

**The Life of Reason:  
Reason in Art**

**George Santayana**

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# **REASON IN ART**



# CHAPTER I

## THE BASIS OF ART IN INSTINCT AND EXPERIENCE

Man exists amid a universal ferment of being, and not only needs plasticity in his habits and pursuits but finds plasticity also in the surrounding world. Life is an equilibrium which is maintained now by accepting modification and now by imposing it. Since the organ for all activity is a body in mechanical relation to other material objects, objects which the creature's instincts often compel him to appropriate or transform, changes in his habits and pursuits leave their mark on whatever he touches. His habitat must needs bear many a trace of his presence, from which intelligent observers might infer something about his life and action. These vestiges of action are for the most part imprinted unconsciously and aimlessly on the world. They are in themselves generally useless, like footprints; and yet almost any sign of man's passage might, under certain conditions, interest a man. A footprint could fill Robinson Crusoe with emotion, the devastation wrought by an army's march might prove many things to a historian, and even the disorder in which a room is casually left may express very vividly the owner's ways and character.

**Man affects his environment, sometimes to good purpose.**

Sometimes, however, man's traces are traces of useful action which has so changed natural objects as to make them congenial to his mind. Instead of a footprint we might find an arrow; instead of a disordered room, a well-planted orchard—things which would not only have betrayed the agent's habits, but would have served and expressed his intent. Such propitious forms given by man to matter are no less instrumental in the Life of Reason than are propitious forms assumed by man's own habit or fancy. Any operation which thus humanises and rationalises objects is called art.

All art has an instinctive source and a material embodiment. If the birds in building nests felt the utility of what they do, they would be practising an art; and for the instinct to be called rational it would even suffice that their traditional purpose and method should become conscious occasionally. Thus weaving is an art, although the weaver may not be at every moment conscious of its purpose, but may be carried along, like any other workman, by the routine of his art; and language is a rational product, not because it always has a use or meaning, but because it is sometimes felt to have one. Arts are no less automatic than instincts, and usually, as Aristotle observed, less thoroughly purposive; for instincts, being transmitted by inheritance and imbedded in congenital structure, have to be economically and deeply organised. If they go far wrong they constitute a burden impossible to throw off and impossible to bear. The man harassed by inordinate instincts perishes through want, vice, disease, or madness. Arts, on the contrary, being transmitted only by imitation and teaching, hover more lightly over life. If ill-adjusted they make less havoc and cause less drain. The more superficial they are and the more detached from practical habits, the more extravagant and meaningless they can dare to become; so that the higher products of life are the most often gratuitous. No instinct or institution was ever so absurd as is a large part of human poetry and philosophy, while the margin of ineptitude is much broader in religious myth than in religious ethics.

Arts are instincts bred and reared in the open, creative habits acquired in the light of reason. Consciousness accompanies their formation; a certain uneasiness or desire and a more or less definite conception of what is wanted often precedes their full organisation. That the need should be felt before the means for satisfying it have been found has led the unreflecting to imagine that in art the need produces the discovery and the idea the work. Causes at best are lightly assigned by mortals, and this particular superstition is no worse than any other. The data—the plan and its execution—as conjoined empirically in the few interesting cases which show successful achievement, are made into a law, in oblivion of the fact that in more numerous cases such conjunction fails wholly or in part, and that even in the successful cases other natural conditions are present, and must be present, to secure the result. In a matter where custom is so ingrained and supported by a constant apperceptive illu-

Art is  
plastic  
instinct  
conscious of  
its aim.

It is  
automatic.

sion, there is little hope of making thought suddenly exact, or exact language not paradoxical. We must observe, however, that only by virtue of a false perspective do ideas seem to govern action, or is a felt necessity the mother of invention. In truth invention is the child of abundance, and the genius or vital premonition and groping which achieve art, simultaneously achieve the ideas which that art embodies; or, rather, ideas are themselves products of an inner movement which has an automatic extension outwards; and this extension manifests the ideas. Mere craving has no lights of its own to prophesy by, no prescience of what the world may contain that would satisfy, no power of imagining what would allay its unrest. Images and satisfactions have to come of themselves; then the blind craving, as it turns into an incipient pleasure, first recognises its object. The pure will's impotence is absolute, and it would writhe for ever and consume itself in darkness if perception gave it no light and experience no premonition.

Now, a man cannot draw bodily from external perception the ideas he is supposed to create or invent; and as his will or uneasiness, before he creates the satisfying ideas, is by hypothesis without them, it follows that creation or invention is automatic. The ideas come of themselves, being new and unthought-of figments, similar, no doubt, to old perceptions and compacted of familiar materials, but reproduced in a novel fashion and dropping in their sudden form from the blue. However instantly they may be welcomed, they were not already known and never could have been summoned. In the stock example, for instance, of groping for a forgotten name, we know the context in which that name should lie; we feel the environment of our local void; but what finally pops into that place, reinstated there by the surrounding tensions, is itself unforeseen, for it was just this that was forgotten. Could we have invoked the name we should not have needed to do so, having it already at our disposal. It is in fact a palpable impossibility that any idea should call itself into being, or that any act or any preference should be its own ground. The responsibility assumed for these things is not a determination to conceive them before they are conceived (which is a contradiction in terms) but an embrace and appropriation of them once they have appeared. It is thus that ebullitions in parts of our nature become touchstones for the whole; and the incidents within us seem hardly our own work till they are accepted and incorporated into the main current of our being. All invention is tentative, all art

So are the  
ideas it  
expresses.

experimental, and to be sought, like salvation, with fear and trembling. There is a painful pregnancy in genius, a long incubation and waiting for the spirit, a thousand rejections and futile birth-pangs, before the wonderful child appears, a gift of the gods, utterly undeserved and inexplicably perfect. Even this unaccountable success comes only in rare and fortunate instances. What is ordinarily produced is so base a hybrid, so lame and ridiculous a changeling, that we reconcile ourselves with difficulty to our offspring and blush to be represented by our fated works.

The propensity to attribute happy events to our own agency, little as we understand what we mean by it, and to attribute only untoward results to external forces, has its ground in the primitive nexus of experience. What we call ourselves is a certain cycle of vegetative processes, bringing a round of familiar impulses and ideas; this stream has a general direction, a conscious vital inertia, in harmony with which it moves. Many of the developments within it are dialectical; that is, they go forward by inner necessity, like an egg hatching within its shell, warmed but undisturbed by an environment of which they are wholly oblivious; and this sort of growth, when there is adequate consciousness of it, is felt to be both absolutely obvious and absolutely free. The emotion that accompanies it is pleasurable, but is too active and proud to call itself a pleasure; it has rather the quality of assurance and right. This part of life, however, is only its courageous core; about it play all sorts of incidental processes, allying themselves to it in more or less congruous movement. Whatever peripheral events fall in with the central impulse are accordingly lost in its energy and felt to be not so much peripheral and accidental as inwardly grounded, being, like the stages of a prosperous dialectic, spontaneously demanded and instantly justified when they come.

The sphere of the self's power is accordingly, for primitive consciousness, simply the sphere of what happens well; it is the entire unoffending and obedient part of the world. A man who has good luck at dice prides himself upon it, and believes that to have it is his destiny and desert. If his luck were absolutely constant, he would say he had the *power* to throw high; and as the event would, by hypothesis, sustain his boast, there would be no practical error in that assumption. A will that never found anything to thwart it would think itself omnipotent; and as the psychological essence of omniscience is not to suspect there

We are said  
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whatever  
obeys us.

is anything which you do not know, so the psychological essence of omnipotence is not to suspect that anything can happen which you do not desire. Such claims would undoubtedly be made if experience lent them the least colour; but would even the most comfortable and innocent assurances of this sort cease to be precarious? Might not any moment of eternity bring the unimagined contradiction, and shake the dreaming god?

Utility, like significance, is an eventual harmony in the arts and by no means their ground. All useful things have been discovered as ancient China discovered roast pig; and the casual feat has furthermore to be supported by a situation favourable to maintaining the art. The most useful act will never be repeated unless its secret remains embodied in structure. Practice and endeavour will not help an artist to remain long at his best; and many a performance is applauded which cannot be imitated. To create the requisite structure two preformed structures are needed: one in the agent, to give him skill and perseverance, and another in the material, to give it the right plasticity. Human progress would long ago have reached its goal if every man who recognised a good could at once appropriate it, and possess wisdom for ever by virtue of one moment's insight. Insight, unfortunately, is in itself perfectly useless and inconsequential; it can neither have produced its own occasion nor now insure its own recurrence. Nevertheless, being proof positive that whatever basis it needs is actual, insight is also an indication that the extant structure, if circumstances maintain it, may continue to operate with the same moral results, maintaining the vision which it has once supported.

**Utility is  
a result.**

When men find that by chance they have started a useful change in the world, they congratulate themselves upon it and call their persistence in that practice a free activity. And the activity is indeed rational, since it subserves an end. The happy organisation which enables us to continue in that rational course is the very organisation which enabled us to initiate it. If this new process was formed under external influences, the same influences, when they operate again, will reconstitute the process each time more easily; while if it was formed quite spontaneously, its own inertia will maintain it quietly in the brain and bring it to the surface whenever circumstances permit. This is what is called learning by experience. Such lessons are far from indelible and are not always at command. Yet what has once been done may be repeated; repetition

**The useful  
naturally  
stable.**

reinforces itself and becomes habit; and a clear memory of the benefit once attained by fortunate action, representing as it does the trace left by that action in the system, and its harmony with the man's usual impulses (for the action is felt to be *beneficial*), constitutes a strong presumption that the act will be repeated automatically on occasion; *i. e.*, that it has really been learned. Consciousness, which willingly attends to results only, will judge either the memory or the benefit, or both confusedly, to be the ground of this readiness to act; and only if some hitch occurs in the machinery, so that rational behaviour fails to take place, will a surprised appeal be made to material accidents, or to a guilty forgetfulness or indocility in the soul.

The idiot cannot learn from experience at all, because a new process, in his liquid brain, does not modify structure; while the fool uses what he has learned only inaptly and in frivolous fragments, because his stretches of linked experience are short and their connections insecure. But when the cerebral plasm is fresh and well disposed and when the paths are clear, attention is consecutive and learning easy; a multitude of details can be gathered into a single cycle of memory or of potential regard. Under such circumstances action is the unimpeded expression of healthy instinct in an environment squarely faced. Conduct from the first then issues in progress, and, by reinforcing its own organisation at each rehearsal, makes progress continual. For there will subsist not only a readiness to act and a great precision in action, but if any significant circumstance has varied in the conditions or in the interests at stake, this change will make itself felt; it will check the process and prevent precipitate action. Deliberation or well-founded scruple has the same source as facility—a plastic and quick organisation. To be sensitive to difficulties and dangers goes with being sensitive to opportunities.

Of all reason's embodiments art is therefore the most splendid and complete. Merely to attain categories by which inner experience may be articulated, or to feign analogies by which a universe may be conceived, would be but a visionary triumph if it remained ineffectual and went with no actual remodelling of the outer world, to render man's dwelling more appropriate and his mind better fed and more largely transmissible. Mind grows self-perpetuating only by its expression in matter. What makes progress possible is that rational action may leave traces in nature, such that nature in consequence furnishes a better basis for the Life of

**Intelligence  
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**Art is reason  
propagating  
itself.**

Reason; in other words progress is art bettering the conditions of existence. Until art arises, all achievement is internal to the brain, dies with the individual, and even in him spends itself without recovery, like music heard in a dream. Art, in establishing instruments for human life beyond the human body, and moulding outer things into sympathy with inner values, establishes a ground whence values may continually spring up; the thatch that protects from to-day's rain will last and keep out to-morrow's rain also; the sign that once expresses an idea will serve to recall it in future.

Not only does the work of art thus perpetuate its own function and produce a better experience, but the process of art also perpetuates itself, because it is teachable. Every animal learns something by living; but if his offspring inherit only what he possessed at birth, they have to learn life's lessons over again from the beginning, with at best some vague help given by their parents' example. But when the fruits of experience exist in the common environment, when new instruments, unknown to nature, are offered to each individual for his better equipment, although he must still learn for himself how to live, he may learn in a humaner school, where artificial occasions are constantly open to him for expanding his powers. It is no longer merely hidden inner processes that he must reproduce to attain his predecessors' wisdom; he may acquire much of it more expeditiously by imitating their outward habit—an imitation which, furthermore, they have some means of exacting from him. Wherever there is art there is a possibility of training. A father who calls his idle sons from the jungle to help him hold the plough, not only inures them to labour but compels them to observe the earth upturned and refreshed, and to watch the germination there; their wandering thought, their incipient rebellions, will be met by the hope of harvest; and it will not be impossible for them, when their father is dead, to follow the plough of their own initiative and for their own children's sake. So great is the sustained advance in rationality made possible by art which, being embodied in matter, is teachable and transmissible by training; for in art the values secured are recognised the more easily for having been first enjoyed when other people furnished the means to them; while the maintenance of these values is facilitated by an external tradition imposing itself contagiously or by force on each new generation.

Art is action which transcending the body makes the world a more congenial stimulus to the soul. All art is therefore useful and practical,

and the notable æsthetic value which some works of art possess, for reasons flowing for the most part out of their moral significance, is itself one of the satisfactions which art offers to human nature as a whole. Between sensation and abstract discourse lies a region of deployed sensibility or synthetic representation, a region where more is seen at arm's length than in any one moment could be felt at close quarters, and yet where the remote parts of experience, which discourse reaches only through symbols, are recovered and recomposed in something like their native colours and experienced relations. This region, called imagination, has pleasures more airy and luminous than those of sense, more massive and rapturous than those of intelligence. The values inherent in imagination, in instant intuition, in sense endowed with form, are called æsthetic values; they are found mainly in nature and living beings, but often also in man's artificial works, in images evoked by language, and in the realm of sound.

Productions in which an æsthetic value is or is supposed to be prominent take the name of fine art; but the work of fine art so defined is almost always an abstraction from the actual object, which has many non-æsthetic functions and values. To separate the æsthetic element, abstract and dependent as it often is, is an artifice which is more misleading than helpful; for neither in the history of art nor in a rational estimate of its value can the æsthetic function of things be divorced from the practical and moral. What had to be done was, by imaginative races, done imaginatively; what had to be spoken or made, was spoken or made fitly, lovingly, beautifully. Or, to take the matter up on its psychological side, the ceaseless experimentation and ferment of ideas, in breeding what it had a propensity to breed, came sometimes on figments that gave it delightful pause; these beauties were the first knowledges and these arrests the first hints of real and useful things. The rose's grace could more easily be plucked from its petals than the beauty of art from its subject, occasion, and use. An æsthetic fragrance, indeed, all things may have, if in soliciting man's senses or reason they can awaken his imagination as well; but this middle zone is so mixed and nebulous, and its limits are so vague, that it cannot well be treated in theory otherwise than as it exists in fact—as a phase of man's sympathy with the world he moves in. If art is that element in the Life of Reason which consists in modifying its environment the better to attain its end,

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others.

art may be expected to subserve all parts of the human ideal, to increase man's comfort, knowledge, and delight. And as nature, in her measure, is wont to satisfy these interests together, so art, in seeking to increase that satisfaction, will work simultaneously in every ideal direction. Nor will any of these directions be on the whole good, or tempt a well-trained will, if it leads to estrangement from all other interests. The æsthetic good will be accordingly hatched in the same nest with the others, and incapable of flying far in a different air.



## CHAPTER II

### RATIONALITY OF INDUSTRIAL ART

If there were anything wholly instrumental or merely useful its rationality, such as it was, would be perfectly obvious. Such a thing would be exhaustively defined by its result and conditioned exclusively by its expediency. Yet the value of most human arts, mechanical as they may appear, has a somewhat doubtful and mixed character. Naval architecture, for instance, serves a clear immediate purpose. Yet to cross the sea is not an ultimate good, and the ambition or curiosity that first led man, being a land-animal, to that now vulgar adventure, has sometimes found moralists to condemn it. A vessel's true excellence is more deeply conditioned than the ship-wright may imagine when he prides himself on having made something that will float and go. The best battle-ship, or racing yacht, or freight steamer, might turn out to be a worse thing for its specific excellence, if the action it facilitated proved on the whole maleficent, and if war or racing or trade could be rightly condemned by a philosopher. The rationality of ship-building has several sets of conditions: the patron's demands must be first fulfilled; then the patron's specifications have to be judged by the purpose he in turn has in mind; this purpose itself has to be justified by his ideal in life, and finally his ideal by its adequacy to his total or ultimate nature. Error on any of these planes makes the ultimate product irrational; and if a finer instinct, even in the midst of absorbing subsidiary action, warns a man that he is working against his highest good, his art will lose its savour and its most skilful products will grow hateful, even to his immediate apprehension, infected as they will be by the canker of folly.

**Utility is  
ultimately  
ideal.**

Art thus has its casuistry no less than morals, and philosophers in the future, if man should at last have ceased to battle with ghosts, might be called upon to review material civilisation from its begin-

nings, testing each complication by its known ultimate fruits and reaching in this way a purified and organic ideal of human industry, an ideal which education and political action might help to embody. If nakedness or a single garment were shown to be wholesomer and more agreeable than complicated clothes, weavers and tailors might be notably diminished in number. If, in another quarter, popular fancy should sicken at last of its traditional round of games and fictions, it might discover infinite entertainment in the play of reality and truth, and infinite novelties to be created by fruitful labour; so that many a pleasure might be found which is now clogged by mere apathy and unintelligence. Human genius, like a foolish Endymion, lies fast asleep amid its opportunities, wasting itself in dreams and disinheriting itself by negligence.

Descriptive economy, however, will have to make great progress before the concrete ethics of art can be properly composed. History, conceived hitherto as a barbarous romance, does not furnish sufficient data by which the happiness of life under various conditions may be soberly estimated. Politics has receded into the region of blind impulse and factional interests, and would need to be reconstituted before it could approach again that scientific problem which Socrates and his great disciples would have wished it to solve. Meantime it may not be premature to say something about another factor in practical philosophy, namely, the ultimate interests by which industrial arts and their products have to be estimated. Even before we know the exact effects of an institution we can fix to some extent

**Ideals must be interpreted, not prescribed.**

the purposes which, in order to be beneficent, it will have to subserve, although in truth such antecedent fixing of aims cannot go far, seeing that every operation reacts on the organ that executes it, thereby modifying the ideal involved. Doubtless the most industrial people would still wish to be happy and might accordingly lay down certain principles which its industry should never transgress, as for instance that production should at any price leave room for liberty, leisure, beauty, and a spirit of general co-operation and goodwill. But a people once having become industrial will hardly be happy if sent back to Arcadia; it will have formed busy habits which it cannot relax without tedium; it will have developed a restlessness and avidity which will crave matter, like any other kind of hunger. Every experiment in living qualifies the initial possibilities of life, and the moralist would reckon without his host if he did not allow for the change which

forced exercise makes in instinct, adjusting it more or less to extant conditions originally, perhaps, unwelcome. It is too late for the highest good to prescribe flying for quadrupeds or peace for the sea waves.

What antecedent interest does mechanical art subserve? What is the initial and commanding ideal of life by which all industrial developments are to be proved rational or condemned as vain? If we look to the most sordid and instrumental of industries we see that their purpose is to produce a foreordained result with the minimum of effort. They serve, in a word, to cheapen commodities. But the value of such an achievement is clearly not final; it hangs on two underlying ideals, one demanding abundance in the things produced and the other diminution in the toil required to produce them. At least the latter interest may in turn be analysed further, for to diminish toil is itself no absolute good; it is a good only when such diminution in one sphere liberates energies which may be employed in other fields, so that the total human accomplishment may be greater. Doubtless useful labour has its natural limits, for if overdone any activity may impair the power of enjoying both its fruits and its operation. Yet in so far as labour can become spontaneous and in itself delightful it is a positive benefit; and to its intrinsic value must be added all those possessions or useful dispositions which it may secure. Thus one ideal—to diminish labour—falls back into the other—to diffuse occasions for enjoyment. The aim is not to curtail occupation but rather to render occupation liberal by supplying it with more appropriate objects.

It is then liberal life, fostered by industry and commerce or involved in them, that alone can justify these instrumental pursuits. Those philosophers whose ethics is nothing but sentimental physics like to point out that happiness arises out of work and that compulsory activities, dutifully performed, underlie freedom.

**The aim of industry is to live well.**

Of course matter or force underlies everything; but rationality does not accrue to spirit because mechanism supports it; it accrues to mechanism in so far as spirit is thereby called into existence; so that while values derive existence only from their causes, causes derive value only from their results. Functions cannot be exercised until their organs exist and are in operation, so that what is primary in the order of genesis is always last and most dependent in the order of worth. The primary substance of things is their mere material; their first cause is their lowest instrument. Matter has only the values of the forms which it assumes, and while each stratifi-

cation may create some intrinsic ideal and achieve some good, these goods are dull and fleeting in proportion to their rudimentary character and their nearness to protoplasmic thrills. Where reason exists life cannot, indeed, be altogether slavish; for any operation, however menial and fragmentary, when it is accompanied by ideal representation of the ends pursued and by felt success in attaining them, becomes a sample and anagram of all freedom. Nevertheless to arrest attention on a means is really illiberal, though not so much by what such an interest contains as by what it ignores. Happiness in a treadmill is far from inconceivable; but for that happiness to be rational the wheel should be nothing less than the whole sky from which influences can descend upon us. There would be meanness of soul in being content with a smaller sphere, so that not everything that was relevant to our welfare should be envisaged in our thoughts and purposes. To be absorbed by the incidental is the animal's portion; to be confined to the instrumental is the slave's. For though within such activity there may be a rational movement, the activity ends in a fog and in mere physical drifting. Happiness has to be begged of fortune or found in mystical indifference: it is not yet subtended by rational art.

The Aristotelian theory of slavery, in making servile action wholly subservient, sins indeed against persons, but not against arts. It sins against persons because there is inconsiderate haste in asserting that whole classes of men are capable of no activities, except the physical, which justify themselves inherently. The lower animals also have physical interests and natural emotions. A man, if he deserves the name, must be credited with some rational capacity: prospect and retrospect, hope and the ideal portraiture of things, must to some extent employ him. Freedom to cultivate these interests is then his inherent right. As the lion vindicates his prerogative to ferocity and dignity, so every rational creature vindicates his prerogative to spiritual freedom. But a too summary classification of individuals covers, in Aristotle, a just discrimination among the arts. In so far as a man's occupation is merely instrumental and justified only externally, he is obviously a slave and his art at best an evil necessity. For the operation is by hypothesis not its own end; and if the product, needful for some ulterior purpose, had been found ready made in nature, the other and self-justifying activities could have gone on unimpeded, without the arrest or dislocation which is involved in first establishing the needful conditions for right

Some arts, but  
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slaves by  
nature.

action. If air had to be manufactured, as dwellings must be, or breathing to be learned like speech, mankind would start with an even greater handicap and would never have come within sight of such goals as it can now pursue. Thus all instrumental and remedial arts, however indispensable, are pure burdens; and progress consists in abridging them as much as is possible without contracting the basis for moral life.

This needful abridgment can take place in two directions. The art may become instinctive, unconscious of the utility that backs it and conscious only of the solicitation that leads it on. In that measure human nature is adapted to its conditions; lessons long dictated by experience are actually learned and become hereditary habits. So inclination to hunt and fondness for nursing children have passed into instincts in the human race; and what if it were a forced art would be servile, by becoming spontaneous has risen to be an ingredient in ideal life; for sport and maternity are human ideals. In an opposite direction servile arts may be abridged by a lapse of the demand which required them. The servile art of vine-dressers, for instance, would meet such a fate if the course of history, instead of tending to make the vintage an ideal episode and to create worshippers of Bacchus and Priapus, tended rather to bring about a distaste for wine and made the whole industry superfluous. This solution is certainly less happy than the other, insomuch as it suppresses a function instead of taking it up into organic life; yet life to be organic has to be exclusive and finite; it has to work out specific tendencies in a specific environment; and therefore to surrender a particular impeded impulse may involve a clear gain, if only a compensating unimpeded good thereby comes to light elsewhere. If wine disappeared, with all its humane and symbolic consecrations, that loss might bring an ultimate gain, could some less treacherous friend of frankness and merriment be thereby brought into the world.

**Servile arts may grow spontaneous or their products may be renounced.**

In practice servile art is usually mitigated by combining these two methods; the demand subserved, being but ill supported, learns to restrain itself and be less importunate; while at the same time habit renders the labour which was once unwilling largely automatic, and even overlays it with ideal associations. Human nature is happily elastic; there is hardly a need that may not be muffled or suspended, and hardly an employment that may not be relieved by the automatic

interest with which it comes to be pursued. To this automatic interest other palliatives are often added, sometimes religion, sometimes mere dulness and resignation; but in these cases the evil imposed is merely counterbalanced or forgotten, it is not remedied. Reflective and spiritual races minimise labour by renunciation, for they find it easier to give up its fruits than to justify its exactions. Among energetic and self-willed men, on the contrary, the demand for material progress remains predominant, and philosophy dwells by preference on the possibility that a violent and continual subjection in the present might issue in a glorious future dominion. This possible result was hardly realised by the Jews, nor long maintained by the Greeks and Romans, and it remains to be seen whether modern industrialism can achieve it. In fact, we may suspect that success only comes when a nation's external task happens to coincide with its natural genius, so that a minimum of its labour is servile and a maximum of its play is beneficial. It is in such cases that we find colossal achievements and apparently inexhaustible energies. Prosperity is indeed the basis of every ideal attainment, so that prematurely to recoil from hardship, or to be habitually conscious of hardship at all, amounts to renouncing beforehand all earthly goods and all chance of spiritual greatness. Yet a chance is no certainty. When glory requires Titanic labours it often finds itself in the end buried under a pyramid rather than raised upon a pedestal. Energies which are not from the beginning self-justifying and flooded with light seldom lead to ideal greatness.

The action to which industry should minister is accordingly liberal or spontaneous action; and this is one condition of rationality in the arts. But a second condition is implicit in the first: freedom means freedom in some operation, ideality means the ideality of something embodied and material. Activity, achievement, a passage from prospect to realisation, is evidently essential to life. If all ends were already reached, and no art were requisite, life could not exist at all, much less a Life of Reason. No politics, no morals, no thought would be possible, for all these move towards some ideal and envisage a goal to which they presently pass. The transition is the activity, without which achievement would lose its zest and indeed its meaning; for a situation could never be achieved which had been given from all eternity. The ideal is a concomitant emanation from the natural and has no other possible status. Those human possessions which are peren-

**Art starts from two potentialities: its material and its problem.**

nial and of inalienable value are in a manner potential possessions only. Knowledge, art, love are always largely in abeyance, while power is absolutely synonymous with potentiality. Fruition requires a continual recovery, a repeated re-establishment of the state we enjoy. So breath and nutrition, feeling and thought, come in pulsations; they have only a periodic and rhythmic sort of actuality. The operation may be sustained indefinitely, but only if it admits a certain internal oscillation.

A creature like man, whose mode of being is a life or experience and not a congealed ideality, such as eternal truth might show, must accordingly find something to do; he must operate in an environment in which everything is not already what he is presently to make it. In the actual world this first condition of life is only too amply fulfilled; the real difficulty in man's estate, the true danger to his vitality, lies not in want of work but in so colossal a disproportion between demand and opportunity that the ideal is stunned out of existence and perishes for want of hope. The Life of Reason is continually beaten back upon its animal sources, and nations are submerged in deluge after deluge of barbarism. Impressed as we may well be by this ancient experience, we should not overlook the complementary truth which under more favourable circumstances would be as plain as the other: namely, that our deepest interest is after all to live, and we could not live if all acquisition, assimilation, government, and creation had been made impossible for us by their foregone realisation, so that every operation was forestalled by the given fact. The distinction between the ideal and the real is one which the human ideal itself insists should be preserved. It is an essential expression of life, and its disappearance would be tantamount to death, making an end to voluntary transition and ideal representation. All objects envisaged either in vulgar action or in the airiest cognition must be at first ideal and distinct from the given facts, otherwise action would have lost its function at the same moment that thought lost its significance. All life would have collapsed into a purposeless datum.

The ideal requires, then, that opportunities should be offered for realising it through action, and that transition should be possible to it from a given state of things. One form of such transition is art, where the ideal is a possible and more excellent form to be given to some external substance or medium. Art needs to find a material relatively formless which its business is to shape; and this initial formlessness in

matter is essential to art's existence. Were there no stone not yet sculptured and built into walls, no sentiment not yet perfectly uttered in poetry, no distance or oblivion yet to be abolished by motion or inferential thought, activity of all sorts would have lost its occasion. Matter, or actuality in what is only potentially ideal, is therefore a necessary condition for realising an ideal at all.

This potentiality, however, in so far as the ideal requires it, is a quite definite disposition. Absolute chaos would defeat life as surely as would absolute ideality. Activity, in presupposing material conditions, presupposes them to be favourable, so that a movement towards the ideal may actually take place. Matter, which from the point of view of a given ideal is merely its potentiality, is in itself the potentiality of every other ideal as well; it is accordingly responsible to no ideal in particular and proves in some measure refractory to all. It makes itself felt, either as an opportune material or as an accidental hindrance, only when it already possesses definite form and affinities; given in a certain quantity, quality, and order, matter feeds the specific life which, if given otherwise, it would impede or smother altogether.

Art, in calling for materials, calls for materials plastic to its influence and definitely predisposed to its ends. Unsuitableness in the data far from grounding action renders it abortive, and no expedient could be more sophistical than that into which theodicy, in its desperate straits, has sometimes been driven, of trying to justify as conditions for ideal achievement the very conditions which make ideal achievement impossible. The given state from which transition is to take place to the ideal must support that transition; so that the desirable want of ideality which plastic matter should possess is merely relative and strictly determined. Art and reason find in nature the background they require; but nature, to be wholly justified by its ideal functions, would have to subserve them perfectly. It would have to offer to reason and art a sufficient and favourable basis; it would have to feed sense with the right stimuli at the right intervals, so that art and reason might continually flourish and be always moving to some new success. A poet needs emotions and perceptions to translate into language, since these are his subject-matter and his inspiration; but starvation, physical or moral, will not help him to sing. One thing is to meet with the conditions inherently necessary for a given action; another thing is to meet with obstacles

**Each must be definite and congruous with the other.**

**A sophism exposed.**

fatal to the same. A propitious formlessness in matter is no sort of evil; and evil is so far from being a propitious formlessness in matter that it is rather an impeding form which matter has already assumed.

