

A R T

I

Art is not an aesthetic but a rhetorical activity.

(Ananda Coomaraswamy)

THE Incarnation may be said to have for Its object the drawing of men from misery to happiness. Being the act of God It is the greatest of all rhetorical acts and therefore the greatest of all works of art. And as from the fatherhood of God all paternity is named in heaven and earth, so from His creative power all art is named. In the Incarnation we do not only know a fact of history or a truth of religion; we behold a work of art, a thing made. As a fact of history It is the most interesting and illuminating of all historical happenings. As a truth of religion It is of primary and fundamental importance. But It is as a work of art that It has a saving power, power to persuade, power to heal, power to rescue, power to redeem.

But the word 'art,' in spite of the obsequious worship which the modern world gives to the works of painters and sculptors and musicians, is not a holy word in these days. Art, the word, which primarily means skill and thus human skill and thus human skill in doing and making, has, in literary circles and among the upper classes, come to mean only the fine arts, and the fine arts have ceased to be rhetorical and are now exclusively aesthetic; they aim only to give pleasure. Hence, however cultured we may be and however refined our pleasures, we do not associate the word art with holiness, or holiness with art. If we associate holiness with art at all it is only with that lowest form of art the 'holy picture,' the cheap mass-produced reproductions we distribute as pious gestures. But art, 'high art,' the sort we put in museums and picture galleries, has

become a pleasure thing; it is put there to amuse. Eat, drink and be merry for to-morrow we die, and the utmost endeavour of our educators is to see to it that our merriment shall be 'high class.' If we put a painting of the Madonna in our art gallery it is not because the painter has succeeded in conveying a specially clear view of her significance but simply because he has succeeded in making a specially pleasing arrangement of materials. A Raphael Madonna! But it is as 'a Raphael' that we honour it and not as a Madonna; for Raphael is, or was until recently, held by the pundits to be particularly good at making pleasing arrangements and we are no longer concerned with meanings.

But 'in the beginning was a thought, not a thing,' and therefore it is that intelligibility is the final cause of all things. 'Pleasure perfects the operation,' but is not the object of working. Final happiness consists in the joy of knowing and not in the satisfaction of sense, however refined. Nevertheless, we must not undervalue or eschew pleasure as though it were evil. On the contrary, exactly as in our physical life, in eating and drinking and all other bodily activities, when there is no pleasure in the work we know there is something wrong with it, and when there is nothing pleasing in the result we know it has been badly done, so it is with things made—pleasure perfects the operation. And there is even pleasure in pain when the pain is the necessary accompaniment or companion of good work. Thus there is satisfaction in the pain of ordinary physical labour and, in the heights of holiness, there is pleasure in the agony of maternity and of martyrdom. 'A man should have joy in his labour,' says the Preacher, 'and this is his portion'; nevertheless, art remains a rhetorical and not an aesthetic activity.

'That while we know God by sight, we may be drawn by Him to the love of things unseen . . . ' and the Word was made flesh.' It is clear, therefore, that it is as a thing made, a thing seen, a thing known precisely because thus

made and seen, that we must first of all consider the Incarnation. 'That we may be drawn,' in these words¹ the rhetorical nature of the life and work of Our Lord and therefore its nature as a work of art is stated. And the applications should be clear also. Man is a social animal. He is not self-sufficient. He cannot live without his neighbours; they cannot live without him. But the object of life is 'your sanctification.' Therefore all our neighbourliness must have that end in view and therefore we are all evangelists and all our works are in their true nature evangelical; they have for their object, their final cause, their end, the winning of beatitude; for each man his own beatitude and for each man the beatitude of his friends and neighbours; my own greatest happiness and enjoyment, yes; the greatest happiness of the greatest number, yes; to be happy with Him eternally.

In these statements I am merely stating facts; such and such is the nature of our life and of our work. But it is necessary to avoid the implication that because all work is of its nature evangelical that therefore we must always be consciously thinking of it as such. Provided that we know it to be so and order our lives accordingly, we may well forget all about it. We may even suppose Our Lord, though always 'about My Father's business,' was not always discursively thinking of it. 'He prays best,' said St. Anthony of the desert, 'who does not know that he is praying.' And similarly, he preaches best who does not know that he is preaching and, even, he loves best who does not know that he is loving. And thus we may go on to say that those works are best which are not labelled holy, which are holy in their nature and without advertisement. The Gospels make a holy book, the most successfully rhetorical of all books, but they are not sicklied

¹ But the word 'drawn' is not strong enough. The Latin is *rapiamur*. The sight of Him is ravishing, not attractive merely.

o'er with the pale cast of religiosity; a mere literary man can enjoy them and not know that he is being 'got at.' We may suspect that Our Lord's life was the same; when we meet Him we are not embarrassed and repelled by self-conscious piety in Him.

