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IN ART AND LITERATURE

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THE NATURE OF BEAUTY IN ART AND LITERATURE

BY

CHARLES MAURON

Translation and Preface
by
ROGER FRY

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PREFACE

A WORD of introduction, of apology perhaps, seems appropriate in asking English readers to pay attention to the ideas of a young French writer who is known as yet only to a small circle of his fellow-countrymen. The excuse, if excuse is necessary, is that M. Mauron brings to these interminably, and so often fruitlessly, discussed questions a combination of faculties which is unusual. Soon after he had taken his degree he made his mark in the scientific world by an important discovery in physical chemistry, being the first to control the passage of matter from a crystalloid to a colloid state. A brilliant career lay before him when the

menace of blindness put an end to all possibility of continuing his researches. Fortunately for him, chemistry, in which he had made such rapid progress, had not been his first study. He had approached science through the Humanities, and his passion for literature and the plastic arts was at least as strong as his love of science. He brought to his renewed contemplation of the nature of literary and plastic beauty that unhesitating confidence in experimental methods and that precision of thought with which his scientific work had endowed him.

As may be seen in his essay on the "Nature of Beauty in Literature," M. Mauron uses the methods of the exact sciences with a boldness which may likely enough shock those who have approached these questions only from the standpoint of literature and art.

To such the analogy is suspect from its use as a rhetorical device for persuasion or at best for the illumination of an already acquired idea. Here it is a technical instrument. M. Mauron trusts himself to it—like those spiders which venture on their air-borne thread —in order to bridge a chasm in our understanding. He looks to it not to persuade others, but actually to reveal to himself hitherto unsuspected relations. The results which this method yields in our author's hands seem to me full of interest for our understanding of the æsthetic problem.

But M. Mauron's interest in so many diverse aspects of the spiritual life have given him far more than a facility in experimental methods. Unlike too many scientific practitioners he is deeply imbued with the scientific spirit. The constructions of science and art are for

him the two great means for the liberation and self-realisation of the human spirit. It is this deep imaginative conviction, together with the candour and freshness of his outlook, which makes M. Mauron's speculations so fascinating to follow and so full of promise by reason of the prospects of further inquiry which they open to the mind.

ROGER FRY.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN ART

I

In æsthetics, as indeed elsewhere, there is only one honest method—the experimental. All the *a priori* affirmations of dubious metaphysics and inopportune ethics are puerile impertinences. One must feel, and feel for a long while, descend to technical considerations, and linger in the laboratory. Then only may one philosophise if one can, for it is no easy matter.

A man of the eighteenth century, without museums, without exhibitions, without photographs, and almost without music, could, if he tried, arrive at certain limited formulæ. Voltaire

could talk of Lully but not of Palestrina, of Poussin but not of Fra Angelico, and had he done so it would almost surely have been beside the mark. Not that great works had not been created before then, but the knowledge of them was not public and ideas like collections were private.

We know and feel to-day so large a number of æsthetic phenomena that the primitive hypotheses, filled to overflowing, have burst. We need hypotheses, however, as we need a house, were it only to taste the pleasures of irony and the open sky. We desire even to have only one, for our minds have grasped the certitude of the unity of all the arts. But what idea is large enough to contain at once Bach and Debussy, Rubens and Giotto, Milton and Verlaine? One may risk the venture, but only on condition of

making, before one starts, good provision of intellectual honesty, of abandoning all pride and all hope of absolute success, of being happy if one finds, not the formula, but a few honest phrases which are not too absurd.

The great danger, in face of so many and such various facts, is to suppose that what we call the æsthetic sense is a form of intelligence. We love unity; in it we repose and by it we are nourished. To succeed in proving that A =B, or at least enters into B, wards off that fear which every original existence awakes in us—the fear of the unknown. To prove that art is, at bottom, the analogue of science, that Baudelaire=Lord Kelvin, and Shakespeare = Leibnitz — what beatitudes were there! The idea is so seductive that it is difficult to suppose it absurd; nor is it absurd. The source of every

intellectual production is always that inexhaustible reservoir of sensations which we call nature. As for the human intelligence, it must be a machine that is always more or less similar, more or less pointed or powerful in different individuals, but constant, like the species, in its mechanism. If, then, there is unity of origin and unity of treatment, how should there not be unity of result? There we have a good example of *a priori* reasoning. It would have no value—because one can, at will, by the balance of the phrase bring into relief the unity or the diversity of the human spirit—if the theory and practice of certain modern painters had not supplied a kind of experimental confirmation of the idea.

A current opinion of the day is that a picture is not the reproduction of nature but a deformation of nature, a

kind of extract destined to bring into relief certain relations which would otherwise be lost among insignificant details. If a group of trees, it is said, owes its æsthetic value in an ensemble only to the sombre masses of its foliage, what is gained by a detailed description of the branches and bark? A few indications will suffice. To keep only what is efficient, to put nothing on the canvas but the harmony which arrested the artist, would be, according to these theories, the means of attaining to that sober strength, that fullness of form which distinguishes good architecture and, in general, all classic works of art.

An argument once started ends generally by plunging down unforeseen declivities. And most people precipitate themselves after it; a few only watch it roll, not without a certain sadness and

perhaps an excessive contempt. Modern theories of painting make straight for Cubism, and I doubt if any reasonable argument has been found to bar the way. If an object counts only by its shape and colour, it is of little importance if it be an object or not; it is purely shape and colour, and one can place it beside other shapes and other colours without any signification; they are chosen by the painter only to satisfy his sense of harmony.