Out of this appears, with sufficient clearness, the rational function which the arts possess. They give, as nature does, a form to matter, but they give it a more propitious form. Such success in art is possible only when the materials and organs at hand are in a large measure already well disposed; for it can as little exist with a dull organ as with no organ at all, while there are winds in which every sail must be furled. Art depends upon profiting by a bonanza and learning to sail in a good breeze, strong enough for speed and conscious power but placable enough for dominion and liberty of soul. Then perfection in action can be attained and a self-justifying energy can emerge out of apathy on the one hand and out of servile and wasteful work on the other. Art has accordingly two stages: one mechanical or industrial, in which untoward matter is better prepared, or impeding media are overcome; the other liberal, in which perfectly fit matter is appropriated to ideal uses and endowed with a direct spiritual function. A premonition or rehearsal of these two stages may be seen in nature, where nutrition and reproduction fit the body for its ideal functions, whereupon sensation and cerebration make it a direct organ of mind. Industry merely gives nature that form which, if more thoroughly humane, she might have originally possessed for our benefit; liberal arts bring to spiritual fruition the matter which either nature or industry has prepared and rendered propitious. This spiritual fruition consists in the activity of turning an apt material into an expressive and delightful form, thus filling the world with objects which by symbolising ideal energies tend to revive them under a favouring influence and therefore to strengthen and refine them.

**Industry  
prepares matter  
for the liberal  
arts.**

It remains merely to note that all industry contains an element of fine art and all fine art an element of industry; since every proximate end, in being attained, satisfies the mind and manifests the intent that pursued it; while every operation upon a material, even one so volatile as sound, finds that material somewhat refractory. Before the product can attain its ideal function many obstacles to its transparency and fitness have to be removed. A certain amount of technical and instrumental labour is thus involved in every work of genius, and a certain genius in every technical success.

**Each partakes  
of the other.**



## CHAPTER III

### EMERGENCE OF FINE ART

Action which is purely spontaneous is merely tentative. Any experience of success or utility which might have preceded, if it availed to make action sure, would avail to make it also intentional and conscious of its ulterior results. Now the actual issue which an action is destined to have, since it is something future and problematical, can exert no influence on its own antecedents; but if any picture of what the issue is likely to be accompanies the heat and momentum of action, that picture being, of all antecedents in the operation, the one most easily remembered and described, may be picked out as essential, and dignified with the name of motive or cause. This will not happen to every prophetic idea; we may live in fear and trembling as easily as with an arrogant consciousness of power. The difference flows from the greater or lesser affinity that happens to exist between expectation and instinct. Action remains always, in its initial phase, spontaneous and automatic; it retains an inwardly grounded and perfectly blind tendency of its own; but this tendency may agree or clash with the motor impulses subtending whatever ideas may at the same time people the fancy. If the blind and the ideal impulses agree, spontaneous action is voluntary and its result intentional; if they clash, the ideas remain speculative and idle, random, ineffectual wishes; while the result, not being referable to any idea, is put down to fate. The sense of power, accordingly, shows either that events have largely satisfied desire, so that natural tendency goes hand in hand with the suggestions of experience, or else that experience has not been allowed to count at all and that the future is being painted *a priori*. In the latter case the sense of power is illusory. Action will then never really issue in the way intended, and even thought will only seem to make progress by constantly forgetting its original direction.

Art is  
spontaneous  
action made  
stable by  
success.

Though life, however, is initially experimental and always remains experimental at bottom, yet experiment fortifies certain tendencies and cancels others, so that a gradual sediment of habit and wisdom is formed in the stream of time. Action then ceases to be merely tentative and spontaneous, and becomes art. Foresight begins to accompany practice and, as we say, to guide it. Purpose thus supervenes on useful impulse, and conscious expression on self-sustaining automatism. Art lies between two extremes. On the one side is purely spontaneous fancy, which would never foresee its own works and scarcely recognise or value them after they had been created, since at the next moment the imaginative current would as likely as not have faced about and might be making in the opposite direction; and on the other side is pure utility, which would deprive the work of all inherent ideality, and render it inexpressive of anything in man save his necessities. War, for instance, is an art when, having set itself an ideal end, it devises means of attaining it; but this ideal end has for its chief basis some failure in politics and morals. War marks a weakness and disease in human society, and its best triumphs are glorious evils—cruel and treacherous remedies, big with new germs of disease. War is accordingly a servile art and not essentially liberal; whatever inherent values its exercise may have would better be realised in another medium. Yet out of the pomp and circumstance of war fine arts may arise—music, armoury, heraldry, and eloquence. So utility leads to art when its vehicle acquires intrinsic value and becomes expressive. On the other hand, spontaneous action leads to art when it acquires a rational function. Thus utterance, which is primarily automatic, becomes the art of speech when it serves to mark crises in experience, making them more memorable and influential through their artificial expression; but expression is never art while it remains expressive to no purpose.

A good way of understanding the fine arts would be to study how they grow, now out of utility, now out of automatism. We should thus see more clearly how they approach their goal, which can be nothing but the complete superposition of these two characters. If all practice were art and all art perfect, no action would remain compulsory and not justified inherently, while no creative impulse would any longer be wasteful or, like the impulse to thrum, symptomatic merely and irrelevant to progress. It is by contributing to the Life of Reason and merging into its substance that art, like

**It combines utility and automatism.**

religion or science, first becomes worthy of praise. Each element comes from a different quarter, bringing its specific excellence and needing its peculiar purification and enlightenment, by co-ordination with all the others; and this process of enlightenment and purification is what we call development in each department. The meanest arts are those which lie near the limit either of utility or of automatic self-expression. They become nobler and more rational as their utility is rendered spontaneous or their spontaneity beneficent.

The spontaneous arts are older than the useful, since man must live and act before he can devise instruments for living and acting better. Both the power to construct machines and the end which, to be useful, they would have to serve, need to be given in initial impulse. There is accordingly a vast amount of irresponsible play and loose experiment in art, as in consciousness, before these gropings acquire a settled habit and function, and rationality begins. The farther back we go into barbarism the more we find life and mind busied with luxuries; and though these indulgences may repel a cultivated taste and seem in the end cruel and monotonous, their status is really nearer to that of religion and spontaneous art than to that of useful art or of science. Ceremony, for instance, is compulsory in society and sometimes truly oppressive, yet its root lies in self-expression and in a certain ascendancy of play which drags all life along into conventional channels originally dug out in irresponsible bursts of action. This occurs inevitably and according to physical analogies. Bodily organs grow automatically and become necessary moulds of life. We must either find a use for them or bear as best we may the idle burden they impose. Of such burdens the barbarian carries the greatest possible sum; and while he paints the heavens with his grotesque mythologies, he encumbers earth with inventions and prescriptions almost as gratuitous. The fiendish dances and shouts, the cruel initiations, mutilations, and sacrifices in which savages indulge, are not planned by them deliberately nor justified in reflection. Men find themselves falling into these practices, driven by a tradition hardly distinguishable from instinct. In its periodic fury the spirit hurries them into wars and orgies, quite as it kindles sudden flaming visions in their brains, habitually so torpid. The spontaneous is the worst of tyrants, for it exercises a needless and fruitless tyranny in the guise of duty and inspiration. Without mitigating in the least the subjection to external forces under

**Automatism  
fundamental  
and  
irresponsible.**

which man necessarily labours, it adds a new artificial subjection to his own false steps and childish errors.

This mental vegetation, this fitful nervous groping, is nevertheless a sign of life, out of which art emerges by discipline and by a gradual application to real issues. An artist is a dreamer consenting to dream of the actual world; he is a highly suggestible mind hypnotised by reality. Even barbaric genius may find points of application in the world. These points will be more numerous the more open the eyes have been, the more docile and intelligent the mind is that gathers and renders back its impressions in a synthetic and ideal form. Intuition will then represent, at least symbolically, an actual situation. Grimace and gesture and ceremony will be modified by a sense of their effect; they will become artful and will transform their automatic expressiveness into ideal expression. They will become significant of what it is intended to communicate and important to know; they will have ceased to be irresponsible exercises and vents for passing feeling, by which feeling is dissipated, as in tears, without being embodied and intellectualised, as in a work of art.

The dance is an early practice that passes after this fashion into an art. A prancing stallion may transfigure his movements more beautifully than man is capable of doing; for the springs and limits of effect are throughout mechanical, and man, in more than one respect, would have to become a centaur before he could rival the horse's prowess. Human instinct is very imperfect in this direction, and grows less happy the more artificial society becomes; most dances, even the savage ones, are somewhat ridiculous. A rudimentary instinct none the less remains, which not only involves a faculty of heightened and rhythmic motion, but also assures a direct appreciation of such motion when seen in others. The conscious agility, *fougue*, and precision which fill the performer become contagious and delight the spectator as well. There are indeed dances so ugly that, like those of contemporary society, they cannot be enjoyed unless they are shared; they yield pleasures of exercise only, or at best of movement in unison. But when man was nearer to the animal and his body and soul were in happier conjunction, when society, too, was more compulsive over the individual, he could lend himself more willingly and gracefully to being a figure in the general pageant of the world. The dance could then detach itself from its early

**It is tamed  
by contact  
with the  
world.**

**The dance.**

association with war and courtship and ally itself rather to religion and art. From being a spontaneous vent for excitement, or a blind means of producing it, the dance became a form of discipline and conscious social control—a cathartic for the soul; and this by a quite intelligible transition. Gesture, of which the dance is merely a pervasive use, is an incipient action. It is conduct in the groping stage, before it has lit on its purpose, as can be seen unmistakably in all the gesticulation of love and defiance. In this way the dance is attached to life initially by its physiological origin. Being an incipient act, it naturally leads to its own completion and may arouse in others the beginnings of an appropriate response. Gesture is only less catching and less eloquent than action itself. But gesture, while it has this power of suggesting action and stimulating the response which would be appropriate if the action took place, may be arrested in the process of execution, since it is incipient only; it will then have revealed an intention and betrayed a state of mind. Thus it will have found a function which action itself can seldom fulfil. When an act is done, indications of what it was to be are superfluous; but indications of possible acts are in the highest degree useful and interesting. In this way gesture assumes the rôle of language and becomes a means of rational expression. It remains suggestive and imitable enough to convey an idea, but not enough to precipitate a full reaction; it feeds that sphere of merely potential action which we call thought; it becomes a vehicle for intuition.

**Functions of gesture.**

Under these circumstances, to tread the measures of a sacred dance, to march with an army, to bear one's share in any universal act, fills the heart with a voluminous silent emotion. The massive suggestion, the pressure of the ambient will, is out of all proportion to the present call for action. Infinite resources and definite premonitions are thus stored up in the soul; and merely to have moved solemnly together is the best possible preparation for living afterwards, even if apart, in the consciousness of a general monition and authority.

Parallel to this is the genesis and destiny of music, an art originally closely intertwined with the dance. The same explosive forces that agitate the limbs loosen the voice; hand, foot, and throat mark their wild rhythm together. Birds probably enjoy the pulsation of their singing rather than its sound. Even human music is performed long before it is listened to, and is at first no more an art than sighing. The original emotions connected with it are felt by

**Automatic music.**

participation in the performance—a participation which can become ideal only because, at bottom, it is always actual. The need of exercise and self-expression, the force of contagion and unison, bears the soul along before an artistic appreciation of music arises; and we may still observe among civilised races how music asserts itself without any æsthetic intent, as when the pious sing hymns in common, or the sentimental, at sea, cannot refrain from whining their whole homely repertory in the moonlight. Here as elsewhere, instinct and habit are phases of the same inner disposition. What has once occurred automatically on a given occasion will be repeated in much the same form when a similar occasion recurs. Thus impulse, reinforced by its own remembered expression, passes into convention. Savages have a music singularly monotonous, automatic, and impersonal; they cannot resist the indulgence, though they probably have little pleasure in it. The same thing happens with customary sounds as with other prescribed ceremonies; to omit them would be shocking and well-nigh impossible, yet to repeat them serves no end further than to avoid a sense of strangeness or inhibition. These automatisms, however, in working themselves out, are not without certain retroactive effects: they leave the system exhausted or relieved, and they have meantime played more or less agreeably on the senses. The music we make automatically we cannot help hearing incidentally; the sensation may even modify the expression, since sensation too has its physical side. The expression is reined in and kept from becoming vagrant, in proportion as its form and occasion are remembered. The automatic performer, being henceforth controlled more or less by reflection and criticism, becomes something of an artist: he trains himself to be consecutive, impressive, agreeable; he begins to compare his improvisation with its subject and function, and thus he develops what is called style and taste.

## CHAPTER IV

### MUSIC

Sound readily acquires ideal values. It has power in itself to engross attention and at the same time may be easily diversified, so as to become a symbol for other things. Its direct empire is to be compared with that of stimulants and opiates, yet it presents to the mind, as these do not, a perception that corresponds, part by part, with the external stimulus. To hear is almost to understand. The process we undergo in mathematical or dialectical thinking is called understanding, because a natural sequence is there adequately translated into ideal terms. Logical connections seem to be internally justified, while only the fact that we perceive them here and now, with more or less facility, is attributed to brute causes. Sound approaches this sort of ideality; it presents to sense something like the efficacious structure of the object. It is almost mathematical; but like mathematics it is adequate only by being abstract; and while it discloses point by point one strain in existence, it leaves many other strains, which in fact are interwoven with it, wholly out of account. Music is accordingly, like mathematics, very nearly a world by itself; it contains a whole gamut of experience, from sensuous elements to ultimate intellectual harmonies. Yet this second existence, this life in music, is no mere ghost of the other; it has its own excitements, its quivering alternatives, its surprising turns; the abstract energy of it takes on so much body, that in progression or declension it seems quite as impassioned as any animal triumph or any moral drama.

That a pattering of sounds on the ear should have such moment is a fact calculated to give pause to those philosophers who attempt to explain consciousness by its utility, or who wish to make physical and moral processes march side by side from all eternity. Music is essentially useless, as life is: but both have an ideal

**Music is a  
world apart.**

**It justifies  
itself.**

extension which lends utility to its conditions. That the way in which idle sounds run together should matter so much is a mystery of the same order as the spirit's concern to keep a particular body alive, or to propagate its life. Such an interest is, from an absolute point of view, wholly gratuitous; and so long as the natural basis and expressive function of spirit are not perceived, this mystery is baffling. In truth the order of values inverts that of causes; and experience, in which all values lie, is an ideal resultant, itself ineffectual, of the potencies it can conceive. Delight in music is liberal; it makes useful the organs and processes that subserve it. These agencies, when they support a conscious interest in their operation, give that operation its first glimmering justification, and admit it to the rational sphere. Just so when organic bodies generate a will bent on their preservation, they add a value and a moral function to their equilibrium. In vain should we ask for what purpose existences arise, or become important; that purpose, to be such, must already have been important to some existence; and the only question that can be asked or answered is what recognised importance, what ideal values, actual existences involve.

We happen to breathe, and on that account are interested in breathing; and it is no greater marvel that, happening to be subject to intricate musical sensations, we should be in earnest about these too. The human ear discriminates sounds with ease; what it hears is so diversified that its elements can be massed without being confused, or can form a sequence having a character of its own, to be appreciated and remembered. The eye too has a field in which clear distinctions and relations appear, and for that reason is an organ favourable to intelligence; but what gives music its superior emotional power is its rhythmic advance. Time is a medium which appeals more than space to emotion. Since life is itself a flux, and thought an operation, there is naturally something immediate and breathless about whatever flows and expands. The visible world offers itself to our regard with a certain lazy indifference. "Peruse me," it seems to say, "if you will. I am here; and even if you pass me by now and later find it to your advantage to resurvey me, I may still be here." The world of sound speaks a more urgent language. It insinuates itself into our very substance, and it is not so much the music that moves us as we that move with it. Its rhythms seize upon our bodily life, to accelerate or to deepen it; and we must either become inattentive altogether or remain enslaved.

**It is vital  
and  
transient.**

This imperious function in music has lent it functions which are far from æsthetic. Song can be used to keep in unison many men's efforts, as when sailors sing as they heave; it can make persuasive and obvious sentiments which, if not set to music, might seem absurd, as often in love songs and in psalmody. It may indeed serve to prepare the mind for any impression whatever, and render the same more intense when it comes. Music was long used before it was loved or people took pains to refine it. It would have seemed as strange in primitive times to turn utterance into a fine art as now to make æsthetic paces out of mourning or childbirth. Primitive music is indeed a wail and a parturition; magical and suggestive as it may be, for long ages it never bethinks itself to be beautiful. It is content to furnish a contagious melancholy employment to souls without a language and with little interest in the real world. Barbaric musicians, singing and playing together more or less at random, are too much carried away by their performance to conceive its effect; they cry far too loud and too unceasingly to listen. A contagious tradition carries them along and controls them, in a way, as they improvise; the assembly is hardly an audience; all are performers, and the crowd is only a stimulus that keeps every one dancing and howling in emulation. This unconsidered flow of early art remains present, more or less, to the end. Instead of vague custom we have schools, and instead of swaying multitudes academic example; but many a discord and mannerism survive simply because the musician is so suggestible, or so lost in the tumult of production, as never to reconsider what he does, or to perceive its wastefulness.

**Its physical  
affinities.**

Nevertheless an inherent value exists in all emitted sounds, although barbaric practice and theory are slow to recognise it. Each tone has its quality, like jewels of different water; every cadence has its vital expression, no less inherent in it than that which comes in a posture or in a thought. Everything audible thrills merely by sounding, and though this perceptual thrill be at first overpowered by the effort and excitement of action, yet it eventually fights its way to the top. Participation in music may become perfunctory or dull for the great majority, as when hymns are sung in church; a mere suggestion of action will doubtless continue to colour the impression received, for a tendency to act is involved in perception; but this suggestion will be only an overtone or echo behind an auditory feeling. Some performers will be singled out from the crowd; those whom the public likes to

hear will be asked to continue alone; and soon a certain suasion will be exerted over them by the approval or censure of others, so that consciously or unconsciously they will train themselves to please.

The musical quality of sounds has a simple physical measure for its basis; and the rate of vibration is complicated by its sweep or loudness, and by concomitant sounds. What a rich note is to a pure and thin one, that a chord is to a note; nor is melody wholly different in principle, for it is a chord rendered piecemeal. Time intervenes, and the harmony is deployed; so that in melody rhythm is added, with its immense appeal, to the cumulative effect already secured by rendering many notes together. The heightened effect which a note gets by figuring in a phrase, or a phrase in a longer passage, comes of course from the tensions established and surviving in the sensorium—a case, differently shaded, of chords and overtones. The difference is only that the more emphatic parts of the melody survive clearly to the end, while the detail, which if perceived might now clash, is largely lost, and out of the preceding parts perhaps nothing but a certain swing and potency is present at the close. The mind has been raked and set vibrating in an unusual fashion, so that the *finale* comes like a fulfilment after much premonition and desire, whereas the same event, unprepared for, might hardly have been observed. The whole technique of music is but an immense elaboration of this principle. It deploys a sensuous harmony by a sort of dialectic, suspending and resolving it, so that the parts become distinct and their relation vital.

Such elaboration often exceeds the synthetic power of all but the best trained minds. Both in scope and in articulation musical faculty varies prodigiously. There is no fixed limit to the power of sustaining a given conscious process while new features appear in the same field; nor is there any fixed limit to the power of recovering, under changed circumstances, a process that was formerly suspended. A whole symphony might be felt at once, if the musician's power of sustained or cumulative hearing could stretch so far. As we all survey two notes and their interval in one sensation (actual experience being always transitive and pregnant, and its terms ideal), so a trained mind might survey a whole composition. This is not to say that time would be transcended in such an experience; the apperception would still have duration and the object would still have successive features, for evidently music not arranged in time would not be music, while all sensations with a recognisable character

**Physiology  
of music.**

**Limits of  
musical  
sensitivity.**

occupy more than an instant in passing. But the passing sensation, throughout its lapse, presents some experience; and this experience, taken at any point, may present a temporal sequence with any number of members, according to the synthetic and analytic power exerted by the given mind. What is tedious and formless to the inattentive may seem a perfect whole to one who, as they say, takes it all in; and similarly what is a frightful deafening discord to a sense incapable of discrimination, for one who can hear the parts may break into a celestial chorus. A musical education is necessary for musical judgment. What most people relish is hardly music; it is rather a drowsy reverie relieved by nervous thrills.

The degree to which music should be elaborated depends on the capacity possessed by those it addresses. There are limits to every man's synthetic powers, and to stretch those powers to their limit is exhausting. Excitement then becomes a debauch; it leaves the soul less capable of habitual harmony. Especially is such extreme tension disastrous when, as in music, nothing remains to be the fruit of that mighty victory; the most pregnant revelation sinks to an illusion and is discredited when it cannot maintain its inspiration in the world's presence. Everything has its own value and sets up its price; but others must judge if that price is fair, and sociability is the condition of all rational excellence. There is therefore a limit to right complexity in music, a limit set not by the nature of music itself, but by its place in human economy. This limit, though clear in principle, is altogether variable in practice; duly cultivated people will naturally place it higher than the unmusical would. In other words, popular music needs to be simple, although elaborate music may be beautiful to the few. When elaborate music is the fashion among people to whom all music is a voluptuous mystery, we may be sure that what they love is voluptuousness or fashion, and not music itself.

**The value of music is relative to them.**

Beneath its hypnotic power music, for the musician, has an intellectual essence. Out of simple chords and melodies, which at first catch only the ear, he weaves elaborate compositions that by their form appeal also to the mind. This side of music resembles a richer versification; it may be compared also to mathematics or to arabesques. A moving arabesque that has a vital dimension, an audible mathematics, adding sense to form, and a versification that, since it has no subject-matter, cannot do violence to it

**Wonders of musical structure.**

by its complex artifices—these are types of pure living, altogether joyful and delightful things. They combine life with order, precision with spontaneity; the flux in them has become rhythmical and its freedom has passed into a rational choice, since it has come in sight of the eternal form it would embody. The musician, like an architect or goldsmith working in sound, but freer than they from material trammels, can expand for ever his yielding labyrinth; every step opens up new vistas, every decision—how unlike those made in real life!—multiplies opportunities, and widens the horizon before him, without preventing him from going back at will to begin afresh at any point, to trace the other possible paths leading thence through various magic landscapes. Pure music is pure art. Its extreme abstraction is balanced by its entire spontaneity, and, while it has no external significance, it bears no internal curse. It is something to which a few spirits may well surrender themselves, sure that in a liberal commonwealth they will be thanked for their ideal labour, the fruits of which many may enjoy. Such excursions into ultra-mundane regions, where order is free, refine the mind and make it familiar with perfection. By analogy an ideal form comes to be conceived and desiderated in other regions, where it is not produced so readily, and the music heard, as the Pythagoreans hoped, makes the soul also musical.

It must be confessed, however, that a world of sounds and rhythms, all about nothing, is a by-world and a mere distraction for a political animal. Its substance is air, though the spell of it may have moral affinities. Nevertheless this ethereal art may be enticed to earth and married with what is mortal. Music interests humanity most when it is wedded to human events. The alliance comes about through the emotions which music and life arouse in common. For sound, in sweeping through the body and making felt there its kinetic and potential stress, provokes no less interest than does any other physical event or premonition. Music can produce emotion

**Its inherent emotions.** as directly as can fighting or love. If in the latter instances the body's whole life may be in jeopardy, this fact is no explanation of our concern; for many a danger is not felt and there is no magic in the body's future condition, that it should now affect the soul. What touches the soul is the body's condition at the moment; and this is altered no less truly by a musical impression than by some protective or reproductive act. If emotions accompany the latter, they might as well accompany the former; and in fact they do. Nor is music the

only idle cerebral commotion that enlists attention and presents issues no less momentous for being quite imaginary; dreams do the same, and seldom can the real crises of life so absorb the soul, or prompt it to such extreme efforts, as can delirium in sickness, or delusion in what passes for health.

There is perhaps no emotion incident to human life that music cannot render in its abstract medium by suggesting the pang of it; though of course music cannot describe the complex situation which lends earthly passions their specific colour. It is by fusion with many suggested emotions that sentiment grows definite; this fusion can hardly come about without ideas intervening, and certainly it could never be sustained or expressed without them. Occasions define feelings; we can convey a delicate emotion only by delicately describing the situation which brings it on. Music, with its irrelevant medium, can never do this for common life, and the passions, as music renders them, are always general.

**In growing  
specific they  
remain  
unearthly.**

But music has its own substitute for conceptual distinctness. It makes feeling specific, nay, more delicate and precise than association with things could make it, by uniting it with musical form. We may say that besides suggesting abstractly all ordinary passions, music creates a new realm of form far more subtly impassioned than is vulgar experience. Human life is confined to a dramatic repertory which has already become somewhat classical and worn, but music has no end of new situations, shaded in infinite ways; it moves in all sorts of bodies to all sorts of adventures. In life the ordinary routine of destiny beats so emphatic a measure that it does not allow free play to feeling; we cannot linger on anything long enough to exhaust its meaning, nor can we wander far from the beaten path to catch new impressions. But in music there are no mortal obligations, no imperious needs calling us back to reality. Here nothing beautiful is extravagant, nothing delightful unworthy. Musical refinement finds no limit but its own instinct, so that a thousand shades of what, in our blundering words, we must call sadness or mirth, find in music their distinct expression. Each phrase, each composition, articulates perfectly what no human situation could embody. These fine emotions are really new; they are altogether musical and unexampled in practical life; they are native to the passing cadence, absolute postures into which it throws the soul.

There is enough likeness, however, between musical and mundane feeling for the first to be used in entertaining the second. Hence

the singular privilege of this art: to give form to what is naturally inarticulate, and express those depths of human nature which can speak no language current in the world. Emotion is primarily about nothing, and much of it remains about nothing to the end. What rescues a part of our passions from this pathological plight, and gives them some other function than merely to be, is the ideal relevance, the practical and mutually representative character, which they sometimes acquire. All experience is pathological if we consider its ground; but a part of it is also rational if we consider its import. The words I am now writing have a meaning not because at this moment they are fused together in my animal soul as a dream might fuse them, however incongruous the situation they depict might be in waking life; they are significant only if this moment's product can meet and conspire with some other thought speaking of what elsewhere exists, and uttering an intuition that from time to time may be actually recovered. The art of distributing interest among the occasions and vistas of life so as to lend them a constant worth, and at the same time to give feeling an ideal object, is at bottom the sole business of education; but the undertaking is long, and much feeling remains unemployed and unaccounted for. This objectless emotion chokes the heart with its dull importunity; now it impedes right action, now it feeds and fattens illusion. Much of it radiates from primary functions which, though their operation is half known, have only base or pitiful associations in human life; so that they trouble us with deep and subtle cravings, the unclaimed *Hinterland* of life. When music, either by verbal indications or by sensuous affinities, or by both at once, succeeds in tapping this fund of suppressed feeling, it accordingly supplies a great need. It makes the dumb speak, and plucks from the animal heart potentialities of expression which might render it, perhaps, even more than human.

By its emotional range music is appropriate to all intense occasions: we dance, pray, and mourn to music, and the more inadequate words or external acts are to the situation, the more grateful music is. As the only bond between music and life is emotion, music is out of place only where emotion itself is absent. If it breaks in upon us in the midst of study or business it becomes an interruption or alternative to our activity, rather than an expression of it; we must either remain inattentive or pass altogether into the realm of sound (which may be unemotional enough) and become musicians for the nonce. Music

brings its sympathetic ministry only to emotional moments; there it merges with common existence, and is a welcome substitute for descriptive ideas, since it co-operates with us and helps to deliver us from dumb subjection to influences which we should not know how to meet otherwise. There is often in what moves us a certain ruthless persistence, together with a certain poverty of form; the power felt is out of proportion to the interest awakened, and attention is kept, as in pain, at once strained and idle. At such a moment music is a blessed resource. Without attempting to remove a mood that is perhaps inevitable, it gives it a congruous filling. Thus the mood is justified by an illustration or expression which seems to offer some objective and ideal ground for its existence; and the mood is at the same time relieved by absorption in that impersonal object. So entertained, the feeling settles. The passion to which at first we succumbed is now tamed and appropriated. We have digested the foreign substance in giving it a rational form: its energies are merged in that strength by which we freely operate.

**Music lends elementary feelings an intellectual communicable form.**

In this way the most abstract of arts serves the dumbest emotions. Matter which cannot enter the moulds of ordinary perception, capacities which a ruling instinct usually keeps under, flow suddenly into this new channel. Music is like those branches which some trees put forth close to the ground, far below the point where the other boughs separate; almost a tree by itself, it has nothing but the root in common with its parent. Somewhat in this fashion music diverts into an abstract sphere a part of those forces which abound beneath the point at which human understanding grows articulate. It flourishes on saps which other branches of ideation are too narrow or rigid to take up. Those elementary substances the musician can spiritualise by his special methods, taking away their reproach and redeeming them from blind intensity.

There is consequently in music a sort of Christian piety, in that it comes not to call the just but sinners to repentance, and understands the spiritual possibilities in outcasts from the respectable world. If we look at things absolutely enough, and from their own point of view, there can be no doubt that each has its own ideal and does not question its own justification. Lust and frenzy, revery or despair, fatal as they may be to a creature that has general ulterior interests, are not perverse in themselves: each

**All essences are in themselves good, even the passions.**

searches for its own affinities, and has a kind of inertia which tends to maintain it in being, and to attach or draw in whatever is propitious to it. Feelings are as blameless as so many forms of vegetation; they can be poisonous only to a different life. They are all primordial motions, eddies which the universal flux makes for no reason, since its habit of falling into such attitudes is the ground-work and exemplar for nature and logic alike. That such strains should exist is an ultimate datum; justification cannot be required of them, but must be offered to each of them in turn by all that enters its particular orbit. There is no will but might find a world to disport itself in and to call good, and thereupon boast to have created that in which it found itself expressed. But such satisfaction has been denied to the majority; the equilibrium of things has at least postponed their day. Yet they are not altogether extinguished, since the equilibrium of things is mechanical and results from no preconcerted harmony such as would have abolished everything contrary to its own perfection. Many ill-suppressed possibilities endure in matter, and peep into being through the crevices, as it were, of the dominant world. Weeds they are called by the tyrant, but in themselves they are aware of being potential gods. Why should not every impulse expand in a congenial paradise? Why should each, made evil now only by an adventitious appellation or a contrary fate, not vindicate its own ideal? If there is a piety towards things deformed, because it is not they that are perverse, but the world that by its laws and arbitrary standards decides to treat them as if they were, how much more should there be a piety towards things altogether lovely, when it is only space and matter that are wanting for their perfect realisation?