It should be clear, therefore, that in proclaiming the essentially evangelical nature of all human works we are not suggesting that the whole world ought to turn itself into one great 'church furniture' shop. The contrary would be nearer the truth; we ought rather to abolish church furniture shops altogether; for just as prayer almost ceases to be prayer when we know that we are praying, so 'church' art ceases to be suitable for churches. The whole point is that human works should be holy, for holiness is properly their criterion, and holiness is not simply that which is so called.

II

'The invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things which are made.'

The Word was made flesh; that is to say: 'the day spring from on high has visited us,' and in our works we reach nearest to that highness when, in a manner of speaking, we carry on that visitation. But we are not to suppose that because pictures and sculptures and poetry are or may be more explicitly rhetorical than chairs and tables that there is or need be any greater holiness in works of fine art than in other works. We know God by sight in the person of our Lord, but we know Him by sight in and through *all* His works. When God looked at the world of His creation 'He saw that it was good.' But 'one alone is good,' God Himself. Therefore God sees Himself reflected in His creation, and we may also see Him thus. His creation is not Himself but it is His word, not *the* Word but *His* Word, a word that we may hear.

*... emittit eloquium suum terrae;
velociter currit sermo ejus.*

Thus again we are confronted by a rhetorical activity. In His creation God invites our attention, draws us to Him, craves our love. And we may carry on the same work; we may collaborate with Him in creating.

That is the difference between art and science. Science is analytical, descriptive, informative. Man does not live by bread alone, but by science he attempts to do so. Hence the deadliness of all that is purely scientific. 'Industry without art is brutality,' said John Ruskin. And it is for this reason that through science and the industries to which science has been rigorously applied we approach rather the works of the brutes than of men. The work of the bee building its comb is simply the application of science to industry. Whether done by what we call instinct or by conscious calculation there is no difference in the nature of the work. In either case only that is done which is demanded by the physical necessities of the occasion. This is not to say that the work of scientists and scientific workers (engineers, mechanics, chemists, financiers) is despicable; on the contrary, it is admirable, as admirable as that of bees and ants; and bicycles and wireless sets, when they are truly themselves and not camouflaged to look like human works, arouse in us the same admiration as do our own livers and lights—wonderful contrivances, ingenious apparatuses, but essentially brutal in kind.

Here it will be thought that writing as an artist I have no proper respect for other sorts of works. But it should be noted that I am not claiming a special loftiness for a small class of special persons for, in a normal society, one, that is to say, composed of responsible persons, responsible for what they do and for what they make, 'the artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is a special kind of artist.' There is no such hard distinction between the fine arts and others as there is in modern England and therefore there is no such hard distinction between what is useful physically and what is useful mentally. In such

a society if science and its applications were less worshipped, for it and they would be less profitable, so also would art and artists be, for it and they would have ceased to be eccentric. Artists no less than Scientists have got to come off their high horses. The fact remains: art is a normal human activity as scientifically controlled industry is not; for making things by human means for human use is the normal occupation of human beings, while the quantitative mass-production methods which are the natural consequence of the scientific method are in their nature abnormal and sub-human. Art as a virtue of the practical intelligence is the well-making of what is needed—whether it be drain-pipes or paintings and sculptures and musical symphonies of the highest religious import—and science is that which enables us to deal faithfully with technique. As art is the hand-maid of religion, science is the hand-maid of art.²

What is the rhetorical value of a mass-produced tea-pot? To what end does it lead? Such questions are difficult to answer. It is useless to say a man can be a very good Catholic in a factory. That won't help him to give rhetorical value to the work he does 'on the belt.' And for the same reason it is useless to say that science has alleviated much physical pain and labour; moreover, for one

² Incidentally we should escape such monstrosities as Renaissance architecture which, for all its charm, is simply theatrical flattery of human vanity on the one hand, and, on the other, is woefully devoid of scientific intelligence. We are mightily pleased when we see St. Peter's dome or the dome of St. Paul's and are not aware of the chains that bind them round and the innumerable sacrifices of good construction made by their architects for the sake of dramatic appearance. We should avoid the absurdity of machine-made ornamentation and the indecency of sprawling wens like London; and painters and sculptors, who, under our present financier-run tyranny, are compelled to be simply mountebanks or lap-dogs and their works a sort of hot-house flower, would again find themselves in normal employment as members of a building gang.

