PURPOSE AND ADMIRATION[1]

IT is a relief to turn from the apocalyptic literature, so prevalent to-day, to a book whose purpose is to indicate the elements which make for reconstruction and order in one of the basic activities of human life. Its author, the retiring President of the Headmasters' Conference, is the head of a great school in one of the most ancient and traditional cities of this country. We need not, therefore, be on our guard against a fanatic of modernity for its own sake; and, in fact, the most striking quality of his book is the breadth and sanity of its outlook, a deep appreciation of the great things of the past with a live awareness of what is vital and sincere in our own time. 'The affectation of despising the old masters is not less dangerous than the opposite error of looking back on art as something embedded in a lost culture, like a fly in amber. Art is continuous, and genuine modernity is not a denial, but only a fresh application in new circumstances, of eternal principles bequeathed to us by the art of all ages . . . . The real lover of art finds no incompatibility between new and old. His exciting consciousness of his own age, as a creative renaissance, only whets his appetite for the best fruits of archaeological research and discovery.' The book has a further merit. There are plenty of monographs dealing with the modern manifestations of this or that art, such as Mr. Casson's works on sculpture and Mr. Roger Fry's on painting. No one would question their value or their legitimacy, but by the very fact that they treat each subject in isolation they continue to uphold the illusion that art is something apart and remote from normal human life. But Mr. Barton succeeds in making us realise that, in the past, art was integrated in the whole social life of the community and that it must be so again if we are to achieve a true civilisation.

'Art in one form or another is essential to the life of every intelligent human being.' This is the underlying principle of the whole book. Its truth is evident if we understand the meaning of the Greek definition of art as

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[1] *Purpose and Admiration.* A Lay Study of the Visual Arts. By J. E. Barton. (Christophers; 10/6.)

the right way of making things, with beauty as the bloom of perfect functioning; and if we recollect that art does not belong solely to the realm of what we call the 'fine arts' but is concerned with our entire environment, with everything which can be made, from a poker to cathedral. Mr. Barton allows no absolute distinction between the crafts and the fine arts, but only a difference in scope. When a man makes a poker, for example, his whole effort is given to making an object fit for *use*: the result is, or may be, a work of art, but there is little room in it for the expression of his personal vision. But when a man paints a picture, although its purpose may be primarily didactic, he is obviously left much more freedom of treatment so that he can introduce his own perceptions more easily. Thus a work of 'fine art' is evolved, free from the limitations of mere utility and enjoyable for its own sake. A *new* element appears, the artist's creation, the produce of his rich experience of life. Thus if we only seek in a picture clever imitations or reminders of natural objects we shall miss this new, this unique thing which is the artist's peculiar contribution. The word 'design' is often used to express this contribution, but Mr. Barton insists that it must not be understood in the sense of an abstract geometrical pattern remote from all human interests, as certain teachers of 'significant form' would have it to be. The artist is an individual with a far richer perception of life than ordinary men: and it is his accumulated experience, the spoils of life, that is expressed with every stroke of the brush and is co-ordinated into a dynamic whole in the design. Thus pure 'abstract art,' though useful as a tonic to an age that wallowed in the notion of painting as imitation, is none the less not truly human and, in this sense, Renoir is a truer guide than Picasso. In any case art is not an escape from life, not a mild hobby for our idle moments; on the contrary it is one of the highest means to a fuller appreciation of life. Even for our spiritual life, art has its noble part to play. Created beauty is a reflection of the absolute Beauty which is God, and points the way to Him. Unfortunately in an age without religious convictions there is a tendency, reflected perhaps in one or two phrases in this book, to confuse the reflection with the Reality. It is a temptation made all the stronger by the grandeur and the

spiritual dignity of art. But it must, of its nature, lead to a terrible desolation of the spirit. In its right order in the scale of values a work of art is a promise, a token, a dim preliminary experience of the unutterable enjoyment that awaits the body and soul of man in Beatitude. Out of that order, and when it is worshipped as a last end, as an object of religion, it becomes an idol; and the distinctive thing about an idol is its helplessness. A work of art, M. Maritain remarks, can help to make a man worth saving: it cannot save him. And all the masterpieces in the world are valueless in comparison with one little act of charity.