Philosophers talk of self-contradiction, but there is evidently no such thing, if we take for the self what is really vital, each propulsive, definite strain of being, each nucleus for estimation and for pleasure and pain. Each impulse may be contradicted, but not by itself; it may find itself opposed, in a theatre which it has entered it knows not how, by violent personages that it has never wished to encounter. The environment it calls for is congenial with it; and by that environment it could never be thwarted or condemned. The lumbering course of events may indeed involve it in ruin, and a mind with permanent interests to defend may at once rule out everything inconsistent with possible harmonies; but such rational judgments come from outside and represent a compro-

Each impulse calls  
for a possible  
congenial world.

mise struck with material forces. Moral judgments and conflicts are possible only in the mind that represents many interests synthetically: in nature, where primary impulses collide, all conflict is physical and all will innocent. Imagine some ingredient of humanity loosed from its oppressive environment in human economy: it would at once vegetate and flower into some ideal form, such as we see exuberantly displayed in nature. If we can only suspend for a moment the congested traffic in the brain, these initial movements will begin to traverse it playfully and show their paces, and we shall live in one of those plausible worlds which the actual world has made impossible.

Man possesses, for example, a native capacity for joy. There are moments, in friendship or in solitude, when joy is realised; but the occasions are often trivial and could never justify in reflection the feelings that then happen to bubble up. Nor can pure joy be long sustained: cross-currents of lassitude or anxiety, distracting incidents, irrelevant associations, trouble its course and make it languish, turning it before long into dulness or melancholy. Language cannot express a joy that shall be full and pure; for to keep the purity nothing would have to be named which carried the least suggestion of sadness with it, and, in the world that human language refers to, such a condition would exclude every situation possible. "O joy, O joy," would be the whole ditty: hence some dialecticians, whose experience is largely verbal, think whatever is pure necessarily thin.

Literature  
incapable of  
expressing  
pure feelings.

That feeling should be so quickly polluted is, however, a superficial and earthly accident. Spirit is clogged by what it flows through, but at its springs it is both limpid and abundant. There is matter enough in joy for many a universe, though the actual world has not a single form quite fit to embody it, and its too rapid syllables are excluded from the current hexameter. Music, on the contrary, has a more flexible measure; its prosody admits every word. Its rhythms can explicate every emotion, through all degrees of complexity and volume, without once disavowing it. Thus unused matter, which is not less fertile than that which nature has absorbed, comes to fill out an infinity of ideal forms. The joy condemned by practical exigencies to scintillate for a moment uncommunicated, and then, as it were, to be buried alive, may now find an abstract art to embody it and bring it before the public, formed into a rich and constant object called a musical composition. So art succeeds

Music may  
do so.

in vindicating the forgotten regions of spirit: a new spontaneous creation shows how little authority or finality the given creation has.

What is true of joy is no less true of sorrow, which, though it arises from failure in some natural ideal, carries with it a sentimental ideal of its own. Even confusion can find in music an expression and a catharsis. That death or change should grieve does not follow from the material nature of these phenomena. To change or to disappear might be as normal a tendency as to move; and it actually happens, when nothing ideal has been attained, that *not to be thus* is the whole law of being. There is then a nameless satisfaction in passing on; which is the virtual ideal of pain and mere willing. Death and change acquire a tragic character when they invade a mind which is not ready for them in all its parts, so that those elements in it which are still vigorous, and would maintain somewhat longer their ideal identity, suffer violence at the hands of the others, already mastered by decay and willing to be self-destructive. Thus a man whose physiological complexion involves more poignant emotion than his ideas can absorb—one who is sentimental—will yearn for new objects that may explain, embody, and focus his dumb feelings; and these objects, if art can produce them, will relieve and glorify those feelings in the act of expressing them. Catharsis is nothing more.

There would be no pleasure in expressing pain, if pain were not dominated through its expression. To know how just a cause we have for grieving is already a consolation, for it is already a shift from feeling to understanding. By such consideration of a passion, the intellectual powers turn it into subject-matter to operate upon. All utterance is a feat, all apprehension a discovery; and this intellectual victory, sounding in the midst of emotional struggles, hushes some part of their brute importunity. It is at once sublime and beneficent, like a god stilling a tempest. Melancholy can in this way be the food of art; and it is no paradox that such a material may be beautiful when a fit form is imposed upon it, since a fit form turns anything into an agreeable object; its beauty runs as deep as its fitness, and stops where its adaptation to human nature begins to fail. Whatever can interest may prompt to expression, as it may have satisfied curiosity; and the mind celebrates a little triumph whenever it can formulate a truth, however unwelcome to the flesh, or discover an actual force, however unfavourable to given interests. As meditation on death and on life make equally for wisdom, so the expression of

**Instability the  
soul of matter.**

**Peace the  
triumph of  
spirit.**

sorrow and joy make equally for beauty. Meditation and expression are themselves congenial activities with an intrinsic value which is not lessened if what they deal with could have been abolished to advantage. If once it exists, we may understand and interpret it; and this reaction will serve a double purpose. At first, in its very act, it will suffuse and mollify the unwelcome experience by another, digesting it, which is welcome; and later, by the broader adjustment which it will bring into the mind, it will help us to elude or confront the evils thus laid clearly before us.

Catharsis has no such effect as a sophisticated optimism wishes to attribute to it; it does not show us that evil is good, or that calamity and crime are things to be grateful for: so forced an apology for evil has nothing to do with tragedy or wisdom; it belongs to apologetics and an artificial theodicy. Catharsis is rather the consciousness of how evil evils are, and how besetting; and how possible goods lie between and involve serious renunciations. To understand, to accept, and to use the situation in which a mortal may find himself is the function of art and reason. Such mastery is desirable in itself and for its fruits; it does not make itself responsible for the chaos of goods and evils that it supervenes upon. Whatever writhes in matter, art strives to give form to; and however unfavourable the field may be for its activity, it does what it can there, since no other field exists in which it may labour.

Sad music pleases the melancholy because it is sad and other men because it is music. When a composer attempts to reproduce complex conflicts in his score he will please complex or disordered spirits for expressing their troubles, but other men only for the order and harmony he may have brought out of that chaos. The chaos in itself will offend, and it is no part of rational art to produce it. As well might a physician poison in order to give an antidote, or maim in order to amputate. The subject-matter of art is life, life as it actually is; but the function of art is to make life better. The depth to which an artist may find current experience to be sunk in discord and confusion is not his special concern; his concern is, in some measure, to lift experience out. The more barbarous his age, the more drastic and violent must be his operation. He will have to shout in a storm. His strength must needs, in such a case, be very largely physical and his methods sensational. In a gentler age he may grow nobler, and blood and thunder will no longer seem impressive. Only the weak are obliged to be violent; the strong, having all means

**Refinement is  
true strength.**

at command, need not resort to the worst. Refined art is not wanting in power if the public is refined also. And as refinement comes only by experience, by comparison, by subordinating means to ends and rejecting what hinders, it follows that a refined mind will really possess the greater volume, as well as the subtler discrimination. Its ecstasy without grimace, and its submission without tears, will hold heaven and earth better together—and hold them better apart—than could a mad imagination.

## CHAPTER V

### SPEECH AND SIGNIFICATION

Music rationalises sound, but a more momentous rationalising of sound is seen in language. Language is one of the most useful of things, yet the greater part of it still remains (what it must all have been in the beginning) useless and without ulterior significance. The musical side of language is its primary and elementary side. Man is endowed with vocal organs so plastic as to emit a great variety of delicately varied sounds; and by good fortune his ear has a parallel sensibility, so that much vocal expression can be registered and confronted by auditory feeling. It has been said that man's pre-eminence in nature is due to his possessing hands; his modest participation in the ideal world may similarly be due to his possessing tongue and ear. For when he finds shouting and vague moaning after a while fatiguing, he can draw a new pleasure from uttering all sorts of labial, dental, and guttural sounds. Their rhythms and oppositions can entertain him, and he can begin to use his lingual gamut to designate the whole range of his perceptions and passions.

Sounds well  
fitted to be  
symbols.

Here we touch upon one of the great crises in creation. As nutrition at first established itself in the face of waste, and reproduction in the face of death, so representation was able, by help of vocal symbols, to confront that dispersion inherent in experience, which is something in itself ephemeral. Merely to associate one thing with another brings little gain; and merely to have added a vocal designation to fleeting things—a designation which of course would have been taken for a part of their essence—would in itself have encumbered phenomena without rendering them in any way more docile to the will. But the encumbrance in this instance proved to be a wonderful preservative and means of comparison. It actually gave each moving thing its niche and cenotaph in the eternal. For the universe of vocal sounds was a field,

like that of colour or number, in which the elements showed relations and transitions easy to dominate. It was a key-board over which attention could run back and forth, eliciting many implicit harmonies. Henceforth when various sounds had been idly associated with various things, and identified with them, the things could, by virtue of their names, be carried over mentally into the linguistic system; they could be manipulated there ideally, and vicariously preserved in representation. Needless to say that the things themselves remained unchanged all the while in their efficacy and mechanical succession, just as they remain unchanged in those respects when they pass for the mathematical observer into their measure or symbol; but as this reduction to mathematical form makes them calculable, so their earlier reduction to words rendered them comparable and memorable, first enabling them to figure in discourse at all.

Language had originally no obligation to subserve an end which we may sometimes measure it by now, and depute to be its proper function,

**Language has a structure independent of things.**

namely, to stand for things and adapt itself perfectly to their structure. In language as in every other existence idealism precedes realism, since it must be a part of nature living its own life before it can become a symbol for the rest and bend

to external control. The vocal and musical medium is, and must always remain, alien to the spatial. What makes terms correspond and refer to one another is a relation eternally disparate from the relation of propinquity or derivation between existences. Yet when sounds were attached to an event or emotion, the sounds became symbols for that disparate fact. The net of vocal relations caught that natural object as a cobweb might catch a fly, without destroying or changing it. The object's quality passed to the word at the same time that the word's relations enveloped the object; and thus a new weight and significance was added to sound, previously nothing but a dull music. A conflict at once established itself between the drift proper to the verbal medium and that proper to the designated things; a conflict which the whole history of language and thought has embodied and which continues to this day.

Suppose an animal going down to a frozen river which he had previously visited in summer. Marks of all sorts would awaken in him an old train of reactions; he would doubtless feel premonitions of satisfied thirst and the splash of water. On finding, however, instead of the fancied liquid, a mass of something like cold stone, he would be dis-

concerted. His active attitude would be pulled up short and contradicted. In his fairyland of faith and magic the old river would have been simply annihilated, the dreamt-of water would have become a vanished ghost, and this ice for the moment the hard reality. He would turn away and live for a while on other illusions. When this shock was overgrown by time and it was summer again, the original habit might, however, reassert itself once more. If he revisited the stream, some god would seem to bring back something from an old familiar world; and the chill of that temporary estrangement, the cloud that for a while had made the good invisible, would soon be gone and forgotten.

Words, remaining identical, serve to identify things that change.

If we imagine, on the contrary, that this animal could speak and had from the first called his haunt *the river*, he would have repeated its name on seeing it even when it was frozen, for he had not failed to recognise it in that guise. The variation afterwards noticed, upon finding it hard, would seem no total substitution, but a *change*; for it would be the same river, once flowing, that was now congealed. An identical word, covering all the identical qualities in the phenomena and serving to abstract them, would force the inconsistent qualities in those phenomena to pass for accidents; and the useful proposition could at once be framed that the same river may be sometimes free and sometimes frozen.

This proposition is true, yet it contains much that is calculated to offend a scrupulous dialectician. Its language and categories are not purely logical, but largely physical and representative. The notion that what changes nevertheless endures is a remarkable hybrid. It arises when rigid ideal terms are imposed on evanescent existence. Feelings, taken alone, would show no identities; they would be lost in changing, or be woven into the infinite feeling of change. Notions, taken alone, would allow no lapse, but would merely lead attention about from point to point over an eternal system of relations. Power to understand the world, logical or scientific mastery of existence, arises only by the forced and conventional marriage of these two essences, when the actual flux is ideally suspended and an ideal harness is loosely flung upon things. For this purpose words are an admirable instrument. They have dialectical relations based on an ideal import, or tendency to definition, which makes their essence their signification; yet they can be freely

Language the dialectical garment of facts.

bandied about and applied for a moment to the ambiguous things that pass through existence.

Had men been dumb, an exchange and circulation of images need not have been wanting, and associations might have arisen between ideals in the mind and corresponding reactive habits in the body. What words add is not power of discernment or action, but a medium of intellectual exchange. Language is like money, without which specific relative values may well exist and be felt, but cannot be reduced to a common denominator. And as money must have a certain intrinsic value of its own in order that its relation to other values may be stable, so a word, by which a thing is represented in discourse, must be a part of that thing's context, an ingredient in the total apparition it is destined to recall. Words, in their existence, are no more universal than gold by nature is a worthless standard of value in other things. Words are a material accompaniment of phenomena, at first an idle accompaniment, but one which happens to subserve easily a universal function. Some other element in objects might conceivably have served for a common denominator between them; but words, just by virtue of their adventitious, detachable status, and because they are so easily compared and manipulated in the world of sound, were singularly well fitted for this office. They are not vague, as any common quality abstracted from things would necessarily become; and though vagueness is a quality only too compatible with perception, so that vague ideas can exist without end, this vagueness is not what makes them universal in their functions. It is one thing to perceive an ill-determined form and quite another to attribute to it a precise general predicate. Words, distinct in their own category and perfectly recognisable, can accordingly perform very well the function of embodying a universal; for they can be identified in turn with many particulars and yet remain throughout particular themselves.

The psychology of nominalism is undoubtedly right where it insists that every image is particular and every term, in its existential aspect, a *flatum vocis*; but nominalists should have recognised that images may have any degree of vagueness and generality when measured by a conceptual standard. A figure having obviously three sides and three corners may very well be present to the mind when it is impossible to say whether it is an equilateral or a rectangular triangle. Functional or logical uni-

Words are  
wise men's  
counters.

Nominalism  
right in  
psychology,  
and realism in  
logic.

versality lies in another sphere altogether, being a matter of intent and not of existence. When we say that “universals alone exist in the mind” we mean by “mind” something unknown to Berkeley; not a bundle of psychoses nor an angelic substance, but quick intelligence, the faculty of discourse. Predication is an act, understanding a spiritual and transitive operation: its existential basis may well be counted in psychologically and reduced to a stream of immediate presences; but its meaning can be caught only by another meaning, as life only can exemplify life. Vague or general images are as little universal as sounds are; but a sound better than a flickering abstraction can serve the intellect in its operation of comparison and synthesis. Words are therefore the body of discourse, of which the soul is understanding.

The categories of discourse are in part merely representative, in part merely grammatical, and in part attributable to both spheres. Euphony and phonetic laws are principles governing language without any reference to its meaning; here speech is still a sort of music. At the other extreme lies that ultimate form of prose which we see in mathematical reasoning or in a telegraphic style, where absolutely nothing is rhetorical and speech is denuded

**Literature  
moves between  
the extremes  
of music and  
denotation.**

of every feature not indispensable to its symbolic rôle. Between these two extremes lies the broad field of poetry, or rather of imaginative or playful expression, where the verbal medium is a medium indeed, having a certain transparency, a certain reference to independent facts, but at the same time elaborates the fact in expressing it, and endows it with affinities alien to its proper nature. A pun is a grotesque example of such diremption, where ambiguities belonging only to speech are used to suggest impossible substitutions in ideas. Less frankly, language habitually wrests its subject-matter in some measure from its real context and transfers it to a represented and secondary world, the world of logic and reflection. Concretions in existence are subsumed, when named, under concretions in discourse. Grammar lays violent hands upon experience, and everything becomes a prey to wit and fancy, a material for fiction and eloquence. Man’s intellectual progress has a poetic phase, in which he imagines the world; and then a scientific phase, in which he sifts and tests what he has imagined.

In what measure do inflection and syntax represent anything in the subject-matter of discourse? In what measure are they an independent play of expression, a quasi-musical, quasi-mathematical veil inter-

posed between reflection and existence? One who knows only languages of a single family can give but a biased answer to this question. There are doubtless many approaches to correct symbolism in language, which grammar may have followed up at different times in strangely different ways. That the medium in every art has a character of its own, a character limiting its representative value, may perhaps be safely asserted, and this intrinsic character in the medium antedates and permeates all representation. Phonetic possibilities and phonetic habits belong, in language, to this indispensable vehicle; what the throat and lips can emit easily and distinguishably, and what sequences can appeal to the ear and be retained, depend alike on physiological conditions; and no matter how convenient or inconvenient these conditions may be for signification, they will always make themselves felt and may sometimes remain predominant. In poetry they are still conspicuous. Euphony, metre, and rhyme colour the images they transmit and add a charm wholly extrinsic and imputed. In this immersion of the message in the medium and in its intrinsic movement the magic of poetry lies; and the miracle grows as there is more and more native analogy between the movement of the medium and that of the subject-matter.

Both language and ideas involve processes in the brain. The two processes may be wholly disparate if we regard their objects only and forget their seat, as Athena is in no way linked to an elephant's tusk; yet in perception all processes are contiguous and exercise a single organism, in which they may find themselves in sympathetic or antipathetic vibration. On this circumstance hangs that subtle congruity between subject and vehicle which is otherwise such a mystery in expression. If to think of Athena and to look on ivory are congruous physiological processes, if they sustain or heighten each other, then to represent Athena in ivory will be a happy expedient, in which the very nature of the medium will already be helping us forward. Scent and form go better together, for instance, in the violet or the rose than in the hyacinth or the poppy: and being better compacted for human perception they seem more expressive and can be linked more unequivocally with other sources of feeling. So a given vocal sound may have more or less analogy to the thing it is used to signify; this analogy may be obvious, as in onomatopœia, or subtle, as when short, sharp sounds go with decision, or involved rhythms and vague rever-

Sound and  
object, in their  
sensuous  
presence, may  
have affinity.

berations with a floating dream. What seems exquisite to one poet may accordingly seem vapid to another, when the texture of experience in the two minds differs, so that a given composition rustles through one man's fancy as a wind might through a wood, but finds no sympathetic response in the other organism, nerved as it may be, perhaps, to precision in thought and action.

The structure of language, when it passes beyond the phonetic level, begins at once to lean upon existences and to imitate the structure of things. We distinguish the parts of speech, for instance, in subservience to distinctions which we make in ideas. The feeling or quality represented by an adjective, the relation indicated by a verb, the substance or concretion of qualities designated by a noun, are diversities growing up in experience, by no means attributable to the mere play of sound. The parts of speech are therefore representative. Their inflection is representative too, since tenses mark important practical differences in the distribution of the events described, and cases express the respective rôles played by objects in the operation. "I struck him and he will strike me," renders in linguistic symbols a marked change in the situation; the variation in phrase is not rhetorical. Language here, though borrowed no doubt from ancestral poetry, has left all revery far behind, and has been submerged in the Life of Reason.

Syntax positively  
representative.

The medium, however, constantly reasserts itself. An example may be found in gender, which, clearly representative in a measure, cuts loose in language from all genuine representation and becomes a feature in abstract linguistic design, a formal characteristic in expression. Contrasted sentiments permeate an animal's dealings with his own sex and with the other; nouns and adjectives represent this contrast by taking on masculine and feminine forms. The distinction is indeed so important that wholly different words—man and woman, bull and cow—stand for the best-known animals of different sex; while adjectives, where declension is extinct, as in English, often take on a connotation of gender and are applied to one sex only—as we say a beautiful woman, but hardly a beautiful man. But gender in language extends much farther than sex, and even if by some subtle analogy all the masculine and feminine nouns in a language could be attached to something suggesting sex in the objects they designate, yet it can hardly be maintained that the elaborate concordance incident upon that distinction is representative

Yet it vitiates  
what it  
represents.

of any felt quality in the things. So remote an analogy to sex could not assert itself pervasively. Thus Horace says:

Quis *multa* gracilis te puer in *rosa*  
 perfusis liquidis urget odoribus  
*grato*, Pyrrha, sub *antro*?

Here we may perceive why the rose was instinctively made feminine, and we may grant that the bower, though the reason escape us, was somehow properly masculine; but no one would urge that a *profusion* of roses was also intrinsically feminine, or that the *pleasantness* of a bower was ever specifically masculine to sense. The epithets *multa* and *grato* take their gender from the nouns, even though the quality they designate fails to do so. Their gender is therefore non-representative and purely formal; it marks an intra-linguistic accommodation. The medium has developed a syntactical structure apart from any intrinsic significance thereby accruing to its elements. Artificial concordance in gender does not express gender: it merely emphasises the grammatical links in the phrases and makes greater variety possible in the arrangement of words.

This example may prepare us to understand a general principle: that language, while essentially significant viewed in its function, is indefinitely wasteful, being mechanical and tentative in its origin. It overloads itself, and being primarily music, and a labyrinth of sounds, it develops an articulation and method of its own, which only in the end, and with much inexactness, reverts to its function of expression. How great the possibilities of effect are in developing a pure medium we can best appreciate in music; but in language a similar development goes on while it is being applied to representing things. The organ is spontaneous, the function adventitious and superimposed. Rhetoric and utility keep language going, as centrifugal and centripetal forces keep a planet in its course. Euphony, verbal analogy, grammatical fancy, poetic confusion, continually drive language afield, in its own tangential direction; while the business of life, in which language is employed, and the natural lapse of rhetorical fashions, as continually draw it back towards convenience and exactitude.

Between music and bare symbolism language has its florid expansion. Until music is subordinated, speech has little sense; it can hardly tell a story or indicate an object unequivocally. Yet if music were left

behind altogether, language would pass into a sort of algebra or vocal shorthand, without literary quality; it would become wholly indicative and record facts without colouring them ideally. This medium and its intrinsic development, though they make the bane of reproduction, make the essence of art; they give representation a new and specific value such as the object, before representation, could not have possessed. Consciousness itself is such a medium in respect to diffuse existence, which it foreshortens and elevates into synthetic ideas. Reason, too, by bringing the movement of events and inclinations to a head in single acts of reflection, thus attaining to laws and purposes, introduces into life the influence of a representative medium, without which life could never pass from a process into an art. Language acquires scope in the same way, by its kindly infidelities; its metaphors and syntax lend experience perspective. Language vitiates the experience it expresses, but thereby makes the burden of one moment relevant to that of another. The two experiences, identified roughly with the same concretion in discourse, are pronounced similar or comparable in character. Thus a proverb, by its verbal pungency and rhythm, becomes more memorable than the event it first described would ever have been if not translated into an epigram and rendered, so to speak, applicable to new cases; for by that translation the event has become an idea.

**Language foreshortens experience.**

To turn events into ideas is the function of literature. Music, which in a certain sense is a mass of pure forms, must leave its "ideas" imbedded in their own medium—they are musical ideas—and cannot impose them on any foreign material, such as human affairs. Science, on the contrary, seeks to disclose the bleak anatomy of existence, stripping off as much as possible the veil of prejudice and words. Literature takes a middle course and tries to subdue music, which for its purposes would be futile and too abstract, into conformity with general experience, making music thereby significant. Literary art in the end rejects all unmeaning flourishes, all complications that have no counterpart in things or no use in expressing their relations; at the same time it aspires to digest that reality to which it confines itself, making it over into ideal substance and material for the mind. It looks at things with an incorrigibly dramatic eye, turning them into permanent unities (which they never are) and almost into persons, grouping them by their imaginative or moral affinities and retaining in them chiefly what is incidental

**It is a perpetual mythology.**

to their being, namely, the part they may chance to play in man's adventures.

Such literary art demands a subject-matter other than the literary impulse itself. The literary man is an interpreter and hardly succeeds, as the musician may, without experience and mastery of human affairs. His art is half genius and half fidelity. He needs inspiration; he must wait for automatic musical tendencies to ferment in his mind, proving it to be fertile in devices, comparisons, and bold assimilations. Yet inspiration alone will lead him astray, for his art is relative to something other than its own formal impulse; it comes to clarify the real world, not to encumber it; and it needs to render its native agility practical and to attach its volume of feeling to what is momentous in human life. Literature has its piety, its conscience; it cannot long forget, without forfeiting all dignity, that it serves a burdened and perplexed creature, a human animal struggling to persuade the universal Sphinx to propose a more intelligible riddle. Irresponsible and trivial in its abstract impulse, man's simian chatter becomes noble as it becomes symbolic; its representative function lends it a serious beauty, its utility endows it with moral worth.

These relations, in determining the function of language, determine the ideal which its structure should approach. Any sort of grammar and rhetoric, the most absurd and inapplicable as well as the most descriptive, can be spontaneous; fit organisms are not less natural than those that are unfit. Felicitous genius is so called because it meets experience half-way. A genius which flies in the opposite direction, though not less fertile internally, is externally inept and is called madness. Ineptitude is something which language needs to shake off. Better surrender altogether some verbal categories and start again, in that respect, with a clean slate, than persist in any line of development that alienates thought from reality. The language of birds is excellent in its way, and those ancient sages who are reported to have understood it very likely had merely perceived that it was not meant to be intelligible; for it is not to understand nature to reduce her childishly to a human scale. Man, who is merged in universal nature at the roots of his being, is not without profound irrational intuitions by which he can half divine her secret processes; and his heart, in its own singing and fluttering, might not wholly misinterpret the birds. But human discourse is not worth having if it is mere piping, and helps not at all in mastering things; for

**It may be apt or inapt, with equal richness.**

man is intelligent, which is another way of saying that he aspires to envisage in thought what he is dealing with in action. Discourse that absolved itself from that observant duty would not be cognitive; and in failing to be cognitive it would fail to redeem the practical forces it ignored from their brute externality, and to make them tributary to the Life of Reason. Thus its own dignity and continued existence depend on its learning to express momentous facts, facts important for action and happiness; and there is nothing which so quickly discredits itself as empty rhetoric and dialectic, or poetry that wanders in dim and private worlds. If pure music, even with its immense sensuous appeal, is so easily tedious, what a universal yawn must meet the verbiage which develops nothing but its own iridescence. Absolute versification and absolute dialectic may have their place in society; they give play to an organ that has its rights like any other, and that, after serving for a while in the economy of life, may well claim a holiday in which to disport itself irresponsibly among the fowls of the air and the lilies of the field. But the exercise is trivial; and if its high priests go through their mummeries with a certain unction, and pretend to be wafted by them into a higher world, the phenomenon is neither new nor remarkable. Language is a wonderful and pliant medium, and why should it not lend itself to imposture? A systematic abuse of words, as of other things, is never without some inner harmony or propriety that makes it prosper; only the man who looks beyond and sees the practical results awakes to the villainy of it. In the end, however, those who play with words lose their labour, and pregnant as they feel themselves to be with new and wonderful universes, they cannot humanise the one in which they live and rather banish themselves from it by their persistent egotism and irrelevance.

**Absolute  
language a  
possible but  
foolish art.**



## CHAPTER VI

### POETRY AND PROSE

There is both truth and illusion in the saying that primitive poets are sublime. Genesis and the *Iliad* (works doubtless backed by a long tradition) are indeed sublime. Primitive men, having perhaps developed language before the other arts, used it with singular directness to describe the chief episodes of life, which was all that life as yet contained. They had frank passions and saw things from single points of view. A breath from that early world seems to enlarge our natures, and to restore to language, which we have sophisticated, all its magnificence and truth. But there is more, for (as we have seen) language is spontaneous; it constitutes an act before it registers an observation. It gives vent to emotion before it is adjusted to things external and reduced, as it were, to its own echo rebounding from a refractory world. The lion's roar, the bellowing of bulls, even the sea's cadence has a great sublimity. Though hardly in itself poetry, an animal cry, when still audible in human language, renders it also the unanswerable, the ultimate voice of nature. Nothing can so pierce the soul as the uttermost sigh of the body. There is no utterance so thrilling as that of absolute impulse, if absolute impulse has learned to speak at all. An intense, inhospitable mind, filled with a single idea, in which all animal, social, and moral interests are fused together, speaks a language of incomparable force. Thus the Hebrew prophets, in their savage concentration, poured into one torrent all that their souls possessed or could dream of. What other men are wont to pursue in politics, business, religion, or art, they looked for from one wave of national repentance and consecration. Their age, swept by this ideal passion, possessed at the same time a fresh and homely vocabulary; and the result was an eloquence so elemental and combative, so imaginative and so bitterly practical, that the world has never heard its like. Such single-mindedness, with such heroic simplicity in

Force of  
primary  
expressions.

words and images, is hardly possible in a late civilisation. Cultivated poets are not unconsciously sublime.

The sublimity of early utterances should not be hailed, however, with unmixed admiration. It is a sublimity born of defect or at least of disproportion. The will asserts itself magnificently; images, like thunder-clouds, seem to cover half the firmament at once.

**Its exclusiveness  
and narrowness.**

But such a will is sadly inexperienced; it has hardly tasted or even conceived any possible or high satisfactions. Its lurid firmament is poor in stars. To throw the whole mind upon something is not so great a feat when the mind has nothing else to throw itself upon. Every animal when goaded becomes intense; and it is perhaps merely the apathy in which mortals are wont to live that keeps them from being habitually sublime in their sentiments. The sympathy that makes a sheep hasten after its fellows, in vague alarm or in vague affection; the fierce premonitions that drive a bull to the heifer; the patience with which a hen sits on her eggs; the loyalty which a dog shows to his master—what thoughts may not all these instincts involve, which it needs only a medium of communication to translate into poetry?