It is enough to choose, it is enough to compose. Such is the irresistible conclusion which is the more seductive in that it passes beyond the limits of painting. It explains music, it may be adapted to poetry. Even more, it is only the emergence into the painter's consciousness, and the application to his craft of familiar psychological truths. To choose out of a natural ensemble, to

abstract, to rearrange, in order to bring out certain relations, is what we do every day. These are the incessantly repeated gestures of the human mind, the very movements of his mental mechanism. One can watch them, for instance, in the domain of science, where these gestures have become extremely conscious. In the simple experiment of the fall of bodies *in vacuo*, the experimenter, when he considers the tube, eliminates its form, its colour, its hardness, and a thousand other qualities so as to see in it only a circumscribed vacuum. Of the falling bodies he considers only that they are as different as possible and, above all, in their mass; of their fall, of that bunch of sensations which is composed of noises, reflected lights, and shades, he considers only the rapidity. Unceasingly the experimenter chooses so as

to bring out the simple relation: all bodies fall *in vacuo* with the same rapidity. And here we are at the heart of the question. It is evident that it is this skilful choice, this arrangement, which is the basis of science. If one can show that these also constitute art we have found the trunk whence the two branches grow. We re-establish unity, we identify, we explain; our mind can rest at ease, we are happy. An *a priori* reasoning is the safe road to happiness.

But let us submit the case to experiment. Let us question our sensations. Let us consider simply, without any theories in mind, the two results that we wish to identify. The end of science is law; more still it is a mathematical formula. It aims at the establishment of a universal function which

would allow us to foresee at each instant the state of the universe. Since it is impossible for the moment to attain to this function, of which we know neither the variables nor the form, we have subdivided the universe into a certain number of domains, and we seek in each of these domains to find the general function which controls it. Scientific knowledge is thus only complete in the most abstract mathematical form. And who would complain that it is simple? As far as knowledge is concerned, one can only rejoice that between the pressure, P, of a gas, the volume, V, and the temperature, T, there should exist so simple a relation as $PV=RT$ where R is a constant. The simpler the result the more we applaud. But what theory would be persuasive enough to make us admit that such schematic results, however

potent, would satisfy us in art, and that a formula in physics could be in any way compared to a portrait by Rembrandt? We feel at once that a fundamental heterogeneity separates them. We feel clearly that the details so necessarily eliminated from the formula ought to be retained in an æsthetic construction. That they must be chosen as being necessary to the ensemble and concurrent with the total harmony is true, but we must have details. We want order in variety, but without variety order is quite useless. A critic once said of Cézanne that when he painted apples he neglected their terrestrial and ephemeral qualities to preserve only their eternal form. But if the sight of an apple is a trivial occurrence of every day, what is there so strange about a sphere?

Whatever is dry, linear, precise,

anæmic is detestable in art. It is not that the work must be sensual. *Le Misanthrope* is not sensual, and with obstinate good sense we insist on living novels—*dramatis personæ* which are not arguments in costume. We want forms more succulent than dihedral angles, a music which is not merely made up of learned harmonies. We require richness; we demand, in fine, that a work of art should nourish us as real things do, and that we can have the divine experience of it as we have of the actual world.

All this is excessively banal, but is there any better sign of an experimental truth than its banality? But we must avoid misunderstanding. A "living" novel is not the realistic mirror in which we find once more a too well-known face. To wish for succulent forms is not to ask the painter to reproduce beautiful models. Keeping to the strict sense of

words, to say that a work of art should be real and should be able to form part of our experience is to ask of it only that it should have the qualities of an external object, at once original and complex. That is not a theory, but a quite ordinary constatement.

Call to mind the way in which any beautiful work presents itself to you. One happens upon it on one's way as one happens on a new person. On its face are inimitable lights and shades, with resemblances to others, no doubt, but always a personality. It has its own life, and thousands of imperceptible influences have modelled the contours of its face—a thousand events of which you are necessarily ignorant, but whence you derive a total impression. If you cease to look at it, you know that others look at it in their turn and see it differently from you;

and if you look at it twenty times, you find it always at once familiar and different.

It is never thus that a scientific law or formula, however subtle its relations, presents itself to our minds. There, all the elements are definite and their relations are definite. You may or may not understand it, but once understood, it remains within you as immutable as the letters that symbolise it. It is necessary to bring into relief those fundamental qualities, however familiar, in order to explore more fully this idea of what is real and endeavour to discover what exactly distinguishes an external object from an intellectual construction. We have a chance thus to be able to define better than by a sensation this condition of reality which seems to be fundamental to a work of art.

An example will make this clearer. If we consider a circle we see clearly that it is entirely determined when one knows the definition of a circle and knows also the centre and the radius. We can probe the reality it offers us as long as we like, we shall never get anything out other than this definition, and even the form of the definition will be sensibly the same. Moreover, with the same elements we are able at will to superpose an infinite number of identical circles. But place beside the circle the contour of a leaf. It is simple enough to the eye, although we cannot define its curve in intelligible words. If we examine it with a microscope it appears made up of the sequence of contours of the cells, which are themselves undefinable (in the interior of each cell the protoplasm disposes its granulations by chance), and one may

continue the process to infinity. We know, moreover, that the whole tree cannot provide us with another leaf whose contour could be superposed on this one.

One may repeat the same reasoning for all intellectual constructions on the one hand, and for all real objects on the other. What distinguishes them in essence is that one is simple enough to be defined in its elements and their relations, whilst the other offers us a complexity which renders it inimitable. It is very possible that one could pass by successive complications from this simple thing to the composite. The complexity of a phenomenon may be incomprehensible to us without being infinite. The human mind is an instrument which has limits to its precision, and we must take account of these. For the photographic objective

infinity begins at seven metres; for our intellect it is enough to have three bodies acting on one another to make the problem of their movements insoluble. As soon, then, as a phenomenon becomes sufficiently complex to be incomprehensible, it enters into the domain where a work of art becomes possible. It can become an æsthetic fact — which does not mean that it must become one. We can only say of any construction of the human spirit that, in so far as it puts off its abstract character and takes on the qualities of a real object, it becomes inimitable.

We have seen already in regard to the preceding example how an increasing complication brought about increasing chances of originality. It is evident to anyone who realises the astonishing progression of possible combinations.

Whatever is purely intellectual is never original. A mathematical formula, a scientific law, uses only elements that are definite, clear, and comprehensible to all. How can we conciliate the general and the particular? We must choose one or the other—idea or sensation, relations or living things.

