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On the Inner Nature of Art

Not merely philosophy but also the fine arts work at bottom toward the solution of the problem of existence. For in every mind that once gives itself up to the purely objective contemplation of the world, a desire has been awakened, however concealed and unconscious, to comprehend the true nature of things, of life, and of existence. For this alone is of interest to the intellect as such, in other words, to the subject of knowing that has become free from the aims of the will and is therefore pure; just as for the subject, knowing as mere individual, only the aims and ends of the will have interest. For this reason the result of every purely objective, and so of every artistic, apprehension of things is an expression more of the true nature of life and of existence, more an answer to the question, "What is life?" Every genuine and successful work of art answers this question in its own way quite calmly and serenely. But all the arts speak only the naive and childlike language of *perception*, not the abstract and serious language of *reflection*; their answer is thus a fleeting image, not a permanent universal knowledge. Thus for *perception*, every work of art answers that question, every painting, every statue, every poem, every scene on the stage. Music also answers it, more profoundly indeed than do all the others, since in a language intelligible with absolute directness, yet not capable of translation into that of our faculty of reason, it expresses the innermost nature of all life and existence. Thus all the other arts together hold before the questioner an image or picture of perception and say: "Look here; this is life!" However correct their answer may be, it will yet always afford only a tempo-

rary, not a complete and final satisfaction. For they always give only a fragment, an example instead of the rule, not the whole that can be given only in the universality of the *concept*. Therefore it is the task of philosophy to give for the concept, and hence for reflection and in the abstract, a reply to that question, which on that very account is permanent and satisfactory for all time. Moreover we see here on what the relationship between philosophy and the fine arts rests, and can conclude from this to what extent the capacity for the two, though very different in its tendency and in secondary matters, is yet radically the same.

Accordingly, every work of art really endeavors to show us life and things as they are in reality; but these cannot be grasped directly by everyone through the mist of objective and subjective contingencies. Art takes away this mist.

The works of poets, sculptors, and pictorial or graphic artists generally contain an acknowledged treasure of profound wisdom, just because the wisdom of the nature of things themselves speaks from them. They interpret the utterances of things merely by elucidation and purer repetition. Therefore everyone who reads the poem or contemplates the work of art must of course contribute from his own resources toward bringing that wisdom to light. Consequently, he grasps only so much of the work as his capacity and culture allow, just as every sailor in a deep sea lets down the sounding lead as far as the length of its line will reach. Everyone has to stand before a picture as before a prince, waiting to see whether it will speak and what it will say to him; and, as with the prince, so he himself must not address it, for then he would hear only himself. It follows from all this that all wisdom is certainly contained in the works of the pictorial or graphic arts, yet only *virtualiter* or *implicite*. Philosophy, on the other hand, endeavors to furnish the same wisdom *actualiter* and *explicite*; in this sense philosophy is related to these arts as wine is to grapes. What it promises to supply would be, so to speak, a clear gain already realized, a firm and abiding possession, whereas that which comes from the achievements and works of art is only one that is always to be produced afresh. But for this it makes discouraging demands, hard to fulfill not merely for those who are to produce its works, but also for those who are to enjoy them. Therefore its public remains small, while that of the arts is large.

The above-mentioned cooperation of the beholder, required for the enjoyment of a work of art, rests partly on the fact that every work of art can act only through the medium of the imagination. It must therefore excite the imagination, which can never be left out of the question and remain inactive. This is a condition of aesthetic effect, and therefore a fundamental law of all the fine arts. But it follows from this that not everything can be given directly to the senses through the work of art, but only as much as is required to lead the imagination on to the right path. Something, and indeed the final thing, must always be left over for it to do. Even the author must always leave something over for the reader to think; for Voltaire has very rightly said: *Le secret d'être ennuyeux, c'est de tout dire.*¹ But in addition to this, the very best in art is too spiritual to be given directly to the senses; it must be born in the beholder's imagination, though it must be begotten by the work of art. It is due to this that the sketches of great masters are often more effective than their finished paintings. Of course another advantage contributes to this, namely, that they are completed at one stroke in the moment of conception, whereas the finished painting is brought about only through continued effort by means of clever deliberation and persistent premeditation, for the inspiration cannot last until the painting is completed. From the fundamental aesthetic law we are considering, it can also be explained why *wax figures* can never produce an aesthetic effect, and are therefore not real works of fine art, although it is precisely in them that the imitation of nature can reach the highest degree. For they leave nothing over for the imagination. Thus sculpture gives the mere form without the color; painting gives the color, but the mere appearance of the form; therefore both appeal to the imagination of the beholder. The wax figure, on the contrary, gives everything, form and color at the same time; from this arises the appearance of reality, and the imagination is left out of account. On the other hand, *poetry* appeals indeed to the imagination alone, and makes it active by means of mere words.

