

EFFECT OF A DECREASE IN THE VALUE OF MONEY ON TASTE AND LITERATURE

By JOHN BARTON*

BY raising the condition of the industrious classes to a higher level, a decrease in the value of money may work important changes in the national taste and literature. The tradesman and farmer, when placed above the necessity of unremitting labour, begin to employ their leisure time in the cultivation of these understandings. Or if habit has rendered irksome all pursuits unconnected with business to the older part of the society, the growth of a new generation never fails to bring with it a taste for reading and a love of information. Such pursuits are even more grateful to the middling than to the higher classes of society, because the former experience fewer temptations to wasting their time in dissipation and frivolity. By no persons are science and literature followed with so much ardour and enjoyed with such genuine delight as by those whose circumstances place them above poverty, without imposing on them the tyrannical shackles of fashion.

The creation of a new set of readers, not only more numerous but more sincere and enthusiastic than the well-educated gentry and clergy, who are taught *what to admire* till the spontaneous emotions of nature are almost extinct, occasions a new and powerful demand for the productions of genius, greater in extent and considerably differing in kind from those which existed before. And in literature, as in commerce, demand will always call forth a corresponding supply. An author who writes for the well-educated and fashionable world naturally endeavours to form a style as polished, harmonious and elegant as possible. Every allusion must be strictly classical and wellbred. Nothing is dreaded so much as to be vulgar or ludicrous. On the other

*The following essay forms part of a manuscript of John Barton (1789-1852) which was acquired some time ago by the London School of Economics. It is believed to be one of the earliest writings of this author and to be printed here for the first time.

Barton took for granted that a decrease in the value of money—inflation is a later term—was profitable to the "industrious classes", i.e. tradesmen and farmers. A decrease in the value of money made their standard of living rise, and this, according to him, affected national taste and literature in the way set forth below.

It will be noted that Barton's thesis was formulated prior to the experience of the latter part of the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th when the rise in the standard of living of the working classes was accompanied by a widespread demand for a cheap pulp literature. Unlike the trend noted by Barton, the new type of literature and, more recently, some motion pictures and radio broadcasts, were produced for but not by the working class and have led to a degradation of thought in general, not to its elevation. Furthermore, the rise in the standard of living of the working classes was a complex process which cannot be reduced solely to a decline in the value of money, as in the case analyzed by Barton.

On the life and published works of John Barton see the *Economic Journal* for March 1952 (vol. LXII) No. 245, pp. 87-102.—G. Sotiroff.

hand, an author who writes for the middle classes aims chiefly at clearness, force and precision. Nothing with them is so unpardonable as languor. An illustration, however homely, is not the less admired, if apt and striking. If eloquence is admissible at all, it is the eloquence of thought and not of language.

A similar change takes place in poetry. The boldest attempts are made to explore new fields of imagination, attempts which would not meet with toleration at another period. A new generation has arisen into whose unlearned minds the venerable name of the father of criticism¹ strikes no awe: who are neither afraid to feel, nor to express what nature dictates.

(²) It is doubtful whether so low bred a person as Wat Tinn could have been introduced at the polished court of *George the First*. Or if his propensity to murder and pillage might be held to atone for his coarseness and ill manners. It is quite certain that Peter Gr——(³) would have been expelled in utter disgrace by the noble wits and witty nobles who flourished at that period; yet so infectious is bad taste that the love for these low lived subjects has actually ascended from the middle to the higher classes of late years.

Nothing casts so deathly a chill over the higher efforts of genius as a lively dread of ridicule. The sublime must always verge on the ridiculous, and in fact the most truly sublime imaginations are ridiculous to every one who from coldness of temperament, natural or acquired, does not enter into the feelings of the speaker. The genuine language of passion can only be attained by one who is completely penetrated with the subject of which he speaks. And, accordingly, from the days of Milton till comparatively a late period, we have not a single specimen of the higher kind of eloquence.

Not only does a new style of literature come into demand with the increasing affluence of the middle classes, but the progress of philosophical enquiry assumes a different form. In particular, political studies come more into vogue. Speculations of this kind are scarcely ever followed by persons in the higher classes of society for the sake of the gratification they afford, however they may sometimes be learned as a necessary qualification for office. It is even not uncommon to hear it asserted that the people at large have neither the ability nor the information to qualify them for understanding public concerns, and that therefore it is ridiculous at least, if nothing worse, for

(1) The last four words replace "Aristotle", which is deleted.

(2) In the MS, the following paragraph is re-written between the lines of another, which is deleted, with the exception of the last 27 words.

(3) Illegible.

them to meddle with such matters at all. But whether ridiculous or not, it is certain that whenever they do begin to read and enquire, political subjects are, of all others, pursued with the most zeal and interest. There is not a corner of this island at the present day, in which every measure of domestic policy is not well known and discussed. A curious contrast to the days of Addison, whose foxhunting squire "never saw how things went, except now and then in Dyer's letter⁽¹⁾, which he read more for the style than the news," and who, on coming up to London, was greatly surprised to see the statue of King Charles still standing at Charing Cross, which he supposed had been pulled down by the disaffected.

We have thus an explanation of the causes of the rise, decline and revival of the bold, irregular, and original style of composition, which distinguishes the literature of England in the time of Elizabeth and now flourishes a second time. It is a very curious fact, if Mr. Southey is correct, that readers were much more numerous at the first mentioned period than in after times. "Never", he says, "in any age was the literary intercourse of Europe so rapid as this; whatever works of real value appeared in France or Italy, Spain or Portugal, were immediately made our own, whether prose or verse, history or travels, science or the miscellanies of omnifarious scraps which abounded in every country and contained so much knowledge with so much error. The industry of our good old translators is truly wonderful: in our days the author who should be rash enough to publish one such volume, as the many which Ed' Grimstone and Philemon Holland⁽²⁾ sent into the world, would in all probability, be punished for his folly by imprisonment for life at the suit of the printer. How is it that the purchasers of books were so much more numerous then than now."⁽³⁾

(1) Dyer is reported to have been "a Jacobite printer, whose News-letter was twice in trouble". Cf. Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 1883 edition, vol. I, p. 164, note 4.

(2) Scholar and translator (1552-1637).

(3) Robert Southey, *Specimens of the Later English Poets, with Preliminary Notices*, London, 1807 (preface, p. 20).