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POETRY AND BUSINESS

ONLY a few dedicate their life to the pursuit of science, only a few to the pursuit of art and letters. But we have all, in a greater or less degree, to do business. In it we have, directly or indirectly, our means of subsistence and our current occupation. Business is the substructure of life. A scientific community only means a community in which certain persons (comparatively a few) work systematically at science. They record their inventions or discoveries; they communicate the results of their research and the stimulus of their enthusiasm to others; and thus a certain secondary scientific knowledge, a certain appreciation of the scientific spirit and a large power of using scientific results, reaches through the mass of the people and colours the national life. A literary and artistic community only means a community in which certain persons (these also comparatively a few) do creative work in art and letters, and in the main body of which there is a certain appreciation of that work, and through it of the art and thought of other centuries and ages likewise. But a business community means one in which the whole mass and body of the nation, with insignificant exceptions, is engaged in business as its daily function, in which business is the staple of the national activity.

The United States are the greatest business community in the world. Industry and commerce have been, from the earliest days of the Republic, the chief pursuits of the nation, those to which it has applied itself constantly and

eagerly, upon which it has grown and thriven. On them the whole social fabric has been built up. With the vast increase of wealth due to expanding population and increased power of handling or creating material resources, the energy of business has kept increasing likewise, and its claims on life have become more and more imperious. A sort of fury of industry set in with the extension of the nation over the Middle and Western States, and just at the same time the great discoveries of applied science began to be made which have increased a hundredfold the control of man over nature. After the Civil War the reunited nation plunged into the business of material development on a scale and with a passion until then unknown in history. The business to be done multiplied faster than the hands who were there to do it. Everything became speeded up. Business encroached on all other national activities, and threatened to overwhelm the whole of life. Against this over-encroachment the national conscience is now beginning to rise up, and to reassert the claims of a smoother, less hurried, less perplexed life, not loaded down and breathless under the weight of its own machinery, but using that machinery towards ampler ends—as its master, not its slave.

Poetry and business may seem to have little to do with each other; or their relation, so far as any exists, to be one of mutual dislike and antagonism. Business methods are not the methods of art. The man of business is apt to regard poetry with contempt; and his contempt is fully reciprocated by many followers of poetry. Yet if both are necessary elements in civilised life, there must be some understanding to be come to between them, some harmony attainable. No poet can afford to neglect the machinery of industry; for by means of it he, like all other men, lives. But neither can the man of business afford (if he knew it)

to neglect poetry; for in it the life which he, like all other men, lives receives its meaning and interpretation. Business is a means, not an end. Its uses are necessary and great; but they require to be adjusted to ends beyond itself, beyond business for its own sake, if the life of the business man is to be one in which the full human capacities can be worthily employed. If his life is not touched and uplifted by imagination, he is the slave of business, and not its master.

For some, indeed,—and more perhaps in America than elsewhere,—business is more than an occupation: it is an art, and its exercise has a quality which might almost be called creative. The born man of business loves it for its own sake; and love implies some sort of ideal, some sort of exercise of the imaginative as well as of the practical faculties. Or we may rather say that the imaginative faculty, checked elsewhere, and not finding its natural outlet, forces itself into the one channel left open for it, and to some extent informs the life of business with ideals of its own, not to be scorned or denied, however short they may come of the higher and larger ideal. Without some such imaginative touch upon it,—and the touch is at best imperfect and rare,—how grey and joyless the purely business life is; how purposeless it seems in moments of serious reflection; how prosaic a world it offers! It keeps the world going, but at what a waste of the energies engaged on that laborious task! Let me quote what was said, sixty years ago, by an able man of business, a master of the theory and practice of finance. 'By dull care,' he wrote, 'by stupid industry, a certain social fabric somehow exists. People contrive to go out to their work, and to find work to employ them; body and soul are kept together. And this is what mankind have to shew for their six thousand years of toil and trouble!' These words of Bagehot are as true now as they were then. The human

race want more than to keep body and soul together: they want, and claim, not merely the continuance, but the fruition of life. Machinery to keep the world going is necessary; but it is not necessary, it is not right, that it should be kept going by turning masses of the nation into mere parts of the machine. For this would indeed be, in the noble line of a Latin poet, *propter vitam vivendi perdere causas*, 'for the sake of life to throw away all that makes life worth living.' It was not for this that man was created. It was not for this that the rights of man were asserted. To be enslaved to business is no less servitude than to be branded with the name and work at the caprice of a slave-owner. And as with the chattel slavery abolished by the Republic half a century ago, so with this subtler but equally real slavery to business (whether forced on the individual by circumstances or adopted by him of his own will under the illusion that it will bring him the real wealth of life), the evil effects spread far beyond the slaves themselves: they contract, degrade, and vitiate the whole life of a nation.

