

THE EARLY RENAISSANCE

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The Early Renaissance by J. M. Hoppin

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NOTE.

The two historical lectures which follow were not intended for the critical instruction of students in the class-room, but were spoken to an audience of the friends and patrons of the Yale School of the Fine Arts, at its usual winter course of public lectures in 1880. A few changes have been made of words and phrases, and a few sentences added.

"there is an art

Which doth mend nature—change it, rather, but

The art itself is nature."

THE EARLY RENAISSANCE.

LECTURE I.

ONCE when a young man I wandered through that sombre forest of pines which skirts the coast between Ravenna and the sea, covering, it is said, the site of the ancient port, delicious with its spicy odors and murmuring to the soft wind of the blue Italian sky, following the path that leads down to Rimini, which Dante was wont to go when he walked musing on his divine theme; and lifted by the place and its memories, my own thought was for a time freed from earthly objects and raised to something higher; and so I esteem it a great privilege to enter with you, my friends, even a little way into that haunted region of the imagination, that world of art and beauty where the mind leaves its earthly cares behind and grows young again as in the golden prime; for the imagination ever ennobles if permitted to seek lofty and pure objects, recalling images of the mind's best moments, its truest life, its deepest thoughts.

"Beauty," Mr. Emerson says, "is the form under which the intellect prefers to study the world. All privilege is that of beauty. The question of beauty takes us out of surfaces to thinking of the foundation of things." If education aims to go beneath the surface, and to produce a profoundly harmonious development of the nature, surely that faculty of the mind which does not belong to the distinctively intellectual powers nor to the distinctively moral, but partly to both—the æsthetic imagination—in which lie the springs of feeling for the true and the beautiful—that vital and influential part of our nature which makes it most genuinely human—ought not to be lost sight of in a liberal theory of education. If so we lose an element of

truth and freedom, and, I venture to say, an element of character of no mean power or value; for if, as Schiller says, "every man bears an ideal man within himself," it is the part of a true education to liberate this ideal man, this perfect humanity; and Art has its place and instrumentality here, since it seeks this ideal, this true beauty, this perfect humanity. Art aids education also by presenting truth in a more synthetic form than science does or can do. The scientific process undoubtedly comes first; the mind must learn to analyze, to reason, and to arrive at the facts of the universe by the path of induction; but science has its partial and dangerous tendencies, and inclines sometimes to overlook the organic synthesis of truth in which resides its life, its real beauty. It fails thus often to come to the unity of knowledge and the perfection of truth. Art by making use of the freer intuitions of the sensibilities and the illumining power of the imagination, makes up for the partialness of the purely intellectual process, by its penetrative and living methods of comprehending truth. While, therefore, Art can never take the place of science, nor is it of that primary importance in education, yet it comes in to correct, modify, and complement science, and to show the learner the truths of nature in their more vital forms. It is thus a vivifying process. It leads the mind from the study of books which are man's invention, and where everything is formulated and conditioned, to the study of nature—those fields of the living world exhaustless in their range and freedom.

But my theme is not Art in general, nor the relations of Art to mind and education; it is a purely historic theme which treats of a great period of Art, and to whose discussion I would invite your attention.

A philosophic writer has said that "culture comes before Art." There is a most suggestive truth in this remark, since Art can always safely be reckoned as among the last and rarest expressions of culture, or of any genuine species of civilization; for though there may be the stirrings of the artistic instinct in a rude person, or a rude nation, yet Art which implies a perception of the beautiful and an intuitive grasp of the hidden laws of form in nature, waits upon the more

perfect development of human powers. Greek art was the flowering of Greek genius. The age of Phidias was the bright consummate period of the Greek civilization. Art indeed rejects what is partial and incomplete and seeks perfection, unity, something that is organic in its wholeness, and this is the yearning surely not of the childlike and undeveloped intellect, but of the thoroughly emancipated and contemplative imagination. This pregnant truth that Art is the fruit or resultant of the combined forces of culture, and waits upon culture, is to my view very strikingly exemplified in the history of what is commonly called the Renaissance, which, in fact, is the history of the beginnings of modern Art.

It will be necessary in trying to give even the most brief account of this great movement of the human mind, to seek to define in a rapid way some of the influences which led up to it as by an irresistible deduction—by the natural working in fact of the principle that has been enunciated, that culture precedes Art; or, that there must be an intellectual and moral preparation of some sort in the age itself for the highest expression of the art-idea.