Man, though with less wholeness of soul, enacts the same dramas. He hears voices on all occasions; he incorporates what little he observes of nature into his verbal dreams; and as each new impulse bubbles to the surface he feels himself on the verge of some inexpressible heaven or hell. He needs but to abandon himself to that seething chaos which perpetually underlies conventional sanity—a chaos in which memory and prophecy, vision and impersonation, sound and sense, are inextricably jumbled together—to find himself at once in a magic world, irrecoverable, largely unmeaning, terribly intricate, but, as he will conceive, deep, inward, and absolutely real. He will have reverted, in other words, to crude experience, to primordial illusion. The movement of his animal or vegetative mind will be far from delightful; it will be unintelligent and unintelligible; nothing in particular will be represented therein; but it will be a movement in the soul and for the soul, as exciting and compulsive as the soul's volume can make it. In this muddy torrent words also may be carried down; and if these words are by chance strung together into a cadence, and are afterwards written down, they may remain for a memento of that turbid moment. Such words we may at first hesitate to call poetry, since very likely they are nonsense; but this nonsense will have some qual-

ity—some rhyme or rhythm—that makes it memorable (else it would not have survived); and moreover the words will probably show, in their connotation and order, some sympathy with the dream that cast them up. For the man himself, in whom such a dream may be partly recurrent, they may consequently have a considerable power of suggestion, and they may even have it for others, whenever the rhythm and incantation avail to plunge them also into a similar trance.

Memorable nonsense, or sound with a certain hypnotic power, is the really primitive and radical form of poetry. Nor is such poetry yet extinct: children still love and compose it, and every genuine poet, on one side of his genius, reverts to it from explicit speech. As all language has acquired its meaning, and did not have it in the beginning, so the man who launches a new locution, the poet who creates a symbol, must do so without knowing what significance it may eventually acquire, and conscious at best only of the emotional background from which it emerged. Pure poetry is pure experiment; and it is not strange that nine-tenths of it should be pure failure. For it matters little what unutterable things may have originally gone together with a phrase in the dreamer's mind; if they were not uttered and the phrase cannot call them back, this verbal relic is none the richer for the high company it may once have kept. Expressiveness is a most accidental matter. What a line suggests at one reading, it may never suggest again even to the same person. For this reason, among others, poets are partial to their own compositions; they truly discover there depths of meaning which exist for nobody else. Those readers who appropriate a poet and make him their own fall into a similar illusion; they attribute to him what they themselves supply, and whatever he reels out, lost in his own personal reverie, seems to them, like *sortes biblicæ*, written to fit their own case.

**Rudimentary  
poetry an  
incantation or  
charm.**

Justice has never been done to Plato's remarkable consistency and boldness in declaring that poets are inspired by a divine madness and yet, when they transgress rational bounds, are to be banished from an ideal republic, though not without some marks of Platonic regard. Instead of fillets, a modern age might assign them a coterie of flattering dames, and instead of banishment, starvation; but the result would be the same in the end. A poet is inspired because what occurs in his brain is a true experiment in creation. His apprehension plays with words and their mean-

**Inspiration  
irresponsible.**

ings as nature, in any spontaneous variation, plays with her own structure. A mechanical force shifts the kaleidoscope; a new direction is given to growth or a new gist to signification. This inspiration, moreover, is mad, being wholly ignorant of its own issue; and though it has a confused fund of experience and verbal habit on which to draw, it draws on this fund blindly and quite at random, consciously possessed by nothing but a certain stress and pregnancy and the pains, as it were, of parturition. Finally the new birth has to be inspected critically by the public censor before it is allowed to live; most probably it is too feeble and defective to prosper in the common air, or is a monster that violates some primary rule of civic existence, tormenting itself to disturb others.

Plato seems to have exaggerated the havoc which these poetic dragons can work in the world. They are in fact more often absurd than venomous, and no special legislation is needed to abolish them. They soon die quietly of universal neglect. The poetry that ordinarily circulates among a people is poetry of a secondary and conventional sort that propagates established ideas in trite metaphors. Popular poets are the parish priests of the Muse, retailing her ancient divinations to a long since converted public. Plato's quarrel was not so much with poetic art as with ancient myth and emotional laxity: he was preaching a crusade against the established church. For naturalistic deities he wished to substitute moral symbols; for the joys of sense, austerity and abstraction. To proscribe Homer was a marked way of protesting against the frivolous reigning ideals. The case is much as if we should now proscribe the book of Genesis, on account of its mythical cosmogony, or in order to proclaim the philosophic truth that the good, being an adequate expression to be attained by creation, could not possibly have preceded it or been its source. We might admit at the same time that Genesis contains excellent images and that its poetic force is remarkable; so that if serious misunderstanding could be avoided the censor might be glad to leave it in everybody's hands. Plato in some such way recognised that Homer was poetical and referred his works, mischievous as they might prove incidentally, to divine inspiration. Poetic madness, like madness in prophecy or love, bursts the body of things to escape from it into some ideal; and even the Homeric world, though no model for a rational state, was a cheerful heroic vision, congenial to many early impulses and dreams of the mind.

Plato's  
discriminating  
view.

Homer, indeed, was no primitive poet; he was a consummate master, the heir to generations of discipline in both life and art. This appears in his perfect prosody, in his limpid style, in his sense for proportion, his abstinences, and the frank pathos of his portraits and principles, in which there is nothing gross, subjective, or arbitrary. The inspirations that came to him never carried him into crudeness or absurdity. Every modern poet, though the world he describes may be more refined in spots and more elaborate, is less advanced in his art; for art is made rudimentary not by its date but by its irrationality. Yet even if Homer had been primitive he might well have been inspired, in the same way as a Bacchic frenzy or a mystic trance; the most blundering explosions may be justified antecedently by the plastic force that is vented in them. They may be expressive, in the physical sense of this ambiguous word; for, far as they may be from conveying an idea, they may betray a tendency and prove that something is stirring in the soul. Expressiveness is often sterile; but it is sometimes fertile and capable of reproducing in representation the experience from which it sprang. As a tree in the autumn sheds leaves and seeds together, so a ripening experience comes indifferently to various manifestations, some barren and without further function, others fit to carry the parent experience over into another mind, and give it a new embodiment there. Expressiveness in the former case is dead, like that of a fossil; in the latter it is living and efficacious, recreating its original. The first is idle self-manifestation, the second rational art.

**Explosive  
and pregnant  
expression.**

Self-manifestation, so soon as it is noted and accepted as such, seems to present the same marvel as any ideal success. Such self-manifestation is incessant, many-sided, unavoidable; yet it seems a miracle when its conditions are looked back upon from the vantage ground of their result. By reading spirit out of a work we turn it into a feat of inspiration. Thus even the crudest and least coherent utterances, when we suspect some soul to be groping in them, and striving to address us, become oracular; a divine afflatus breathes behind their gibberish and they seem to manifest some deep intent. The miracle of creation or inspiration consists in nothing but this, that an external effect should embody an inner intention. The miracle, of course, is apparent only, and due to an inverted and captious point of view. In truth the tendency that executed the work was what first made its conception possible; but this conception,

**Natural  
history of  
inspiration.**

finding the work responsive in some measure to its inner demand, attributes that response to its own magic prerogative. Hence the least stir and rumble of formative processes, when it generates a soul, makes itself somehow that soul's interpreter; and dim as the spirit and its expression may both remain, they are none the less in profound concord, a concord which wears a miraculous providential character when it is appreciated without being understood.

Primitive poetry is the basis of all discourse. If we open any ancient book we come at once upon an elaborate language, and on diverse conventional concepts, of whose origin and history we hear nothing. We must read on, until by dint of guessing and by confronting instances we grow to understand those symbols. The writer was himself heir to a linguistic tradition which he made his own by the same process of adoption and tentative use by which we, in turn, interpret his phrases: he understood what he heard in terms of his own experience, and attributed to his predecessors (no matter what their incommunicable feelings may have been) such ideas as their words generated in his own thinking. In this way expressions continually change their sense; they can communicate a thought only by diffusing a stimulus, and in passing from mouth to mouth they will wholly reverse their connotation, unless some external object or some recurring human situation gives them a constant standard, by which private aberrations may be checked. Thus in the first phrase of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," the words have a stable meaning only in so far as they are indicative and bring us back to a stable object. What "heavens" and "earth" stand for can be conveyed by gestures, by merely pointing up and down; but beyond that sensuous connotation their meaning has entirely changed since they were here written; and no two minds, even to-day, will respond to these familiar words with exactly the same images. "Beginning" and "created" have a superficial clearness, though their implications cannot be defined without precipitating the most intricate metaphysics, which would end in nothing but a proof that both terms were ambiguous and unthinkable. As to the word "God," all mutual understanding is impossible. It is a floating literary symbol, with a value which, if we define it scientifically, becomes quite algebraic. As no experienced object corresponds to it, it is without fixed indicative force, and admits any sense which its context in any mind may hap-

Expressions  
to be  
understood  
must be  
recreated,  
and so  
changed.

pen to give it. In the first sentence of Genesis its meaning, we may safely say, is “a masculine being by whom heaven and earth were created.” To fill out this implication other instances of the word would have to be gathered, in each of which, of course, the word would appear with a new and perhaps incompatible meaning.

Whenever a word appears in a radically new context it has a radically new sense: the expression in which it so figures is a poetic figment, a fresh literary creation. Such invention is sometimes perverse, sometimes humorous, sometimes sublime; that is, it may either buffet old associations without enlarging them, or give them a plausible but impossible twist, or enlarge them to cover, with unexpected propriety, a much wider or more momentous experience. The force of experience in any moment—if we abstract from represented values—is emotional; so that for sublime poetry what is required is to tap some reservoir of feeling. If a phrase opens the flood-gates of emotion, it has made itself most deeply significant. Its discursive range and clearness may not be remarkable; its emotional power will quite suffice. For this reason again primitive poetry may be sublime: in its inchoate phrases there is affinity to raw passion and their very blindness may serve to bring that passion back. Poetry has body; it represents the volume of experience as well as its form, and to express volume a primitive poet will rely rather on rhythm, sound, and condensed suggestion than on discursive fulness or scope.

Expressions  
may be recast  
perversely,  
humorously, or  
sublimely.

The descent from poetry to prose is in one sense a progress. When use has worn down a poetic phrase to its external import, and rendered it an indifferent symbol for a particular thing, that phrase has become prosaic; it has also become, by the same process, transparent and purely instrumental. In poetry feeling is transferred by contagion; in prose it is communicated by bending the attention upon determinate objects; the one stimulates and the other informs. Under the influence of poetry various minds radiate from a somewhat similar core of sensation, from the same vital mood, into the most diverse and incommunicable images. Interlocutors speaking prose, on the contrary, pelt and besiege one another with a peripheral attack; they come into contact at sundry superficial points and thence push their agreement inwards, until perhaps a practical coincidence is arrived at in their thought. Agreement is produced by controlling each mind externally, through a series of checks and little appeals to possible

The nature  
of prose.

sensation; whereas in poetry the agreement, where it exists, is vague and massive; there is an initial fusion of minds under hypnotic musical influences, from which each listener, as he awakes, passes into his own thoughts and interpretations. In prose the vehicle for communication is a conventional sign, standing in the last analysis for some demonstrable object or controllable feeling. By marshalling specific details a certain indirect suasion is exercised on the mind, as nature herself, by continual checks and denials, gradually tames the human will. The elements of prose are always practical, if we run back and reconstruct their primitive essence, for at bottom every experience is an original and not a copy, a nucleus for ideation rather than an object to which ideas may refer. It is when these stimulations are shaken together and become a system of mutual checks that they begin to take on ideally a rhythm borrowed from the order in which they actually recurred. Then a prophetic or representative movement arises in thought. Before this comes about, experience remains a constantly renovated dream, as poetry to the end conspires to keep it. For poetry, while truly poetical, never loses sight of initial feelings and underlying appeals; it is incorrigibly transcendental, and takes every present passion and every private dream in turn for the core of the universe. By creating new signs, or by recasting and crossing those which have become conventional, it keeps communication massive and instinctive, immersed in music, and inexhaustible by clear thought.

Lying is a privilege of poets because they have not yet reached the level on which truth and error are discernible. Veracity and significance are not ideals for a primitive mind; we learn to value them as we learn to live, when we discover that the spirit cannot be wholly free and solipsistic. To have to distinguish fact from fancy is so great a violence to the inner man that not only poets, but theologians and philosophers, still protest against such a distinction. They urge (what is perfectly true for a rudimentary creature) that facts are mere conceptions and conceptions full-fledged facts; but this interesting embryonic lore they apply, in their intellectual weakness, to retracting or undermining those human categories which, though alone fruitful or applicable in life, are not congenial to their half-formed imagination. Retreating deeper into the inner chaos, they bring to bear the whole momentum of an irresponsible dialectic to frustrate the growth of representative ideas. In this they are genuine, if somewhat belated, poets, experimenting anew

**It is more advanced and responsible than poetry.**

with solved problems, and fancying how creation might have moved upon other lines. The great merit that prose shares with science is that it is responsible. Its conscience is a new and wiser imagination, by which creative thought is rendered cumulative and progressive; for a man does not build less boldly or solidly if he takes the precaution of building in baked brick. Prose is in itself meagre and bodiless, merely indicating the riches of the world. Its transparency helps us to look through it to the issue, and the signals it gives fill the mind with an honest assurance and a prophetic art far nobler than any ecstasy.

As men of action have a better intelligence than poets, if only their action is on a broad enough stage, so the prosaic rendering of experience has the greater value, if only the experience rendered covers enough human interests. Youth and aspiration indulge in poetry; a mature and masterful mind will often despise it, and prefer to express itself laconically in prose. It is clearly proper that prosaic habits should supervene in this way on the poetical; for youth, being as yet little fed by experience, can find volume and depth only in the soul; the half-seen, the supra-mundane, the inexpressible, seem to it alone beautiful and worthy of homage. Time modifies this sentiment in two directions. It breeds lassitude and indifference towards impracticable ideals, originally no less worthy than the practicable. Ideals which cannot be realised, and are not fed at least by partial realisations, soon grow dormant. Life-blood passes to other veins; the urgent and palpitating interests of life appear in other quarters. While things impossible thus lose their serious charm, things actual reveal their natural order and variety; these not only can entertain the mind abstractly, but they can offer a thousand material rewards in observation and action. In their presence, a private dream begins to look rather cheap and hysterical. Not that existence has any dignity or prerogative in the presence of will, but that will itself, being elastic, grows definite and firm when it is fed by success; and its formed and expressible ideals then put to shame the others, which have remained vague for want of practical expression. Mature interests centre on soluble problems and tasks capable of execution; it is at such points that the ideal can be really served. The individual's dream straightens and reassures itself by merging with the dream of humanity. To dwell, as irrational poets do, on some private experience, on some emotion without representative or ulterior value, then seems a waste of time. Fiction becomes less

**Maturity  
brings love of  
practical  
truth.**

interesting than affairs, and poetry turns into a sort of incompetent whimper, a childish foreshortening of the outspread world.

On the other hand, prose has a great defect, which is abstractness. It drops the volume of experience in finding bodiless algebraic symbols by which to express it. The verbal form, instead of transmitting an image, seems to constitute it, in so far as there is an image suggested at all; and the ulterior situation is described only in the sense that a change is induced in the hearer which prepares him to meet that situation. Prose seems to be a use of language in the service of material life. It would tend, in that case, to undermine its own basis; for in proportion as signals for action are quick and efficacious they diminish their sensuous stimulus and fade from consciousness. Were language such a set of signals it would be something merely instrumental, which if made perfect ought to be automatic and unconscious. It would be a buzzing in the ears, not a music native to the mind. Such a theory of language would treat it as a necessary evil and would look forward hopefully to the extinction of literature, in which it would recognise nothing ideal. There is of course no reason to deprecate the use of vocables, or of any other material agency, to expedite affairs; but an art of speech, if it is to add any ultimate charm to life, has to supervene upon a mere code of signals. Prose, could it be purely representative, would be ideally superfluous. A literary prose accordingly owns a double allegiance, and its life is amphibious. It must convey intelligence, but intelligence clothed in a language that lends the message an intrinsic value, and makes it delightful to apprehend apart from its importance in ultimate theory or practice. Prose is in that measure a fine art. It might be called poetry that had become pervasively representative, and was altogether faithful to its rational function.

We may therefore with good reason distinguish prosaic form from prosaic substance. A novel, a satire, a book of speculative philosophy, may have a most prosaic exterior; every phrase may convey its idea economically; but the substance may nevertheless be poetical, since these ideas may be irrelevant to all ulterior events, and may express nothing but the imaginative energy that called them forth. On the other hand, a poetic vehicle in which there is much ornamental play of language and rhythm may clothe a dry ideal skeleton. So those tremendous positivists, the Hebrew prophets, had the most prosaic notions about the

**Pure prose would tend to efface itself.**

**Form alone, or substance alone, may be poetical.**

goods and evils of life. So Lucretius praised, I will not say the atoms merely, but even fecundity and wisdom. The motives, to take another example, which Racine attributed to his personages, were prosaically conceived; a physiologist could not be more exact in his calculations, for even love may be made the mainspring in a clock-work of emotions. Yet that Racine was a born poet appears in the music, nobility, and tenderness of his medium; he clothed his intelligible characters in magical and tragic robes; the aroma of sentiment rises like a sort of pungent incense between them and us, and no dramatist has ever had so sure a mastery over transports and tears.

In the medium a poet is at home; in the world he tries to render, he is a child and a stranger. Poetic notions are false notions; in so far as their function is representative they are vitiated by containing elements not present in things. Truth is a jewel which should not be painted over; but it may be set to advantage and shown in a good light. The poetic way of idealising reality is dull, bungling, and impure; a better acquaintance with things renders such flatteries ridiculous. That very effort of thought by which opaque masses of experience were first detached from the flux and given a certain individuality, seeks to continue to clarify them until they become as transparent as possible. To resist this clarification, to love the chance incrustations that encumber human ideas, is a piece of timid folly, and poetry in this respect is nothing but childish confusion. Poetic apprehension is a makeshift, in so far as its cognitive worth is concerned; it is exactly, in this respect, what myth is to science. Approaching its subject-matter from a distance, with incongruous categories, it translates it into some vague and misleading symbol rich in emotions which the object as it is could never arouse and is sure presently to contradict. What lends these hybrid ideas their temporary eloquence and charm is their congruity with the mind that breeds them and with its early habits. Falsification, or rather clouded vision, gives to poetry a more human accent and a reader welcome than to truth. In other words, it is the medium that asserts itself; the apperceptive powers indulge their private humours, and neglect the office to which they were assigned once for all by their cognitive essence.

Poetry has its place in the medium.

That the medium should so assert itself, however, is no anomaly, the cognitive function being an ulterior one to which ideas are by no means obliged to conform. Apperception is itself an activity or art, and

like all others terminates in a product which is a good in itself, apart from its utilities. If we abstract, then, from the representative function which may perhaps accrue to speech, and regard it merely as an operation absorbing energy and occasioning delight, we see that poetic language is language at its best. Its essential success consists in fusing ideas in charming sounds or in metaphors that shine by their own brilliance. Poetry is an eloquence justified by its spontaneity, as eloquence is a poetry justified by its application. The first draws the whole soul into the situation, and the second puts the whole situation before the soul.

**It is the best medium possible.**

Is there not, we may ask, some ideal form of discourse in which apperceptive life could be engaged with all its volume and transmuting power, and in which at the same time no misrepresentation should be involved? Transmutation is not erroneous when it is intentional; misrepresentation does not please for being false, but only because truth would be more congenial if it resembled such a fiction. Why should not discourse, then, have nothing but truth in its import and nothing but beauty in its form? With regard to euphony and grammatical structure there is evidently nothing impossible in such an ideal; for these radical beauties of language are independent of the subject-matter. They form the body of poetry; but the ideal and emotional atmosphere which is its soul depends on things external to language, which no perfection in the medium could modify. It might seem as if the brilliant substitutions, the magic suggestions essential to poetry, would necessarily vanish in the full light of day. The light of day is itself beautiful; but would not the loss be terrible if no other light were ever suffered to shine?

**Might it not convey what it is best to know?**

The Life of Reason involves sacrifice. What forces yearn for the ideal, being many and incompatible, have to yield and partly deny themselves in order to attain any ideal at all. There is something sad in all possible attainment so long as the rational virtue (which wills such attainment) is not pervasive; and even then there is limitation to put up with, and the memory of many a defeat. Rational poetry is possible and would be infinitely more beautiful than the other; but the charm of unreason, if unreason seem charming, it certainly could not preserve. In what human fancy demands, as at present constituted, there are irrational elements. The given world seems insufficient; impossible things have

**A rational poetry would exclude much now thought poetical.**

to be imagined, both to extend its limits and to fill in and vivify its texture. Homer has a mythology without which experience would have seemed to him undecipherable; Dante has his allegories and his mock science; Shakespeare has his romanticism; Goethe his symbolic characters and artificial machinery. All this lumber seems to have been somehow necessary to their genius; they could not reach expression in more honest terms. If such indirect expression could be discarded, it would not be missed; but while the mind, for want of a better vocabulary, is reduced to using these symbols, it pours into them a part of its own life and makes them beautiful. Their loss is a real blow, while the incapacity that called for them endures; and the soul seems to be crippled by losing its crutches.

There are certain adaptations and abbreviations of reality which thought can never outgrow. Thought is representative; it enriches each soul and each moment with premonitions of surrounding existences. If discourse is to be significant it must transfer to its territory and reduce to its scale whatever objects it deals with: in other words, thought has a point of view and cannot see the world except in perspective. This point of view is not, for reason, locally or naturally determined; sense alone is limited in that material fashion, being seated in the body and looking thence centrifugally upon things in so far as they come into dynamic relations with that body. Intelligence, on the contrary, sallies from that physical stronghold and consists precisely in shifting and universalising the point of view, neutralising all local, temporal, or personal conditions. Yet intelligence, notwithstanding, has its own centre and point of origin, not explicitly in space or in a natural body, but in some specific interest or moral aim. It translates animal life into moral endeavour, and what figured in the first as a local existence figures in the second as a specific good. Reason accordingly has its essential bias, and looks at things as they affect the particular form of life which reason expresses; and though all reality should be ultimately swept by the eye of reason, the whole would still be surveyed by a particular method, from a particular starting-point, for a particular end; nor would it take much shrewdness to perceive that this nucleus for discourse and estimation, this ideal life, corresponds in the moral world to that animal body which gave sensuous experience its seat and centre; so that rationality is nothing but the ideal function or aspect of natural life. Reason is universal in its outlook and in its sympathies: it

**All apperception  
modifies its object.**

is the faculty of changing places ideally and representing alien points of view; but this very self-transcendence manifests a certain special method in life, an equilibrium which a far-sighted being is able to establish between itself and its comprehended conditions. Reason remains to the end essentially human and, in its momentary actuality, necessarily personal.

We have here an essential condition of discourse which renders it at bottom poetical. Selection and applicability govern all thinking, and govern it in the interests of the soul. Reason is itself a specific medium; so that prose can never attain that perfect transparency and mere utility which we were attributing to it. We should not wish to know "things in themselves," even if we were able. What it concerns us to know about them is merely the service or injury they are able to do us, and in what fashion they can affect our lives. To know this would be, in so far, truly to know them; but it would be to know them through our own faculties and through their supposed effects; it would be to know them by their appearance. A singular proof of the frivolous way in which philosophers often proceed, when they think they are particularly profound, is seen in this puzzle, on which they solemnly ask us to fix our thoughts: How is it possible to know reality, if all we can attain in experience is but appearance? The meaning of knowledge, which is an intellectual and living thing, is here forgotten, and the notion of sensation, or bodily possession, is substituted for it; so what we are really asked to consider is how, had we no understanding, we should be able to understand what we endure. It is by conceiving what we endure to be the appearance of something beyond us, that we reach knowledge that something exists beyond us, and that it plays in respect to us a determinate rôle. There could be no knowledge of reality if what conveyed that knowledge were not felt to be appearance; nor can a medium of knowledge better than appearance be by any possibility conceived. To have such appearances is what makes realities knowable. Knowledge transcends sensation by relating it to other sensation, and thereby rising to a supersensuous plane, the plane of principles and causes by which sensibles are identified in character and distributed in existence. These principles and causes are what we call the intelligible or the real world; and the sensations, when they have been so interpreted and underpinned, are what we call experience.

**Reason has its own  
bias and method.**

If a poet could clarify the myths he begins with, so as to reach ultimate scientific notions of nature and life, he would still be dealing with vivid feeling and with its imaginative expression. The prosaic landscape before him would still be a work of art, painted on the human brain by human reason. If he found that landscape uninteresting, it would be because he was not really interested in life; if he found it dull and unpoetical, he would be manifesting his small capacity and childish whims. Tragic, fatal, intractable, he might well feel that the truth was; but these qualities have never been absent from that half-mythical world through which poets, for want of a rational education, have hitherto wandered. A rational poet's vision would have the same moral functions which myth was asked to fulfil, and fulfilled so treacherously; it would employ the same ideal faculties which myth expressed in a confused and hasty fashion. More detail would have been added, and more variety in interpretation. To deal with so great an object, and retain his mastery over it, a poet would doubtless need a robust genius. If he possessed it, and in transmuting all existence falsified nothing, giving that picture of everything which human experience in the end would have drawn, he would achieve an ideal result. In prompting mankind to imagine, he would be helping them to live. His poetry, without ceasing to be a fiction in its method and ideality, would be an ultimate truth in its practical scope. It would present in graphic images the total efficacy of real things. Such a poetry would be more deeply rooted in human experience than is any casual fancy, and therefore more appealing to the heart. Such a poetry would represent more thoroughly than any formula the concrete burden of experience; it would become the most trustworthy of companions. The images it had worked out would confront human passion more intelligibly than does the world as at present conceived, with its mechanism half ignored and its ideality half invented; they would represent vividly the uses of nature, and thereby make all natural situations seem so many incentives to art.

**Rational poetry would envelop exact knowledge in ultimate emotions.**

Rational poetry is not wholly unknown. When Homer mentions an object, how does he render it poetical? First, doubtless, by the euphony of its name or the sensuous glow of some epithet coupled with it. Sometimes, however, even this ornamental epithet is not merely sensuous; it is very likely a patronymic, the name of some region or some mythical ancestor. In

**An illustration.**

other words, it is a signal for widening our view and for conceiving the object, not only vividly and with pause, but in an adequate historic setting. Macbeth tells us that his dagger was “unmannerly breeched in gore.” Achilles would not have amused himself with such a metaphor, even if breeches had existed in his day, but would rather have told us whose blood, on other occasions, had stained the same blade, and perhaps what father or mother had grieved for the slaughtered hero, or what brave children remained to continue his race. Shakespeare’s phrase is ingenious and fanciful; it dazzles for a moment, but in the end it seems violent and crude. What Homer would have said, on the contrary, being simple and true, might have grown, as we dwelt upon it, always more noble, pathetic, and poetical. Shakespeare too, beneath his occasional absurdities of plot and diction, ennobles his stage with actual history, with life painted to the quick, with genuine human characters, politics, and wisdom; and surely these are not the elements that do least credit to his genius. In every poet, indeed, there is some fidelity to nature, mixed with that irrelevant false fancy with which poetry is sometimes identified; and the degree in which a poet’s imagination dominates reality is, in the end, the exact measure of his importance and dignity.

Before prosaic objects are descried, the volume and richness needful for poetry lie in a blurred and undigested chaos; but after the common world has emerged and has called on prose to describe it, the same volume and richness may be recovered; and a new and clarified poetry may arise through synthesis. Scope is a better thing than suggestion, and more truly poetical. It has expressed what suggestion pointed to and felt in the bulk: it possesses what was yearned for. A real thing, when all its pertinent natural associates are discerned, touches wonder, pathos, and beauty on every side; the rational poet is one who, without feigning anything unreal, perceives these momentous ties, and presents his subject loaded with its whole fate, missing no source of worth which is in it, no ideal influence which it may have. Homer remains, perhaps, the greatest master in this art. The world he glorified by showing in how many ways it could serve reason and beauty was but a simple world, and an equal genius in these days might be distracted by the Babel about him, and be driven, as poets now are, into incidental dreams. Yet the ideal of mastery and idealisation remains the same, if any one could only attain it: mastery, to see

**Volume can be found in scope better than in suggestion.**

things as they are and dare to describe them ingenuously; idealisation, to select from this reality what is pertinent to ultimate interests and can speak eloquently to the soul.



## CHAPTER VII

### PLASTIC CONSTRUCTION

We have seen how arts founded on exercise and automatic self-expression develop into music, poetry, and prose. By an indirect approach they come to represent outer conditions, till they are interwoven in a life which has in some measure gone out to meet its opportunities and learned to turn them to an ideal use.

**Automatic expression often leaves traces in the outer world.**

We have now to see how man's reactive habits pass simultaneously into art in a wholly different region. Spontaneous expression, such as song, comes when internal growth in an animal system vents itself, as it were, by the way. At the same time animal economy has playful manifestations concerned with outer things, such as burrowing or collecting objects. These practices are not less spontaneous than the others, and no less expressive; but they seem more external because the traces they leave on the environment are more clearly marked.

To change an object is the surest and most glorious way of changing a perception. A shift in posture may relieve the body, and in that way satisfy, but the new attitude is itself unstable. Its pleasantness, like its existence, is transient, and scarcely is a movement executed when both its occasion and its charm are forgotten. Self-expression by exercise, in spite of its pronounced automatism, is therefore something comparatively passive and inglorious. A man has hardly *done* anything when he has laughed or yawned. Even the inspired poet retains something of this passivity: his work is not his, but that of a restless, irresponsible spirit passing through him, and hypnotising him for its own ends. Of the result he has no profit, no glory, and little understanding. So the mystic also positively gloats on his own nothingness, and puts his whole genuine being in a fancied instrumentality and subordination to something else. Far more virile and noble is the sense of having actually done something, and left at least the temporary stamp of one's

special will on the world. To chop a stick, to catch a fly, to pile a heap of sand, is a satisfying action; for the sand stays for a while in its novel arrangement, proclaiming to the surrounding level that we have made it our instrument, while the fly will never stir nor the stick grow together again in all eternity. If the impulse that has thus left its indelible mark on things is constant in our own bosom, the world will have been permanently improved and humanised by our action. Nature cannot but be more favourable to those ideas which have once found an efficacious champion.