In thus opposing our æsthetic experience to the endeavour to reduce art to purely intellectual elements, we have, to start with, only translated an indisputable impression—viz. that the work of art must be a part of reality. But when, having examined the meaning of the word reality, and having found it almost synonymous with inexhaustible complexity, we say, further, that the work of art must possess this complexity, we are formulating a hypothesis. And this hypothesis will have value, not if it is true—there are so

many indisputable propositions without interest — but if it explains and co-ordinates a certain number of sensations without contradicting any one which is essential.

It is this that we must now investigate. Perhaps before examining the facts which may support or contradict our hypothesis we must avoid a misunderstanding, without serious importance, it is true, but capable of interfering with our comprehension of the problem. One might say that, no matter what work of art, good or bad, will possess the complexity of real objects, since it itself is one. One sees at once the sophism. When we consider a statue it is the form that interests us, not the stone; it is the form which must possess this necessary complexity. Matter cannot confer it. And in the form itself it is the intention that

counts. A cube may have its corners chipped; it is none the less a cube for the spirit. Every complexity to count must be voluntary and not accidental.

II

We can now try our hypothesis. Everyone can first of all see if it holds when he applies it successively to all the works of art he knows. I doubt if any can be resolved into merely intelligible relations; but this is only our first impression made more precise and extensive. There is, too, the incapacity in art of all automatism. We may range under this heading the most diverse facts. There is the painter's love of what he calls a sensitive line, his horror of the compass, his exclusive interest in what is manual; there is the musician's love for phrases with unforeseen modulations; there is the impossibility of manufacturing art by machine, and even by hand if one uses

only geometric drawings. A problem which has haunted all those who are interested without prejudice in æsthetics is that of the *à peu près* in art. Nothing in it is exact. We talk frequently of symmetry, equilibrium, and proportions in art, but it is useless to try to discover the sense and range of these terms, which never have in their context the rigorous meaning we give them. Symmetry very roughly observed is generally only suggestive. Not that the artist lacks means; it is with evident intention that the order is broken. Still more, it is just that that charms us. On one side of the porch are the Elect, on the other the Damned. The general movement is repeated on either side, but the attitudes are very different. Similarly in a sonata, the motive recurs only in a different key or with modifications, which symmetry allows us to

feel and which we enjoy as much as it. We may say it is to avoid monotony, but the whole question lies there. Who would ever talk of the monotony of a formula? Symmetry has a geometrical interest only if it is absolutely exact; it seems to have æsthetic interest only if it is not. And what balance could estimate the equilibrium of a work of art? It is made, not for an instrument of knowledge, but for a sensitive eye whose optic nerve ends in a thinking brain. To natural complexity there is added spiritual complexity. Most objects are modified by their colour and their import for human beings. One speaks, indeed, of relations and proportions, and one must admit that we have no other words; but how vague and indetermined a meaning must be allowed when we talk of the proportions of a figure to a

landscape! Its meaning is altogether qualitative. Possibly, indeed almost certainly, it is a question of respective dimensions. But what formula could ever make explicit the dimensions of a human body and those of the surrounding landscape seen in perspective? To know that such a formula exists is but a Platonic satisfaction. A chemist, too, may have an intimate conviction that there exists a formula for wood; but, since he does not know it, he is content to admire its fibres and its texture, which cannot enter into any scientific construction. And even if he found the formula it would give him only the chemical composition, and would not explain to him the movement of its fibres and the colour of its grain. The intelligibility which it would bring would be so minute beside the infinity of the real object that one

could never imagine it would explain its beauty! On this point many contemporary works of art which show remarkable intelligence and ingenuity and a quick sense of relations, but which fail of being genuine creations, would seem to be fairly conclusive. One has before them the feeling that when once one has understood the relations there is an end of it. It is this which explains, too, that among the works of the old masters so many learned constructions, so many "big machines"—the artist's slang is itself expressive of our idea—remain forgotten, whilst many smaller works continue to charm us because a living sensibility has put into them that infinite complexity which the intellect cannot attain to. Even if we consider an art which is more intelligible, like architecture, this idea that beauty

comes from happy proportions appears insufficient. It is certain that the three dimensions of a room ought to be chosen according to æsthetically correct relations, but could this simple volume alone give us the sensation of beauty? In that which we feel in the interior of a cathedral there is not merely a relation of proportions; there is light and shade, there are the ribs whereon these play, and it is quite possible that its beauty when orientated from East to West would be lessened if it lay North and South. What architect's "plan, section, and elevation," where the relations are none the less exactly reproduced, could give us in the least the impression of the actual monument? And how fallacious we feel those geometric schemes to be by which, recently, people have tried to interpret the masterpieces of painting!

To begin with, the work does not agree with the schema, and, moreover, we feel that starting from the most perfect schema in the world one could never create such a picture! All those facts, all these infallible sensations, converge towards the idea of a necessary complexity. If the aim of science is the creation of a formula, that of art is the creation of an object. And besides, is there not in each domain parallel to its art a science which handles the same material? There exists a science of forms, but if anyone ever thought of employing for æsthetic ends the results of descriptive geometry he could not, I think, realise anything very felicitous. Similarly, we have never seen that progress in acoustics has intervened in the progress of music; and harmony itself —so useful for composition, so prominent in the musicians' craft—do we

not know that its laws may be perfectly observed in a work of no musical value whatever?

It is a terrible poser for the partisans of a purely intellectual art to explain why so much science, so subtle and so profound, can at times appear so vain. It is, indeed, because one can add as many terms as one likes to a formula; it never can in any way attain to the character of a sensation.

Here then are resumed, I think, most of the facts which support our hypothesis. But can one perhaps raise against it a serious objection? I mean, does it omit no essential fact? I only see one, but that a very important one: if complexity is a necessary condition of art, how is it that the most striking characteristic of many beautiful works is precisely their simplicity? The sen-

sation of beauty that comes from them seems precisely to be derived from the fact that they are largely and lucidly constructed. But we have already sufficiently insisted on the sense here given to the words simple and complex to prevent anyone saying that such works are, in our sense, simple. A fresco by Giotto, though we call it simple in design, has none the less the complicated and subtle curves of a living thing. The objection under this heading, then, falls to the ground. But when one makes this objection, one may have in view most of all the example of our religious architecture, which in passing from the Romanesque through Gothic to the Flamboyant enriches itself continually with fresh complications in proportion as, generally speaking, its beauty grows less. Is not that a progression exactly the opposite of what the preceding

ideas would lead us to expect? The objection is strong and will, in fact, complicate our hypothesis and make it more precise. The creation of a work of art is certainly a happy concurrence. It is a phenomenon which, according to what we have already said, is more related to biological than purely intellectual facts. And we know how for the birth of a new creature, a series of conditions is necessary, of which each one, not only is not sufficient, but also may be harmful to all the others and compromise the general equilibrium if it develops in an abnormal way.

