

AN ASPECT OF PRESENT-DAY LIFE

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YOU pass along streets of fashionable shops, and your memory retains a whole mass of impressions. This has been the case up to the present. Suddenly you come upon something unusual, though you cannot say what it is. In the choice and arrangement of the various articles, dealers and tradespeople have given evidence of intentions they have been entertaining for some considerable time which can be estimated with a fair degree of exactness, and these intentions make you aware that the world is changing rapidly. All around and within you is a new spirit, of which hitherto you have been but vaguely aware. What we know least of all is the world in which we live, the rhythm of its incessant transformations.

You dwell upon these impressions, curious as to the secret bond between them; they all have a certain *éclat* and ruggedness, an apparent disdain of precautions and transitions. It is as though in all things art, from the beginning of the world, had consisted in preparing and cautiously considering, and had now suddenly begun to surprise and astound. Why do these shop windows, which for so long have been merely ceremonious invitations and gracious welcomes, seem now to solicit you with a shout or a slap in the face?

Soon you find in them something analogous to the looks and general aspect, the physiognomy and dress of the passers-by. In the whole town or city there is no longer a single person or thing that does not set before you the puzzle of the age.

You call on friends; one of them takes from his coat pocket a silver cigarette case, and immediately you have an answer to your questions. The secret of the century lies in this tiny box. How strangely simple, indeed; nothing but two smooth unadorned pieces of silver plate, neither clasp nor hinges showing any visible projection, even the edges rounded off and fastening imperceptibly. In your own pocket you have a case given to you fifteen years ago; compare the two. Whereas the artisan of the past indulged in complications and embellishments, the present-day artisan does

1. Translated from the original German by F. Rothwell.

away with all this. Twining garlands have disappeared, and their place has been taken by surfaces and lines.

Then you discover that, in numberless shops up to quite recent times, jewellery and morocco-leather work, even dolls resembling Dahomeyan fetishes, have been but countless instances of the same simplification. Instead of ideals of daintiness and charm, we have ideals of utility and skill. New houses, also, the entire architecture of the place and its inhabitants, have been subjected to the same process of scraping and rough-casting, so to speak. Trimmed beards and moustaches have disappeared. In a drawing-room, devoid of both cornice and stucco work, women with shingled hair show you as distinctly as they can the shape of their cranium, while in the street the natural outlines of female form are patent to all.

Glance again round the room; what is in the shops speedily finds its way into the homes. Note how the angles of the walls have been rounded off like those of the cigarette case; the furniture consists of so many smooth polyhedra; the various stuffs and hangings are valued only for their size or their striking monochromy. What does all this signify? If you want a comparison, you call to mind motor-cars with hoods of inordinate size, the entire squat length of the machine whose oily appearance seems as though it were intended to slip unconsciously into your memory. Of a sudden, you imagine you have discovered the symbol of your age: the walls of this drawing-room are bare as those of a modern sick room; a surgeon's lancet might be regarded as the ideal type of all these objects, and you wonder if architects and house furnishers are not compelling you to live inside a case of surgical instruments!

Not yet have we fathomed the secret; the change extends farther still. Through living in this environment, human beings have assumed different attitudes, expressions and thoughts. Writers and artists, who act as their mouthpiece, have in turn been engaged in speeding up and slowing down, submitting to various novel requirements. What is said regarding books which people praise? Generally that their style is stripped bare, "dépouillé". A sort of mathematical instinct gives them a resemblance to geometrical theorems. "That's literature" is the worst charge that can be brought against a book or an article. What, then, is it expected to be? Born of the new spirit, literature must speak to all these people of nothing but themselves. Plastic art is now appraised according to its volume and bulk. A masterpiece may be an outline sketch with details omitted, or a mere rudimentary model. There is a "pounced" aspect about pictures and statues, and even monuments.

