

—would be an empty, moralizing gesture if it were really true, as the modern age assumed, that instrumentality under the disguise of usefulness rules the realm of the finished world as exclusively as it rules the activity through which the world and all things it contains came into being.

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THE PERMANENCE OF THE WORLD AND THE WORK OF ART

Among the things that give the human artifice the stability without which it could never be a reliable home for men are a number of objects which are strictly without any utility whatsoever and which, moreover, because they are unique, are not exchangeable and therefore defy equalization through a common denominator such as money; if they enter the exchange market, they can only be arbitrarily priced. Moreover, the proper intercourse with a work of art is certainly not “using” it; on the contrary, it must be removed carefully from the whole context of ordinary use objects to attain its proper place in the world. By the same token, it must be removed from the exigencies and wants of daily life, with which it has less contact than any other thing. Whether this uselessness of art objects has always pertained or whether art formerly served the so-called religious needs of men as ordinary use objects serve more ordinary needs does not enter the argument. Even if the historical origin of art were of an exclusively religious or mythological character, the fact is that art has survived gloriously its severance from religion, magic, and myth.

Because of their outstanding permanence, works of art are the most intensely worldly of all tangible things; their durability is almost untouched by the corroding effect of natural processes, since they are not subject to the use of living creatures, a use which, indeed, far from actualizing their own inherent purpose—as the purpose of a chair is actualized when it is sat upon—can only destroy them. Thus, their durability is of a higher order than that which all things need in order to exist at all; it can attain permanence throughout the ages. In this permanence, the very stability of the human artifice, which, being inhabited and used by mortals,

can never be absolute, achieves a representation of its own. Nowhere else does the sheer durability of the world of things appear in such purity and clarity, nowhere else therefore does this thing-world reveal itself so spectacularly as the non-mortal home for mortal beings. It is as though worldly stability had become transparent in the permanence of art, so that a premonition of immortality, not the immortality of the soul or of life but of something immortal achieved by mortal hands, has become tangibly present, to shine and to be seen, to sound and to be heard, to speak and to be read.

The immediate source of the art work is the human capacity for thought, as man's "propensity to truck and barter" is the source of exchange objects, and as his ability to use is the source of use things. These are capacities of man and not mere attributes of the human animal like feelings, wants, and needs, to which they are related and which often constitute their content. Such human properties are as unrelated to the world which man creates as his home on earth as the corresponding properties of other animal species, and if they were to constitute a man-made environment for the human animal, this would be a non-world, the product of emanation rather than of creation. Thought is related to feeling and transforms its mute and inarticulate despondency, as exchange transforms the naked greed of desire and usage transforms the desperate longing of needs—until they all are fit to enter the world and to be transformed into things, to become reified. In each instance, a human capacity which by its very nature is world-open and communicative transcends and releases into the world a passionate intensity from its imprisonment within the self.

In the case of art works, reification is more than mere transformation; it is transfiguration, a veritable metamorphosis in which it is as though the course of nature which wills that all fire burn to ashes is reverted and even dust can burst into flames.³⁹ Works of

39. The text refers to a poem by Rilke on art, which under the title "Magic," describes this transfiguration. It reads as follows: "Aus unbeschreiblicher Verwandlung stammen / solche Gebilde—: Fühl! und glaub! / Wir leidens oft: zu Asche werden Flammen, / doch, in der Kunst: zur Flamme wird der Staub. / Hier ist Magie. In das Bereich des Zaubers / scheint das gemeine Wort hinaufgestuft . . . / und ist doch wirklich wie der Ruf des Taubers, / der nach der unsichtbaren Taube ruft" (in *Aus Taschen-Büchern und Merk-Blättern* [1950]).

art are thought things, but this does not prevent their being things. The thought process by itself no more produces and fabricates tangible things, such as books, paintings, sculptures, or compositions, than usage by itself produces and fabricates houses and furniture. The reification which occurs in writing something down, painting an image, modeling a figure, or composing a melody is of course related to the thought which preceded it, but what actually makes the thought a reality and fabricates things of thought is the same workmanship which, through the primordial instrument of human hands, builds the other durable things of the human artifice.

