THE PLAY PRINCIPLE. BY OSCAR LOVELL TRIGGS.

BEAUTY, the end of art, in its essence is Pleasure. Pleasure is the accompaniment of the active functioning of personality. This creative activity of personality I denominate Play. I purpose in this paper to examine the principle, the phenomena of play, and having found their meaning, to apply the principle to the solution of some problems in industrialism and in education.

The properties of play may be determined by a study of its modes among animinals, and of its processes, when it becomes humanized and consciously artistic. What, in fine, are the conditions under which necessity becomes freedom and the useful is idealized and transfigured?

The function that beauty serves in evolution is an important one. Not infrequently the law of the survival of the fittest means the survival of the most beautiful. The graceful feathers of the lyre-bird, the gorgeous coloring of the peacock and humming-bird, the calls of monkeys, birds and insects, the brilliancy of flowers—all represent evolutionary selection in lines of beauty. Fair form and colors are the summons sent from objects to objects for fusion and union. Impressionability to beauty implies a conscious aesthetic sense on the part of those creatures thus affected. That there is aesthetic feeling among the lower forms of life is proven beyond a doubt. The famous bower-birds of Australia furnish the most notable instance of aesthetic display among animals. For use during the time of courtship these birds construct bowers of twigs and grass. These halls are not made for practical use, but serve as festal structures, or avenues of assembly, in which their owners may plume and display themselves. The greatest care and taste are lavished upon the work. Foundations are laid in the ground, and a bower of grass and bushes, several feet in length, is arched overhead. The courts at the end of the bower are paved with small round pebbles, and bright stones, shells and feathers are so displayed that a color adornment is secured. Such structures, not being intended for nests, but simply to be used during a special festal period, are wholly ideal in their nature, and evidence the presence of the spirit of play.

The aesthetic display in man began with the same reference to his mate, but the feeling was gradually extended to comprise outside persons, and having assumed sociological import, it became in time a most efficient instrument in the struggle for existence. The savage adorned his body, decorated his utensils and weapons, shaped and colored his dwelling place. To the adornment of his home he further employed sculpture and painting. Under excitement, he sang—a simple musical chant, and to its rhythms he danced, and out of the dance poetry and the drama arose. Everything in primitive life points to the immense importance of the aesthetic activity. The quality of the art and the stage of culture correspond intimately. When men ceased to hunt, and settled as agriculturists, the richness of their art compared with the former poverty, is a sign of social advance. But this very improvement is in part due to the order and unity introduced into the fluctuating life of hunting tribes by various forms of art, particularly the dance, in which activity
whole family groups engaging, furthered greater social union.

What now is the source of the artistic impulse and with what life process is it associated? Among the lowest forms of life all the energy of being seems to be expended in sustaining and preserving life. Among the higher orders, where the conflict of life is less fierce, opportunity is afforded for escape into ideal action. The energy of being, not fully exhausted in the effort to supply physical needs, engages in some form of free expression, as directed by more or less conscious ideal desire. Play implies freedom from physical need, an excess of life functioning, some degree of self-determination, some conscious satisfaction, and a certain power of abstraction.

To justify this statement let me pass in review a series of activities; advancing from the simple to the complex and from animals to men.

The simple aimless running about of animals and men in play rises into the more complex forms of the leap and gesture, in a more advanced civilization passing to forms of the dance. The simple shout and cry develops into successive and pleasing notes, as of a bird, and issues in human song. The purposeless clawing and cutting of animals and men became some form of pleasure-giving construction, such as purposeful carving and adornment, with delight in form. The simple color sense leads to decoration for pleasure and with a sense of harmony. The adornment of nests with bright objects proceeds to construction, with a sense of form, and, among men, to building with a conscious feeling for proportion.

