

ON IMAGINATION

EVEN in war-time men cannot think only of what they are doing here and now. Their desire goes beyond the immediate job; and when their outer world falls to bits they turn to God, if they believe in Him and seek Him, or to the Future that is always going to be so much better than the past, or to their own souls. Belief that the human soul is somehow, vaguely, 'divine' is intensified by the horrors that surround it and to which it seems a stranger even while it directs them. The sense of the strangeness of man's soul in this world, of its unconformity to the outer madness, causes wonder; and wonder has traditionally found expression, in England, in the individual voice of poets. Yet as a citizen and in public the poet is expected not merely to draw poetry from the situation, but to relate it back to the situation. He must be practical, he must provide propaganda or, in the widest sense of the word, amusement. If Shakespeare is ever played nowadays, he is expected, officially at least, either to help people to forget the War completely or to make them remember it all the more intensely. Teach us to forget ourselves for a night. Teach us to remember ourselves to-night so that to-morrow we may fight like Englishmen.

Every artist will recognise that these two demands mean little to Shakespeare once he sets to work; but they may set him to work in the first place. He is human and English and a bread-winner, so he sits down to begin *Much Ado* or *King Lear*. There is no inconsequence in the fact that from this moment until he writes *finis* to the composition he will be in a kind of trance, as Wyndham Lewis says; he will be thinking not of the State or his family, but simply of the work to be done, the *factibile* to be made, the words to be found. And the more he concentrates, the more he is likely to succeed. If you were to ask him, in the heat of composing Act III of *Lear*, why

exactly he was doing anything so odd as that, he would tell you, if he managed to be so polite, to keep that question for another day.

To compose is to put together and, if the composer be a poet, it is to put together materials of the imagination. the inner world of sense, and bring it all to the surface with words. Over that inner world we have more control than over any other part of knowledge. Over his imagination a man is lord to the extent that he can invent what he imagines, and to this extent he can create his own experience. Edgar raves through the storm and the storm raves through Shakespeare's inner world. And he deliberately lets it do so because he wants to find words for it. For the moment let us not ask him why. Let us ask him instead to remember, for his soul's health, that it is not a real storm and, further, that even a fictional storm, being in imagination, must obey the law governing imagination; and this, in *Man*, says that imagination should be used by Intelligence. Images are given us to be used and their use consists in being understood. It is no use, properly speaking, having images of cats unless I become, as they say, knowing about cats and, in the end, a philosopher about cats. To substantiate this would require a separate essay; here it is stated dogmatically as a basis for the remarks which follow.

Images are meant to become examples. There is freedom in the choice of examples, for they are many and varied, and this brings into our earth-bound thinking an element of play and of Humour which is born from comparison of the disparate. But here it is more important to see that it matters not at all to the imagination whether the images chosen as examples are good examples or no. Imagination as such has nothing to say on the question whether the image of a cat or that of a three-sided figure on a blackboard be the better example of the idea of triangularity. To the imagination they are equally good or bad because they are equally indifferent; for imagina-

tion has no idea of triangularity at all. Hence it is clear that imagination is not *directly* concerned with Truth. It is always, in one sense, truthful: whatever I choose to imagine corresponds to some reality somehow. But of its nature it is indifferent to this correspondence. It is quite according to its nature to present me with images of things that never were on sea or land; and if it does image things that are or have been, it has nothing to say to the question whether they are or what they are. Clearly then it may delude us if its data be not controlled by that in us which *is* concerned directly with Truth, by Intelligence. If I fancy that, viewed from behind, I am beautiful, whereas in reality this is not so, the one thing needed is that I stop to consider whether I have ever seen myself from behind. Similarly, much confusion is caused by trying to think with two or more images at the same time. The result of this will be irrelevance, for the extra image will insert its own unneeded quality into the mind and so hinder abstraction. Thus if, when we think of Chastity we allow unneeded images of pallor and delicacy (like lilies) to intrude too far, we shall probably end by confusing chastity with prudery and weakness. So also a lot of modern writing and talking about the intellectual or the spiritual life seems to add to whatever images are needed the images of cold and dryness and pain; and so concludes that this glorious life (for, in a Catholic, they should be one and the same) is no life at all, but a living death. Before we can define ideas we must sort out images. We must put them in their place. And this, or a great part of this process, means shaking the images off the *words* we use. Words accumulate images as a rock in the sea accumulates seaweed. We have to look hard at the images which words accumulate and separate out from the tangle those which may properly accompany a particular word from those which are only accidentally connected with it and which perhaps ought not to be connected with it at all.