An old rabbinic proverb says that "night came before day." Out of night is born the new light. The dissolution of the Roman empire and the sweeping away of the old civilization by northern barbarism and rude uncultivated force, was followed in Southern Europe where the Latin civilization prevailed, by an intellectual night, in which the learning then contained exclusively in the Latin and Greek languages, was blotted out. The new civilization had not dawned and the old had been destroyed. This period of gross darkness lasted, Mr. Hallam says, "with no very sensible difference on a superficial view about five centuries." The only glimmer of learning arose from the necessity of preserving some forms of the Latin language by the church for ecclesiastical uses; and, too, by a happy circumstance, that religious order in the church which was then the most influential and widely diffused, the Benedictine order, enjoined the preserving and copying of classical manuscripts, and thus the learning of the Latin language became deposited (safe to be sure but useless) in the stone walls of monasteries as in a tomb awaiting its resurrection. The

palimpsest was only the winding-sheet within the coffin. But the knowledge of the Greek language and literature seems literally to have perished; and there was not found in Western Europe a man who could read a line of Homer or Plato, or who had even a suspicion of the inestimable wealth of wisdom and beauty shut up in Greek literature.

The causes which led to the revival of learning in Europe would form too vast a theme for us to enter upon, it would be in fact to review the history of Europe during the Middle Ages—but however brought about, and the sources of this revival are probably deeper than philosophy can reach, the fact remains that towards the middle of the fourteenth century there was an intellectual awakening, a new enthusiasm for classic learning, which was anticipated by the poet Dante, who gathered into his mind all the tendencies of the age and was himself an epoch. While, as one has said, the thought and the subject matter of the *Divina Commedia* is intensely mediæval, its style has felt the breath of classical antiquity;* for its very name '*Commedia*' showed that Dante chose the 'middle style,' between ancient 'tragedy' and 'elegy'—the classic style of easy narration and human life, the style, as he says, of his 'master and author,' Virgil; and if Beatrice was his symbolic interpreter in divine wisdom, Virgil was his interpreter in all human wisdom. The forces and laws of nature took on their old classic forms even in the deepest place of punishment; and the poem, though its theme was so serious, caught the everlasting spirit of beauty which was in the old literatures of humanity, which is ever old and which is also ever new, making Dante, as some have thought, the heralding-star of modern literature. But even more than to Dante the immediate resuscitation of classical culture may be ascribed to the poet Petrarch, whose exquisite perception of beauty led him to lay hold of the poetry of Virgil and the writings of Cicero, and to make them his masters, for he had learned Greek with Boccaccio only in the later years of his life and but very imperfectly. He was himself an ardent collector of ancient manuscripts, and never, it is related of him, could he pass convent walls without stopping to rummage their depths for literary

* Hallam's *Hist. of Literature*, p. 73.

treasures. His visits to the city of Rome introduced him to the actual monuments of antiquity: and he loved to ascend the weed-grown arches of the Baths of Diocletian, and the still more "mountainous vaults," as Shelley called them, of the Baths of Caracalla, in whose shadows and inspired by whose pagan vastness that poet wrote the 'Prometheus Unbound.'

The revival of classic antiquity was in fact of two kinds, of its literature and its monuments. Of the latter Rome itself was and still is the great treasure-house. Allow me to observe in passing that antique Rome is best seen at night, or, if that seem paradoxical, by moonlight, when the garish sights and colors of the modern city vanish away and the colossal forms of antiquity come out to view—the huge bones of the old city are visible. Then alone (to use a homely but expressive word) one *senses* he is in Rome of the Cæsars. Above all, that enormous shell of antique power, the Vespasian amphitheatre, with its condensed mass of black shadow on one side, touched here and there by spots of silver light penetrating the cavernous arches, and the numerous tiers of vaults above vaults, giving airiness and elegance even to that Titanic structure, at such a moment brings back the old imperial city with wonderful distinctness. Only it is deplorable that the Coliseum in these last years has been cleaned! The ruthless besom of tasteless improvement has swept away all the wild shrubs and flowers, of which it is said there were 420 different species growing at one time upon its aged walls and lending a picturesque mantle to its decay. Although in Petrarch's time much remained of the ancient city, much more had fallen into irretrievable ruin. It is a very curious history—that of the ruins of Rome. For three centuries after Constantine removed the seat of empire to Constantinople, desolation and almost silence reigned in Rome. Time slowly undermined tower and arch. But the mediæval wars and sieges did as much for the destruction of the monuments of Rome (an Italian historian says) as the hostile assaults and calamities which attended the destruction of the western empire. Her temples were used for fortresses by the fierce nobles of the Middle Ages in their sanguinary wars. "Whatever were the means," says another writer, "by which they obtained possession, the Orsini had occu-