Now examine the later modes of these activities and note the common characteristic! The dance, the complex form of running and leaping, is distinguished by conscious rhythm. The song, the higher form of the cry, is characterized by a conscious sense of time. Carving, the artistic outcome of cutting, is differentiated by a knowledge of design. Color decoration, the complex form of a simple sense for bright objects, is distinguished by perception of color harmony. Finally, building, the higher form of construction, is done under knowledge of proportion. What is added in the second series to the first?

Plainly in the first series the activity is aimless; in the second there is order and design. The presence of order evidences the introduction of mind into the process. The savage dances in rhythm, sings in time, paints in color, builds in proportion, because it is pleasing to him psychically to engage in an ideal self-determined exercise. Here, then, play-activity becomes aesthetic; his play is carried on with conscious purpose, freedom, self-determination, and pleasure.

Where purpose does not enter, the activity is not truly denominated play. The deer in running strikes his hoofs in order, but the order is mechanical and not self-controlled. The bird sings in successive notes, the beaver builds dams, ants build hills, bees construct cells; but these results are not intentional. The animal is unconscious, merely under the control of evolutionary forces; the excellence of the result not being dependent upon conscious intelligence, but upon fixedness of habit and the very narrowness of the line of improvement. The flower displays its color, but it has no sense of its harmony in a field. Birds sing
pleasing notes, but not, as in a choir, with a knowledge of a general harmony.

Mentality is perhaps most readily perceived in music. The cries of animals and the notes of birds can hardly be designated as song. The indefinite shouts and irregular cries of primitive man were expressions which had not yet arrived at aesthetic value. Sounds become musical when mind controls the succession and coördination. Music ascends from simple concord of two notes to ever more complex phrases, strains, songs and choruses:—ever higher and higher above the plane of sensation, until in orchestral and symphonic music the effect is almost wholly mental. Into the work of art reflection, intention and invention enter.

A convenient savage for our scrutiny in these respects is Browning’s Caliban: a primitive man, yet one sufficiently evolved to exhibit racial characteristics. He is undeveloped, yet old enough to be taught of deity by his dam, and to think somewhat for himself. His sensory experiences are of a low order. Within the range of his interests, his senses are keen, but only now and then does he see or hear aesthetically. He has learned the look of things in relation to his physical safety. He would examine clouds and sunsets as tokens of storm. The range of his interests is shown in his first reflection:

“Will sprawl now that the heat of day is best, Flat on his belly in the pit’s much mire, With elbows wide, fists clenched to prop his chin, And while he kicks both feet in the cool slush, And feels about his spine small eft-things course, Run in and out each arm, and make him laugh; And while above his head a pomeion-plant, Coating the cave-top as a brow its eye, Creeps down to touch and tickle hair and beard, And now a flower drops with a bee inside, And now a fruit to snap at, catch and crunch—

He looks out o’er yon sea which sunbeams cross And recross, till they weave a spider-web— Meshes of fire some great fish breaks at times, And talks with his own self.”

In one of these sensory experiences: namely, when he looks out over the sea and watches the play of sunbeams, Caliban is receiving an aesthetic effect which has no relation to his bodily pleasures; it is not a sensuous pleasure only, but, also, an intellectual enjoyment. Furthermore, he is a creative artist. Thus he compares himself with Setebos:

“Tasteth himself no finer good in the world When all goes right, in this safe summer time, And he wants little, hungers, aches, not much, Than trying what to do with wit and strength, Falls to make something; piled yon pile of turfs And squared and stuck their squares of soft white chalk, And with a fish-tooth, scratched a moon on each, And set up endwise certain spikes of tree, And crowned the whole with a sloth’s scull a-top Found dead in the woods, too hard for one to kill. No use at all in the work, for work’s sole sake.”

The conditions of his artistic activity are thus his physical safety, satisfaction, and consequent excess of energy. He is freed from external objects and permitted to give his ideal faculties full play. All that he does, thus conditioned, is characterized by the presence of design; all is proportioned, harmonized and well ordered. He was under no compulsion to make these objects; he was purely self-conditioned in doing so, and manifestly he works to the end of pleasure.

