

Art and the Spiritual Life .

By 'Art' we mean all the Fine Arts. We take the term to cover painting, sculpture, poetry, music, architecture, and so on. And by 'Spiritual Life', the other half of our title, we mean the whole process of the Higher Evolution of Man. Incidentally, I must confess that I am not very happy with this word spiritual. When I was drawing up the list of the titles I hesitated very much before putting down this word spiritual and speaking of Art and the Spiritual Life because for some people, this word has all sorts of wrong connotations. When one speaks of spiritual life, they start thinking of

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of a question of what is Art. But we'll put that aside for a moment and we will first consider the artist as New Man, consider the artist as sharing the characteristics of the New Man.

The artist as more aware or self-conscious.

First of all, the artist is more self-conscious or more aware. The artist, we may even say the true artist, is more alive than other people. And this is very often revealed by the fact that he is more sensitive in the full sense of the term, in the best sense of the term, than people usually are. We know that the painter is much more vividly, much more keenly, aware of differences of shape, of contour, of colour, etc., much more alive to, more aware of these things than other people. If you happen to go out with an artist friend, say, into the country, whether it is in the Spring or the Autumn or some other time of year, you will notice, you will observe, you can't help noticing, that he sees more than you do. He'll call your attention to something: maybe the outline of a tree against the sky or the colours of a fallen leaf or a withered flower, or shadows cast by something, blue shadows cast by trees on the grass; and he'll point out to you that those shadows are blue and you almost certainly haven't noticed that. The painter has a much keener eye, he is much more aware of what is going on in the outside world, in the world of shapes and forms and colours.

And in the same way with the musician, the musician has a much keener ear, he can detect differences of notes which we perhaps can't detect. I remember that when I was in India I was astonished by the subtleties sometimes of the drumming in Indian music, the subtleties of their drum playing. These were difficult to detect, difficult to follow sometimes, even by an Indian who was comparatively experienced, comparatively trained in these things. There were sometimes

his eyes, in the texture of the skin, the shape of the mouth, and his rather grim, fixed expression. You could see that he must have come to the papacy by corruption, it was written all over his face; and much more than that, you could see all sorts of things, you could almost reconstruct his biography just from that portrait. The artist, the painter, whoever he was, had seen it all and had not only seen it but he had put it all down there on the canvas, in pigment.

And as I said, we see the same sort of thing in the dramatist, especially a dramatist like Shakespeare. We see the same sort of thing in the great novelists. We can see how clearly, how intensely these great artists do see other people. I remember again, to take an example from painting, that I used to think when I was much younger, that Hogarth paintings of people were caricatures. But after being acquainted with people a bit more, for a few more years, and maybe observing them more closely, I came to realise that Hogarth was simply being deadly accurate. People were actually like that. He wasn't exaggerating anything, wasn't laying anything on thick, he wasn't a caricaturist, he just saw them as they were and as they were he depicted them in his paintings and in his engravings. He saw them with that almost terrifying, almost clairvoyant honesty and directness. But above all, we may say the artist is aware not just of the external world, not just of himself, not just of other people; the artist is aware in some sort of incomprehensible way of reality, in the sense that he is deeply and resonantly sensitive to the meaning and mystery of existence itself. It is this that he feels, this mystery of existence, whether cosmic or human.

The Artist as Creative.

The artist is creative, this of course goes without saying. Not just productive - though of course creation includes production - but creative in the sense of producing new values, values which did not exist or which were not experienced or perceived before. And it is interesting to note that the greatest, the very greatest artist, in most cases is often immensely productive, not just one or two masterpieces but ten, fifteen, twenty, even a hundred masterpieces. In the field of poetry, we think of Shakespeare, Goethe, Lope de Vega, of all the ancient Greek dramatists who produced at least one hundred dramas each, of which only a few unfortunately survive. In the world of music, we think of Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, in the field of painting we think of Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt, and these are all amongst the very greatest names. We find that all are immensely productive, immensely creative. When we read the lives of these great artists of all kinds, we are struck, sometimes with wonder, at the spectacle of this uninterrupted flow of creativity. You wonder how on earth they managed to do it all, how for instance Bach managed to create that great mass of music. He must have been working at it morning, noon and night, uninterruptedly; and finding time, at the same time, to bring up nearly 20 children, I believe. Nowadays, you would find it difficult with just 2 or 3. And there was Bach, pouring out this great mass of music in what would seem to be rather unfavourable domestic conditions. And all this immense creativity and productivity of these artists implies a great deal of hard work. No dilettantism for them; they were up early in the morning, at their desks or easels, and they carried on all day until late at night, and this was their life, in some cases every day of their lives, for years on end, right into old age.

