

A DEFENCE OF PUBLICITY

It is a very significant fact that the form of art in which the modern world has certainly not improved upon the ancient is what may roughly be called the art of the open air. Public monuments have certainly not improved, nor has the criticism of them improved, as is evident from the fashion of condemning such a large number of them as pompous. An interesting essay might be written on the enormous number of words that are used as insults when they are really compliments. It is in itself a singular study in that tendency which, as I have said, is always making things out worse than they are, and necessitating a systematic attitude of defence. Thus, for example, some dramatic critics cast contempt upon a dramatic performance by calling it theatrical, which simply means that it is suitable to a theatre, and is as much a compliment as calling a poem poetical. Similarly we speak disdainfully of a certain kind of work as sentimental, which simply means possessing the admirable and essential quality of sentiment. Such phrases are all parts of one peddling and cowardly philosophy, and remind us of the days when 'enthusiast' was a term of reproach. But of all this vocabulary of unconscious eulogies nothing is more striking than the word 'pompous.'

Properly speaking, of course, a public monument ought to be pompous. Pomp is its very object; it would be absurd to have columns and pyramids blushing in some coy nook like violets in the woods of spring. And public monuments have in this matter a great and much-needed lesson to teach. Valour and mercy and the great enthusiasms ought to be a great deal more public than they are at present. We are too fond nowadays of committing the sin of fear and calling it the virtue of reverence. We have forgotten the old and wholesome morality of the Book of Proverbs, 'Wisdom crieth without; her voice is heard in the streets.' In Athens and Florence her voice was heard in the streets. They had an outdoor life of war and argument, and they had what modern commercial civilization has never had--an outdoor art. Religious services, the most sacred of all things, have always been held publicly; it is entirely a new and debased notion that sanctity is the same as secrecy. A great many modern poets, with the most abstruse and delicate sensibilities, love darkness, when all is said and done, much for the same reason that thieves love it. The mission of a great spire or statue should be to strike the spirit with a sudden sense of pride as with a thunderbolt. It should lift us with it into the empty and ennobling air. Along the base of every noble monument, whatever else may be written there, runs in invisible letters the lines of Swinburne:

'This thing is God: To be man with thy might, To go straight in the strength of

thy spirit, and live out thy life in the light.'

If a public monument does not meet this first supreme and obvious need, that it should be public and monumental, it fails from the outset.

There has arisen lately a school of realistic sculpture, which may perhaps be better described as a school of sketchy sculpture. Such a movement was right and inevitable as a reaction from the mean and dingy pomposity of English Victorian statuary. Perhaps the most hideous and depressing object in the universe--far more hideous and depressing than one of Mr. H.G. Wells's shapeless monsters of the slime (and not at all unlike them)--is the statue of an English philanthropist. Almost as bad, though, of course, not quite as bad, are the statues of English politicians in Parliament Fields. Each of them is cased in a cylindrical frock-coat, and each carries either a scroll or a dubious-looking garment over the arm that might be either a bathing-towel or a light great-coat. Each of them is in an oratorical attitude, which has all the disadvantage of being affected without even any of the advantages of being theatrical. Let no one suppose that such abortions arise merely from technical demerit. In every line of those leaden dolls is expressed the fact that they were not set up with any heat of natural enthusiasm for beauty or dignity. They were set up mechanically, because it would seem indecorous or stingy if they were not set up. They were even set up sulkily, in a utilitarian age which was haunted by the thought that there were a great many more sensible ways of spending money. So long as this is the dominant national sentiment, the land is barren, statues and churches will not grow--for they have to grow, as much as trees and flowers. But this moral disadvantage which lay so heavily upon the early Victorian sculpture lies in a modified degree upon that rough, picturesque, commonplace sculpture which has begun to arise, and of which the statue of Darwin in the South Kensington Museum and the statue of Gordon in Trafalgar Square are admirable examples. It is not enough for a popular monument to be artistic, like a black charcoal sketch; it must be striking; it must be in the highest sense of the word sensational; it must stand for humanity; it must speak for us to the stars; it must declare in the face of all the heavens that when the longest and blackest catalogue has been made of all our crimes and follies there are some things of which we men are not ashamed.

The two modes of commemorating a public man are a statue and a biography. They are alike in certain respects, as, for example, in the fact that neither of them resembles the original, and that both of them commonly tone down not only all a man's vices, but all the more amusing of his virtues. But they are treated in one respect differently. We never hear anything about biography without hearing something about the sanctity of private life and the necessity for suppressing the whole of the most important part of a man's existence. The sculptor does not

work at this disadvantage. The sculptor does not leave out the nose of an eminent philanthropist because it is too beautiful to be given to the public; he does not depict a statesman with a sack over his head because his smile was too sweet to be enduring in the light of day. But in biography the thesis is popularly and solidly maintained, so that it requires some courage even to hint a doubt of it, that the better a man was, the more truly human life he led, the less should be said about it.

For this idea, this modern idea that sanctity is identical with secrecy, there is one thing at least to be said. It is for all practical purposes an entirely new idea; it was unknown to all the ages in which the idea of sanctity really flourished. The record of the great spiritual movements of mankind is dead against the idea that spirituality is a private matter. The most awful secret of every man's soul, its most lonely and individual need, its most primal and psychological relationship, the thing called worship, the communication between the soul and the last reality--this most private matter is the most public spectacle in the world. Anyone who chooses to walk into a large church on Sunday morning may see a hundred men each alone with his Maker. He stands, in truth, in the presence of one of the strangest spectacles in the world--a mob of hermits. And in thus definitely espousing publicity by making public the most internal mystery, Christianity acts in accordance with its earliest origins and its terrible beginning. It was surely by no accident that the spectacle which darkened the sun at noonday was set upon a hill. The martyrdoms of the early Christians were public not only by the caprice of the oppressor, but by the whole desire and conception of the victims.

The mere grammatical meaning of the word 'martyr' breaks into pieces at a blow the whole notion of the privacy of goodness. The Christian martyrdoms were more than demonstrations: they were advertisements. In our day the new theory of spiritual delicacy would desire to alter all this. It would permit Christ to be crucified if it was necessary to His Divine nature, but it would ask in the name of good taste why He could not be crucified in a private room. It would declare that the act of a martyr in being torn in pieces by lions was vulgar and sensational, though, of course, it would have no objection to being torn in pieces by a lion in one's own parlour before a circle of really intimate friends.

It is, I am inclined to think, a decadent and diseased purity which has inaugurated this notion that the sacred object must be hidden. The stars have never lost their sanctity, and they are more shameless and naked and numerous than advertisements of Pears' soap. It would be a strange world indeed if Nature was suddenly stricken with this ethereal shame, if the trees grew with their roots in the air and their load of leaves and blossoms underground, if the flowers closed at dawn and opened at sunset, if the sunflower turned towards the

darkness, and the birds flew, like bats, by night.