To say that a certain complexity is necessary is to mark an inferior limit in the series of increasing complexities. There ought to exist a second, very variable no doubt, in order to define the region wherein the work of art can exist. There must be for it a vital

zone placed between the Formula and Chaos, and experience alone can fix its limits. We have already noticed, too, the hypothesis which acts as a counterweight to our own, order in opposition to complexity; whether attained by symmetry, however imperfect, or by choice of proportions, which is needful but in itself inadequate. It is precisely because a work of art is not the analogue of a chain of reasoning nor of a scientific law, but forms a part of objective reality that in it forces are opposed and in equilibrium. What unity can be stronger than that of a tree and what complexity greater? It was clear that in pushing our hypothesis we should meet with limitations as all living things must. And here another æsthetic question poses itself: that of the unity of the work of art. Whatever importance we attribute to that, it

does not affect the value of complexity any more than the rôle of temperature in germination is opposed to the different but equally necessary rôle of humidity.

III

Besides the arguments of a general kind hitherto enumerated, one could certainly find facts supporting our hypothesis in the empirical æsthetics, which have been long ago laid down in each branch of art. It is thus that one could interpret the literary formula of the seventeenth century, which prescribed the strict following of nature. We know quite well that a mere copy of manners and characters offers no artistic interest, but if, instead of following step by step this precept, the artist dominates his subject as Molière and Racine did, he may find in it a powerful means of obtaining the necessary complexity. A constant comparison between the work of art on

the one hand and the spectacle which the world affords must conduce to a continual shading and modelling of the effects. It is not a question of imitating nature but of finding therein a school which nothing else can replace. Every art would afford similar examples in its technique.

It may be worth while to examine one of these more closely in order to verify in detail the importance of our hypothesis. Of all the cases one might choose, that of the art of letters might seem, *a priori*, the most difficult to reconcile with the preceding suggestions, since ideas themselves and their logical sequence play so great a part there that one is tempted to allow them a primordial importance. It is a commonplace to say that the excellence of a writer shows itself among other things in the exactitude of his terminology, in the

mot juste, and we are so confirmed in this idea of exactitude that we willingly allow it the same rigorous sense that it would have if applied, for example, to a mathematical work.

It seems as though a sensation or an emotion might be represented by a particular word as a geometrical figure or property is. But if one examines the meaning of the expression *mot juste* in this latter case, one finds that it implies nothing other than the possibility for the word in question to be replaced by its exact definition. The same remark applies for any scientific work. I find, for instance, in an article this simple phrase: "It has been found possible to cinematograph the flight of birds." If one gives to the word flight its usual definition: "The movements made by a bird to maintain itself or to progress in the air," one sees

that there is no difficulty in replacing in the preceding phrase the word flight by its definition. But, on the other hand, let us take the verse in which Mallarmé says about his daughter's fan:

> Ce blanc vol fermé que tu poses
> Contre le feu d'un bracelet.

If we try to repeat the same operation, not only does the phrase become ridiculous, which is a question of rhythm and need not be considered, but it becomes absurd. One might try other definitions. It is a simple experiment, but the result is always the same, and we are led to the surprising conclusion that the word is not capable of definition. It represents nevertheless a reality, and one that is evocative of very delicate sensations. It brings back to us those sensations of aerial lightness

and rhythmic beats which we have often experienced but which we could not exactly define. The example is taken at random, and anyone can repeat the experiment as often as he likes.

He will thereby be led to see that every word is the symbol of two quite distinct realities: one, which I will call intellectual—the definition of the dictionary (though this is sometimes more than a definition, an explanation, where an acute apprehension of things is already apparent)—the other, which one may call poetic, which is the ensemble of the reactions of our sensibility before the objective realities which the words represent. I mean by this, in case of an object, the ensemble of the impressions experienced before this object; in the case of an emotion, the ensemble of those moments in which we have felt it, in short the experience

we have of the thing named. The mind weaves between these diverse impressions—and without distinguishing the sensual from the emotive—more or less tenuous threads which cause each word to construct as an inner reality a kind of fragile system—often without any logic other than that of associations or partial resemblances—a system which would suggest to the chemist those enormous molecules which constitute living matter, whose groupings are so insecure and so complicated that the body undergoes incessant small changes, tightening here and loosening there, always analogous but never identical with itself and never defined. We find thus in a precise manner the fundamental dissimilarity between the products of science and those of art.

It shows itself even in the words themselves, which can be according to

the mind which employs them either geometrical figures or living protoplasm. One can see as a result in what sense one must understand the expression of the *mot juste*. If nothing is less defined, nothing is more delicate and more precise than a natural construction. One cannot enunciate the drawing of a face; one can only feel and savour it, but with what care must this be done in order to create a likeness. Similarly, a felicitous expression requires a delicate sensibility which will succeed where the most alert intellect could accomplish nothing.

It is, moreover, not only in the words themselves that such misconceptions have arisen, it is also in what constitutes almost the essence of the art of unity, in the poetical image. People have crassly confused the poetical image with those comparisons which we con-

stantly make in order to explain our thought. Let us take a very simple example, which has nothing of the rather precious complications of modern writers. Everyone knows the old rondeau of Charles d'Orléans:

> Le temps a laissé son manteau
> De vent, de froidure, et de pluie!

