

I wish we could analyze all the leading principles; but I have already made great demands on your attention, and the two remaining subjects, rhythm and the illusion of development, or growth, are difficult. So I can only say, in conclusion, that the more you study artistic composition, the more lucidly you see its likeness to the composition of life itself, from the elementary biological patterns to the great structures of human feeling and personality that are the import of our crowning works of art; and it is by virtue of this likeness that a picture, a song, a poem is more than a thing—that it seems to be a living form, created, not mechanically contrived, for the expression of a meaning that seems inherent in the work itself: our own sentient being, Reality.

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ARTISTIC PERCEPTION AND
“NATURAL LIGHT”

By artistic perception I mean the perception of *expressiveness* in works of art. Expressiveness belongs to every successful work; it is not limited to pictures, poems, or other compositions that make a reference to human beings and their feelings, show looks and gestures or emotionally charged situations. The representation of feeling is one thing, the specifically artistic expression of it is another. A wholly non-representational design, a happily proportioned building, a beautiful pot may, artistically speaking, be just as expressive as a love-sonnet or a religious picture. It has an import which is, I think, a wordlessly presented conception of *what life feels like*. That is the significance of “Significant Form” (to use Clive Bell’s much-attacked phrase), the “livingness” Augusto Centeno calls the essence of art, the cryptic “artistic truth” that is independent of facts and actualities. I call it vital import: “vital,” because it is always

some mode of feeling, sense, emotion, consciousness, that is conveyed by a successful work of art; "import," because it is conveyed. Vital import is the element of felt life objectified in the work, made amenable to our understanding. In this way, and in no other essential way, a work of art is a symbol.

But vital import, or artistic expressiveness, cannot be pointed out, as the presence of this or that color contrast, balance of shapes, or thematic item may be pointed out by the discerning critic. You apprehend expressiveness or you do not; it cannot be demonstrated. One may demonstrate that such-and-such ingredients—chords, words, shapes, or what-not—have gone into the structure of the work; one may even point out pleasant or harsh sensory effects, and anybody may note them. But no one can show, let alone prove to us, that a certain vision of human feeling (in the widest sense of the word "feeling") is embodied in the piece. This sort of feeling, which is not represented, but composed and articulated by the entire apparition, the art symbol, is found there directly, or not at all. That finding of a vital import is what I mean by "artistic perception." It is not the same thing as aesthetic sensibility; it is insight.

Artists and art-lovers generally agree that artistic perception is intuitive. It takes place, they would say, spontaneously and immediately, without reasoning, without benefit of logic. Some would claim, furthermore, that a special power of intuition leads the art connoisseur to knowledge of an inner reality, which the philistine can never know. This knowledge, they say, comes through feeling, not thought; it is irrational; it is a metaphysical contact with the real.

If you grant that artistic perception is an act of intuition, you do throw the doors wide open to this sort of mysticism, mixed with every degree of philosophical irrationalism and transcendentalism on the one hand, and on the other with sheer sentimentality and romantic fancies. But the fact that an important concept has been used in confused or questionable ways does not prevent anyone from using it properly. It merely saddles the careful user with the rather heavy task of clearing away the adventitious meanings that cling to it, and their equally irrelevant implications. "Intuition" is such an overloaded concept; and since I do believe, with many aestheticians and most artists, that artistic perception is intuitive, a matter of direct insight and not a product of discursive thinking, it behoves me, I suppose, to explain what I mean by "intuition," and especially what I do not mean. For I do not believe that artistic perception is a kind of reasoning performed, as people say, "through feeling," as though one could use feeling in place of thought to vindicate a belief. It does not involve belief, nor lead to the acceptance of any proposition at all. But neither is it irrational, a special talent for making a mystical, unnegotiated contact with reality. I submit that it is an act of understanding, mediated by a single symbol, which is the created visual, poetic, musical, or other aesthetic impression—the apparition that results from the artist's work.

What, then, is meant by calling artistic perception "intuitive"? What is meant by "intuition"?