Evolutionary aesthetics, then, establishes several important facts about art and the artistic impulse. The essential characteristic of artistic expression is freedom. Art is not a product of necessity or related to use. It affords gratification to instincts
and feelings which find their exercise only when necessity and use are satisfied. Practical activity serves as means, aesthetic activity is an end in itself. When savage tribes engage in warfare, their energy is practical. When victory is celebrated with dancing, the aesthetic is brought into play to the degree of the pleasure experienced by the dancers in their own rhythmic movements. In art, man is not the creature of fate, but the arbiter in the ideal realm, at least, of his own destinies, the maker of his own world. The artist is absolutely the only free man.

And connected with this attribute is that of self-determination. When moved by the impulse to create, the artist proves his individuality. He becomes conscious of possessing ideal faculties which, in order to realize, he must objectify for his contemplation. Thought must be expressed. Freedom is not lawlessness. But inner control is exchanged for outer law. When the artist creates a form and embodies himself therein, he is made aware that he is a free, self-determining, law-abiding personality.

The third characteristic implied by the other two is what I shall call, for want of a better term, ideality. It is not the function of art to reproduce the real world. We have senses of our own and can take the artist’s skill for granted. What we want displayed and defined is personality. What is the man’s mystery? As we have seen, simple play becomes aesthetic, when it is conscious and conducted in freedom to the end of self-realization. Order, proportion, harmony are laws of art, not from any enactment on the part of critics, but from the very nature of mind. Mind is itself an order, a rhythm, a harmony. The history of art, therefore, is the history of a freely developing personality. As the soul expands and contains more, it expresses more. Mediaeval art is, in a sense, greater than Grecian art, since it contains more of life and experience. Gothic art may be inferior in point of skill and manipulation, but its soul is greater, its feeling more intense, its grasp of ideality more complete. The ancient world has no counterpart to Michelangelo, with his fierce, vital, electric face and his turbulent, strenuous soul. The difference between the classic and the mediaeval is well expressed in Gilder’s poems of the Two Worlds: one the world of the Venus of Milo:

“Grace, majesty, and, the calm bliss of life,
No conscious war ’twixt human will and duty.
Here breathes, forever free from pain and strife,
The old, untroubled pagan world of beauty.”

The other is the world of Michelangelo’s Slave:

“Of life, of death the mystery and woe,
Witness in this mute, carven stone the whole!
That suffering smile were never fashioned so
Before the world had wakened to a soul.”

To the same effect is a passage in Lowell’s Cathedral:

“The Grecian glutts me with its perfectness.
But ah! this other, this Gothic that never ends,
Still climbing, luring fancy still to climb,
As full of morals half-divined as life,
Graceful, grotesque, with ever new surprise
Of hazardous caprices sure to please,
Heavy as night-mare, airy-light as fern,
Imagination’s very self in stone!
Your blood is mine, ye architects of dreams,
Builders of aspiration incomplete.”

To illustrate the growth in ideality one might bring a Greek of the age of Pericles into the Western world. How much of the mediaeval and the modern would he comprehend! He would stand before a Gothic
Cathedral with amazement. The meaning of the structure, the sign of the Cross in transept and nave, everywhere the symbols of aspiration, of the yearning of the soul to reach through material forms to a spiritual truth far higher than Olympian heights: these would pass his understanding. If taken to a Symphony Concert, he would have neither the sensory experience nor the ideality necessary to comprehend the different movements. How could he, who thought to enter the region of calm tenanted by Zeus, feel the mighty passion, the tumultuous struggles of Beethoven’s Heroic Symphony! Take him into a gallery of painting—would he not be bewildered by the complexity of modern life? What reading would he make of the pain and power in Millet’s peasant faces? What conception could he have of the tragedy and depth of the life conducted on the vast laborious earth? So would not the more recent psychic experiences of the race be beyond his comprehension?

