

WANDERING AND WONDERING

HERE is an interesting point, that it is not the works of art, but the works of raw Nature that wonder the heart of man. However great be the thing man made, there is always the reflection that it was a man who did it, a man like myself, I might have done it; why not have a try? But Nature defies me from the first and it wins my love by winning my respect. The works of Nature produce wonder, but art elicits delight from the heart of man. This must not be taken as an absolute statement, as such it is most certainly not true. Nor is it meant as a generalisation, but rather as a description of a radical difference. There are many works of art which produce wonder, but the wonder comes rather from an affinity with Nature which these particular works possess than from the fact that they are art. There is a word which I love to use to characterise such art; it is 'creational,' and it is not irrelevant to notice that the Creation provided the first great occasion for its use. The first chapters of Genesis are beautiful poetry and therefore great art, but they produce wonder in the heart of man because they speak of the making of Nature.

Why this difference between art and Nature? It is essentially a psychological difference; that is to say, one affecting the very soul of man. It is concerned with man's response, and his reaction to things. He reacts differently to Nature from the way he reacts to art, and this difference of his reaction is caused by his different relationship to the one and the other. Nature is hiding something, what precisely is not so certain: possibly a maker, certainly a meaning. But art? There is no mystery here. One might almost say that art is primarily concerned to reveal, and to manifest. Not that we always know the meaning

of art, nor that art always or even ever has a meaning, but it always has a maker, and maybe it is sufficient to say here that inasmuch as we know its maker we can know that much about its meaning.

Nature, too, may well have a meaning. It certainly has a meaning. But Nature does not declare her secret; she is no ambassador from a distant King presenting her credentials. Whatever Nature means, it is not the obvious. I must guard against a possible difficulty about this word 'meaning.' Of course, if you ask me what is the meaning of a tree, I can say that it is to produce wood, and wood is to make fires, and making fires is to keep us warm, and what we are for is another question. But even granting that we could go on for ever forwards, we are not getting to the meaning of the thing, because the actual situation is much more complicated at the very start. Why should we be kept warm by burning wood? Matthew Arnold would probably be very upset if you cut a particular tree on Boars Hill, not particularly because he preferred to remain cold, but certainly because he loved that tree. Yet if that tree were a lone tree on a desert arctic island, and Matthew Arnold were very cold, all the poet in him would rise in revolt at the very idea that he should ever be warm. To see beauty in Nature is in some way to see a meaning, and it is not the mere meaning of utility. It is not meaning looking forwards, but meaning looking backwards. It can be, when deeply experienced, almost a straining back to remember what it is that Nature is here hiding from me, and then suddenly to realise that I have never known. There are few more difficult ideas to express than this great idea gained from Nature herself.

We are not at present discussing the very discussable subject of what it is exactly that Nature is hiding, that will come later. We are interested only in the fact that Nature does cause man to wonder, because something is concealed. Now this fact in itself is of considerable sig-

nificance in modern times, because our modern cities, which are the works of man and not the works of Nature, do not help us in any obvious way to this wonder which Nature gives us. There is in all the man-made cities of to-day a measured proportion between the need and the house built to satisfy that need. Cities are works of art undoubtedly, though it hurts to say so. Yet our modern cities are unnatural works of art if it is of the nature of a work of art to produce delight. And if this is so, it is because true art imitates Nature precisely in that prodigality which so many moderns dislike in Nature; whereas London fails to be prodigal. Where London is prodigal, it is also beautiful and produces complete delight and an element of wonder, too, in its citizens. But most of our modern cities are sordidly utilitarian, and nothing else.

Here, then, is a difficult situation. All the great facts in modern life are killing the great fact in human life, for they are all conspiring to make man take his life for granted. Everything is so proportioned to his needs that he has no needs, and this is the weakness as well as the strength of Socialism. It is also the weakness as well as the strength of the whole of modernism, for modernism caters for all that is common to all men but not at all for what is proper to each, his personality, and his individual desires. We must face up to this unpleasant fact, too; namely, that carried to its logical conclusions this is a real slavery. In the perfect Socialist State you are free to do all that you like except wonder about the world in which you live and model your life on the result of your wonderings. In 'Brave New World' you will never be given the chance to wonder.

Yet, on the other hand, there is the opposite difficulty. Continual wonder is not a good thing; it would produce a dreamer; a man who never could do anything, for he never was sure what ultimately he should act for. It is not merely a bad thing for his activity; it would be a bad thing for himself. He would become one of the never-

ending wandering philosophers always realising that there is so much to be said for the other School. He could never be happy, his very wisdom would be folly, for he would be denied the joys of common humanity whom he might easily despise and yet have no substitute for them.

Christendom gives us the answer to this apparent dilemma, for it gives us a state mid-way between the two. It is not in a sense logically satisfying I grant. Yet it is most certainly psychologically satisfying. I must explain how this is so. The Christian religion supplies us with an answer to the wonder which Nature provokes. It tells us about a different purpose of Nature from that which Science can point. Science tells us of the intrinsic tendencies of things, but religion tells us of the extrinsic tendency or the purpose of all things which are. Philosophy tries to do this, but it can do really so little. It can in fact tell us little else than that Nature has a purpose outside itself and is therefore tending to some end extrinsic to itself, some end intended by an intelligent being. This being has been called the Absolute, and we might without irreverence call him the Limit. It is about enough. It is something like coming to the end of a long walk and finding that we have no appetite for tea. Modern thinkers have almost exhausted their vocabulary in their search for God, but they have not yet found a god worth the trouble. But the Catholic Faith is founded on a historical fact. Its basis is history, it is the history of a Person who was Himself God. On the testimony of Jesus, we can learn many things about this world in which we live, its purpose, its meaning and, what is more, its Maker.

Now this is an extraordinary thing that the teaching of Jesus is never mentioned in those books which are called histories of philosophy; that is to say, histories of wisdom. Jesus is never regarded as one of the great philosophers of history. He is placed over against the philosophers among another group called the prophets or religious teachers of the world. This is really a very strange thing,

for even on their own principles Jesus very much comes within their province. For, a man who walked on the waters must provoke the question to any mind in search of Wisdom: Can a man work miracles? But this is an interruption, though a very important interruption.

Our present point is this, that the Catholic Faith, following the teaching of her divine Master Jesus, gives mankind an answer to the great question which troubles him, the Faith tells us what there is behind the stars. The Catholic Faith gives men an answer to that Wonder which Nature provokes, and yet leaves so much still unexplained that there is still plenty for all men to wonder about. Thus is preserved a beautiful balance between fullness of knowledge and a great ignorance; 'we know in part.' Thus on the one side is Science and Philosophy preserved for us; for we can reason from what we already know: but so is Poetry and Romance also preserved to us; for Poetry does not concern herself only with what we know, but also with what we hazard guesses about, what we do not know.

But it does not rest here. Even in Heaven there will still be room for Wonder as well as Knowledge. We shall see God even as He is, we shall know Him even as we are known, and yet there will be room for wonder, for no man can comprehend God, no man can know God as God knows Himself. The essence of the Trinity which is God, though seen by us in happiness and love, will yet escape our comprehension and so leave us with something in God which we cannot understand fully yet, which will be for us a source of wonder for all eternity. How Wonderful, O God, is Thy name over all the World!

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