

ART AND SEDUCTION

Being is, above all, a vocation to continue to be. In the inanimate world, pure inertia achieves this ambition by means of its insistence on maintaining every conceivable state of equilibrium or else of movement. That which *is* persists in remaining as it is; a stone, for instance, insofar as nothing prevents it from continuing to exist in its condition as a stone. Certainly, this is the earliest and most remote origin of that which, at a later stage, is destined to manifest itself in art in a form that is not recognizable; in this case one might well say that, in the Beginning, was Classicism.

With the appearance of organic life, however, everything becomes more complex, since the very existence of organic matter is subject to the maintaining of extremely unstable states of equilibrium. To continue being what one *is* requires a strategy which will make it possible to subject to this purpose all that one *is not* in order to be able to avail oneself, beyond the inevitable frontier of death, of something novel that has only now been born. The mating of two cells in the first place, then

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the period of waiting that follows it, are the first reactions of the existential inertia of the species to the phenomenon of the death of its individuals. Reproduction can thus be said to be death's counterpart. An immortal being would never have chosen to have recourse to as cumbersome a means of continuing to be what it is. Reality must, however, have soon wearied of its first experiments in monosexual reproduction: these have indeed a devastating monotony in that they turn out to be an interminable series of multiplications by one, resulting always and only in one because it was the original multiplicator. Reality then revealed its dramatic genius by inventing another number, two. The finest verse of the poet Marechal can aptly be quoted here: "Pain was born together with the figure two." With its origins in the tragedy of sexual differentiation, pain was thus born: much later, one of its more serious consequences was the appearance of Romanticism.

The balance of the continued existence of each species becomes more complex as a result of the necessity of this dual cooperation which requires the birth of a whole series of complementary affinities and discordances which, much later, were finally given the name of love. That is also why love finds itself inextricably bound to death. Of course, I do not claim, in saying this, to be making a very sensational discovery; I must indeed apologize for not being able to avoid such a revelation of the obvious at this stage in order to go ahead from here so as to develop what it is now my purpose to clarify.

It is important, however, to point out, at this stage of my argument, that love seems to be the result of a kind of solidarity which does not at all reduce the fatal risk of death that threatens the one or the other of the components of the couple; at the same time, love transfuses their tiny particle of immortality to other beings which are equally mortal. In this context, one should also refer to the death, in some respects a ritual, of one of the participants in the act of love—of course the male—as one can observe it in so many of the lower species: it is then like a cruel testimony of having lived only in order to transmit life to others, whereas the individual male's life seems to be deprived of any feeling or sense. We then see love courting death as in a bull-ring, and death recovering its own dignity in

the very moment when it appears to be ridiculed by love. Reproduction is indeed a fundamentally and specifically anti-individual function. For every individual, the act of love is a prefiguration of the individual's own destruction. Even in the above-mentioned cases of sexual cannibalism, the surviving female, though her death is thereby postponed for a while, still has to face all the vexations of gestation, until she gives birth, as well as all the subsequent instinctive worry for the future of her offspring. In the sexual act, the species has everything to gain and the individual everything to lose, to such an extent that, were every individual endowed with the ability to see fully all the inescapable consequences of his action, none would ever reproduce, which is of course absurd since each individual owes its own existence to reproduction and, without it, would never have achieved a state of being.

Biology's basic inertia needed to supply by anticipation a remedy to a state of affairs that is so senseless. For this reason, love has as its setting a series of most delightful illusions or mirages beyond which its voracious features remain concealed under a mask of appealing appearances. In this context, one might even say that nature has acted with a prodigality which anticipates, or at least seems to us to anticipate, since in fact the brightest colors and the most delicately sensual perfumes are those which develop around the reproductive organs of flowers. Seduction, which is inseparable from love, establishes here its alliance with it. The most wily of courtesans turns out in this respect to be but an inexperienced adolescent, if one compares her to the most ingenuous rose-bud, though the latter cannot even say on whom it exerts its seductions, since its stamens and pistils are probably insensitive, we have every reason to believe, to the magic of scents and hues. Biologists speak to us of insects and birds that can play a part in the mechanics of exchanges of pollen, so that we must suppose that the bio-chemical providence of the rose distills for them, whether insects, birds or biologists, all the secret sweetness that can contribute to the splendid display of its charms. Be that all as it may, one thing remains certain: that we can already see, in the vegetable world, the development of an extremely complex technique of seduction which remains parallel to genetic mating since it appears to have no immediate

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bearing on it, though this mating remains the true and ultimate purpose of the whole reproductive process.