There are, in the main, two common uses of the word in serious philosophical literature, besides its technical use as a translation of Kant's word *Anschauung*, which

we may omit here (some other words of his, sometimes translated as "intuition," fall under one of the two uses just mentioned). The first of these uses makes "intuition" mean some sort of *extra-sensory* as well as unreasoned awareness of fact—a knowledge that occurs without any mediating information, exhibition, or other experience to induce it. Katherine Wild, the author of a study entitled *Intuition*,¹ follows this first usage; she offers two alternative definitions, which in fact alternate cheerfully and indiscriminately all through her book:

"A. An intuition is an immediate awareness by a subject, of some particular entity, without such aid from the senses or from reason as would account for that awareness.

B. Intuition is a method by which a subject becomes aware of an entity without such aid from the senses or from reason as would account for such awareness."

Here the author adds a gloss: "In both cases, 'entity' is used in its widest possible significance so as to include: idea, fact, situation, indeed any one individual particular of any nature whatever. . . ."

Whether such extra-sensory and otherwise uncaused knowledge of any "entity" ever occurs seems to me highly problematical. As for the second definition, which makes "intuition" a *method* of extra-sensory and unaccountable knowing, I am quite sure no such method exists. Let us take the better definition to establish this concept of intuition: it is, then, some super-sensible and irrational awareness of what she calls "individual particulars"—things, facts, or what not, but always concrete entities.

¹ London: Cambridge University Press, 1938.

"Intuition" in this sense is a mysterious event, a startling experience when, or rather if, it occurs. Its possession is regarded as a special gift, said to be found most frequently in persons of slight or untrained discursive intellect. It is, moreover, intuition in this sense that is opposed to everything that may be called reason—observation, memory, proof, probable inference. And it is in this sense that people argue about its existence, and adduce wonderful instances to prove it or invent *ad hoc* explanations to disprove it.

There is, however, another sense of the word, that does not make intuition a dubious abnormal phenomenon, nor commit us to any denial of sensory aids or symbolic media in connection with it. This sense has been defined quite broadly and at the same time precisely by C. A. Ewing in his lecture to the British Academy, 1941, entitled "Reason and Intuition,"² as "cognitions that are both non-empirical and immediate." Intuition in this sense is a normal and in fact ubiquitous phenomenon in our mental life. In his later development of the subject I think Mr. Ewing tends to confuse "intuition" with "belief," which is not the same thing (we shall return to the distinction a little later). This confusion leads him to speak of religious and moral intuitions, and of erroneous claims to intuitive knowledge. I don't think there are any peculiarly religious, moral, or other topically specialized intuitions, though intuition occurs in thinking on these special topics. But that problem need not detain us. In the early part of his lecture he explains

² Published in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Vol. XXVII, and reprinted as a monograph by Humphrey Milford, London, 1941. See p. 12.

how "cognitions that are both non-empirical and immediate" occur in reasoning itself, and in so doing he is using precisely the concept here in question. Here are his words:

"In order to establish conclusions of any sort by reasoning we need premises which are supplied either by experience or by immediate insight as opposed to reasoning. . . . There is a further point of still greater importance. In order to conduct a valid deductive argument we must see that each step in the argument follows logically from the preceding one. . . . We could not start at all in any reasoning without assuming that we immediately perceive a connexion between certain premisses and their conclusion. To argue at all we must see the connexion between the propositions which constitute the different stages of the argument not by mediate reasoning but intuitively. We can no doubt call this not 'intuition' but 'immediate,' as opposed to mediate, reasoning . . . but such *immediate* reasoning would only be another name for what is commonly called intuition. The connexion between *p* and *q* would still be something that you could not *prove* but either saw or did not see."

This sense of the word "intuition" is certainly quite different from the one which Katherine Wild defined. If hers is taken as the extreme metaphysical sense, namely direct awareness of concrete reality, Mr. Ewing's use in the passage just quoted—"cognitions that are both non-empirical and immediate"—may be regarded as the other extreme, the barest, most naturalistic, and least hypothetical sense. Between these two widely different

concepts lies a whole gamut of more or less logical, more or less mystical notions (including Croce's, which makes intuition identical with expression).

