

Discoveries : W. B. Yeats

Discoveries ; a volume of essays

W. B. Yeats

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PROPHET, PRIEST AND KING

The little theatrical company I write my plays for had come to a west of Ireland town and was to give a performance in an old ball-room, for there was no other room big enough. I went there from a neighbouring country house and arriving a little before the players, tried to open a window. My hands were black with dirt in a moment and presently a pane of glass and a part of the window frame came out in my hands. Everything in this room was half in ruins, the rotten boards cracked under my feet, and our new proscenium and the new boards of the platform looked out of place, and yet the room was not really old, in spite of the musicians' gallery over the stage. It had been built by some romantic or philanthropic landlord some three or four generations ago, and was a memory of we knew not what unfinished scheme.

From there I went to look for the players and called for information on a young priest, who had invited them, and taken upon himself the finding of an audience. He lived in a high house with other priests, and as I went in I noticed with a whimsical pleasure a broken pane of glass in the fan-light over the door, for he had once told me the story of an old woman who a good many years ago quarrelled with the bishop, got drunk, and hurled a stone through the painted glass. He was a clever man, who read Meredith and Ibsen, but some of his books had been packed in the fire-grate by his house-keeper, instead of the customary view of an Italian lake or the coloured tissue-paper. The players, who had been giving a performance in a neighbouring town, had not yet come, or were unpacking their costumes and properties at the hotel he had recommended them. We should have time, he said, to go through the half-ruined town and to visit the convent schools and the cathedral, where, owing to his influence, two of our young Irish sculptors had been set to carve an altar and the heads of pillars. I had only heard of this work, and I found its strangeness and simplicity — one of them had been Rodin's pupil — could not make me forget the meretriciousness of the architecture and the commercial commonplace of the inlaid pavements. The new movement had seized on the cathedral midway in its growth, and the worst of the old & the best of the new were side by side without any sign of transition. The convent school was, as other like places have been to me — a long room in a workhouse hospital at Portumna, in particular — a delight to the imagination and the eyes. A new floor had been put into some ecclesiastical building and the light from a great mullioned window, cut off at the middle, fell aslant upon rows of clean and seemingly happy children. The nuns, who show in their own convents, where they can put what they like, a love of what is mean and pretty, make beautiful rooms where the regulations compel them to do all with a few colours and a few flowers. I think it was that day, but am not sure, that I had lunch at a convent and told fairy stories to a couple of nuns, and I hope it was not mere politeness that made them seem to have a child's interest in such things. A good many of our audience, when the curtain went up. in the old ball-room, were drunk, but all were attentive for they had a great deal of respect for my friend and there were other priests there. Presently the man at the door opposite to the stage I strayed off somewhere and I took his place and when boys came up offering two or three pence and asking to be let into the

sixpenny seats I let them join the melancholy crowd. The play professed to tell of the heroic life of ancient Ireland but was really full of sedentary refinement and the spirituality of cities. Every emotion was made as dainty footed and dainty fingered as might be, and a love and pathos where passion had faded into sentiment, emotions of pensive and harmless people, drove shadowy young men through the shadows of death and battle. I watched it with growing rage. It was not my own work, but I have sometimes watched my own work with a rage made all the more salt in the mouth from being half despair. Why should we make so much noise about ourselves and yet have nothing to say that was not better said in that work-house dormitory, where a few flowers and a few coloured counterpanes and the coloured walls had made a severe and gracious beauty? Presently the play was changed and our comedian began to act a little farce, and when I saw him struggle to wake into laughter an audience, out of whom the life had run as if it were water, I rejoiced, as I had over that broken windowpane. Here was something secular, abounding, even a little vulgar, for he was gagging horribly, condescending to his audience, though not without contempt.

We had our supper in the priest's house, and a government official who had come down from Dublin, partly out of interest in this attempt 'to educate the people,' and partly because it was his holiday and it was necessary to go somewhere, entertained us with little jokes. Somebody, not I think a priest, talked of the spiritual destiny of our race and praised the night's work, for the play was refined and the people really very attentive, and he could not understand my discontent; but presently he was silenced by the patter of jokes.

I had my breakfast by myself the next morning, for the players had got up in the middle of the night and driven some ten miles to catch an early train to Dublin, and were already on their way to their shops and offices. I had brought the visitor's book of the hotel to turn over its pages while waiting for my bacon and eggs, and found several pages full of obscenities, scrawled there some two or three weeks before, by Dublin visitors it seemed, for a notorious Dublin street was mentioned. Nobody had thought it worth his while to tear out the page or block out the lines, and as I put the book away impressions that had been drifting through my mind for months rushed up into a single thought. 'If we poets are to move the people, we must reintegrate the human spirit in our imagination. The English have driven away the kings, and turned the prophets into demagogues and you cannot have health among a people if you have not prophet, priest and king.'

