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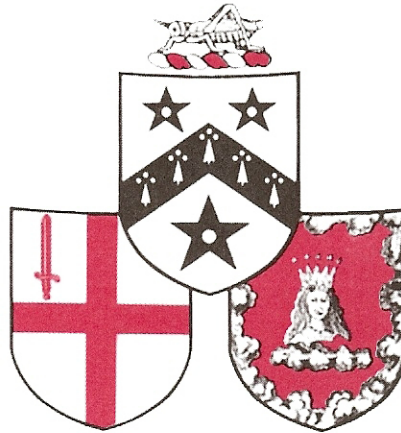

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INDUSTRY AND THE ARTS

Three Lectures by

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THE TYRANNY OF CHARITY: PATRONAGE, PHILANTHROPY AND STATE INTERVENTION

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'THE ARTS INDUSTRY'

The relationship between 'industry' and 'art' is not the simple thing it may seem. In the first talk I dwelt upon the way the word 'art' has changed its meaning - from the sixteenth century when the word was used in the broadest possible way, meaning any kind of 'skill', when Sir Thomas Gresham was comfortably able to described his abilities in financial dealing as an 'art', to the late twentieth century when state bureaucrats have tended to canonise an activity as 'art' only when it seems to function as a positive social catylist.

In this talk I am going to stir the pot a little more by pointing out that the word 'industry' has also changed its meaning, and just as dramatically. At the end I shall conclude that not only does such a thing as an 'arts industry' not exist, but that - in both of the modern senses of the words - the term 'arts industry' is self contradictory. Therefore it is quite impossible that such a thing could ever exist.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, 'industry' meant, broadly speaking, 'hard work', 'diligent application to a task', or what in our drearier modern jargon we might call 'commitment'. In that early sense the word presents no difficulty; industriousness in art as in other things is plainly desirable. It was proper that, in his first Discourse to the students of the new Royal Academy of Art in 1769 Sir Joshua Reynolds should urge that keen young artists devote themselves to industry:

'If you have great talents, industry will improve them; if you have but moderate abilities, industry will supply their deficiency.'

When William Shipley's Society of Arts was created, its plan (1755) uses both the term 'arts' and the term 'industry' in their earlier senses. The plan begins:

'Whereas the Riches, Honour, Strength and Prosperity of a Nation depend in a great Measure on the Knowledge and

Improvement of useful Arts, Manufactures, Etc., several of the Nobility and Gentry of this Kingdom, being fully sensible that due Encouragements and Rewards are greatly conducive to excite a Spirit of Emulation and Industry, have resolved to form themselves into a Society, by the Name of The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce....'

To live the good life you therefore needed both industry and art, application and skill. As Ruskin put it in his 1870 lecture, The Relation of Art to Morals:

'Life without industry is guilt, and industry without art is brutality.'

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In the eighteenth century, for the most part, art and industry - skill and hard work - had been seen as natural bedfellows. Sometimes they had even blended within a commercial rural idyll, as in Jack of Newbury's well-known doggerel verse about the cheery cotton weavers:

'Two hundred men, the truth is so,
Wrought in these looms, all in a row.
By every one a pretty boy,
Sate making quills with sickle joy:
And in another place hard by,
An hundred women merrily
Were carding hard with joyful cheer
Who singing sate with voices clear...'

The eighteenth century offers many similar, and perhaps more convincing, examples of the integration of music, storytelling and dramatic ritual with commercial tasks and commercial purpose, and all pursued with industry. There were many eighteenth century examples of employers who felt that their duties to their employees did not end with providing them with paid work, but should include providing them with a rich cultural environment.

Perhaps the best known of these was Robert Owen, with his model society at New Lanark, in which every child was taught to read, to recite and to sing. But there were many lesser-known employers who did the same thing. One, John Strutt at Belper in

Derbyshire, actually went so far as to give all his workers time off work to receive free musical instruction. So successful was he that after a time it was found that the most musical of his mill hands were being poached from him and offered work elsewhere in the county as music teachers. To remedy this, Strutt made the best musicians, particularly those workers who played in his works orchestra, sign an undertaking to remain in his employ for seven years.