Insight into the nature of relations whereby we recognize distinctions and identities, contradictions and entailments, and *use*, even if we never explicitly assert, the laws of logic, is what John Locke, in his *Essay on Human Understanding*, called "natural light." "For," he says, "in this the mind is at no pains of proving or examining, but perceives the truth, as the eye doth light, only by being directed toward it. Thus the mind perceives, that white is not black, that a circle is not a triangle, that three are more than two, and equal to one and two. Such kind of truths the mind perceives at the first sight of the ideas together, by bare intuition, without the intervention of any other idea." Locke held, furthermore, that we have intuitive knowledge of our own existence; but I am fairly sure that this special intuition, which seems, offhand, to go beyond "natural light," resolves itself upon analysis into a complex of other intuitions. Let us lay it aside for the moment, especially as it belongs to the most questionable part of Locke's doctrine, his psychology.

If, then, we gather together all the functions of intuition enumerated at various points in the *Essay*, we find that intuitive knowledge is essentially:

- A. Perception of relations in general.
- B. Perception of forms, or abstractive seeing.
- C. Perception of significance, or meaning.
- D. Perception of examples.

Each one of these intuitive functions is, of course, a meet subject for a long study; but even without further inquiry we may observe a common characteristic of all forms of insight that compose the spectrum of Locke's "natural light": *they are all either logical or semantical*. Intuition, for Locke, is not a revelation of metaphysical reality; such reality, which is called "substance" or "real essence," neither reason nor intuition finally reveals. If we have any inkling of it at all, we have it by inference from the data of "sensation and reflection."

Locke took the same view of discursive reason that Mr. Ewing presented in the passage I have quoted. Reason is a systematic means of getting from one intuition to another, of eliciting complex and cumulative intuitions. There is, then, no possible conflict between intuition as he conceives it, and discursive reason. There is a distinction between insight achieved by reasoning and insight immediately enjoyed, but that is no opposition between two radically different powers of the mind.

What I mean by intuition is essentially what Locke called "natural light" (with, possibly, some reservation about intuitive self-knowledge). Intuition is, I think, the fundamental intellectual activity, which produces logical or semantical understanding. It comprises all acts of insight or recognition of formal properties, of relations, of significance, and of abstraction and exemplification. It is more primitive than *belief*, which is true or false. Intuition is not true or false, but simply present. We may construct true or false propositions involving its deliverances, just as direct sensory experiences may be involved in true or false propositions. But that is a large

epistemological topic which we need not pursue here.³

Let us return to the realm of art, and to the recognition of expressiveness in works of art, and the perception of artistic import.

Such perception is, I think, intuitive. The import of a work of art—its essential, or artistic, import—can never be stated in discursive language. A work of art is an expressive form, and therefore a symbol, but not a symbol which points beyond itself so that one's thought passes on to the concept symbolized. The idea remains bound up in the form that makes it conceivable. That is why I do not call the conveyed, or rather presented, idea the *meaning* of the sensuous form, but use the philosophically less committal word "import" to denote what that sensuous form, the work of art, expresses.

The act of intuition whereby we recognize the idea of "felt life" embodied in a good work of art is the same sort of insight that makes language more than a stream of little squeaks or an arabesque of serried inkspots. The great differences between artistic import and meaning in a strict sense, lie in the disparity of the symbolic modes to which, respectively, they belong. Language is a *symbolism*: that is, a system of symbols governed by conventions of use, separately or in combination. It has the further characteristic that different complexes of its basic symbols are equivalent to each other; that is, different combinations and permutations of words (the basic symbols) may be used to express the same mean-

³ Any reader who wishes to pursue the subject further is referred to the essay, "Abstraction in Science and Abstraction in Art," in the Appendix.

ing. This makes definition and explanation possible within the frame of language itself. It also allows us to pass from one expression to another and build up an idea out of simpler ideas gradually meted out. This process is known as discourse. Discursive thought is a passage from one intuition, or act of understanding, to another. If, at any point, intuition fails, we use equivalent symbols to present the desired meaning until insight occurs.