PERSONALITY AND THE INTELLECTUAL ESSENCES

My work in Ireland has continually set this thought before me, 'How can I make my work mean something to vigorous and simple men whose attention is not given to art but to a shop, or teaching in a National School, or dispensing medicine?' I had not wanted to 'elevate them' or 'educate them,' as these words are understood, but to make them understand my vision, and I had not wanted a large audience, certainly not what is called a national audience, but enough people for what is accidental and temporary to lose itself in the lump. In England where there have been so many changing activities and so much systematic education one only escapes from crudities and temporary interests among students, but here there is the right audience could one but get its ears. I have always come to this certainty, what moves natural men in the arts is what moves them in life, and that is, intensity of personal life, intonations that show them in a book or a play, the strength, the essential moment of a man who would be exciting in the market or at the dispensary door. They must go out of the theatre with the strength they live by strengthened with looking upon some passion that could, whatever its chosen way of life, strike down an enemy, fill a long stocking with money

or move a girl's heart. They have not much to do with the speculations of science, though they have a little, or with the speculations of metaphysics, though they have a little. Their legs will tire on the road if there is nothing in their hearts but vague sentiment, and though it is charming to have an affectionate feeling about flowers, that will not pull the cart out of the ditch. An exciting person, whether the hero of a play or the maker of poems, will display the greatest volume of personal energy, and this energy must seem to come out of the body as out of the mind. We must say to ourselves continually when we imagine a character, 'Have I given him the roots, as it were, of all faculties necessary for life?' And only when one is certain of that may one give him the one faculty that fills the imagination with joy. I even doubt if any play had ever a great popularity that did not use, or seem to use, the bodily energies of its principal actor to the full. Villon the robber could have delighted these Irishmen with plays and songs, if he and they had been born to the same traditions of word and symbol, but Shelley could not; and as men came to live in towns and to read printed books and to have many specialised activities, it has become more possible to produce Shelleys and less and less possible to produce Villons. The last Villon dwindled into Robert Burns because the highest faculties had faded, taking the sense of beauty with them, into some sort of vague heaven & left the lower to lumber where they best could. In literature, partly from the lack of that spoken word which knits us to normal man, we have lost in personalty, in our delight in the whole man — blood, imagination, intellect, running together — but have found a new delight, in essences, in states of mind, in pure imagination, in all that comes to us most easily in elaborate music. There are two ways before literature — upward into ever-growing subtlety, with Verhaeren, with Mallarmé, with Maeterlinck, until at last, it may be, a new agreement among refined and studious men gives birth to a new passion, and what seems literature becomes religion; or downward, taking the soul with us until all is simplified and solidified again. That is the choice of choices — the way of the bird until common eyes have lost us, or to the market carts; but we must see to it that the soul goes with us, for the bird's song is beautiful, and the traditions of modern imagination, growing always more musical, more lyrical, more melancholy, casting up now a Shelley, now a Swinburne, now Wagner, are it may be the frenzy of those that are about to see what the magic hymn printed by the Abbe de Villars has called the Crown of Living and Melodious Diamonds. If the carts have hit our fancy we must have the soul tight within our bodies, for it has grown so fond of a beauty accumulated by subtle generations that it will for a long time be impatient with our thirst for mere force, mere personality, for the tumult of the blood. If it begin to slip away we must go after it, for Shelley's Chapel of the Morning Star is better than Burns's beer house — surely it was beer not barleycorn — except at the day's weary end; and it is always better than that uncomfortable place where there is no beer, the machine shop of the realists.

THE MUSICIAN AND THE ORATOR

Walter Pater says music is the type of all the Arts, but somebody else, I forget now who, that oratory is their type. You will side with the one or the other according to the nature of your energy, and I in my present mood am all for the man who, with an average audience before him, uses all means of persuasion — stories, laughter, tears, and but so much music as he can discover on the wings of words. I would even avoid the conversation of the lovers of music, who would draw us into the impersonal land of sound and colour, and would have no one write with a sonata in his memory. We may even speak a little evil of musicians, having admitted that they will see before we do that melodious crown. We may remind them that the housemaid does not respect the piano-tuner as she does the plumber, and of the enmity that they have aroused among all poets. Music is the most impersonal of things and words the most personal, and that is why musicians do not like words. They masticate them for a long

time, being afraid they would not be able to digest them, and when the words are so broken and softened and mixed with spittle, that they are not words any longer, they swallow them.

A BANJO PLAYER

A girl has been playing on the banjo. She is pretty and if I didn't listen to her I could have watched her, and if I didn't watch her I could have listened. Her voice, the movements of her body, the expression of her face all said the same thing. A player of a different temper and body would have made all different and might have been delightful in some other way. A movement not of music only but of life came to its perfection. I was delighted and I did not know why until I thought 'that is the way my people, the people I see in the mind's eye, play music, and I like it because it is all personal, as personal as Villon's poetry.' The little instrument is quite light and the player can move freely and express a joy that is not of the fingers and the mind only but of the whole being; and all the while her movements call up into the mind, so erect and natural she is, whatever is most beautiful in her daily life. Nearly all the old instruments were like that, even the organ was once a little instrument and when it grew big our wise forefathers gave it to God in the cathedrals where it befits Him to be everything. But if you sit at the piano it is the piano, the mechanism, that is the important thing, and nothing of you means anything but your fingers and your intellect.

THE LOOKING-GLASS

I have just been talking to a girl with a shrill monotonous voice and an abrupt way of moving. She is fresh from school where they have taught her history and geography 'whereby a soul can be discerned,' but what is the value of an education, or even in the long run of a science, that does not begin with the personality, the habitual self, and illustrate all by that? Somebody should have taught her to speak for the most part on whatever note of her voice is most musical, and soften those harsh notes by speaking, not singing, to some stringed instrument, taking note after note and, as it were, caressing her words a little as if she loved the sound of them, and have taught her after this some beautiful pantomimic dance, till it had grown a habit to live for eye and ear. A wise theatre might make a training in strong and beautiful life the fashion, teaching before all else the heroic discipline of the looking-glass, for is not beauty, even as lasting love, one of the most difficult of the arts.?

