

FOR A SYNCRETISM OF THE
FACULTIES OF THE MIND:
ART AS A MEANS OF
KNOWLEDGE

Since his beginnings, Man has produced art: gests and works in some way bound to the essence of man's existence, gests and works grafted onto the epidermis of the world, yet gests and works for transcending the immediate givens, for understanding veiled realities and future possibilities: gests and works of global apprehension, brought about and nourished through the ages by elementary needs, by visceral fears, by existential hopes.

We have nevertheless finished by disintegrating these gests and works. Western man above all, Western man foremost, has dissected, sorted and separated them into ostensibly autonomous categories: poetry, arts, literature, science, philosophy, religion—as if the mind that bore them were not fundamentally one. This classification has been hierarchized by him in arrogant analyses carried out by the most arid part of the human mind. And, in an inebriated logic, he has progressively discredited as irrational, he has in fact

Translated from the French

eliminated, ordinary human activities, poetic emotion and the artistic act as well as spiritual ascendancy.

Thus, on this versant of the mind, which is unceasingly swept by the exigencies and capabilities of verbal logic and experimental method, art and religion no longer develop or, if they do, they grow stuntedly in the hollows, rejected from the serious and the everyday, reduced to the rank of activities that are idle, gratuitous, whimsical or trivial, insignificant and, in a word, useless. Their seeds come, like a weed, from the other side of the mind, at the confines of the conscience, the shadowy side—which some people call their soul because there they sense the quivering of strange roots—and which others disparage, ranking it as the pre-logical mentality, fruit of the dark centuries of evolution, on the same level as our reptilian reflexes.

“What is Truth?”, the echo reverberates indefinitely across the centuries. A truth gathering together, unifying, giving life to the sum of fragmentary and more or less evanescent truths which men have acquired since Man emerged from the hominid; does this truth exist? In spite of passionate denials, ironic or disillusioned, across the generations, the ineradicable conviction still filters through that, beyond the incomprehensible dust which is man, an open and welcoming truth exists which, although having no need of us to be what it is, appears to us as only fully itself because it generously invites us to partake in its feast. Some glimpse it in filigree in the celebration of knowledge. And Claudel, in separating the prefix from the word, *co-naissance*, has encouraged us to see that in glimpsing this totality of the real through the opacity of its veils, and in striving with all our being to draw closer to it, we engage in the progressive revelation of ourselves at the same time as that of the truth.

If such a truth exists, and if we may one day rejoice in it, we may imagine that it will have the simplicity of a splendid Presence. It will be global, peremptory, indubitable, all-revealed and all-welcoming, even better, a living truth, it will be an exchanged presence.

What a difference today! Our relations with the truth are partial, compartmentalized, conditioned by the complex structure of the human mind in which are rooted our unconscious prejudices, born of hereditary imprints and the accidents of our existence.

For a Syncretism of the Faculties of the Mind

Progress towards the True, the advancement in *co-naissance*, thus supposes a double effort: we must better ourselves through knowledge and relate this to the essential through personal judgement.

In the face of our appetite and, perhaps, our need for knowledge, Reality discloses an infinite variety of elements: the evolution of the universe and its mechanisms of extraordinary complexity, the remarkable place which Man occupies in it, the meaning of each destiny. This ensemble poses for every individual an inexhaustible set of questions, to which the most gifted and the most wise can only produce embryonic responses on the conceptual level; yet each person is aware that his conceptual intelligence is supported by other aptitudes of the mind, which, by means other than that of discourse, render him capable of astonishing shortcuts. These aptitudes, of which the commodity of language permits an arbitrary categorization, have imprecise limits; without doubt, in the unity of the mind, they form a gradation as continuous as the colours of the light spectrum. At the risk of lending ourselves to much criticism, we will attempt here to regroup them around three words: thought, poetry, love—three fundamental and irreducible faculties of the mind. In the manner of a Mircea Eliade, one could, perhaps, to explain this triple specificity, single out three “structures of conscience”: logical and experimental reflection, art, the sacred. But the term “structure” must be used with caution because it favours the too-common tendency to immobilize classification: it would only be acceptable in the concept of a superstructure which encompasses the diverse aptitudes of the human mind while permanently ensuring intercommunication.

Thought—based on logic and, when it is scientific, on experimental method—rules over concepts of which it strives to grasp the largest possible part of reality. The aptitudes which, for lack of a better phrase, one describes as *of the heart*, bring into play the ineffable intuitions of love, irreplaceable means for grasping certain truths of that which is closest to us as well as realities which are on a higher level and apparently the farthest from us.

