

# The Artistic Temperament

EVERY one has his own notion of what the artistic temperament is. It is a divine irresponsibility, in the eyes of the flapper and the writer of gushy reviews. In the eyes of the poet it is a bewilderment of flashing colors, a wild symphony of delicious harmonies and agonizing discords. It is lechery, roars the graybearded moralist, and the multitude of unco guid folk prick up their ears and moisten their dry lips. It is hell, groans the despairing manager, and the artist's investment in husband or wife echoes the groan. Whatever it really is, we all join in the opinion that the artistic temperament is unique, and has some very direct relation to creative activity.

The convention of an artistic temperament, strange as it may seem, has been known only to recent generations. The writers of Greece and Rome, though keen observers of manners and morals, never, so far as I can ascertain, isolated any temperament as peculiar to the artist. There were, to be sure, sibyls and priestesses who brought forth hexameters in the madness, real or feigned, of "enthusiasm"—the infusion into their souls of the personality of the god. But the lay poets and painters and sculptors never thought of borrowing the sibyl's license. There are no anecdotes illustrating the moods and paroxysms of Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides. If Phidias and Apelles, in the intervals of their creative work, threw the furniture out of the window or chased their children around with mallet or paint pot, they must have done it very quietly. In the Roman theatre the audience was often temperamental. It would leave in a body if somebody shouted that a good fight was going on around the corner, or the plebeians would yell for the substitution of a boxing match for the third act which was drawing the applause of the patricians. The actors never had tantrums. They were grave, solid fellows, if we may trust to Cicero's testimony. The nearest we come to the artistic temperament in classical antiquity is in one of the *Satires* of Horace. He had ventured the remark that good poetry cannot be nourished by cold water. All the young versifiers in the city thereupon proceeded to drink themselves to death. They were trying to produce temperament, however, not to express it.

I am not arguing that the artistic temperament is only a pose, more or less conscious. There is, I am convinced, a good, solid kernel of reality in it, however deeply husked in the exaggerations of a convention. The painter, the sculptor, the actor go through experiences in the practice of their arts that leave a psychological residue that must somehow be worked off in their periods of ease. I have before me a water color landscape by a famous French artist. Great spaces of buff, with

a few wavering lines that make it into plain and hill, ravine and rocky cliff. A few patches of something like cross hatching give you forests of balsam and pine; your nostrils expand to the resinous odor. A succession of arches sets you on a dusty road that leads from Italy to Germany, from ancient Rome to the next century. On these two square feet the artist has created a whole canton, with its present life, its history and the coming time. If you or I had seen this plain and hill, we should have had a fleeting sense of pleasure and then we should have turned to our Baedekers. We haven't the artist's eye, you say. But eyes are eyes. Every detail that impressed itself upon the eye of Cézanne was mirrored in our eyes too. But Cézanne's attention sprang upon the significant, like a lion upon its prey. I do not know what further processes went on in his mind, how the struggle between the crude vision and the picture was fought out to victory. Probably the artist himself did not know. The processes worked themselves through too swiftly for observation. But I am sure that the consumption of nervous energy must have been immense. The artist's whole will was concentrated on the task, whether he was conscious of the fact or not. There was no place in this work for whim or parade of personality. A touch of these would have ruined the picture. The same is true of all good art. Inevitability is its very essence. Not my will but thine, every artist fervently prays to his art.

Art ruthlessly excludes the "artistic temperament." While he is practising his art, the poet or painter is in chains. He is trussed up to the law of his work. It is not surprising that when at length the completion of the work unbinds him, he should kick up his heels and gallop in mad circles. Ordinary folk like ourselves may wreak our personalities upon our ordinary work. We may dance a jig in our editorials, our briefs, our columns of cash accounts. It matters little. That is why we go sure-footedly when turned into the pasture.

The "artistic temperament" where it is not an affectation, is a wild flight from the super-human concentration of creative activity. But is the artist alone subject to this rigorous rule of concentration? Take the general, laying out the plan of campaign upon which his country's safety may depend. Is he not equally bound by the laws of his work? Can he indulge in whim or personal parade? No more than the artist. Why, then, when the work is done, does he not go on the loose? The answer is, he does. Observe Wood, governing the Philippines. Listen to Pershing expounding his views of politics. Look at Ludendorff, diving blunderingly from the pier before the full tide of revolt has come in, and all but breaking his thick

neck. What we have here is the artistic temperament seeking expression without an appropriate convention. If military men could all swear like Goethals, or throw china and furniture out of the window the world would be safer for generals.