THE TREE OF LIFE

We artists have taken over-much to heart that old commandment about seeking after the Kingdom of Heaven. Verlaine told me that he had tried to translate 'In Memoriam,' but could not because Tennyson was 'too noble, too Anglais, and when he should have been broken-hearted had many reminiscences.' About that time I found in some English review an essay of his on Shakespeare. 'I had once a fine Shakespeare,' he wrote, or some such words, 'but I have it no longer. I write from memory.' One wondered in what vicissitude he had sold it, and for what money; and an image of the man rose in the imagination. To be his ordinary self as much as possible, not a scholar or even a reader, that was certainly his pose; and in the lecture he gave at Oxford he insisted 'that the poet should hide nothing of himself,' though he must speak it all with 'a care of that dignity which should manifest itself, if not in the perfection of form, at all events with an invisible, insensible, but effectual endeavour after this lofty and severe quality, I was about to say this virtue.' It was this feeling for his own personality, his delight in singing his own life, even more than that life itself, which made the generation I belong to compare him to Villon. It was not till after his death that I understood the meaning his words should have had for me, for while he lived I was interested in nothing

but states of mind, lyrical moments, intellectual essences. I would not then have been as delighted as I am now by that banjo-player, or as shocked as I am now by that girl whose movements have grown abrupt, and whose voice has grown harsh by the neglect of all but external activities. I had not learned what sweetness, what rhythmic movement, there is in those who have become the joy that is themselves. Without knowing it I had come to care for nothing but impersonal beauty. I had set out on life with the thought of putting my very self into poetry, and had understood this as a representation of my own visions and an attempt to cut away the non-essential, but as I imagined the visions outside myself my imagination became full of decorative landscape and of still life. I thought of myself as something unmoving and silent living in the middle of my own mind and body, a grain of sand in Bloomsbury or in Connacht that Satan's watch fiends cannot find. Then one day I understood quite suddenly, as the way is, that I was seeking something unchanging and unmixed and always outside myself, a Stone or an Elixir that was always out of reach, and that I myself was the fleeting thing that held out its hand. The more I tried to make my art deliberately beautiful, the more did I follow the opposite of myself, for deliberate beauty is like a woman always desiring man's desire. Presently I found that I entered into myself and pictured myself and not some essence when I was not seeking beauty at all, but merely to lighten the mind of some burden of love or bitterness thrown upon it by the events of life. We are only permitted to desire life, and all the rest should be our complaints or our praise of that exacting mistress who can awake our lips into song with her kisses. But we must not give her all, we must deceive her a little at times, for, as Le Sage says in 'The Devil on Two Sticks,' the false lovers who do not become melancholy or jealous with honest passion have the happiest mistress and are rewarded the soonest and by the most beautiful. Our deceit will give us style, mastery, that dignity, that lofty and severe quality Verlaine spoke of. To put it otherwise, we should ascend out of common interests, the thoughts of the newspapers, of the market-place, of men of science, but only so far as we can carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole. We must find some place upon the Tree of Life high enough for the forked branches to keep it safe, and low enough to be out of the little wind-tossed boughs and twigs, for the Phoenix nest, for the passion that is exaltation and not negation of the will, for the wings that are always upon fire.

THE PRAISE OF OLD WIVES' TALES

An art may become impersonal because it has too much circumstance or too little, because the world is too little or too much with it, because it is too near the ground or too far up among the branches. I met an old man out fishing a year ago who said to me 'Don Quixote and Odysseus are always near to me;' that is true for me also, for even Hamlet and Lear and Ædipus are more cloudy. No playwright ever has made or ever will make a character that will follow us out of the theatre as Don Quixote follows us out of the book, for no playwright can be wholly episodic, and when one constructs, bringing one's characters into complicated relations with one another, something impersonal comes into the story. Society, fate, 'tendency,' something not quite human begins to arrange the characters and to excite into action only so much of their humanity as they find it necessary to show to one another. The common heart will always love better the tales that have something of an old wives' tale and that look upon their hero from every side as if he alone were wonderful, as a child does with a new penny. In plays of a comedy too extravagant to photograph life, or written in verse, the construction is of a necessity woven out of naked motives and passions, but when an atmosphere of modern reality has to be built up as well, and the tendency, or fate, or society has to be shown as it is about ourselves the characters grow fainter and we have to read the book many times or see the play many times before we can remember them. Even then they are

only possible in a certain drawing-room and among such and such people, and we must carry all that lumber in our heads. I thought Tolstoi's ' War and Peace' the greatest story I had ever read, and yet it has gone from me ; even Lancelot, ever a shadow, is more visible in my memory than all its substance.

