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Art & Life

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For an *Ave Mary*

Art & Life

ROBERT MARCHANT

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To

Maykai Lok

Preface

This little book points a telescope at some things that everyone is familiar with and screws the eye piece round to bring everything into another focus. These things are the high culture and common life and meaning.

The late Miss Anscombe said there is nothing wrong with taking a topic piecemeal. If only there were any option!—for the only eye piece I have to screw round is the very words I am trying to bring into another focus.

R.F.M.

CHAPTER ONE

Mortal Life

“Alle Menschen müssen sterben”

Bach organ chorale prelude

There is something wild in every human being. Call it his “soul”.

When Simone Weil says that love of the beauty of the world and love of the order of the world are the same thing, she is giving *human being* a character. Neither beauty nor how things stand lies indifferently there. It is the part of the human being to apprehend the beauty and to know that he belongs to the order of the world; which in both cases means to stand in a relation to these. Hence it is that she speaks of the *love* of these. Where I am said to love, as distinct from to enjoy, what we are talking about is a way I am present and a way I am.

The form of the beauty of the world is mortality; the form of the order of the world is mortality. To stand in relation to what there is of beauty and in relation to the way things stand in the world, must in some sense be to assume my mortality. So it is that, in her paradoxical way, Simone Weil calls love and death the two greatest gifts of God (who made me).

Are we to contemplate love and death, though? No harm in trying, perhaps. But Bach’s text was not *Alle Menschen das Sterben betrachten müssen*; any more than it was *Alle Menschen sterben werden*. (I seem to hear the latter chanted in a football stadium, while a Mexican

wave goes round. This is the way the world ends.) The Bach organ chorale is a serious piece of music, and sets a text that begins with a *müssen*. Must? Must what? I'm not going to: what if I just don't? (Don't what?)—If we tried to respond, I imagine it might be by way of gesturing somehow at what things are like. For are there not things? And so is there not what things are like?

Another of Simon Weil's sayings is: "Truth is the radiant manifestation of reality." (*La vérité est l'éclat de la réalité.*) We might say that a piece of expression can be a radiant manifestation of reality if it has the form: an expression of mortal life. An expression of life to which the psalmist's "we all do fade as a leaf" had no application, anyway, would denature the life it expressed. This is not to say that a piece of expression has got to be *about* mortality. Even where we want to call it a contemplation of death, a piece of expression need not, I think, be "about death". For one thing it is not very obvious what that would mean. We are not just now thinking of poems about, or of paintings of, sad cypresses, gloomy vistas—those objects of vague discomfort and vaguer consolation.

It seems to be essential to expression, if it would answer to Simone Weil's *éclat de la réalité*, that it is as local and as limited as are the things of the world and of life. Expression belongs to culture, too, so luck is part of it; as in Bach's good luck and Brahms' bad, respecting the cultures into which they were born. Culture we might call the coming into being and the life and the passing of possibilities of the human spirit. A culture would seem to have something in common with a life. What it will turn out to be is unanticipated in just that sort of way. We can try to say what we shall use the word *culture* to try to talk about, perhaps. We can try to give this a character. The concept of culture (if we try to do this), like that of mortal life, we might venture to call a concept of *destiny*. A piece of expression that showed destiny, then, might be "about mortality" in the sense we want.

What is showing destiny? If (as we quipped) there are things and so there is what things are like, destiny belongs to the latter and is a character of expression. Destiny is something that a piece of expression can be recognised as manifesting. Destiny can only be embodied, or so to speak “envoiced”, and so shown forth. I have a notion that the Greek genius may have been particularly for this embodiment or envoicing: the Parthenon, *there*; a phrase such as Sophocles’ *phoiton enarges tauros* (roaring *there* bull). If someone says Beethoven’s fifth symphony is more *about* destiny, then fine; only I think the symphony will be wrongly taken if it is given the title, “Defiance”. For Beethoven in the Fifth is not defiantly refusing the fact of mortality, but on the contrary: he is giving a voice and a body to mortal life. By all means, if you will, he does this in a defiant spirit; but the symphony is still mortal life made there. In that sense, mortality is not something he is contemplating, or something he is writing about. It is more the character of his utterance. You cannot, quite, extract a philosophy, a world-view or a thesis from the character in which a piece of expression is voiced; from the character in which it stands, in a voice and a body made there in mortal life.

Now I want to ask what all this has to do with anything. Surely it is common life that is going to have to be the place of meaning? Not the high culture?

What, the life that disappears like steam upon the air?—Maybe.

Let us agree that art gives us life more deeply. It is when we have said this that our problem comes.

Truth is the radiant manifestation of reality. Is reality then something that may get expressed or not, as luck may have it? Surely this is a mistake. We have already said that expression arises within culture. But culture *is* reality coming into expression. If so, is not the ordinary

life that is also the culture necessarily also just that: reality, coming into expression?

And if that is not bad enough: culture, expression, reality—how do these differ from just *what it's like*? Culture in the aspect we want is: what it's like, living around here. Everyone knows how until recently French, Italian and English speakers led French, Italian and English lives; and some, how some work done has sometimes deepened the culture in which it has been accomplished: a lot of the ancient Greek writing that has survived, considered as *writing*, as people working life out, for instance. I include in *what it's like* the possibilities the culture around here gives: of opening mind and spirit; of education, or finding out what the possibilities are; of development of discrimination; of wit; of just living, in the life of the society. So that it is the “trained adult”, the adult brought up in the life of the culture, who on this view is the educable man. It is the trained adult who is a soul, in our sense; who is educable, then, in our sense. Do not find this too comfortable a thought.

But didn't first a spermatozoon get into an egg and spark off you? Of course this is nonsense, just like that. We were talking about the relation of reality to its expression. We were talking about the *human* life. (Actually, we may have been talking about God.) Certainly I began to be in that way: but there is nonsense clouding this. Even the biological continuity extends back through the generations, as people have surely always known. And there is more to the race and still more to the culture into which I am born than the biological continuity down the generations.

He is begotten and starts to grow. He comes to conduct his life in the world into which he is born. He grows old and he dies. Death is the name we give to the coming to an end of a life. This is not just like the coming to an end of something in life. It is not like these chords, that are the end of the sonata. There isn't any listening again,

better next time, or worse; any bringing what you have learnt next time; for that matter, any growing out of listening to this sort of music. Neither is it like the end of the roses, where you can cut the stem back and hope to get some more. It is somewhat more like the end of the marriage. The marriage was contracted and ran its course and is over. It will have made a difference to him and to her. And if it was anything, it will continue to live, as part of his life and as part of hers. If the marriage is over, it's over. Yet it doesn't necessarily cease to exist. We don't *mean* by the marriage something that can just stop. What we mean by the marriage may go on, in the way she may go on, part of my life, when the marriage is over, and when she is dead.

We say *she died*, but also *she is dead*. The latter seems to be about the difference there now is, because she has lived. There is a muddle in these ideas, in how they are expressed in our language anyway, but the talk persists because it is of a clouded reality. When she was my friend, there was always a living presence to disturb the peace. Her life will come to an end, but—if one can put it so—she doesn't just stop; any more than she just started, though, in the sense we are trying to get.

Death is a difficulty, but need not be any more of a muddle than the problem of reality and its expression is. "Contemplation of death" is contemplation of life, of course. (Of the character of what it's like, I'm afraid, though.)

To contemplate death is to contemplate the fact that a human being, who has a beginning of existence—of uniquely his existence—has also a life, which has to be led. His existence begins and ceases. But his life, what has to be led: not in the same sense.

Within human life, *müssen* has a very particular force. It is not the force of *thou shalt*. We can't quite say to *müssen*, what if I don't? Whereas to *thou shalt*, this is the only decent thing to say. The human life, rather, is a

matter of the sort of striving that *alle Menschen müssen sterben* is about. The sense in which there is life and the sense in which there is death are not the same. There is life, the life which comes to an end—there is human life: it constitutes what is, the world. The world is what must be made or created. But then there is this queer slide of language, in which we speak of *being dead*! I call it queer, though in all conscience it is natural enough. It comes from the sense in which the life I lead, the human life, the human soul I am, is not coterminous with the famous entry of the spermatozoon into the egg and the eventual arrival of the hearse.