So much is fairly obvious. But it is less obvious that it is just here, in this matter of the cleansing of our words from their false or falsifying associations, that the first and yet least recognised social function of great literature is performed. I say 'great literature,' though I know that the term is vague, because it seems to me that literature as a whole does not cleanse language in this way; rather that it tends to exploit all the words' associations, the false and the true indifferently; and that it does this because it tends on the whole to give the public what it thinks the public wants, and at any given moment the public's language is clustered around with a crowd of unsorted associations, and the public's desire is that its poets and novelists should play upon them. Literature as a whole always tends to vulgarity, for vulgarity in literature is nothing but the use of words for the sake of their associations, for the sake of some emotional quality attached to them which blots out or blurs their proper content. (If it be snobbish to say this, at least I am turning snobbery against itself, for it is a form of vulgarity.) Vulgarity of this kind is always an exploitation of language. But the masters of language do not exploit it. It would be truer to say that they explode it. At least they break through the word's conventional, vulgar covering and discover the bright and single image or idea. They recover its real meaning by *unifying* its meaning in the distinguishing light of their imagination and intelligence. The resulting single image—let us keep this discussion to images—can *now* be caught up into metaphor or reflected in similes according to its own proper quality and the power of the writer. But if the word has not had this shaking it will certainly come to be used as a stale counter or as sentimental dope. Precision does not make a language poor, as those who call distinctions 'pedantry' are foolish enough to suppose. But it does cut away that growth on words which kills them.

Now this power of cleansing language can nowhere be

found so quick and strong as in Shakespeare. It is quite a mistake to suppose that because Shakespeare, compared with Dante, is wild and complex in his speech he is therefore a vague writer in any sense. He does not define his terms as he goes along, for that is not his business, but he uses words that are already defined by the mere fact that they *follow* the play of imagination and do not precede it. When he is most himself the image always comes first. It is there, and *then* the word is found; so that the word appears charged with a real and therefore definite image. Compared with current speech his language seems wild and strange to us, like a new creation—quite apart from any archaisms. He seems to have written from a source behind the words he throws out or packs together. Most of us write from a stock of words, but he wrote from his imagination. Words of course were clanging there, but he seems not to mind them until he has focussed the image and related it to the passion he is expressing. Then the word is pulled in, but so that you can hardly recognise it in this *galère*. There is no writer who so gives one the impression of finding words as he goes along, of pulling them in by the hair. But they do their work and are the better for it. Think of 'looped and windowed raggedness' and a thousand other phrases that are nearer to imagination than to current speech. That is Shakespeare's quality as a writer: he draws speech back to the imagination, where other writers would let their imaginations be drawn after the conventionalities of current speech.

Besides its cleansing effect on words, there is another good result to be expected from the poet's use of imagination. If the first function of imagination is to serve the intelligence with intelligible data and its second function is to provide examples and analogies of things already understood, it has surely a third function in human life now, in our present decrepit condition, even if this was not necessary in Eden. I mean that the mind can play with images without seeking to understand them or make examples

of them; and it claims to do this sometimes for its own good. It needs to bathe in the freedom of fancy from time to time not merely for the sake of repose, but also because it is nourished by the sensible world, and it is through images that it makes itself aware of the wild and independent vastness of this world. *Quam magnificata sunt opera tua Domine.* This wild world comes home to us sometimes. Chesterton strove to bring it home to his duller contemporaries; but he was forever outstripping fancy, diving down to the contingency of created being where only intelligence could take him. The artist need not go so far; he can yet awake us: 'There, in the thrilling chasm of the sky, the ever-vivid meniscus was visible. The masked figure kissed his hand to it as an Attic husbandman would to the new sun, and he turned the little silver coins in his pocket.' I take this quotation at hazard, not knowing its context; it seems to be an example of what I mean. The image can transport us out of ourselves, and that was probably the artist's intention.

The artist's intention! How much do we really know about it? Why does Wyndham Lewis want to make us forget, even for an instant, everything but the thing expressed, why does he strain after the pure bright image behind our usual words and reactions? He is not being just fancy-free. At least we hope not, we do not think he ought to be just fancy-free, we think art should have a message over and above its message of the wonder of this world. The wonder! What about the War? We have got to live in a world of men, of action and passion and sin and suffering; in a world of morals and psychology. What has fancy to do with all this?

What indeed? But perhaps more than we hastily think. Imagination is that inner world in which I hold the outer world as in a mirror that controls its own reflections. In this mirror the flurry of physical movement comes together for me into a whole, an inner world. It is like the birth of a new cosmos with each new baby born. And gradually

this new world of images is unified more and more, converges into the self, its centre, with the growth of intelligence until at last the human person is perfectly actual in a single and supreme intellectual act possessing all things in God. That is our destiny by Grace not by Nature. But in the meantime this convergence of images, this inner world forming in us, means more to us than a mere springboard to acts of the intellect. A mere springboard you leave behind when you spring, but *this* is the real world as it is in us, and until, in Heaven, we see the real world as it is in God we do not want to lose it. We have a natural and noble desire not to lose it precisely because, in our present state, it is so dark to us. It is always *going* to be understood, and the ways of God are always *going* to be glimpsed in it. It is like a book written in a tongue that we are just beginning to learn; and for the sake of the story we cling to the book even if we can hardly spell. And we cling to it as it is in imagination, and we try to hold down our imagination with Art. By Art we find fixed symbols in which we can possess our inner and fleeting world; that is to say, our fleeting selves in so far as we are what we imagine—

' La feuille jaunit et le fruit tombe, mais la feuille dans mes vers ne p rit pas.'