It would therefore be wrong to think of music, literature and the visual arts as mere embellishments of commercial activity. I must repeat that for long periods the arts in Britain were themselves an integral part of the wider commercial world. Sometimes they became a thriving commercial activity in their own right, as happened in the second half of the eighteenth century with such enterprises as music publishing, pottery and musical instrument making.

And cultural enterprise was carried on in no less commercialised a way than was the spinning of cotton or the mining of coal. Josiah Wedgwood's pottery for example was manufactured by workers who worked a shift system - being paid for the time they spent at work, rather than, as had previously been the case, being paid as piece workers according to the number of pots they had made. Wedgewood's factory also ran on an efficient subdivision of labour with each worker allotted a specified task, for which he or she had been recruited and specifically trained.

By 1790 Wedgwood had 160 male employees working variously as slip-mixers, clay beaters, throwers, plate makers, dish makers, hollow ware pressers, turners of flat ware, turners of hollow ware, handlers, biscuit oven firemen, slippers, brushers, placers and firemen in the glost oven. They were supported by men working as coal getters, modellers, mould makers and as sagger makers. In addition Wedgwood also trained and employed women as colour-grinders, painters, enamellers and gilders.

So Wedgwood's factory might seem to have had many of the characteristics of the nineteenth century factory. A bell rang half an hour before work began in order to summon the workers. Meal breaks were signalled by the ringing of other bells, and at the end of the day 'when they could no longer see' the workers were dismissed from their day long shift by means of the 'going home' bell. Workers were paid weekly, on grades determined by Wedgwood himself, according to the skill, or art, which they employed in their work.

Yet in many important ways Wedgwood's enterprise was quite different from the production line factories of the nineteenth century. Traditional potter's skills - that is, the 'fine arts' of making pots - were still employed; there was no attempt to economise with short cuts in the production process. Wedgwood

did not follow Ricardo's famous dictum and concentrate upon producing only the most profitable lines; his products remained numerous and varied, both in quality and price. And he standardised his production processes only up to a point; the Wedgwood pottery still bore the distinctive stamp of the individual designers of genius who worked with him. Most important, his workforce was not drawn up into the rigid industrial battlelines of the nineteenth century. Although the factory did operate a shift system, it was a remarkably benign one, as his personal instructions to his gatekeeper show:

'Those who come (to the factory JP) later than the time appointed should be noticed, and if after repeated marks of disapprobation they do not come in due time, an account of the time they are deficient should be taken, and so much of their wages stopt as the time comes to.'

Wedgewood's gatekeeper stands as a symbol of a departing age, an age in which the arts were industriously created within ordinary commercial practice, but still within a benign and relatively fluid social order.

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Yet whatever dramatic changes the rapidly developing new factory systems may have wrought in the first half of the nineteenth century, the words 'industry' and 'art' were still being used in their traditional senses at the time of Prince Albert's Great Exhibition in 1851.

It is commonly said that Albert brought with him from his native country Germanic notions of Royal and state support for cultural activities. I do not think there is much truth in this. The British government had already begun its support of national museums and galleries in 1753, with the purchase of Soane's paintings for the nation. The British Royal family had of course already supported the arts for at least three hundred years And after his marriage to Victoria Albert did nothing to make good the cut which the Queen on her accession had made in her annual payment made to the patent theatres.

Certainly when, on June 30th. 1849, during his presidency of the Royal Society of Arts, Prince Albert proposed holding a great international exhibition 'of the works of industry of all nations' he looked neither to the Royal coffers nor to the state for support. The Exhibition was financed in what had become the traditional British way, from public subscription within the private sector. The idea was successfully launched.

Within a few weeks of the announcement of the exhibition, £64,000 had been subscribed, and a guarantee fund of £200,000 created from further pledges.

Hyde Park was shosen as the site, and a public competition held to choose the design of the exhibition building. There were 254 entries. The winning design, an ambitious iron and glass building which was at first called the Caxton Palace, and later, after it had been erected, the Crystal Palace, was submitted by the Head Gardener for the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth House, Mr (afterwards Sir) Joseph Paxton. He had modelled his design on the extension to the Chatsworth conservatories. The building was one of the first large buildings in Europe to be assembled wholly from prefabicated parts, and was erected, by Messrs Fox and Henderson, using an army of 2,000 labourers, in just 17 weeks.