Hardly a manual of literature but declares that the poet has personified the weather. But if it was so, and if that was the whole of the poetical image, what a poor impression it would make on us! We know only too well the factitious and ugly character of those symbolic figures which encumber the engravings and the bad verse of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where one represents, of course, Commerce handing the products of Industry to naked savages, and Science contem-

plating a globe. And again they tell us that the image is visual, and they make it a great merit for the author. But if we try to see, we have got first of all to imagine the Weather for ourselves, since all we are told of him is that he had a cloak. And if we ask of what nature this cloak was and what was its form, we are told: "Of wind and cold and rain." We can only feel puzzled, for how can we humanly conceive of a cloak made of cold. One could at a pinch suppose it made of snow or of mist, but here it is, I think, impossible to frame any clear image, and, moreover, the mind is perplexed by the contradiction implied in the expression "cloak of cold." Must we conclude, then, as they certainly would have done in the eighteenth century, that the image is bad since it is neither visible nor comprehensible? Evidently not,

for we have no need either to imagine or to understand. It is enough to feel.

The "Weather" is not a kind of Goodfellow; it is what we all call the weather, that is to say the temperature, the force of the wind on our face and the colour of the sky; and the cloak—if we are content to listen to our spirit and let it do its own business—the cloak represents the most complete system of wintry sensations. It may be, it is true, the cloak of cloud which covers the wintry sky, but it is certainly also our own cloak; not indeed, as the dictionary would say, that warm garment which we cover ourselves with in winter, which would make the phrase ridiculous; it is our experience of the cloak, the wind which has lifted it and which it resembles moreover by its spreading gesture and its enveloping folds; it is the cold from which it has

protected us and the rain on our faces, and besides this, making a background at once to our experience and the phrase, it is a thousand landscapes, shaken trees, and skies either grey or too icily blue; in short it is the weather of winter-time.

To forget all these sensations, to leave them in the same cupboard as the woollens and furs and to see nothing but the white embroideries of a sunny sky or a woman's dress, that is indeed for us the coming of spring. So that the two verses which have no other definable sense than that of the banal phrase "winter is over," because they employ instead of words which are intellectual constructions other words stuffed for us with sensations and minute details, because they speak of that fundamental object our clothing, which we lighten or thicken according

to the time or the season, contain a reality which makes of them a work of art. They would be poor enough if they only brought us an image and an allegory, but they are, in fact, a new original and complex method of expression. One may object, perhaps, that we are putting too many things into a few words, and that it is impossible to see all that in a simple reading of the verses. But did we see, in the contour of the leaf the cells and the granulation of the protoplasm which all the same gave its suppleness to the line? The poet feels what words are swollen with realities; it is when he finds them that he makes a beautiful work and not when his intellect discovers some ingenious comparison.

When on any controverted issue one has sorted out one's sincere impressions,

analysed one's sensations, tried a hypothesis, discussed and applied this hypothesis to particular cases in order to test its value, there remains apparently no more to be said. There is, however, some advantage in carrying one's philosophy further and giving the metaphysic, so to speak, of the experimental idea, because one shows more clearly thus its meaning and underlying tendencies. An idea never remains isolated; there is in it a force of attraction which makes it join with others in a system. It is only when it is thus classified in the totality of our conceptions that we really apprehend it in its entirety. Our hypothesis of a certain complexity being necessary to art relates itself inevitably to the thought, already an old one, that if the end of science is solely a knowledge of the existing world, art aims at a genuine creation. If we refuse to be

stopped by the banality of words falsified by popular usage, we shall see that the formula is of inexhaustible wealth. The idea of "creation" contains, in fact, if one adds to it that of "play," nearly all that man has hitherto been able to conceive of the divinity. From antiquity downwards there have always been certain spirits to whom the diverse ends which religion and morals have tried to make out for human activity have appeared too narrow. No one of these could contain it entirely, and one is led to this conclusion that the highest aim which one can give to it, that which a god would give to his gestures, is nothing but this activity itself, or, if you like, the pleasure which one finds in exercising it—and this is nothing but its internal aspect, the view we have of it from within.

Whatever the gods of antiquity do they play. And we too—actors of a miniature history which none the less surpasses us infinitely—we could not find a finer attitude. But when a spirit plays, it can only do so in two ways, either by regarding the pre-existing world and marvelling at it, or seeking to comprehend it and foretell its events, or by dissociating this same world into its elements which he will employ to construct others from them according to his fancy, as a child destroys a pattern of coloured cubes to build up new ones. That, indeed, is a divine game, and it is the game of the artist. It is not without rules, and one can deduce at once that the new construction is valueless unless it has as forcible a reality as the original world.

If one creates one must create a reality, and not, as painters say, card-

board. The face painted by Rembrandt has to be at least as rich as those we meet every day, or otherwise what do we gain? It is necessary, too, that this reality should be different from that which we find in the external world, and thereby we see that complexity is not sufficient by itself and that we must find in the work of art the very impress of our spirit with all its logic and its sensitiveness. The end is to create a world which shall be at once a world and ours. I think we can deduce thence all the fundamental conditions of a work of art; at all events we see how easily the experimental hypothesis at which we have arrived fits it.

A point which it may be interesting to consider is the choice of the elements of a work of art. Springing from our spirit, it will discover the properties

and the extraordinary mixtures which characterise it. It is a quality of our sensibility and our intelligence, to which attention has already been called, that nothing which affects them can remain isolated, and that these fusions—I might almost say symbioses—which are brought about between our impressions, of whatever order they may be, sensual or emotive, result in the birth of indefinable intellectual elements. And this to such a degree that it is really impossible to have what we can call a pure sensation, and that there are mixed for instance with the simplest vision, such as that of a banal object, memories and emotions that we generally do not analyse, but which give its originality to our impression. This quality is probably one of the most fertile resources of art. The forms and sounds which it offers are, whether we

will or no, impregnated with emotions of which we only have a global sensation, but which account in great part for its richness. The artist who creates can really employ at will and put side by side in his work, without its appearing strange to us, impressions which are quite dissimilar in their nature. The work thus created, absolutely incomprehensible for the intellect, since it is like an addition of disparate objects, is none the less familiar to our spirit which accomplishes every moment this absurd operation.