Yet if there is not, in the same sense of *is*, life and death, in what sense is there life? Can you say of life, as of something in life, *It is*? Montale's *Il mondo esiste* would seem to express an attitude, or a frame of mind. It doesn't really say anything about life. (It's a kind of exclamation before *ibings*.) That there is life, oddly, then, isn't a proposition. We can sometimes try to contemplate life, life as such, as distinct from this or that of which it can meaningfully be asserted, *It is*. I think we are then however trying to come into an intelligible frame of mind. We are trying to speak, almost. We are trying to know where we stand, rather than to say anything about life or the world. Put differently: this is what such talk means, or what kind of talk it is.

I mentioned the biological and the racial continuity in which this individual got sparked off. This continuity gives the nature of my life. My death will have it in common with the end of the roses that like them I do *stem from*. The difference though is in what I am trying to see as the peculiarly human life. This both stems (biologically, racially), and consists in my striving, my grasp of *müssen*, within the stemming. In other words, the human stemming is not a fact but in large part a matter of what I can bring to be. My life stems also from

the culture, but in this case only, so to speak, to the extent I can.

Spirit and *human life* say the same thing. The important thing here is that spirit is rooted in the order of the world. In fact, it would be found in a man's grasp of reality; in whatever gives you his life. I stem from race, nation, class and so forth, and am what I am able to strive towards, given these. The torment of life resides in this. There is the torment of character, which isn't going to go. There is "the stone in the belly" of misery, the way I do not know how to take hold on life. The point though is that there is someone for whom this is so. This unhappiness is my unhappiness, even if it has the same description as yours. You cannot specify conditions for happiness and misery. That is the sense, actually, in which a human being is something. What I am—is what *I* am.

His soul looks out of every one, and is the most obvious thing about him. It is the wild place where the ordinary life *can* stand in relation to the culture, around here, and its peculiar possibilities for *l'éclat de la réalité*. Reality as we have been speaking of it is not an option. It is something met, by every man that cometh into the world.

CHAPTER TWO

Eternity

There is a relation between the human life, the life that must be led, and art, embodied and envoiced. But I do not think they are different points on the one scale. To say that the human life must be led is not to say that it must be trying to bring anything to expression, or that the man leading the life must have anything special to say.

The human life is the life led together, that consists in standing, looking, speaking, acting, with one another. It is the life led in common, and will also in some sense be the life led in communion. But must it not follow from the fact that it is the life led in *language*—which of course is what we are getting to—that the human life must be life trying to rise into expression?—I do not think this follows. The life that must be led is the life that is joined in. The actions and so forth belonging to it will have the character of belonging to a whole. Our question how the place of meaning can be the common life may come to this. Spirit and—the same thing—human life, is the life embodied and envoiced *in culture*. But if common life and works of art or expression have it in common that they are embodied and envoiced in culture, it does not follow that common life must be trying to be art or expression, or for that matter that art or expression must be trying to be life.

We shall complain of shallow or degenerate culture where some body or gesture in which the human spirit is seen is impure. Particularly is this true of works of

expression. Where these pretend to the high culture and are impure, our complaint will be bitter. But it is true in just the same way of common life. Where people are *foolish* and their lives *ridiculous*; or where they are *wicked* and their lives *shameful*—this is the very language with which we characterise culture. Now *shameful* is the sort of word that can rise in those bad quarters of an hour when I am visited by certain things I have done. It is then less a judgement-word than one I can find myself assuming, or standing in. Where this happens, there is generally not much that can be mended. For I am standing in a reality of things. If true judgement were to enter, it might in fact be to bring me from this, to some extent. Simone Weil did not call truth “the balanced view of reality”. And to say so is to notice that she was not calling reality the balanced view, either. She wanted truth and reality *wild*.

We recognise culture, say in a building, where we are alive to its character of giving the whole to which it belongs. Where we recognise culture, it is not necessarily, and I think not normally, the whole that we are looking at. Culture is more the part seen for what it really is.

Within common life, the life lived in language, we do of course tirelessly talk about the things people do and say. It sometimes seems the main thing we busy ourselves with. And this I think does stand on one scale with what is called “criticism of life”. By this I understand the refinement of common judgement that we may try to carry on in public discourse: in novels and other literature, in the higher press, and in the practice of the higher education (where these are not just gone silly, understood). When I suggest that ordinary conversation and criticism of life stand on the one scale, though, I mean to suggest that *this* scale is not the topic of our present inquiry. The common gestures of our apprehensions, speech and actions are express as culture. Culture can be called *noble, upright, poor,*

degenerate. It can be characterised in the way we characterise a human life.

When I said that the human life is the life lived in communion, I used a word to be avoided, of course.

Beethoven wrought music, as Haydn and Mozart had developed it, into forms expressing his masculine strength and tenderness, embodying the depth of his feeling for life and world. The thing I so characterise must be the particular composition—the second Rasumowski quartet, for instance. Obviously, my response to hearing this will not be just like my response to something in nature—should I be standing by a horse that takes off, say, or watching the Matterhorn in some mood of the weather. In neither case should I want to say this *is* something: because of course it is! If I said this of the second Rasumowski quartet, I should be exclaiming, most likely, that here was something really getting expressed. The quartet is not like the black storm cloud lying on the hills.

But isn't it? My life is impoverished and mean without both: the things of the world, and the things that have really got expressed. Both were part of the life I was leading with A. We were there, in each other's company. If I had been there on my own, communion would have been lacking. I do not mean "communion with nature". That might have been there in its fashion. But neither do I mean anything that would ordinarily be thought of as agreement in ideas, or as criticism or as the third realm. I mean rather that the black storm cloud, the work of music, was part of what our being there together that day *was*. We had no need of words, watching the horses, listening to the music. And I want to say that our being there was *that* communion in understanding.

The human life is the life led with one another, in the world. The human life is what there is, including us, being made world by us as we go along. It is the common life, being made world by us, in the culture. What I am, means *how* the world is my world. It is what

shows in my peculiar delight or unhappiness, and in where I find I must strive. The life that has to be led needs the pain of conscience—mine—in the way my body needs physical pain, to get about in their respective domains; which I shall try to say are the eternal and the temporal domains. I take it that *what things are* means pretty much: the world *my* world. But things are not just there, and neither, in the sense I want to bring out, am *I* just here. When we are young we speak straight out, but cruelly, really. When we are older we may learn with pain to speak from the heart. This—human communion—is I think learning to stand on the same ground as every one else. Trust may be learnt, late and with pain. I did say it was a word to be avoided.

Wittgenstein says:

6.43 If good or bad willing changes the world, it can only change the limits of the world, not the facts; not the things that can be expressed in language.

In brief, the world must thereby become quite another. It must so to speak wax or wane as a whole.

The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy.

6.431 As in death, too, the world does not change, but ceases.

6.4311 Death is not an event of life. Death is not lived through.

If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present.

Our life is endless in the way that our visual field is without limit.*

I want the remarks at the end of the *Tractatus* that include “death is not lived through” and “he lives eternally who lives in the present”; however, I do not

* Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922

think they quite give what I am after. A man is judged—as we go along, though: this is important—by his morally significant actions. And yes, this is timelessly judged, or eternally, in Wittgenstein's sense and in what Dante shows in the *Divina Commedia*. For all that, the man is not by us condemned. I am not convinced that ethical judgement plays more than a limited part in the conversation. I know myself to be a very poor ethical judge, constantly swayed now one way, now another, on tides of emotion. Certainly I want to say there is the Last Judgement. It is made I believe by the course of the lives we lead, there in the character our actions have of exhibiting a whole, and seen finally when it is brought to the full.

What sort of a character is that? I want to say that what a man *is*—what is seen in the life that must be led—belongs to truth, meaning: reality, radiant. *Truth* would seem to belong to another domain from *ought*. When some one has died, we view him whole. But this I think means more that we view him with human sympathy. I see him now from where I stand myself. But this belongs more to the domain of say Victoria's Requiem, that gives a tremendous, whole view of the human life, than to ethical judgement, which accompanies us as we go along. It belongs more to life under the aspect of destiny.

But is there not an *ought* in Bach's setting of *Alle Menschen müssen sterben*?

Well, as I said, you can't say "what if I don't?" to it. *Ought* doesn't seem to get us into what I am trying to look at here. There seems to be no clear answer to the question as posed. Obviously, any *ought* there might be here wouldn't be like "You ought to listen to the *Goldberg Variations*", if only because that *ought* will usually be perfectly pointless. Neither could you tell the man what he will be missing if he doesn't. Doesn't what? And what *will* he be missing? What will the man who does obey the injunction supposed to lie in Bach's

sterben müssen (how?) *not* be missing? Perhaps there is an ought in Bach's setting that is more like telling somebody that he ought to be a man? All right: but if so, it only makes my point. If he answers that he doesn't see the necessity, just here, then I suppose he will be telling you where he stands. A man can tell you where he stands, can't he? Bach was capable of various utterances that he made. But I would not put this organ chorale in a different drawer from the others, Brandenburg 5 for instance, "one of the most exhilarating things in music"; or not because it conveys an *ought*, that the other doesn't.

