Literature and Architecture

By PERCY E. NOBBS

Architectural expression, like literary expression, has a wide field; dancing, sculpture, music, painting are more limited than either, both as to theme and in emotional range. All these arts, however, are richer than either literature or architecture can ever be, in that third element which makes direct assault upon our senses to lead us happy captives in the realms of pure delight.

Now, the subdivision of literature into prose and poetry is misleading. One might, with equal reason, divide building into construction and architecture. The place where prose and poetry meet may be clear enough to the typographer, and the place where construction and architecture meet may be obvious to the stonemason, but to the critic—by which I mean an intelligent representative of the public not unwilling to appreciate—the matter is not so easy. One may be pardoned for taking a leaf from the books of the modern aestheticians and for dealing with these two great modes of expression—architecture and literature—as if art and expression were synonymous terms, even while holding most strongly that they are not, accepting only half the proposition and admitting that all art is expression, while stubbornly insisting that only all rhythmic expression is art. That, however, is not to classify poetry and architecture as against prose and construction. The difference between the expression that is and the expression that is not art is more subtle than that. True, inventories and time-tables, and workshops and trainsheds are all by nature either prosy or constructional, while hymns of praise and choragic monuments are by nature at once poetic or architectural. But we must not forget that railway viaducts and histories of Rome, while essentially expressions, may be something more, in virtue of rhythmic disposition of their several elements, and may thereby achieve emotional potency and a claim to a Parnassian environment.

Let us for present purposes think of literature as embracing all arrangements of words, and architecture as embracing all arrangements of bricks, and see how much there is that is common to both activities; and perhaps we shall discover that what is special to each is so fortuitous and accidental that, as the mathematicians would say, "it may be ignored" at least in a philosophical long range view sketched from the slopes of Olympus, where the critics gambol among the brambles and boulders.

In the matter of literature I must confess to a less assured knowledge than I make claim to in the case of architecture and its kindred arts. I do, however, know enough with surety to realize that both these arts have far more in common than they have of difference. It is to the analogies of literature and architecture that I would draw attention. There is set purpose in this, for today literary criticism is perhaps more highly developed and certainly more generally understood than ever before. Strangely enough, architectural criticism, outside the perfunctory but sympathetic columns of our very technical professional press is non-existent. By criticism we should mean just appreciation, with the bias favorable if anything. The common implication that criticism is necessarily destructive rather than constructive, affords evidence in favor of the old doctrine of the total depravity of man.

Now, before the invention of printing by movable types, the builded stone answered for the printed word in the scheme of things. Architecture then held her proud place as the great democratic vernacular art. Today we can tell what manner of men lived in XIIth Century England or IIIrd Century Italy far more truly and really by looking at their many eloquent buildings than by reading their few stilted books. But nowadays our books reflect the best that is in us more truly than our buildings do.

The other day I came across a sentence by Auguste Rodin, the great French sculptor, aptly translated and set out in graceful script, by way of dedication to a German book on ancient art. It ran: "We moderns are but flimsy shadows of those who went before us, and would die of thirst but for the springs which their spirit and faith have discovered for us." And we remember how Browning speaks of the builders of Notre Dame as building their hearts into the stones of the Cathedral.

Modern literary criticism is, I think, abundantly assured of the fact that men write their hearts into pages, and if criticism does not concern itself intensely with the hearts of writers, and a little as to the manner of the writing of those hearts into the pages, then I do not at all know what criticism is, and must ask forgiveness for presuming to waste a reader's time.

But when anything is now written about architecture, whether in a novel—unless it be one by W. J. Locke—or in a poem, or a tale of travel, or a history of building, or a newspaper article, the last thing one will find will be any interpretations in regard to the builders' hearts (and for present purposes architects are builders). What you will find may be a description more or less specific, in the manner of Ezekiel, as to the disposition of accommodation involved in the building in question, or, still more in the manner of Ezekiel, as to the materials employed, with a shrewd hint or two as to the financial aspect of the said
materials. Then you will find the period label, if it is
an old building, and the "stylemonger" label of refer-
ence and resemblance to some past mannerism or tradit-
ion, if it be a new one.