Pascal spoke of a “God sensitive to the heart” and, since Bergson, the mystical experience, the acme of the intuition of love, has been taken into consideration by philosophy as a specific means to knowledge. Jean Guilton does not hesitate to present mystics,

whose state of awareness comes close to the source of being, as “mutants”; they would show us the third great stage of our evolution: from beast to man, then to the angel or, at least, to the “chosen”.¹ The fact is that love overthrows perspectives. Love telescopes. It allows everything to be seen at the closest range, by demonstrative contact. In general we reserve the qualification “mystical” for the approach to an Absolute of power, that is to say of presence, beauty, intelligence, love—an overabundance of being conceived as Supreme Being, the mysterious ordaining source of all, beginning with those modalities which seem to enclose our fibre, space and time, beyond which inevitably there is that all-embracing “surreality” which no word, no imagination can encompass. It is not, however, exclusively to the hypothetical author of all things, experienced by some, that this strange movement of the heart of man applies itself which takes him beyond himself and, ultimately, leads him to give his own life for that which he loves. This love, whose sign is, in fact, in a thousand striking or obscure ways, the gift of self, this love called mystical, also applies itself to creatures, or to one creature, to creation or to one of the realms of creation. Too often confused with the sombre passions in which man sometimes loses himself, carried away, blinded by the most visceral part of his being, in rupture with the spirit of life which he then aspires to destroy in himself—indeed, in others—this true love, on the contrary, is the passion of lucidity: it confers an interior vision so illuminated that it abolishes all distance between he who loves and the object of his love. And it is thus that love, at this most eminent level, or at different levels—because man, in this as in everything else, is very unequally endowed by reason of his chromosomes or as a result of his application—love is an active agent of knowledge. Through it, by following its law, through oblation, by chastising pride, by checking egocentricities of all kinds, the spirit gains in power to embrace and penetrate the loved object, whatever it may be. Thus, this love can stir the man of the laboratory as much as the man of pure meditation, the erudite as much as the artist, the man of action as much as the man of prayer.

Aptitudes of sensibility express themselves without words—by

¹ Jean Guittou, of the French Academy, *Le temps d'une vie*, Retz Centurion, 1980.

For a Syncretism of the Faculties of the Mind

gestures, sounds, images—in art, in which poetry brings out something of the hidden side of the mind: a tingling of being, an intensity of life oscillating from feverish delirium to glacial ecstasy,
“the madness that trembles
in our blood”

as Audiberti says, that pulses and repulses, that sings like an invisible sea in tireless dialogue with the cliffs.

Out of fragments, the artist records and develops this song; out of fragments, through him, in a certain sense, the universe expresses itself. It is sometimes said—it is the fashion—that the artist is a seismograph: he registers the tendencies of the collective unconscious while vibrating to the excitement of the age. Put in that way, the idea simultaneously discounts both the artist and his vocation: the one too mechanical, the other too contingent. Certainly many artists reflect their times excessively—they vie with journalists, collecting up, gathering in everything to be found. They then put on show, like a net hauled in with the catch, chance collections and rejects, which must not be confused with the objective of the trawl. The artist is not capable of reducing himself to a teletype machine, subject to more or less automatic writing. His honour lies not in resigning his conscience but, quite the opposite, in extending it, keeping it in a state of intense alertness. Certainly, the artist is a witness: of himself, of his times, the outward aspect of history where the journalistic dross festers; that scarcely distinguishes him from the rest of us. He finds his specificity beyond the anecdotes of his life and his times: in the acuteness and amplex of his soul, capable of intercepting with the maximum precision a glimmer, new modulations, like a tremor, the profound humming of the spheres, the rumbling of origins, a chant emanating from the world, a chant immanent in the world.

An infantile conscience mutilates and castrates the real. It is for this reason that the instinctive creations of children have more charm than the fruit of their reflective attention. In the same way the artistic pseudo-fruits produced by the laborious effort of a dry intelligence are less moving than primitive art, prerogative of alienation. Conscience, however, only truly attains adulthood by dominating the two sides of the mind and by disclosing itself to both simultaneously. Then, in this efflorescence, it can draw closer to the most subtle aspect of reality. Thus, each human being is

given the chance, as he grows, as the whole of his being grows in an increasing lucidity, to reap his share of things with a more delicate and more profound awareness.

