

38: THE CHORUS

One of the most marked instances of the decline of true popular sympathy is the gradual disappearance in our time of the habit of singing in chorus. Even when it is done nowadays it is done tentatively and sometimes inaudibly; apparently upon some preposterous principle (which I have never clearly grasped) that singing is an art. In the new aristocracy of the drawing-room a lady is actually asked whether she sings. In the old democracy of the dinner table a man was simply told to sing, and he had to do it. I like the atmosphere of those old banquets. I like to think of my ancestors, middle-aged or venerable gentlemen, all sitting round a table and explaining that they would never forget old days or friends with a rumpy-iddity-iddity, or letting it be known that they would die for England's glory with their tooral ooral, etc. Even the vices of that society (which 'sometimes, I fear, rendered the narrative portions of the song almost as cryptic and inarticulate as the chorus) were displayed with a more human softening than the same vices in the saloon bars of our own time. I greatly prefer Mr. Richard Swiveller to Mr. Stanley Ortheris. I prefer the man who exceeded in rosy wine in order that the wing of friendship might never moult a feather to the man who exceeds quite as much in whiskies and sodas, but declares all the time that he's for number one, and that you don't catch him paying for other men's drinks. The old men of pleasure (with their tooral ooral) got at least some social and communal virtue out of pleasure. The new men of pleasure (without the slightest vestige of a tooral ooral) are simply hermits of irreligion instead of religion, anchorites of atheism, and they might as well be drugging themselves with hashish or opium in a wilderness.

But the chorus of the old songs had another use besides this obvious one of asserting the popular element in the arts. The chorus of a song, even of a comic song, has the same purpose as the chorus in a Greek tragedy. It reconciles men to the gods. It connects this one particular tale with the cosmos and the philosophy of common things. Thus we constantly find in the old ballads, especially the pathetic ballads, some refrain about the grass growing green, or the birds singing, or the woods being merry in spring. These are windows opened in the house of tragedy; momentary glimpses of larger and quieter scenes, of more ancient and enduring landscapes. Many of the country songs describing crime and death have refrains of a startling joviality like cock crow, just as if the whole company were coming in with a shout of protest against so sombre a view of existence. There is a long and gruesome ballad called "The Berkshire Tragedy," about a murder committed by a jealous sister, for the consummation of which a wicked miller is hanged, and the chorus (which should come in a kind of burst) runs:

"And I'll be true to my love If my love'll be true to me."

The very reasonable arrangement here suggested is introduced, I think, as a kind of throw back to the normal, a reminder that even "The Berkshire Tragedy" does not fill the whole of Berkshire. The poor young lady is drowned, and the wicked miller (to whom we may have been affectionately attached) is hanged; but still a ruby kindles in the vine, and many a garden by the water blows. Not that Omar's type of hedonistic resignation is at all the same as the breezy impatience of the Berkshire refrain; but they are alike in so far as they gaze out beyond the particular complication to more open plains of peace. The chorus of the ballad looks past the drowning maiden and the miller's gibbet, and sees the lanes full of lovers.

This use of the chorus to humanize and dilute a dark story is strongly opposed to the modern view of art. Modern art has to be what is called "intense." It is not easy to define being intense; but, roughly speaking, it means saying only one thing at a time, and saying it wrong. Modern tragic writers have to write short stories; if they wrote long stories (as the man said of philosophy) cheerfulness would creep in. Such stories are like stings; brief, but purely painful. And doubtless they bore some resemblance to some lives lived under our successful scientific civilization; lives which tend in any case to be painful, and in many cases to be brief. But when the artistic people passed beyond the poignant anecdote and began to write long books full of poignancy, then the reading public began to rebel and to demand the recall of romance. The long books about the black poverty of cities became quite insupportable. The Berkshire tragedy had a chorus; but the London tragedy has no chorus. Therefore people welcomed the return of adventurous novels about alien places and times, the trenchant and swordlike stories of Stevenson. But I am not narrowly on the side of the romantics. I think that glimpses of the gloom of our civilization ought to be recorded. I think that the bewilderments of the solitary and sceptical soul ought to be preserved, if it be only for the pity (yes, and the admiration) of a happier time. But I wish that there were some way in which the chorus could enter. I wish that at the end of each chapter of stiff agony or insane terror the choir of humanity could come in with a crash of music and tell both the reader and the author that this is not the whole of human experience. Let them go on recording hard scenes or hideous questions, but let there be a jolly refrain.

Thus we might read: "As Honoria laid down the volume of Ibsen and went wearily to her window, she realized that life must be to her not only harsher, but colder than it was to the comfortable and the weak. With her tooral ooral, etc.;" or, again: "The young curate smiled grimly as he listened to his great-grandmother's last words. He knew only too well that since Phogg's discovery of the hereditary

hairiness of goats religion stood on a very different basis from that which it had occupied in his childhood. With his rumpy-iddity, rumpy-iddity;" and so on. Or we might read: "Uriel Maybloom stared gloomily down at his sandals, as he realized for the first time how senseless and anti-social are all ties between man and woman; how each must go his or her way without any attempt to arrest the head-long separation of their souls." And then would come in one deafening chorus of everlasting humanity "But I'll be true to my love, if my love'll be true to me."

In the records of the first majestic and yet fantastic developments of the foundation of St. Francis of Assisi is an account of a certain Blessed Brother Giles. I have forgotten most of it, but I remember one fact: that certain students of theology came to ask him whether he believed in free will, and, if so, how he could reconcile it with necessity. On hearing the question St. Francis's follower reflected a little while and then seized a fiddle and began capering and dancing about the garden, playing a wild tune and generally expressing a violent and invigorating indifference. The tune is not recorded, but it is the eternal chorus of mankind, that modifies all the arts and mocks all the individualisms, like the laughter and thunder of some distant sea.