THE PLAY OF MODERN MANNERS

Of all artistic forms that have had a large share of the world's attention the worst is the play about modern educated people. Except where it is superficial or deliberately argumentative it fills one's soul with a sense of commonness as with dust. It has one mortal ailment. It cannot become impassioned, that is to say vital, without making somebody gushing and sentimental. Educated and well-bred people do not wear their hearts upon their sleeves and they have no artistic and charming language except light persiflage and no powerful language at all, and when they are deeply moved they look silently into the fireplace. Again and again I have watched some play of this sort with growing curiosity through the opening scene. The minor people argue, chaffone another, hint sometimes at some deeper stream of life just as we do in our houses, and I am content. But all the time I have been wondering why the chief character, the man who is to bear the burden of fate, is gushing, sentimental and quite without ideas. Then the great scene comes and I understand that he cannot be well-bred or self-possessed or intellectual, for if he were he would draw a chair to the fire and there would be no duologue at the end of the third act. Ibsen understood the difficulty and made all his characters a little provincial that they might not put each other out of countenance, and made a leading article sort of poetry, phrases about vine leaves and harps in the air it was possible to believe them using in their moments of excitement, and if the play needed more than that they could always do something stupid. They could go out and hoist a flag as they do at the end of Little Eyolf. One only understands that this manner, deliberately adopted one doubts not, had gone into his soul and filled it with dust, when one has noticed that he could no longer create a man of genius. The happiest writers are those that, knowing this form of play is slight and passing, keep to the surface, never showing anything but the arguments and the persiflage of daily observation, or now and then, instead of the expression of passion, a stage picture, a man holding a woman's hand or sitting with his head in his hands in dim light by the red glow of a fire. It was certainly an understanding of the slightness of the form, of its incapacity for the expression of the deeper sorts of passion, that made the French invent the play with a thesis, for where there is a thesis people can grow hot in argument, almost the only kind of passion that displays itself in our daily life. The novel of contemporary educated life is upon the other hand a permanent form because having the power of psychological description it can follow the thought of a man who is looking into the grate.

HAS THE DRAMA OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE A ROOT OF ITS OWN

In watching a play about modern educated people with its meagre language and its action crushed into the narrow limits of possibility I have found myself constantly saying : ' Maybe it has its power to move, slight as that is, from being able to suggest fundamental contrasts and passions which romantic and poetical literature have shown to be beautiful.' A man facing his enemies alone in a quarrel over the purity of the water in a Norwegian Spa and using no language but that of the newspapers can call up into our minds, let us say, the passion of Coriolanus. The lovers and fighters of old imaginative literature are more vivid experiences in the soul than anything but one's own ruling passion that is itself riddled by their thought as by lightning, and even two dumb figures on the roads can call up all that glory. Put the man who has no knowledge of literature before a play of this kind and he will

say as he has said in some form or other in every age at the first shock of naturalism, ‘ What has brought me out to hear nothing but the words we use at home when we are talking of the rates ?’ And he will prefer to it any play where there is visible beauty or mirth, where life is exciting, at high tide as it were. It is not his fault that he will prefer in all likelihood a worse play although its kind may be greater, for we have been following the lure of science for generations and forgotten him and his. I come always back to this thought. There is something of an old wives’ tale in fine literature. The makers of it are like an old peasant telling stories of the great famine or the hangings of ’98 or his own memories. He has felt something in the depth of his mind and he wants to make it as visible and powerful to our senses as possible. He will use the most extravagant words or illustrations if they suit his purpose. Or he will invent a wild parable and the more his mind is on fire or the more creative it is the less will he look at the outer world or value it for its own sake. It gives him metaphors and examples and that is all. He is even a little scornful of it, for it seems to him while the fit is on that the fire has gone out of it and left it but white ashes. I cannot explain it, but I am certain that every high thing was invented in this way, between sleeping and waking, as it were, and that peering and peeping persons are but hawkers of stolen goods. How else could their noses have grown so ravenous or their eyes so sharp ?

WHY THE BLIND MAN IN ANCIENT TIMES WAS MADE A POET

A description in the Iliad or the Odyssey, unlike one in the Æneid or in most modern writers, is the swift and natural observation of a man as he is shaped by life. It is a refinement of the primary hungers and has the least possible of what is merely scholarly or exceptional. It is, above all, never too observant, too professional, and when the book is closed we have had our energies enriched, for we have been in the mid-current. We have never seen anything Odysseus could not have seen while his thought was of the Cyclops, or Achilles when Briseis moved him to desire. In the art of the greatest periods there is something careless and sudden in all habitual moods though not in their expression, because these moods are a conflagration of all the energies of active life. In primitive times the blind man became a poet as he becomes a fiddler in our villages, because he had to be driven out of activities all his nature cried for, before he could be contented with the praise of life. And often it is Villon or Verlaine with impediments plain to all, who sings of life with the ancient simplicity. Poets of coming days when once more it will be possible to write as in the great epochs will recognise that their sacrifice shall be to refuse what blindness and evil name, or imprisonment at the outset, denied to men who missed thereby the sting of a deliberate refusal. The poets of the ages of silver need no refusal of life, the dome of many-coloured glass is already shattered while they live. They look at life deliberately and as if from beyond life, and the greatest of them need suffer nothing but the sadness that the saints have known. This is their aim, and their temptation is not a passionate activity, but the approval of their fellows, which comes to them in full abundance only when they delight in the general thoughts that hold together a cultivated middle-class, where irresponsibilities of position and poverty are lacking ; the things that are more excellent among educated men who have political pre-occupations, Augustus Caesar’s affability, all that impersonal fecundity which muddies the intellectual passions. Ben Jonson says in the Poetaster, that even the best of men without Promethean fire is but a hollow statue, and a studious man will commonly forget after some forty winters that of a certainty Promethean fire will burn somebody’s fingers. It may happen that poets will be made more often by their sins than by their virtues, for general praise is unlucky, as the villages know, and not merely as I imagine — for I am superstitious about these things — because the praise of all but an equal enslaves and adds a pound to the ball at the ankle with every compliment.