We seem to have got into the wrong grammar. That all men must die is not really a proposition. It is not something you are obliged to accept if you are unable to refute it. For taken as a proposition, it is comically trite. Could we imagine things any different? It is more an utterance; in Bach's setting, a serious one. See it so, and you could almost put it that Bach's setting removes *sterben müssen* from the common domain of *ought*. It places it where it can be beheld, and acknowledged; where it speaks for us. It removes it into the domain of truth as Weil's remark defines truth. An *éclat* is *not* a proposition.

Culture is the aspect in which the things of the human life, that must be led, are seen for what they are. I also suggested that a culture has something in common with a life. Now we do judge a life, or anyway we do constantly judge the actions that make up people's lives. But is this necessarily ethically judge? When we think about what a man is, we contemplate *him*. A large part of this is the knowledge—call it sympathy—that what I am, is given. I imagine that the different way in which we think of someone when he has died has to do with this sympathy. Then, we do seem to view him as a whole. *Er ist vollgebracht*? Oddly enough, this would ring false. Oddly enough, it's still *Es ist vollgebracht* even where it's only you or me. Or so my

instinct that *the life that must be led* equates to *destiny* seems to say.

When I encounter a human being, I encounter a soul. My sense of the other man is a sense of what he *is*. Have I warrant for saying, with at least a tinge of colour from my discussions: it's what the life *is* that is meaningful; not: what it *means*? Will you denounce me out of hand for not having told you better what this "what the life *is*" means? Part of my difficulty is that even Wittgenstein's "he lives eternally who lives in the present" seems too remote from what it would need to be alive with. "Lives in the present" would have to mean "lives around here, in what it's like", wouldn't it? "What the life *is*" has to do with *the way* the life is: the thing it is in the unpredictable culture, itself like a life, itself a destiny; its being in which *is* its being the life it is. The unpredictability of a life is the unpredictability of the culture in which it is a life.

A caricature of *ought* might be: you ought to face that your roses are going to end. You can't just be telling me that my life will end! I am born and live and my life comes to an end. But this is not just like: all things come to be and pass away. For my *life* is not a thing. It is not a thing in this regard, that I cannot choose whether to pay it attention or not, as I can some thing, my roses, say. I don't contemplate my life in the way I may something that comes within my ken. I don't regard my life with *interest*; and, in just the same way, I don't in the common meaning of the term regard it with disgust (turn away from it; wash my hands of it; decide to do something else). Again, it's more like the marriage, where it wouldn't really be marriage if I were to enter upon it thinking that, on average, it was likely to last for about seven years and cost an awful lot of strife. Perhaps an error is carried in to the discussion with the idea of "contemplation of life". I believe we do feel this instinctively when we are preached to. It all comes out as: if this, then that. So that we are asked to con-

template, not the thing, after all, but the consequences. I once tried to say that the Psalms give a picture of righteousness as the flowering of the human spirit. But it would be very important to keep the sense that this is one possible picture. If the Psalms do give that picture, they are in this as unpredictable as any life—oughtn't we to admit?

I don't contemplate that my life is limited, for in the usual sense of the word, it is not. My life, the human life that has to be led, is not a thing. It has no limit, in Wittgenstein's comparison, as the visual field has no limit. In large measure, when I unpack what my life consists in, there's what I bring (what I am), but mainly what is there will be what I have joined in, that I didn't bring and that won't stop when I do. And for us there is only the human life. I should like to regard *this* as defining death. The human life is the mortal life, embodied thus, and only there at all in so far as it is led, in the culture. He lives eternally who lives in the present is right, but it's my life, the mortal life led embodied thus, in this culture, that is timelessly judged as I go along, and eternal.

You will not avoid distress and vexation of spirit, or doing some pretty shabby things. Neither will you become a much better person. You might learn to be less afraid of things; less of a coward. (I don't know.) But living will go on meaning getting into these messes that torment you. He lives eternally who lives in the present! "Eternally" is predicated upon living in the world. Wittgenstein does, I imagine, mean living not lost in a cloud of unknowing; but I wonder whether his remark sufficiently takes in all it needs to.

The world is my world, and the human life, the life that has to be lived, does not begin and end as things do. Where eternity is not taken to mean endless temporal duration, "eternally judged" is not a degree, but a kind, of judgement. Dante shows people eternally judged, not by showing them kept in a place with a legend over the

gate, but as he realises in poetry the body and the gesture that gives the man.

The judgements of our common conversation do as much. Even the verb in the ejaculation, “He is a (so and so)!”, is timeless. There is this domain of language, or of speech, in which we express ourselves so. And it is worth noting the idiom: “express *ourselves*”. The judgements made by the judge are different. They are removed into the theatre of the court. The theatre of the court says: we are *not* just now expressing ourselves, timelessly judging the man as what he is, as we all of us do in everyday speech. We are asking whether a law has been broken. We are upholding the law, doing obeisance to its majesty. This, with its cruel indifference to the individual who stands in the dock, is so foreign to normal human intercourse that we must have the theatre of the court. By contrast, it is in common life, where we are not scrutinising evidence to determine whether a law has been broken, that the eternal has its home. The place of the eternal is the communal and homely one of the common human life, the life that must be led.

Certainly philosophy and art give “the view from God”, and express the eternal. But it is the work of art, not that scruffy individual the artist, or Socrates, that gives that view and that expression. In Arthur Streeton’s landscape, “Still Glides the Stream and Shall Forever Glide” (1890: Art Gallery of New South Wales), we are not conscious of Streeton, and neither is the painting itself trying to be something (especially if you have the chance to see the surprisingly scrubbed-looking original). That is what is wonderful about it, and holds you before it. What is there is an embodied presence to things. And that is what the painting is “about”: this embodied presence, to these things.

I was moved. But don’t forget what is here, what is being seen for what it is: we see the culture in the painting. The painting is what we mean—or the sort

of thing we mean—by the culture. The particular “embodied presence to things” belongs to the moment in culture that it gives. The unpredictability of the work of expression, or of the life, is that of the culture itself. But in this sense, what we have in the painting belongs to, as it constitutes, a *kind*. The painting doesn’t just “show us itself”, illuminating though that remark of Rhees’ is. For this is impossible! What it shows, or is, is *reality*. And reality is always particular reality, an *éclat*, and so, of its culture; its culture speaking. It is in this sense that the painting gives us to experience: human presence in the world.

The painting gives reality. But the way this comes in our language will suggest that the painting shows us something out there. I don’t want to say this, of course. The reality I mean is this painting, this presence to things, embodied in its culture. Trying to get the painting, as we stand before it, is trying to come into this human reality. If I say it is a form of communion, I risk the error this will bring by way of emphasising that standing before the painting is not like standing before some impressive piece of nature. The painting invites the human soul I am: the human soul I can be. I said that life is not trying to be art or philosophy, and is not judged by how close it comes to being either. But can we not recognise the same *kind* of thing, in the common life and in the work of art, without suggesting this?

I do not think that *participation in the language* gives what I’m after. Participation in the culture is better, I think. And better still would be: standing up in the culture. And this is fortified by the way a work of expression does stand there, in its culture, so that, in getting what the work is, you enter its culture, even where that is remote (as in reading Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, for instance). A danger in trying to get this sense is that, rather as virtue can only be recognised in someone else, for if I see it in myself, what becomes of it?, so can Weilian truth.

But what has Streeton's painting to do with the ethical? The painting is an example of what I meant when I spoke of the "the pure gesture". The pure human gesture stands behind ethical judgement. It makes express the domain of ethical judgement. It is a gesture *of* language, in which a language becomes itself; a primary place of meaning. Certainly, *he mousike technē*, "the art pertaining to the Muse", is essential to the Whole. But clearly it is not the case that everyone must have music and art. Music and art are the human life, the reality, the eternal, coming to expression. But they are not all that *constitutes* this. Rhees somewhere objects to the phrase "the gift of life" that there was no one for the gift to be made to.

Alle Menschen müssen sterben is a natural thing to say and Bach's setting is quite naturally serious. It gives expression, by speaking out of it, to the domain of our human lives: the evening sky; the birch trees; the thin moon, there; company, communion, family and friends, the human scene, and what belongs to our lives in the way of duties, or just of standing up. *Nunc dimittis*: being dismissed when you have done your duty: belongs here. Certainly, this music is not something that is tritely true.