On the 1st. May 1851, half a million people assembled in Hyde Park to watch Queen Victoria open the exhibition. It closed on 11th. October in the same year. During that time 6,500,000 people had visited the exhibition, paying either 5/- admission or, on alternate days, the 'days of the little people', paying 1/-. Overall the exhibition - which was not of course a charitable concern - made a commercial profit of some £200,000.

So what did those visitors see, and what were felt to be the purposes of the exhibition? Inside the Crystal Palace visitors found that the thirteen thousand exhibitors were divided into four groups - raw materials, machinery, manufactures and fine arts. The major motif of the exhibition was the celebration of the virtues of hard work, or, in the sense in which the word was still insistently used, the celebration of the supreme virtues of industry.

In 1851 Industry - hard work - was still perceived as the engine which drove science and commerce, fine arts and manufacture towards their common goals. It was a concept which, in the minds of the Great Exhibition's creators, should unite rather than divide mankind. As Henry Cole, the most powerful of Prince Albert's allies, said to the Society of Arts:

'For the first time in the world's history, the men of Arts, Science and Commerce were permitted by their respective governments to meet together to discuss and promote those objects for which civilised nations exist.'

Later, in summarising the success of the exhibition, Cole made its purposes clearer still:

'The history of the world records no event comparable in its promotion of human industry, with that of the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations in 1851. A great people invited all civilised nations to a festival, to bring into comparison the works of human skill.'

A second motif of the Great Exhibition was <u>unity.</u> Certainly Cole speaks as if the Fine Arts, the new factory systems, science and commerce were still, in Britain at least, united, industriously pursuing common goals.

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Unfortunately that was not so, as a glance at a famous book published just three years after the Great Exhibition, in 1854, may serve to remind us. Charles Dickens' grim novel <u>Hard Times</u> describes the spirit-breaking mechanics of life in a newly created Northern Mill Town:

'It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever, and never got uncoiled. It had a black canal in it, and a river than ran purple with evil-smelling dye, and vast piles of building full of windows where there was a rattling and a trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam engine worked monotonously up and down, like the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another and many small streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow, and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.'

In <u>Hard Times</u> Dickens chooses to pit this dreadful place, Coketown - with its dehumanising mechanical values - against an unexpected adversary. In the novel what disturbs the characters' lives, and throws Coketown society into disarray, is the arrival on the outskirts of the town of a third rate, apparently innocuous travelling circus. Sleary's Horse Riding might almost come from a different planet. Certainly the author's tone changes noticeably when he describes the circus; the hard sardonic edge is replaced by what can best be described as friskiness:

'The clashing and banging band attached to the horse-riding establishment which had there set up its rest in a wooden pavilion was in full bray. A flag, floating from the summit of the temple, proclaimed to mankind that it was 'Sleary's Horse-riding' which claimed their suffrages. Sleary himself, a stout modern statue with a money box at its elbow, in an ecclesiastical niche of early Gothic architecture, took the money. Miss Josephine Sleary, as some very long and very narrow strips of printed bill announced, was then inaugurating the entertainments with her graceful equestrian Tyrolean flower act. Among the other pleasing but always strictly moral wonders which must be seen to be believed, Signor Jupe was that afternoon to 'elucidate the diverting accomplishments of his highly trained performing dog Merrylegs.' He was also to exhibit his astounding feat of throwing seventy five hundred weight in rapid succession backhanded over his head thus forming a fountain of solid iron in mid air, a feat never before attempted in this or any other country....'

What Hard Times shows us is a new world in which music, entertainment and recreation can no longer be a part of the working day. They now exist outside work time, their aim is now to be a solace, but because they deal in the realms of the fancy and play upon dangerous emotions they are instead perceived by the new 'Captains of Industry' as a distinct threat to the work ethic. It is quite impossible to imagine Mr Bounderby, the Coketown Mill Owner, urging his hands to learn music, or forming a works orchestra.

Of course a novel, even so great a novel as I believe Hard Times to be, is only a novel, and we cannot look within it for conclusive proof of social trends. Yet in this instance Dickens is conveying the divided essence of Victorian Britain far more surely than did the eulogistic promoters of the Great Exhibition.

