The Beauty of Ugliness, by Ernest Crosby

In my former papers I have shown that the nineteenth century was the century of ugliness, and that the labor-saving machinery which it gave us in exchange for the beauty of life degraded the workman without really adding materially to the happiness of the consumer. Some of my readers and critics have called this pessimistic, and so it would be, if I had intended to stop there. But pessimism is the root of optimism and you have to be thoroughly persuaded that things are in a bad way before you are willing to set to work to improve them.

And if I have said that the nineteenth century was ugly, I have not said that ugliness was an unmixed evil, for it is not. There is a beauty in ugliness; in fact, the greatest of all beauties, for ugliness usually tells the truth, while beauty is often a liar. The worst sin is hypocrisy and ugliness knows nothing of this. Anything which is ugly at heart ought to look ugly on the surface and has no business to look otherwise. All that we have a right to ask of a face is that it should honestly represent the soul behind it. It is a mistake to whiten sepulchres or battleships. It is their duty to look grim and forbidding. Corruption should be inscribed on the front of the one, and hatred on the other. A slaughter house should have a crude and cruel architecture, recalling the iron age, and when I saw last week the plans of a beautiful building (erected to the memory of an innocent baby, too!), devoted to the torture of animals in the name of science—falsely so-called—it was clear enough to me that here artists and architects had been prostituting beauty to evil uses.

The nineteenth century was guilty of no such subterfuge. It felt the ugliness at its core, and it did the best thing that it could under the circumstances: it let it come to the surface. If it had tried to conceal it, keep it in, and to look pretty notwithstanding, it would have died the death. It is better to break out in ulcers than to let the poison ferment within. Outside and inside should match, and the outside of the nineteenth century, its devastated forests, its black and bleak mining regions, its slums and factories and polluted streams, were merely the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual disease. The real trouble was that men were harboring a false ideal of life, and it broke out in eruption all over the surface of things. And now with the surface of things ugly, it is harder than ever to cultivate beautiful,
sane and healthy ideals again, for ugliness begets ugliness. I have seen villages in the South which were clearly designed as the background of lynchings, and it is a labor of Hercules to be and to act more beautiful than your environment.

And yet this is the one obvious thing to do. We have never suffered from lack of energy, and the preaching of strenuousness was never more out of place than in America, but we have had low ideals, and the preachers of strenuousness have nothing better to offer us. Our ideal has been to get something for nothing: to reap the forbidden fruit of the tree of others’ labor; to rise (or rather to sink) from earnings to income; to seek an “independence” in absolute dependence upon the toil of others; and to shelve a profit from the hire of the laborer. Our northern woods have fallen, not for the house-builder, but for the timber-speculator. Coal mines are worked, with an eye, not to the hearthstone, but to the dividend. Railways serve the stockholder and not the traveler. The nineteenth century slaved and slaved, not because things were useful or beautiful, but because they paid. It never cared at all what it was doing, but only for the reflex action upon the doer. Its God was the market, and it built its cities not to live in, but to rent. It is easy to see that such a false motive must be disastrous to all beauty and to all art. Once admit that you are making a thing merely to sell, and you open the door to every commercial villainy. Make it to use, and, at once, all the muses hover about you. The peddler who cried: “razors to sell,” and when told by a customer that his razors did not shave, answered that they were “to sell” and not “to shave”—is a good symbol of the nineteenth century. If the twentieth is to be any better, we must go to the root of the matter and set up a new ideal. Profit-mongering, which is nothing but gambling with our workmen as counters, must cease, before the world can begin to be beautiful truthfully, and before art can be anything but a hollow, mincing lie.

“THERE are two books from which I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of His servant Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript, that lies expans’d unto the Eyes of all: those that never saw Him in the one, have discovered Him in the other.”

SIR THOMAS BROWNE.