Among animals, the go-between function of seduction continues to multiply its appearances: phosphorescences, warblings, bellowings, strange plumages, speckled skins, crests, specific odors that can be perceived from a distance of several miles, nuptial dances, messages transmitted as if by wireless and corresponding antennae that have been sensitized to tune in on them. Probably, the range of nature's seductions extends in this field far beyond what our own imperfect senses can perceive. All of creative imagination in the world that surrounds us appears to aim at achieving a greater prodigality of devices destined to seduce the partners in each couple so that they forget their fatal sacrifice and contribute to the procreation of other and no less easily seduced individuals. This seduction seems indeed to be more important, in nature's eyes, than the accomplishment of such basic functions as nutrition and even the reproduction of the species considered as a separate phenomenon in itself.

All this great variety and display seems moreover to be reduced to the importance of a mere prop-room bauble if one compares it to the most ingenious of all plots that have been devised against the individual's will in order to lead it astray, against its own interests and with indomitable violence, by means of the supreme masterpiece of seduction that is sexual pleasure. All the repertory of physical satisfactions that leads up to it appears thoroughly colorless and unsubstantial when confronted by this all-absorbing and sudden blaze that overcomes whoever experiences it or becomes the object of its experiment. One is then raised to the heights of ecstasy in such a fullness of the sense of being that it brings one close to a mystical experience in that one then transcends the limitations of everyday experience, as if suddenly released from a prison. All the individual's limitations seem to expand their scope so as to coincide with the frontiers of pure being, thereby granting access to the incandescent particle of eternity which blinds one with its splendor and seems to contain self-evident truth. All that is merely physical seems indeed to be transmuted in a state of spiritual flux while the body loses its sense of its own weight, sustained in levitation by its own burning ecstasy. One then experiences an antonomastic

sense of possession, both possessing and being possessed in a single act or action; whoever feels this absolutely vital plenitude understands the full value of having been born, but understands this paradoxically in the very moment when he has become the instrument of his own mortality. This intoxication must be complete and it is necessary that one's "marrows should burn in glory," to quote the phrase of Quevedo, in order that the memory of all this should lead one to repeat the experience, in spite of all other considerations, such as those, it would seem in many cases, of one's own salvation in eternity. Nobody will ever be able to boast, one can well affirm it now, of having invented any trick that can fool one more effectively.

Among irrational beings, the memory of the intensity of this experience seems to be restricted to the periods of the oestrus, at least as far as the females of most species are concerned. But man remains, among all animals, the one whose memory is most developed. Whether consciously or unconsciously, he thinks unceasingly of the brilliance of this veritable *aurora borealis* that he has experienced in the orgasm. Nor should he be blamed too much if he identifies all this with the real final purpose of love, since all the rest of its batteries of seduction, glances, smiles, invitations, presumably coy poses, perfumes, caresses, furtive insinuations, invariably lead up to this one vortex. Sober reflection is required to understand that it is not possible for all human beings to understand how much illusion there can be in all this, or rather that this whole repertory of masks serves only one purpose, to conceal another mask, the most artful of all, in fact the one of sexual pleasure, an activity which is parallel and, in a way, indispensable to the reproductive process, the latter being thus founded, to a great extent, on the interplay of seduction.

At a certain level of evolution, being discovers a new way of assuring itself an escape from mortality and, thanks to the human being's ability to memorize and remember, develops a different technique to perpetuate the individual. As the centuries and the ages went by, this new device gradually acquired an awareness of its own activity and character and became known as ART.

Its first attempts, of course, can also be traced back to a

very felicitously modulated warbling, to the color-harmonies of a petal complementarily stressed by their background of foliage or else, going back further, perhaps also to the strict architecture of a mineral crystal. But all these aesthetic forms have also been recognized by the initiates as truly valid in themselves. Nevertheless, what we understand as true art remains inseparable from memory, which presupposes previous experiences. The memory of every animal is abruptly restricted to the life of the individual and ends with it. Its very animality arises from its inability to transmit it. Man, on the other hand, begins to be human as soon as his memory begins to transcend the limitations of his own individual existence and finds ways and means of extending itself beyond them. Supra-individual experience teaches one to increase one's potentialities as an individual thanks to the integration of experiences obtained from various other beings, all living in different conditions; this also makes it possible to achieve progress in techniques which had originally been more rudimentary. Thanks to all this, *homo faber* enters on the scene of history and, since in order to *make* it is absolutely necessary to know *how* to make, *homo sapiens* is created at the same time.