There are certain pictures and notions that do naturally give where we find ourselves. There is the bird that flies through the lighted banqueting hall, from the void dark to the void dark. There is the idea of death as giving what there is of destiny in the human life. There just are expressions of mortality that are expressions of destiny. To be sure, the bird blundering in to all that is *feierlich* and wonderfully beyond it was not *destined* in its doing so. That is not the sense I want, anyway. For did I not just happen into existence, a wonderfully unlikely product (our science tells us) of the general likelihood of my parents' having some children, bearing some likeness to them? Neither are we "destined to die". The saying would be trite, absurd. My coming into existence

is pictured by the bird happening into the hall. The picture expresses the wonder of the thing—the only thing we know, after all.

We have to live the human life. Somehow, this cannot be dissociated from the idea that it is I that grow. The world is my world, and I am a kind of thing that stems from and that grows. The wonder of the thing isn't what I am calling destiny. Destiny belongs more to the human life, that has to be led. Destiny is the character of what this is. Destiny is, after all, the character in which things are done. My opponents in another discussion thought it was character.

CHAPTER THREE

Music

Schubert is gifted to be a fountain of soul. A song like “Ständchen” or “Du bist die Ruh” (*Komm, beglücke mich!; Oh füll mich ganz!*) is a perfection of the yearning human soul.

Listen to these songs, and then try: Art presents life. No one, I think, would come from them wanting to say that. For he will have heard a perfection, and have been alive in a way they only seem to make possible. You would almost want to say that whatever art does, it does not present life. But are these songs not just what everyone sometimes feels, wrought to an exquisite pitch? Are they not life?—I feel that this is wrong. It is at least wrong in this way, that if the art here presents life, it is still the *picture* we want; the work of *expression* we want. In the midst of life we want it; and almost: for our life.

We want it, perhaps, from the same place as the musical composition and its performance sprang from. The domain of human life—the eternal or timeless, the ethical, and human consciousness and world—is grounded in my life in that it is my grasp of mortal life and world. Music will be grounded in life, and may exhibit grasp. In the case of my life, the grasp is what I am calling the human life. In the case of music? The analogy falters. *He mousike techne* is not life. More obviously, it is not my life. But, perhaps, song or poetry rises towards art or expression as it begins to exist in the

sort of way what I am calling the human life does. This would no doubt be what we want of “the art pertaining to the Muse”. The main thing we want, on this view, is the difference: the way the art pertaining to the Muse is not life; not my life. This we want! We must try to characterise the grasp that *he mousike technē* may exhibit that is not the same thing, though more exquisite, as my grasp of mortal life, even though it belongs to the same kind, exists in the same way.

This way in should at least help us to avoid saying that the human life *is* a sort of music. There is no reason in the world why this must be said. The perennial attempt to say something of the kind (Plato met and fought it) will always muddy the water.

Music gets you moving. It makes you restrain your breath, and start to sway and tap. It quickens the spirit. It makes you want it, more and more; and again. It takes you out of yourself. It teases you with expectations which it fulfils wrong. It is as music does these things and more that it can move you.

In language are many traps: “The deeply moving slow movement.” Well it probably starved you of oxygen, for one thing, by causing you to restrain your breath. Having known the slow movement of Beethoven’s second Rasumowski quartet for forty years, I chanced upon his remark, as recorded by his friend Czerny, that he had composed the movement “after contemplating the starry sky one night and thinking of the harmony of the spheres”. I had never noticed that.

The remark did at first seem to help. The music did seem to take on a more pronounced aspect of being a contemplation of something. I thought how everyone sometimes contemplates the night sky. The music, then, was grounded in a common human experience. It was not just an abstract suggestion of vastness and serenity. But this cannot quite be right. I want rather to say that this slow movement articulates something characteristic of the human life (as I am using the term; though I

shall stop adding this qualification), *as distinct from* expressing a common human experience. Beethoven marked the movement both *Molto Adagio* and *Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento*. This last just means: This part to be played with plenty of feeling. It is a technical direction to the performers, necessary in music, which has first to be realised, but absurd, say, next to a painting in an art gallery. This said, the slow movement of Opus 59 No. 2 does also articulate a human reality. The human reality being articulated as this music, realised under the composer's direction, is the life led in time but outside of time, the "eternal" life. And I think that this is in the music in virtue of the way music does develop in time; by creating its own time. The human reality is there in the way music stands where time was.

But I do not mean that music stands to *just life* as the human life stands to *just life*. I mean more that music is the human life speaking. Whereas the human life isn't necessarily, or as such, speaking. This difference is what we want of the art pertaining to the Muse.

Everyone lives the human life; but it is not the case that everyone must have music. It is not the case that he who misses music misses the human life. For one thing, music has its history. The music we mean when we speak of music was written when and where it was. Before that it was not. But people still were, leading the human life. I said in the last chapter that Streecon's landscape invites the human soul I can be. When I try to get Streecon's painting, and when I try to get the slow movement of the second Rasumowski quartet, I am standing in the human reality articulated so. Probably this is easier to take on the painting side of the comparison. It will seem easier to understand what is meant by attending, or by being there, where we are sharing a painter's attention to a real landscape. If I try to speak of Beethoven's attention or of his being there—you will want to ask, "Attention to what? Being where?"

No one will want to answer, "Out in the garden, looking at the stars."

Simone Weil wrote:

If I could leave, that the creator and the creature might exchange their secrets. . . .

To see a landscape as it is when I am not there. . . .

When I am in it, the silence of sky and earth are spoiled by my breathing and the beating of my heart.*

But she was talking about being in and alive to the world, not about standing in front of a painting in the Art Gallery of New South Wales or sitting in her flat listening to the gramophone. I shall go wrong if I suggest that the Beethoven slow movement or the Streeton landscape gives what Simone Weil is talking about. I shall muddle up being in and alive to the world and understanding a work of expression. The work of expression gives, perhaps, something like what Simone Weil is talking about.

It gives expression to it. Better: it embodies or envoices it. Whereas Simone Weil was not saying: "If only I could express . . . !" She was characterising the beauty of the world. The character she was giving it was her understanding that it can only be known by being in it and spoiling it by my breathing and the beating of my heart. Her remarks express a conception of human life; a conception of human destiny.

"If I could be there as if *I* were not there." It is not just a paradox, or hopeless. It comes from a desire to lion-tame the *I*. The desire to do this is desire for the beauty of the world; one aspect of desire for God. If so, then desire for the beauty of the world, or God, is desire reaching out of the human destiny. It is not something that can be separated off from the fact that *I* must be there, spoiling it with my breathing, standing there, in the rag and bone shop of the human heart.

*Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grâce*

Say it of the painting—but in Simone Weil's own words, not mine—and it is illuminating. It can help you to understand what the painting is doing. But in another of her phrases, there is “the silence in great painting”. Say it of Beethoven's slow movement—and we have I suppose to explain how something that consists of the sound of rosined horse hair being drawn across cat gut stretched out on a sound box, four of them going at once, can give a silence.

Music starts to move the listener as it starts to get him moving. The two senses of the verb become one. You must be there, and your body and mind start to dance, to be moved by music. (Yet how else would you get Streeton's painting but by standing in front of it? How else would you experience the silence in it, but by having your breathing restrained by standing in front of it and attending to it?) I still want to speak of a human reality, articulated so. I do think that, though it works in the body, moving the body and mind *quasi* in an unfolding dance, the slow movement embodies an experience like “what it is like when I am not there”; and that there is a silence in it. The *I* can be lion-tamed by the attention the landscape painting or the slow movement demands if we are to get them at all.

In both cases, the painting and the musical composition, the work of expression is a gesture in which I can try to stand myself. I mentioned in another discussion that a work of art *consists* in expression. The pure gesture is what has the character we must try to bring out.

The Schubert songs I called a pure expression of the yearning human soul. The Streeton landscape does not express the yearning human soul. Its manifest purity from any will to effect is just what moved me. I wonder whether there could be a musical composition or performance (they are interdependent) that had this purity from any will to effect. The Schubert songs I mentioned play on one's heart strings. Not all music does so in just that way; but music does seem to move the listener by

exciting him. What could there be in music that was counterpart of “the silence in great painting”?