In common speech, as in popular thought, business is opposed to pleasure. This is highly significant. So far as the opposition represents a fact—and if it does not represent a fact, how are we to explain its prevalence, its being taken everywhere for granted?—it means that the unity of life has been lost. Business that does not bring pleasure with it, and in it, is only drudgery. It sustains life, but the life which it sustains is thin and barren. It accumulates wealth, but the value of wealth depends on the use made of it, and national, like private, riches are but the substructure of national well-being: they are the means of living, not the object of life. To bring business and pleasure into their true relation, business must be elevated from a mechanism into an art. This is not done by legislation: it is done by the self-realisation of

the human spirit. Towards this self-realisation poetry works; and therefore a nation needs poetry.

Business, or industry, has two sides—production and organisation. In order to elevate it into an art it must be carried on with pleasure and for the sake of pleasure. For this is the definition of art: it is production with pleasure and for the sake of producing. The pleasure of production is given by the pattern or ideal in the mind of the producer. And similarly, the pleasure of organisation is given by the pattern or ideal in the mind of the organiser. Now the function of poetry, as we have seen, is to create patterns or ideals of life; and the study of poetry means the reception into the mind of these patterns of life created by the poets, and their assimilation by the sympathetic instinct which they awaken. Thus received and assimilated, they fertilise life and make it fruitful; they make industry into a conscious pleasure. The beauty and the joy of life which they embody become part of our own life. Our industry becomes truly creative; our business is not carried on as a burden, but exercised as an art. Work and enjoyment are no longer contrary forces tearing our life asunder between them. Poetry, through the patterns of life created by the great poets, will raise us above our own lives, give us spiritual control over them, make the conduct of them no mere mechanical keeping of things going from day to day, but the daily exercise of faculties through which we are partakers in a full humanity.

Poets are often called dreamers, and some poets have been such. For the making of poetry is, like the other arts, also an industry; and, like other industries, it can be pursued mechanically: the poet may become absorbed in the workmanship of his art, and practise it, as the business man may practise his business, from mere habit, when he has lost the vital energy of creation. Or, like other ways of life, it can

be pursued with too much absorption; and, cutting itself away from the deep roots of thought, emotion, and experience, it may become a tissue of fantasies where the creative or imaginative powers have been working in a vacuum, and the patterns of life which they produce dissolve in the very act of forming themselves; as in some witch's weaving, 'the web, reeled off, curls and goes out like steam.' Nor is the study of poetry free from the same danger. Those who neglect business, which is the foundation of life, and conduct, which in the famous phrase is three-fourths of life, for the mere study of poetry as an art, may still find in that study both pleasure and occupation; but when thus cut off from what should be its foundation and substance, such study degenerates: it is apt to turn into the assiduity of the pedant or into the busy idleness of the dilettante. For those who content themselves with it—and all the more if by it they drug themselves into unconcern with activity and duty—the censure of the practical man of business is justified, and his contempt intelligible. They discredit the study of poetry by studying it wrongly. Not one of the least important functions which an institution of higher education fulfils is to direct and organise this study so as to make it really fertile, and to combine it with other studies in the scope of a training at once liberal and practical. The product of such institutions, so far as they succeed in doing what they set out to do, will be men and women nurtured among the ideals of thought and art, made sensitive to beauty, quickened by sympathetic intelligence, yet not so the less competent, but the more, to take their share in the business of the world, in commerce or finance or industry. A generation so equipped for life, and sent into it with the whole range of their faculties so developed, will not only keep the world going, but will raise the whole national life to a higher plane. They

will be in the highest sense good citizens: and in the goodness of its citizens lie the excellence and the true greatness of the state.

The ideals of citizenship include in them nearly all the lesser or more partial ideals aimed at through the specialisation of faculty on particular pursuits. By their wider scope and larger outlook they connect and balance these others. It is the privilege, as it is the duty, of a community which through the labour of past generations has conquered and cleared a dwelling-place for itself, to set in order and beautify its house. The pursuit of riches, of material comfort, even of greatness, is with the nation, as with the individual, a pursuit upon which the whole of life should not be spent. Until now the Republic has had her hands full with a great, necessary, and engrossing task—that of creating a nation, of organising a commonwealth, of bringing the resources of a continent under her control and asserting her place and dignity in the world. Upon that vast structure the spirit of beauty must be breathed, into it the patterns of noble thought, action, and emotion must be brought, to make the Republic of the future fulfil the plan of its founders, and justify the vast labour that past generations have lavished on building it up into material stability.