

International Gramsci Journal

Volume 5

Issue 3 *Gramsci: lycée essays; Gramsci in his situation and ours; Gramsci's translation of the brothers Grimm's folktales; book review section* HE BROTHERS GRIMM'S FOLKTALES; BOOK REVIEW SECTION

Article 9

2024

Lycée Essay (1): Man Must not be Content to do Good Things

Antonio Gramsci

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci>

Recommended Citation

Gramsci, Antonio, Lycée Essay (1): Man Must not be Content to do Good Things, *International Gramsci Journal*, 5(3), 2024, 31-33.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol5/iss3/9>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Lycée Essay (1): Man Must not be Content to do Good Things

Abstract

This is the English version of Gramsci's essay based on the phrase "Man Must not be Content to do Good Things" from the sixteenth century author Giovanni Della Casa's *Galateo* (The Rules of Polite Behavior in modern English versions). This starting point leads into a discussion of aesthetics, art and beauty and their accessibility to the different classes and strata of society. Only in galleries and museums, the preserve of the "initiated", were art forms accessible. The lower strata of society adopted forms of adornment and decoration which, although aesthetically ugly, in a primitive way showed the yearning for beauty. The styles needed channelling to realize beauty; the nascent garden cities in England indicated what could be achieved while, in contrast to the luxurious mansions of the rich in Italy, or even the aesthetic content typifying ancient Greece and Rome, the working people were confined to fetid alleyways and squalid housing, showing up in the stress of modern life: for the Aristotelian catharsis to come about the artistic spirit must predominate.

Keywords

Aesthetics; Americanization; Common Life; Rich-Poor Division; Housing; Catharsis.

Lycée Essay (1): “Man must not be Content to Do Good Things”

Antonio Gramsci

It always gives me pleasure to re-read that most fluent prose used by Carducci in the Premise to his *Levia Gravia*. Pleasure comes not only through the extrinsic merits that these words may have, but in particular because – it seems to me – a number of the writer’s tirades against the men of his times could with slight variants be attributed to the present generation. And I might repeat, without a trace of exaggeration, that if the era from 1866 to ’80 was one of the most anti-aesthetic ones, the current one in my view is even more so. It is not that in itself an era contains an initial defect making it impossible to produce anything worthwhile; I think, rather, that at all times and places where beauty and art are simmering in the mind, a narrative of beauty may be created. I believe in fact that the the present age is guilty of having separated art and beauty from common life, of having relegated all the fine expressions of artistic feeling to Museums and Galleries, where access to the cult of the divinity is reserved only for the initiated. The people were allowed to lapse into barbarism, in a revolting vulgarity, and the conviction was allowed to seep in that we, the practical and open-minded moderns, must despise all that does not involve immediate practical realities; it came about, if one may say, that there has been an Americanization of the old Europe.

Sometimes it is true, one even feels the need of some work serving as an assertion or as a memory; and for that reason those horrendous monuments were erected, those swollen constructions whose ugliness, as Carducci says, brings on an attack of bile.

It cannot be denied that over the last few years there has been a certain rebirth, since it appears that it has in the main been understood that many of the ills afflicting us stem from this enveloping vulgarity. A rebirth since, one may say what one likes, but basically in man there is still something aspiring to rise, to be purified in more breathable airs; in everyday life too one comes to observe certain small facts denoting that, even if the taste of men is

defiled, there does still exist in him the love of the beautiful. The housewife who adorns the walls of her house with horrendous lithographs or the shepherd who adorns his pumpkin with baroque friezes, express in these primitive ways their love of the beautiful. It is a task of society to channel and refine these barely apparent instincts, to put a stop to those certain abominations now being committed.

I recall with pleasure the day when, in the pages of a review, I was able to read of the realization in England of garden cities. I imagined I could really see those villages formed of little houses, elegant in their simplicity, made glad by a small flower garden, pleasing in their joyful colours without any disfiguration. And then I compared them with the houses comprising our townships: small mud houses, badly built, drab and infirm, dirty and undecorated; and I thought of the heart-felt wish of our womenfolk to have a plot of land where they may satisfy their desire to grow a few flowers. In the cities, then, the discord is even more strident: from the noble houses, proud in their Byzantinizing polychromatism and gilding, one goes over to the dark and boding little houses, to the damp and fetid alleyways that seem like caves seeping dampness and melancholy from every pore. And then they go looking for the cause of the exhaustion and stress afflicting modern people in their work overload! They ought instead to look for the cause of it in the lack of satisfaction of the aesthetic feeling. The agricultural worker goes home and, having only a squalid room to stay in, among his domestic and non-domestic animals prefers instead to go to a drinking den and ruining himself with alcohol. In the towns, continuously lacerated by the strident shriek of sirens, or blinded by light or sickened by fumes, in the long run people get hydrophobic. How far we are from the life of the Greeks or from that of our Renaissance: eurhythmy was dominant in all walks of life; even during the roughest fatigue the eye fell upon a graceful line, on a slim and elegant figure, the pupil dilated with pleasure, the soul was softened and thought did not turn to viscid and hateful images, but created urbane perceptions and brought together the various threads of a graceful web. The Aristotelian catharsis will only come about, when in all the manifestations of art there will be a predominance of the spirit of the artist; then the soul will be purified of evil passions, and dream of high ideals. But ... to flee

the nymphs and weep in the occult rivers of the maternal cortex ...
and, who knows if the sons of man will ever return to gladden us
with their presence.

If there is some slight exaggeration, the least to be said is that
you say sensible and reasonable things, and in a good form

V. A. Arullani

7-8/10

[The signature “A. Gramsci” appears under the judgment and
signature of Arullani and the grade]