The millions of industrial workers who had been drawn into the new industrial and mill towns found their work and play now rigidly separated. Just as the shift system had rigidly defined working hours, so for the first time did the new factory workers find their leisure time rigidly defined. That leisure time became a battlefield between the excitements and escapes offered by the showmen and the popular publishers, and the worthy pastimes - the libraries, museums, galleries and improving lecture series - offered by the churches and the new civic authorities. For the first time in British history working people found they had a degree of choice about how they could spend their leisure time.

When we look back on the mid-nineteenth century we may be tempted to assume rather arrogantly that we can judge the quality of that leisure time by measuring only the availability

of those activities we now choose to call 'the arts'. That would be a mistake. If, unblinkered, we look beyond our own categories we will see a rich cultural diversity, a plethora of amusements and diversions - some improving, some merely entertaining, some neither, some both - available in the Victorians' leisure time. Peepshows, dioramas, circuses, magic theatres, popular concerts, pantomimes, touring exhibitions, penny gaffs, nightly dances, fireworks, song and supper rooms, operas, water cascades and museums of all kinds provided a rich diet for the leisure time of mid-century urban Victorians. For example, around the time of the Great Exhibition a visitor to the Eagle pleasure gardens in the City Road exclaimed:

> 'Song, dance, opera, farce and ballet all relieve each other, and the visitor is sure to go away delighted with the entertainment the worthy caterer has provided for him. But, as if this were not enough, other enchantments await him. Brandy and ballet dancing, grog and glees, cakes and catches, with cigars and cascades, all allure the palate, enchant the eye and delight the ear.'

Or for another example we might turn to one of the rapidly growing industrial cities. Birmingham, whose population had grown from around 70,000 at the turn of the century to some 233,000 by 1851, in the year of the Great Exhibition amongst other things offered its workers plays, pantomimes, waxworks shows, panoramas, firework displays, concerts, musical glasses, freak sideshows which included the 7ft.4in. tall Pantagonian Sampson, visiting circuses and, a particular favourite in Birmingham, 'Signor Bertollotis and his performing fleas'.

There is an absence of cultural barriers and an absence of antagonisms. A Birmingham poet, John Freeth, suggests that although people of all kinds resorted to Birmingham's own pleasure gardens, they were peaceful places:

> 'When the evening is fine, how enlivening the scene
> The walks to parade or to trip o'er the green
> No troubles to harass, no fears to alarm
> The mind sits at ease when there's music to charm
> Then quickly away - to the regions resort
> Which pleasure makes use of when keeping her court.'

Nor, until later in the century, were there obstacles to managers moving in all classes of society. At the end of his

life, and in the course of writing his memoirs, one of the great nineteenth century showmen, 'Lord' George Sanger, said to his readers apropos those mid-Victorian years. He wrote:

'On my travels you shall go with me into the company of the highest and the lowest. It has been my fortune to mix with all sorts and conditions of men. Angry mobs have stormed my tent and more than once gone far to wreck what little fortine I had got together by months and years of toil and patience. On the other hand, I have had great triumphs....

The showman was several times commanded by Queen Victoria. (Nothing unusual there; his great rival Wombwell gave no fewer than five command performances at Windsor.) Among others Sanger also met Emperor Napoleon IIIrd and the Empress Eugene, Czar Nicolas 1st, Abraham Lincoln and the Pope (twice).

And the mid nineteenth century showmen could still move easily enough between what we should now distinguish as the 'high' and 'low' arts as well as between art forms. In the course of the Gresham research we have come across many showmen with a quite extraordinary width of interest, such as David Prince Miller, the manager of the Royal Adelphi Theatre, Glasgow. At other times in his career he was an interviewer for Henry Mayhew, a prize-fighter, an equestrian, a fortune teller, a conjurer, a ring keeper for Wombwell's circus, a publicity officer for Richardson's travelling theatre, lessee of the Queen's Theatre, Manchester and an impersonator of a black giantess.

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However we now come to a crucial point. In the decades immediately following the Great Exhibition it became ever clearer that the pervasive Victorian factory system had wrought a fundamental change in the way many people lived. To communicate its enormity several writers, but most particularly Thomas Carlyle, began in the 1880s to use the word 'industry' in a distinct new way. It no longer referred to hard work and diligence, but to the organised forms of mechanical production which had transformed Britain and the British way of life.