A work of art, though it may be called a symbol (perhaps for want of a more accurate word), is not a product of a symbolism, or conventional system of symbols. There are, of course, conventions in art, but these are not simply accepted conventions of symbol-using. What they are cannot well be brought into this discussion, as it would take us too far afield. The relevant facts are (1) that a picture, a statue, a building, a poem or novel or play, or a musical composition, is a single symbol of complex vital and emotive import; (2) that there are no conventional meaningful units which compose that symbol, and build up its import stepwise for the percipient; (3) that artistic perception, therefore, always starts with an intuition of total import, and increases by contemplation as the expressive articulations of the form become apparent; (4) that the import of an art symbol cannot be paraphrased in discourse.

All symbolic expression involves a formulation of what is expressed; that means recognition of form, the elementary act of abstraction, which is one of the major functions of intuition. In discourse we achieve abstraction, or awareness of form, through generalization (this again is a subject we have to eschew for lack

of time). But in art we do not generalize. A work of art is a single, specific presentation of its import. If that import is to be perceived the abstraction of it must be made directly by the way it is presented. That is why, in one way, all good art is abstract, and in another way it is concrete. The "Idea," as Flaubert called it, is not only perceived by one initial intuition, but also without being separated from its symbol; it is *universalium in re*.

The point I want to stress is that the same sort of intuition that enters into ordinary understanding, and forms the basis of discursive reason, functions as artistic perception when we are confronted with a work of art that has import for us. The great difference between rational insight and artistic insight lies in the ways intuition is elicited. We need not postulate any mysterious factor in the mind or in the world to admit that artistic perception is directly intuitive, incommunicable, yet rational: it is one of the major forms of "natural light."

The recognition of art as both a product and an instrument of human insight opens a new approach to a problem that many philosophical and psychological theories (e.g., the pleasure theory, the play theory, the "wish-fulfilment" theory) notoriously fail to meet: the problem of its cultural importance. Why is it so apt to be the vanguard of cultural advance, as it was in Egypt, in Greece, in Christian Europe (think of Gregorian music and Gothic architecture), in Renaissance Italy—not to speculate about ancient cavemen, whose art is all that we know of them? One thinks of culture as economic increase, social organization, the gradual ascend-

ancy of rational thinking and scientific control of nature over superstitious imagination and magical practices. But art is not practical; it is neither philosophy nor science; it is not religion, morality, nor even social comment (as many drama critics take comedy to be). What does it contribute to culture that could be of major importance?

It merely presents forms—sometimes intangible forms—to imagination. Its direct appeal is to imagination—that faculty, or function, that Lord Bacon considered the chief stumbling block in the way of reason, and that enlightened writers like Stuart Chase never tire of condemning as the source of all nonsense and bizarre erroneous beliefs. And so it is; but it is also the source of all insight and true beliefs. Imagination is probably the oldest mental trait that is typically human—older than discursive reason; it is probably the common source of dream, reason, religion, and all true general observation. It is this primitive human power—imagination—that engenders the arts and is in turn directly affected by their products.

Somewhere at the animalian starting line of human evolution lie the beginnings of that supreme instrument of the mind, language. We think of it as a device for communication among the members of a society. But communication is only one, and perhaps not even the first, of its functions. The first thing it does is to break up what William James called the “blooming, buzzing confusion” of sense perception into units and groups, events and chains of events—things and relations, causes and effects. All these patterns are imposed on our experience

by language. We think, as we speak, in terms of objects and their relations.

But the process of breaking up our sense experience in this way, making reality conceivable, memorable, sometimes even predictable, is a process of imagination. Primitive conception is imagination. Language and imagination grow up together in a reciprocal tutelage.

What discursive symbolism—language in its literal use—does for our awareness of things about us and our own relation to them, the arts do for our awareness of subjective reality, feeling and emotion; they give inward experiences form and thus make them conceivable. The only way we can really envisage vital movement, the stirring and growth and passage of emotion, and ultimately the whole direct sense of human life, is in artistic terms. A musical person thinks of emotions musically. They cannot be discursively talked about above a very general level. But they may none the less be known—objectively set forth, publicly known—and there is nothing necessarily confused or formless about emotions.

