

Essay

The toil of the laborer is artless. There is in it neither form, nor color, nor tone. For months I have been working as only workingmen work, and in the dreary round of the hours it has come to me that the thing which is wearisome and disheartening about it is that it is utterly devoid of art. In the construction of a building, for instance, whereat we labored for three long months, I discovered that with each day's labor I was in contact only with that which was formless and colorless and toneless. Huge, misshapen, disheartening piles of brick; commonplace, indifferent and colorless masses of stone, wood, iron, sand, cement; bone and sinew of what was to be, but in themselves devoid of all that could appeal to the eye or touch the heart, and scattered about in such an aimless way as to bring to the mind nothing but a wearying sense of disorder. This disorder, however, as soon became clear to me, was not apparent in a definite way to all those who worked amidst it. These mixers of mortar and carriers of brick toiled in the grime and dust without seeming to realize that it was a wretched condition, hard, grim and, so far as the sum of their individual lives was concerned, but meagerly profitable. Carpenters, masons and iron-workers went sturdily about their labors, but the artless and unlovely nature of their work was over it all, and despite their seeming unconsciousness to it one felt the drag of its absence, their eagerness to get away, their innate yearning to be where things were not in the making, the urge to be out in the larger and more perfect world where form and color and tone do abound.

For, after all, in the main, things do stand complete, as we see them. The hills have their enduring roundness, the trees their perpetual forms. Landscapes and skylines are not torn and scraped as in the vicinity of some (comparatively) minute constructive labor. Nature is nearly always cunningly pleasing to the eye on the surface, whatever may go on below, whereas the average constructive processes are so often discordant, broken, disordered.

Seeing this, and not being able in my own consciousness to explain why, my heart was sad and I wondered why life should be thus grimly organized; why formlessness in the parts of the thing to be formed; why tonelessness in that which when laboriously organized would be all tone; why colorlessness in that which in the end would enliven the heart with color and dance before the eye a perfect thing.

In the progress of the work, however, it was given me to see that, in the production of all things here, there is at bottom this very formlessness innate. For to organize and perfect one thing we must take from and destroy another; and in doing that we fly in the face of that which we most desire: order and harmony. Therefore, if we would have that which the inexplicable urge for something new and more beautiful commands, we must apparently steel our hearts against the old and destroy it, although, having committed the offense of destruction, we must repay or balance by the labor of construction.

It is not given to all of us to follow the ramifications of Nature's planning nor to see wherein justice or the seeming injustice lies. Most of those about me—average short-reasoning creatures—took their labor drearily enough and were not able to see in any definite inspiring way the approaching beauty of that which their hands were building. It did not concern them. Many of them came and labored but a little while, doing but a minute portion of that which was to be the whole, seeing only the mass and chaos of it without ever obtaining one glimpse of the loveliness which was to be.

But when the labor had been completed, when the mortar had been mixed and the brick and stone removed from their uneven masses and set in order, when the wounds of the earth had been smoothed over, the scattered debris removed and the grass allowed to grow, when in the light of the restful evening there rose, in this instance, high in the air a perfect tower, buttressed, arched and pinnacled, with here a window reflecting the golden Western glow and there a pillar standing out in delicate relief against the perfect background of the sky, the meaning of the chaos came home. Here it was: color, form, tone, beauty. The labor of the excavator, the toil of the iron-worker, the irritating beats of the carpenters' hammers, the mess and disorder of the field of action, had all blended together finally and made this perfect thing—only

they were no longer a part of it. To most of them it was all but meaningless. Having labored on but portions of it they could scarcely conceive it as a whole.

And yet as I looked my heart rose up, and I, for one, was thankful to have been in part a worker, to have worked a little, to have wearied a little, to have sighed a little, that so lovely a thing might be.

Theodore DREISER, “The Toil of the Laborer” (1913)

Suggested Outline

In his 1901 Hull House lecture entitled ‘The Art and Craft of the Machine’, the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright noted that the advent of machinery meant that the workers, contrary to the craftsmen, could not see their work to completion. As a result, they only focused on a specific part of the task at hand, thus losing sight of the overall purpose of the creative process.

