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Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Of the Wisdom of the Ancients. 1857.

XIX. Dædalus
Or the Mechanic

UNDER the person of Dædalus, a man of the greatest genius but of very bad character, the ancients drew a picture of mechanical skill and industry, together with its unlawful artifices and depraved applications. Dædalus had been banished for murdering a fellow-pupil and rival; yet found favour in his banishment with kings and states. Many and excellent works, as well in honour of the gods as for the adornment and ennobling of cities and public places, had been built and modelled by him; but it is for unlawful inventions that his name is most famous. For he it was who supplied the machine which enabled Pasiphae to satisfy her passion for the bull; so that the unhappy and infamous birth of the monster Minotaurus, which devoured the ingenuous youth, was owing to the wicked industry and pernicious genius of this man. Then to conceal the first mischief he added another, and for the security of this pest devised and constructed the Labyrinth; a work wicked in its end and destination, but in respect of art and contrivance excellent and admirable. Afterwards again, that his fame might not rest on bad arts only, and that he might be sought to for remedies as well as instruments of evil, he became the author likewise of that ingenious device of the clue, by which the mazes of the labyrinth should be retraced. This Dædalus was persecuted with great severity and diligence and inquisition by Minos; yet he always found both means of escape and places of refuge. Last of all, he taught his son Icarus how to fly; who being a novice and ostentatious of his art fell from the sky into the water.

The parable may be interpreted thus. In the entrance is noted that envy which is strongly predominant in great artists and never lets them rest; for there is no class of men more troubled with envy, and that of the bitterest and most implacable character.

Then is touched the impolitic and improvident nature of the punishment inflicted; namely banishment. For it is the prerogative of famous workmen to be acceptable all over the world, insomuch that to an excellent artisan exile is scarcely any punishment at all. For whereas other modes and conditions of life cannot easily flourish out of their own country, the admiration of an artisan spreads wider and grows greater among strangers and foreigners; it being the nature of men to hold their own countrymen, in respect of mechanical arts, in less estimation.

The passages which follow concerning the use of mechanical arts are plain enough. Certainly human life is much indebted to them, for very many things which concern both the furniture of religion and the ornament of state and the culture of life in general, are drawn from their store. And yet out of the same fountain come instruments of lust, and

also instruments of death. For (not to speak of the arts of procurers) the most exquisite poisons, also guns, and such like engines of destruction, are the fruits of mechanical invention; and well we know how far in cruelty and destructiveness they exceed the Minotaurus himself.

Very beautiful again is that allegory of the labyrinth; under which the general nature of mechanics is represented. For all the more ingenious and exact mechanical inventions may, for their subtlety, their intricate variety, and the apparent likeness of one part to another, which scarcely any judgment can order and discriminate, but only the clue of experiment, be compared to a labyrinth. Nor is the next point less to the purpose; viz. that the same man who devised the mazes of the labyrinth disclosed likewise the use of the clue. For the mechanical arts may be turned either way, and serve as well for the cure as for the hurt and have power for the most part to dissolve their own spell.

Moreover the unlawful contrivances of art, and indeed the arts themselves, are often persecuted by Minos; that is by the laws; which condemn them and forbid people to use them. Nevertheless they are secretly preserved, and find every where both hiding-places and entertainment; as was well observed by Tacitus in his times, in a case not much unlike; where speaking of the mathematicians and fortune-tellers, he calls them *a class of men which in our state will always be retained and always prohibited*. And yet these unlawful and curious arts do in tract of time, since for the most part they fail to perform their promises, fall out of estimation, as Icarus from the sky, and come into contempt, and through the very excess of ostentation perish. And certainly if the truth must be told, they are not so easily bridled by law as convicted by their proper vanity.

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