Of recent years our knowledge of the history of art has been vastly expanded; we have come into contact with civilisations whose very existence was scarcely suspected. The effect of this impressive mass of evidence has been threefold. Most of the art of these early ages is anonymous and we have been compelled to look at it for its own sake with eyes enfranchised from the labels of schools and great names: thus what is essential in art has been emphasised and brought home. Secondly this art is of the kind that we call primitive, or archaic, or unconscious. Its technique is often crude. In spite of this it possesses a mysterious uncanny power that is often lacking in the work of more sophisticated periods. 'But the total of these facts is no argument against a civilised order of living for mankind. They only serve to point the moral that beauty, as we understand the word, has roots in something deeper than the conscious intellect: in a region of instincts too complex for analysis, connected with our physiological as well as with our emotional nature . . . . Civilisation over-reaches itself when it ceases to draw on this hidden reservoir of natural power. There is a strain of the primitive in every first class artist, whatever his date may be.' Then, thirdly, 'All this new and wider knowledge compels us to think of art as something inherent in the whole body of mankind, rising to peculiar expressiveness and meaning in certain ages of social development.' The author concentrates on several of these more eminent ages and gives a lucid exposition of their artistic structure. Dealing with two in particular, that of Greece and that of the thirteenth century, he shows how society was unified and bound together into an organic whole. The binding force in each case was religion:

the central art work in each case was a building, the Greek temple, the medieval cathedral, the home of God; and from this building all the other arts proceeded, sculpture first, then painting, then the various crafts, all inspired by a common purpose and creating a common style. Mr. Barton's description of Chartres is memorable and must be quoted:

'Happiness is a positive thing, and the only force that is really positive in its effects is the force of religion. A modern man who stands in the Cathedral of Chartres will inevitably ask himself what motive, what incentive, was strong enough to sustain a work of such glory and magnitude, a work that declares itself both in conception and execution to be the co-operative miracle of an entire community. It is not enough to answer that the Church of that age was exceptionally powerful in organisation and discipline, nor that the beliefs of men were exceptionally definite as regards their hope of immortality or their fear of damnation. To say . . . . that Chartres is the product of a great religious awakening is true but vague. The conviction that is brought home to us, though no words will cover it, is in the main a feeling that this extraordinary thing was created by a family of men : by men who not only accepted and steadfastly believed the doctrines handed down to them, but also were enabled to endow these doctrines with a new life, drawn from an altogether new awareness of themselves, as children who all sat round the same table and partook of the same spiritual bread. Here, if anywhere, is the evidence of a genuine collectivism : not a political or economic theory, nor an affair of platforms and committees, nor a sentiment of 'social service' recited in the Babbit phraseology with which we are all so well acquainted; but an active, profound, and unquestioning sense of fraternity, kept alive at a steady heat by the common pursuit of invisible realities . . . . the certitude and serenity are quite different from what in other ages are found in detached lives of saints. They inhabit the minds of ordinary working people and come from a religion that is also a contagion.'

It will be admitted that this is a fine and instructive passage: and in other places in the book we find illuminating appreciations of the reality of the communal civilisation of the thirteenth century. Only on one point we venture to disagree: Comparing Christian with Greek art, Mr. Barton admits that it reveals an outlook that could face the mystery of suffering and evil, which the Greeks

avoided, but that it failed to establish that harmony between the intellect and religion, which the Greeks achieved, and in particular that in Christian art 'the soul is at war with the body.' This view, we think, fails to take into account the completeness of that synthesis whereby the thinkers of the thirteenth century frankly accepted the Greek inheritance and far from denying its perennial truth carried it to a perfection that no Greek could have suspected. Faith, for example, in the view of the thirteenth century theologian, was not opposed to knowledge; it was rather, the ultimate perfection of the human intelligence on earth. The Greek mind ever sought lucidity, and yet all sciences have their insufficiencies and beyond them lies mystery. Christianity has thrown light on that mystery, the obscure light of faith, it is true, but nevertheless sufficient to bring the mind into communication with the unknown. As for the relation between soul and body we put in a footnote the observation of an accredited modern disciple of those medieval theologians to the effect that hostility is definitely not the Christian doctrine of their relationship.[2]