The artist as True Individual.

The artist is an individual, the true artist never hesitates to go his own way, doesn't hesitate to be himself. In fact we may say that nowadays and for many a long day past, the artist is notorious for this, for going his own way, for being, or endeavouring to be, himself. And very often we find the artist flouts convention and refuses to conform, refuses to be just part of the mass. And in so doing, he is not just being eccentric. He is not just being perverse or difficult. He is simply trying to lead his own life and to be himself.

The artist as isolated and alone.

The artist is alone, you won't find many companions in that sort of life. Like all New Men, the artist, too, is isolated from the masses on account of his greater awareness, his greater individuality, and even on account of his greater creativity. The ordinary man only too often cannot understand why the artist should take endless pains with words, with sounds, with colours. The ordinary man might think that one will do as well as another - why bother, does it really matter - a bit more or a little less shade, or this comma going in or that full-stop being taken out, what difference does it really make? But to the artist, to the creator, all these things are of the first importance. And we may say that the artist often feels his aloneness more even than the religious genius or the mystic, and as we shall see shortly, he occupies a sort of intermediate position, sort of half-way up the Higher Evolution of Man.

The artist as unpopular.

And lastly, the artist is unpopular, or rather not popular. Only too often, the really great artist is in advance of his time, in advance even of other comparatively ordinary artists. And sometimes it takes the rest of humanity even centuries to catch up. In many cases, they are still trying to catch up, or maybe they are not even trying. Only too often we find that the artist, the great creator, is condemned in his own generation only to be praised in others. It is as though the voice of the ordinary people said that the only good artist is a dead artist. This is all so well known that it is not necessary to insist upon it. But I hope I have said enough to show that the artist does share, in great measure, the characteristics of the New Man, and that the true artist, the really great artist, is in fact the New Man and participates as such in the higher evolution of humanity.

What is art?

Well now, let us turn to the question of art. Let us try to answer the question: What is art? This is surely one of the most vexed, much debated and discussed questions in the whole history of thought, especially western thought; though it is discussed also in the East, especially in India, but the discussion which has gone on in India has followed such different lines that one cannot even begin to compare it with western discussions on the subject.

Now some years ago, when I had more time than I have nowadays, I devoted quite a lot of time and energy to the study of this question of what is art. And I found that there are numberless definitions of art, and some of them are in a way quite extraordinary. There is one definition that goes: 'Art is an attempt to create pleasing forms'. This is Herbert Read's definition. Then there is another one, very famous indeed in its own day: 'Art is significant form'. A whole book has been written about that phrase. This is Clive Bell's definition. And then we find someone else saying: 'Art is intuition'. This is Croce. This seems rather vague, that art is intuition. And all of these definitions, and all the other definitions that I came across, I found very very unsatisfactory. I found them either too broad or too narrow, or just incomplete. So I eventually decided that I would have to formulate my own definition of art, at least to my own satisfaction. And I did this in a little work that I wrote in 1953 or 1954, when I was in Kalimpong, and I called it *The Religion of Art*.

Now in this little work I have defined art as follows:

Art is the organisation of sense impressions [into pleasurable formal relations] that expresses the artist's sensibility and communicates to his audience a sense of values that can transform their lives.

Now I believe, and this is my honest opinion, that this is the most complete definition of art that has

ever been suggested. I have not seen any other since then in any way as complete, covering all aspects of the subject. So let us examine it in a little greater detail. There is no time for a full discussion, that would take us too far afield, but we will deal mainly with those aspects of the definition that have some bearing on the subject with which we are at present concerned: art and the spiritual life, or art and the Higher Evolution of Man.