Plastic impulses find in this way an immediate sanction in the sense of victory and dominion which they carry with them; it is so evident a proof of power in ourselves to see things and animals bent out of their habitual form and obedient instead to our idea. But a far weightier sanction immediately follows. Man depends on things for his experience, yet by automatic action he changes these very things so that it becomes possible that by his action he should promote his welfare. He may, of course, no less readily precipitate his ruin. The animal is more subject to vicissitudes than the plant, which makes no effort to escape them or to give chase to what it feeds upon. The greater perils of action, however, are in animals covered partly by fertility, partly by adaptability, partly by success. The mere possibility of success, in a world governed by natural selection, is an earnest of progress. Sometimes, in impressing the environment, a man will improve it: which is merely to say that a change may sometimes fortify the impulse which brought it about. As soon as this retroaction is perceived and the act is done with knowledge of its ensuing benefits, plastic impulse becomes art, and the world begins actually to change in obedience to reason.

One respect, for instance, in which man depends on things is for the æsthetic quality of his perceptions. If he happens, by a twist of the hand, to turn a flowering branch into a wreath, thereby making it more interesting, he will have discovered a decorative art and initiated himself auspiciously into the practice of it. Experimentation may follow, and whenever the new form given to the object improves it—*i. e.*, increases its interest for the eye—the experimenter will triumph and will congratulate himself on his genius. The garland so arranged will be said to express the taste it satisfies; insight and reason will be mythically thought to have guided the work by which they are sustained in being. It is no small harmony, however, that they should be sustained

by it. The consonances man introduces into nature will follow him wherever he goes. It will no longer be necessary that nature should supply them spontaneously, by a rare adventitious harmony with his demands. His new habit will habitually rearrange her chance arrangements, and his path will be marked by the beauties he has strewn it with. So long as the same plastic impulse continues operative it will be accompanied by knowledge and criticism of its happy results. Self-criticism, being a second incipient artistic impulse, contrasting itself with the one which a work embodies, may to some extent modify the next performance. If life is drawn largely into this deepening channel, physical proficiency and its ideal sanctions will develop more or less harmoniously into what is called a school of art.

The first felt utilities by which plastic instinct is sanctioned are of course not distinctly æsthetic, much less distinctly practical; they are magical. A stone cut into some human or animal semblance fascinates the savage eye much more than would a useful tool or a beautiful idol. The man wonders at his own work, and petrifies the miracle of his art into miraculous properties in its product. Primitive art is incredibly conservative; its first creations, having once attracted attention, monopolise it henceforth and nothing else will be trusted to work the miracle. It is a sign of stupidity in general to stick to physical objects and given forms apart from their ideal functions, as when a child cries for a broken doll, even if a new and better one is at hand to replace it. Inert associations establish themselves, in such a case, with that part of a thing which is irrelevant to its value—its material substance or perhaps its name. Art can make no progress in such a situation. A man remains incorrigibly unhappy and perplexed, cowed, and helpless, because not intelligent enough to readjust his actions; his idol must be the self-same hereditary stock, or at least it must have the old sanctified rigidity and stare. Plastic impulse, as yet sporadic, is overwhelmed by a brute idolatrous awe at mere existence and actuality. What is, what has always been, what chance has associated with one person, alone seems acceptable or conceivable.

Idolatry is by no means incident to art; art, on the contrary, is a release from idolatry. A cloud, an animal, a spring, a stone, or the whole heaven, will serve the pure idolater's purpose to perfection; these things have existence and a certain hypnotic power, so that he may make them a focus for his

**Magic authority  
of man's first  
creations.**

**Art brings  
relief from  
idolatry.**

dazed contemplation. When the mind takes to generalities it finds the same fascination in Being or in the Absolute, something it needs no art to discover. The more indeterminate, immediate, and unutterable the idol is, the better it induces panic self-contraction and a reduction of all discourse to the infinite intensity of zero. When idolaters pass from trying to evoke the Absolutely Existent to apostrophising the sun or an ithyphallic bull they have made an immense progress in art and religion, for now their idols represent some specific and beneficent function in nature, something propitious to ideal life and to its determinate expression. Isaiah is very scornful of idols made with hands, because they have no physical energy. He forgets that perhaps they represent something, and so have a spiritual dignity which things living and powerful never have unless they too become representative and express some ideal. Isaiah's conception of Jehovah, for instance, is itself a poetic image, the work of man's brain; and the innocent worship of it would not be idolatry, if that conception represented something friendly to human happiness and to human art. The question merely is whether the sculptor's image or the prophet's stands for the greater interest and is a more adequate symbol for the good. The noblest art will be the one, whether plastic or literary or dialectical, which creates figments most truly representative of what is momentous in human life. Similarly the least idolatrous religion would be the one which used the most perfect art, and most successfully abstracted the good from the real.

Conservatism rules also in those manufactures which are tributary to architecture and the smaller plastic arts. Utility makes small headway against custom, not only when custom has become religion, but even when it remains inert and without mythical sanction.

**Inertia in technique.**

To admit or trust anything new is to overcome that inertia which is a general law in the brain no less than elsewhere, and which may be distinguished in reflection into a technical and a social conservatism. Technical conservatism appears, for instance, in a man's handwriting, which is so seldom improved, even when admitted, perhaps, to be execrable. Every artist has his tricks of execution, every school its hereditary, irrational processes. These refractory habits are to blame for the rare and inimitable quality of genius; they impose excellence on one man and refuse it to a million. A happy physiological structure, by creating a mannerism under the special circumstances favourable to expression, may lift a man, per-

haps inferior in intelligence, to heights which no insight can attain with inferior organs. As a voice is necessary for singing, so a certain quickness of eye and hand is needed for good execution in the plastic arts. The same principle goes deeper. Conception and imagination are themselves automatic and run in grooves, so that only certain forms in certain combinations will ever suggest themselves to a given designer. Every writer's style, too, however varied within limits, is single and monotonous compared with the ideal possibilities of expression. Genius at every moment is confined to the idiom it is creating.

Social inertia is due to the same causes working in the community at large. The fancy, for instance, of building churches in the shape of a cross has largely determined Christian architecture. Builders were prevented by a foregone suggestion in themselves and by their patrons' demands from conceiving any alternative to that convention. Early pottery, they say, imitates wicker-work, and painted landscape was for ages not allowed to exist without figures, although even the old masters show plainly enough in their backgrounds that they could love landscape for its own sake. When one link with humanity has been rendered explicit and familiar, people assume that by no other means can humanity be touched at all; even if at the same time their own heart is expanding to the highest raptures in a quite different region. The severer Greeks reprobated music without words; Saint Augustine complained of chants that rendered the sacred text unintelligible; the Puritans regarded elaborate music as diabolical, little knowing how soon some of their descendants would find religion in nothing else. A stupid convention still looks on material and mathematical processes as somehow distressing and ugly, and systems of philosophy, artificially mechanical, are invented to try to explain natural mechanism away; whereas in no region can the spirit feel so much at home as among natural causes, or realise so well its universal affinities, or so safely enlarge its happiness. Mechanism is the source of beauty. It is not necessary to look so high as the stars to perceive this truth: the action of an animal's limbs or the movement of a waterfall will prove it to any one who has eyes and can shake himself loose from verbal prejudices, those débris of old perceptions which choke all fresh perception in the soul. Irrational hopes, irrational shames, irrational decencies, make man's chief desolation. A slight knocking of fools' heads together might be enough to break up the ossifications there and start the blood coursing again through pos-

**Inertia in  
appreciation.**

sible channels. Art has an infinite range; nothing shifts so easily as taste and yet nothing so persistently avoids the directions in which it might find most satisfaction.

Since construction grows rational slowly and by indirect pressure, we may expect that its most superficial merits will be the first appreciated.

Adventitious  
effects  
appreciated  
first.

Ultimate beauty in a building would consist, of course, in responding simultaneously to all the human faculties affected: to the eye, by the building's size, form, and colour of the edifice; to the imagination, by its fitness and ideal expression.

Of all grounds for admiration those most readily seized are size, elaboration, splendour of materials, and difficulties or cost involved. Having built or dug in the conventional way a man may hang before his door some trophy of battle or the chase, bearing witness to his prowess; just as people now, not thinking of making their rooms beautiful, fill them with photographs of friends or places they have known, to suggest and reburnish in their minds their interesting personal history, which even they, unstimulated, might tend to forget. That dwelling will seem best adorned which contains most adventitious objects; bare and ugly will be whatever is not concealed by something else. Again, a barbarous architect, without changing his model, may build in a more precious material; and his work will be admired for the evidence it furnishes of wealth and wilfulness. As a community grows luxurious and becomes accustomed to such display, it may come to seem strange and hideous to see a wooden plate or a pewter spoon. A beautiful house will need to be in marble and the sight of plebeian brick will banish all satisfaction.

Less irrational, and therefore less vulgar, is the wonder aroused by great bulk or difficulty in the work. Exertions, to produce a great result, even if it be material, must be allied to perseverance and intelligent direction. Roman bridges and aqueducts, for instance, gain a profound emotional power when we see in their monotonous arches a symbol of the mightiest enterprise in history, and in their decay an evidence of its failure. Curiosity is satisfied, historic imagination is stimulated, tragic reflection is called forth. We cannot refuse admiration to a work so full of mind, even if no great plastic beauty happens to distinguish it. It is at any rate beautiful enough, like the sea or the skeleton of a mountain. We may rely on the life it has made possible to add more positive charms and clothe it with imaginative functions. Modern engineering works often have a similar value; the force and

intelligence they express merge in an æsthetic essence, and the place they hold in a portentous civilisation lends them an almost epic dignity. New York, since it took to doing business in towers, has become interesting to look at from the sea; nor is it possible to walk through the overshadowed streets without feeling a pleasing wonder. A city, when enough people swarm in it, is as fascinating as an ant-hill, and its buildings, whatever other charms they may have, are at least as curious and delightful as sea-shells or birds' nests. The purpose of improvements in modern structures may be economic, just as the purpose of castles was military; but both may incidentally please the contemplative mind by their huge forms and human associations.

Of the two approaches which barbaric architecture makes to beauty—one through ornamentation and the other through mass—the latter is in general the more successful. An engineer fights with nature hand to hand; he is less easily extravagant than a decorator; he can hardly ever afford to be absurd. He becomes accordingly more rapidly civilised and his work acquires, in spite of itself, more rationality and a more permanent charm. A self-sustaining structure, in art as in life, is the only possible basis for a vital ideal. When the framework is determined, when it is tested by trial and found to stand and serve, it will gradually ingratiate itself with the observer; affinities it may have in his memory or apperceptive habits will come to light; they will help him to assimilate the new vision and will define its æsthetic character. Whatever beauty its lines may have will become a permanent possession and whatever beauties they exclude will be rejected by a faithful artist, no matter how sorely at first they may tempt him. Not that these excluded beauties would not be really beautiful; like fashions, they would truly please in their day and very likely would contain certain absolute excellences of form or feeling which an attentive eye could enjoy at any time. Yet if appended to a structure they have no function in, these excellences will hardly impose themselves on the next builder. Being adventitious they will remain optional, and since fancy is quick, and exotic beauties are many, there will be no end to the variations, in endless directions, which art will undergo. Caprice will follow caprice and no style will be developed.

**Approach  
to beauty  
through  
useful  
structure.**

A settled style is perhaps in itself no desideratum. A city that should be a bazaar of all possible architectures, adding a multitude of new inventions to samples of every historical style, might have a cer-

tain interest; yet carnival can hardly be enjoyed all the year round and there is a certain latent hideousness in masquerades in spite of their glitter. Not only are the effects juxtaposed incongruous, but each apart is usually shallow and absurd. A perruque cannot bring back courtly manners, and a style of architecture, when revived, is never quite genuine; adaptations have to be introduced and every adaptation, the bolder it is, runs the greater risk of being extravagant. Nothing is more pitiable than the attempts people make, who think they have an exquisite sensibility, to live in a house all of one period. The connoisseur, like an uncritical philosopher, boasts to have patched his dwelling perfectly together, but he has forgotten himself, its egregious inhabitant. Nor is he merely a blot in his own composition; his presence secretly infects and denaturalises everything in it. Ridiculous himself in such a setting, he makes it ridiculous too by his æsthetic pose and appreciations; for the objects he has collected or reproduced were once used and prized in all honesty, when life and inevitable tradition had brought them forth, while now they are studied and exhibited, relics of a dead past and evidences of a dead present. Historic remains and restorations might well be used as one uses historic knowledge, to serve some living interest and equip the mind for the undertakings of the hour. An artist may visit a museum but only a pedant can live there. Ideas that have long been used may be used still, if they remain ideas and have not been congealed into memories. Incorporated into a design that calls for them, traditional forms cease to be incongruous, as words that still have a felt meaning may be old without being obsolete. All depends on men subserving an actual ideal and having so firm and genuine an appreciation of the past as to distinguish at once what is still serviceable in it from what is already ghostly and dead.

An artist may be kept true to his style either by ignorance of all others or by love of his own. This fidelity is a condition of progress. When he has learned to appreciate whatever is æsthetically appreciable in his problem, he can go on to refine his construction, to ennoble, and finally to decorate it. As fish, flesh, and fowl have specific forms, each more or less beautiful and adorned, so every necessary structure has its specific character and its essential associations. Taking his cue from these, an artist may experiment freely; he may emphasise the structure in the classic manner and turn its lines into ornament, adding only

**Failure of adapted styles.**

**Not all structure beautiful, nor all beauty structural.**

what may help to complete and unite its suggestions. This puritanism in design is rightly commended, but its opposite may be admirable too. We may admit that nudity is the right garment for the gods, but it would hardly serve the interests of beauty to legislate that all mortals should always go naked. The veil that conceals natural imperfections may have a perfection of its own. Maxims in art are pernicious; beauty is here the only commandment. And beauty is a free natural gift. When it has appeared, we may perceive that its influence is rational, since it both expresses and fosters a harmony of impressions and impulses in the soul; but to take any mechanism whatever, and merely because it is actual or necessary to insist that it is worth exhibiting, and that by divine decree it shall be pronounced beautiful, is to be quite at sea in moral philosophy.

Beauty is adventitious, occasional, incidental, in human products no less than in nature. Works of art are automatic figments which nature fashions through man. It is impossible they should be wholly beautiful, as it is impossible that they should offer no foothold or seed-plot for beauty at all. Beauty is everywhere potential and in a way pervasive because existence itself presupposes a modicum of harmony, first within the thing and then between the thing and its environment. Of this environment the observer's senses are in this case an important part. Man can with difficulty maintain senses quite out of key with the stimuli furnished by the outer world. They would then be useless burdens to his organism. On the other side, even artificial structures must be somehow geometrical or proportional, because only such structures hold physically together. Objects that are to be esteemed by man must further possess or acquire some function in his economy; otherwise they would not be noticed nor be so defined as to be recognisable. Out of these physical necessities beauty may grow; but an adjustment must first take place between the material stimulus and the sense it affects. Beauty is something spiritual and, being such, it rests not on the material constitution of each existence taken apart, but on their conspiring ideally together, so that each furthers the other's endeavour. Structure by itself is no more beautiful than existence by itself is good. They are only potentialities or conditions of excellence.

An architect, when his main structure is uninteresting, may have recourse to a subsidiary construction. The façade, or a part of it, or the interior may still have a natural form that lends itself to elaboration. This beautiful feature may be developed so as to ignore or even con-

ceal the rest; then the visible portion may be entirely beautiful, like the ideal human figure, though no pledges be given concerning the anatomy within. Many an Italian palace has a false front in itself magnificent. We may chance to observe, however, that it overtops its backing, perhaps an amorphous rambling pile in quite another material. What we admire is not so much a façade as a triumphal gateway, set up in front of the house to be its ambassador to the world, wearing decidedly richer apparel than its master can afford at home. This was not vanity in the Italians so much as civility to the public, to whose taste this flattering embassy was addressed. However our moral sense may judge the matter, it is clear that two separate monuments occupied the architect in such cases, if indeed inside and outside were actually designed by the same hand. Structure may appear in each independently and may be frankly enough expressed. The most beautiful façades, even if independent of their building, are buildings themselves, and since their construction is decorative there is the greater likelihood that their decoration should be structural.

In relation to the house, however, the façade in such an extreme case would be an abstract ornament; and so, though the ornament be structural within its own lines, we have reverted to the style of building where construction is one thing and decoration another. Applied ornament has an indefinite range and there would be little profit in reasoning about it. Philosophy can do little more at this point than expose the fallacies into which dogmatic criticism is apt to fall. Everything is true decoration which truly adorns, and everything adorns which enriches the impression and pleasantly entertains the eye. There is a decorative impulse as well as a sense for decoration. As I sit idle my stick makes meaningless marks upon the sand; or (what is nearer to the usual origin of ornament) I make a design out of somebody's initials, or symbolise fantastically something lying in my thoughts. We place also one thing upon another, the better to see and to think of two things at once.

To love decoration is to enjoy synthesis: in other words, it is to have hungry senses and unused powers of attention. This hunger, when it cannot well be fed by recollecting things past, relishes a profusion of things simultaneous. Nothing is so much respected by unintelligent people as elaboration and complexity. They are simply dazed and overawed at seeing at once

**Structures  
designed for  
display.**

**Appeal made  
by decoration.**

so much more than they can master. To overwhelm the senses is, for them, the only way of filling the mind. It takes cultivation to appreciate in art, as in philosophy, the consummate value of what is simple and finite, because it has found its pure function and ultimate import in the world. What is just, what is delicately and silently adjusted to its special office, and thereby in truth to all ultimate issues, seems to the vulgar something obvious and poor. What astonishes them is the crude and paradoxical jumble of a thousand suggestions in a single view. As the mystic yearns for an infinitely glutted consciousness that feels everything at once and is not put to the inconvenience of any longer thinking or imagining, so the barbarian craves the assault of a myriad sensations together, and feels replete and comfortable when a sort of infinite is poured into him without ideal mediation. As ideal mediation is another name for intelligence, so it is the condition of elegance. Intelligence and elegance naturally exist together, since they both spring from a subtle sense for absent and eventual processes. They are sustained by experience, by nicety in foretaste and selection. Before ideality, however, is developed, volume and variety must be given bodily or they cannot be given at all. At that earlier stage a furious ornamentation is the chief vehicle for beauty.

That the ornate may be very beautiful, that in fact what is to be completely beautiful needs to be somehow rich, is a fact of experience which further justifies the above analysis. For sensation is the matter of ideas; all representation is such only in its function; in its existence it remains mere feeling. Decoration, by stimulating the senses, not only brings a primary satisfaction with it, independent of any that may supervene, but it furnishes an element of effect which no higher beauty can ever render unwelcome or inappropriate, since any higher beauty, in moving the mind, must give it a certain sensuous and emotional colouring. Decoration is accordingly an independent art, to be practised for its own sake, in obedience to elementary plastic instincts. It is fundamental in design, for everything structural or significant produces in the first instance some sensuous impression and figures as a spot or pattern in the field of vision. The fortunate architect is he who has, for structural skeleton in his work, a form in itself decorative and beautiful, who can carry it out in a beautiful material, and who finally is suffered to add so much decoration as the eye may take in with pleasure, without losing the expression and lucidity of the whole.

**Its natural rights.**

It is impossible, however, to imagine beforehand what these elements should be or how to combine them. The problem must exist before its solution can be found. The forms of good taste and beauty which a man can think of or esteem are limited by the scope of his previous experience. It would be impossible to foresee or desire a beauty which had not somehow grown up of itself and been recognised receptively. A satisfaction cannot be conceived ideally when neither its organ nor its occasion has as yet arisen. That ideal conception, to exist, would have to bring both into play. The fine arts are butter to man's daily bread; there is no conceiving or creating them except as they spring out of social exigencies. Their types are imposed by utility: their ornamentation betrays the tradition that happens to envelop and diversify them; their expression and dignity are borrowed from the company they keep in the world.

The Greek temple, for instance, if we imagine it in its glory, with all its colour and furniture, was a type of human art at its best, where decoration, without in the least restricting itself, took naturally an exquisitely subordinate and pervasive form: each detail had its own splendour and refinement, yet kept its place in the whole. Structure and decoration were alike traditional and imposed by ulterior practical or religious purposes; yet, by good fortune and by grace of that rationality which unified Greek life, they fell together easily into a harmony such as imagination could never have devised had it been invited to decree pleasure-domes for non-existent beings. Had the Greek gods been hideous, their images and fable could not so readily have beautified the place where they were honoured; and had the structural theme and uses of the temple been more complicated, they would not have lent themselves so well to decoration without being submerged beneath it.

In some ways the ideal Gothic church attained a similar perfection, because there too the structure remained lucid and predominant, while it was enriched by many necessary appointments—altars, stalls, screens, chantries—which, while really the *raison d'être* of the whole edifice, æsthetically regarded, served for its ornaments. It may be doubted, however, whether Gothic construction was well grounded enough in utility to be a sound and permanent basis for beauty; and the extreme instability of Gothic style, the feverish inconstancy of architects straining after effects never, apparently, satisfactory when achieved, shows that something was

**Its alliance  
with structure  
in Greek  
architecture.**

**Relations of  
the two in  
Gothic art.**

wrong and artificial in the situation. The structure, in becoming an ornament, ceased to be anything else, and could be discarded by any one whose fancy preferred a different image.

For this reason a building like the cathedral of Amiens, where a structural system is put through consistently, is far from representing mediæval art in its full and ideal essence; it is rather an incidental achievement, a sport in which an adventitious interest is, for a moment, emphasised overwhelmingly. Intelligence here comes to the fore, and a sort of mathematical virtuosity: but it was not mathematical virtuosity nor even intelligence to which, in Christian art, the leading rôle properly belonged. What structural elucidation did for church architecture was much like what scholastic elucidation did for church dogma: it insinuated a logic into the traditional edifice which was far from representing its soul or its genuine value. The dialectic introduced might be admirable in itself, in its lay and abstruse rationality; but it could not be applied to the poetic material in hand without rendering it absurd and sterile. The given problem was scientifically carried out, but the given problem was itself fantastic. To vault at such heights and to prop that vault with external buttresses was a gratuitous undertaking. The result was indeed interesting, the ingenuity and method exhibited were masterly in their way; yet the result was not proportionate in beauty to the effort required; it was after all a technical and a vain triumph.

The true magic of that very architecture lay not in its intelligible structure but in the bewildering incidental effects which that structure permitted. The part in such churches is better than the symmetrical whole; often incompleteness and accretions alone give grace or expression to the monument. A cross vista where all is wonder, a side chapel where all is peace, strike the key-note here; not that punctilious and wooden repetition of props and arches, as a builder's model might boast to exhibit them. Perhaps the most beautiful Gothic interiors are those without aisles, if what we are considering is their proportion and majesty; elsewhere the structure, if perceived at all, is too artificial and strange to be perceived intuitively and to have the glow of a genuine beauty. There is an over-ingenuous mechanism, redeemed by its colour and the thousand intervening objects, when these have not been swept away. Glazed and painted as Gothic churches were meant to be, they were no doubt exceedingly gorgeous. When we admire their structural scheme we are perhaps

The result here romantic.

nursing an illusion like that which sentimental classicists once cherished when they talked about the purity of white marble statues and the ideality of their blank and sightless eyes. What we treat as a supreme quality may have been a mere means to mediæval builders, and a mechanical expedient: their simple hearts were set on making their churches, for God's glory and their own, as large, as high, and as rich as possible. After all, an uninterrupted tradition attached them to Byzantium; and it was the sudden passion for stained glass and the goldsmith's love of intricate fineness—which the Saracens also had shown—that carried them in a century from Romanesque to flamboyant. The structure was but the inevitable underpinning for the desired display. If these sanctuaries, in their spoliation and ruin, now show us their admirable bones, we should thank nature for that rational skeleton, imposed by material conditions on an art which in its life-time was goaded on only by a pious and local emulation, and wished at all costs to be sumptuous and astonishing.

It was rather in another direction that groping mediæval art reached its most congenial triumphs. That was an age, so to speak, of epidemic privacy; social contagion was irresistible, yet it served only to make each man's life no less hard, narrow, and visionary than that of every one else. Like bees in a hive, each soul worked in its separate cell by the same impulse as every other. Each was absorbed in saving itself only, but according to a universal prescription. This isolation in unanimity appears in those patient and childlike artists who copied each his leaf or flower, or imagined each his curious angels and devils, taking what was told of them so much to heart that his rendering became deeply individual. The lamp of sacrifice—or perhaps rather of ignorance—burned in every workshop; much labour was wasted in forgetfulness of the function which the work was to perform, yet a certain pathos and expression was infused into the detail, on which all invention and pride had to be lavished. Carvings and statues at impossible elevations, minute symbols hidden in corners, the choice for architectural ornament of animal and vegetable forms, copied as attentively and quaintly as possible—all this shows how abstractedly the artist surrendered himself to the given task. He dedicated his genius like the widow's mite, and left the universal composition to Providence.

Nor was this humility, on another side, wholly pious and sacrificial. The Middle Ages were, in their way, merry, sturdy, and mischie-

vous. A fresh breath, as of convalescence, breathed through their misery. Never was spring so green and lovely as when men greeted it in a cloistered garden, with hearts quite empty and clean, only half-awakened from a long trance of despair. It mattered little at such a moment where a work was to figure or whether any one should ever enjoy it. The pleasure and the function lay here, in this private revelation, in this playful dialogue between a bit of nature and a passing mood. When a Greek workman cut a volute or a moulding, he was not asked to be a poet; he was merely a scribe, writing out what some master had composed before him. The spirit of his art, if that was called forth consciously at all, could be nothing short of intelligence. Those lines and none other, he would say to himself, are requisite and sufficient: to do less would be unskilful, to do more would be perverse. But the mediæval craftsman was irresponsible in his earnestness. The whole did not concern him, for the whole was providential and therefore, to the artist, irrelevant. He was only responsible inwardly, to his casual inspiration, to his individual model, and his allotted block of stone. With these he carried on, as it were, an ingenuous dialectic, asking them questions by a blow of the hammer, and gathering their oracular answers experimentally from the result. Art, like salvation, proceeded by a series of little miracles; it was a blind work, half stubborn patience, half unmerited grace. If the product was destined to fill a niche in the celestial edifice, that was God's business and might be left to him: what concerned the sculptor was to-day's labour and joy, with the shrewd wisdom they might bring after them.

Gothic ornament was accordingly more than ornament; it was sculpture. To the architect sculpture and painting are only means of variegating a surface; light and shade, depth and elaboration, are thereby secured and aid him in distributing his masses. For this reason geometrical or highly conventionalised ornament is all the architect requires. If his decorators furnish more, if they insist on copying natural forms or illustrating history, that is their own affair. Their humanity will doubtless give them, as representative artists, a new claim on human regard, and the building they enrich in their pictorial fashion will gain a new charm, just as it would gain by historic associations or by the smell of incense clinging to its walls. When the arts superpose their effects the total impression belongs to none of them in particular; it is imaginative merely or in the broadest sense poetical. So the monumental function

**Representation  
introduced.**

of Greek sculpture, and the interpretations it gave to national myths, made every temple a storehouse of poetic memories. In the same way every great cathedral became a pious story-book. Construction, by admitting applied decoration, offers a splendid basis and background for representative art. It is in their decorative function that construction and representation meet; they are able to conspire in one ideal effect by virtue of the common appeal which they unwittingly make to the senses. If construction were not decorative it could never ally itself imaginatively to decoration; and decoration in turn would never be willingly representative if the forms which illustration requires were not decorative in themselves.

Illustration has nevertheless an intellectual function by which it diverges altogether from decoration and even, in the narrowest sense of the word, from art: for the essence of illustration lies neither in use nor in beauty. The illustrator's impulse is to reproduce and describe given objects. He wishes in the first place to force observers—overlooking all logical scruples—to call his work by the name of its subject-matter; and then he wishes to inform them further, through his representation, and to teach them to apprehend the real object as, in its natural existence, it might never have been apprehended. His first task is to translate the object faithfully into his special medium; his second task, somewhat more ambitious, is so to penetrate into the object during that process of translation that this translation may become at the same time analytic and imaginative, in that it signalises the object's structure and emphasises its ideal suggestions. In such reproduction both hand and mind are called upon to construct and build up a new apparition; but here construction has ceased to be chiefly decorative or absolute in order to become representative. The æsthetic element in art has begun to recede before the intellectual; and sensuous effects, while of course retained and still studied, seem to be impressed into the service of ideas.

**Transition to illustration.**

## CHAPTER VIII

### PLASTIC REPRESENTATION

Imitation is a fertile principle in the Life of Reason. We have seen that it furnishes the only rational sanction for belief in any fellow mind; now we shall see how it creates the most glorious and interesting of plastic arts. The machinery of imitation is obscure but its prevalence is obvious, and even in the present rudimentary state of human biology we may perhaps divine some of its general features. In a motor image the mind represents prophetically what the body is about to execute: but all images are more or less motor, so that no idea, apparently, can occupy the mind unless the body has received some impulse to enact the same. The plastic instinct to reproduce what is seen is therefore simply an uninterrupted and adequate seeing; these two phenomena, separable logically and divided in Cartesian psychology by an artificial chasm, are inseparable in existence and are, for natural history, two parts of the same event. That an image should exist for consciousness is, abstractly regarded, a fact which neither involves motion nor constitutes knowledge; but that natural relation to ulterior events which endows that image with a cognitive function identifies it at the same time with the motor impulse which accompanies the idea. If the image involved no bodily attitude and prophesied no action it would refer to no eventual existence and would have no practical meaning. Even if it *meant* to refer to something ulterior it would, under those circumstances, miss its aim, seeing that no natural relation connected it with any object which could support or verify its asseverations. It might *feel* significant, like a dream, but its significance would be vain and not really self-transcendent; for it is in the world of events that logic must find application, if it cares for applicability at all. This needful bond between ideas and the further existences they forebode is not merely a logical postulate, taken on trust because the ideas in themselves

Psychology of  
imitation.

assert it; it is a previous and genetic bond, proper to the soil in which the idea flourishes and a condition of its existence. For the idea expresses unawares a present cerebral event of which the ulterior event consciously looked to is a descendant or an ancestor; so that the ripening of that idea, or its prior history, leads materially to the fact which the idea seeks to represent ideally.

