after truth of the philosopher and his fearlessness in uttering it ; one might prefer the open but bloody mode of redressing wrongs, or avenging injuries, practised by barbarian nations, to the slow process of law which performs that office in civilised communities : these arguments may amuse the idle, but they can bear no practical fruit to a community that has reached the state of civilisation we have attained. To the philosopher, however, the equality of reasoning on both sides may

induce him to look deeper for the solution, and he will probably find it in the fact that no state of society, from the merest barbarism to the highest civilisation, is without its advantages and disadvantages, its virtues and its vices ; and that, in fact, there is no natural advantage possessed by one over the other : in all, vice does and must exist—in all, virtue is attainable by those who seek it ; there is no state in which it is not in man's power to improve his condition : none in which a neglect of what is right may not render his position intolerable. And as with nations, so it is with individuals ; there is no station so low and humble that virtue and industry will not make the man placed in it as happy as it is given to man to be, none so high and fortunate that vice and indolence may not convert it into a hell upon earth. Health, and wealth, and power, are of no avail to an ill-regulated or vicious mind ; and poverty and misfortune cannot long oppress the well-trained and virtuous man. The rich, it is true, have the advantage of knowledge, and leisure, and power, but they are bought at the expense of a fearful increase of temptation to do wrong. The industrious classes are denied these advantages, but their path is straighter, and the temptations to deviate from it far fewer than with their much-envied superiors.

I know no doctrine that appears to me so self-evident as that of the perfect *natural* equality of all conditions of mankind—as far as the power of attaining happiness is concerned—from the most patriarchal simplicity to the most complex civilisation, and from the poorest hewer of wood and drawer of water to the wealthiest potentate on the face of the earth ; combined at the same time with the most unmistakeable diversity of physical condition, and of power, both mental and bodily : or, in other words, that all men are equal in station and in power to enjoy, improve, or deteriorate their own condition ; while no two men are physically like one another, either mentally or bodily, or have the power of assimilating themselves to any other person in these respects.

Few will, perhaps, feel inclined to go the whole length of this assertion with me, nor is it at all essential to the argument that they should ; it is not an open question, or one in which we have any choice, and a full-grown man might quite as reasonably hope to return to the forms and feelings of boyhood, as a nation that has reached the density of population and degree of civilisation that we have reached to return to a state of barbarous freedom and equality. Men and nations may reach a second childhood, but only through the slow and degrading process of decay ; and this second

childishness is not like the first, and no one ever yet desired to attain to it. If this be so, it is useless to waste time in unavailing regrets for the past, or idle speculations as to whether one state of civilisation is better than another: that I look upon as quite out of our power; but man's will is free, and we may now either exert ourselves to improve the position in which we are placed, and extract from it all the good of which it is capable, or we may cross our arms in indolent despair, and sink—as we then most certainly must do—into all the evils which surround every condition of life in which either men or nations are or can be placed.

We are thus led inevitably to the real question, and the most important one that can occupy the minds of thinking men,—What are we to do to extract all the possible good out of our present condition? Each man will probably answer according to the bent of his own mind. The Priest will say, Build more churches, and extend ecclesiastical establishments; the Jurist, Reform your criminal and civil codes, and administer your laws better; the Physician would naturally turn his mind to the requisite sanitary regulations for increasing the health and improving the bodily condition of the masses; the Political Economist, to the means of accumulating and distributing wealth, and improving the intercourse and commerce of nations. All these are excellent measures in themselves, and so are ten thousand others, any one of which it would be wrong to neglect: but before all this I would answer—Cultivate the sciences and the arts; no purer faith,—no real and permanent good can be effected except from an improvement of knowledge; no higher or more elevated tone can be given on the all-important subjects of morals or religion, except by imparting a higher degree of refinement, and a better appreciation of the purely beautiful, to the public mind. This last is—or at least should be—the true mission of art; and were art so cultivated and based on knowledge, we should have higher aims and nobler purposes than we now have, and we might be struggling forward towards the Divinity instead of grovelling in error and uncertainty, as we are now doing.

Were the minds of the upper classes in this country thoroughly imbued with the truths of science and earnest in their pursuit, they would not require to waste in dissipation and frivolity that energy which might be so far better employed on higher objects; and were they to cultivate intellectual beauty, they would find in it a far higher and more lasting gratification than in those forms of sensual beauty in which alone they now indulge. Their wealth and luxury, instead of being the unmitigated

evil Rousseau so eloquently denounced, would enable them to approach as nearly to a state of Utopian perfection as it is possible for men to conceive ; their power so employed would be a blessing to themselves and all around them, as it would give them the means of elevating themselves above their fellow-men, and thus of setting an example which the humbler classes would not be long in following.