In his autobiographical essay entitled ‘The Toil of the Laborer: A Trilogy’, originally published in a 1913 issue of *The New York Call* and later collected in *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub* (1920), the naturalist novelist and journalist Theodore Dreiser identifies the very same problem: most of the construction workers he frequented had very little understanding of the creative process in which they took part. He alone, being a writer (and therefore an artist), could take stock of the end result of the process, recognizing the beauty and elevation it may entail. In the course of his account of the construction of a high-rise, Dreiser notes that, through a process of creative destruction, nature is destroyed and transformed into a work of art, thus sublimating the inherent ugliness of the building site ^{UK} / construction site ^{US} into artistic architecture and, ultimately, textual beauty.

The following question may thus be raised: To what extent is the initial opposition between destructive work and organic nature questioned by the speaker, a figure of the artist, in order to reveal the transcendent beauty of both architectural construction and textual composition?

After showing that the negative definition of work forms the basis of an opposition between human activity and nature (I), I shall examine the oxymoronic account of the creative process provided by the speaker-as-artist (II). Only then will I analyse the conception of art as a vehicle for elevation through beauty which underpins Dreiser’s essay (III).

1. Work and Nature

a. Negative Definition of Work

Dire (privative suffixes in “disheartening”, “misshapen”, “discordant”, etc.) and repetitive (“dreary round of the hours” and **rhythmic analysis**: long sentences + sometimes, spondaic rhythm that seems to lengthen the sentences even further) experience.

cf. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776): describes industrial work as repetitive, fragmented, and interchangeable

Gnomic, axiomatic definition of work through what it lacks: use of the **privative suffix** <-less> in “The toil of the laborer is artless.” (l. 1) + sense of being deprived of something essential, with **restrictive structure** and privative suffixes: “I discovered that with each day’s labor I was in contact only with that which was formless and colorless and toneless” (l. 4-5).

Multiple **negative forms** throughout the passage (e.g. “neither, nor, nor”, l. 1) mark a constitutive absence (see “utterly devoid of art”, l. 3) at the heart of the “toil of the laborer”: *technê* in the Aristotelian sense of the word (i.e. inherent imperfection of man’s imitation of nature).

b. Work vs Nature

Beauty in nature, described as the “more perfect world where form and color and tone do abound” (l. 15), implying comparison between the building site and nature. **Emphatic use of DO** underlines the opposition between work (no form, no colour, no tone) and nature (form, colour, tone).

Interconnectedness in nature pitted against disconnection of the various elements on the building site. Emphasis on the fragmentary nature of the experience of the workers (see “in themselves devoid...”, l. 7; “scattered about”, l. 8; “doing but a minute portion of that which was to be the whole”, l. 34-35, confirmed

at the stylistic level by the **paratactic style**). Centripetal tendency: see the almost **pleonastic** repetition “their eagerness to get away, their innate yearning to be where things were not in the making, the urge to be out in the larger and more perfect world” (l. 14-15).

Organicity (“ramifications”) and *telos* (“planning” / “cunningly” = form of intelligence in nature) in nature, which the workers cannot find in work (→ alienation) but that the writer seems to pinpoint anyways (style betrays him: e.g., “bone and sinew” = organic potentiality; “formless and colorless and toneless” = full **ternary rhythm** just as in l. 15) + the “round” hills vs. jagged, irregular “piles of bricks” as possible reference to Burke’s aesthetic typology: round curves evocative of femininity → the beautiful.

2. “Creative destruction” (J. Schumpeter)

a. From Chaos to Order

Paradox, destroying the order and harmony of nature to create art. Replace the old by the new (→ echoes Transcendentalist preoccupations). Described as an “offense” (l. 30) = transgression. **Moral implications** of this act. Atonement / redemption through work.

Need to impose new order on the chaos work has created. Work = destruction of the unity traditionally found in nature (e.g. **list** of materials = natural elements, but disconnected, as shown by the **asyndetic enumeration**: “masses of stone, wood, iron, sand, cement”, l. 6).