While the World’s Fair was building at Chicago I watched the simple Java folk erect their huts and wattle fences beside the complex gigantic Ferris Wheel. I could not see that the Javians looked upon the wheel even with any wonder. They were hardly curious. The whole mechanical mystery was utterly beyond their grasp. The ideality of the wheel, the principles of its construction, were many fold greater than that of their simple dwellings.

The whole Fair, by the way, was a colossal play:—the Titanic sport of a summer, a buoyant lyric endeavor just meant to exhibit for a moment the hidden prophetic intentions of an ideal people, the scope of whose ideality was but inadequately measured by the vast arches that spanned the space of the manufactory building. Festivals, shows, pomp, may be as important as the realities of the streets, opportunities for ideal exercises, for which trade and commerce are the preparation and the background. When the complaint is heard that World’s Fairs represent economic waste, it is well to be reminded of that saying of Schiller: “Man only plays, when in the full meaning of the term, he is man, and he is only completely man, when he plays.”

When man plays he is free, he is self-determined. Freedom, self-determination, ideality:—these are the characteristics of aesthetic play.

An important truth remains now to be stated. It is this: whenever a man expresses himself under conditions of freedom and self-control, he is an artist—whatever his occupation or field of activity—and he receives the rewards and gains of an artist: the reward of pleasure, the gain of an enlarged personality, and an increasing personal force. What are called The Fine Arts are by no means the only aesthetic field. These have to-day limited an instinct which is common to all, usurped a privilege that should be shared by all. It has come about through historical changes that the artist, in these more specialized spheres, is the only free man in the world of work; all others, in some degree, live under compulsion. Therefore, the problem of freedom in the modern world is to extend that freedom that the artist alone enjoys into every field of industrialism. We may summarize our freedom thus far in these terms: Man is free politically. We have struggled with thrones and tyrannies and have won the victory. If we suffer
THE PLAY PRINCIPLE

mismgovernment to-day, we have ourselves to blame. So man is free in religious matters. We have battled with priesthood and ecclesiasticism and have gained the right of worship according to our conscience. If we remain evil, the fault is at our own doors. In these realms we are practically free, shapers of laws and creeds for ourselves. These matters have already receded in special interest, and special devotion to them bespeaks a retarded development. But, in the way of work, in what is for most of us most intimate, we are little better than slaves living under necessity, obeying machines, attending to masters. Now, as political liberty does not mean license and lawlessness, but rather the right to be a law to oneself as religious liberty does not mean the right to have no religion, but rather to be self-directive in worship and service, so industrial liberty does not mean freedom from labor, but freedom in labor. For this right of self-directive labor, or, in the terms of this paper, for the right of play, the modern world is battling. Disguise the situation as we may, the industrial world is in a state of warfare. Various compromises have been agreed upon, whereby a partial freedom is enjoyed. Thus, we distinguish between our activities; setting aside a portion of the day to toil and drudge, yielding this much to submission, hoping to escape at night, when we can indulge our higher desires and live a moment spontaneously and instinctively. Meanwhile, we clamor for shorter hours of labor and a longer time for play. So long as labor is under bonds, untransformed by freedom, so long will this division and clamor continue. But the granting of an eight-hour day is no real solution of the problem. It is simply compromise and leaves the situation unchanged. The only satisfactory solution lies in the consecration of labor to the ends of life, to the ends of personality. Toil is a "curse" to none but slaves. To a freeman it is pleasure and desire. Conditions must so be changed that the laborer can find in his very work his genuine satisfaction. He must be granted the privilege now enjoyed by the artist only: the privilege of free expression, of self-determination, of ideal creation. Art and labor must so be associated that the one be extended and made universal as labor, and the other be redeemed and made delightful as art. It was some such association that Thoreau was making, when he said, at work in his field of beans: "It was not I that hoed beans, or beans that I hoed." He had in mind a celestial kind of agriculture and was raising a transcendental crop of virtues, patience, manliness, clear-thought and high-mindedness. It is better to produce great men than abundant crops. The reversal of this proposition as applied in modern industrialism is provocative of mirth,—when one is not too angry at the spectacle. I submit that how to make a freeman at play out of a slave at work is the problem of history, the problem of democracy, the problem of to-day.