It is in this direction, I think, that one must seek for the solution of the problem of the subject in art which has so preoccupied people's minds. Must we, or must we not, consider the subject of a work of art? The mistake is to suppose that there is a subject and a work which represents it. There is

no subject, there are only objects which may have served as models and which are part of the great reservoir whence the artist draws the elements of his work, and there is beside, independent, real and different, this work itself. By this absurd division of the work of art which is on the contrary essentially one, people have got into the habit of ranging on one side in the subject all the emotive elements of the work, and on the other in the thing executed all the formal elements; but this arrangement does not in any way correspond with our sensation any more than it does with that of the artist. The latter—the man who would be a god—has built with the stones which he thought best. These may be merely forms or merely sounds: contrary to the outworn but persistent opinion that the subject is the essence

of the work, his creation will be no less beautiful for that. But why should the artist, by an inverse reaction, systematically abstain from employing the regrets, the joys, and so many other nameless conceptions of our spirit? He has not, moreover, really abstained, and if one wishes to make experimental æsthetics one cannot thus, *a priori*, separate from works such as Beethoven's—which by themselves form perhaps the most complex world that a man has ever conceived, and which is not a transcription of his joys and sorrows taken as subject, but a totality in which joys and sorrows contribute their share to the general harmony. It suffices us that this totality possesses on the one hand a richness which makes it equal to the creations of nature, and on the other spiritual qualities which give it beauty.

There, I think, we have in brief the generalities which form the philosophic prolongation of this essay. I hope that they may have made it clearer and given it a wider horizon, although they are probably false and certainly full of mystery. Æsthetic is not nearing completion. But whatever one thinks of these suggestions, the hypothesis of a necessary complexity remains: it too is perishable, no doubt, but, born of experience it can only be killed by experience; and that is the only nobility to which a hypothesis can decently lay claim.

BEAUTY IN LITERATURE

There is no sentiment more ill-defined than that which we have with regard to the nature of Literary Beauty. We should have a certain shame in praising in a painter's work "the freshness of the imagination which directs his choice of subject," or the "tender feeling with which he details a grandmother's wrinkled face"; it is not, perhaps, because we have a clearer sense of plastic beauty than our elders, but, with a more exact understanding of the painter's purpose, a shame has come to life in us which fears to praise for the wrong reason. It is science and not want of precision which creates delicacy. One might search in vain for

this shame in our literary critiques; one writer is praised for his psychological penetration, another for the elegance of his phrases or the solid construction of his intrigues; one is amusing, another profound, and a third is praised for having created popular rhythms, or for having avoided adjectival excess — indifferently. The worst of it is that we feel all these things; the confusion is not in the mind of the critics, but in our own sensibility. Only an uneasiness arises from this want of definition, a malaise, an irritation in face of this heap of literary facts which lacks all classification. Only the facts exist, but the facts are terrible; they crush the spirit by their individuality. We admit them all: we adore the classics and secretly cherish the romantics; we insist on order and construction, and it is enough

for Laforgue to appear with his "little sensation" of orphans out for a Sunday walk, and of the piano heard at the corner of a desolate street, to make us forget our exigencies and make us proclaim the eternal superiority of living novelty over dead logic. Where then is literary beauty? Is there ever any special sentiment to which we can give that name?

Not only are we unable to define that which is so dear to us, but we do not even know in which direction to look for it. We see its reflection everywhere, nowhere the flame itself.

I wish to propose here simply a method of research. It is identical with that which, in the sciences, gives us the brightest lights and perhaps the greatest spiritual pleasures: the comparison of formulæ. We find, for instance, that the movement of a

pendulum or of a diapason are expressed by the same equation as the electrical oscillations of an emission station of Hertzian waves: from this apposition a sudden illumination emerges: quantities hitherto mysterious now reveal their meaning. Self-induction, which was supposed to be an original force, shows the true visage, long since known, of inertia. The heap of facts suddenly becomes orderly and manageable.

Who knows if such comparisons might not give interesting results in æsthetics? It is no longer, naturally, a question of formulæ, but of analogous quantities or rather analogous realities. It is an intellectual experiment to be undertaken with prudence. The only underlying hypothesis necessary is that there exists a certain unity among all the arts or rather among our sensations of

beauty, and this, I think, may easily be admitted.

From the point of view of æsthetic theory, the plastic arts are the best known to us. It is not, indeed, that we know much even of them: we can affirm that a piece of architecture is beautiful, we cannot yet explain why, even in the simplest cases. At least we can say wherein its beauty consists: it is in its volume. Our reactions before a work of art are so complicated that we must consider it an important result to be able to isolate from them the specific æsthetic emotion. In a picture, colour is added to the volume, as also the play of light and certain movements which do not define precise forms, but which may play around the principal theme, echoing and enriching it. But still there are cases where the volume alone is sufficient

to arouse the sentiment of beauty, and volume remains always a fundamental element of it.

What analogue in literature shall we give to volume? It suffices to transfer it from the domain of space to that of the spirit; and as the notion of volume admits of all spatial possibilities, the corresponding literary notion ought to admit of all spiritual possibilities. The psychological reality, the psychological complex—there is the material which the writer should work upon. Notice that in both domains our æsthetic sensibility rejects realities that are too simple, geometric volumes in one and pure ideas in the other. In spatial world there remains the vast crowd of complex volumes: in the spiritual there remain the everyday realities of our soul, all the forms of our inner life.

"As the painter creates a spatial

being, the writer creates a psychological being." Such, I think, is the hypothesis that we might admit as the basis of all literary criticism. We must before developing it obviate certain immediate objections:

1. Most people think that the painter has the intention of representing some object on his canvas, of copying the reality which he has before his eyes. The notion of the descriptive writer is no less popular even among writers themselves. Literature abounds in examples of minute descriptions, composed with a scientific respect for the observation of reality: landscapes, manners, characters are offered as "true." All the literary schools have attributed value to this imitation of nature. On the other hand, all the same, they have safeguarded the rights of fiction, glorifying it even, under the

names of phantasy, imagination, the power of creating "types," etc.