[2] There is not one of these effects (of Greek culture) which Christianity does not utilise. Its place is certainly not the desert nor its dream the disincarnate mind . . . . It believes that the sound equilibrium of the body and the vigorous play of its functions guarantee the health of a soul, firm in its judgments and free in its activity. In a word, it agrees with the ordinary Greek view, represented by Aristotle rather than by Plato and Pythagoras that the soul and the body—*i.e.*, the spiritual and the sensitive functions—are conjoined and compenetrate each other in the unity of a living organism, and that there is a natural connection between them against which nothing can prevail. *Our body is fundamentally most certainly not our enemy, and the natural order most certainly not our seducer.* The difference between Christianity and the Greeks lies doubtless in the fact that it insists to a greater extent on the spiritual issues of bodily perfections, that it finds physical ugliness and wretchedness less repugnant, and that it establishes a more definite distinction between goodness and beauty. Above all, it maintains a certain mistrust with regard to the passions of the flesh which was not at all common among the Greeks, none of whom would have spoken of them in the terms of St. Paul. But here again we must beware of extremes, and not confuse

From considering the communal nature of the great periods Mr. Barton is able to discuss the problem of taste. The common saying 'There is no arguing about taste' could only be used in an age where there is, as yet, no common style. 'A sound taste in the arts, maintained by a reasonably unanimous diffusion through society, is produced when social conditions bind men together in a common scheme of life, in common aspirations and beliefs, and in a common education. The nearest approach to this state of things of which we have historical and ocular evidence is seen in the age already described, the age when our great cathedrals were built. In such an age, the arts were the outcome of an ordered view of life, and an ordered system of manual training shared by every artisan. Within the limits of inevitable personal differences, tastes would differ, of course, even then. But the broad principles of art, deciding in general what was good and what was bad, were no more uncertain than the broad principles of religion and morality, for the simple reason that they grew from the same roots and served the same purposes.' And this is true, in a lesser degree, of the civilisations of the Italian City States, and of the renaissance and eighteenth century England. In such a period the 'style' belongs to the whole community and exists before any individual style can emerge. 'The style of Shakespeare could not have existed unless there had already been something that we call the Elizabethan style . . . . Behind the style of the artist lies the style of the age and the society.'

No age before the nineteenth century had been without such a community style, at least to some degree. But in the nineteenth century, with the advent of democracy, machinery and applied science, that 'cultural unity which

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Jansenist anathemas with the Christian idea of concupiscence. The Greeks themselves recommended asceticism and practised renunciation, but while they did so only in view of the increased perfection of their nature, Christianity added the idea of the imitation of Christ and the spirit of religion. In a word, it raises the goal of activity from the human to the divine. And in this it denies nothing, but only completes and concludes.—T. Demain, O.P., Professor of Moral Theology at Le Saulchoir. (*Vie Intellectuelle*, 10 Sept., 1932; pp. 298-299.)

more or less held our civilisation together since the middle ages' was broken up. The effect was a wide deterioration both in creation and judgement. There were individual great artists, but these were considerably hampered; the architectural and domestic arts lost their creative significance and the idea of 'art' was narrowed to painting and sculpture; and thus the individual artist came to be regarded as a remote purveyor of luxuries without any necessary function in society. Further 'the industrial revolution destroyed the old popular handicrafts, and with them the high level of sensibility which a tradition of handicraft implies. Social changes brought into play two devastating influences: the influence of a newly instructed but not educated populace, and the influence of a prosperous, new middle class, whose moral judgements were largely determined by the aim of "getting on" in the world, and whose artistic judgements were tainted by the fatal notion that "art" is a luxury appertaining to social success rather than a universal necessity for intelligent, as distinct from animal, living . . . . Commercial enterprise was not slow to flood the vast new market with the kinds of literature and journalism that in the long run, probably do most harm; too inane to be suspected of evil, but deadly because they led to nothing higher, and lodge the mind in a morass of a complacent mediocrity. Machine production herded men into towns and town life means inhuman squalor: the town was "an eruption of sordid building with no aim beyond immediate utility," and no "plan" save to make money by factories, and to keep close at hand the necessary hordes of operatives.' The prosperous went to live outside: hence the suburb with its conception of art as 'one of life's agreeable unnecessary frills: something to be kept for hours of mild relaxation and not to be mixed up with serious institutions, such as factories and shops.' Mr. Barton contrasts this with the great days of England when the merchant 'took care that his city was seemly and well ordered, because he lived in it, and not only worked there.' The Great Exhibition of 1851 summed up the prevalent conception of art. 'Evidently the ruling idea was sumptuousness. The shapes might be clumsy, but this did not matter if they bristled with ornament to suggest opulence

. . . .' In this age the whole structural purpose of society was lost sight of in the chaos of anarchistic individualism. No wonder that when they did make efforts in the essentially communal art of architecture the results formed only 'a nightmare of aesthetic insincerity.'