At the height of conscience poetic aptitude joins in this operation; radiant quality, power of revelation, gift which leads all things to greater truth, because reality transcends all our apprehensions. Thus poetry expressing itself in all the arts, to which it is like leaven, gives access to the greatest Reality, with no boundary between the “natural” and the “supernatural”; the maximum, the glorious state where one and all bathe in a light and in a music of eternity.

Nothing is ever as beautiful as in this music which is light or in this light which is music, whose play it is the artist’s vocation to understand and translate. Venus herself, “Venus is not as beautiful, naked and breathless, as she is in certain verses by Virgil”, Montaigne remarked.

Inspiration is not a meaningless word. The artist receives and records; a vision rises from the vertiginous abysses of inner space, greater than the cosmos in expansion: a message arrives from the unknown. But, from there, at attention’s extreme limit, a humble and active conscience comes into play: decyphering, decoding, translating the unelaborated data of the message, at the risk of flaunting the insignificant. It is in this that the absolute singularity of artistic intervention is at work. We have seen, opening tremblingly among the rocks in tidal pools, at rising tide, the marvellous sea anemones. We have wanted to take hold of them, to possess them, to offer them to each and everyone: we have snatched them from the water and have displayed only shapeless jellies. Many respond thus to the provocations of the deep. Only artists discover the secret of fixing and restoring to us the evanescent *elsewhere* of beauty. On that which does not happen in our world, that which the world rejects as incompatible, the artist works this immunological miracle of imposition: he gives it to us forever.

It does not happen on its own. The gift had to be tamed. The state of grace had to be won. The artist had to liberate his art, by will, by concentration, by breaking down alien automatisms, by mastering the very facilities of the gift, by filtering this flow in himself which sweeps along the impure with the authentic, by research which scorns fashionable onanisms, the sterile deviations

For a Syncretism of the Faculties of the Mind

of the creative act. Genius demands total exclusion of these complacencies, gropings in the dark, endless practices more wracking than the nocturnal struggle between Jacob and the angel, to wipe out, from the mind to the action, all rigidity, all inertia, to smooth away all asperity and to let the truth flow from the tip of the brush, the pen or the chisel, under the illusion that it happens by itself, that anyone, in the same position, could do it.

Every human possesses, more or less, this sixth sense which permits him to tone down the real in its aura of eternity without extinguishing it. If each individual were to exercise this capacity in an autonomous manner, no two men would see, hear, experience the same thing in the same way. But the originality of perception is a measure of poetic personality. Great artists impose their perception—all at once or bit by bit—on the masses with more or less related feelings: these, renouncing, in effect, the cultivation of their differences (of which, often, they are not even aware) rally to the peremptory expression of the genius.

In such a way that it is only at the second stage, in an identification distilled by memory, that the greater part of humanity applies its co-efficient of poetic exaltation to instinctive sensations, to impressions and to sentiments which originate in its conscience. They respond to tested influences. They don the pre-established in borrowing, from the props store, those spectacles, hearing aids, verbal pincers for understanding the world: all works of art.

Faces then appear through Botticelli, Van Gogh, or *La Fille aux cheveux de lin*; a certain landscape—or sentiment—magnifies itself to become, in the existential flux, that of Shakespeare or Chateaubriand, Mozart or Ravel, Hokusai or Seurat. Quite normally, in this way, “nature imitates art”, according to Oscar Wilde’s paradox.

By the power of their genius, great artists thus coalesce the disintegration of individual perceptions. They reconcile the multitudes by rallying them to the same tempo, to the same beat. They *transport* different mentalities. They are mediators: it is through them that we arrive at a certain modality of truth.

The work of art ceases to be, according to Kant’s formula, “a finality without end”. If the language of one alone is to impose itself on many, it must be demonstrative. Just as the reasoning of a mathematician and the experience of a physicist or a naturalist

compels minds to unanimity, a sculpture by Michelangelo, a chorale by Bach or a canvas by Vermeer, on another level, unites individuals in a blaze of objectivity.

Objectivity? One can easily distinguish Euclidean and non-Euclidian geometry, without the relativity of the one or the other ever having put their subjectiveness in question. Why should there not be an objectivity according to El Greco and one according to Rembrandt? According to Albinoni and according to Borodin? According to Goethe and according to Supervielle? Perhaps fewer men have penetrated the creative impetus of Einstein than that of Da Vinci or Beethoven. Here, without doubt, we are touching on the essential in the artist's vocation. Just as scientists make inventions, artists bring forth revelations. Both push back the frontiers of the documented world and bring potentials to light.