pain alleviated, scientifically controlled industry has brought into existence ten pains and miseries or a hundred that did not previously exist. Not all our skill in surgery and medicine can compensate for the dehumanization and depersonalization of life that industrialism necessarily connotes or the unholiness of industrial products. It is not easy to describe a negative. Bad is the privation of good; unholiness is the privation of holiness. On the other hand, neither is it easy to say precisely in what the goodness, the sanctity of pre-industrial or non-industrial things consists. All industrial products, however saleable, however flattering to our vanity, however useful in an ephemeral sort of way, are in their nature unholy or, if it will ease the reader's mind, lacking in holiness; but not all the works of men in other periods, not all the works of men outside the factory system are holy. There has always been much bad work done; for there have always been selfishness and vanity and greed, and there have always been stupidity and insensitiveness and foolish nonsense. But there is at least this distinction between industrialism and human labour; in the former, holiness is ruled out both from the life and the work; in the latter, holiness is a constant potentiality. And so it is that, in spite of the much bad work done in medieval England, or China or Peru, we may see constantly breaking out, so to say, those qualities which I group together under the general name of holiness. We are reluctant to admit these things, we are so enthralled by our material successes, but we are not reluctant to fill our museums and galleries with specimens of Chinese pottery, ancient cottage nick-nacks and paintings and sculptures of all races and ages. We are not all aesthetes, dotting on lines and colours and the relations of masses. We are not all archaeologists, talking about dates and the history of cultures. 'That which being seen, pleases,' yes. And we are all capable of pleasure; it is part of our equipment, for pleasure of the mind attracts us to the truth. We are social animals and we

are all interested in history. But it is not aesthetics or ancient history that endears things to us.

Endears! Perhaps that word may be a key for us. But I do not mean a sentimental endearment such as that which prompts us to treasure a child's lock of hair or Ruskin's blue 'tie' in a museum; I mean such endearment as pertains to the intrinsic quality of things. It is difficult to separate the sentimental from the intrinsic, and it is better so; for to be devoid of sentiment is to be inhuman and even ungodly. But there is no need to separate them. What is important is that we should keep things in their proper hierarchy. Man is matter and spirit, and the primacy is the spirit. There is no formula for good works, whether of doing or making. It is the meaning that matters, and the meaning of the Universe is Emmanuel, God with us.

Apply it how you like. And it applies in all times and places. It is not only the Christians who have lived with God. Though we know Him 'by sight,' others have lived with Him in close and intimate 'correspondence,' and *we* have often turned away our eyes.

What is the rhetorical value of a tea-pot? In what way can a tea-pot minister to salvation? Here it becomes obvious that the word rhetoric does not simply mean verbal eloquence or didacticism.³ And as he prays best who does not know that he is praying, so that craftsman ministers best who does not know that he is ministering. All that is required is that he shall be a responsible workman. As such he may contribute to the good life and the good life is that which leads heavenwards. There is no need that we should all be self-conscious prigs. There is no need to rule out gaiety, or bodily enjoyment, or even buf-

³ 'Rhetoric or Art of Oratory, in which eloquence is thought of not as an end in itself, or art for art's sake, or to display the artist's skill, but as *the art of effective communication.*' (Italics mine) Coomaraswamy.

foonery, and we should learn to appreciate what we may call God's own coarse humour. God is no more refined than He is a 'South Place' ethicist. Nature 'red in tooth and claw' is as much in accord with His will as small children singing hymns. Rocky mountains, grassy downs, rats, germs and dung, all are things singing to us of Him; and when we slip on orange peel we may suppose He enjoys our laughter.

Art is a rhetorical activity—this is easily understood when we think of books and dramatic plays, of poetry and music, of pictures and sculptures. And if we realize that there is no dividing line between such things and the work of blacksmiths and navvies, we shall see how all things work together for good, and that is to say for God.

'I asked the earth and it said: "I am not He," and all things that are in the earth confessed the same. I asked the sea, the deeps and all creeping things, and they answered: "We are not your God, seek Him above us." I asked the subtle air, and with all its inhabitants this air made answer: "Anaximenes is deceived, I am not your God." I asked the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, "Neither are we," said they, "the God you seek." And to all who stood before those portals of my soul, my senses five, I said: "As to my God you say you are not He; but tell me now somewhat of what He is." And with a mighty voice did they cry out: "It is He that made us."'

(Confessions of St. Augustine, Book X.)

Dante speaks to us of God, and so do the daisies, the dew-drops and the dung. And if that is so, is it not even more obvious that pots and pans may do so? For the works of men and women carry the work of creation on to a higher level than that of what we call Nature. We are ourselves creators. Through us exist things which God himself could not otherwise have made. The 'natural' world is God's present to Himself. Our works are His

works, but they are also in a strict sense our own, and if we present them to him they are *our* presents to Him, and not simply His to Himself. They are free-will offerings. And, indeed all things should thus be offered up. There is, properly, no such thing as a secular world. The banker's world which we have made or by which we are held prisoners, is a monstrosity, a disease, a product of sin. In that world all things are made for sale. Labour itself is a commodity to be bought and sold. In such a world we may offer ourselves as burnt offerings, but we cannot offer praises, we cannot praise God in our works.

What is a work of art? A word made flesh. That is the truth, in the clearest sense of the text. A word; that which emanates from mind. Made flesh; a thing, a thing seen, a thing known, the immeasurable translated into terms of the measurable. From the highest to the lowest that is the substance of works of art. And it is a rhetorical activity; for whether by the ministry of angels or of saints or by the ministry of common workmen, grave-diggers, we are all led heavenwards.

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