'The Victorians have left to us—still, alas! in good condition structurally—thousands of public and private buildings in which every detail was thought out by a scholar: that is, by a man whose notion of architecture was to copy details with lifeless exactitude from the arts of the past. Nobody in 1870 demanded that living historians or poets should write English in the style of Malory or Chaucer. Yet architects and all their subordinate craftsmen were compelled, by the taste of the time, to turn out sham Gothic churches or sham Greek town halls which one and all were born dead, because they were conceived in defiance of the elementary laws that no human work can live unless it is spontaneous, and that no spontaneous work is possible if men have to spend their time in copying instead of creating.'

The age had its rebels, of course, the Pre-Raphaelites who sought a refuge from the sordid world in a dream garden of an idealist past, the 'aesthetes' of the Yellow Book in the closing years of the century with their doctrine of 'art for art's sake.' But the truth was that though the best minds were aware of the chaos they could not really see a way out.

Now the importance of emphasising this catastrophic break in tradition is that it shows the futility of those critics who accuse modern artists of breaking away from tradition. 'Nobody can well break away from something that has already been shattered into fragments.' The fact is that modern artists have had to start anew and re-assert traditional principles under the new and enormously complicated conditions of our own age. And Mr. Barton maintains that this is precisely what we are witnessing—a return to principles after an age of chaos. The return to a conception of order in art began in France with the Impressionist painters and reached its definite shape in the work of Cézanne (d. 1905). Cézanne is the 'primitive' of the new movement. He slowly worked out for himself a conception of painting that was fundamentally classical. In his work 'we are taken back again, over the intervening

unrest of a century, to the old conception of art as something which co-ordinates reality.' It was through this new sense of order and constructiveness inaugurated by Cézanne and followed out by the Cubists with their solidified and simplified shapes, that architecture, the supremely social art, was reinspired and once again became a force. In Le Corbusier we find its most logical theorist 'stripping architecture to the bone, rejecting all the accretions and fancies that have gathered round it . . . . accessories that once had love behind them, but which now have neither love nor meaning, except the sentimental meaning of association and habit . . . . shaping it anew in the strictest conformity with practical requirements . . . .' At the same time it is important to note that this fitness for purpose is by no means material and physical only. The work done must be 'easy on the eyes' as well. And although at present there is a formidable intellectual austerity in the new building this has been necessary 'as an ascetic diet to help in art's recovery from prolonged fatty degeneration.' With the return of our civilisation to wholeness of life and outlook the 'fine' arts will recover their illustrative and symbolic functions. Already the new architecture is far more than a matter of isolated buildings. In Europe, at least, the centre of civilisation has always been the city, and just as the most disconcerting feature of the nineteenth century was degradation and decay of the city into a mere factory slum so among the more hopeful signs of our own time is the appearance of new cities intelligently planned and built. Mr. Barton describes two of these, Stuttgart and Stockholm, and of the latter he says 'we are made to feel that modern life in this northern city has recaptured in its own way the Greek ideal: the ideal of a community that seeks to express it own dignity and its best aspirations in visible terms. Public buildings in Sweden teach also the lesson of bringing all the crafts into harmony.' Such phenomena well deserve stressing: they indicate a new collective consciousness that is replacing the ferocious individualism of the last century. There are signs also that the problem of machinery may receive a similarly rational solution, and the danger of a mechanised mankind averted. 'It is quite untrue that men are more subservient to

machines than they used to be. On the contrary, machines and machine operation are more and more dominated by human intelligence . . . . and gradually, as man becomes master of the mechanical instrument, and as general education goes on among all classes, a world of machinery may turn out to be not incompatible with art everywhere, alike in design, execution and appreciation.' And he points out that the aspects of modern life which least support the indictment that personality is obliterated are those which belong to modern bridges, ocean liners, and motor cars. At present there is a certain bleak cosmopolitanism in the visible arts; this is natural in an age of transition when artists have been compelled to get down to the root principles of aesthetic form; but when the renewed tradition is well under way there can be no doubt that national influences will once again assert themselves. One of the most fascinating chapters of the book entitled 'Art and the English Race' is devoted to our magnificent contribution to the visible arts through the ages, and the author notes that in spite of the cosmopolitan influences which our recent artists have necessarily undergone, 'it is a striking fact that not one of our most interesting "modern" painters could by any chance be mistaken for a foreigner.'