In some such fashion we may come to conceive how imitative art is simply the perfection and fulfilment of sensation. The act of apperception in which a sensation is reflected upon and understood is already an internal reproduction. The object is retraced and gone over in the mind, not without quite perceptible movements in the limbs, which sway, as it were, in sympathy with the object's habit. Presumably this incipient imitation of the object is the physical basis for apperception itself; the stimulus, whatever devious courses it may pursue, reconstitutes itself into an impulse to render the object again, as we acquire the accent which we often hear. This imitation sometimes has the happiest results, in that the animal fights with one that fights, and runs after one that runs away from him. All this happens initially, as we may still observe in ourselves, quite without thought of eventual profit; although if chase leads to contact, and contact stimulates hunger or lust, movements important for preservation will quickly follow. Such eventual utilities, however, like all utilities, are supported by a prodigious gratuitous vitality, and long before a practical or scientific use of sensation is attained its artistic force is in full operation. If art be play, it is only because all life is play in the beginning. Rational adjustments to truth and to benefit supervene only occasionally and at a higher level.

Imitation cannot, of course, result in a literal repetition of the object that suggests it. The copy is secondary; it does not iterate the model by creating a second object on the same plane of reality, but reproduces the form in a new medium and gives it a different function. In these latter circumstances lies the imitative essence of the second image: for one leaf does not imitate another nor is each twin the other's copy. Like sensibility, imitation remodels a given being so that it becomes, in certain formal respects, like another being in its environment. It is a response and an index, by which note is taken of a situation or of its possible developments. When a man involuntarily

**Sustained sensation involves reproduction.**

**Imitative art repeats with intent to repeat, and in a new material.**

imitates other men, he does not become those other persons; he is simply modified by their presence in a manner that allows him to conceive their will and their independent existence, not without growing similar to them in some measure and framing a genuine representation of them in his soul. He enacts what he understands, and his understanding consists precisely in knowing that he is re-enacting something which has its collateral existence elsewhere in nature. An element in the percipient repeats the total movement and tendency of the person perceived. The imitation, though akin to what it imitates, and reproducing it, lies in a different medium, and accordingly has a specific individuality and specific effects. Imitation is far more than similarity, nor does its ideal function lie in bringing a flat and unmeaning similarity about. It has a representative and intellectual value because in reproducing the forms of things it reproduces them in a fresh substance to a new purpose.

If I imitate mankind by following their fashions, I add one to the million and improve nothing: but if I imitate them under proper inhibitions and in the service of my own ends, I really understand them, and, by representing what I do not bodily become, I preserve and enlarge my own being and make it relevant ideally to what it physically depends upon. Assimilation is a way of drifting through the flux or of letting it drift through oneself; representation, on the contrary, is a principle of progress. To grow by accumulating passions and fancies is at best to grow in bulk: it is to become what a colony or a hydra might be. But to make the accretions which time brings to your being representative of what you are not, and do not wish to be, is to grow in dignity. It is to be wise and prepared. It is to survey a universe without ceasing to be a mind.

A product of imitative sensibility is accordingly on a higher plane than the original existences it introduces to one another—the ignorant individual and the unknown world. Imitation in softening the body into physical adjustment stimulates the mind to ideal representation. This is the case even when the stimulus is a contagious influence or habit, though the response may then be slavish and the representation vague. Sheep jumping a wall after their leader doubtless feel that they are not alone; and though their action may have no purpose it probably has a felt sanction and reward. Men also think they invoke an authority when they appeal to the *quod semper et ubique et ab omnibus*, and a conscious

**Imitation leads to adaptation and to knowledge.**

unanimity is a human if not a rational joy. When, however, the stimulus to imitation is not so pervasive and touches chiefly a single sense, when what it arouses is a movement of the hand or eye retracing the object, then the response becomes very definitely cognitive. It constitutes an observation of fact, an acquaintance with a thing's structure amounting to technical knowledge; for such a survey leaves behind it a power to reconstitute the process it involved. It leaves an efficacious idea. In an idle moment, when the information thus acquired need not be put to instant use, the new-born faculty may work itself out spontaneously. The sound heard is repeated, the thing observed is sketched, the event conceived is acted out in pantomime. Then imitation rounds itself out; an uninhibited sensation has become an instinct to keep that sensation alive, and plastic representation has begun.

The secret of representative genius is simple enough. All hangs on intense, exhaustive, rehearsed sensation. To paint is a way of letting vision work; nor should the amateur imagine that while he lacks technical knowledge he can have in his possession all the ideal burden of an art. His reaction will be personal and adventitious, and he will miss the artist's real inspiration and ignore his genuine successes. You may instruct a poet about literature, but his allegiance is to emotion. You may offer the sculptor your comparative observations on style and taste; he may or may not care to listen, but what he knows and loves is the human body. Critics are in this way always one stage behind or beyond the artist; their operation is reflective and his is direct. In transferring to his special medium what he has before him his whole mind is lost in the object; as the marksman, to shoot straight, looks at the mark. How successful the result is, or how appealing to human nature, he judges afterwards, as an outsider might, and usually judges ill; since there is no life less apt to yield a broad understanding for human affairs or even for the residue of art itself, than the life of a man inspired, a man absorbed, as the genuine artist is, in his own travail. But into this travail, into this digestion and reproduction of the thing seen, a critic can hardly enter. Having himself the ulterior office of judge, he must not hope to rival nature's children in their sportiveness and intuition.

In an age of moral confusion, these circumstances may lead to a strange shifting of rôles. The critic, feeling that something in the artist has escaped him, may labour to put himself in the artist's place. If he

**How the artist is inspired and irresponsible.**

succeeded, the result would only be to make him a biographer; he would be describing in words the very intuitions which the artist had rendered in some other medium. To understand how the artist felt, however, is not criticism; criticism is an investigation of what the work is good for. Its function may be chiefly to awaken certain emotions in the beholder, to deepen in him certain habits of apperception; but even this most æsthetic element in the value of art does not borrow its value from the possible fact that the artist also shared those habits and emotions. If he did, and if they are desirable, so much the better for him; but his work would still have its value entirely in its power to propagate such good effects, whether they were already present in him or not. All criticism is therefore moral, since it deals with benefits and their relative weight. Psychological penetration and reconstructed biography may be excellent sport; if they do not reach historic truth they may at least exercise dramatic talent. Criticism, on the other hand, is a serious and public function; it shows the race assimilating the individual, dividing the immortal from the mortal part of a soul.

Representation naturally repeats those objects which are most interesting in themselves. Even the medium, when a choice is possible, is usually determined by the sort of objects to be reproduced. Instruments lose their virtue with their use and a medium of representation, together with its manipulation, is nothing but a vehicle. It is fit if it makes possible a good rendition. All accordingly hangs on what life has made interesting to the senses, on what presents itself persuasively to the artist for imitation; and living arts exist only while well-known, much-loved things imperatively demand to be copied, so that their reproduction has some honest non-æsthetic interest for mankind. Although subject-matter is often said to be indifferent to art, and an artist, when his art is secondary, may think of his technique only, nothing is really so poor and melancholy as art that is interested in itself and not in its subject. If any remnant of inspiration or value clings to such a performance, it comes from a surviving taste for something in the real world. Thus the literature that calls itself purely æsthetic is in truth prurient; without this half-avowed weakness to play upon, the coloured images evoked would have had nothing to marshal or to sustain them.

A good way to understand schools and styles and to appreciate their respective functions and successes is to consider first what region of nature preoccupied the age in which they arose. Perception can cut

**Need of knowing  
and loving the  
subject rendered.**

the world up into many patterns, which it isolates and dignifies with the name of things. It must distinguish before it can reproduce and the objects

**Public interests determine the subject of art, and the subject the medium.**

which attention distinguishes are of many strange sorts.

Thus the single man, the hero, in his acts of prowess or in his readiness, may be the unit and standard in discourse. It will then be his image that will preoccupy the arts. For such

a task the most adequate art is evidently sculpture, for sculpture is the most complete of imitations. In no other art can apprehension render itself so exhaustively and with such recuperative force. Sculpture retains form and colour, with all that both can suggest, and it retains them in their integrity, leaving the observer free to resurvey them from any point of view and drink in their quality exhaustively.

The movement and speech which are wanting, the stage may be called upon to supply; but it cannot supply them without a terrible sacrifice, for it

**Reproduction by acting ephemeral.**

cannot give permanence to its expression. Acting is for this

reason an inferior art, not perhaps in difficulty and certainly not in effect, but inferior in dignity, since the effort of art is

to keep what is interesting in existence, to recreate it in the eternal, and this ideal is half frustrated if the representation is itself fleeting and the rendering has no firmer subsistence than the inspiration that gave it birth. By making himself, almost in his entirety, the medium of his art, the actor is morally diminished, and as little of him remains in his work, when this is good, as of his work in history. He lends himself without interest, and after being Brutus at one moment and Falstaff at another, he is not more truly himself. He is abolished by his creations, which nevertheless cannot survive him.

Being so adequate a rendering of its object, sculpture demands a perfect mastery over it and is correspondingly difficult. It requires taste and

**High demands of sculpture.**

training above every other art; for not only must the material form be reproduced, but its motor suggestions and

moral expression must be rendered; things which in the

model itself are at best transitory, and which may never be found there if a heroic or ideal theme is proposed. The sculptor is obliged to have caught on the wing attitudes momentarily achieved or vaguely imagined; yet these must grow firm and harmonious under his hand. Nor is this enough; for sculpture is more dependent than other arts on its model. If the statue is to be ideal, *i. e.*, if it

is to express the possible motions and vital character of its subject, the model must itself be refined. Training must have cut in the flesh those lines which are to make the language and eloquence of the marble. Trivial and vulgar forms, such as modern sculpture abounds in, reflect an undisciplined race of men, one in which neither soul nor body has done anything well, because the two have done nothing together. The frame has remained gross or awkward, while the face has taken on a tense expression, betraying loose and undignified habits of mind. To carve such a creature is to perpetuate a caricature. The modern sculptor is stopped short at the first conception of a figure; if he gives it its costume, it is grotesque; if he strips it, it is unmeaning and pitiful.

Greece was in all these respects a soil singularly favourable to sculpture. The success there achieved was so conspicuous that two thousand years of essential superfluity have not availed to extirpate the art. Plastic impulse is indeed immortal, and many a hand, even without classic example, would have fallen to modelling. In the middle ages, while monumental sculpture was still rudely reminiscent, ornamental carving arose spontaneously. Yet at every step the experimental sculptor would run up against disaster. What could be seen in the streets, while it offered plenty of subjects, offered none that could stimulate his talent. His patrons asked only for illustration and applied ornament; his models offered only the smirk and sad humour of a stunted life. Here and there his statues might attain a certain sweetness and grace, such as painting might perfectly well have rendered; but on the whole sculpture remained decorative and infantile.

The Renaissance brought back technical freedom and a certain inspiration, unhappily a retrospective and exotic one. The art cut praiseworthy capers in the face of the public, but nobody could teach the public itself to dance. If several great temperaments, under the auspices of fashion, could then call up a magic world in which bodies still spoke a heroic language, that was a passing dream. Society could not feed such an artificial passion, nor the schools transmit an arbitrary personal style that responded to nothing permanent in social conditions. Academies continued to offer prizes for sculpture, the nude continued to be seen in studios, and equestrian or other rhetorical statues continued occasionally to be erected in public squares. Heroic sculpture, however, in modern society, is really an anomaly and confesses as much by being a failure. No personal talent avails to rescue

It is  
essentially  
obsolete.

an art from laboured insignificance when it has no steadying function in the moral world, and must waver between caprice and convention. Where something modest and genuine peeped out was in portraiture, and also at times in that devotional sculpture in wood which still responded to a native interest and consequently kept its sincerity and colour. Pious images may be feeble in the extreme, but they have not the weakness of being merely æsthetic. The purveyor of church wares has a stated theme; he is employed for a purpose; and if he has enough technical resource his work may become truly beautiful: which is not to say that he will succeed if his conceptions are without dignity or his style without discretion. There are good *Mater dolorosas*; there is no good *Sacred Heart*.

It may happen, however, that people are not interested in subjects that demand or allow reproduction in bulk. The isolated figure or simple group may seem cold apart from its natural setting. In rendering an action you may need to render its scene, if it is the circumstance that gives it value rather than the hero. You may also wish to trace out the action through a series of episodes with many figures. In the latter case you might have recourse to a bas-relief, which, although durable, is usually a thankless work; there is little in it that might not be conveyed in a drawing with distinctness. As some artists, like Michael Angelo, have carried the sculptor's spirit into painting, many more, when painting is the prevalent and natural art, have produced carved pictures. It may be said that any work is essentially a picture which is conceived from a single quarter and meant to be looked at only in one light. Objects in such a case need not be so truly apperceived and appropriated as they would have to be in true sculpture. One aspect suffices: the subject presented is not so much constructed as dreamt.

The whole history of painting may be strung on this single thread—the effort to reconstitute impressions, first the dramatic impression and then the sensuous. A summary and symbolic representation of things is all that at first is demanded; the point is to describe something pictorially and recall people's names and actions. It is characteristic of archaic painting to be quite discursive and symbolic; each figure is treated separately and stuck side by side with the others upon a golden ground. The painter is here smothered in the recorder, in the annalist; only those perceptions are

When men see groups and backgrounds they are natural painters.

Evolution of painting.

allowed to stand which have individual names or chronicle facts mentioned in the story. But vision is really more sensuous and rich than report, if art is only able to hold vision in suspense and make it explicit. When painting is still at this stage, and is employed on hieroglyphics, it may reach the maximum of decorative splendour. Whatever sensuous glow finer representations may later acquire will be not sensuous merely, but poetical; Titians, Murillos, or Turners are *colourists in representation*, and their canvases would not be particularly warm or luminous if they represented nothing human or mystical or atmospheric. A stained-glass window or a wall of tiles can outdo them for pure colour and decorative magic. Leaving decoration, accordingly, to take care of itself and be applied as sense may from time to time require, painting goes on to elaborate the symbols with which it begins, to make them symbolise more and more of what their object contains. A catalogue of persons will fall into a group, a group will be fused into a dramatic action. Conventional as the separate figures may still be, their attitudes and relations will reconstitute the dramatic impression. The event will be rendered in its own language; it will not, to be recognised, have to appeal to words. Thus a symbolic crucifixion is a crucifixion only because we know by report that it is; a plastic crucifixion would first teach us, on the contrary, what a real crucifixion might be. It only remains to supply the aerial medium and make dramatic truth sensuous truth also.

To work up a sensation intellectually and reawaken all its passionate associations is to reach a new and more exciting sensation which we call emotion or thought. As in poetry there are two stages, one pregnant and prior to prose and another posterior and synthetic, so in painting we have not only a reversion to sense but an ulterior synthesis of the sensuous, its interpretation in a dramatic or poetic vision. Archaic painting, with its abstract rendering of separate things, is the prose of design. It would not be beautiful at all but for its colour and technical feeling—that expression of candour and satisfaction which may pervade it, as it might a Latin rhyme. To correct this thinness and dislocation, to restore life without losing significance, painting must proceed to accumulate symbol upon symbol, till the original impression is almost restored, but so restored that it contains all the articulation which a thorough analysis had given it. Such painting as Tintoretto's or Paolo Veronese's records impressions as a cultivated sense might

**Sensuous and dramatic  
adequacy approached.**

receive them. It glows with visible light and studies the sensuous appearance, but it contains at the same time an intelligent expression of all those mechanisms, those situations and passions, with which the living world is diversified. It is not a design in spots, meant merely to outdo a sunset; it is a richer dream of experience, meant to outshine the reality.

In order to reconstitute the image we may take an abstract representation or hieroglyphic and gradually increase its depth and its scope. As the painter becomes aware of what at first he had ignored, he adds colour to outline, modelling to colour, and finally an observant rendering of tints and values. This process gives back to objects their texture and atmosphere, and the space in which they lie. From a representation which is statuesque in feeling and which renders figures by furnishing a visible inventory of their parts and attributes, the artist passes to considering his figures more and more as parts of a whole and as moving in an ambient ether. They tend accordingly to lose their separate emphasis, in order to be like flowers in a field or trees in a forest. They become elements, interesting chiefly by their interplay, and shining by a light which is mutually reflected.

When this transformation is complete the painting is essentially a landscape. It may not represent precisely the open country; it may even depict an interior, like Velasquez's *Meninas*. But the observer, even in the presence of men and artificial objects, has been overcome by the medium in which they swim. He is seeing the air and what it happens to hold. He is impartially recreating from within all that nature puts before him, quite as if his imagination had become their diffused material substance. Whatever individuality and moral value these bits of substance may have they acquire for him, as for nature, incidentally and by virtue of ulterior relations consequent on their physical being. If this physical being is wholly expressed, the humanity and morality involved will be expressed likewise, even if expressed unawares. Thus a profound and omnivorous reverie overflows the mind; it devours its objects or is absorbed into them, and the mood which this active self-alienation brings with it is called the spirit of the scene, the sentiment of the landscape.

Perception and art, in this phase, easily grow mystical; they are readily lost in primordial physical sympathies. Although at first a certain articulation and discursiveness may be retained in the picture, so

**Essence of landscape-painting.**

that the things seen in their atmosphere and relations may still be distinguished clearly, the farther the impartial absorption in them goes, the more what is inter-individual rises and floods the individual over. All becomes light and depth and air, and those particular objects threaten to vanish which we had hoped to make luminous, breathing, and profound. The initiated eye sees so many nameless tints and surfaces, that it can no longer select any creative limits for things. There cease to be fixed outlines, continuous colours, or discrete existences in nature.

An artist, however, cannot afford to forget that even in such a case units and divisions would have to be introduced by him into his work. A man, in falling back on immediate reality, or immediate appearance, may well feel his mind's articulate grammar losing its authority, but that grammar must evidently be reasserted if from the immediate he ever wishes to rise again to articulate mind; and art, after all, exists for the mind and must speak humanly. If we crave something else, we have not so far to go: there is always the infinite about us and the animal within us to absolve us from human distinctions.

**Its threatened  
dissolution.**

Moreover, it is not quite true that the immediate has no real diversity. It evidently suggests the ideal terms into which we divide it, and it sustains our apprehension itself, with all the diversities this may create. To what I call right and left, light and darkness, a real opposition must correspond in any reality which is at all relevant to my experience; so that I should fail to integrate my impression, and to absorb the only reality that concerns me, if I obliterated those points of reference which originally made the world figured and visible. Space remains absolutely dark, for all the infinite light which we may declare to be radiating through it, until this light is concentrated in one body or reflected from another; and a landscape cannot be so much as vaporous unless mists are distinguishable in it, and through them some known object which they obscure. In a word, landscape is always, in spite of itself, a collection of particular representations. It is a mass of hieroglyphics, each the graphic symbol for some definite human sensation or reaction; only these symbols have been extraordinarily enriched and are fused in representation, so that, like instruments in an orchestra, they are merged in the voluminous sensation they constitute together, a sensation in which, for attentive perception, they never cease to exist.

Impatience of such control as reality must always exercise over representation may drive painting back to a simpler function. When a designer, following his own automatic impulse, conventionalises a form, he makes a legitimate exchange, substituting fidelity to his apperceptive instincts for fidelity to his external impressions.

When a landscape-painter, revolting against a tedious discursive style, studies only masses of colour and abstract systems of lines, he retains something in itself beautiful, although no longer representative, perhaps, of anything in nature. A pure impression cannot be illegitimate; it cannot be false until it pretends to represent something, and then it will have ceased to be a simple feeling, since something in it will refer to an ulterior existence, to which it ought to conform. This ulterior existence (since intelligence is life understanding its own conditions) can be nothing in the end but what produced that impression. Sensuous life, however, has its value within itself; its pleasures are not significant. Representative art is accordingly in a sense secondary; beauty and expression begin farther back. They are present whenever the outer stimulus agreeably strikes an organ and thereby arouses a sustained image, in which the consciousness of both stimulation and reaction is embodied. An abstract design in outline and colour will amply fulfil these conditions, if sensuous and motor harmonies are preserved in it, and if a sufficient sweep and depth of reaction is secured. Stained-glass, tapestry, panelling, and in a measure all objects, by their mere presence and distribution, have a decorative function. When sculpture and painting cease to be representative they pass into the same category. Decoration in turn merges in construction; and so all art, like the whole Life of Reason, is joined together at its roots, and branches out from the vital processes of sensation and reaction. Diversity arises centrifugally, according to the provinces explored and the degree of mutual checking and control to which the various extensions are subjected.

Organisation, both internal and adaptive, marks the dignity and authority which each art may have attained; but this advantage, important as it must seem to a philosopher or a legislator, is not what the artist chiefly considers. His privilege is to remain capricious in his response to the full-blown universe of science and passion, and to be still sensuous in his highest imaginings. He cares for structure only when it is naturally decorative. He thinks gates were invented for the sake of

**Reversion to  
pure  
decorative  
design.**

**Sensuous values are  
primordial and so  
indispensable.**

triumphal arches, and forests for the sake of poets and deer. Representation, with all it may represent, means to him simply what it says to his emotions. In all this the artist, though in one sense foolish, in another way is singularly sane; for, after all, everything must pass through the senses, and life, whatever its complexity, remains always primarily a feeling.

To render this feeling delightful, to train the senses to their highest potency and harmony in operation, is to begin life well. Were the foundations defective and subject to internal strain there could be little soundness in the superstructure. *Æsthetic* activity is far from being a late or adventitious ornament in human economy; it is an elementary factor, the perfection of an indispensable vehicle. Whenever science or morals have done violence to sense they have decreed their own dissolution. To sense a rebellious appeal will presently be addressed, and the appeal will go against rash and empty dogmas. A keen *æsthetic* sensibility and a flourishing art mark the puberty of reason. Fertility comes later, after a marriage with the practical world. But a sensuous ripening is needed first, such as myth and ornament betray in their exuberance. A man who has no feeling for feeling and no felicity in expression will hardly know what he is about in his further undertakings. He will have missed his first lesson in living spontaneously and well. Not knowing himself, he will be all hearsay and pedantry. He may fall into the superstition of supposing that what gives life value can be something external to life. Science and morals are themselves arts that express natural impulses and find experimental rewards. This fact, in betraying their analogy to *æsthetic* activity, enables them also to vindicate their excellence.



## CHAPTER IX

### JUSTIFICATION OF ART

It is no longer the fashion among philosophers to decry art. Either its influence seems to them too slight to excite alarm, or their systems are too lax to subject anything to censure which has the least glamour or ideality about it. Tired, perhaps, of daily resolving the conflict between science and religion, they prefer to assume silently a harmony between morals and art. Moral harmonies, however, are not given; they have to be made. The curse of superstition is that it justifies and protracts their absence by proclaiming their invisible presence. Of course a rational religion could not conflict with a rational science; and similarly an art that was wholly admirable would necessarily play into the hands of progress. But as the real difficulty in the former case lies in saying what religion and what science would be truly rational, so here the problem is how far extant art is a benefit to mankind, and how far, perhaps, a vice or a burden.

**Art is subject to moral censorship.**

That art is *prima facie* and in itself a good cannot be doubted. It is a spontaneous activity, and that settles the question. Yet the function of ethics is precisely to revise *prima facie* judgments of this kind and to fix the ultimate resultant of all given interests, in so far as they can be combined. In the actual disarray of human life and desire, wisdom consists in knowing what goods to sacrifice and what simples to pour into the supreme mixture. The extent to which æsthetic values are allowed to colour the resultant or highest good is a point of great theoretic importance, not only for art but for general philosophy. If art is excluded altogether or given only a trivial rôle, perhaps as a necessary relaxation, we feel at once that a philosophy so judging human arts is ascetic or post-rational. It pretends to guide life from above and from without; it has discredited human nature and mortal interests, and has

**Its initial or specific excellence is not enough.**

thereby undermined itself, since it is at best but a partial expression of that humanity which it strives to transcend. If, on the contrary, art is prized as something supreme and irresponsible, if the poetic and mystic glow which it may bring seems its own complete justification, then philosophy is evidently still prerational or, rather, non-existent; for the beasts that listened to Orpheus belong to this school.

To be bewitched is not to be saved, though all the magicians and æsthetes in the world should pronounce it to be so. Intoxication is a sad business, at least for a philosopher; for you must either drown yourself altogether, or else when sober again you will feel somewhat fooled by yesterday's joys and somewhat lost in to-day's vacancy. The man who would emancipate art from discipline and reason is trying to elude rationality, not merely in art, but in all existence. He is vexed at conditions of excellence that make him conscious of his own incompetence and failure. Rather than consider his function, he proclaims his self-sufficiency. A way foolishness has of revenging itself is to excommunicate the world.

It is in the world, however, that art must find its level. It must vindicate its function in the human commonwealth. What direct acceptable contribution does it make to the highest good? What sacrifices, if any, does it impose? What indirect influence does it exert on other activities? Our answer to these questions will be our apology for art, our proof that art belongs to the Life of Reason.

When moralists deprecate passion and contrast it with reason, they do so, if they are themselves rational, only because passion is so often "guilty," because it works havoc so often in the surrounding world and leaves, among other ruins, "a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed." Were there no danger of such after-effects within and without the sufferer, no passion would be reprehensible. Nature is innocent, and so are all her impulses and moods when taken in isolation; it is only on meeting that they blush. If it be true that matter is sinful, the logic of this truth is far from being what the fanatics imagine who commonly propound it. Matter is sinful only because it is insufficient, or is wastefully distributed. There is not enough of it to go round among the legion of hungry ideas. To embody or enact an idea is the only way of making it actual; but its embodiment may mutilate it, if the material or the situation is not propitious. So an infant may be maimed at birth, when what injures him is not being brought forth, but being brought

All satisfactions,  
however hurtful,  
have an initial  
worth.

forth in the wrong manner. Matter has a double function in respect to existence; essentially it enables the spirit to be, yet chokes it incidentally. Men sadly misbegotten, or those who are thwarted at every step by the times' penury, may fall to thinking of matter only by its defect, ignoring the material ground of their own aspirations. All flesh will seem to them weak, except that forgotten piece of it which makes their own spiritual strength. Every impulse, however, had initially the same authority as this censorious one, by which the others are now judged and condemned.

If a practice can point to its innocence, if it can absolve itself from concern for a world with which it does not interfere, it has justified itself to those who love it, though it may not yet have recommended itself to those who do not. Now art, more than any other considerable pursuit, more even than specula-

**But, on the whole,  
artistic activity is  
innocent.**

tion, is abstract and inconsequential. Born of suspended attention, it ends in itself. It encourages sensuous abstraction, and nothing concerns it less than to influence the world. Nor does it really do so in a notable degree. Social changes do not reach artistic expression until after their momentum is acquired and their other collateral effects are fully predetermined. Scarcely is a school of art established, giving expression to prevailing sentiment, when the sentiment changes and makes that style seem empty and ridiculous. The expression has little or no power to maintain the movement it registers, as a waterfall has little or no power to bring more water down. Currents may indeed cut deep channels, but they cannot feed their own springs—at least not until the whole revolution of nature is taken into account.

In the individual, also, art registers passions without stimulating them; on the contrary, in stopping to depict them it steals away their life; and whatever interest and delight it transfers to their expression it subtracts from their vital energy. This appears unmistakably in erotic and in religious art. Though the artist's avowed purpose here be to arouse a practical impulse, he fails in so far as he is an artist in truth; for he then will seek to move the given passions only through beauty, but beauty is a rival object of passion in itself. Lascivious and pious works, when beauty has touched them, cease to give out what is wilful and disquieting in their subject and become altogether intellectual and sublime. There is a high breathlessness about beauty that cancels lust and superstition. The artist, in taking the latter for his theme, renders

them innocent and interesting, because he looks at them from above, composes their attitudes and surroundings harmoniously, and makes them food for the mind. Accordingly it is only in a refined and secondary stage that active passions like to amuse themselves with their æsthetic expression. Unmitigated lustiness and raw fanaticism will snarl at pictures. Representations begin to interest when crude passions recede, and feel the need of conciliating liberal interests and adding some intellectual charm to their dumb attractions. Thus art, while by its subject it may betray the pre-occupations among which it springs up, embodies a new and quite innocent interest.

This interest is more than innocent; it is liberal. Not being concerned with material reality so much as with the ideal, it knows neither ulterior motives nor quantitative limits; the more beauty there is the more there can be, and the higher one artist's imagination soars the better the whole flock flies. In æsthetic activity we have accordingly one side of rational life; sensuous experience is dominated there as mechanical or social realities ought to be dominated in science and politics. Such dominion comes of having faculties suited to their conditions and consequently finding an inherent satisfaction in their operation. The justification of life must be ultimately intrinsic; and wherever such self-justifying experience is attained, the ideal has been in so far embodied. To have realised it in a measure helps us to realise it further; for there is a cumulative fecundity in those goods which come not by increase of force or matter, but by a better organisation and form.

Art has met, on the whole, with more success than science or morals. Beauty gives men the best hint of ultimate good which their experience as yet can offer; and the most lauded geniuses have been poets, as if people felt that those seers, rather than men of action or thought, had lived ideally and known what was worth knowing. That such should be the case, if the fact be admitted, would indeed prove the rudimentary state of human civilisation. The truly comprehensive life should be the statesman's, for whom perception and theory might be expressed and rewarded in action. The ideal dignity of art is therefore merely symbolic and vicarious. As some people study character in novels, and travel by reading tales of adventure, because real life is not yet so interesting to them as fiction, or because they find it cheaper to make their experiments in their dreams, so art in general is a rehearsal of rational living, and

**It is liberal,**

**and typical of perfect activity.**

recasts in idea a world which we have no present means of recasting in reality. Yet this rehearsal reveals the glories of a possible performance better than do the miserable experiments until now executed on the reality.

When we consider the present distracted state of government and religion, there is much relief in turning from them to almost any art, where what is good is altogether and finally good, and what is bad is at least not treacherous. When we consider further the senseless rivalries, the vanities, the ignominy that reign in the "practical" world, how doubly blessed it becomes to find a sphere where limitation is an excellence, where diversity is a beauty, and where every man's ambition is consistent with every other man's and even favourable to it! It is indeed so in art; for we must not import into its blameless labours the bickerings and jealousies of criticism. Critics quarrel with other critics, and that is a part of philosophy. With an artist no sane man quarrels, any more than with the colour of a child's eyes. As nature, being full of seeds, rises into all sorts of crystallisations, each having its own ideal and potential life, each a nucleus of order and a habitation for the absolute self, so art, though in a medium poorer than pregnant matter, and incapable of intrinsic life, generates a semblance of all conceivable beings. What nature does with existence, art does with appearance; and while the achievement leaves us, unhappily, much where we were before in all our efficacious relations, it entirely renews our vision and breeds a fresh world in fancy, where all form has the same inner justification that all life has in the real world. As no insect is without its rights and every cripple has his dream of happiness, so no artistic fact, no child of imagination, is without its small birthright of beauty. In this freer element, competition does not exist and everything is Olympian. Hungry generations do not tread down the ideal but only its spokesmen or embodiments, that have cast in their lot with other material things. Art supplies constantly to contemplation what nature seldom affords in concrete experience—the union of life and peace.