"To each his truth" is not a formula of despair but of realistic optimism, from the moment that we are ready to recognize that human truths do not necessarily exclude each other, and can supplement each other to advantage. There are, surely, truths which lapse and which other truths dethrone. But there are also enduring truths, different and not exclusive. In this category, notably, are the great artistic truths—and the great philosophies are, in this respect, closer to the arts than to the sciences. The anonymous painters of the caves of Lascaux, just as those of the Egyptian tombs and the Chinese sanctuaries, Breughel, Raphael, Tintoretto, Rubens, Zurbaran, Philippe de Champaigne, Watteau, Reynolds, Turner, Courbet, Monet, Gauguin, Jacques Villon, Braque and Pollock can, for example, be regarded as great components in the rainbow of painting, beside the many other intercalated nuances, born and to be born, each and all forever compatible and complementary.

The drama of the artistic Babel, just as much as of the philosophic Babel, originates in Man's pretention that he can enclose in his works the whole Truth when the totality of this, by nature, escapes him, equating him with his "fellow men" who think, feel and express themselves differently.

Aesthetic quarrels are crude, puerile games, which stir up and sometimes give rise to malicious mercantile preoccupations. The market place would however be more active and lively if we could accept the necessity to substitute artistic reconciliations and ecu-

menism for war between factions.

The objectivity of men is always reductive. It is practical no doubt to agree that two and two make four. But in reality, in actual fact, two and two never make four: where sensitivity is involved, where life is present, there are only singularities. It is legitimate to admire Velazquez, Haydn and Verlaine as well as Mathieu, Messiaen and Michaux. Admiration does not, however, have to be sanctimonious for fear of profanation. Has one not the right, even if far from being a Velazquez, Haydn, Verlaine, Mathieu, Messiaen or Michaux to say to one's self: here I might have stressed (or suppressed) this rhythm?—I would have accentuated (or toned down) this quality? Thus, in its inalienable liberty, each conscience, aided by the artists, by chance encounters, will move towards Beauty, the splendour of Truth. This shines out from an infinity of facets. Each authentic artist, in his sincerity with regard to what is most true in himself, in his loyalty towards this personal truth, unique, reaches absolute splendour in revealing that part of it which he alone can translate. In such a way that, in the diversity of artistic schools, in the multitude of nuances introduced by the members of each school, the creators of the past, the present, and the future are not competitors like athletes who continually break their records, outclassing and declassing each other, but cooperate in coming to take their place in an immense orchestra which ceaselessly grows and in which one never stops counting and discovering refinements.

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To distinguish clearly the three forms of knowledge that are thought, poetry and love, is without doubt justified and, in any case, profitable. The proof of that is abundant. We realize that the very idea of a possibility of confusion between them would put us on our guard. Each individual scientific researcher, professional philosopher, artist, theologian examining the scriptures, must be able, in a rigorous separation of methodological levels, to extend and deepen with absolute authority the mastery of his field through the specific means and inspirations of that field.

This does not at all prevent us from reflecting on the fruits which the influences of poetry or love on thought, thought or love on

poetry, poetry or thought on love can produce as well as of the reciprocal benefits which can result from their respective processes. It is pointless, no doubt, but not prohibited, to dream, for example, that Einstein, so excellent a violinist that he once hesitated at the crossroads between music and a career as a physicist, might perhaps have confessed that, during decisive research, an interior accompaniment of harmonies and rhythms led him to certain formulas. . .

We know little about the process of the act of knowing, not only in its eminent manifestations which constitute the discoveries and the works of the creative imagination, but even in its most humble forms, brought about by each man's daily confrontation with the mass of information of all kinds which comes his way. It is a fact that, without doubt, the unfathomable alchemy of the mind differentiates less between the various modes of knowledge than do our conceptual analyses. In the totality of conscience, in its uninterrupted flow, as much in broad daylight as in the subterranean regions of slumber, it is doubtlessly through the uncontrollable contagions of thought, poetry and love, through their intermingling and their union that moral, philosophical, spiritual and other convictions are elaborated, in every human being, whether he likes it or not, and even if he deludes himself that it is not so, it is by this intermingling and this union that knowledge becomes truly operative. The syncretism of the superior faculties of the mind, largely unconscious and, when perceived, very largely unconfessed, would, if more decisive, without doubt produce more striking cultural fruits. The presentient fecundity of this syncretism is behind all the reform projects of educational systems launched periodically. Yet until now it has scarcely inspired anything but pious hopes. The word "cultural," used above is not applied here to collectives, in the sense of the ethnologist or the sociologist, but to individuals. In the social fabric, each man introduces a destiny, the fundamental colouring of which, regardless of the issue, is characterized by the individuality of his culture. The cultivated mind classifies information, weighs it up and, on it, builds. If culture could appreciate, it would do so, no doubt, through the quantity of information on which the mind works, but, still more, through the quality, the inestimable output of this work. Because the cultivated mind does not build in just any fashion.