Memory of this kind, moreover, in order to be projected into the future, requires the solidarity of the tribe, the race or the species, so that man actually becomes human on the basis of the individual who has already existed, thanks to the links of solidarity that are created with ancestors who have already surmounted many difficulties for the living and also with the latter's descendants, so that he can likewise project himself into the future, thereby expanding in both directions the scope of his own individual existence.

Gradually, as a result of its patient and somewhat sordid game of chance played by juggling with its chromosomes in order to try out new combinations of the individual's potentialities, the species then discovers another direction in which it can extend its own immortality in a deeper sense. It is no longer a matter of creating repetitiously innumerable versions of itself in the hope that a viable mutation will finally perfect them, but rather of immortalizing, in a supra-personal manner those experiences which have significance and value and that various

individuals have known. A latent human being thus comes to light, one who is no longer subject to the contingencies of decrepitude and death because he is no longer restricted to the fate of a single physical body; instead, he has acquired the ability to become incarnate in, and to *possess*, if only for a while, any other individual in order to *exist* there and illuminate the latter's fugitive nature with the resplendent light of permanence. He needs but use the sounds of tribal words and language in a meaning that is perchance different from those of every day, or to modulate them in a way that recalls the warbling of a bird; or else, to draw a simple pictogram on the surface of a rock which, until that day, had never expressed anything; or again, to endow the clay in which he moulds his merely useful pitcher with a new grace in its curves so as to communicate an obscure joy to whoever uses it or sees it.

Art thus develops into a new form of supra-individual self-reproduction; thanks to its links of communication, all more common individuals, to whom a receptive sensibility has not been denied, are endowed with the capacity to relive, as an intimate and intense experience, what the most eminent representatives of our species have known, men like Pheidias, Dante or Mozart. Nor need we limit ourself here to such examples of genius. The creative talent of anyone who is gifted with it to any degree survives to enrich potentially the spirit of every other human being. The vital capacity to perceive no longer dies with their body, but remains integrated in an expressive form, the contemplation of which renders it no longer necessary to await the almost impossible repetition of the specific result of the genetic lottery that had once made this act of perception possible. An infinite number of beings who, in this respect, are less gifted, though not deprived of sensitivity, can then reproduce in fantasy, but with full intensity, experiences which, though not identical, yet approximate them as closely as possible. Pure inertia, acting in the spiritual sphere, finds thereby a means of giving a lasting character to what has been experienced by perishable beings and, projecting in no less perishable beings the brilliance of its loftiest sparks, achieves a result, by means of such a chain of mere mortality, similar to that of the successive fires, each one burning on a different hill-top, which brought

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to Mycenae the news of the fall of Troy without needing to exhaust a single messenger to cover these vast distances.

Such a transcendent solidarity creates in the human being a permanence that allows and even needs all possible variations for his enrichment, since that which it saves is raised above the limitations of the individual and permits the peaceful coexistence of elements which are antagonistic to each other. No form of art develops at the expense of another or invalidates it: diversity is indeed the law of art and the most flagrant contradictions serve in it as foundations for the final understanding of its meanings that are stressed by the stimulus of contrasts.

Art thus represents not only a form of reproduction but, at the same time, a strict selection among all things reproduced, by a fatal elimination of everything that lacks authenticity. At the same time, it offers the means to enrich the scope of possibilities placed at the disposal of every human being who thereby acquires the ability to humanize himself even further. The history of art is indeed more dramatic than merely entertaining. We need but refer here to the series of very great efforts that each one of its masterpieces has cost and to the bitter and painful struggle that artists have had to face in dominating their obstinately unwilling materials while, at the same time, they also had to face the surly opposition of a community which could understand their aims only with a certain time-lag, in many cases long after the creator's death. Creative ability has always concealed its gifts beneath a harsh and rugged surface and, from the other shore, we can understand fully each work of art only if it is not granted to us gratuitously but also revives in us the anguish that its actual creation inspired. Access to the joys of art, as indeed to those of mystical experience too, requires a preparatory discipline, an obligation of vigilance and the greatest humility, all of which the general philistinism of the crowd that surrounds artists is far from ever suspecting.