This indecision about the true rôle of the writer has resulted in a series of rules like the poetic art of Boileau and the prefaces of the Romantics —rules which each generation establishes or questions and which, however excellent they may be in themselves, are certainly all incapable of founding a general æsthetic of literature. We must decide now, frankly, as has been done in the domain of the plastic arts, whether the work is an independent creation—a reality, as undeniable as a tree or a man—or whether it is a document which is more or less trustworthy, in the same category as a geographer's description or a psychologist's observation. It is a mistake to suppose that one can unite the two conceptions; one can mix them, no doubt, and that

is what is constantly done. There will come a time, I hope, when the pretension of a writer to contribute to psychology and even physiology (as Zola in the Rougon Macquart series) will appear as ridiculous as a pretension on the part of a landscape painter to contribute to geology or botany.

The study of an existent reality and the creation of a new one ought not to be confounded. It is possible, it is certain even, that creation is favoured by study, and this is enough to explain all the precepts which teach the respect of "nature." But we must be careful not to regard as an end what is only a means. A novel ought to be living but not impartial nor exact; it is not a source of information. I am almost ashamed to write all this; but do we not constantly hear novelists propose "to paint modern society" or the "manners of

Paris," to "dissect the human heart" or to "bring to life" a past epoch? Has not a writer been recently taken to task for errors of date and "false" interpretation of the facts? Have they not praised Proust as a great psychologist, whereas he is in reality a great poet? The assimilation here suggested of literature to the plastic arts, and the idea that the writer's end is solely to model a spiritual volume, would relegate sternly to the background the documentary value of a work of literature.

2. A conception the very opposite of that which would make of the artist a describer, a man in the laboratory, is that which presents him solely as a man of his craft. "The subject is nothing," so it runs—what matters is the manner in which it is treated, it is the form, it is the rhythm and harmony, the purity of the language, the

wealth of vocabulary, etc. We must be on our guard here: the old scholastic distinction of form and content has created many confusions from which it is hard to get free.

Let us eliminate first of all the subject. It is true that a writer can, like a painter, create a masterpiece by taking any sort of object as his point of departure. This exterior subject, I would rather say this pretext, has so little importance that it would be best to decide not to talk of it at all. The problem, then, stands thus: When Proust makes a still-life of some asparagus lying on a table, the subject is doubtless insignificant and without interest. Is the sentiment of beauty which we feel, given by the words, by their sound, by their rhythm, by the balance of the phrases, by their grammatical correctness—or do we owe it

to the pleasing and delicate imaginations which this spectacle has suggested to the author? I avoid using the vague words "form" and "content" in order to fix our consideration on actual sensations. I think the reply is clear: it is the sense of the phrases that gives us pleasure and not their rhythm, it is our spirit and not our ear that savours them. The work of art in question is a moment of the spirit of Proust—and, by the medium of words, a moment of our own spirit. The great danger in æsthetics is that of failing to take one's position on the appropriate ground, of not seeing the reality of things. The æsthetic reality of a cathedral lies not in its mysticism, but in its form, its actual palpable form. The reality of a poem is in the spiritual shape that it offers us.

I do not, however, deny that there

is *another* pleasure in savouring the euphony of the phrase in a verse like:

"La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé"

which was dear to Bloch. But I say that it is very feeble when reduced to isolation, as one can discover by listening to a poem recited in an unknown language. The check to certain post-symbolist attempts shows clearly that we are not near to accepting an art of words deprived of sense. Or rather we can accept it here and there, in fragments and by the way. Literary art none the less remains essentially an art of the spirit.

Let us return to our hypothesis: the end of all literature is the creation of psychological beings as that of the plastic arts is the creation of spatial beings. One sees that it resumes all the preceding discussion. We must

now proceed to make clear what may be the nature of these monsters born of our brains. Here, in all humility, is offered a sketch for a classification of the pure types, of which the majority of works of literary art are complexes.

(*a*) The simplest entities that literary art admits are states of mind, or perhaps one ought to say moments of the spirit. They are what we are at a given moment: the landscape that we contemplate, the sentiment which agitates us, the wonderful rhythm of a respiration, the movement of a palm tree. The external reality blends with the interior, or rather there is only one reality. Those divisions, useful enough for the life of action into external objects, sensation, and sentiment, are abolished. It is the central principle of all lyric poetry. I must here call attention to what is more than a mere

shade of meaning: a state of mind is not necessarily a sentimental state; and I do not mean that the lyric poet must confide his joys and sorrows to the reader. The æsthetic emotion is no more in poetry than elsewhere a sharing of pity or joy: it is an impassioned adoration before a new birth, the happy surprise of an annunciation, gratitude on the threshold of a world revealed. Before reading a poem on the sadness of death, we know that sadness, and no words can avail in comparison with a direct experience. But sadness is only the pretext, the poem is not sadness; it is something different; a new direct experience of the spirit (not of the ear); an unforeseen mixture of sensations, ideas, memories, and emotions which find themselves miraculously in unison, and compose, one knows not how, a single whole.

This choice and this situation of common psychological values (as the painter does spatial value), herein lies the poet's art. Mallarmé banished from it the dream; we must also keep out of it any idea of the transcription of a sentiment. As regards the new reality which the poem profers, we are just as far off if we explain it as being a matter of sadness or joy as if we explain it as a matter of cæsuras. To find it we must let the words themselves fall one by one into the mind, listen long, be sincere and not believe too surely that one will understand, even if it should be Ronsard, for instance, rather than Verlaine.

(*b*) After the "state of mind" the simplest psychological entity is the character. It is the class of creation dear to the classics, perhaps because it has the strongest unity which is materi-

ally imposed on us in the person of the actor. It is upon it, too, that critics have bent most constantly the mania and the fury of their explanations: Hermione represents jealousy; Phedra, the passion of love; L'Avare, avarice, and the Mentor, lying—it is very simple. It was thus that in the eighteenth century they arrived at "creating" (?) the "Father of the family," the "Son of the family," etc., etc. Voltaire complained that the grand rôles had all been played. He had nothing left but the scraps. It is easy, however, to perceive that those figures have more vitality in proportion as they are less representative. What does the *Misanthrope* represent? What does *Hamlet?* What, for that matter, does a cathedral? Nothing. They are monsters; these in the realm of the spirit; that in the realm of space.