The cultivated mind certainly does not bring its responsibility

For a Syncretism of the Faculties of the Mind

to bear by limiting itself to following the schemas invented by others. This, a well-programmed computer could do. But, on the contrary, could we fully accomplish our role as *Homo sapiens* if we gave in to a purely arbitrary fantasy, however brilliant? Does not the progressive structure of options to which the mind is open, if not destined, draw its justification in some way from an intellectual, affective and spiritual development in adequate rapport, in each of us, with what a psychologist has nicely called the “veining” of our being?² These invisible veins are characterized by their uniqueness just as fingerprints are. By thought, by poetry and by love, each mind, developing according to these veins, in a purely personal way, illustrates the truth of culture—sign and measure in each of us of our liberty.

Through culture, in effect, our liberty is won. All the pledges of heredity and education weigh on it, a complex matrix which represses it and tends to eclipse it. However, except in extreme cases of terrible handicap or madness, there is, it seems, in each of us a margin, however slight, of liberty, innate in man like a seal of his dignity. To cultivate oneself is to free from its matrix that liberty of perception, judgment and love—it is, if not the gradual elimination of the mass of pressures and unchecked mental habits, at least the recognition of them for what they are: prejudices, ready-made images, accepted ideas, conformities, subtle reflections of fashions or lightning reflexes of the reptilian brain which is in all of us one of the heritages of the long evolution of man. The culture of each of us, in progressing, calibrates the autonomy of the mind. It is its opportunity for development.

The opportunity, but also, correspondingly, the risk: culture is the adventure of the mind. As with every adventure, it begins with the breaks of departure—as we have just said. Afterwards however precious the exchanges may be that take place within work teams or think tanks, artistic circles, prayer communities or associations and groups of all kinds, culture will never cease to require a sort of fundamental solitude of the mind. Ultimately, culture can demand the removal of that of which, through specialist dedication, we are too sure.

² Quentin Ritwen (Pierre Debray-Ritzen), *Les nervures de l'être*, Lausanne, Rencontre, 1967.

For culture is beyond all specialization: it is provoked, stimulated and boosted by successive waves of *how?* and *why?* which, reproducing themselves, pervade all realms of knowledge. With the splendid humility of the scholar, André Guinier once said “We are all, taken as a whole, about as ignorant as the next.”³ Our learning is continually progressing, but it is fragmentary, battered by haunting doubts. In the face of these, culture presents the common front of its vocation, which is much less what is acquired than what is still in doubt, the pure Essential. Whether or not this essential is, or is not, beyond time and space, is it not a right and a duty of each mind to go out to meet it in its own way and as if by natural development? Culture integrates science, yet it must relay it, since science has eroded the initiatory power of societies. From an immense universe of pieces, by ways and means proper to it, culture constructs an inhabitable figure in and for the stability of each minute human being.

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Thus a strange mistake, too often encountered, is that of considering culture, all realms of culture and, particularly, the interest in art and mental speculation, as an amateur pastime or a luxury for people with time on their hands. In a world where the present-day trio—mass communication, mass consumption, sophistication of publicity techniques—exercises its enormous power of intimidation, in the presence of that objective alliance of material forces tending to immobilize human nature, faced with this massifying Goliath, each human being frees himself from the state of fungible molecule when, a new David, he ensures for himself thought, poetry and love, whose virtues he concentrates in the slingshot of his culture—a slingshot more powerful than a laser since it renders him aware of being a miniscule but unique cell, supremely irreplaceable.

“Paranoia!” perhaps some people will say. Certainly, if the uncompromising solitude of man in a mistaken culture did not conceal a mysterious element of solidarity with all other men.

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³ *La vulgarisation scientifique*, by André Guinier, delegate of the Academy of Sciences, annual public session of the five Academies (1978).