And again Claudel says:

' Et l'imp rissable esprit envisage les choses passantes.'

Thus Art supplies for imagination. Imagination can share in the immobility of the intelligence that relates it to symbols. We stoop to paint or print or stone and sign it with the mind, making it a sign of that which is nobler than itself but which, without it, would vanish away and be lost to us. Thus we grip and rescue the materials of intelligence. All art is a recovery. Far from being an escape from the real world, it is a recovery of the real world. Of course we may recover the real only to build

it into castles in the clouds. But probably not for long. Pure imagination is a far more likely escape from reality than is art; it is so much easier. The effort required of the artist is some guarantee at least that it will be an attempt to recover and face the real world. But the chief guarantee, after all, is the insatiable human interest in reality. Yet how strangely this interest is shown! The artist as such seeks to answer no questions, solve no problems; he does not even seek to give a faithful picture. Two things which revolt the soul of every artist are exhaustive realism and exhaustive abstraction. If Shakespeare began to write *Hamlet* after leaving a roomful of people and with a vision of human society as it really is (*Hamlet* is the most thoroughly social of his tragedies), we can be sure that if there was anything further from his thoughts than the intention of painting an exact portrait of that roomful it was the intention of illustrating, with the aid of the roomful, some moral axiom or proposition in psychology. No; what he sets out to do is to recover that roomful in imagination; and not precisely in memory. He sets out to *see* the world, and to fix his vision in words. But really to see this world a man must see it from the inside *outwards*, as he sees his own actions following his own thoughts. He must see thought, passion and event as they actually are outside himself; and as such they follow in that order. Of course men are acted upon from outside; but they act from within; and therefore the process of my re-creation, my recovery of them in Art must be from within *outwards*. Hence Shakespeare must eliminate himself before *Hamlet*. He leaves his processes of knowledge behind, so that his particular sensations of that roomful, as well as his subsequent analysis of it, are left behind; to appear again, but transformed. And he leaves his moral criticism of that roomful behind; for this is only a reflection on the fact, and if he can recover the fact there will be no need of a separate criticism. The fact of *Hamlet* will be criticism enough. In short, Shakespeare eliminates

his experience in so far as it is experience *of* anything, and his criticism in so far as it is criticism *of* anyone; with the result that his Hamlet really is Hamlet and *not* one of that roomful, with a goodness and badness which really is in act of being so and not merely in act of being judged to be so, not merely reflected in a moral commentary. And of course since it is reality that Shakespeare wants to see, he flings in sensations, packing his verse with particulars.

It is the triumph of the Image. In a great work of art such as this the image is, as it were, drawn up into the closest contact with Intelligence. It is no longer mere material. It is no longer mere example. It is characterised in all its details and down to its least actions by intelligence; not merely by that of God, as are all particulars and images of them, but by the intelligence of a man, the artist. He is within the image of Hamlet as a hand in a glove, and all its deeds and words follow an act of his understanding. He does not know it through its behaviour; on the contrary, it acts according to his knowledge of it. It is ruled by his mind. He has got behind his images as he got behind his words. If the real world were Hamlet, Shakespeare would be God; and when only that inner world of his is Hamlet how the image of God shines out in him! Man-like he has moved to the conquest of the world; not by knowing it in its causes, but by becoming it in its activity. And this of course he cannot do except by creating a new world; and man-like he does this linking together spirit and matter, creating other men in his image, rational animals in action.

Alas, poor little god, it all happens in his fancy! And, worse still, he finds, when he has made his Hamlets and Lears, that they are torn asunder by a moral conflict which he could not help transmitting to them. They are torn asunder, and they are so like men that their maker, the man Shakespeare, cannot put them together again. He can give them his conflicts and ours, he can make us hate and love ourselves in them, he can turn us violently to

the reality of the sin and the passionate mind of man; but he cannot solve their problem. He is too great to try. He can only give them a sort of shadow-justice. He can make, he *must* make Hamlet kill Polonius instead of the criminal he had sworn to kill; and then the son of Polonius kill Hamlet on behalf of the criminal; and then the criminal be killed with the sword which he had poisoned. The wheel comes full circle as in Lear; but it is only a human wheel, within a human imagination, and therefore its full circle does not display the full justice of God. Hamlet does not even enter into his own kingdom. It is always a shadow-justice, and no one lives happily ever after. But no one ever does live happily ever after, outside Heaven and fairy tales. In this world there are only the beginnings of justice like shadows on a screen; and Shakespeare was concerned with his images, that is with this world.

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