(*c*) The relations between the facts are psychological realities by the same right as the facts themselves. Our fathers called them simply situations. They have a life independent of the characters, although there is a reciprocal modifying influence between them. There are even some so powerful that they crush the personages and reduce them to one level. The history of Œdipus is such. The individuals in that situation are, as on a chess-board, pieces which count by reason of their relative situations. The game is begun: the monster lives, and the events are like its attitudes or the aspects of its visage.

Moments of the spirit, characters, situations, and their complexes—these, it seems to me, all literature envisages. Let me now come back to the question of content and form, treated rather

lightly in my haste to prove that the essential, the equivalent of volume in the plastic arts, is the content, the sense of the words the psychological reality which they define. One may refuse to place the æsthetic value of a poem solely in the euphony and rhythm of the verse (a proceeding which leads to painful deceptions) and all the same attribute more importance than I did just now to the "formal" elements: correctness of language, verbal richness, vivacity or amplitude of the phrase, elegance and ease of style, the general disposition of the work, etc. It needs certainly an effort to pass from the work as conceived to the work as written, and it is this effort that one would be tempted to call literary in the proper sense.

A little reflection shows, however, that the elaboration and the work must

be continuous. That is clear for a picture or a statue: from the sketch to the last detail it is always the same volume that the artist accumulates and models. Surely it is no otherwise with the writer. To a delicate perception that which is called form derives clearly from what is called content: it is not indifferent to the sense of a phrase whether it be correct or not: grammatical subtleties are often nothing but shades of the thought, the movement of the phrase being imposed by the movement of the mind, the choice of words by its nourishment and its form. The fact that the construction of the work has been placed among the formal elements is significant; it shows clearly where the error lies, the confusion between the "content" of the work and its "subject," and the idea that the form is like a movable and inter-

changeable frame. What is more essential, more fundamental in a man than his skeleton, in a work than its construction? Every reality, of whatever order it is, has always a scaffolding. It will be made of syllogisms if it is a question of geometry, of beams if it is a question of architecture. If we allow that a poem is a reality it must have a framework and of the same order as itself, which is more or less apparent but in any case perceptible. One sees the vanity of this distinction between content and form. The formal elements under analysis show either as modellings or as essential framework. There is nothing to justify grouping them apart.

In fact, then, only one distinction stands out: it is that which separates the thought and the written text. For it too often happens that the thought

is vague and lacks force; a portion of the volume is then missing, and the text appears made of empty words, of words that have not their full sense, ordered not according to an imperious inner logic but according to custom, common usage, reminiscences. It is curious that one finds the analogue of this in the plastic arts.

We have made the thought the equivalent of the volume; we must now take the written text as equivalent to the surface which delimits the volume. This comparison, strange enough at first sight, takes, on reflection, so unexpected a meaning that it is worth while, I think, to examine it. I pass over the amusing detail that surface and text are both skins through which we make contact with the reality they cover. Far more important is the explanation that one can give of

the feeling of greater or less "density" that we experience before a work of art. That sense of density which we get from a monument depends to a great extent upon the way its surfaces have been treated. The ornaments upon it may have a plastic value, and function as a modelling of the total volume which thus attains its plenitude. But, on the other hand, they may be stuck on to the volume without æsthetic relation with it, and then the surface appears like a wrinkled skin, as though the idea of the work, the internal impulse which created the forms, had not had force enough to distend them and impose its proper curvature.

Similar phenomena occur in literature. One of the beauties of classic works is precisely this tension of the text: each word in it has a sense so

full and so evidently in touch with the rest of the discourse that the whole becomes a solid block. It is what is ordinarily praised under the name of sobriety. But that idea is false, for sobriety is not a virtue in itself. There are geniuses so potent that they can fill the wildest ornamentations. Shakespeare is not sober. The comparisons —volume-thought, surface-text—give a much larger explanation of the facts: distinct for a bad work, they become fused in a perfect one. All the artist's efforts should tend towards this fusion. It alone, however, does not suffice to make a beautiful work, otherwise a cube or a theorem would be beautiful. It may even be the sign of poverty in the creative effort, due to an abuse of abstractions capable of exact statement. But for a complex work it is surely one of the elements of beauty.

One might push the comparison further, and show that there exists a modelling of the text important by what it adds of complexity to forms too simple in themselves; one could indicate the existence of literary "depth," and search out the methods which give us that illusion. But these are details in which one must guard against facile ingenuity.

For my part I would draw from this parallel between plastic and literary art two conclusions.

First, that it has allowed us a simple and acceptable definition of literary art. We want to know, in effect, if a great writer is he who makes harmonious or correct or profound phrases or substantial images. We wish, above all, not to be told that the great writer unites all these disparate qualities, since we know that he may be incorrect like

Saint Simon, or lack profundity as much as Hugo. There is a literary emotion which we must disengage from the tangle of other emotions. The simple definition which I have described declares that there are psychological unities, spiritual entities, and that the poem or the book ought to give us the impression that it has created one of these beings. (Naturally no mysticism is implied here.) My definition does not explain very much; for we ought to be able to tell why certain psychological complexes give us this sentiment of unity and independent life whilst others remain only mixtures —why Tartuffe exists and the hero of a bad novel does not. But this is a general problem that one can pose also with regard to the volumes of the plastic arts and about musical phrases. It is already something gained to be

able to put the question and to know in what direction to look further.

And certainly if such parallels as this had a recognised value in æsthetics our researches would become much easier. Experiments like cubism are full of indications which might have a general bearing. Music has been for long the purest art, the art of which the effects are apprehended by the purest feeling; painting and sculpture are to-day almost approaching this. But literature remains encumbered with accessories, philosophical, psychological, social demonstration, with sentimentalities and opinions. A great step would be made if we could savour, appreciate, and discuss pure literary qualities. I say a great step—and in this I am not thinking only of æsthetics which is a very small matter beside the realities it examines. I know how

much any pleasure can be heightened by our attaining to a clear consciousness of it, and I am simply thinking of the pleasures of reading. The game is well worth the risk of some poor comparisons.

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