

11: THE FURROWS

As I see the corn grow green all about my neighbourhood, there rushes on me for no reason in particular a memory of the winter. I say "rushes," for that is the very word for the old sweeping lines of the ploughed fields. From some accidental turn of a train-journey or a walking tour, I saw suddenly the fierce rush of the furrows. The furrows are like arrows; they fly along an arc of sky. They are like leaping animals; they vault an inviolable hill and roll down the other side. They are like battering battalions; they rush over a hill with flying squadrons and carry it with a cavalry charge. They have all the air of Arabs sweeping a desert, of rockets sweeping the sky, of torrents sweeping a watercourse. Nothing ever seemed so living as those brown lines as they shot sheer from the height of a ridge down to their still whirl of the valley. They were swifter than arrows, fiercer than Arabs, more riotous and rejoicing than rockets. And yet they were only thin straight lines drawn with difficulty, like a diagram, by painful and patient men. The men that ploughed tried to plough straight; they had no notion of giving great sweeps and swirls to the eye. Those cataracts of cloven earth; they were done by the grace of God. I had always rejoiced in them; but I had never found any reason for my joy. There are some very clever people who cannot enjoy the joy unless they understand it. There are other and even cleverer people who say that they lose the joy the moment they do understand it. Thank God I was never clever, and I could always enjoy

things when I understood them and when I didn't. I can enjoy the orthodox Tory, though I could never understand him. I can also enjoy the orthodox Liberal, though I understand him only too well.

But the splendour of furrowed fields is this: that like all brave things they are made straight, and therefore they bend. In everything that bows gracefully there must be an effort at stiffness. Bows arc beautiful when they bend only because they try to remain rigid; and sword-blades can curl like silver ribbons only because they are certain to spring straight again. But the same is true of every tough curve of the tree-trunk, of every strong-backed bend of the bough; there is hardly any such thing in Nature as a mere droop of weakness. Rigidity yielding a little, like justice swayed by mercy, is the whole beauty of the earth. The cosmos is a diagram just bent beautifully out of shape. Everything tries to be straight; and everything just fortunately fails.

The foil may curve in the lunge, but there is nothing beautiful about beginning the battle with a crooked foil. So the strict aim, the strong doctrine, may give a little in the actual fight with facts: but that is no reason for beginning with a weak

doctrine or a twisted aim. Do not be an opportunist; try to be theoretic at all the opportunities; fate can be trusted to do all the opportunist part of it. Do not try to bend, any more than the trees try to bend. Try to grow straight, and life will bend you.

Alas! I am giving the moral before the fable; and yet I hardly think that otherwise you could see all that I mean in that enormous vision of the ploughed hills. These great furrowed slopes are the oldest architecture of man: the oldest astronomy was his guide, the oldest botany his object. And for geometry, the mere word proves my case.

But when I looked at those torrents of ploughed parallels, that great rush of rigid lines, I seemed to see the whole huge achievement of democracy, Here was mere equality: but equality seen in bulk is more superb than any supremacy. Equality free and flying, equality rushing over hill and dale, equality charging the world--that was the meaning of those military furrows, military in their identity, military in their energy. They sculptured hill and dale with strong curves merely because they did not mean to curve at all. They made the strong lines of landscape with their stiffly driven swords of the soil. It is not only nonsense, but blasphemy, to say that man has spoilt the country. Man has created the country; it was his business, as the image of God. No hill, covered with common scrub or patches of purple heath, could have been so sublimely hilly as that ridge up to which the ranked furrows rose like aspiring angels. No valley, confused with needless cottages and towns, can have been so utterly valleyish as that abyss into which the down-rushing furrows raged like demons into the swirling pit.

It is the hard lines of discipline and equality that mark out a landscape and give it all its mould and meaning. It is just because the lines of the furrow arc ugly and even that the landscape is living and superb. As I think I have remarked elsewhere, the Republic is founded on the plough.