First of all, Art is the organisation of sensuous impressions. I remember reading some time ago a book on poetry, and this book started off by saying that we must never forget that poetry consists of words. You might think it difficult to forget this, but apparently, according to the author of this book, lots of people did forget this, that poetry consisted of words. We can go even further than that, and say that, yes, poetry consists of words, but of what do words consist? Words consist of sounds, vibrations in the air. So we find that all the arts have as their raw material, their basic stuff, sensuous impressions. This is where the arts begin, with the impressions coming in to us through our five physical senses. The raw material of painting is after all simply visual impressions; impressions of shape and colour, light and shade, etc. And in the same way, the raw material, the stuff of music is auditory impressions, sounds of various kinds: loud, soft, harmonious, discordant, etc. And poetry, what is the raw material of poetry? Again sounds, but sounds associated in varying degrees, and not always completely associated, with conceptual meaning. So we have these sensuous impressions through the ear, the eye and so on, pouring in upon us all the time, things that we see and hear, shapes, colours, sounds, etc. and these impressions the artist organises into a pattern. At first there is a chaos, a chaos of sensuous impressions. The artist, being a creator, organises these sensuous impressions into a pattern, a world, a whole, so that there is no longer just a chaos of impressions but this shape, this whole, this work of art.

There are of course various ways of organising sensuous impressions. Some ways are very simple, others are highly sophisticated. These different ways involve the principles of, for instance, repetition, contrast, etc. Now this organisation of sensuous impressions, which the work of art essentially is, does not hang suspended in mid-air. It does not exist apart from or dissociated from the artist. The work of art, the artist's organisation of sensuous impressions into a pattern, into a whole, into a work of art, in fact, expresses the artist's sensibility. That is to say, the pattern, the work of art, which organises the sensuous impressions, expresses or embodies the awareness of the artist, the experience of the artist, his experience of life as a whole, his experience of himself, of other people, even of reality. And this we may say is the aspect of our definition of art which concerns us most in our present context: that the work of art expresses the artist's sensibility or awareness or experience. Now this is generally understood, but it is not generally understood that this sensibility, this awareness of the artist has many different degrees corresponding to the level of being and consciousness of the individual artist. And this brings us directly back to the subject of Higher Evolution. We may say that the Lower Evolution consists in the development of a higher and ever higher degree of life, whereas the Higher Evolution consists in the attainment of higher and ever higher degrees of consciousness and awareness. Now the true artist has access to higher levels of consciousness, awareness, understanding even, than the ordinary man, and this is one of the reasons why he is an artist; because of this greater, more advanced, more extensive, higher awareness and experience.

Artist as wicked, immoral and selfish?

Some people, I think, might be a bit shocked by the bold claim that the true artist represents a higher type of humanity than the ordinary, decent citizen. Some people might even be tempted to point out, very nicely of course, that only too often the artist unfortunately, most regrettably, is wicked and immoral and selfish. So it is worth perhaps looking into this a little. One can readily admit that the artist, whether painter, poet or musician, can be rather difficult to live with, but this I

think is usually due to the fact that very often the artist is concerned, rightly concerned, to safeguard from intrusion his own privacy and his own conditions of work. We know, too, that there are well-meaning people who try to make the artist conform, try to make him like other people, to make him live, dress, look, write, paint like other people, etc. and it is only natural perhaps that the artist tends to rebel against these well-meaning attempts, sometimes even violently. And rather ungratefully, he insists upon being himself.

We also often find that the artist is in revolt against conventional morality. Now this is especially conspicuous in the case of a poet like Shelley, who flouted all the conventional moral canons of his day, and was ostracised for so doing. But one might say, is the artist's flouting conventional morality wrong? Only too often we have to recognise that it is conventional morality itself which is at fault, and the artist's rejection of it is in fact, in many cases if not most cases, simply an expression of his own more healthy and more normal mental attitude.