Now you are prepared to confront me with an apparent exception to the rule I am trying to establish—the man of science. Does any one work with greater concentration than he? And does any one carry himself in his hours of ease more judiciously and sedately? Where is his temperamental reaction to the rigors of his creative labor?

The scientist himself is not conscious of any such reaction. This fact, however, need not trouble us. Until the convention of the artistic temperament was well established the poets regarded themselves as possessed of an inspiration that was valid anywhere. The greatest poet of Rome felt that his judgment on grafting and stockbreeding, on manures and irrigation, was worth perpetuating in deathless hexameters. The next greatest poet plunged heroically into physics and metaphysics. In the face of universal laughter there are still poets who pretend to universal inspiration—witness Zangwill in the rôle of political oracle. The generals have not learned even yet what misfits they are in politics. If the scientist sets himself up as an expert on life in general, we need not be astonished. But we must ask ourselves whether those generalized judgments of his are anything, after

all, but the exhibition of an artistic temperament which has not found its proper means of expression in broken crockery and shattered lives.

What about the famous roundrobin of the German scientists, exculpating Germany from the guilt of bringing on the war? We were taught by the Allied propaganda to regard it as evidence of Teutonic untruthfulness. Was it really that, or was it rather only a manifestation of "temperament?" We have had many similar manifestations on the part of our own scientists. We know they are not liars. Temperament is the only valid, as it is the only polite explanation.

It is only one more myth that a "scientific habit of mind" can be produced in, say, chemistry, and transferred intact to politics or ethics or history. True, the chemist has been trained to go straight to the facts and follow the evidence wherever it may lead. But so has the artist been trained to see the thing as it is, in its true proportions. It is desperate and exhausting work to live according to either rule, and neither scientist nor artist will do it, outside of his own confines. Liberty is sweet to one who has been in chains. Inevitably he will use it and abuse it. Grant him the convention of the artistic temperament and he will refrain from cutting up valuable sod in his galloping and pirouetting. Deny him this convention and there is no limit to the mischief he may do, to himself and to the world.

ALVIN JOHNSON.

## What British Labor Wants

THE present intellectual position of the British Labor movement has a certain irony. The old distinction between the trade union and the socialist wings has, for practical purposes, ceased to be of importance. "Socialism" is not merely the official aim of the party, but probably also the political creed of a majority of the individuals composing it. And just when the word has come to command general acceptance, its content has been changing with a rapidity so bewildering as to make the recent debate in the House of Commons, when hoary arguments concerning private enterprise, free competition and collective ownership were marshalled like obsolete cavalry at impossible manoeuvres, seem like a voice from the eighteen-nineties. Recent movements have distended traditional generalities till they seem almost on the point of bursting. In a world where proletarians, white, black and yellow, appear to contend with not less ferocity than their masters, what is the significance of the message, "Workers of all lands unite"? Amid the economic actualities of today is "the nationalization of the means of production, distribution and exchange" an adequate program?

Every party has, of course, its own short-hand:

comprehensive and ambiguous formulae are as much in vogue among Conservatives and Liberals as in the ranks of Labor, and the common argument "either you will socialize everything, which is absurd, or you will not, in which case you are not socialists," is fit only for the press which uses it. Political nomenclature indicates a direction, not a system, and serious discussion begins where these black and white antitheses end. The danger, which the writers of this book\* evidently feel, that the Labor party, like others, may be parasitic on the intellectual efforts of a past generation is not negligible.

What made possible the Liberal triumphs after 1832 was the work of Bentham. What has more than anything else made possible that of the Labor movement is the work of the Webbs. The futility of liberalism when it ceased to think (which it did shortly after the death of John Stuart Mill) is an awful warning. Unless the Labor movement makes the intellectual effort needed to reinterpret

\* The Labour Party's Aim: A Criticism and a Restatement, by Seven Members of the Labour Party. London: George Allen and Unwin. 1 s 6 d.