'Materially the age is still in the throes of political distraction and economic chaos. Spiritually, it looks for salvation to ideals of social unity and established order.' In this autonomy lies the tragedy of the situation of the modern world. There is the new corporate sense expressed in the arts that have been described, there is a widespread unselfishness willing to devote itself to social ideals—'Believing for myself that idealism is stronger in the world now, among men at large, than in any period since the Black Death'—and yet at any moment the structure of society threatens to sink back into chaos from a lack of any unifying principle or any common and settled convictions. For although it is true that everywhere there are men who share unselfish aspirations for the common good, yet the intellectual and moral disorder in Germany portrayed in such a book as Paul Kastner's *Fabian* or the complete lack of unanimity upon fundamental issues in our own country do not, at present, offer much chance for such ideals to crystallise and become a force. Mr. Barton remarks that a

new vertical class distinction is evolving, cutting through the existing distinctions of birth and wealth and education, a distinction roughly, between those who cling vaguely to the prejudices of the nineteenth century and those who resolutely turn towards a new age. There can be no doubt that this is true, and it is also true that youth throughout the world is revolutionary. Will this 'new natural aristocracy' spread, as it is, though every class, be able to form a nucleus for a new civilisation? To do this it must have a common affection for the same high things: there must be 'a contagious fraternity' springing from the love of the same object. Mr. Barton suggests that this object to which a religious value is to be assigned is what he calls 'the things of the mind,' an affection for which produces 'a spirit of wise, ungrudging and disinterested sympathy' among those who share their love. No one would deny that a common interest in the major achievements of the human spirit in the natural order does generate a common enthusiasm and a spirit of co-operation. It is one of the main delights of civilised living. But is such enthusiasm adequate in any degree to the terrific task of welding together and recreating a shattered society? We need not despair of the conditions of our time: there have been times far worse. When Pope Gregory the Great sent his little nucleus to the savage land of Britain it looked very much as if the world was going to end in a universal catastrophe. Yet he serenely sent it forth, because the power that united them *was* adequate to their task: a power not of this world. And it is as true to-day that the only force which can unite the innumerable conflicting wills of mankind is no object of this world but a Person who can claim their love and at the same time *their worship*. At the centre of history stands that figure, human and divine, united through the humanity with every aspiration that belongs to man, with man himself, and because He is divine giving those aspirations an eternal value. This is no mysticism in the popular (and false) sense of that word, but sober fact. The motive which united every strata of society in the age when Chartres was built was the service of God through Christ. That ideal may now be thought to be mythical, but, at least, no higher ideal is conceivable. The Incarnation both for the individual and for society

presents a motive by the side of which any other is immediately dwarfed.

It will be obvious that Mr. Barton's book is stimulating. It is the best introduction, that we have read, for an intelligent understanding of a vastly important subject. It is delightfully written; and we have only been able to mention a very few of the good things in it. It is a book to be read and kept. We cannot accept his ultimate solution or, rather, we cannot regard it as sufficient. But we can accept and appreciate the evidence he brings as to the new and abundant vitality of our time. It is our business, as Catholics, to understand and sympathise with it, and wherever possible harness its energies so that it may be brought under that direction in which alone its lasting peace and stability may be secured.

ÆLFRIC MANSON, O.P.

THE FLIGHT INTO EGYPT

O Far-fleeing Mother
The great star of Egypt
Keeps vigil above
Whilst thou bearest sleeping
To the dumb gods' keeping
The speechless Word of Love

Away to the northward
The uplands of Juda
Are hid from thy sight.
And all about thee hieing
Come whispering and sighing
The homeless winds of night.

ELIZABETH BELLOC.