No work will be even looked at unless it has "donned the uniform". Never was an age so disciplined; never has the prevailing taste—both in women's dresses and coiffures and in the typography of poems—been subjected to so absolute and tyrannous a sway. And yet, never was the tyrant more anonymous. One of the most noteworthy signs of this spiritual revolution is that it is taking place simultaneously throughout the whole of the so-called civilised world. In reality it is a spasm, a paroxysm of civilisation. There is not a single large town or city in the western hemisphere in which we do not find parallel attempts being made in art, identical objects in the shop windows. Only a few years ago, a few hours' journey from home proved sufficient for a man to find himself—the gods be praised!—in quite another land; he simply needed to look at the shop. But nowadays one would imagine that somewhere there are half a dozen dealers and manufacturers whose duty it is to stock a single bazaar, which we continue to call the universe.

Consider how the word "Europe", like some sudden discovery, fills the mouths of our contemporaries. In spite of the meaning it appears to have, and although, according to Nietzsche, it comes to us from Germany, the wonder is that, owing to Whitman, it rings with an American accent. Spiritual frontiers become obliterated long before political frontiers. We may imagine to what an extent this novel state of things must transform art, which was hitherto the work of limited ethnical groupings, their most violent effort to distinguish themselves from their neighbours and to react upon them. Both in the nation and in the individual, art responded to a need for domination, for setting oneself above and apart from others; it was the most pronounced way that a nation had for separating itself from other nations, for relieving that tendency, "the spirit of isolation inherent in the human race", of which Gobineau speaks.

As music is the one universal language, it is here that we obtain the firmest hold upon common preoccupations. Since the time of Wagner, at least, instead of building up vast melodic organisms, alike continuous and indissoluble, all the new musicians tend to introduce elements that are crude and in the rough. For many centuries past, music endeavoured to produce the sense of duration; nowadays it builds upon interruption, it aims at being the art of the impermanent and the partial. It splits up time, just as the plastic arts split up space. Tiny bits of phrases, melodies in embryo, are placed end to end, like chance material in which the workman does not wish his hand to appear; he obeys the same tendency as the artisan who creates a cigarette case out of two pieces of metal.

If we open one of the new reviews or periodicals, whether it be French, Italian, German, Spanish or English, we find writers doing their best to show, both in the meaning and in the style of their work, discord and disharmony between events, things, individuals, and this, too, in their very essence. The whole of their work is one of dissociation. Do not say that analysis was ever the chief part of their task. The thing that in the past stirred great minds was the desire to bring before the world a cohesion which was exceptionally evolving in their thought. Their purpose in life was to reveal rapports and relations between things; our contemporaries, the rivals of Giraudoux and Morand, as well as those of Dostoievski, Freud and Proust, seek after and attach great importance to the very bones and skeletons connected with things and persons, the very tendencies of a man clashing, repelling one another, in a spirit of anarchy.

What is it that all these young reviews call a poem? A cascade of unequal lines. Nietzsche assuredly contributed more than is generally imagined to blur and obscure the time-honoured line of demarcation between prose and poetry. Still, it is mainly from the time of Walt Whitman that we date the popular taste for a free and untrammelled rhythm which rejects the regularity of antique prosody, the repudiation of rhyme and pre-established forms: a sort of "surprise" rhythm. This type of artisan also repudiates everything that comes between the native vein or lode and the finished article; to chisel and trim the rough block actually appears to him intolerable. No adornment of the metal plate which every verse aims at being; no cement between the layers; simply different elements joined together, the deliberately abrupt aspect of which is asserted and proclaimed as the sole means of remaining faithful to a virgin inspiration.

The reason why such goods as these are exhibited at the various counters of the world's bazaar is because the human concept of beauty has changed everywhere.

