

THE MYSTAGOGUE

Whenever you hear much of things being unutterable and indefinable and impalpable and unnamable and subtly indescribable, then elevate your aristocratic nose towards heaven and snuff up the smell of decay. It is perfectly true that there is something in all good things that is beyond all speech or figure of speech. But it is also true that there is in all good things a perpetual desire for expression and concrete embodiment; and though the attempt to embody it is always inadequate, the attempt is always made. If the idea does not seek to be the word, the chances are that it is an evil idea. If the word is not made flesh it is a bad word.

Thus Giotto or Fra Angelico would have at once admitted theologically that God was too good to be painted; but they would always try to paint Him. And they felt (very rightly) that representing Him as a rather quaint old man with a gold crown and a white beard, like a king of the elves, was less profane than resisting the sacred impulse to express Him in some way. That is why the Christian world is full of gaudy pictures and twisted statues which seem, to many refined persons, more blasphemous than the secret volumes of an atheist. The trend of good is always towards Incarnation. But, on the other hand, those refined thinkers who worship the Devil, whether in the swamps of Jamaica or the salons of Paris, always insist upon the shapelessness, the wordlessness, the unutterable character of the abomination. They call him "horror of emptiness," as did the black witch in Stevenson's *Dynamiter*; they worship him as the unspeakable name; as the unbearable silence. They

think of him as the void in the heart of the whirlwind; the cloud on the brain of the maniac; the toppling turrets of vertigo or the endless corridors of nightmare. It was the Christians who gave the Devil a grotesque and energetic outline, with sharp horns and spiked tail. It was the saints who drew Satan as comic and even lively. The Satanists never drew him at all.

And as it is with moral good and evil, so it is also with mental clarity and mental confusion. There is one very valid test by which we may separate genuine, if perverse and unbalanced, originality and revolt from mere impudent innovation and bluff. The man who really thinks he has an idea will always try to explain that idea. The charlatan who has no idea will always confine himself to explaining that it is much too subtle to be explained. The first idea may really be very outree or specialist; it may really be very difficult to express to ordinary people. But because the man is trying to express it, it is most probable that there is something in it, after all. The honest man is he who is always trying to utter the unutterable, to describe the indescribable; but the quack lives not by plunging into mystery, but by refusing to come out of it.

Perhaps this distinction is most comically plain in the case of the thing called Art, and the people called Art Critics. It is obvious that an attractive landscape or a living face can only half express the holy cunning that has made them what they are. It is equally obvious that a landscape painter expresses only half of the landscape; a portrait

painter only half of the person; they are lucky if they express so much. And again it is yet more obvious that any literary description of the pictures can only express half of them, and that the less important half. Still, it does express something; the thread is not broken that connects God With Nature, or Nature with men, or men with critics. The "Mona Lisa" was in some respects (not all, I fancy) what God meant her to be. Leonardo's picture was, in some respects, like the lady. And Walter Pater's rich description was, in some respects, like the picture. Thus we come to the consoling reflection that even literature, in the last resort, can express something other than its own unhappy self.

Now the modern critic is a humbug, because he professes to be entirely inarticulate. Speech is his whole business; and he boasts of being speechless. Before Botticelli he is mute. But if there is any good in Botticelli (there is much good, and much evil too) it is emphatically the critic's business to explain it: to translate it from terms of painting into terms of diction. Of course, the rendering will be inadequate—but so is Botticelli. It is a fact he would be the first to admit. But anything which has been intelligently received can at least be intelligently suggested. Pater does suggest an intelligent cause for the cadaverous colour of Botticelli's "Venus Rising from the Sea." Ruskin does suggest an intelligent motive for Turner destroying forests and falsifying landscapes. These two great critics were far too fastidious for my taste; they urged to excess the idea that a sense of art was a sort of secret; to be patiently taught and slowly learnt. Still, they thought it could be taught: they thought it could be learnt.

They constrained themselves, with considerable creative fatigue, to find the exact adjectives which might parallel in English prose what has been done in Italian painting. The same is true of Whistler and R. A. M. Stevenson and many others in the exposition of Velasquez. They had something to say about the pictures; they knew it was unworthy of the pictures, but they said it.

Now the eulogists of the latest artistic insanities (Cubism and Post Impressionism and Mr. Picasso) are eulogists and nothing else. They are not critics; least of all creative critics. They do not attempt to translate beauty into language; they merely tell you that it is untranslatable—that is, unutterable, indefinable, indescribable, impalpable, ineffable, and all the rest of it. The cloud is their banner; they cry to chaos and old night. They circulate a piece of paper on which Mr. Picasso has had the misfortune to upset the ink and tried to dry it with his boots, and they seek to terrify democracy by the good old anti-democratic muddlements: that "the public" does not understand these things; that "the likes of us" cannot dare to question the dark decisions of our lords.

I venture to suggest that we resist all this rubbish by the very simple test mentioned above. If there were anything intelligent in such art, something of it at least could be made intelligible in literature. Man is made with one head, not with two or three. No criticism of Rembrandt is as good as Rembrandt; but it can be so written as to make a man go back and look at his pictures. If there is a curious and fantastic art,

it is the business of the art critics to create a curious and fantastic literary expression for it; inferior to it, doubtless, but still akin to it. If they cannot do this, as they cannot; if there is nothing in their eulogies, as there is nothing except eulogy—then they are quacks or the high-priests of the unutterable. If the art critics can say nothing about the artists except that they are good it is because the artists are bad. They can explain nothing because they have found nothing; and they have found nothing because there is nothing to be found.

THE RED REACTIONARY

The one case for Revolution is that it is the only quite clean and complete road to anything—even to restoration. Revolution alone can be not merely a revolt of the living, but also a resurrection of the dead.

A friend of mine (one, in fact, who writes prominently on this paper) was once walking down the street in a town of Western France, situated in that area that used to be called La Vendee; which in that great creative crisis about 1790 formed a separate and mystical soul of its own, and made a revolution against a revolution. As my friend went down this street he whistled an old French air which he had found, like Mr.