The problem of education in a democracy is the same as that of industrialism. Shall education be motivated by the desire for a special culture, a sort of objective product, or for a special character, a form of interior life? It seems to me that our education is even yet too formal and objective, too much concerned with knowledge and machinery, and not enough with character. The ideal prevailing in our centers of education is
that of the cultured gentleman—a culture special, possible to the few, a culture dependent upon refinement, intelligence and knowledge of books in a library, a culture that tends to separate men, that erects barriers between the wise and the not-wise, that is selfish and unsocial. This is an ideal which we have inherited from feudal countries and from the theory of the leisure class. The cultured man, in fine, is prepared to live in an aristocracy and not in a democracy. His sympathies are untouched. His imagination is without vitality. His fellows have no interest to him, save as they are comprehended in the same exclusive circle. However attractive the ideal may be, it is destined to fade away before the slowly unfolding meanings of democracy,—fade as the ideals of kings and knights and priests have faded and become lost in the distance. Democracy demands a man of generous sympathies, with imaginative, if not actual community, in every experience, a genuine social being, "a fluid and attaching character": one capable of living, not in an exclusive aristocratic coterie, but in an inclusive democratic society, and one able to live at large, not with condescension, but with full sympathy. Now, personality is the one common possession of all men—this is the comprehensive and unifying principle. It is of no account to hold men together by a written constitution. A nation is compacted by love and sympathy. Extend the essence of each until he comes to include the multitude; until his right becomes the right of all, and his law the law of all. Produce great men; the rest follows. Educate the interior men; avoid the ceremonial; educate for freedom, self-control, ideal action, creative character.

It was not without reason that Lincoln was called by Lowell “The First American.” For this man was the very embodiment of the democratic idea. He had a culture that was broad as life, as generous as love. Frederick Douglas said of him: “He was the first man in whose presence I forgot I was a negro.” That is a sublime testimony, and signifies what I mean by an inclusive character. Lincoln was not educated in our schools. The college might have instructed him, but it would have destroyed him. Democracy contemplates the possibility of education through the simple life processes, or at least, through the expert selection of those especially fitted for education. Lincoln’s associate in democratism was Whitman, a man who escaped the traditional discipline of the schools, but who, in secret striving for the culture of life, achieved a character that so combined the intellectual and the sympathetic, the individual and the social, that in his own personality he comprehended humanity. If Lincoln was the only man, “Leaves of Grass” is the only book to which Douglas might come and find himself sympathetically comprehended. One of the greatest lines in modern literature is Whitman’s address to the poor outcast: “Not till the sun excludes you do I exclude you.” In one of his poems, he proclaims the ideal of life in a democracy:

“I announce natural persons to arise.
I announce uncompromising liberty and equality.
I announce splendors and majesties to make all previous politics of the earth insignificant.
I announce adhesiveness, I say it shall be limitless, unloosened.
THE PLAY PRINCIPLE

I announce the great individual, fluid as nature, chaste, affectionate, compassionate, fully armed.
I announce life that shall be copious, vehement, spiritual, bold.
I announce an end that shall lightly and joyfully meet its translation."