As soon as the natural forms of subjective experience are abstracted to the point of symbolic presentation, we can use those forms to *imagine* feeling and understand its nature. Self-knowledge, insight into all phases of life and mind, springs from artistic imagination. That is the cognitive value of the arts.

But their influence on human life goes deeper than the intellectual level. As language actually gives form to our sense-experience, grouping our impressions around those things which have names, and fitting sensations to the qualities that have adjectival names, and so on, the arts

we live with—our picture books and stories and the music we hear—actually form our emotive experience. Every generation has its styles of feeling. One age shudders and blushes and faints, another swaggers, still another is god-like in a universal indifference. These styles in actual emotion are not insincere. They are largely unconscious—determined by many social causes, but *shaped* by artists, usually popular artists of the screen, the juke-box, the shop window, and the picture magazine. (That, rather than incitement to crime, is my objection to the comics.) Irwin Edman remarks in one of his books that our emotions are largely Shakespeare's poetry.

This influence of art on life gives us an indication why a period of efflorescence in the arts is apt to lead a cultural advance: it formulates a new way of feeling, and that is the beginning of a cultural age. It suggests another matter for reflection, too: that a wide neglect of artistic education is a neglect in the education of feeling. Most people are so imbued with the idea that feeling is a formless total organic excitement in human beings as in animals, that the idea of educating feeling, developing its scope and quality, seems odd to them, if not absurd. It is really, I think, at the very heart of personal education.

There is one other function of the arts that benefits not so much the advance of culture as its stabilization; an influence on individual lives. This function is the converse and complement of the objectification of feeling, the driving force of creation in art: it is the education of vision that we receive in seeing, hearing, reading works of art—the development of the artist's eye, that assimilates ordinary sights (or sounds, motions, or events) to inward

vision, and lends expressiveness and emotional import to the world. Wherever art takes a motif from actuality—a flowering branch, a bit of landscape, a historic event or a personal memory, any model or theme from life—it transforms it into a piece of imagination, and imbues its image with artistic vitality. The result is an impregnation of ordinary reality with the significance of created form. This is the *subjectification of nature*, that makes reality itself a symbol of life and feeling.

I cannot say much about this last point because I am just working with the idea myself. One of my students gave it to me, in a criticism of my own theory. But it seems to me to be of great significance.

Let us sum up briefly, then, why the arts, which many people regard as a cultural frill, are actually never a late addition to civilized life, an ornament gracing society like tea ceremonies or etiquette, but are born during the rise and the primitive phases of cultures, and often outrun all other developments in achieving mature character and technical competence. Cultures begin with the development of personal and social and religious feeling. The great instrument of this development is art. For, (1) art makes feeling apparent, objectively given so we may reflect on it and understand it; (2) the practice and familiar knowledge of any art provides forms for actual feeling to take, as language provides forms for sensory experience and factual observation; and (3) art is the education of the senses to see nature in expressive form. Thereby the actual world becomes in some measure symbolic of feeling (without being "anthropomorphized," supposed to *have* feelings) and personally significant.

The arts objectify subjective reality, and subjectify outward experience of nature. Art education is the education of feeling, and a society that neglects it gives itself up to formless emotion. Bad art is corruption of feeling. This is a large factor in the irrationalism which dictators and demagogues exploit.

6

DECEPTIVE ANALOGIES:
SPECIOUS AND REAL RELATION-
SHIPS AMONG THE ARTS

THE interrelations among all the arts—painting, sculpture, and architecture, music, poetry, drama, fiction, dance, film, and any others you may admit—have become a venerable old topic in aesthetics. The prevailing doctrines about those relations, too, are rapidly getting gray hair or something that looks a lot like a mould. It has lately become acceptable again to assert that all the arts are really just one “Art” with a capital *A*; that the apparent difference between painting and poetry, for instance, are superficial, due only to the difference of their materials. One artist paints with pigments, the other with words—or one speaks in rhyme, and one in images—and so forth. Dance is the language of gesture, drama is “really” a dithyramb, i.e., a choric dance, architecture is (of course) frozen music. Some aestheticians merely mark the fundamental