Art is the most difficult of man's tasks; the kind of transcendental paternity with which the creative artist is endowed is always granted to him at his own expense. Our filial attitude towards him, in order to permit us to identify ourselves fully with his dramatic tension, can scarcely be, in itself, a mere pleasure. Just as biological reproduction could not exist if it

were not accompanied, in order to induce us to accept all that it imposes on us, by all the parallel attractions of the most subtle seductions, art too cannot afford, for the very same reasons, to deprive itself of the similar support of seduction. To accept what is alien and to subject our own intimate personality so that something should exist at our own expense and within our own being, this is what we undertake to do when we set out to read a poem in its authenticity, when we contemplate a painting in the full meaning of such an act of perception, when we surrender ourselves to the full act of listening that all music requires in order to be properly felt. In addition, we should then relieve the anguish and the painful uncertainties that accompanied the creation of this particular work of art. Only a marked predisposition for masochism can lead us to accept all this. Art too must surely be endowed with some element of masochism; were it aiming only at its real final causes and refraining from any reliance on the magic of seduction, it would indeed have no more chances of survival than certain biological species would have of reproducing themselves. This is why art exerts its appeal and remains so powerful and ambiguous, becoming to such an extent involved with that which is its real essence that we can no longer distinguish the one from the other. The benefits of beauty have therefore come to be considered to be the final purpose of art, though they remain but the supreme physical manifestation of its seductive magic. Beauty is indeed to art what the orgasm is to the biological act of reproduction. Both these acts of fulfilment contain potentialities of such a nature that they finally impose themselves as purposes in themselves; but to become accustomed to the enjoyment of beauty as a purpose in itself, deprived of all other purposes which it should serve, degenerates into a kind of lechery of the spirit, as vitally satisfactory, to be quite frank, but at the same time as thoroughly fruitless as lechery of the physical senses when it is no longer associated with the purpose of the reproduction of the species. The equivocal formula of "Art for Art's sake" which had still been so popular in the early years of our century can thus be interpreted, in truth, as only "Beauty for Beauty's sake," being thereby reduced to a hedonistic proclamation of the validity of pleasure for pleasure's own sake. Any form of art

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that reduces its aims to the mere achievement of beauty condemns itself to remain imprisoned within its own limitations, since we already know how easily the canons of mere beauty can vary under the influence of fashions and fads. Besides, every kind of hedonism contains within itself the fatal seeds of an inevitable disgust.

In the art of those masters who have proven to be truly great, one becomes conscious of this nausea which can be inspired by what is merely beautiful and which can be detected in their more famous or popular works, which they themselves, in the long run, have surely felt to be less satisfactory or acceptable. The final purpose of art should never be confused with the blandishments created in order to conceal it. Whatever this finality may truly be, this cannot easily be explained, but I venture to propose, somewhat rashly, that the aim which art sets itself is to achieve a kind of permanence of man's more significant experiences by using forms which, in themselves, are no less significant and, at the same time, refer to them or designate them. These experiences, as has already been said, are so intense that they have little relationship with what is merely pleasurable; if one gives full scope to their nature, they may even prove to be quite offensive because of their violence and their lack of any restraint. What is significantly human and, for this reason, rooted in its own personal mortality, is always of an essentially dramatic character; this is why it has also been said that every comedy is a tragedy insofar as it lacks the unraveling of its plot, which is indeed an allusion to the limitative condition implied by mortality. Whatever its apparent intention, every work of art remains finally a *memento mori*.

True art, left free to achieve its own ends without being distorted by any subjection to *a priori* theories, seeks to compensate what is terrible in these ends by having recourse to the beauty of the appearances which conceal them, sometimes even increasing this element of beauty in proportion to the earnestness of the tasks entrusted to it. Egyptian statuary, which is of great formal beauty though its purpose is funerary, provides us with the most obvious example of this kind of relationship. But we also lose faith in the austerity of purpose of any art that reveals itself to us under austere appearances; almost always, it reduces

its own scope to a mere attempt to arouse the sado-masochistic instincts of a public which the artist considers incapable of responding to any kind of more noble stimulus. Our own contemporary art, if one views it as a whole in the light of most of its purposes, has succumbed to this heresy and, as usually happens in such cases, recommends itself to us with a declaration of the most noble intentions in order to justify its claims. We are thus told that art now seeks to free itself from everything that is merely accessory or incidental and has no direct bearing on its basic requirements; this means that art has renounced every element of seduction in order to concentrate strictly on the achievement of its own specific purposes. A picture is therefore an organized area of colors; a poem, a syntactic structure of semantic tensions; a piece of music, a numerical relationship of tonal or atonal proportions. All this, without any disturbing element of seduction: melody, anecdote or plot and the infantile mirror-play of perspective have all been exorcized as if they were mischievous *incubi* or *succubi* whose mere presence, even as a minimal ingredient in a work of art, would corrupt it as a whole. Beauty is thus believed to perturb the ascetic concentration that is demanded of the spectator. Like the fisherman in the ancient adage, artists have decided not to put any bait on their fish-hooks. From now on, no deceit is to be practiced on anyone: let him nibble who truly wants to nibble. A very honest attitude indeed, but its immediate reward is that the artist's hands remain from now on quite pure, unadulterated by any smell of fish.