We must not also forget, this is very, very important, that the artist of whatsoever kind is only too often a deeply divided person; that is to say, divided within himself. And sometimes, the greater the artist, the more deeply divided he is within himself. And this deep division, this cleft, sometimes in the depths of his own being, is productive of tension and of lack of balance, bordering even, sometimes, on madness. The artist, by very definition perhaps, has access to higher states of consciousness, higher states of being than most other people, or than almost all other people, but this does not mean that he has access to them all the time. To quote Shelley, he says or sings in one of his poems: 'Rarely, rarely, comest thou, spirit of delight'. And this is only too often the experience of the artist, the creator, poet, musician; that this spirit of delight, this higher experience, this experience of a higher mode of being and consciousness, comes only rarely, only sometimes. The artist does not live in these higher states all the time, and in this the artist differs from the true mystic who tends to dwell in these states much of the time. And in the case of the artist, sometimes in these higher states of consciousness and experience, sometimes in more ordinary states, it is only too often as though the artist were two people. When he creates, he is one person. When he is not creating, he is another person. We all know that sometimes you read a book by somebody, you think, what a wonderful book, what a wonderful person the author must be, how you would like to meet him, and when you go along, full of gratitude and willing to be full of admiration for this wonderful book which has uplifted you so much, you find some dry, withered, mean little man and you are sorry that you ever set eyes upon him, you are so disappointed. And this is because of this sort of split, division, between the higher experience of the artist and his more ordinary, more normal experience. It's as though the artist is two people, as though he has an artistic self and an ordinary self, and a division between them.

This is why, today, we often speak in terms of inspiration. The artist's inspiration comes to him from on high, as it were, comes from above, it is not him. There is a well-known story in connection with Handel; when he finished the manuscript of the Messiah, when he read it over, he was astonished himself that he had written anything so good, and he was so astonished, we are told, that he put down his pen, looked up, and said, 'It came from above, it is not me'. Now he is back in his ordinary state of consciousness, It is not me, I did not produce this, it came from above. It came, that is to say, from the artist himself when he was in this higher, this supra-normal state of consciousness. This is also one of the reasons why traditionally we refer to the artist as a genius. We speak of a poetic genius, of an artistic genius in general, or a mystical genius, and so on.

Nabokov and the word 'Genius'.

What does this word genius mean? Genius meant originally one's guardian deity, like one's guardian angel, one's good angel. It represented the higher powers overshadowing a man, guiding

him and directing him; representing, we may say, one's own higher self, conceived of as an independent, or quasi-independent, personality that was one's source, i.e. the ordinary self's source, of direction and inspiration and guidance. We get the same sort of idea behind the classical concept of the Muses. When you read, say, Homer's Iliad or Odyssey 20, what does he do at the beginning? He invokes the muses, he says, 'Goddess, or goddesses, inspire me'. And all the classical poets did this. Milton does it at the beginning of Paradise Lost, except that he invokes the heavenly muse and not the profane muse. The idea is the same. You are invoking some higher source, some higher power, which seems outside you but which at the same time is really and truly your own highest self. And it is from there that the creation comes.

Incidentally, it is interesting to notice an observation on the use of the word genius by that well-known modern writer, Nabokov, and he makes the following observation (he was being interviewed by one of those rather pertinacious people who ask all sorts of questions and one wonders how people sometimes have the patience to answer the questions): the particular question was whether Nabokov sees himself as a genius. He said, in reply:

The word genius is passed around rather generously isn't it, at least in English, because its Russian counterpart, geni, is a term brimming with a sort of throaty awe, and is used only in the case of a very small number of writers: Shakespeare, Milton, Pushkin, Tolstoy. To such deeply beloved authors as Turgenev and Chekhov, Russians assign the thinner term 'talent', not 'genius'. It is a bizarre example of semantic discrepancy, the same word being more substantial in one language than in another. Although my Russian and my English are practically coeval, I still feel appalled and puzzled at seeing 'genius' applied to any important story-teller, such as Maupassant or Maugham. Genius still means to me, in my Russian fastidiousness and pride of phrase, a unique dazzling gift. The genius of James Joyce, and not the talent of Henry James.

Now one might not agree with his estimation of Henry James, but I would think the force of the distinction is clear. But there is something else I would like to draw your attention to while we are at it. And this is the interviewer's first question; and it is rather extraordinary. I don't know where he got his questions from, but the first question was: 'What distinguishes us from the animals?', and what do you think Nabokov says? He says:

Being aware of being aware of being. In other words, if I not only know that I am, but also know that I know it, then I belong to the human species. All the rest follows, the glorious thought, poetry, a vision of the universe. In that respect, the gap between ape and man is immeasurably greater than the one between amoeba and ape. The difference between an ape's memory and a human memory is the difference between an ampersand and the British Museum Library.