Art is more especially a search after luxuriousness, a need of profusion and rarity. Until recently the artistic criterion consisted of a certain intricate complexity inherited from the earliest traditions. Suddenly the "difficulty overcome" is discredited; attachment to academic forms has ended in discouraging the spirit of complaisance everywhere; a roistering over-supply of "all the talents" seems to have exhausted the final resources of every kind of technique; a brutal rupture is made with every style, as being too well known. Possibly this may be a necessary coup d'état. But we are living at a period, perhaps a preparatory one, where a clean

sweep has been made, where any incongruity thinks it has a place. A new art will become certain, and the hope of our times will be verified, only when there appears a new logic, a new power and agility to seize upon and grasp relations and links. Already such signs and tokens as *Le Roi David* of the musician Honegger, and the exposition recently organized by a few Parisian collectors, show what really gifted artists can extract from the tentative methods of their extravagant predecessors; even Satie and Apollinaire may supply starting-points: the main thing is for starters to come along. After proscribing the ornamental in favour of the lineal, it will not suffice to carry over the principle of aristocracy, once we have despoiled it of the idea of ornamentation, on to ideas of éclat and bulk.

The one thing that may injure future creation is immediate approval and a general imitation. Up to quite recently, a nation, however small, imposed its taste and style upon the rest of the world. Now, every six months there comes into being an oecumenical taste, like the season's fashions. Will not the more numerous populations impose it on the less numerous? Even now, if we seek on whom to throw the responsibility, we shall be told that the oppression of the exact sciences has made us impatient of all embellishment; that the reign of metal causes us to live in whatever shines, weighs and brutally asserts itself; that the invasion of commerce—and of those made wealthy thereby—into every department of life, has spread broadcast the cult of the "sample"; that the simple-minded public, by reason of their progressive encroachments, will listen to none but the most ill-endowed among the self-taught. Now, all this—along with comfort and sport, two words which represent singularly destructive ideas—displaces the centre of gravity of the spiritual world; another age and another tradition are opposing the old classical ideas. France is still at the head of the movement; which, all the same, is being waged against the Graeco-Latin order of things.

The formulae of the Renaissance, of the Louis XIV, Louis XV and Louis XVI styles, long survived. At first the Romantics gave them a renewal of life; then, from the very excess of genius which seemed to exhaust all human possibilities, these formulae made only more evident the universal decadence. More vividly than any other man did Mallarmé see that the poetical revolution, which was to gain prestige from himself, was inevitable by reason of Victor Hugo. "Hugo, in his mysterious task, lowered the claims of all prose, philosophy, rhetoric and history in favour of verse and poetry, and, as he was the very personification of verse,

he confiscated, in those who think, discourse or narrate, almost the entire right of self-expression". (*Divagations, Crise de vers*). Something similar might be said regarding what came after Ingres and Belacroix, Berlioz and Wagner, Balzac and Flaubert. No longer was transformation possible by continuing along the old lines; what was needed was a rending asunder, a complete repudiation, the discovery of virgin soil. This was proclaimed by Nietzsche also, in the second part of his *Zarathustra*:

And yet, I grew tired of that spirit: and I see approaching a time when it will be tired of itself.

Before now I have seen poets become transformed, and direct their gaze against themselves.

I have seen the coming of propitiators of the spirit: it is among poets that they are born.

Do we recognize it, this gaze of poets, of all artists, directed against themselves? Assuredly it is this that often makes us so uneasy, whether at a concert or at a picture dealer's. We feel that artists who appeal for our judgment are conscious of a kind of antecedent shame of art, that they make excuse for employing tools well worn by so many hands before their time, that they are not afraid to be the first to flout and scoff at what constitutes the very rationale of their existence. How could their work become creation, when everything about it breathes of the thirst after destruction? Truly we have here the last of the dogmas which succumbs to the attacks of the propitiators of the spirit. We understand why there are no longer in the temple any but negro fetishes, to whom our music is dedicated.

For the first time in history, we see conscious individuals acting deliberately as had been done before only after mighty cataclysms. The early Greek sculptors carried out their rude wooden images, their *xoana*, only because previous civilizations had bequeathed to them no canon of art. The Merovingian jewellers made up for lack of style by surplus of metal, because of the upheavals consequent on invasion. Nowadays it is man, the cultured product of civilization, who makes *tabula rasa*, a clean slate.