The door is deliberately slammed in the face of the general public, which is considered *a priori* quite incompetent in the field of aesthetics. Pitfalls are even prepared, in case it should prove itself willing. Ever since the end of the last century, the general public has thus been defined as *cretinous*, *bourgeois* or *block-headed*. Since when has it been justified in its absurd belief that an artist will waste his time working for the majority of his fellow-men? As a result of this attitude, we now have a proliferation of poems which are read only by other poets, who find them detestable, of pictures that interest only other painters, who denigrate them, or of musical works which have algebraical qualities, having been composed only for other composers who,

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in turn, take pleasure in pointing out their faults as mere theorems. Problematical techniques for technicians who are no less problematical prove to be the inescapable consequences of this generalized contempt for everything that might be at all seductive. Nor is it my intent to press claims here for an art which would be exclusively seductive and, for this very reason, would of course cease to be true art and degenerate into what Macedonio Fernandez has called "culinary."

Those who manipulate propaganda, which debases and prostitutes beauty, have expert knowledge of all the tricks that are necessary to arouse and deceive the aesthetic appetites of all human beings, especially now that these appetites have been frustrated because art is determined to neglect them. Little more need be said here concerning the aesthetic values of a poster or a slogan intended to induce us to become regular consumers of some brand of canned soup or to enlist among the believers in some political ideology. On the other hand, the "disinterested" art that produces so many sunsets, harem beauties and Neapolitan fishermen is scarcely any better, though it still continues to swell the legion of cheap hucksters whose vulgar cult of seduction for seduction's sake seems to spread to a terrifying extent in proportion to the increasing disregard for the legitimate part that seduction should nevertheless play as a vital element in the various fields of art.

We thus see those who create in the plastic arts limiting their scope more and more to a search for cryptic solutions, which may well be very noble in themselves, to their problems of design and composition, while poets are likewise busy cauterizing in their art every element of sensuality or sentiment so as to render poetry quite antiseptic and reduce its scope to mere lyrical subtleties, incomprehensible to all who are not yet initiates. If they all continue to betray art in this manner and to deprive it of its real possibilities of expanding its scope and achieving timelessness, such artists and poets become finally no better than a biologist who would set out to prove that the final purpose of the sexual act is only to perpetuate the species and to "create more children for Heaven," proposing to human couples a perfected method of preserving their purity by eliminating all accessory elements of seduction so as to achieve an

improved kind of procreation, liberated of all the disturbing artifices of the orgasm; in fact, copulation without pleasure, one might well argue, would then correspond quite equitably to painless childbirth.

An art that has been deprived of the seductions of beauty is of much the same nature, in its logic and in the wisdom of its purposes, as artificial insemination. But is it wise, in vital terms, to impoverish voluntarily and in this manner the repertory of our possibilities of happiness? Are we so munificently endowed with happiness that we can afford to underestimate it? Finally, are we so very well acquainted with all the deeper relationship between spiritual and biological mechanisms? Might we not finally reach, after many generations, the disconcerting conclusion that the steaks of young bulls conceived thanks to the somewhat untimely mediation of veterinarians are less tender than those obtained as a result of the completely idyllic sexual satisfaction of their mothers? Are we sure that the true final purposes of an anaesthetized art would still be the same as those that were once concealed beneath the seductive appearance of beauty?

Like every other auxiliary form of seduction, beauty is intolerable if it claims to be master or mistress, but remains indispensable in its auxiliary role. Seated as a servant by the gates of the temple, it helps as a reminder, to those who are too impatient, of the fact that the steps towards Parnassus still exist and that it remains necessary to climb them one by one and not three at a time. Its seductive appeal attracts those who are remiss and, though there may be little room for it in some of the more disciplined hives, it continues to be indispensable as an indication, for those who are not initiates, of the path of access that must be followed by them.