Modern descriptive writing is full of Nature and
her moods, and occasionally architectural objects
obtrude; if the writers would only treat their
architecture as they do their nature, there would be
little to complain of. But the moment the material
creations of man are touched on, the writers lose grip
and proceed to revel in all the things about architecture
which are irrelevant—the limbs, the organs, the flesh,
the clothing. But, on the spirit of the building, the
soul of its builders, the real fundamental subject matter
of the monument, there is silence. The arts are, of
course, ultimately untranslatable, and things spiritual
can be built that cannot be said or sung, and vice versa.
But without asking the writers to attempt the im-
possible, we might expect them to see that some build-
ings are instinct with spiritual life, and that some are
less so, and others not at all, and to differentiate
accordingly. Mountains are allowed to be gloomy,
and lakes to smile, and rivulets to sing; even ruins are
permitted to frown. Why not let the houses be dis-
creet or smug, the hotels be pompous, hospitable, or
vulgar, and the churches chaste or ascetic, and not all
be merely physically and materially convenient, plus
"style" designation, plus valuation.

But there is more in a building that has architectural
qualities than its own particular mood which its
designer may, in a happy moment have bestowed upon
it. In the mere determination of this mood he reveals
something of his personality, but in the elaboration of
the idea he can conceal nothing.

Architects themselves, like writers and painters, have
hearts—good ones and bad ones, hard ones and soft
ones, kind ones and cruel ones, deep bottomed hearts
and hearts as shallow as saucers, and whether they
like it or not (but often with conscious effort in blood
and sweat and tears) they do inevitably build their
hearts into their buildings today just as they did before
printing was invented, and just as any writer does,
and must inevitably do, in his pages. But now that all the
world has learnt to read, and forgotten how to see,
none but the architects are any the wiser or the better
for it all.

Reverting now to the current fallacy of architectural
styles as disembodied traditions, independent alike of
time and place, it is pertinent to enquire: "How
would the literary artists like it if the principal
criterion of public appreciation amounted to the cita-
tion of arid resemblances with respect to ancient
models— if the first thing to be remarked about the
style of a novel was that it was Jacobean or Louis
XIII; or about a play that it was XVth Century
Italian; or about a song that it was Queen Anne—
use is habitually made of certain metrical formulæ. These, in their simplest and most elementary, almost their embryonic form, are the orders of the ancients, Doric, Ionic, and what not, and in their more elaborate developments are often called the "styles" when the "systems" would be a far better word.

Now, if a man writes today in iambic pentameters, no critic in his senses would feel that by calling attention to the fact he had done more than state the obvious. If he is a critic of the head rather than of the heart, and says the metre used is inappropriate or well chosen, that is better. If he leaves the metre alone and can tell how he responds to the verse he has been reading, that is best of all.

So, with architecture—to tell us there is an Ionic order and that the "style" is classic, is to say nothing; to tell us that the scale of the order or the severity of the style is impressive is better; but to tell us of the mood in which contemplation of the building leaves him, is best of all.

McFee, in his very wonderful work of wistful appreciations of men, books and places, "Harbours of Memory," makes these quotations from a long-suppressed preface to "The Nigger of the Narcissus," by Conrad. They constitute, in the first place, an epitome of what a great literary artist thinks about himself, in relation to his work, and in the second place they have the imprimatur of another one—no less eminent—who accepts the words as requiring neither comment nor elucidation.

"The literary art," says Conrad, "... must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the color of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music, which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of sentences that an approach can be made to plasticity, to color, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of words: of the old, old words, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage."

"And again, of the writer:

"'He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invisible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to be solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.'"

So he sums it up. Beyond this, in placing the bounds of the author's art, it is impossible to go. One is permitted only to add, for the purpose of supplying a fitting conclusion, the final paragraph. "The humble and industrious among us may smile incredulously, yet toil on with a better heart, when they read that our aim should be: '... to arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and color, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile—such is the aim, difficult and evanescent and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate even that task is accomplished. And when it is accomplished— behold!—all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest.'"

Now, in applying these same sentences, without modification of structure or essential sense with here and there a word altered, but no paraphrasing, one gets as complete a statement as one could wish to find, invent or compass of the position of the architect as to his work. For instance: Architecture must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the color of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music, which is the art of arts. And it is only through complete, unswerving devotion to the perfect blending of form and substance; it is only through an unremitting, never-discouraged care for the shape and look of building forms that an approach can be made to plasticity, to color, and that the light of magic suggestiveness may be brought to play for an evanescent instant over the commonplace surface of stones: of the old, old stones, worn thin, defaced by ages of careless usage.

Now, I have changed but four words—for the "literary art" I have written "architecture," for "ring," "look," for "sentences," "building forms," and for "words," "stones"—that is all. And so, with the other quotations.

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These words need not even a fortuitous substitution. Apply them to architecture and they stand, and there is little more that can be said.