Perhaps it will be agreed that music, preeminently among the arts pertaining to the Muses, belongs to our home, the domain of the human life, which I sketched; and that it exhibits that domain: the world in its beauty; human communion; love and feeling; the yearning soul; strength and tenderness; the pulse of existence: the human life. Music makes it there; embodies it in its rhythms and harmonies. (Fortunately, for present purposes it is not necessary to try to say how.) This would have to do with the nature of our desire for music. We want it as we want our lives.

On this way of approaching the matter, music which was “about death” would be music which was timeless life, defining itself. A work of art can embody world and life, in seriousness. I do not see how death could be absent from this. Where a composer is writing music *about* death, we have, I think, a different sense of *about*. In something like Victoria’s setting of the Requiem Mass, we have this sense of *about* together with the sense I am suggesting. Victoria is setting words to be sung in church when someone has died. But I do not think that his music, as distinct from the words he is setting, is about death in the ordinary sense of *about*. His composition embodies a sight of human life as a whole, the whole given by a conception of human destiny, with its counterpart in judgement. On this way of approach, William Cornysh’s radiant settings of texts saluting the Blessed Virgin Mary and praying for her intercession for us poor sinners in the earth are just as much about death as Victoria’s Requiem is. In the sense of *about* I am considering, both are radiant embodiments of life, defining death. And in his *Vespro della Beata Vergine* Monteverdi gives a *dancing* radiance, that defines the dark. The Bach organ chorale we mentioned is on this way of approach not so much sad as serious in the way I am trying to suggest.

Art that has gone trivial is art which no longer defines the dark. Greek art when it became Hellenism had passed. There isn't anything there that we ought to want. There certainly isn't anything there that is anything like this chorus of maidens of Trachis addressing the sun:

Whom shimmering Night, slain and despoiled,
brings forth and cradles blazing,
Sun! Sun! I beg—
tell where to me where to me
now dwells Alcmena's son, O blazing with flashing
light!
in the straits of the sea, or abiding on either
continent?
O tell, thou mightiest in sight!

For with aching heart, I understand,
doth battle-prized Deianeira ever
like some sorrowing bird
still never her sorrow with tearless eye;
with full mind dreads her husband's course of life;
wastes on widowed bed,
wretched for his fate.

As one may watch
unresting waves
of south and north
pass by and coming on:
so many-laboured life
throws back and flings forth
Kadmos' son.
Yet ever some god unfailing
holds him from Hades' halls.

So with respect I say:
you ought not fret away
good hope: the all-disposing Lord has not cast
man a painless lot,

but pain, then joy:
the whirling circuits of the Bear.

Shimmering Night
bides never with men;
calamity or wealth
moves on, and joy or mourning's here.
So thou, our queen, I say,
hold on in hope; no one ever saw Zeus
turn mindlessly away.*

Where we have a radiant manifestation, defining the dark, that consists in expression: this *picture* has truth in it. Or: this *voice*.

The truth *is* the purity of the gesture. It is true in virtue of being that: in virtue of being Voice. And this is where it stands in a relation to the human life. The gesture consists in expression, and is full of judgement. Even where what the artist wants is a free, spontaneous gesture, it is his judgement that will tell him whether he has got what he wants or not. So may a dancing radiance be a pure gesture, and serious, full of judgement. Destiny is what is made express, as grasp. It is in whatever defines the dark. It is in what is fearless, where we are pointing with the word to something's freedom from fear. Cornysh achieves it in his ringing clarity (of florid elaboration!); Monteverdi, in the stretched artifice of his "Duo seraphim", in the *Vespro*: that dance. Destiny is made express in what is given voice; is there in these very elaborate, very pure utterances in which life defines itself, and so the dark.

I almost want to say that you cannot have soul in music without losing the music. Music is rather the voice of soul. The stamp of soul is not soulfulness. The stamp of soul is, for instance: music. The Schubert songs I mentioned and called pure yearning soul are for all that first and last *music*. The grasp I speak of is not

* Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 95 ff., author's translation

grasp *of* something—something else. The grasp *is* the music. Through their grasp, the purity and power of their gesture (the great swelling crescendo on *Oh füll mich ganz!* and its quiet repetition, bringing fullness, if not peace), the Schubert songs redeem the soulful yearning they issue within. That is what they make express, defining the dark: not the yearning they come out of.

This brings us to the interesting question whether *in the music* (or *in the writing*) has one aspect or more. But it needs another discussion.

Our language, again, works against understanding. When I say the soul here is the music, I am sure to cause unbalanced misunderstandings, fetched without warrant from Plato. The one I suspect to be floating around just now is that music is characteristically *beautiful*. So Plato had to fight the misapprehension that he thought of the soul as an attunement.

Art is the human life, but embodied and given Voice: so not, after all, the human life. It is what exhibits articulate grasp. It is what is presented to us. We try to stand in it, to live in it, “while the music lasts”, as Eliot said. The relation art bears to life is here. We want art—music—as we live defining the dark; to the extent, anyway, we do live and don’t just go along in a cloud of unknowing until we fade out. The question we ask in contemplating music is this question of Voice. The Goldberg Variations and Bach’s works for solo violin are true voice. Brahms is gifted for voice but must speak a false language, repeat tired gestures, constantly push massive boulders of sound up ill-advised hills of emotional grandeur. Bach is far deeper than Brahms, who is characteristically the more soulful composer. This of course is his culture in Brahms and in Bach. Bach is deeper as he is clearer; which is perfectly compatible with his being very much the more elaborate composer, never happy unless he is presenting some figure, usually quite ugly and nothing to notice, picked

up as it were from what lies around in the general musical language, played over itself in several voices or even five or six, with compressed staggered entries and upside down and back to front. Whatever complexity it may be to be seen in, depth, in Bach, is still clarity: the creation of a musical world beyond just the world. Bach's music is also very obviously the voice of soul.

When I called Bach the through and through religious composer it had, perhaps, to do with this: with the way his music is grounded in the human life, but gives the human life taken out of the day to day into a world of music beyond just the world, though made of and issuing within the world. The complexity is the very body and the very joy of the thing. I have in mind the side of Bach represented by such works as the Goldberg Variations and the chaconne for solo violin. I had better say that I regard these as supreme works of the human spirit. And to listen to this side of Bach is to enter his far purer interest in *music*.

In this, he contrasts with Beethoven, not just with Brahms.

Beethoven's string quartet No. 10 in E flat major ("Harp"), for instance, is obviously more rooted in life—the composer's, too—than are the Bach works I mentioned. When Bach in the Goldberg Variations is "soulful" (in Variation 25 for instance) the effect is of the music's opening the human realm in a higher region occupied by the variations as a whole, which the variations are then quick to re-enter. There is a "soulful" passage in the chaconne which is a place where the whole set of variations arrives at a moving stillness. In both instances the human life is brought to a place created through the music itself. By contrast, the "Harp" quartet throughout embodies a powerful sentiment of human existence, arising within world and life. The work is full of an urgency of world and life that everyone who hears it will want. The temptation this will bring though is to think that what I want of the

“Harp” is something in life that it gives me. With the Bach, there is not the same temptation, to imagine that what is in the music exists elsewhere.

“You claim you want the music: but admit that this is artificial! Admit that it is the life it opens to you that you want!”—The point of admitting such a protest is to notice its absurdity.

We can go there by way of just asking a question concerning emotion in music. *Emotion* is likely to mislead us when we ask about music in just the way *soul* and *beauty* are. Is there emotion in the Classical and Romantic music, but not in the Baroque? Of course not. But this is not because the Baroque already has emotion. It is because the notion is wrong.

I agree with Wittgenstein’s remark that Schubert is melancholy and irreligious. But I do not find that Schubert puts me in a black mood. Neither do I find that he especially likes to write about being in a black mood or irreligious. When I said the Schubert songs were a perfection of the yearning soul, I did not mean that his setting of *Oh füll mich ganz!* makes me yearn. Certainly it moves me. But this is to say that it does *not* make me sad, or yearning. I am moved to find myself taken up and along with something that, as I tried to suggest, goes beyond the day to day human life, with its sadnesses and yearnings. With the more down to earth Beethoven, powerfully alive in the full pulse of human existence, this is still more the case. The “Harp” quartet is grounded in life; in unhappiness, and in desire. But I don’t listen to it in order to feel unhappy, again, or desire, again. What I want again is this articulation, that is the musical body and its life here. This is far from “wanting to feel an emotion”.

Why would music have to be conveying emotion? Does poetry? Donne’s love poetry, for instance? Does “The Sunne Rising” convey an emotion? Can you name it? Does music make you angry? Fed up? Merry? Up for it (in an Australian idiom)? It might make you totally

bored: but not I think on purpose. The joyous Brandenburg concerti are properly so called, but the audience doesn't have to be wreathed in smiles in order to be taking what they give. Nor does it get us in, to say that music presents emotion, rather than makes you feel it. This would be implausible for the same sort of reason.