The ideal, however, would not come down from the empyrean and be conceived unless somebody's thought were absorbed in the conception. Art actually segregates classes of men and masses of matter to serve its special interests. This involves expense; it impedes some possible activities and imposes others. On this ground, from the earliest times until our own, art has been occasionally attacked by moralists, who

**The ideal,  
when incarnate,  
becomes subject  
to civil society.**

have felt that it fostered idolatry or luxury or irresponsible dreams. Of these attacks the most interesting is Plato's, because he was an artist by temperament, bred in the very focus of artistic life and discussion, and at the same time a consummate moral philosopher. His æsthetic sensibility was indeed so great that it led him, perhaps, into a relative error, in that he overestimated the influence which art can have on character and affairs. Homer's stories about the gods can hardly have demoralised the youths who recited them. No religion has ever given a picture of deity which men could have imitated without the grossest immorality. Yet these shocking representations have not had a bad effect on believers. The deity was opposed to their own vices; those it might itself be credited with offered no contagious example. In spite of the theologians, we know by instinct that in speaking of the gods we are dealing in myths and symbols. Some aspect of nature or some law of life, expressed in an attribute of deity, is what we really regard, and to regard such things, however sinister they may be, cannot but chasten and moralise us. The personal character that such a function would involve, if it were exercised willingly by a responsible being, is something that never enters our thoughts. No such painful image comes to perplex the plain sense of instinctive, poetic religion. To give moral importance to myths, as Plato tended to do, is to take them far too seriously and to belittle what they stand for. Left to themselves they float in an ineffectual stratum of the brain. They are understood and grow current precisely by not being pressed, like an idiom or a metaphor. The same æsthetic sterility appears at the other end of the scale, where fancy is anything but sacred. A Frenchman once saw in "Punch and Judy" a shocking proof of British brutality, destined further to demoralise the nation; and yet the scandal may pass. That black tragedy reflects not very pretty manners, but puppets exercise no suasion over men.

His deeper moral objections.

To his supersensitive censure of myths Plato added strictures upon music and the drama: to excite passions idly was to enervate the soul. Only martial or religious strains should be heard in the ideal republic. Furthermore, art put before us a mere phantom of the good. True excellence was the function things had in use; the horseman knew the use and essence of a bridle better than the artisan did who put it together; but a painted bridle would lack even this relation to utility. It would rein in no horse,

and was an impertinent sensuous reduplication of what, even when it had material being, was only an instrument and a means.

This reasoning has been little understood, because Platonists so soon lost sight of their master's Socratic habit and moral intent. They turned the good into an existence, making it thereby unmeaning. Plato's dialectic, if we do not thus abolish the force of its terms, is perfectly cogent: representative art has indeed no utility, and, if the good has been identified with efficiency in a military state, it can have no justification. Plato's Republic was avowedly a fallen state, a church militant, coming sadly short of perfection; and the joy which Plato as much as any one could feel in sensuous art he postponed, as a man in mourning might, until life should be redeemed from baseness.

Never have art and beauty received a more glowing eulogy than is implied in Plato's censure. To him nothing was beautiful that was not beautiful to the core, and he would have thought to insult art—the remodelling of nature by reason—if he had given it a narrower field than all practice. As an architect who had fondly designed something impossible, or which might not please in execution, would at once erase it from the plan and abandon it for the love of perfect beauty and perfect art, so Plato wished to erase from pleasing appearance all that, when its operation was completed, would bring discord into the world. This was done in the ultimate interest of art and beauty, which in a cultivated mind are inseparable from the vitally good. It is mere barbarism to feel that a thing is æsthetically good but morally evil, or morally good but hateful to perception. Things partially evil or partially ugly may have to be chosen under stress of unfavourable circumstances, lest some worse thing come; but if a thing were ugly it would *thereby* not be wholly good, and if it were *altogether* good it would perforce be beautiful.

Their  
rightness.

To criticise art on moral grounds is to pay it a high compliment by assuming that it aims to be adequate, and is addressed to a comprehensive mind. The only way in which art could disallow such criticism would be to protest its irresponsible infancy, and admit that it was a more or less amiable blatancy in individuals, and not *art* at all. Young animals often gambol in a delightful fashion, and men also may, though hardly when they intend to do so. Sportive self-expression can be prized because human nature contains a certain elasticity and margin for experiment, in which waste activity is inevitable and may be precious: for this license may lead, amid a thousand failures, to some

real discovery and advance. Art, like life, should be free, since both are experimental. But it is one thing to make room for genius and to respect the sudden madness of poets through which, possibly, some god may speak, and it is quite another not to judge the result by rational standards. The earth's bowels are full of all sorts of rumblings; which of the oracles drawn thence is true can be judged only by the light of day. If an artist's inspiration has been happy, it has been so because his work can sweeten or ennoble the mind and because its total effect will be beneficent. Art being a part of life, the criticism of art is a part of morals.

Maladjustments in human society are still so scandalous, they touch matters so much more pressing than fine art, that maladjustments in the latter are passed over with a smile, as if art were at any rate an irresponsible miraculous parasite that the legislator had better not meddle with. The day may come, however, if the state is ever reduced to a tolerable order, when questions of art will be the most urgent questions of morals, when genius at last will feel responsible, and the twist given to imagination will seem the most crucial thing in life. Under a thin disguise, the momentous character of imaginative choices has already been fully recognised by mankind. Men have passionately loved their special religions, languages, and manners, and preferred death to a life flowering in any other fashion. In justifying this attachment forensically, with arguments on the low level of men's named and consecrated interests, people have indeed said, and perhaps come to believe, that their imaginative interests were material interests at bottom, thinking thus to give them more weight and legitimacy; whereas in truth material life itself would be nothing worth, were it not, in its essence and its issue, ideal.

It was stupidly asserted, however, that if a man omitted the prescribed ceremonies or had unauthorised dreams about the gods, he would lose his battles in this world and go to hell in the other. He who runs can see that these expectations are not founded on any evidence, on any observation of what actually occurs; they are obviously a *mirage* arising from a direct ideal passion, that tries to justify itself by indirection and by falsehoods, as it has no need to do. We all read facts in the way most congruous with our intellectual habit, and when this habit drives us to effulgent creations, absorbing and expressing the whole current of our being, it not merely biasses our reading of this

Importance of  
aesthetic  
alternatives.

world but carries us into another world altogether, which we posit instead of the real one, or beside it.

Grotesque as the blunder may seem by which we thus introduce our poetic tropes into the sequence of external events or existences, the blunder is intellectual only; morally, zeal for our special rhetoric may not be irrational. The lovely Phœbus is no fact for astronomy, nor does he stand behind the material sun, in some higher heaven, physically superintending its movements; but Phœbus is a fact in his own region, a token of man's joyful piety in the presence of the forces that really condition his welfare. In the region of symbols, in the world of poetry, Phœbus has his inalienable rights. Forms of poetry are forms of human life. Languages express national character and enshrine particular ways of seeing and valuing events. To make substitutions and extensions in expression is to give the soul, in her inmost substance, a somewhat new constitution. A method of apperception is a spontaneous variation in mind, perhaps the origin of a new moral species.

The value apperceptive methods have is of course largely representative, in that they serve more or less aptly to dominate the order of events and to guide action; but quite apart from this practical value, expressions possess a character of their own, a sort of vegetative life, as languages possess euphony. Two reports of the same fact may be equally trustworthy, equally useful as information, yet they may embody two types of mental rhetoric, and this diversity in genius may be of more intrinsic importance than the raw fact it works upon. The non-representative side of human perception may thus be the most momentous side of it, because it represents, or even constitutes, the man. After all, the chief interest we have in things lies in what we can make of them or what they can make of us. There is consequently nothing fitted to colour human happiness more pervasively than art does, nor to express more deeply the mind's internal habit. In educating the imagination art crowns all moral endeavour, which from the beginning is a species of art, and which becomes a fine art more completely as it works in a freer medium.

How great a portion of human energies should be spent on art and its appreciation is a question to be answered variously by various persons and nations. There is no ideal *à priori*; an ideal can but express, if it is genuine, the balance of impulses and potentialities in a given soul. A mind at once sensuous and mobile will find its appropriate

The importance of  
æsthetic goods  
varies with  
temperaments.

perfection in studying and reconstructing objects of sense. Its rationality will appear chiefly on the plane of perception, to render the circle of visions which makes up its life as delightful as possible. For such a man art will be the most satisfying, the most significant activity, and to load him with material riches or speculative truths or profound social loyalties will be to impede and depress him. The irrational is what does not justify itself in the end; and the born artist, repelled by the soberer and bitterer passions of the world, may justly call them irrational. They would not justify themselves in his experience; they make grievous demands and yield nothing in the end which is intelligible to him. His picture of them, if he be a dramatist, will hardly fail to be satirical; fate, frailty, illusion will be his constant themes. If his temperament could find political expression, he would minimise the machinery of life and deprecate any calculated prudence. He would trust the heart, enjoy nature, and not frown too angrily on inclination. Such a Bohemia he would regard as an ideal world in which humanity might flourish congenially.

A puritan moralist, before condemning such an infantile paradise, should remember that a commonwealth of butterflies actually exists. It is not any inherent wrongness in such an ideal that makes it unacceptable, but only the fact that human butterflies are not wholly mercurial and that even imperfect geniuses are but an extreme type in a society whose guiding ideal is based upon a broader humanity than the artist represents. Men of science or business will accuse the poet of folly, on the very grounds on which he accuses them of the same. Each will seem to the other to be obeying a barren obsession. The statesman or philosopher who should aspire to adjust their quarrel could do so only by force of intelligent sympathy with both sides, and in view of the common conditions in which they find themselves. What ought to be done is that which, when done, will most nearly justify itself to all concerned. Practical problems of morals are judicial and political problems. Justice can never be pronounced without hearing the parties and weighing the interests at stake.

A circumstance that complicates such a calculation is this: æsthetic and other interests are not separable units, to be compared externally; they are rather strands interwoven in the texture of everything. Æsthetic sensibility colours every thought, qualifies every allegiance, and modifies

The æsthetic temperament requires tutelage.

Æsthetic values everywhere interfused.

every product of human labour. Consequently the love of beauty has to justify itself not merely intrinsically, or as a constituent part of life more or less to be insisted upon; it has to justify itself also as an influence. A hostile influence is the most odious of things. The enemy himself, the alien creature, lies in his own camp, and in a speculative moment we may put ourselves in his place and learn to think of him charitably; but his spirit in our own souls is like a private tempter, a treasonable voice weakening our allegiance to our own duty. A zealot might allow his neighbours to be damned in peace, did not a certain heretical odour emitted by them infect the sanctuary and disturb his own dogmatic calm. In the same way practical people might leave the artist alone in his oasis, and even grant him a pittance on which to live, as they feed the animals in a zoological garden, did he not intrude into their inmost conclave and vitiate the abstract cogency of their designs. It is not so much art in its own field that men of science look askance upon, as the love of glitter and rhetoric and false finality trespassing upon scientific ground; while men of affairs may well deprecate a rooted habit of sensuous absorption and of sudden transit to imaginary worlds, a habit which must work havoc in their own sphere. In other words, there is an element of poetry inherent in thought, in conduct, in affection; and we must ask ourselves how far this ingredient is an obstacle to their proper development.

The fabled dove who complained, in flying, of the resistance of the air, was as wise as the philosopher who should lament the presence and influence of sense. Sense is the native element and substance of experience; all its refinements are still parts of it existentially; and whatever excellence belongs specifically to sense is a preliminary excellence, a value antecedent to any which thought or action can achieve. Science and morals have but representative authority; they are principles of ideal synthesis and safe transition; they are bridges from moment to moment of sentience. Their function is indeed universal and their value overwhelming, yet their office remains derivative or secondary, and what they serve to put in order has previously its intrinsic worth. An æsthetic bias is native to sense, being indeed nothing but its form and potency; and the influence which æsthetic habits exercise on thought and action should not be regarded as an intrusion to be resented, but rather as an original interest to be built upon and developed. Sensibility contains the distinctions which reason afterward carries out and applies; it is

**They are  
primordial.**

sensibility that involves and supports primitive diversities, such as those between good and bad, here and there, fast and slow, light and darkness. There are complications and harmonies inherent in these oppositions, harmonies which æsthetic faculty proceeds to note; and from these we may then construct others, not immediately presentable, which we distinguish by attributing them to reason. Reason may well outflank and transform æsthetic judgments, but can never undermine them. Its own materials are the perceptions which if full and perfect are called beauties. Its function is to endow the parts of sentience with a consciousness of the system in which they lie, so that they may attain a mutual relevance and ideally support one another. But what could relevance or support be worth if the things to be buttressed were themselves worthless? It is not to organise pain, ugliness, and boredom that reason can be called into the world.

When a practical or scientific man boasts that he has laid aside æsthetic prejudices and is following truth and utility with a single eye, he can mean, if he is judicious, only that he has not yielded to æsthetic preference after his problem was fixed, nor in an arbitrary and vexatious fashion. He has not consulted taste when it would have been in bad taste to do so. If he meant that he had rendered himself altogether insensible to æsthetic values, and that he had proceeded to organise conduct or thought in complete indifference to the beautiful, he would be simply proclaiming his inhumanity and incompetence. A right observance of æsthetic demands does not obstruct utility nor logic; for utility and logic are themselves beautiful, while a sensuous beauty that ran counter to reason could never be, in the end, pleasing to an exquisite sense. Æsthetic vice is not favourable to æsthetic faculty: it is an impediment to the greatest æsthetic satisfactions. And so when by yielding to a blind passion for beauty we derange theory and practice, we cut ourselves off from those beauties which alone could have satisfied our passion. What we drag in so obstinately will bring but a cheap and unstable pleasure, while a double beauty will thereby be lost or obscured—first, the unlooked-for beauty which a genuine and stable system of things could not but betray, and secondly the coveted beauty itself, which, being imported here into the wrong context, will be rendered meretricious and offensive to good taste. If a jewel worn on the wrong finger sends a shiver through the flesh, how disgusting must not rhetoric be in diplomacy or unction in metaphysics!

To superpose them  
adventitiously is to  
destroy them.

The poetic element inherent in thought, affection, and conduct is prior to their prosaic development and altogether legitimate. Clear, well-digested perception and rational choices follow upon those primary creative impulses, and carry out their purpose systematically. At every stage in this development new and appropriate materials are offered for æsthetic contemplation. Straightness, for instance, symmetry, and rhythm are at first sensuously defined; they are characters arrested by æsthetic instinct; but they are the materials of mathematics. And long after these initial forms have disowned their sensuous values, and suffered a wholly dialectical expansion or analysis, mathematical objects again fall under the æsthetic eye, and surprise the senses by their emotional power. A mechanical system, such as astronomy in one region has already unveiled, is an inexhaustible field for æsthetic wonder. Similarly, in another sphere, sensuous affinity leads to friendship and love, and makes us huddle up to our fellows and feel their heart-beats; but when human society has thereupon established a legal and moral edifice, this new spectacle yields new imaginative transports, tragic, lyric, and religious. Æsthetic values everywhere precede and accompany rational activity, and life is, in one aspect, always a fine art; not by introducing inaptly æsthetic vetoes or æsthetic flourishes, but by giving to everything a form which, implying a structure, implies also an ideal and a possible perfection. This perfection, being felt, is also a beauty, since any process, though it may have become intellectual or practical, remains for all that a vital and sentient operation, with its inherent sensuous values. Whatever is to be representative in import must first be immediate in existence; whatever is transitive in operation must be at the same time actual in being. So that an æsthetic sanction sweetens all successful living; animal efficiency cannot be without grace, nor moral achievement without a sensible glory.

**They flow naturally from perfect function.**

These vital harmonies are natural; they are neither perfect nor preordained. We often come upon beauties that need to be sacrificed, as we come upon events and practical necessities without number that are truly regrettable. There are a myriad conflicts in practice and in thought, conflicts between rival possibilities, knocking inopportunistly and in vain at the door of existence. Owing to the initial disorganisation of things, some demands continually prove to be incompatible with others arising no less naturally. Reason in such cases imposes real

and irreparable sacrifices, but it brings a stable consolation if its discipline is accepted. Decay, for instance, is a moral and æsthetic evil; but being a natural necessity it can become the basis for pathetic and magnificent harmonies, when once imagination is adjusted to it. The hatred of change and death is ineradicable while life lasts, since it expresses that self-sustaining organisation in a creature which we call its soul; yet this hatred of change and death is not so deeply seated in the nature of things as are death and change themselves, for the flux is deeper than the ideal. Discipline may attune our higher and more adaptable part to the harsh conditions of being, and the resulting sentiment, being the only one which can be maintained successfully, will express the greatest satisfactions which can be reached, though not the greatest that might be conceived or desired. To be interested in the changing seasons is, in this middling zone, a happier state of mind than to be hopelessly in love with spring. Wisdom discovers these possible accommodations, as circumstances impose them; and education ought to prepare men to accept them.

It is for want of education and discipline that a man so often insists petulantly on his random tastes, instead of cultivating those which might find some satisfaction in the world and might produce in him some pertinent culture. Untutored self-assertion may even lead him to deny some fact that should have been patent, and plunge him into needless calamity. His Utopias cheat him in the end, if indeed the barbarous taste he has indulged in clinging to them does not itself lapse before the dream is half formed. So men have feverishly conceived a heaven only to find it insipid, and a hell to find it ridiculous. Theodicies that were to demonstrate an absolute cosmic harmony have turned the universe into a tyrannous nightmare, from which we are glad to awake again in this unintentional and somewhat tractable world. Thus the fancies of effeminate poets in violating science are false to the highest art, and the products of sheer confusion, instigated by the love of beauty, turn out to be hideous. A rational severity in respect to art simply weeds the garden; it expresses a mature æsthetic choice and opens the way to supreme artistic achievements. To keep beauty in its place is to make all things beautiful.

Even inhibited  
functions, when  
they fall into a  
new rhythm,  
yield new  
beauties.

He who loves  
beauty must  
chasten it.

## CHAPTER X

### THE CRITERION OF TASTE

Dogmatism in matters of taste has the same status as dogmatism in other spheres. It is initially justified by sincerity, being a systematic expression of a man's preferences; but it becomes absurd when its basis in a particular disposition is ignored and it pretends to have an absolute or metaphysical scope. Reason, with the order which in every region it imposes on life, is grounded on an animal nature and has no other function than to serve the same; and it fails to exercise its office quite as much when it oversteps its bounds and forgets whom it is serving as when it neglects some part of its legitimate province and serves its master imperfectly, without considering all his interests.

**Dogmatism is inevitable but may be enlightened.**

Dialectic, logic, and morals lose their authority and become inept if they trespass upon the realm of physics and try to disclose existences; while physics is a mere idea in the realm of poetic meditation. So the notorious diversities which human taste exhibits do not become conflicts, and raise no moral problem, until their basis or their function has been forgotten, and each has claimed a right to assert itself exclusively. This claim is altogether absurd, and we might fail to understand how so preposterous an attitude could be assumed by anybody did we not remember that every young animal thinks himself absolute, and that dogmatism in the thinker is only the speculative side of greed and courage in the brute. The brute cannot surrender his appetites nor abdicate his primary right to dominate his environment. What experience and reason may teach him is merely how to make his self-assertion well balanced and successful. In the same way taste is bound to maintain its preferences but free to rationalise them. After a man has compared his feelings with the no less legitimate feelings of other creatures, he can reassert his own with more complete authority, since now he is aware of their necessary

ground in his nature, and of their affinities with whatever other interests his nature enables him to recognise in others and to co-ordinate with his own.

A criterion of taste is, therefore, nothing but taste itself in its more deliberate and circumspect form. Reflection refines particular sentiments by bringing them into sympathy with all rational life. There is consequently the greatest possible difference in authority between taste and taste, and while delight in drums and eagle's feathers is perfectly genuine and has no cause to blush for itself, it cannot be compared in scope or representative value with delight in a symphony or an epic. The very instinct that is satisfied by beauty prefers one beauty to another; and we have only to question and purge our æsthetic feelings in order to obtain our criterion of taste. This criterion will be natural, personal, autonomous; a circumstance that will give it authority over our own judgment—which is all moral science is concerned about—and will extend its authority over other minds also, in so far as their constitution is similar to ours. In that measure what is a genuine instance of reason in us, others will recognise for a genuine expression of reason in themselves also.

Æsthetic feeling, in different people, may make up a different fraction of life and vary greatly in volume. The more nearly insensible a man is the more incompetent he becomes to proclaim the values which sensibility might have. To beauty men are habitually insensible, even while they are awake and rationally active. Tomes of æsthetic criticism hang on a few moments of real delight and intuition. It is in rare and scattered instants that beauty smiles even on her adorers, who are reduced for habitual comfort to remembering her past favours. An æsthetic glow may pervade experience, but that circumstance is seldom remarked; it figures only as an influence working subterraneously on thoughts and judgments which in themselves take a cognitive or practical direction. Only when the æsthetic ingredient becomes predominant do we exclaim, How beautiful! Ordinarily the pleasures which formal perception gives remain an undistinguished part of our comfort or curiosity.

Taste is formed in those moments when æsthetic emotion is massive and distinct; preferences then grown conscious, judgments then put into words will reverberate through calmer hours; they will con-

**Taste gains in authority as it is more and more widely based.**

**Different æsthetic endowments may be compared in quantity or force.**

stitute prejudices, habits of apperception, secret standards for all other beauties. A period of life in which such intuitions have been frequent may amass tastes and ideals sufficient for the rest of our days. Youth in these matters governs maturity, and while men may develop their early impressions more systematically and find confirmations of them in various quarters, they will seldom look at the world afresh or use new categories in deciphering it. Half our standards come from our first masters, and the other half from our first loves. Never being so deeply stirred again, we remain persuaded that no objects save those we then discovered can have a true sublimity. These high-water marks of æsthetic life may easily be reached under tutelage. It may be some eloquent appreciations read in a book, or some preference expressed by a gifted friend, that may have revealed unsuspected beauties in art or nature; and then, since our own perception was vicarious and obviously inferior in volume to that which our mentor possessed, we shall take his judgments for our criterion, since they were the source and exemplar of all our own. Thus the volume and intensity of some appreciations, especially when nothing of the kind has preceded, makes them authoritative over our subsequent judgments. On those warm moments hang all our cold systematic opinions; and while the latter fill our days and shape our careers it is only the former that are crucial and alive.

Authority of  
vital over  
verbal  
judgments.

A race which loves beauty holds the same place in history that a season of love or enthusiasm holds in an individual life. Such a race has a pre-eminent right to pronounce upon beauty and to bequeath its judgments to duller peoples. We may accordingly listen with reverence to a Greek judgment on that subject, expecting that what might seem to us wrong about it is the expression of knowledge and passion beyond our range; it will suffice that we learn to live in the world of beauty, instead of merely studying its relics, for us to understand, for instance, that imitation is a fundamental principle in art, and that any rational judgment on the beautiful must be a moral and political judgment, enveloping chance æsthetic feelings and determining their value. What most German philosophers, on the contrary, have written about art and beauty has a minimal importance: it treats artificial problems in a grammatical spirit, seldom giving any proof of experience or imagination. What painters say about painting and poets about poetry is better than lay opinion; it may reveal, of course, some

petty jealousy or some partial incapacity, because a special gift often carries with it complementary defects in apprehension; yet what is positive in such judgments is founded on knowledge and avoids the romancing into which litterateurs and sentimentalists will gladly wander. The specific values of art are technical values, more permanent and definite than the adventitious analogies on which a stray observer usually bases his views. Only a technical education can raise judgments on musical compositions above impertinent autobiography. The Japanese know the beauty of flowers, and tailors and dressmakers have the best sense for the fashions. We ask them for suggestions, and if we do not always take their advice, it is not because the fine effects they love are not genuine, but because they may not be effects which we care to produce.

This touches a second consideration, besides the volume and vivacity of feeling, which enters into good taste. What is voluminous may be inwardly confused or outwardly confusing. Excitement, though on the whole and for the moment agreeable, may verge on pain and may be, when it subsides a little, a cause of bitterness. A thing's attractions may be partly at war with its ideal function. In such a case what, in our haste, we call a beauty becomes hateful on a second view, and according to the key of our dissatisfaction we pronounce that effect meretricious, harsh, or affected. These discords appear when elaborate things are attempted without enough art and refinement; they are essentially in bad taste. Rudimentary effects, on the contrary, are pure, and though we may think them trivial when we are expecting something richer, their defect is never intrinsic; they do not plunge us, as impure excitements do, into a corrupt artificial conflict. So wild-flowers, plain chant, or a scarlet uniform are beautiful enough; their simplicity is a positive merit, while their crudity is only relative. There is a touch of sophistication and disease in not being able to fall back on such things and enjoy them thoroughly, as if a man could no longer relish a glass of water. Your true epicure will study not to lose so genuine a pleasure. Better forego some artificial stimulus, though that, too, has its charm, than become insensible to natural joys. Indeed, ability to revert to elementary beauties is a test that judgment remains sound.

Vulgarity is quite another matter. An old woman in a blond wig, a dirty hand covered with jewels, ostentation without dignity, rhetoric without cogency, all offend by an inner contradiction. To like such

**Tastes differ also  
in purity or  
consistency.**

things we should have to surrender our better intuitions and suffer a kind of dishonour. Yet the elements offensively combined may be excellent in isolation, so that an untrained or torpid mind will be at a loss to understand the critic's displeasure. Oftentimes barbaric art almost succeeds, by dint of splendour, in banishing the sense of confusion and absurdity; for everything, even reason, must bow to force. Yet the impression remains chaotic, and we must be either partly inattentive or partly distressed. Nothing could show better than this alternative how mechanical barbaric art is. Driven by blind impulse or tradition, the artist has worked in the dark. He has dismissed his work without having quite understood it or really justified it to his own mind. It is rather his excretion than his product. Astonished, very likely, at his own fertility, he has thought himself divinely inspired, little knowing that clear reason is the highest and truest of inspirations. Other men, observing his obscure work, have then honoured him for profundity; and so mere bulk or stress or complexity have produced a mystical wonder by which generation after generation may be enthralled. Barbaric art is half necromantic; its ascendancy rests in a certain measure on bewilderment and fraud.

To purge away these impurities nothing is needed but quickened intelligence, a keener spiritual flame. Where perception is adequate, expression is so too, and if a man will only grow sensitive to the various solicitations which anything monstrous combines, he will thereby perceive its monstrosity. Let him but enact his sensations, let him pause to make explicit the confused hints that threaten to stupefy him; he will find that he can follow out each of them only by rejecting and forgetting the others. To free his imagination in any direction he must disengage it from the contrary intent, and so he must either purify his object or leave it a mass of confused promptings. Promptings essentially demand to be carried out, and when once an idea has become articulate it is not enriched but destroyed if it is still identified with its contrary. Any complete expression of a barbarous theme will, therefore, disengage its incompatible elements and turn it into a number of rational beauties.

When good taste has in this way purified and digested some turgid medley, it still has a progress to make. Ideas, like men, live in society. Not only has each a will of its own and an inherent ideal, but each finds itself conditioned for its expression by a host of other beings, on whose co-operation it depends. Good taste, besides being inwardly

clear, has to be outwardly fit. A monstrous ideal devours and dissolves itself, but even a rational one does not find an immortal embodiment simply for being inwardly possible and free from contradiction. It needs a material basis, a soil and situation propitious to its growth. This basis, as it varies, makes the ideal vary which is simply its expression; and therefore no ideal can be ultimately fixed in ignorance of the conditions that may modify it. It subsists, to be sure, as an eternal possibility, independently of all further earthly revolutions. Once expressed, it has revealed the inalienable values that attach to a certain form of being, whenever that form is actualised. But its expression may have been only momentary, and that eternal ideal may have no further relevance to the living world. A criterion of taste, however, looks to a social career; it hopes to educate and to judge. In order to be an applicable and a just law, it must represent the interests over which it would preside.

**They differ, finally, in pertinence, and in width of appeal.**

There are many undiscovered ideals. There are many beauties which nothing in this world can embody or suggest. There are also many once suggested or even embodied, which find later their basis gone and evaporate into their native heaven. The saddest tragedy in the world is the destruction of what has within it no inward ground of dissolution, death in youth, and the crushing out of perfection. Imagination has its bereavements of this kind. A complete mastery of existence achieved at one moment gives no warrant that it will be sustained or achieved again at the next. The achievement may have been perfect; nature will not on that account stop to admire it. She will move on, and the meaning which was read so triumphantly in her momentary attitude will not fit her new posture. Like Polonius's cloud, she will always suggest some new ideal, because she has none of her own.

In lieu of an ideal, however, nature has a constitution, and this, which is a necessary ground for ideals, is what it concerns the ideal to reckon with. A poet, spokesman of his full soul at a given juncture, cannot consider eventualities or think of anything but the message he is sent to deliver, whether the world can then hear it or not. God, he may feel sure, understands him, and in the eternal the beauty he sees and loves immortally justifies his enthusiasm. Nevertheless, critics must view his momentary ebullition from another side. They do not come to justify the poet in his own eyes; he amply relieves them of such a function. They come only to inquire how significant the poet's

expressions are for humanity at large or for whatever public he addresses. They come to register the social or representative value of the poet's soul. His inspiration may have been an odd cerebral rumbling, a perfectly irrecoverable and wasted intuition; the exquisite quality it doubtless had to his own sense is now not to the purpose. A work of art is a public possession; it is addressed to the world. By taking on a material embodiment, a spirit solicits attention and claims some kinship with the prevalent gods. Has it, critics should ask, the affinities needed for such intercourse? Is it humane, is it rational, is it representative? To its inherent incommunicable charms it must add a kind of courtesy. If it wants other approval than its own, it cannot afford to regard no other aspiration.