It was Carlyle who first gave particular currency to the defining phrase 'Industrial Revolution'. Pairing the words 'Industrial' and 'Revolution' is intended to convey the fact that the organisation of mechanical factory production not only changed the way people worked - in long shifts at repetitive tasks - but changed almost every aspect of their social and

domestic lives as well. Wedgwood's workers had gone home to live their various domestic lives, and follow their traditional bucolic pleasures much as their forebears had done. By contrast the workers of 'Coketown' went back to their squalid back-to-backs from which they 'went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow....'

In Carlyle's newly pejorative sense 'industry' referred to a pervasive new social force which mechanised, standardised and deadened people's working lives, and from which the music halls and travelling shows and pleasure gardens provided a brief escape. As writers as different as Engels and Matthew Arnold averred, although industry created wealth, it also produced, in Arnold's phrase, 'a multitude of miserable, sunken and ignorant human beings'. Or, to recall Carlyle's memorable description, the new industrial poor gazed over the chasm which had opened between them and their masters, with 'bitter discontent grown fierce and mad'. (The new adjective deriving from the new use of the noun makes the difference clear. Formerly even a poor community may have prided itself on being _industrious_; the new industry by contrast gives rise to _industrial_ towns, the _industrial_ poor and _industrial_ waste.)

Carlyle's bitter new definition of 'industry' is one of the senses in which we still use the word. And when we have this sense in mind the phrase 'arts industry' becomes an oxymoron, an impossible amalgam of opposites. 'Industry' in this sense means standardised, mechanised, dehumanised, whereas the 'arts' inevitably call to the individual living spirit. So in this sense we can only use the term ironically, or destructively. If I wished to pour scorn on the actions of an arts bureaucracy I might jeeringly say they were helping to create an 'arts industry' - much as I might scoff at the actions of one of my more insensitive country neighbours for helping the cause of 'factory farming'.

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Yet of course 'industry' did not become a pejorative term for all of the later Victorians. Like others Samuel Smiles (in spite of his great admiration for Carlyle) continued to use the term in its older sense. In _Self Help_ (1859) he wrote:

'Whatever is done _for_ men and classes to a certain extent takes away the stimulus and necessity of doing for themselves...No laws, however astringent, can make the idle industrious....'

Smiles was not a William Morris. He did not believe that the only salvation lay in the recreation of small 'model' factories. He believed that the existing mass of mills and factories could, with some energetic social engineering, create a working class which did not look with 'discontent grown fierce and mad', but had higher aspirations. He said:

'Those who do society's work - who produce, under the direction of the most intelligent of their number, the wealth of the nation - are entitled to a much higher place than they have yet assumed. We believe in a good time coming for working men and women....'

For Smiles 'industry' also referred to the Victorian factory system, but in his case such capitalist activity was not self-evidently an engine of spiritual destruction. If all concerned could learn the virtues of self-reliance within the capitalist system, then for working men and women there could be 'a good time coming'.

Plainly this is a second, less judgemental, sense in which we still use the word 'industry'. Yet this gives us as many problems as the first meaning did. The term 'arts industry' is still an oxymoron, but for a different reason.

As we discussed last week we have decided in Britain that the arts are now a proper object of charity, that they are somehow disadvantaged in the modern commercial world, and cannot exist independently, still less make a profit. The word 'industry', even used in this second and more benign sense, still means a particular kind of commercial organisation which is profitable. Looked at in this light the term 'arts industry' means that we simultaneously believe that the arts are highly profitable and that they must have ever more of the taxpayers' charity.

Sadly, during the last fifteen years, I think that our arts bureaucrats have not really understood in which of the two senses they are misusing the term. They have slid haphazardly from one to the other, repeating the phrase 'arts industry' as often as they can because it sounds tough and gutsy, and bolstering their own importance by claiming that their political and economic fantasies exist in 'the real world' - an exalted plane which mere artists can scarcely comprehend. I think it is a piece of political guff. I also think it is dangerous, not just because it distorts the truth, but because it blurs the important fact that, although they are not the kind of activity that can be narrowly characterised as an industry, most of the arts have nevertheless thrived in the wider commercial world for the past three hundred years.

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