When I speak of the joyous concerti, this is obviously unlike the sense of freedom with which we headed off for Braidwood one morning when we should have been at work, feeling like laughing out loud. "Joyous" characterises the body being made articulate here; the body in which I come to stand as I get the music. What is in the music is a joyousness that of its nature, of what it is, wants to be thought about and contemplated, but in the sense of dwelt in. Whereas, with the other . . . this would be to lose what was there. Music's is a serious, a contemplative, joy.

You cannot try to dwell in free spontaneous life: it would be like trying to catch your thumb. But art is not life. It is composition. It has this character, or this; but only in the participation that is an assumption of the expressive body of the work. The composition that must be dwelt in is what we enjoy, whether it is joyous or "about death". With the Goldberg Variations we enjoy participation in a world (I had almost written a heaven) of exhilarating delight, related to sadness and the human destiny, also there. The only thing like a paradox in this view of music is that serious work can have produced anything so brassy-clear, ringing, radiant, as the joyous Brandenburs, or as full of delight as the Goldberg Variations, grounded in the human sadness and destiny also there.

But that is just what we mean by the art pertaining to the Muse.

CHAPTER FOUR

Poetry

The fifth Brandenburg Concerto, according to a sleeve note, is one of the most exhilarating things in music. Has it got to mean something, as well?

Where you have enjoyed, say, some guitar picking, the question what the music meant would scarcely arise, or be understood. If someone did raise it, the situation would be the enjoyable one where he has first got to tell you what he means by *means*. If a question of the sort seemed to persist, I imagine we should have got into a way of regarding cultural manifestations as various shots at describing what there is, or what it's like. But this is implausible. If I find, say, William Cornysh's music remarkable and want to keep listening to it, this will not be because I have found that it shows a lot of things that other music doesn't. For: what things *does* Cornysh's music show? I mean, what things that lie outside of Cornysh's music, does it show?

"Expressing what?" will generally be the wrong question for our inquiry. The better question will be: "What sort of expression?" If art does give "what it's like", it does not follow that there must be something that it *is* like, which it is the business of art to investigate and show. The works of art that take human destiny or "what it's like" for topic, *King Lear* for instance or Isaiah, tend to be removed from common life. A work such as the Goldberg Variations speaks out of life, I suggested; but I cannot readily imagine wanting to say

that it was “about life”. Admittedly this might be more of a temptation where Beethoven’s fifth symphony was concerned. But then, I do mean a temptation. And again there would be the removal from common life.

Is music about something? Listen to Mozart’s wind serenade in C minor K. 388, then to its transcription for string quintet, K. 406. The music the second time comes dressed in more impressive clothes, those of the medium *par excellence* of intellectual classical music. But played on oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns, it has I feel more of mystery or of vivid particularity to it. The wind serenade version brings a world more vividly alive; a world akin, perhaps, to what is evoked in some of Watteau’s painting, of evening assignations in grand gardens; something, perhaps, of the world of *Don Giovanni*. Which is the more profound, though—the version of this music for wind serenade or the version for string quintet? I am inclined to reject the question and say the wind serenade version is the more alive and dangerous (to what I am used to), and just for that reason the more enticing. Is music about something? It is something. It is something in the sort of way life can sometimes be something.

I want to say the same of the arts pertaining to the Muses generally, including poetry and other literature.

O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being—
 Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
 Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
 Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
 Pestilence-stricken multitudes!—O thou
 Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
 The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,
 Each like a corpse within its grave, until
 Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
 Her clarion o’er the dreaming earth, and fill
 (Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
 With living hues and odours plain and hill—
 Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere—
 Destroyer and Preserver—hear, O hear!

I think this one of the most exhilarating things in poetry. Has it got to mean something, as well? I mean, mean something as well as just being the vivid gesture of life it is? If you like it, go for it. If you want to cavil at some of it, no problem: it dares you to.* Just don't be looking about you for the thing that is the thing it means.

There is a temptation to think of poetry as giving the world, radiant in exquisite comprehension. And if, as we must, we extend poetry to include the drama and the novel, more than a temptation: just the way we think. Poetry in this extended sense we just assume to be: the sense of the world. Why should even the sense the novel makes be a sense the world makes, though? I should have thought a distinction a more natural thing to have expected. Simone Weil said truth was the radiant manifestation of *reality*—not the radiant manifestation of the world.

Somebody might very well complain for instance that what is wrong with the novel now-a-days is that it has got people in it who have no religion, or art, or love, or morality, or any sense of making sense of life. The novel today no longer deals with human life as we thought it was.

Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* has people in it who have some religion; some art; some love; some morality; some sense of making sense of life. As it happens, you could almost categorise the major characters of *Anna Karenina* under those heads. Konstantin Levin, for instance. His particular burden in life is the last of these desiderata. Ponderous and wearying it makes him, too, both in the tale and to the reader. But then Levin takes

* F. R. Leavis's noted objection to something Shelley says in the following stanza, "what *are* the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean?", was much more than a cavil and deserves to be seriously considered as much more. But, when all's said . . . the leaves, shook from real tangled boughs, and the clouds, looking as though shook from *their* tangled boughs, of turbulent air and wave . . . is this *so* unfamiliar a move in language?

out a gun with a house guest who proceeds to spoil the day's sport so thoroughly that Tolstoy gives the very gun dogs winged words of complaint. What they want to be, is gun-dogging. It is a perfect day for it but all the human beings can think of is quarrelling and frightening the game away. This Homeric episode ends with Levin astonishing every one, and in particular himself, by asking his guest to leave.* It appears in the world for the first time, with Levin's almost unwilling action of turning the nuisance out, that what *Levin* wants to be is taking hold on life—life as it is given Konstantin Levin to apprehend it, though: I should want it scarcely at all. (I already have my own, which suits me well enough.) In Levin's action, possession of one of the desiderata is shown being overcome; or maybe the word is, *transfigured*.

There is nothing general about the development in Levin. But this is only to say in other words that when it occurs it surprises everyone—and to take its connection with the more significant development in Levin's life of the courtship and marriage he then consummates. If it had been something general, we should not have been reading a work of poetry as I am using the term. Yet there is *something* general about the development in Levin, for all that. Where the characters in a novel have no religion, art, love, morality or sense of making sense of life (or no relation to such: we must not forget Mr Collins), there is nothing there; nothing capable of being overcome, or transfigured; nothing that might destroy a man or a woman, as religion may, or love; no life; no possibility of what I like to call tragedy.

The general thing is world and life, the novel's general intelligibility. The "new thing that has appeared", by contrast, is something to be found in the writing. The development in Levin is one human possibility, or it would not be intelligible. But it is still something Tolstoy is presenting, here—presenting with his un-

* Part 6, Chapter 15

matched ability to realise world and life as though objectively. Better, perhaps: it is something *Anna Karenina* is presenting. I have no objection to saying that Tolstoy or *Anna Karenina* is presenting human life in some aspect. I am only concerned to say that presenting human life in some aspect is not, so far as the art pertaining to the Muse is concerned, presenting some aspect of the world that the reader can then go out and for the first time notice lying about him. For one thing, to recognise the new thing when it appears he must in some sense already know it. The novel in that sense tells him nothing he did not already know.

Poetry is of course rooted in world and life. But as I said, it is the human life speaking. And the human life is not, necessarily or as such, speaking. Human life is not as such any more than just human beings, getting on with what comes naturally to them, and to that extent rising out of animal existence. *Naturally* as applied to human life would have to do with the observable habits of the human being: how on earth he always manages to find the only one for him, or his vocation, or his fate, or whatever other forms of life he finds that define the individual that, apparently, he always and eternally and as such is. (“Which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be”: if horses could have religion, their god would be equine.) No formal provision exists for any of it and nobody can quite say how it all manages to come about for each and every life, every time: which problem is the domain of the novel. But poetry, including *Anna Karenina*, is not the same thing as the domain in which it says what it has to say, or out of which it speaks. Poetry is not the world, made radiant in exquisite comprehension. “In the writing” just doesn’t have *that* sense.