Still it must be confessed that a state of wealth and luxury is one of great temptation and danger, and has led, and may still lead, to the most fatal consequences ; but only because it is one where exertion is not necessary, and because persons placed in it are frequently deprived of an aim or worthy object of ambition which may supply that purpose and wholesome incitement to exertion that is forced on the humbler classes by their necessities. But the question that here arises is,—Can they not be provided with such an aim, and cannot their wealth and leisure be turned to as much advantage to the common weal and to themselves as is derived by the forced exertions of the labouring classes, whose toils not only serve the state, but keep their own minds and bodies in a state of healthful excitement ?

Our own belief is that this aim can easily be furnished to them, and that, consequently, the solution of the problem is in our own hands : whether we shall solve it practically or care to do so, is another question ; our power appears to me indubitable, and the mode in which it must be done, or at least commenced, appears to me to lie only in a better cultivation of the sciences and arts, properly understood and appreciated. They, I believe, could effect this most-to-be-desired reformation, and without one single evil consequence arising from the attempt.

A metaphysician can, of course, prove any thing he likes (metaphysically), and, by heaping together a number of unintelligible words in an incoherent manner sufficient to puzzle both himself and his readers, arrive at the conclusion he desires ; and if, like Rousseau, he will only by an eloquent sleight of hand interchange sufficiently often the words, luxury and learning, art and enervation, and forget to define what he means by vice or virtue, he may have it all his own way. No one yet, however—so far, at least, as I am aware—has shewn that knowledge of truth, which is science, or the pursuit of it, ever debased a man, or depraved his mind, or made him in any respect less virtuous ; or that the worship and elucidation of the beautiful, either in nature or in art, enervated a man's mind, or made him less humane on the one hand, or less brave on the other. Judging

à priori, these healthful exercises of the mind are exactly what should strengthen and invigorate it, remove superstitions or unfounded fears, and elevate a man not only above his fellow-men, but above all the natural evils he is beset with. If they will not, I do not know what will : and practically, so far as my knowledge of either history or biography goes, this has invariably been the case. I do not mean to deny that there have been depraved and wrongheaded men of science, or effeminate and vicious artists ; but even admitting the few cases that can be adduced, it still remains to be proven that it was their knowledge or their art that was the cause of this, and not rather the imperfection of the one or the other ; that their science was only empiricism or sophistry, and their art mere imitation or mere sensuality ; or that they were living in a society that had no sympathy with their pursuits, and that they were driven to despair and depravity by isolation and contempt.

Rome has been often quoted as an example opposed to these views. When, it is said, she had neither arts nor science, she was virtuous and great : when these came, with increased civilisation, she became a spectacle of vice and crime such as the world never saw. As I read history, the true inference is diametrically opposed to this. When she was poor, it is true she escaped those vices to which from her poverty she was not tempted ; but when she reached that state of civilisation which was inevitable, it was because she was not prepared for it, and had neither cultivated the sciences nor cared for them, and because she had no native arts, that she wasted her power and wealth in gross and brutal debauchery, and its consequent horrors. The arts that did exist in Rome were borrowed from the Greeks and mostly practised by Greeks, and only used as articles of luxury or to pander to sensuality ; and even poetry, after the age of Augustus, became merely the handmaid, or the reprobator, of her depravity : and it was because she had no higher aim than the attainment of material power and the enjoyment of sensual indulgence, that she became so fearful an example of all that is or can be bad among mankind.

On the other hand, the petty state of Athens, even when deprived of her liberty, and reduced to being only the nominal capital of a conquered province, was throughout all antiquity, and is now, an object of such unbounded admiration ; and this though neither her polity nor her morals were perfect, but merely because she had cultivated the sciences and arts. These saved her from the contempt her unfortunate position would otherwise have consigned her to ; and this ennobled her citizens and herself,

and made even her conquerors look on her with respect, and treat her as the intellectual mistress of the world, though no people were less capable of appreciating this kind of superiority than the Romans.

We are fast verging to a state of wealth and luxury almost equal to that of Rome before she fell under the dominion of her emperors; and if we are to remain a mere money-making, power-accumulating people, undignified by any higher pursuit, our fate must be hers; before long it may be too late to retract, and our doom be inevitable: for even now there is a mass of idle wealth, seeking and finding its only gratification in frivolity or sensuality; and a still more fearful mass of want and misery festering at the base and preying on the vitals of society. Still the mass is yet healthy, and it is not too late to elect. The path of Athens is as open to us as that of Rome. We have only to choose, and, having chosen, to persevere in the path of our election, either to attain that eminence which ennobled Athens, or to sink into that abyss which destroyed Rome. But there is no time to be lost, and unless the right direction is now given to the public mind, the problem may be solved without us, and the luxury or corruption that exists among the highest and the lowest may extend through all the ranks of society.

