

# 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 æstheticians 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 timetables, 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 XIIIth 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 Bröwning 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 readers 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 reference and resemblance to some past mannerism or tradition, 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 impossible, we might expect them to see that some buildings 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 discreet 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 citation 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—

could literature live under such a blight? I trow not. But architecture is expected to thrive under this handicap, imposed by the superficial information which is the hall mark of our time, and something far more difficult and dangerous than honest ignorance. How can it?

The evil is greatly accentuated by an accident of language. Odd uses of words usually enfold some fundamental truth, but the double meaning of the word "style" is not a case in point. I am not philologist enough to know whether the word has crept into our language from two different sources or not. That would be an explanation. But as things are, ~~this~~ <sup>real</sup> is a fundamental fallacy crystallized by the use of the selfsame word to denote what is individual and what is generic. When applied to a literary effort style connotes all that is differentially characteristic of the author in his power over his technique. When applied to an architectural effort the word nearly always connotes something general, shared, gregariously habitual, imitatively inane, confessedly imbecile, a negation of technical achievement and progress, a denial of evolution.

Yet, architects do achieve style in a precisely similar sense to authors—only, unfortunately, the public is not educated to the perception of it, and accords to architecture a flabby interest in impersonal traditionalism, whose highest manifestation is associational preference when rival traditions are brought into commercial competition by the rival propagandists of mullions, or lintels, cottage craftsmanship, or the grand manner. Now, all this would soon come to an end if people would write about architecture in precisely the same spirit as they write about poetry.

The musical analogy—"frozen music" as a definition of architecture for instance,—is very slight, but the literary analogy, if not pushed too far, affords some illumination.

Architecture has its words, and even its spellings, its phrases and sequences of arrangement to render them intelligible, its statements of fact, its comment, its rhetoric laden with similes, its historic allusiveness, and above all, whether the architecture be an architecture of prose or an architecture of verse, it has its rhythm or it is, as nothing; just as prose and poetry either have rhythm or, wanting it, are altogether inane. And what of the cadences, and echoes, and rhymes and jingles in architecture—the metrical formulæ, the speech in numbers? It is in metrical quality that architecture is pre-eminent among the arts. If the practice of architecture be defined as the "discovery of form" and one school of architecture would stress the "discovery" while another stresses the "form," still all agree that in the search for that form,—a thing itself compact of elements of mass, of scale and of proportion,—abundant

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 invincible 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 indus-

trious 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.

"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."

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~~ <sup>road</sup> 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 mediævalism, and one of the school masters 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 whole-heartedly, 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