

"IN TWO HUNDRED YEARS THERE WILL BE NO POETS NOR AUTHORS"

Thus Predicts Victor Auburtin, and the Cause, He Claims, Is Democracy and Utilitarianism.

I BELIEVE that art is dying, and of this belief I shall speak in the present work. Art is dying of democracy and utilitarianism. It is dying because the soil it needs has been built over—the soil of simplicity and superstition. I believe firmly that in 200 years we shall have no more artists and no more poets. On the other hand, we shall surely have machines, duly patented, by which may be turned out sixty plaster copies of the Apollo di Belvedere in a single minute."

These are the opening words of a highly characteristic work just published by one of that galaxy of young Germans whose names have become known throughout the civilized world through their association with the Simplicissimus—the humorous weekly which by many is regarded as the most effective enemy so far encountered by the upholders of German bureaucracy, militarism, "junk-erdom," and reaction.

The name of this work is a war-whoop in itself: "Art is Dying." It is sensational, paradoxical, iconoclastic in the utmost degree. But it is also logically reasoned and cleverly worded. It is, in a word, a document not to be blown aside with a pooh-poohing breath of contempt. For it constitutes a bitter, insistent challenge to all that our own time stands for, to all the ideals of which we have been dreaming for a century or more; to our whole future, one might say.

The author, Victor Auburtin, is an artist himself, a dreamer of charming dreams, a poet and a playwright. But he is best known probably as a "causeur," or feuilletonist—as a writer of those pungent and poignant pieces of satirical cleverness which have made the pages of Simplicissimus and Jugend, modern refuges for the almost extinguished spirit of Aristophanes. In Germany the little book has succeeded in stirring up the finest hubbub that they have heard of in a long while in that land particularly given to discussion of vast, soul-searching abstractions. Perhaps somebody replies to Herr Auburtin by and by, that he overlooks a significant possibility—namely, that the mistakes of the moment may prove so many stepping stones to the true progress of the future.

"Oh, progress," he rejoins, promptly; "always that word—progress!" And it is just our vaunted progress he accuses of having killed individuality, sentiment, adventure, the blue flower of poetry—~~and~~ love itself

"Who," he asks, "would to-day dare to make an Othello's jealousy the main motive of a drama?" And he points out that love does not play the leading part in a single one of Ibsen's dramas except "Love's Comedy"—and there it appears only to be mercilessly laughed to scorn.

Love, like art, demands passion, enthusiasm, self-surrender.

To-day what every man fears most of all is to seem hopelessly ridiculous by display of some kind of enthusiasm. Not even youth itself forms an exception to this rule. What modern man would dare to twang a mandolin under his donna's balcony? What modern man would dare to ramp up and down the world, like a crusader or a Don Quixote, in defense of some foolishly idealistic cause?

War is one of the things that Herr Auburtin holds needful to art—and other such things are religious credulity, individual self-assertion to the verge of cruelty, social disorganization, and much more that we now regard as thoroughly undesirable. Listen to him:

"Contradiction, conflict, disorder, the undignified love of the soft-hearted, deceit and robbery and ambush, stupid peasant beliefs in cobolds and glistening elves—these form the soil whence art and poetry draw their nourishment, their power. And my mind is made up: if you abolish those things, if you arrange the world with regard to nothing but comfort and complete equality, then you will abolish art, too.

"The arts are so many parasites. And this does not offend anybody who knows that the earth's most wonderful flowers, the orchids, are also parasitic growths. The arts borrow their being either from the top of the princely tree, or from the decaying, phosphorescent dirt of superstition at its foot.

"In the well-organized cells of an electrically illuminated merchant state art must die; and its irrational charms fall particularly to assert themselves where all life is directed toward a rational exploitation of human labor. No, at the Courts of demented Popes and arrogant despots, under the political tyranny of Venetian Councils, in the criminal tumult surrounding figures like the French Louis XV., there art has produced its finest and most delicate flowers."

Labor seems almost as bad as war to this despiser of accepted values. For labor means organization, and organization means suppression of personality, peculiarity, genius. Art is above every-

thing else personal, and the slogan of our time is the subordination of personality to machinery.

A baneful homogeneousness is spreading its blight over the world—a monotony such as our globe has never before experienced. Uniformity in sports, preoccupation with mass politics, the daily consumption of identically served journalistic tidbits—all serve to wipe out indi-

vidual peculiarities and angularities.