As in Rome, our arts are not, or at least have not hitherto been, native, but borrowed from other nations and other times, and have, consequently, as yet no real root in the soil, and are too contemptible seriously to engage the attention of the best class of minds. Still I believe it is not too late to plant them, and, if properly nurtured, they may yet flourish and bear good fruit. Our sciences have hitherto been cultivated for far too material a purpose to be instrumental either in guiding us in our onward path, or in elevating our minds so as to overcome the difficulties we may encounter. But there is still time to bring them back; to revive, or rather, I should say, to re-create, mental philosophy, for it scarcely can now be said to exist; to free it from the visionary speculations which the spider-brains of the metaphysicians have substituted in its place, and give philosophy that truth and reality which shall make it intelligible to all, and give it that elevation and vitality which will render it applicable to the high purposes for which it was designed.

I have myself no doubt but all this can be done, and more; but it would be idle to assert that it can be done easily or quickly: indeed, the more intimate our acquaintance becomes with the present state of the sciences and arts, the more difficult does it appear. Old men will not and

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cannot re-educate themselves. Artists who have been brought up in a certain line of art, and found it pay, will not now forsake that for any new scheme, and will look with ill-will and suspicion on any new theory that may be proposed; and men of science will continue to cling to the mathematical and physical sciences as the only ones which are cultivated on intelligible grounds, or which lead to satisfactory conclusions; and it will be long before they can be brought to believe that the mental sciences can be elevated above the jargon that at present occupies their place. Still it is to be done, and victory is so noble, and defeat so disastrous, that all, however humble, should lend their aid to accomplish so desirable an end.

At the same time I cannot but think, that the nation at large is becoming aware that there is some such great problem to be solved, and that the time is come to set about it. There is on all hands a strong desire to see the lower classes better educated, whatever difference of opinion may exist as to the mode in which this should be effected; and schools of design and galleries of art are being every where established to enable artisans to understand and practise a higher style of art than has hitherto been within their reach. All this is right, and indeed essential, but it is not all, or indeed the most essential thing: what is most wanted is a better style of education for the upper classes. It is in them that the great danger to society exists, and from them that the example must come that will elevate the tone of society. It is in vain to hope that a poor man, who has his daily bread to earn by the sweat of his brow, can have either the leisure or the opportunity to improve the arts of his country. Long thought and elegant refinement are essential for the improvement of a fine art, and these can exist only among the upper classes: long, patient, steady, and expensive research can alone advance science; and these, too, are incompatible with the condition of the lower orders. But when the upper classes are so refined as to make art a necessity to them, have their taste so cultivated as to be able to appreciate what is right and what is wrong, and knowledge sufficient to direct and command, then will art advance; and they will soon find ten thousand hands ready and able to execute what they must conceive, but what the labourer now neither can nor dare attempt. At present we have not an upper class capable of conceiving or creating, and consequently no lower class trained merely to execute; but art rests half way on a class combining both attributes, and who practise it only for its money-value as a trade, thinking and executing themselves.

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Science, too, has hitherto in this country been exercised almost exclusively for its money-value, though not so entirely as art. We have some scientific gentlemen, though few. But the mass of the work is done by persons who pursue it either to reap a money-profit by the discoveries they may make, or to gain an income from communicating the knowledge they may accumulate. A higher aim, and more means than these men can command, are requisite before much can be done.

To reform this, and obtain any beneficial results, it appears to me requisite to begin at the beginning, and provide a better class of education than is now available for the upper classes. At present, in England, whatever may be the capabilities or dispositions of a boy, he is taught Latin and Greek, with a little abstract mathematics, and little else; and it is contended, that this is not only quite sufficient, but the best mode of exercising his memory and improving his intellectual capabilities. It may be so; but, by a parity of reasoning, it could be proved that a treadmill is by far the best means of exercising the muscles of the legs, and a pair of dumb-bells those of the arms and chest. In their bodily education we encourage boys to run, to leap, to swim, to ride, to play at cricket or football—in short, a thousand various and congenial exercises, and the results are in every respect beneficial and satisfactory. Our public schoolboys grow up vigorous, active, and manly; but their minds are subjected to the distasteful and unvaried treadmill and dumb-bell system of the Greek and Latin grammar, which they hate while practising, for it is uncongenial, they know it to be useless, and they escape from it the moment they can, and forget it almost immediately afterwards.

Of a hundred boys that are sent to a public school, perhaps not ten, certainly not twenty, are capable, from the structure of their minds, of becoming classical philologists, or of finding in after-life a pursuit, or even a recreation, in the studies forced on them in their boyhood. There are perhaps ten or a dozen others, who might have their sympathies awakened, and their taste for the beautiful cultivated, were it presented to them in the form of painting; as many more might be attracted by sculpture or music. There are some incapable of appreciating beauty in any of its various forms, who would be as much elevated and as usefully instructed by mechanics and practical mathematics; and others, again, to whom the natural sciences are so congenial that the mind springs exultingly to their cultivation, and they find in the plumage of a bird, or the flower of a plant, that beauty which written poetry cannot convey to their minds. The great