If people, and particularly writers, would regard buildings as they regard poems, and pictures and plays, and men, women and children, and animals, and flowers, that is to say, as organisms with character, they would obtain and spread much spiritual refreshment in the exercise. If a guide is wanted, one cannot do better than read Mr. Geoffrey Scott's delightful book "The Architecture of Humanism," which sets forth the vital qualities of the buildings of the Baroque period, by a system of thought and analysis just as applicable, I think, to buildings of any and every other period, and therefore (though he would not admit it, being
obsessed by the Baroque) of quite universal application within the realm of architecture, and probably outside it.

There is at Marlborough College a Chapel designed by Bodley and Garner, who brought to bloom the full flower of the Victorian revived mediaevalism, and one of the schoolmasters made it his pleasure and his privilege to show visitors over this part of what Mr. Veblen would call "the Material Equipment" of the institution. One visitor asked this master whether, on entering the chapel the first time, people said "Oh!," and was assured that it was invariably so. "Then," said the visitor, "I know nothing about architecture, but I know that this chapel is all right." That man knew more about architecture than most of us, I think.

Conclusion

Now, no man can arrange ten words for print without revealing something of his nature; so, no man can design ten courses of brickwork without a like dissipation of spiritual forces, and if the heart of the writer is what some readers seek, as many assuredly do when they have truck with writers, then I make a plea for the heart of the architect as a no less interesting creation.

Of course, it may be urged that the hearts of writers are intrinsically better worth attention than the hearts of builders; or again, it may be urged that, as the architects in these days speak a variety of languages, apart from the idiosyncrasies of accent, they have lost their traditions in a veritable Tower of Babel of stylemongery. And there is a good deal in the latter argument.

Still, I will state in conclusion, for the benefit of those who infest the precincts we evolve, that all architectural languages are in themselves very easy to understand, though very difficult and subtle to theorize about; so simple that many fail to understand them after trying, chiefly because they allow themselves to be bamboozled with the clap-trap of the style names and the mysteries of non-existent quintessential fantasies with ugly names such as "associationalism."

Industrial Relations

The Chairman of the Committee on Industrial Relations has before him two documents which have been issued during the past month. The first of these is the circular announcing the formation of the New Jersey Building Congress, which is, as may be guessed, the same type of building industry organization that is now functioning in New York City, Boston, Portland, Ore., Seattle and Philadelphia.

The opening words of the document are these: "If he will but think, everyone will realize that he is affected by the building industry in one way or another, even if he is not immediately concerned in its operation. To many, even of those who follow some other business, the building industry and its problems are vital, for, taking it in all its ramifications, it is the second largest industry in the country. All need the shelter it provides. All are affected in its problems."

The second document is the Report of the Public Group of the Building Industry (New York City), and its opening phrases are these:

"No industry so important as the building industry at this time can be considered apart from the interests of the community, and therefore any attempt to deal with the problems arising must give heed not alone to labor and the employer, but to the public as well."

Is it not fair to assume that the problems of the building industry are beginning to be understood in their nature if not in their detail? Both of these documents represent groups of people in two different communities. It is true that the Building Congress is a body composed of representatives of the labor and employer groups and of the public, while the Public Group of the Building Industry is composed entirely of people representing the public at large. But it is the public, let us agree, that is at last finding its place in the tri-partite whole.

These are auguries from which we may hope for real progress in setting up a clearer understanding of the functional relationship which all of the elements in the building industry bear to each other, and it would be hard to over-emphasize the value of having made it clear to groups of people that the public must bear its share of the burden in bringing about a better condition.

The second point of interest is the fact that an architect is at the head of these central groups. Mr. Harry T. Stephens is President of the New Jersey Building Congress. Mr. R. H. Shreve is Chairman of the Public Group of the Building Industry in New York City. Both are well-known members of the Institute. These things do not happen by chance but because the parties in interest recognize the fact that the architect is a professional man. It thus follows that as his interest is completely divorced from the individual interests of the others, he alone can function judicially. This is a fact which the architects ought to have realized long ago. They were wrong in holding aloof as though they feared to antagonize this, that, or the other group or class. They are right in now coming forward wholeheartedly, as so many of them are doing, as leaders of groups which seek to discover the nature of the problems that beset the building industry. They are the ones who can do the most. It is their opportunity.

Of the New Jersey Building Congress I can but say that we greet it with pleasure and extend to it our hearty assurance of co-operation. The "Congress" idea is now too well known perhaps to require any detailed explanation, but it might be well to recall the fact that it is, from its nature, a body which will concern itself with research and investigation and not with problems of a temporarily contentious nature. Numerous statements of the work done by the various Congresses to which I have alluded have appeared in the JOURNAL, and, as is well known, one of its most promising aspects is the success that already has attended the movement toward