This scope, this representative faculty or wide appeal, is necessary to good taste. All authority is representative; force and inner consistency are gifts on which I may well congratulate another, but they give him no right to speak for me. Either æsthetic experience would have remained a chaos—which it is not altogether—or it must have tended to conciliate certain general human demands and ultimately all those interests which its operation in any way affects. The more conspicuous and permanent a work of art is, the more is such an adjustment needed. A poet or philosopher may be erratic and assure us that he is inspired; if we cannot well gainsay it, we are at least not obliged to read his works. An architect or a sculptor, however, or a public performer of any sort, that thrusts before us a spectacle justified only in his inner consciousness, makes himself a nuisance. A social standard of taste must assert itself here, or else no efficacious and cumulative art can exist at all. Good taste in such matters cannot abstract from tradition, utility, and the temper of the world. It must make itself an interpreter of humanity and think esoteric dreams less beautiful than what the public eye might conceivably admire.

There are various affinities by which art may acquire a representative or classic quality. It may do so by giving form to objects which everybody knows, by rendering experiences that are universal and primary. The human figure, elementary passions, common types and crises of fate—these are facts which pass too constantly through apperception not to have a normal æsthetic value. The artist who can catch that effect in its fulness and simplicity accordingly does immortal work. This sort of art immediately becomes popular; it passes into language

Art may grow classic by idealising the familiar,

and convention so that its æsthetic charm is apparently worn down. The old images after a while hardly stimulate unless they be presented in some paradoxical way; but in that case attention will be diverted to the accidental extravagance, and the chief classic effect will be missed. It is the honourable fate or euthanasia of artistic successes that they pass from the field of professional art altogether and become a portion of human faculty. Every man learns to be to that extent an artist; approved figures and maxims pass current like the words and idioms of a mother-tongue, themselves once brilliant inventions. The lustre of such successes is not really dimmed, however, when it becomes a part of man's daily light; a retrogression from that habitual style or habitual insight would at once prove, by the shock it caused, how precious those ingrained apperceptions continued to be.

Universality may also be achieved, in a more heroic fashion, by art that expresses ultimate truths, cosmic laws, great human ideals. Virgil and Dante are classic poets in this sense, and a similar quality belongs to Greek sculpture and architecture. They may not cause enthusiasm in everybody; but in the end experience and reflection renew their charm; and their greatness, like that of high mountains, grows more obvious with distance. Such eminence is the reward of having accepted discipline and made the mind a clear anagram of much experience. There is a great difference between the depth of expression so gained and richness or realism in details. A supreme work presupposes minute study, sympathy with varied passions, many experiments in expression; but these preliminary things are submerged in it and are not displayed side by side with it, like the foot-notes to a learned work, so that the ignorant may know they have existed.

Some persons, themselves inattentive, imagine, for instance, that Greek sculpture is abstract, that it has left out all the detail and character which they cannot find on the surface, as they might in a modern work. In truth it contains those features, as it were, in solution and in the resultant which, when reduced to harmony, they would produce. It embodies a finished humanity which only varied exercises could have attained, for as the body is the existent ground for all possible actions, in which as actions they exist only potentially, so a perfect body, such as a sculptor might conceive, which ought to be ready for all excellent activities, cannot present them all in act but only the readiness for them. The features that might express them severally

or by reporting  
the ultimate.

must be absorbed and mastered, hidden like a sword in its scabbard, and reduced to a general dignity or grace. Though such immersed eloquence be at first overlooked and seldom explicitly acknowledged, homage is nevertheless rendered to it in the most unmistakable ways. When lazy artists, backed by no great technical or moral discipline, think they, too, can produce masterpieces by summary treatment, their failure shows how pregnant and supreme a thing simplicity is. Every man, in proportion to his experience and moral distinction, returns to the simple but inexhaustible work of finished minds, and finds more and more of his own soul responsive to it.

Human nature, for all its margin of variability, has a substantial core which is invariable, as the human body has a structure which it cannot lose without perishing altogether; for as creatures grow more complex a greater number of their organs become vital and indispensable. Advanced forms will rather die than surrender a tittle of their character; a fact which is the physical basis for loyalty and martyrdom. Any deep interpretation of oneself, or indeed of anything, has for that reason a largely representative truth. Other men, if they look closely, will make the same discovery for themselves. Hence distinction and profundity, in spite of their rarity, are wont to be largely recognised. The best men in all ages keep classic traditions alive. These men have on their side the weight of superior intelligence, and, though they are few, they might even claim the weight of numbers, since the few of all ages, added together, may be more than the many who in any one age follow a temporary fashion. Classic work is nevertheless always national, or at least characteristic of its period, as the classic poetry of each people is that in which its language appears most pure and free. To translate it is impossible; but it is easy to find that the human nature so inimitably expressed in each masterpiece is the same that, under different circumstance, dictates a different performance. The deviations between races and men are not yet so great as is the ignorance of self, the blindness to the native ideal, which prevails in most of them. Hence a great man of a remote epoch is more intelligible than a common man of our own time.

Both elementary and ultimate judgments, then, contribute to a standard of taste; yet human life lies between these limits, and an art which is to be truly adjusted to life should speak also for the intermediate experience. Good taste is indeed nothing but a name for those appreciations which the swelling incidents of life recall and reinforce.

Good taste is that taste which is a good possession, a friend to the whole man. It must not alienate him from anything except to ally him to something greater and more fertile in satisfactions. It will not suffer him to dote on things, however seductive, which rob him of some nobler companionship. To have a foretaste of such a loss, and to reject instinctively whatever will cause it, is the very essence of refinement. Good taste comes, therefore, from experience, in the best sense of that word; it comes from having united in one's memory and character the fruit of many diverse undertakings. Mere taste is apt to be bad taste, since it regards nothing but a chance feeling. Every man who pursues an art may be presumed to have some sensibility; the question is whether he has breeding, too, and whether what he stops at is not, in the end, vulgar and offensive. Chance feeling needs to fortify itself with reasons and to find its level in the great world. When it has added fitness to its sincerity, beneficence to its passion, it will have acquired a right to live. Violence and self-justification will not pass muster in a moral society, for vipers possess both, and must nevertheless be stamped out. Citizenship is conferred only on creatures with human and co-operative instincts. A civilised imagination has to understand and to serve the world.

The great obstacle which art finds in attempting to be rational is its functional isolation. Sense and each of the passions suffers from a similar independence. The disarray of human instincts lets every spontaneous motion run too far; life oscillates between constraint and unreason. Morality too often puts up with being a constraint and even imagines such a disgrace to be its essence. Art, on the contrary, as often hugs unreason for fear of losing its inspiration, and forgets that it is itself a rational principle of creation and order. Morality is thus reduced to a necessary evil and art to a vain good, all for want of harmony among human impulses. If the passions arose in season, if perception fed only on those things which action should be adjusted to, turning them, while action proceeded, into the substance of ideas—then all conduct would be voluntary and enlightened, all speculation would be practical, all perceptions beautiful, and all operations arts. The Life of Reason would then be universal.

To approach this ideal, so far as art is concerned, would involve diffusing its processes and no longer confining them to a set of dead and unproductive objects called works of art.

**Good taste demands that art should be rational, *i. e.*, harmonious with all other interests.**

Why art, the most vital and generative of activities, should produce a set of abstract images, monuments to lost intuitions, is a curious mystery. Nature gives her products life, and they are at least equal to their sources in dignity. Why should mind, the actualisation of nature's powers, produce something so inferior to itself, reverting in its expression to material being, so that its witnesses seem so many fossils with which it strews its path? What we call museums—mausoleums, rather, in which a dead art heaps up its remains—are those the places where the Muses intended to dwell? We do not keep in show-cases the coins current in the world. A living art does not produce curiosities to be collected but spiritual necessities to be diffused.

A mere  
"work of  
art" a  
baseless  
artifice.

Artificial art, made to be exhibited, is something gratuitous and sophisticated, and the greater part of men's concern about it is affectation. There is a genuine pleasure in planning a work, in modelling and painting it; there is a pleasure in showing it to a sympathetic friend, who associates himself in this way with the artist's technical experiment and with his interpretation of some human episode; and there might be a satisfaction in seeing the work set up in some appropriate space for which it was designed, where its decorative quality might enrich the scene, and the curious passer-by might stop to decipher it. The pleasures proper to an ingenuous artist are spontaneous and human; but his works, once delivered to his patrons, are household furniture for the state. Set up to-day, they are outworn and replaced to-morrow, like trees in the parks or officers in the government. A community where art was native and flourishing would have an uninterrupted supply of such ornaments, furnished by its citizens in the same modest and cheerful spirit in which they furnish other commodities. Every craft has its dignity, and the decorative and monumental crafts certainly have their own; but such art is neither singular nor pre-eminent, and a statesman or reformer who should raise somewhat the level of thought or practice in the state would do an infinitely greater service.

The joys of creating are not confined, moreover, to those who create things without practical uses. The merely æsthetic, like rhyme and fireworks, is not the only subject that can engage a playful fancy or be planned with a premonition of beautiful effects. Architecture may be useful, sculpture commemorative, poetry reflective, even music, by its expression, religious or martial. In a word, practical exigencies, in call-

ing forth the arts, give them moral functions which it is a pleasure to see them fulfil. Works may not be æsthetic in their purpose, and yet that fact may be a ground for their being doubly delightful in execution and doubly beautiful in effect. A richer plexus of emotions is concerned in producing or contemplating something humanly necessary than something idly conceived. What is very rightly called a *sense* for fitness is a vital experience, involving æsthetic satisfactions and æsthetic shocks. The more numerous the rational harmonies are which are present to the mind, the more sensible movements will be going on there to give immediate delight; for the perception or expectation of an ulterior good is a present good also. Accordingly nothing can so well call forth or sustain attention as what has a complex structure relating it to many complex interests. A work woven out of precious threads has a deep pertinence and glory; the artist who creates it does not need to surrender his practical and moral sense in order to indulge his imagination.

The truth is that mere sensation or mere emotion is an indignity to a mature human being. When we eat, we demand a pleasant vista, flowers, or conversation, and failing these we take refuge in a newspaper. The monks, knowing that men should not feed silently like stalled oxen, appointed some one to read aloud in the refectory; and the Fathers, obeying the same civilised instinct, had contrived in their theology intelligible points of attachment for religious emotion. A refined mind finds as little happiness in love without friendship as in sensuality without love; it may succumb to both, but it accepts neither. What is true of mere sensibility is no less true of mere fancy. The Arabian Nights—futile enough in any case—would be absolutely intolerable if they contained no Oriental manners, no human passions, and no convinced epicureanism behind their miracles and their tattle. Any absolute work of art which serves no further purpose than to stimulate an emotion has about it a certain luxurious and visionary taint. We leave it with a blank mind, and a pang bubbles up from the very fountain of pleasures. Art, so long as it needs to be a dream, will never cease to prove a disappointment. Its facile cruelty, its narcotic abstraction, can never sweeten the evils we return to at home; it can liberate half the mind only by leaving the other half in abeyance. In the mere artist, too, there is always something that falls short of the gentleman and that defeats the man.

Human uses  
give to works  
of art their  
highest  
expression and  
charm.

Surely it is not the artistic impulse in itself that involves such lack of equilibrium. To impress a meaning and a rational form on matter is one of the most masterful of actions. The trouble lies in the barren and superficial character of this imposed form: fine art is a play of appearance. Appearance, for a critical philosophy, is distinguished from reality by its separation from the context of things, by its immediacy and insignificance. A play of appearance is accordingly some little closed circle in experience, some dream in which we lose ourselves by ignoring most of our interests, and from which we awake into a world in which that lost episode plays no further part and leaves no heirs. Art as mankind has hitherto practised it falls largely under this head and too much resembles an opiate or a stimulant. Life and history are not thereby rendered better in their principle, but a mere ideal is extracted out of them and presented for our delectation in some cheap material, like words or marble. The only precious materials are flesh and blood, for these alone can defend and propagate the ideal which has once informed them.

**The sad values  
of appearance.**

Artistic creation shows at this point a great inferiority to natural reproduction, since its product is dead. Fine art shapes inert matter and peoples the mind with impotent ghosts. What influence it has—for every event has consequences—is not pertinent to its inspiration. The art of the past is powerless even to create similar art in the present, unless similar conditions recur independently. The moments snatched for art have been generally interludes in life and its products parasites in nature, the body of them being materially functionless and the soul merely represented. To exalt fine art into a truly ideal activity we should have to knit it more closely with other rational functions, so that to beautify things might render them more useful and to represent them most imaginatively might be to see them in their truth. Something of the sort has been actually attained by the noblest arts in their noblest phases. A Sophocles or a Leonardo dominates his dreamful vehicle and works upon the real world by its means. These small centres, where interfunctional harmony is attained, ought to expand and cover the whole field. Art, like religion, needs to be absorbed in the Life of Reason.

What might help to bring about this consummation would be, on the one side, more knowledge; on the other, better taste. When a mind is filled with important and true ideas and sees the actual relations of

things, it cannot relish pictures of the world which wantonly misrepresent it. Myth and metaphor remain beautiful so long as they are the most adequate or graphic means available for expressing the facts, but so soon as they cease to be needful and sincere they become false finery. The same thing happens in the plastic arts. Unless they spring from love of their subject, and employ imagination only to penetrate into that subject and interpret it with a more inward sympathy and truth, they become conventional and overgrown with mere ornament. They then seem ridiculous to any man who can truly conceive what they represent. So in putting antique heroes on the stage we nowadays no longer tolerate a modern costume, because the externals of ancient life are too well known to us; but in the seventeenth century people demanded in such personages intelligence and nobleness, since these were virtues which the ancients were clothed with in their thought. A knowledge that should be at once full and appreciative would evidently demand fidelity in both matters. Knowledge, where it exists, undermines satisfaction in what does violence to truth, and it renders such representations grotesque. If knowledge were general and adequate the fine arts would accordingly be brought round to expressing reality.

At the same time, if the rendering of reality is to remain artistic, it must still study to satisfy the senses; but as this study would now accompany every activity, taste would grow vastly more subtle and exacting. Whatever any man said or did or made, he would be alive to its æsthetic quality, and beauty would be a pervasive ingredient in happiness. No work would be called, in a special sense, a work of art, for all works would be such intrinsically; and even instinctive mimicry and reproduction would themselves operate, not when mischief or idleness prompted, but when some human occasion and some general utility made the exercise of such skill entirely delightful. Thus there would need to be no division of mankind into mechanical blind workers and half-demented poets, and no separation of useful from fine art, such as people make who have understood neither the nature nor the ultimate reward of human action. All arts would be practised together and merged in the art of life, the only one wholly useful or fine among them.

**They need  
to be made  
prophetic of  
practical  
goods,**

**which in turn  
would be  
suffused with  
beauty.**

## CHAPTER XI

### ART AND HAPPINESS

The greatest enemy harmony can have is a premature settlement in which some essential force is wholly disregarded. This excluded element will rankle in the flesh; it will bring about no end of disorders until it is finally recognised and admitted into a truly comprehensive regimen. The more numerous the interests which a premature settlement combines the greater inertia will it oppose to reform, and the more self-righteously will it condemn the innocent pariah that it leaves outside.

*Æsthetic harmonies are parodies of real ones,*

Art has had to suffer much Pharisaical opposition of this sort. Sometimes political systems, sometimes religious zeal, have excluded it from their programme, thereby making their programme unjust and inadequate. Yet of all premature settlements the most premature is that which the fine arts are wont to establish. A harmony in appearance only, one that touches the springs of nothing and has no power to propagate itself, is so partial and momentary a good that we may justly call it an illusion. To gloat on rhythms and declamations, to live lost in imaginary passions and histrionic woes, is an unmanly life, cut off from practical dominion and from rational happiness. A lovely dream is an excellent thing in itself, but it leaves the world no less a chaos and makes it by contrast seem even darker than it did. By dwelling in its mock heaven art may inflict on men the same kind of injury that any irresponsible passion or luxurious vice might inflict. For this reason it sometimes passes for a misfortune in a family if a son insists on being a poet or an actor. Such gifts suggest too much incompetence and such honours too much disrepute. A man does not avoid real evils by having visionary pleasures, but besides exposing himself to the real evils quite unprotected, he probably adds fancied evils to them in generous measure. He becomes supersensitive, envious, hysterical; the world, which was perhaps carried away at first by his ecstasies, at the next

moment merely applauds his performance, then criticises it superciliously, and very likely ends by forgetting it altogether.

Thus the fine arts are seldom an original factor in human progress. If they express moral and political greatness, and serve to enhance it, they acquire a certain dignity; but so soon as this expressive function is abandoned they grow meretricious. The artist becomes an abstracted trifler, and the public is divided into two camps: the dilettanti, who dote on the artist's affectations, and the rabble, who pay him to grow coarse. Both influences degrade him and he helps to foster both. An atmosphere of dependence and charlatantry gathers about the artistic attitude and spreads with its influence. Religion, philosophy, and manners may in turn be infected with this spirit, being reduced to a voluntary hallucination or petty flattery. Romanticism, ritualism, æstheticism, symbolism are names this disease has borne at different times as it appeared in different circles or touched a different object. Needless to say that the arts themselves are the first to suffer. That beauty which should have been an inevitable smile on the face of society, an overflow of genuine happiness and power, has to be imported, stimulated artificially, and applied from without; so that art becomes a sickly ornament for an ugly existence.

Nevertheless, æsthetic harmony, so incomplete in its basis as to be fleeting and deceptive, is most complete in its form. This so partial synthesis is a synthesis indeed, and just because settlements made in fancy are altogether premature, and ignore almost everything in the world, in type they can be the most perfect settlements. The artist, being a born lover of the good, a natural breeder of perfections, clings to his insight. If the world calls his accomplishments vain, he can, with better reason, call vain the world's cumbrous instrumentalities, by which nothing clearly good is attained. Appearances, he may justly urge, are alone actual. All forces, substances, realities, and principles are inferred and potential only and in the moral scale mere instruments to bring perfect appearances about. To have grasped such an appearance, to have embodied a form in matter, is to have justified for the first time whatever may underlie appearance and to have put reality to some use. It is to have begun to live. As the standard of perfection is internal and is measured by the satisfaction felt in realising it, every artist has tasted, in his activity, what activity essentially is. He has moulded existence into the likeness of thought and lost himself in that ideal achievement which,

yet prototypes  
of true  
perfections.

so to speak, beckons all things into being. Even if a thousand misfortunes await him and a final disappointment, he has been happy once. He may be inclined to rest his case there and challenge practical people to justify in the same way the faith that is in them.

That a moment of the most perfect happiness should prove a source of unhappiness is no paradox to any one who has observed the world. A hope, a passion, a crime, is a flash of vitality. It is inwardly congruous with the will that breeds it, yet the happiness it pictures is so partial that even while it is felt it may be overshadowed by sinister forebodings. A certain unrest and insecurity may consciously harass it. With time, or by a slight widening in the field of interest, this submerged unhappiness may rise to the surface. If, as is probable, it is caused or increased by the indulgence which preceded, then the only moment in which a good was tasted, the only vista that had opened congenially before the mind, will prove a new and permanent curse. In this way love often misleads individuals, ambition cities, and religion whole races of men. That art, also, should often be an indulgence, a blind that hides reality from ill-balanced minds and ultimately increases their confusion, is by no means incompatible with art's ideal essence. On the contrary, such a result is inevitable when ideality is carried at all far upon a narrow basis. The more genuine and excellent the vision the greater havoc it makes if, being inadequate, it establishes itself authoritatively in the soul. Art, in the better sense, is a condition of happiness for a practical and labouring creature, since without art he remains a slave; but it is one more source of unhappiness for him so long as it is not squared with his necessary labours and merely interrupts them. It then alienates him from his world without being able to carry him effectually into a better one.

**Pros and cons of detached indulgences.**

The artist is in many ways like a child. He seems happy, because his life is spontaneous, yet he is not competent to secure his own good. To be truly happy he must be well bred, reared from the cradle, as it were, under propitious influences, so that he may have learned to love what conduces to his development. In that rare case his art will expand as his understanding ripens; he will not need to repent and begin again on a lower key. The ideal artist, like the ideal philosopher, has all time and all existence for his virtual theme. Fed by the world, he can help to mould it, and his insight is a kind of wisdom, preparing

**The happy imagination is one initially in line with things,**

him as science might for using the world well and making it more fruitful. He can then be happy, not merely in the sense of having now and then an ecstatic moment, but happy in having light and resource enough within him to cope steadily with real things and to leave upon them the vestige of his mind.

One effect of growing experience is to render what is unreal uninteresting. Momentous alternatives in life are so numerous and the possibilities they open up so varied that imagination finds enough employment of a historic and practical sort in trying to seize them. A child plans Towers of Babel; a mature architect, in planning, would lose all interest if he were bidden to disregard gravity and economy. The conditions of existence, after they are known and accepted, become conditions for the only pertinent beauty. In each place, for each situation, the plastic mind finds an appropriate ideal. It need not go afield to import something exotic. It need make no sacrifices to whim and to personal memories. It rather breeds out of the given problem a new and singular solution, thereby exercising greater invention than would be requisite for framing an arbitrary ideal and imposing it at all costs on every occasion.

In other words, a happy result can be secured in art, as in life, only by intelligence. Intelligence consists in having read the heart and deciphered the promptings latent there, and then in reading the world and deciphering its law and constitution, to see how and where the heart's ideal may be embodied. Our troubles come from the colossal blunders made by our ancestors (who had worse ancestors of their own) in both these interpretations, blunders which have come down to us in our blood and in our institutions. The vices thus transmitted cloud our intelligence. We fail in practical affairs when we ignore the conditions of action and we fail in works of imagination when we concoct what is fantastic and without roots in the world.

The value of art lies in making people happy, first in practising the art and then in possessing its product. This observation might seem needless, and ought to be so; but if we compare it with what is commonly said on these subjects, we must confess that it may often be denied and more often, perhaps, may not be understood. Happiness is something men ought to pursue, although they seldom do so; they are drawn away from it at first by foolish impulses and afterwards by

and brought  
always closer  
to them by  
experience.

Reason is the  
principle of  
both art and  
happiness.

perverse laws. To secure happiness conduct would have to remain spontaneous while it learned not to be criminal; but the fanatical attachment of men, now to a fierce liberty, now to a false regimen, keeps them barbarous and wretched. A rational pursuit of happiness—which is one thing with progress or with the Life of Reason—would embody that natural piety which leaves to the episodes of life their inherent values, mourning death, celebrating love, sanctifying civic traditions, enjoying and correcting nature's ways. To discriminate happiness is therefore the very soul of art, which expresses experience without distorting it, as those political or metaphysical tyrannies distort it which sanctify unhappiness. A free mind, like a creative imagination, rejoices at the harmonies it can find or make between man and nature; and, where it finds none, it solves the conflict so far as it may and then notes and endures it with a shudder.

A morality organised about the human heart in an ingenuous and sincere fashion would involve every fine art and would render the world pervasively beautiful—beautiful in its artificial products and beautiful in its underlying natural terrors. The closer we keep to elementary human needs and to the natural agencies that may satisfy them, the closer we are to beauty. Industry, sport, and science, with the perennial intercourse and passions of men, swarm with incentives to expression, because they are everywhere creating new moulds of being and compelling the eye to observe those forms and to recast them ideally. Art is simply an adequate industry; it arises when industry is carried out to the satisfaction of all human demands, even of those incidental sensuous demands which we call æsthetic and which a brutal industry, in its haste, may despise or ignore.

Arts responsive in this way to all human nature would be beautiful according to reason and might remain beautiful long. Poetic beauty touches the world whenever it attains some unfeigned harmony either with sense or with reason; and the more unfeignedly human happiness was made the test of all institutions and pursuits, the more beautiful they would be, having more numerous points of fusion with the mind, and fusing with it more profoundly. To distinguish and to create beauty would then be no art relegated to a few abstracted spirits, playing with casual fancies; it would be a habit inseparable from practical efficiency. All operations, all affairs, would then be viewed in the light of ultimate interests, and in their deep relation to human good. The arts would thus recover their Homeric glory; touching human fate as they clearly

would, they would borrow something of its grandeur and pathos, and yet the interest that worked in them would be warm, because it would remain unmistakably animal and sincere.

The principle that all institutions should subserve happiness runs deeper than any cult for art and lays the foundation on which the latter might rest

**Only a rational society can have sure and perfect arts.**

safely. If social structure were rational its free expression would be so too. Many observers, with no particular philosophy to adduce, feel that the arts among us are somehow impotent, and they look for a better inspiration, now to ancient models, now to the raw phenomena of life. A dilettante may, indeed, summon inspiration whence he will; and a virtuoso will never lack some material to keep him busy; but if what is hoped for is a genuine, native, inevitable art, a great revolution would first have to be worked in society. We should have to abandon our vested illusions, our irrational religions and patriotisms and schools of art, and to discover instead our genuine needs, the forms of our possible happiness. To call for such self-examination seems revolutionary only because we start from a sophisticated system, a system resting on traditional fashions and superstitions, by which the will of the living generation is misinterpreted and betrayed. To shake off that system would not subvert order but rather institute order for the first time; it would be an *Instauratio Magna*, a setting things again on their feet.

We in Christendom are so accustomed to artificial ideals and to artificial institutions, kept up to express them, that we hardly conceive how anomalous our situation is, sorely as we may suffer from it. We found academies and museums, as we found missions, to fan a flame that constantly threatens to die out for lack of natural fuel. Our overt ideals are parasites in the body politic, while the ideals native to the body politic, those involved in our natural structure and situation, are either stifled by that alien incubus, leaving civic life barbarous, or else force their way up, unremarked or not justly honoured as ideals. Industry and science and social amenities, with all the congruous comforts and appurtenances of contemporary life, march on their way, as if they had nothing to say to the spirit, which remains entangled in a cobweb of dead traditions. An idle pottering of the fancy over obsolete forms—theological, dramatic, or plastic—makes that by-play to the sober business of life which men call their art or their religion; and the more functionless and gratuitous this by-play is the more those who indulge in it think they are idealists. They feel they are champions of

what is most precious in the world, as a sentimental lady might fancy herself a lover of flowers when she pressed them in a book instead of planting their seeds in the garden.

It is clear that gratuitous and functionless habits cannot bring happiness; they do not constitute an activity at once spontaneous and beneficent, such as noble art is an instance of. Those habits may indeed give pleasure; they may bring extreme excitement, as madness notably does, though it is in the highest degree functionless and gratuitous. Nor is such by-play without consequences, some of which might conceivably be fortunate. What is functionless is so called for being worthless from some ideal point of view, and not conducing to the particular life considered. But nothing real is dissociated from the universal flux; everything—madness and all unmeaning cross-currents in being—count in the general process and discharge somewhere, not without effect, the substance they have drawn for a moment into their little vortex. So our vain arts and unnecessary religions are not without real effects and not without a certain internal vitality. When life is profoundly disorganised it may well happen that only in detached episodes, only in moments snatched for dreaming in, can men see the blue or catch a glimpse of something like the ideal. In that case their esteem for their irrelevant visions may be well grounded, and their thin art and far-fetched religion may really constitute what is best in their experience. In a pathetic way these poor enthusiasms may be justified, but only because the very conception of a rational life lies entirely beyond the horizon.

**Why art is now empty and unstable.**

It is no marvel, when art is a brief truancy from rational practice, that the artist himself should be a vagrant, and at best, as it were, an infant prodigy. The wings of genius serve him only for an escape, enabling him to skirt the perilous edge of madness and of mystical abysses. But such an erratic workman does not deserve the name of artist or master; he has burst convention only to break it, not to create a new convention more in harmony with nature. His originality, though it may astonish for a moment, will in the end be despised and will find no thoroughfare. He will meantime be wretched himself, torn from the roots of his being by that cruel, unmeaning inspiration; or, if too rapt to see his own plight, he will be all the more pitied by practical men, who cannot think it a real blessing to be lost in joys that do not strengthen the character and yield nothing for posterity.

**Anomalous character of the irrational artist.**

Art, in its nobler acceptance, is an achievement, not an indulgence. It prepares the world in some sense to receive the soul, and the soul to master the world; it disentangles those threads in each that can be woven into the other. That the artist should be eccentric, homeless, dreamful may almost seem a natural law, but it is none the less a scandal. An artist's business is not really to cut fantastical capers or be licensed to play the fool. His business is simply that of every keen soul to build well when it builds, and to speak well when it speaks, giving practice everywhere the greatest possible affinity to the situation, the most delicate adjustment to every faculty it affects. The wonder of an artist's performance grows with the range of his penetration, with the instinctive sympathy that makes him, in his mortal isolation, considerate of other men's fate and a great diviner of their secret, so that his work speaks to them kindly, with a deeper assurance than they could have spoken with to themselves. And the joy of his great sanity, the power of his adequate vision, is not the less intense because he can lend it to others and has borrowed it from a faithful study of the world.

If happiness is the ultimate sanction of art, art in turn is the best instrument of happiness. In art more directly than in other activities man's self-expression is cumulative and finds an immediate reward; for it alters the material conditions of sentience so that sentience becomes at once more delightful and more significant. In industry man is still servile, preparing the materials he is to use in action. In action itself, though he is free, he exerts his influence on a living and treacherous medium and sees the issue at each moment drift farther and farther from his intent. In science he is an observer, preparing himself for action in another way, by studying its results and conditions. But in art he is at once competent and free; he is creative. He is not troubled by his materials, because he has assimilated them and may take them for granted; nor is he concerned with the chance complexion of affairs in the actual world, because he is making the world over, not merely considering how it grew or how it will consent to grow in future. Nothing, accordingly, could be more delightful than genuine art, nor more free from remorse and the sting of vanity. Art springs so completely from the heart of man that it makes everything speak to him in his own language; it reaches, nevertheless, so truly to the heart of nature that it co-operates with her, becomes a parcel of her creative material energy, and builds by her instinctive hand. If the various

**True art  
measures and  
completes  
happiness.**

formative impulses afoot in the world never opposed stress to stress and made no havoc with one another, nature might be called an unconscious artist. In fact, just where such a formative impulse finds support from the environment, a consciousness supervenes. If that consciousness is adequate enough to be prophetic, an art arises. Thus the emergence of arts out of instincts is the token and exact measure of nature's success and of mortal happiness.