We mentioned before that this reification and materialization, without which no thought can become a tangible thing, is always paid for, and that the price is life itself: it is always the "dead letter" in which the "living spirit" must survive, a deadness from which it can be rescued only when the dead letter comes again into contact with a life willing to resurrect it, although this resurrection of the dead shares with all living things that it, too, will die again. This deadness, however, though somehow present in all art and indicating, as it were, the distance between thought's original home in the heart or head of man and its eventual destination in the world, varies in the different arts. In music and poetry, the least "materialistic" of the arts because their "material" consists of sounds and words, reification and the workmanship it demands are kept to a minimum. The young poet and the musical child prodigy can attain a perfection without much training and experience—a phenomenon hardly matched in painting, sculpture, or architecture.

Poetry, whose material is language, is perhaps the most human and least worldly of the arts, the one in which the end product remains closest to the thought that inspired it. The durability of a poem is produced through condensation, so that it is as though language spoken in utmost density and concentration were poetic in itself. Here, remembrance, *Mnēmosynē*, the mother of the muses, is directly transformed into memory, and the poet's means to achieve the transformation is rhythm, through which the poem becomes fixed in the recollection almost by itself. It is this closeness to living recollection that enables the poem to remain, to retain its durability, outside the printed or the written page, and though the "quality" of a poem may be subject to a variety of

standards, its "memorability" will inevitably determine its durability, that is, its chance to be permanently fixed in the recollection of humanity. Of all things of thought, poetry is closest to thought, and a poem is less a thing than any other work of art; yet even a poem, no matter how long it existed as a living spoken word in the recollection of the bard and those who listened to him, will eventually be "made," that is, written down and transformed into a tangible thing among things, because remembrance and the gift of recollection, from which all desire for imperishability springs, need tangible things to remind them, lest they perish themselves.⁴⁰

Thought and cognition are not the same. Thought, the source of art works, is manifest without transformation or transfiguration in all great philosophy, whereas the chief manifestation of the cognitive processes, by which we acquire and store up knowledge, is the sciences. Cognition always pursues a definite aim, which can be set by practical considerations as well as by "idle curiosity"; but once this aim is reached, the cognitive process has come to an end. Thought, on the contrary, has neither an end nor an aim outside itself, and it does not even produce results; not only the utilitarian philosophy of *homo faber* but also the men of action and the lovers of results in the sciences have never tired of pointing out how entirely "useless" thought is—as useless, indeed, as the works of art it inspires. And not even to these useless products can thought lay claim, for they as well as the great philosophic systems can hardly be called the results of pure thinking, strictly speaking, since it is precisely the thought process which the artist or writing philosopher must interrupt and transform for the materializing reification

40. The idiomatic "make a poem" or *faire des vers* for the activity of the poet already relates to this reification. The same is true for the German *dichten*, which probably comes from the Latin *dictare*: "das ausgesonnene geistig Geschaffene niederschreiben oder zum Niederschreiben vorsagen" (Grimm's *Wörterbuch*); the same would be true if the word were derived, as is now suggested by the *Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (1951) of Kluge/Götze, from *tichen*, an old word for *schaffen*, which is perhaps related to the Latin *ingere*. In this case, the poetic activity which produces the poem before it is written down is also understood as "making." Thus Democritus praised the divine genius of Homer, who "framed a cosmos out of all kinds of words"—*epeōn kosmon etektēnato pantoion* (Diels, *op. cit.*, B21). The same emphasis on the craftsmanship of poets is present in the Greek idiom for the art of poetry: *tektōnes hymnōn*.

of his work. The activity of thinking is as relentless and repetitive as life itself, and the question whether thought has any meaning at all constitutes the same unanswerable riddle as the question for the meaning of life; its processes permeate the whole of human existence so intimately that its beginning and end coincide with the beginning and end of human life itself. Thought, therefore, although it inspires the highest worldly productivity of *homo faber*, is by no means his prerogative; it begins to assert itself as his source of inspiration only where he overreaches himself, as it were, and begins to produce useless things, objects which are unrelated to material or intellectual wants, to man's physical needs no less than to his thirst for knowledge. Cognition, on the other hand, belongs to all, and not only to intellectual or artistic work processes; like fabrication itself, it is a process with a beginning and end, whose usefulness can be tested, and which, if it produces no results, has failed, like a carpenter's workmanship has failed when he fabricates a two-legged table. The cognitive processes in the sciences are basically not different from the function of cognition in fabrication; scientific results produced through cognition are added to the human artifice like all other things.