Work described as the process that makes the transition from chaos (“this very formlessness innate”, l. 26) to order (“order and harmony”, l. 27, the **binary rhythm** evoking balance) possible. Imposing order on chaos = definition of the role of art in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Work is bound to be “artless” until the constructive process is complete.

b. The Artist and the Worker

Superiority of the speaker over the workers: only one to notice the movement leading to order in the construction of the building. The **structural organization of the text** itself is meant to echo the progressive **revelation** of the meaning of work. An artist, like Dreiser, can see “below” the “surface” (l. 19), unlike the workers (see: “To most of them it was all but meaningless”, l. 45).

From his initial position as a worker (**pronoun** in “we labored”), he is gradually singled out from the rest of the construction workers (“it was given me to see”, l. 25 ≠ “It is not given to all of us”, l. 31). As if he had been chosen (notion of “election” → Protestant conception of work). Almost **visionary** quality: “the approaching beauty” (l. 33), “what was to be” (l. 7; similar forms in l. 35-36).

Hence the emphasis on the speaker’s identity or singularity (e.g. inclusion of autobiographical element). As for the workers, they are presented as a mass (use of plural forms) and seem to have undergone a process of “**defacement**” (Paul DeMan) through which they are reduced to the task they accomplish (e.g. “mixers of mortar”, l. 10 or “Carpenters...”, l. 12). On the other hand, author not limited to his role as worker: “in part a worker” (l. 47).

3. Beauty and Transcendence

a. Elevation

Elevation of the speaker mimicked by the structural organization of the text → **rising tension** until the **climax**, identified by a **presentative structure**: “Here it was: color, form, tone, beauty” (l. 42), with the addition of the fourth word, “beauty”, as if to go beyond the ternary rhythms which the beginning of the text is interspersed with (l. 5 ff.). Idea of the presence and **immediacy** of the experience of beauty (here = proximity ≠ there = distance; **anteposition** of the adverb = sense of relief, of fulfilment). Familiarity, even: “the meaning of the chaos came home” (l. 42).

Experience of perfection (see repetition of the adjective “perfect”) and transcendence through this vertical movement towards the sky. Even possible experience of the divine: “golden Western glow” evocative of the gold background in mediaeval art (= sign of the presence of God); “pillar” (l. 41) in Annunciation paintings is the sign of God’s presence. Perfect union between art and nature (“reflecting”, l. 40 and “in delicate relief”, l. 41)

Parallel between the artist and the work of art which he helped build: “there rose... high in the air a perfect tower” (l. 40) echoes the personal elevation of the writer “my heart rose up” (l. 47). Text captures the elevation towards artistic perfection: **ekphrastic description** of the tower in lines 39-42 (see the use of “background”, a word associated with painting). Holistic conception: whole > “sum” (l. 11) of the parts.

b. Essay and Poetry

Experience of elevation attenuates the experience of hard work. Beginning: “it was a wretched condition, hard, grim and... but meagerly profitable” (l. 11-12) with **postposition** of the adjectives “hard...” as **emphatic** device to underline that the workers’ suffering never seems to stop. With **polysemous implications** of the adjective “profitable”: no financial profits, but no spiritual benefits either. But at the end, suffering is lessened (e.g. use of **epiphora**: “a little”, l. 47). Replaced the dire description of the building site by an evocation of **Romantic topoi** (e.g. “the light of the restful evening” or the growing grass, l. 38), and the opposition between work and nature by the union between art and nature: “a window reflecting the golden Western glow and there a pillar standing out in delicate relief against the perfect background of the sky” (l. 40-42).

End of the essay as (possible) **intertextual reference** to the first two lines of William Wordsworth’s famous poem “My Heart Leaps Up”:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

Essay writing closely associated with **poetic prose** here: when the perfection of the work of art or the speaker’s feelings are described, **iambic rhythm** (e.g. “the grass allowed to grow” = X / X / X / + **alliteration** in /g/ or “high in the air a perfect tower, buttressed, arched and pinnacle” = iambic rhythm with **trochaic inversion** at the start) and **sounds** (e.g. alliteration in /g/ and assonance in /əʊ/ in “golden Western glow” or alliteration in /l/ in the last sentence) that infuse the text with a poetic quality. As the writer attempts to encapsulate the experience of beauty, the text itself becomes beautiful. The “perfect thing” (l. 44) the writer mentions could be the text itself, and not merely the building, pointing to the possible parallels between architectural construction and textual composition.