All energy that comes from the whole man is as irregular as the lightning, for the communicable and forecastable and discoverable is a part only, a hungry chicken under the breast of the pelican, and the test of poetry is not in reason but in a delight not different from the delight that comes to a man at the first coming of love into the heart. I knew an old man who had spent his whole life cutting hazel and privet from the paths, and in some seventy years he had observed little but had many imaginations. He had never seen like a naturalist, never seen things as they are, for his habitual mood had been that of a man stirred in his affairs ; and Shakespeare, Tintoretto, though the times were running out when Tintoretto painted, nearly all the great men of the renaissance, looked at the world with eyes like his. Their minds were never quiescent, never as it were in a mood for scientific observations, always an exaltation, never — to use known words — founded upon an elimination of the personal factor ; and their attention and the attention of those they worked for dwelt constantly with what is present to the mind in exaltation. I am too modern fully to enjoy Tintoretto's Creation of the Milky Way, I cannot fix my thoughts upon that glowing and palpitating flesh intently enough to forget, as I can the make-believe of a fairy tale, that heavy drapery hanging from a cloud, though I find my pleasure in King Lear heightened by the make-believe that comes upon it all when the fool says : ' This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time : ' — and I always find it quite natural, so little does logic in the mere circumstance matter in the finest art, that Richard's & Richmond's tents should be side by side. I saw with delight the ' Knight of the Burning Pestle ' when Mr. Carr revived it, and found it none the worse because the apprentice acted a whole play upon the spur of the moment and without committing a line to heart. When Ben Jonson's ' Epicoene ' rammed a century of laughter into the two hours' traffic, I found with amazement that almost every journalist had put logic on the seat, where our lady imagination should pronounce that unjust and favouring sentence her woman's heart is ever plotting, & had felt bound to cherish none but reasonable sympathies and to resent the baiting of that grotesque old man. I have been looking over a book of engravings made in the eighteenth century from those wall-pictures of Herculaneum and Pompeii that were, it seems, the work of journeymen copying from finer paintings, for the composition is always too good for the execution. I find in great numbers an indifference to obvious logic, to all that the eye sees at common moments. Perseus shows Andromeda the death she lived by in a pool, and though the lovers are carefully drawn the reflection is upside down that we may see it the better. There is hardly an old master who has not made known to us in some like way how little he cares for what every fool can see and every knave can praise. The men who imagined the arts were not less superstitious in religion, understanding the spiritual relations, but not the mechanical, and finding nothing that need strain the throat in those gnats the floods of Noah and Deucalion, and in Joshua's moon at Ascalon.

CONCERNING SAINTS AND ARTISTS

I took the Indian hemp with certain followers of St. Martin on the ground floor of a house in the Latin Quarter. I had never taken it before, and was instructed by a boisterous young poet, whose English was no better than my French. He gave me a little pellet, if I am not forgetting, an hour before dinner, and another after we had dined together at some restaurant. As we were going through the streets to the meeting-place of the Martinists, I felt suddenly that a cloud I was looking at floated in an immense space, and for an instant my being rushed out, as it seemed, into that space with ecstasy. I was myself again immediately, but the poet was wholly above himself, and presently he pointed to one of the street lamps now brightening in the fading twilight, and cried at the top of his voice, ' Why do you look at me with your

great eye ?' There were perhaps a dozen people already much excited when we arrived ; and after I had drunk some cups of coffee and eaten a pellet or two more, I grew very anxious to dance, but did not, as I could not remember any steps. I sat down and closed my eyes ; but no, I had no visions, nothing but a sensation of some dark shadow which seemed to be telling me that some day I would go into a trance and so out of my body for a while, but not yet. I opened my eyes and looked at some red ornament on the mantelpiece, and at once the room was full of harmonies of red, but when a blue china figure caught my eye the harmonies became blue upon the instant. I was puzzled, for the reds were all there, nothing had changed, but they were no longer important or harmonious ; and why had the blues so unimportant but a moment ago become exciting and delightful ? Thereupon it struck me that I was seeing like a painter, and that in the course of the evening every one there would change through every kind of artistic perception.

After a while a Martinist ran towards me with a piece of paper on which he had drawn a circle with a dot in it, and pointing at it with his finger he cried out, ' God, God !' Some immeasurable mystery had been revealed, and his eyes shone ; and at some time or other a lean and shabby man, with rather a distinguished face, showed me his horoscope and pointed with an ecstasy of melancholy at its evil aspects. The boisterous poet, who was an old eater of the Indian hemp, had told me that it took one three months growing used to it, three months more enjoying it, and three months being cured of it. These men were in their second period ; but I never forgot myself, never really rose above myself for more than a moment, and was even able to feel the absurdity of that gaiety, an Herr Nordau among the men of genius but one that was abashed at his own sobriety. The sky outside was beginning to grey when there came a knocking at the window shutters. Somebody opened the window, and a woman in evening dress, who was not a little bewildered to find so many people, was helped down into the room. She had been at a student's ball unknown to her husband, who was asleep overhead, and had thought to have crept home unobserved, but for a confederate at the window. All those talking or dancing men laughed in a dreamy way ; and she, understanding that there was no judgment in the laughter of men that had no thought but of the spectacle of the world, blushed, laughed and darted through the room and so upstairs. Alas that the hangman's rope should be own brother to that Indian happiness that keeps alone, were it not for some stray cactus, mother of as many dreams, an immemorial impartiality and simpleness.