Both thought and cognition, furthermore, must be distinguished from the power of logical reasoning which is manifest in such operations as deductions from axiomatic or self-evident statements, subsumption of particular occurrences under general rules, or the techniques of spinning out consistent chains of conclusions. In these human faculties we are actually confronted with a sort of brain power which in more than one respect resembles nothing so much as the labor power the human animal develops in its metabolism with nature. The mental processes which feed on brain power we usually call intelligence, and this intelligence can indeed be measured by intelligence tests as bodily strength can be measured by other devices. Their laws, the laws of logic, can be discovered like other laws of nature because they are ultimately rooted in the structure of the human brain, and they possess, for the normally healthy individual, the same force of compulsion as the driving necessity which regulates the other functions of our bodies. It is in the structure of the human brain to be compelled to admit that two and two equal four. If it were true that man is an *animal rationale* in

the sense in which the modern age understood the term, namely, an animal species which differs from other animals in that it is endowed with superior brain power, then the newly invented electronic machines, which, sometimes to the dismay and sometimes to the confusion of their inventors, are so spectacularly more "intelligent" than human beings, would indeed be *homunculi*. As it is, they are, like all machines, mere substitutes and artificial improvers of human labor power, following the time-honored device of all division of labor to break down every operation into its simplest constituent motions, substituting, for instance, repeated addition for multiplication. The superior power of the machine is manifest in its speed, which is far greater than that of human brain power; because of this superior speed, the machine can dispense with multiplication, which is the pre-electronic technical device to speed up addition. All that the giant computers prove is that the modern age was wrong to believe with Hobbes that rationality, in the sense of "reckoning with consequences," is the highest and most human of man's capacities, and that the life and labor philosophers, Marx or Bergson or Nietzsche, were right to see in this type of intelligence, which they mistook for reason, a mere function of the life process itself, or, as Hume put it, a mere "slave of the passions." Obviously, this brain power and the compelling logical processes it generates are not capable of erecting a world, are as worldless as the compulsory processes of life, labor, and consumption.

One of the striking discrepancies in classical economics is that the same theorists who prided themselves on the consistency of their utilitarian outlook frequently took a very dim view of sheer utility. As a rule, they were well aware that the specific productivity of work lies less in its usefulness than in its capacity for producing durability. By this discrepancy, they tacitly admit the lack of realism in their own utilitarian philosophy. For although the durability of ordinary things is but a feeble reflection of the permanence of which the most worldly of all things, works of art, are capable, something of this quality—which to Plato was divine because it approaches immortality—is inherent in every thing as a thing, and it is precisely this quality or the lack of it that shines forth in its shape and makes it beautiful or ugly. To be sure, an ordinary use object is not and should not be intended to be beautiful; yet what-

ever has a shape at all and is seen cannot help being either beautiful, ugly, or something in-between. Everything that is, must appear, and nothing can appear without a shape of its own; hence there is in fact no thing that does not in some way transcend its functional use, and its transcendence, its beauty or ugliness, is identical with appearing publicly and being seen. By the same token, namely, in its sheer worldly existence, every thing also transcends the sphere of pure instrumentality once it is completed. The standard by which a thing's excellence is judged is never mere usefulness, as though an ugly table will fulfil the same function as a handsome one, but its adequacy or inadequacy to what it should *look* like, and this is, in Platonic language, nothing but its adequacy or inadequacy to the *eidos* or *idea*, the mental image, or rather the image seen by the inner eye, that preceded its coming into the world and survives its potential destruction. In other words, even use objects are judged not only according to the subjective needs of men but by the objective standards of the world where they will find their place, to last, to be seen, and to be used.

The man-made world of things, the human artifice erected by *homo faber*, becomes a home for mortal men, whose stability will endure and outlast the ever-changing movement of their lives and actions, only inasmuch as it transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use. Life in its non-biological sense, the span of time each man has between birth and death, manifests itself in action and speech, both of which share with life its essential futility. The "doing of great deeds and the speaking of great words" will leave no trace, no product that might endure after the moment of action and the spoken word has passed. If the *animal laborans* needs the help of *homo faber* to ease his labor and remove his pain, and if mortals need his help to erect a home on earth, acting and speaking men need the help of *homo faber* in his highest capacity, that is, the help of the artist, of poets and historiographers, of monument-builders or writers, because without them the only product of their activity, the story they enact and tell, would not survive at all. In order to be what the world is always meant to be, a home for men during their life on earth, the human artifice must be a place fit for action and speech, for activities not only entirely

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useless for the necessities of life but of an entirely different nature from the manifold activities of fabrication by which the world itself and all things in it are produced. We need not choose here between Plato and Protagoras, or decide whether man or a god should be the measure of all things; what is certain is that the measure can be neither the driving necessity of biological life and labor nor the utilitarian instrumentalism of fabrication and usage.