An arbitrary playing with the means of art without proper knowledge of the end is in every art the fundamental characteristic

1. The secret of being dull and tedious consists in our saying everything.—Tr.

of bungling. Such bungling shows itself in the supports that carry nothing, in the purposeless volutes, prominences, and projections of bad architecture, in the meaningless runs and figures together with the aimless noise of bad music, in the jingling rhymes of verses with little or no meaning, and so on.

It follows from the previous chapter and from my whole view of art that its object is to facilitate knowledge of the *ideas* of the world (in the Platonic sense, the only one that I recognize for the word *idea*). But the *ideas* are essentially something of perception, and therefore, in its fuller determinations, something inexhaustible. The communication of such a thing can therefore take place only on the path of perception, which is that of art. Therefore, whoever is imbued with the apprehension of an *idea* is justified when he chooses art as the medium of his communication. The mere *concept*, on the other hand, is something completely determinable, hence something to be exhausted, something distinctly thought, which can be, according to its whole content, communicated coldly and dispassionately by words. Now to wish to communicate such a thing through *a work of art* is a very useless indirect course; in fact, it belongs to that playing with the means of art without knowledge of the end that I have just censured. Therefore, a work of art, the conception of which has resulted from mere, distinct concepts, is always ungenue. If, when considering a work of plastic art, or reading a poem, or listening to a piece of music (which aims at describing something definite), we see the distinct, limited, cold, dispassionate concept glimmer and finally appear through all the rich resources of art, the concept that was the kernel of this work, the whole conception of the work having therefore consisted only in clearly thinking this concept, and accordingly being completely exhausted by its communication, then we feel disgust and indignation, for we see ourselves deceived and cheated of our interest and attention. We are entirely satisfied by the impression of a work of art only when it leaves behind something that, in spite of all our reflection on it, we cannot bring down to the distinctiveness of a concept. The mark of that hybrid origin from mere concepts is that the author of a work of art should have been able, before setting about it, to state in distinct words what he intended to present; for then it would have been possible to attain his whole end through these words themselves. It is therefore an undertaking

as unworthy as it is absurd when, as has often been attempted at the present day, one tries to reduce a poem of Shakespeare or Goethe to an abstract truth, the communication whereof would have been the aim of the poem. Naturally the artist should think when arranging his work, but only *that* idea that was *perceived* before it was thought has suggestive and stimulating force when it is communicated, and thereby becomes immortal and imperishable. Hence we will not refrain from remarking that the work done at one stroke, like the previously mentioned sketches of painters, perfected in the inspiration of the first conception and drawn unconsciously as it were; likewise the melody that comes entirely without reflection and wholly as if by inspiration; finally also the lyrical poem proper, the mere song, in which the deeply felt mood of the present and the impression of the surroundings flow forth as if involuntarily in words, whose metre and rhyme are realized automatically—that all these, I say, have the great merit of being the pure work of the rapture of the moment, of the inspiration, of the free impulse of genius, without any admixture of deliberation and reflection. They are therefore delightful and enjoyable through and through, without shell and kernel, and their effect is much more infallible than is that of the greatest works of art of slow and deliberate execution. In all these, e.g., in great historical paintings, long epic poems, great operas, and so on, reflection, intention, and deliberate selection play an important part. Understanding, technical skill, and routine must fill up here the gaps left by the conception and inspiration of genius, and all kinds of necessary subsidiary work must run through the really only genuine and brilliant parts as their cement. This explains why all such works, with the sole exception of the most perfect masterpieces of the very greatest masters (such as *Hamlet*, *Faust*, the opera *Don Juan*, for example), inevitably contain an admixture of something insipid and tedious that restricts the enjoyment of them to some extent. Proofs of this are the *Messiad*, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, even *Paradise Lost* and the *Aeneid*; and Horace makes the bold remark: *Quandoque dormitat bonus Homerus*.² But that this is the case is a consequence of the limitation of human powers in general.

The mother of the useful arts is necessity; that of the fine arts

2. [I am mortified] whenever the great Homer sleeps. (*Ars Poetica*, 359.)—Tr.

superfluity and abundance. As their father, the former have understanding, the latter genius, which is itself a kind of superfluity, that of the power of knowledge beyond the measure required for the service of the will.

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