Someone might close *Anna Karenina* and, putting it down, sigh and remark: This is what it is like: this is the world. I very much doubt that I should; but if this were to be my remark, I imagine my attention should have

been awakened by something presented. I should be wanting to read the novel again, in order to know again, and better, what *it* is. And by what *it* is, I mean the thing the author has presented: not something in the world, that the thing the author has presented now shows me. A work of expression has more in common with saying something with a view to finding out what your interlocutor will say, than with explicating something you have found out. ("It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." Then on she carries, without so much as a by-your-leave, for three hundred-odd pages, in one sense entirely on her own terms. Just this is what we want again. The sense in which it is not entirely on her own terms is that she is developing in this way the sense of what she is imagining, and is in service to that sense.) When I said that Shelley's Ode dares you to cavil at it, I was not imputing frivolity to Shelley, who ought to have been more exactly setting out what he had meteorologically observed. The domain of the gesture of poetry is not the world. The domain of the gesture of poetry is the Austenian carry-on (or the Mozartian carry-on, if one thinks of most of his piano concerti). More soberly put: the domain of the gesture of poetry is the world or sense those artists are in service to. In the novel, this domain is elaborated as the sense of the fictional world and the fictional life the author is presenting.

"The way poetry means" is a perennial topic, but not my present one and I shall otherwise just assume it. I am trying in these pages only to come at something very general: that the way poetry means, what I am just calling the gesture of poetry, brings you to confront what *anything's* meaning anything is. I want to suggest that this is in fact the form of poetry, considered very generally.

When I am in the National Gallery, London, looking at Piero della Francesca's "Nativity", my favourite

painting when I am there looking at it, the thought, “Is this it, then?”, is perhaps not very likely to arise in my mind. But poetry is something in itself. It is something that consists in expression, that is something in itself. Its very gesture is, that it shows you itself. The topic of poetry does not have to be the darkness or the void, or, for that matter, human destiny—whatever the topic of poetry’s being one of those might mean. (The paintings of John Martin?) But whoever dwells in the gesture of poetry stands in a relation to the darkness and the void, and to human destiny. Human destiny is not something found in the world. (Any more than the darkness and the void are, I suppose.) It is dwelling in the gesture of poetry that you may find yourself stand in a relation to human destiny—that sense of things.

(But poetry does sometimes *deal with* what I am trying here to deal with:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
 O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
 How can we know the dancer from the dance?*)

I shall only get into a panic about the void, or human destiny, where I cease to attend; where I begin to think as though it can only be what comes from poetry that can give it any significance; where I start to wonder what difference poetry can make; how many it can reach; what difference it can make *then*: in other words, where language starts to go on holiday. What matters is not what difference poetry makes, or could make, at all. What matters is the character of the Streton landscape, or the Beethoven slow movement. What matters is the sort of verity there is in what is expressed. What matters is *reality*. Reality is not a shining of what is. It is what has been made express, as voice. Voice does not refer to reality: it is reality. It is what contrasts with the world, going on. In life as distinct from in art, after all, it is what hits us

* W. B. Yeats, “Among School Children”

like an electric shock, as the death of someone close can, that may shake us into speaking of *reality*.

I said in another discussion that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* gives the view from God. Sophocles' *Trachiniae* also gives that view. In the chorus I quoted above, shimmering Night, being slain, brings forth and cradles blazing Sun; of whom I beg what I crave to know. Nothing could be more natural, than that man should address what he finds himself surrounded by and has being in, and beg of it what he craves to know. Here is the thought that all will disappear into the void from which it issued, given splendour. The view from God as Sophocles gives it in this figure and in this play gives the human destiny its tragic splendour. But it is no use closing *Trachiniae* and looking about you for the human destiny in its tragic splendour, which for some reason up to now had apparently escaped your attention.

The phrase "criticism of life", as applied to art, can seem to suggest: here the art, there the life. Yet art is criticism of life. It is full of—it consists in—judgement. The judgement made by poetry, though, is in what the work *is*. Judgement is *in* the "Waldstein" sonata; *in* the Parthenon; *in* *Anna Karenina*; *in* the "Ode to the West Wind". And I will just make the suggestion, which needs its own discussion, that we also distinguish the human life from just life in virtue of the judgement that is *in* it.

Art is criticism of life in virtue of what it is. Where something fails of being art, it fails of constituting criticism of life. Bing Crosby for the billionth time sings "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas" over the loud-speaker in the shopping mall and—I don't need to finish the sentence. The reader will already have started to come over dead, or murderous. I am complaining that there is no life in it. In what sense, though, when it isn't him but Beethoven's "Waldstein" sonata, is there life in it? Ian Robinson once said that if you want *life*, just

glance down the garden at the great wheeling brambles awaiting your attention.

Art does for all that have to have something of what is visible in, say, the spreading of the bough, the stepping of the giraffe. I do not mean that these are forms of expression or that art must imitate these, but that there is a necessary relation. The gesture of poetry must branch, and step. It must not collapse under its own weight, or be supported on props.

The "Waldstein" sonata must develop, and reach its conclusion. Only the *must* here is a form of recognition. It is actually what you are listening to in the sonata. Artur Schnabel in his performance of the "Waldstein" practically subsumes the entire work—which beneath the hands of a pianist like Wilhelm Kempff is laid out with classical clarity—under its imperious *must*.

The development in the rondo of the "Waldstein" as Schnabel realises it is irresistible in a way that may suggest the sun coming up. But it is not the sun or some brambles, but mind and spirit, human being, that is coming up. This has to do with the way the development is an unfolding of mind: the mind that is the music. No doubt there is discipline in it, like that of the dance. But it is mind or criticism rather than the exercise of a discipline in being a stepping into the unknown. This, a form of exercise of knowledge, is how it is mind, and spirit. A sunrise obeys, or exhibits, natural "law": "Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course . . .". But what we have in the music that may tempt comparison with a sunrise is a coherence heard as a *must*, as imperious as a law of nature. This relation between art and nature belongs to what art is.

The "Waldstein" is the unfolding of its own necessity. The criticism or musical mind in the development is intrinsic to what development we have here. The conclusion exhibits criticism of another sort. In the conclusion, the artist looks at what he has been doing and decides that it *is* something; and what. In both

cases, though, we have growth of knowledge. Beethoven, to be sure, developing the “Waldstein” sonata as it must develop, knows how to go about it. He finds out how the “Waldstein” must develop by writing it and re-writing it; by shaping it into the thing that has the necessity in it that is the thing it is. But he can do that, find out how the “Waldstein” must grow and develop and become what it is, because of other work he has done, the knowledge he has. He brings the knowledge he has, Beethoven’s musical knowledge, to the new work he has in hand. The new work comes out of his knowledge. The new work is a development within Beethoven’s musical knowledge, and of his musical knowledge. Only the knowledge it comes out of is more than the work’s matrix: it is its spring. I mean that *what is there* is growing. (I am a kind of thing that grows.) The form of this growth is spirit and intellect, expressing itself as the critical activity of composition.

It is quite obvious with say sculpture that the form and the criticism are one and the same thing. The waters are more likely to get muddied where we want to speak of literature, and in particular of the novel. Here we may be on the lookout for—or just distracted by—talk (critical, judging) about the human domain. And this is not what, just now, I am trying to screw the eye piece round to bring into another perspective.

Natasha Rostova, in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, gives *criticism of life* in the sense I am trying to consider. In his presentation of Natasha, Tolstoy stands as it were on the threshold, regarding the human being, what sort of thing it is. The part his presentation of Natasha plays in his general presentation in *War and Peace*—“her mother knew that Natasha had too much of something, and that because of this she would not be happy”—can perhaps be understood by holding it against something like: Beethoven, finding out how the “Waldstein” sonata must grow and develop and become what it is. The part Tolstoy’s presentation of Count Vronsky plays in his

general presentation in *Anna Karenina* can perhaps be understood in this way. What is Natasha, but a young girl? What is Count Vronsky, but the sort of handsome, well-off army officer we see? But Natasha's mother, watching her, sees that she has too much of something. Vronsky's way of being alive every man wants, while the music lasts. The disaster that overtakes Vronsky and is made there in a terrible sinking scene as: Vronsky, in Italy, in civilian dress, wearing a soft broad-brimmed hat and an "artist's cloak"—*that* development; gives the sort of criticism of life I am trying to consider. It is a mistake to see what Tolstoy is doing with Konstantin Levin as more serious than what he is doing with Vronsky. Why shouldn't the disaster that overtakes Vronsky be serious? —Even: more serious? Levin's greater seriousness does not make Tolstoy's presentation of Levin more serious than his presentation of Vronsky—or, for that matter, more serious than his presentation of Natasha.