And industry makes out of its slaves so many parts of a machine—breathing in unison, and oiled simultaneously by the administration of the same kind of foodstuffs. The laboring hordes of Silesia are not a whit different from those of Wales and Pittsburg. And in the "garden cities" of England each two Englishmen resemble each other just as

closely as do their villas built from identical patterns.

The men we call great to-day are not really great—they only seem so because they rise a little above the general dreary level. And really great men are not wanted. "Why," cries our author, "why should we demand elephants to turn the coffee grinder that is our own day?"

And in a fine frenzy of derision he points out that the sacred city of Eleusis, which once gave to the world gods and cults and Dionysian mysteries, to-day produces nothing but cement and soap. The river Rhine, once the main German source of nature poetry and general poetical inspiration, is nowadays lined with factories from end to end—and at the Rock of Loreley there is a pier for stone lighters! Where the antique glories of Rome once held undisputed sway, there we meet to-day with noisome tenements.

"A world without a Rhine, a world without a Rome," says Herr Auburtin, "does it not make you feel the night—the great night toward which we are inevitably tending?"

Taking up the arts one by one, he sweeps aside their present expressions with a mere wave of the hand. Painting—nothing but frescoes for public school stairways, ordered and made by the yard. Sculpture—over and over again the same nude young lady, labeled yesterday "Circe," to-day "Youth," and to-morrow "Love's Awakening."

There are still houses being built with Ionic columns in front of them, but only as a means of advertising, or for the sake of vulgar display of wealth. There are still windows of stained glass to be seen—but not so often in churches as in beer saloons.

And the drama, the noblest art of all—buried, exiled, forgotten, lost in the on-sweep of musical comedy, vaudeville and moving picture shows. Even the sacred soil of Italy is closely covered with cinematograph booths from the Alp-touching top to the sea-lined heel of its boot. And Herr Auburtin dreams a nightmarish dream about the triumphal entry of Sherlock Holmes into Baireuth as its master and the embodiment of its future destination.

"How can people who have lived all day in the noise and haste of business give their nightly leisure to the delicate nuances of psychological analysis?" he demands. And he adds the assertion, which may sound a little startling here, that some of New York's most successful business men have to devote their evenings to woodcutting as the only means of getting their frazzled nerves into some kind of shape again. "The Americanization of art" is, by the bye, a term that appears quite frequently in Herr Auburtin's book. It is already well under way in Europe, he says, and as for America itself—well, here art died before it was really born.

As the average "right-minded" man praises work, so this German sings the praise of leisure, loafing, indolence. He speaks of the "saving holiness of the doing habit, without which art cannot exist." And he insists that only people utterly reckless of time and its value can appreciate art. Work, he goes on—work which is exalted as the gospel of the day—makes man common and vulgar and incapable of grasping those swiftly passing moods out of which have sprung beauties like the elegies of Horace and the poems of Goethe.

"I believe that the human race is headed for a tremendous future," he concludes his vitriolic outpourings. "I believe in the arrival of peaceful democracies, and in monstrous, harmonious labor associations that shall want the highest and attain it.

"I believe that they are going to pick the Alps from their places and use their crushed fragments to fill up the bays of the oceans, so that the new ground may be used for the rearing of more barracks. I believe that they are going to win their way to the Great Righteousness, and that the last speck of vice and ill-will shall be erased from our hearts, so that henceforth everything may run with perfect ease and smoothness.

"All this will come—I feel it, and I can see the human creatures spread in black density over all the five continents. But I know, too, that never a painfully sweet note will rise out of those anonymous multitudes—or if it be heard, it will never be understood.

"We, who feel the magic power of art, we belong to a dying species, to a weaker species which, by the law of natural selection, is doomed to make place for the stronger—that is, the coarser—and for the fitter—that is, the more vulgar.

"I quake before the electrical greatness of coming generations, and I shall spurn them even out of the pineboard box in which, by the time of their coming, I shall have been nailed.

"New culture. But an artless culture. The vision of nature's secrets stirs deeply, but it will never stir man to that divine insanity which we have at various times named 'the Dome of St. Mark,' or 'the Hermes of Praxiteles,' or 'Orlando Furioso.' All that is gone. It is dying between our hands, or it is already dead, and will no longer stand in the way of the laudably perfect arrangements for hygiene and comfort in the best of all coming worlds."