THE SUBJECT MATTER OF DRAMA

I read this sentence a few days ago, or one like it, in an obituary of Ibsen : ' Let nobody again go back to the old ballad material of Shakespeare, to murders, and ghosts, for what interests us on the stage is modern experience and the discussion of our interests ;' and in another part of the article Ibsen was blamed because he had written of suicides and in other ways made use of ' the morbid terror of death.' Dramatic literature has for along time been left to the criticism of journalists, and all these, the old stupid ones and the new clever ones, have tried to impress upon it their absorption in the life of the moment, their delight in obvious originality & in obvious logic, their shrinking from the ancient and insoluble. The writer I have quoted is much more than a journalist, but he has lived their hurried life, and instinctively turns to them for judgement. He is not thinking of the great poets and painters, of the cloud of witnesses, who are there that we may become, through our understanding of their minds, spectators of the ages, but of this age. Drama is a means of expression, not a special subject matter, and the dramatist is as free to choose, where he has a mind to, as the poet of ' Endymion' or as the painter of Mary Magdalene at the door of Simon the Pharisee. So far from the discussion of our interests and the immediate circumstance of our life being the

most moving to the imagination, it is what is old and far off that stirs us the most deeply. There is a sentence in 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell' that is meaningless until we understand Blake's system of correspondences. 'The best wine is the oldest, the best water the newest.' Water is experience, immediate sensation, and wine is emotion, and it is with the intellect, as distinguished from imagination, that we enlarge the bounds of experience and separate it from all but itself, from illusion, from memory, and create among other things science and good journalism. Emotion, on the other hand, grows intoxicating and delightful after it has been enriched with the memory of old emotions, with all the uncounted flavours of old experience, and it is necessarily an antiquity of thought, emotions that have been deepened by the experiences of many men of genius, that distinguishes the cultivated man. The subject-matter of his meditation and invention is old, and he will disdain a too conscious originality in the arts as in those matters of daily life where, is it not Balzac who says, 'we are all conservatives?' He is above all things well bred, and whether he write or paint will not desire a technique that denies or obtrudes his long and noble descent. Corneille and Racine did not deny their masters, and when Dante spoke of his master Virgil there was no crowing of the cock. In their day imitation was conscious or all but conscious, and while originality was but so much the more a part of the man himself, so much the deeper because unconscious, no quick analysis could find out their miracle, that needed it may be generations to reveal; but it is our imitation that is unconscious and that waits the certainties of time. The more religious the subject-matter of an art, the more will it be as it were stationary, and the more ancient will be the emotion that it arouses and the circumstances that it calls up before our eyes. When in the Middle Ages the pilgrim to St. Patrick's Purgatory found himself on the lake side, he found a boat made out of a hollow tree to ferry him to the cave of vision. In religious painting and poetry, crowns and swords of an ancient pattern take upon themselves new meanings, and it is impossible to separate our idea of what is noble from a mystic stair, where not men and women, but robes, jewels, incidents, ancient utilities float upward slowly over the all but sleeping mind, putting on emotional and spiritual life as they ascend until they are swallowed up by some far glory that they even were too modern and momentary to endure. All art is dream, and what the day is done with is dreaming ripe, and what art moulds religion accepts, and in the end all is in the wine cup, all is in the drunken phantasy, and the grapes begin to stammer.

THE TWO KINDS OF ASCETICISM

It is not possible to separate an emotion or a spiritual state from the image that calls it up and gives it expression. Michael Angelo's Moses, Velasquez' Philip the Second, the colour purple, a crucifix, call into life an emotion or state that vanishes with them because they are its only possible expression, and that is why no mind is more valuable than the images it contains. The imaginative writer differs from the saint in that he identifies himself — to the neglect of his own soul, alas! — with the soul of the world, and frees himself from all that is impermanent in that soul, an ascetic not of women and wine, but of the newspapers. That which is permanent in the soul of the world upon the other hand, the great passions that trouble all and have but a brief recurring life of flower and seed in any man, is the renunciation of the saint who seeks not an eternal art, but his own eternity. The artist stands between the saint and the world of impermanent things, and just in so far as his mind dwells on what is impermanent in his sense, on all that 'modern experience and the discussion of our interests,' that is to say on what never recurs, as desire and hope, terror and weariness, spring and autumn recur in varying rhythms, will his mind become critical, as distinguished from creative, and his emotions wither. He will think less of what he sees and more of his own attitude towards it, and will express this attitude by an essentially critical selection and emphasis. I am not quite sure of my memory but I think that Mr. Ricketts has said in his book

on the Prado that he feels the critic in Velasquez for the first time in painting, and we all feel the critic in Whistler and Degas, in Browning, even in Mr. Swinburne, in the finest art of all ages but the greatest. The end for art is the ecstasy awakened by the presence before an ever changing mind of what is permanent in the world, or by the arousing of that mind itself into the very delicate and fastidious mood habitual with it when it is seeking those permanent & recurring things. There is a little of both ecstasies at all times, but at this time we have a small measure of the creative impulse itself, of the divine vision, a great one of 'the lost traveller's dream under the hill,' perhaps because all the old simple things have been painted or written, and they will only have meaning for us again when a new race or a new civilisation has made us look upon all with new eyesight.

IN THE SERPENT'S MOUTH

There is an old saying that God is a circle whose centre is everywhere. If that is true, the saint goes to the centre, the poet and artist to the ring where everything comes round again. The poet must not seek for what is still and fixed, for that has no life for him ; and if he did his style would become cold and monotonous, and his sense of beauty faint and sickly, as are both style and beauty to my imagination in the prose and poetry of Newman, but be content to find his pleasure in all that is for ever passing away that it may come again, in the beauty of woman, in the fragile flowers of spring, in momentary heroic passion, in whatever is most fleeting, most impassioned, as it were, for its own perfection, most eager to return in its glory. Yet perhaps he must endure the impermanent a little, for these things return, but not wholly, for no two faces are alike, and, it may be, had we more learned eyes, no two flowers. Is it that all things are made by the struggle of the individual and the world, of the unchanging and the returning, and that the saint and the poet are over all, and that the poet has made his home in the Serpent's mouth ?