The educational problem presented by the lives of these two men, the first practical democrats the world has known, is profound and not easily solved. They represent the ideal around which the sympathies and imagination of men must henceforth gather. They exhibit a special development of personality and to their making ages of history have gone. Dare we face this ideal? Might not education assist the individual through some method of self-activity? Might we not adopt for our whole educational system the principle of play? Man has something to learn, something to receive, but also something to give and achieve. The educational watchword of a former generation, the generation of culture, was discipline. The watchword of the present, the generation of knowledge, is observation. Might not the future, the generation of personality, take for its sign the watchword, play? The need of the hour is education by execution, by creation, by modes of self-realization—controlled always by the motive of helpfulness. By such modes alone the personality is extended and the individual rounded full-circle.

The beginnings of such education have been made in the kindergarten; this being the latest, the most modern in spirit and most democratic section of our educational system. This is the children's age, and a little child is leading us away from our formalism and traditionalism, and compelling a more sincere study of the actual field.

In the kindergarten the principle of play is frankly adopted. The application of the principle in the upper grades, where traditional ideas are entrenched, has yet to be accomplished. By the introduction of Manual Training, which is only a name for the educational principle of self-activity, a means of self-expression is afforded the older pupils. In the more progressive schools there is taking place a reconstruction of the school program with the various art studies as the coördinating center. Vacation schools in the larger cities are experimenting with the new ideas, and it is not unlikely that the success of their freer methods will bring about extensive modification of the traditional curricula. All these are signs of the evolution of play; of the effort made by modern man to adopt social forms to current idea.

That this adjustment of man to his immediate environment will continue in all the fields of human endeavor, there is not the slightest doubt. The evolutionary forces are always at work. Nature creates to-day, as in the early ages of the world. Man's creative power is deepening and widening. There are many evidences of increase in personality, most notably, perhaps, in the arts which still afford the field of purest play. I refer particularly to the instance of music, the art at present in most rapid process of development, the one most capable of bearing the high emotionalism and the complex idealism of the modern world. The history of music shows that an enormous distance has been passed from Mozart to Brahms. Once the former was thought to have reached the perfection of composition. Then came Beethoven with newer modes. Then followed Wagner.
THE CRAFTSMAN

and Brohams and Richard Strauss, each adding something to the expressiveness of music. To-day, Mozart is simple, hardly interesting, apprehensible to a child. Wagner is now at the point of full reception. But few have the capacity to follow the complexities of the latest composers. But will not Brahms be as simple to the ordinary ear, as Mozart is now to the critical musician? What does this growth in apprehension signify, if not that the race is advancing farther and farther into the interior region, where harmonies are realized and ideals formed?

In conclusion, the matter may be summed up by saying that, at every stage of his being, man has possessed an ideal self-determined life, existing side by side, but apart from his life, as conditioned by material needs. The origin of this freedom is lost in the dim evolutionary regions; the poets and some scientists postulate a certain degree of sentient life in the material atom. Certainly, the higher animals experience a degree of freedom. In such moments, they engage in play. In the lower grades of life, this activity is merely play; in the higher grades, it takes the rational and significant form of artistic creation.

In some future golden age, foretold by poets and prophets, it may be that all work will be play, all speech will be song, and joy will be universal.

THERE is a question in regard to which one can scarcely find any difference of opinion. It is well-nigh universally agreed by men of all parties, not only in England, but all over Europe and America and our colonies, that it is deeply to be deplored that the people should continue to stream into the already over-crowded cities, and should thus further deplete the country districts.

Lord Rosebery, speaking some years ago as chairman of the London County Council, dwelt with very special emphasis on this point:

“There is no thought of pride associated in my mind with the idea of London. I am always haunted by the awfulness of London: by the great appalling fact of these millions cast down, as it would appear by hazard, on the banks of this noble stream, working each in their own groove and their own cell, without regard or knowledge of each other, without heeding each other, without having the slightest idea how the other lives—the heedless casualty of un-numbered thousands of men. Sixty years ago a great Englishman, Cobbett, called it a wen. If it was a wen then, what is it now? A tumor, an elephantis sucking into its gorged system half the life and the blood and the bone of the rural districts.”

—Ebenezer Howard in “Garden Cities of To-Morrow.”