Values that can transform our lives.

We have seen that art is the organisation of sensuous impressions that express the artist's sensibility, whether higher or lower. And now for the second half of the definition: 'communicate to his audience a sense of values that can transform their lives'. Now very much could be said on art as communication but this had better wait for the time being. It is not directly concerned with our main topic. I want to deal with the concluding part of the definition, that is with 'a sense of values that can transform our lives'. What does one mean by this? We have seen that the artist experiences a higher level of awareness than ordinary people. And out of this level of awareness, this higher insight, this experience, this more comprehensive, more powerful experience, he expresses in the form of the work of art, not only expresses but communicates. This word communicate means that when we enjoy the work of art, we experience for the time being, even though in a lesser degree, the state of consciousness in which the artist produced it. And this is what we mean by

communication. He experiences, he expresses, in the work of art. We enjoy the work of art, and we too experience what he experienced when he produced the work. Temporarily at least, we are raised to his level. Temporarily we become, as it were, artist and share his sense of values, his insight, his experience, and this transforms our lives. Transformation is evolution. It is not a change of place but a change of level. So we see that the artist is not only himself more highly evolved but through works of art, in which he expresses, through which he communicates to other people, his own experience of himself, he contributes to the higher evolution of other people, of the human race.

Enjoyment of great works of art, we may say, enlarges our own consciousness. When we listen to a great piece of music or when we see a great painting, read a great poem, really experience it, really allow it to soak into us, we go beyond our ordinary or normal consciousness, we become bigger, greater, our whole life is modified, our whole experience is transformed and, if we persist in

When the artist creates, he objectifies.

How and why is it, we may ask, that for the artist, the production of works of art should be a means, even the means, of higher evolution? What happens when the artist creates? When the artist creates, he objectifies. And when he objectifies, he can assimilate, and this is not unlike what happens in the process of traditional Buddhist visualisation exercises.

When, for instance, in meditation, we visualise the Buddha, what happens? First of all, we close our eyes and we see - not just think about - a great expanse of green, above that a great expanse of blue sky, in between a great Bodhi tree; at the foot of the Bodhi tree we see the figure of the Buddha in the orange robe, then we see the very peaceful features, the golden complexion, the compassionate smile. We see the curly black hair, the aura, the five colours of the aura. We see all of these things and we see them as clearly and vividly as though the Buddha himself sat before us. We not only visualise like this, but we recognise also the great spiritual qualities of the Buddha, we see expressed in the Buddha's face wisdom, compassion, love, peace, tranquillity, assurance, strength, fearlessness, and so on. And gradually we draw near to these qualities, we feel as if we were drawing near to this visualised image, we feel as if this visualised image is drawing near to us. We feel that we are absorbing within ourselves the Buddha's own qualities of love and wisdom and compassion, etc. And if we persevere in this exercise, if we keep it up, not just for a few days, but for months and maybe even for years, eventually a time comes when we fully assimilate all these qualities of the Buddha, and become one with the Buddha in that meditation experience. And when that happens, the unenlightened being, we may say, becomes transformed into the Enlightened Being and we realise our own Buddha nature.

But in the course of this practice, in the course of this process, in the course of this exercise, what has happened? What was potential in us, that is to say Buddhahood - what was there all the time, unknown and unrecognised, in the depths of our own being, in the depths of our own nature - has become actual, has become realised by us, by being first objectified, by being seen out there, even though it is in here; and then, having been seen out there, gradually assimilated more and more until we become one with it.

And the same sort of thing happens in the case of artistic creation. We have spoken of the artist as having experienced something, some higher level of being and consciousness, and then creating out of that experience. But it is not really quite so simple and straightforward. It is not that the artist has the experience itself fully and perfectly and completely first, before creating. If he had it in that way, fully and perfectly, he would not be an artist, he would be a mystic, which is something higher or at least potentially higher. No, what the artist has is at first a sort of vague sense, an indeterminate experience of something, and this is his starting point. He clarifies this, he intensifies this, in the process of actual creation of the work of art. And we may say that the original experience of the artist, the creative experience, is like a sort of seed which is pulsing with life but the nature of which is fully revealed only when the flower, that is to say the work of art itself, stands complete and stands perfect.

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