THE BLACK AND THE WHITE ARROWS

Instinct creates the recurring and the beautiful, all the winding of the serpent ; but reason, the most ugly man, as Blake called it, is a drawer of the straight line, the maker of the arbitrary and the impermanent, for no recurring spring will ever bring again yesterday's clock. Sanctity has its straight line also, darting from the centre, and with these arrows the many-coloured serpent, theme of all our poetry, is maimed and hunted. He that finds the white arrow shall have wisdom older than the Serpent, but what of the black arrow. How much knowledge, how heavy a quiver of the crow-feathered ebony rods can the soul endure ?

HIS MISTRESS'S EYEBROWS

The preoccupation of our Art and Literature with knowledge, with the surface of life, with the arbitrary, with mechanism, has arisen out of the root. A careful, but not necessarily very subtle man could foretell the history of any religion if he knew its first principle, and that it would live long enough to fulfil itself. The mind can never do the same thing twice over, and having exhausted simple beauty and meaning, it passes to the strange and hidden, and at last must find its delight, having outrun its harmonies in the emphatic and discordant. When I was a boy at the art school I watched an older student late returned from Paris, with a wonder that had no understanding in it. He was very amorous, and every new love was the occasion of a new picture, and every new picture was uglier than its forerunner. He was excited about his mistress's eyebrows, as was fitting, but the interest of beauty had been exhausted by the logical energies of Art, which destroys where it has rummaged, and can but discover, whether

it will or no. We cannot discover our subject-matter by deliberate intellect, for when a subject-matter ceases to move us we must go elsewhere, and when it moves us, even though it be 'that old ballad material of Shakespeare' or even 'the morbid terror of death,' we can laugh at reason. We must not ask is the world interested in this or that, for nothing is in question but our own interest, and we can understand no other. Our place in the Hierarchy is settled for us by our choice of a subject-matter, and all good criticism is hieratic, delighting in setting things above one another. Epic and Drama above Lyric and so on, and not merely side by side. But it is our instinct and not our intellect that chooses. We can deliberately refashion our characters, but not our painting or our poetry. If our characters also were not unconsciously refashioned so completely by the unfolding of the logical energies of Art, that even simple things have in the end a new aspect in our eyes, the Arts would not be among those things that return for ever. The ballads that Bishop Percy gathered returned in the Ancient Mariner, and the delight in the world of old Greek sculptors sprang into a more delicate loveliness in that archaistic head of the young athlete down the long corridor to your left hand as you go into the British Museum. Civilisation too, will not that also destroy where it has loved, until it shall bring the simple and natural things again and a new Argo with all the gilding on her bows sail out to find another fleece ?

THE TRESSES OF THE HAIR

Hafiz cried to his beloved, 'I made a bargain with that brown hair before the beginning of time, and it shall not be broken through unending time,' and it may be that Mistress Nature knows that we have lived many times, and that whatsoever changes and winds into itself belongs to us. She covers her eyes away from us, but she lets us play with the tresses of her hair.

A TOWER ON THE APENNINE

The other day I was walking towards Urbino where I was to spend the night, having crossed the Apennines from San Sepolcro, and had come to a level place on the mountain top near the journey's end. My friends were in a carriage somewhere behind, on a road which was still ascending in great loops, and I was alone amid a visionary fantastic impossible scenery. It was sunset and the stormy clouds hung upon mountain after mountain, and far off on one great summit a cloud darker than the rest glimmered with lightning. Away to the south a mediaeval tower, with no building near nor any sign of life, rose upon its solitary summit into the clouds. I saw suddenly in the mind's eye an old man, erect and a little gaunt, standing in the door of the tower, while about him broke a windy light. He was the poet who had at last, because he had done so much for the word's sake, come to share in the dignity of the saint. He had hidden nothing of himself but he had taken care of 'that dignity the perfection of form . . . this lofty and severe quality . . . this virtue.' And though he had but sought it for the word's sake, or for a woman's praise, it had come at last into his body and his mind. Certainly as he stood there he knew how from behind that laborious mood, that pose, that genius, no flower of himself but all himself, looked out as from behind a mask that other Who alone of all men, the country people say, is not a hair's breadth more nor less than six feet high. He has in his ears well instructed voices and seeming solid sights are before his eyes, and not as we say of many a one, speaking in metaphor, but as this were Delphi or Eleusis, and the substance and the voice come to him among his memories which are of women's faces ; for was it Columbanus or another that wrote 'There is one among the birds that is perfect, and one perfect among the fish.'

THE THINKING OF THE BODY

Those learned men who are a terror to children and an ignominious sight in lovers' eyes, all those butts of a traditional humour where there is something of the wisdom of peasants, are mathematicians, theologians, lawyers, men of science of various kinds. They have followed some abstract reverie, which stirs the brain only and needs that only, and have therefore stood before the looking-glass without pleasure and never known those thoughts that shape the lines of the body for beauty or animation, and wake a desire for praise or for display. There are two pictures of Venice side by side in the house where I am writing this, a Canaletto that has little but careful drawing and a not very emotional pleasure in clean bright air, and a Franz Francken, where the blue water, that in the other stirs one so little, can make one long to plunge into the green depth where a cloud shadow falls. Neither painting could move us at all, if our thought did not rush out to the edges of our flesh, and it is so with all good art, whether the Victory of Samothrace which reminds the soles of our feet of swiftness, or the Odyssey that would send us out under the salt wind, or the young horsemen on the Parthenon, that seem happier than our boyhood ever was, and in our boyhood's way. Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrinks from what Blake calls fmathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body. Its morality is personal, knows little of any general law, has no blame for Little Musgrave, no care for Lord Barnard's house, seems lighter than a breath and yet is hard and heavy, for if a man is not ready to face toil and risk, and in all gaiety of heart, his body will grow unshapely and his heart lack the wild will that stirs desire. It approved before all men those that talked or wrestled or tilted under the walls of Urbino, or sat in the wide window seats discussing all things, with love ever in their thought, when the wise Duchess ordered all, and the Lady Emilia gave the theme.

RELIGIOUS BELIEF NECESSARY TO SYMBOLIC ART

All art is sensuous, but when a man puts only his contemplative nature, and his more vague desires into his art, the sensuous images through which it speaks become broken, fleeting, uncertain, or are chosen for their distance from general experience, and all grows unsubstantial & fantastic. When imagination moves in a dim world like the country of sleep in Love's Nocturne and 'Siren there winds her dizzy hair and sings' we go to it for delight indeed but in our weariness. If we are to sojourn there that world must grow consistent with itself, emotion must be related to emotion by a system of ordered images, as in the Divine Comedy. It must grow to be symbolic, that is, for the soul can only achieve a distinct separated life where many related objects at once distinguish and arouse its energies in their fullness. All visionaries have entered into such a world in trances, and all ideal art has trance for warranty. Shelley seemed to Matthew Arnold to beat his ineffectual wings in the void, and I only made my pleasure in him contented pleasure by massing in my imagination his recurring images of towers and rivers, and caves with fountains in them, and that one star of his, till his world had grown solid underfoot and consistent enough for the soul's habitation.

But even then I lacked something to compensate my imagination for geographical and historical reality, for the testimony of our ordinary senses, and found myself wishing for and trying to imagine, as I had also when reading Keats' Endymion, a crowd of believers who could put into all those strange sights the strength of their belief and the rare testimony of their visions. A little crowd had been sufficient, and I would have had Shelley a sectary that his revelation might have found the only sufficient evidence of religion, miracle. All

symbolic art should arise out of a real belief, and that it cannot do so in this age proves that this age is a road and not a resting place for the imaginative arts. I can only understand others by myself, and I am certain that there are many who are not moved as they desire to be by that solitary light burning in the tower of Prince Athanais, because it has not entered into men's prayers nor lighted any through the sacred dark of religious contemplation.

Lyrical poems even when they but speak of emotions common to all need, if not a religious belief like the spiritual arts, a life that has leisure for itself, and a society that is quickly stirred that our emotion may be strengthened by the emotion of others. All circumstance that makes emotion at once dignified and visible, increases the poet's power, and I think that is why I have always longed for some stringed instrument, and a listening audience not drawn out of the hurried streets but from a life where it would be natural to murmur over again the singer's thought. When I heard Ivette Guilbert the other day, who has the lyre or as good, I was not content, for she sang among people whose life had nothing it could share with an exquisite art that should rise out of life as the blade out of the spearshaft, a song out of the mood, the fountain from its pool, all art out of the body, laughter from a happy company. I longed to make all things over again, that she might sing in some great hall, where there was no one that did not love life and speak of it continually.

THE HOLY PLACES

When all art was struck out of personality, whether as in our daily business or in the adventure of religion, there was little separation between holy and common things, and just as the arts themselves passed quickly from passion to divine contemplation, from the conversation of peasants to that of princes, the one song remembering the drunken miller and but half forgetting Cambynskan bold ; so did a man feel himself near sacred presences when he turned his plough from the slope of Cruachmaa or of Olympus. The occupations and the places known to Homer or to Hesiod, those pure first artists, might, as it were, if but the fashioners hands had loosened, have changed before the poem's end to symbols and vanished, winged and unwreary, into the unchanging worlds where religion only can discover life as well as peace. A man of that unbroken day could have all the subtlety of Shelley, & yet use no image unknown among the common people, and speak no thought that was not a deduction from the common thought. Unless the discovery of legendary knowledge and the returning belief in miracle, or what we must needs call so, can bring once more a new belief in the sanctity of common ploughland, and new wonders that reward no difficult ecclesiastical routine but the common, wayward, spirited man, we may never see again a Shelley and a Dickens in the one body, but be broken to the end. We have grown jealous of the body, and we dress it in dull unshapely clothes, that we may cherish aspiration alone. Moliere being but the master of common sense lived ever in the common dayhght, but Shakespeare could not, & Shakespeare seems to bring us to the very market-place, when we remember Shelley's dizzy and Landor's calm disdain of usual daily things. And at last we have Villiers de L'Isle Adam crying in the ecstasy of a supreme culture, of a supreme refusal, ' as for living, our servants will do that for us.' One of the means of loftiness, of marmorean stillness has been the choice of strange and far away places, for the scenery of art, but this choice has grown bitter to me, and there are moments when I cannot believe in the reality of imaginations that are not inset with the minute life of long familiar things and symbols and places. I have come to think of even Shakespeare's journeys to Rome or to Verona as the out-flowing of an unrest, a dissatisfaction with natural interests, an unstable equilibrium of the whole European mind that would not have come had Constantinople wall been built of better stone. I am orthodox and pray for a resurrection of the body, and am certain that a man should

find his Holy Land where he first crept upon the floor, and that familiar woods and rivers should fade into symbol with so gradual a change that he never discover, no not even in ecstasy itself, that he is beyond space, and that time alone keeps him from Primum Mobile, the Supernal Eden, and the White Rose over all.

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