What Tolstoy gives in Levin that is serious is not Levin's seriousness but his discontent, and how he is moved by it. And that is what he gives that is serious in his presentation of Vronsky. And in Natasha, Tolstoy, I think, gives something like this at an immature stage, where it is present just as what the human being *is*. In each case, what Tolstoy presents is the human being. Tolstoy isn't so much saying, life is like this, as: here is the human being. He is showing us *human being*. And I am saying that this is not something that lies elsewhere than in the presentation. The form of the presentation is, that it shows us itself.

And what is itself? Levin bringing himself to where he is carried to his unanticipated action and the deeper development of his life to which it belongs, is a picture of necessity. Vronsky bringing upon his life its development to the artist's cloak in Italy, is a picture of necessity. What we are given to experience in Natasha that makes the sense *she will not be happy; she has too much of something*, is a picture of necessity. The development of

the “Waldstein” sonata as the human spirit imperiously coming up, is a picture of necessity. In this very general sense, Tolstoy’s and Beethoven’s works both “mean” in the same way, not by *meaning something* (else), but by being the thing it has got to be and showing us that. Why else would I want to experience Levin’s discomfiture again; to endure that irritating day’s shooting again? I want what it is, again. I want Tolstoy’s presentation, here, of *human being*, again. The criticism of life in these examples is the judgement that is *in* the presentation of Levin; *in* the presentation of Vronsky; *in* the presentation of Natasha. When we want this, it is the same kind of wanting as when we want the “Waldstein” sonata again, or the Parthenon. How can the Parthenon be criticism of life—as surely it is? In being the subtle and the noble creation it is; but more, in the way it is made *there*, embodying the necessity that is the thing it is.

Poetry is not discourse. It is not a getting of something said. People sometimes speak of having “contemplated the Parthenon”. This is because the response to it is a falling silent before what it is. Before the Parthenon was there, there wasn’t anything to fall silent before—I mean, anything of which the Parthenon then came and spoke, so that we listened. If I speak of the Parthenon as an utterance, though, I shall probably invite the question, “Utterance of what?” We should rather think of what the artist creates of his knowledge (what Beethoven creates of his musical knowledge). “Knowledge of what?” will answer itself.

The poet (in our general sense) is in service to the necessity he is creating. Without this necessity is no true culture. The Roman and the Victorian copies of culture (in so far as this is just) are debased and lack true originality because they have not this necessity to exhibit. Instead, they have only to exhibit force—the opposite of necessity as we mean it. So, oddly enough, we have the Parthenon, or Renaissance Mass settings, as a type of

creative originality. I qualified “shows me itself” earlier by saying that this must mean rather: shows me the culture it embodies. Another aspect would be the way, for example, Beethoven’s works speak within his total *oeuvre*, the piano sonatas for instance within “Beethoven’s piano sonatas”, which can be apprehended as a whole. The growth that the individual work exhibits belongs also to the work’s development of the *oeuvre*. Greek temples and Renaissance Mass settings are individually understood as developments within the wholes to which they respectively belong. When I say that the relation art bears to life is in the way the work of art, the human life, respectively, *is* something, also implicit is the growth that is the development of a greater whole.

Literature in the novel or the drama does present people and life and can be the deepest kind of discussion there is of human life and world. For all that, it is ultimately poetry, in our larger sense.

Poetry in our larger sense is completely embodied intellect and spirit; it has nothing to say. When Tolstoy gives us to experience Levin’s transfigured discontent; or Vronsky’s different discontent; or Natasha, on the threshold; he is not telling us that things are thus, in the way the scientist may tell us how things are (how they came about and how they work). The topic of his novel is, to be sure, all that informs its presentation of people and human life and society (for the best account of what this can be, see F. R. Leavis on *Anna Karenina*). But human being is not his topic. Human being is rather what we listen to in taking his presentation, critical and searching, of people and human life and society.

Human destiny is something we may sometimes listen to, dwelling in the gesture of poetry. The gesture of poetry is a gesture of life. It is *life* that may open your life and deepen it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Meaning

The arts pertaining to the Muses stand on all fours with common life at least in this, that common life has nothing to say, either.

The whole seen in the part, where the part is the common gesture of speech or just the common gesture, we may call a *human world*. A human world (the Neapolitan, the Australian aboriginal, the Geordie) is a particular realm of possible forms of life. No one ever lived but in such a realm. But living in a realm of possible forms of life means living the gestures. It means giving the possibilities. They are all that is said and done in which the culture is seen.

When I say that no one ever lived but in a particular realm of human possibilities, I do not mean *as it so happens*. This, rather, belongs to what we mean by the human life.

I suggested earlier that a culture is in some ways like a human life. I will now summarise these and say that culture is the place of *fortune*, exhibiting *character* and *destiny*. Fortune, character and destiny are the domain of life and of art. They are that in which we recognise the human life and art. They are what we “listen to” as life or as art. The high culture does not give the meaning of the human life. This would be to import a wrong sense of meaning. We recognise a work of art in the grasp of fortune that exhibits character and destiny.

We recognise the distinctively human life in the grasp of fortune that exhibits character and destiny. In neither case is this a matter of taking what the life or the work of art is meaning. We should be wrong if we were tempted to suppose that anything so important-sounding as an embodiment of a realm of human possibilities must be finding something to say, because fortune, character and destiny are not things said. Neither is *grasp* anything *said*.

A work of art consists of expression. A human life, by contrast, has to be led—not brought to expression. Any coherence or sense a human life has must be a coherence of things like walking down the road in the wind and sunshine and getting on a bus. A human life wanders along. It takes in what comes to it. It is where time passes. It is always on the lookout. It is the very antithesis of a work of art. If the works of art were to be viewed as giving the meaning of the human life, they would have to be viewed as always getting this wrong; always trying to give something that the human life is *not* like. But I do not maintain that works of art bear no relation to life. I maintain that they bear the deepest relation to life.

Poetry in our broad sense is a form of the enjoyment of life. The body of poetry may take the form of a kind of discourse (*Pride and Prejudice*). Or it may seem to take off into a life of its own, in the end abandoning its “form” as no longer the important thing (*Mansfield Park*). Or the poet’s voice itself may come to seem the main thing (some places in *King Lear*, some places in Beethoven, in which the poet seems to “speak for all humanity”). Whatever the body of poetry may be, the poetry itself is the wonder at life so embodied. For a just description of poetry would have to recognise poetry’s wonder at itself: the purity of the gesture of poetry, itself a kind of wonder. In this sense, poetry is not about reality, but that in which there may be reality. The enjoyment of poetry in our broad sense is a form of enjoyment of the distinctively human life—*that* reality, or set of realities.

“All men must die” is no proposition at all. But perhaps it may on occasion be something a person stands saying, where what matters is the character of the remark he is making where he makes it. Someone who addresses that *all men must die* can be meeting this alive, himself, to something of the yearning and the depth of human life. To that extent he can be meeting this in a way comparable with the way Bach was meeting it in writing his prelude to the Lutheran chorale and, of course, many far more considerable works. My suggestion is that this in fact is common. It belongs to what being one of us is. A human being is a being who can stand in this sort of address to the spirit, and who sometimes may. Poetry only stands in this sort of address more vividly, and more deeply. Poetry, we may say, can bring more of reality. But that is just why I maintain that, no more than the common human life, has poetry anything to *say*.

When I suggest that standing in an address to the spirit is something common, I am only pointing to some fairly ordinary matters.

You tumbled about the bit of the world you were delivered into and then were sent to school, where you got the rudiments and began to study subjects. In very general terms, this being brought under instruction into the struggle the adults were engaged in, the struggle to say what things are, was your acculturation. For the subjects were real: the teachers were not talking about parsing or trigonometry, but trying to do them with you. They were themselves engaged, in the sense that Thomas Hardy contemplated in his poem, “The Self-Unseeing”: “But they were looking away”. I suggest that this was the sense in which school studies *were* education. It was in this sense that you were being inducted into the adult life. There was also a more suspect side to education, the bending of the twig into conformity. This no doubt you saw for what it was, and fought. Today the genuine and this more questionable

side tend both to be subsumed under an understanding of education as *leading out* (Latin *educere*). This does seem to me to contain a confusion (leading *what* out?). Education, surely, has always been a leading of the horse *to* water, to see whether it will drink. Schooling has always been a leading into the reality that has been worked out as the particular culture, be it what it might and make of it what you are able.

Education in the sense I sketch is more an induction into the spiritual world of the tribe. I don't in my own case even remember having grumbled, "What's the *point?*", as might perhaps be expected of the school-child. Apart from attempts to contemplate the point like the present one, this would anyway be a question without an answer. The reality of the subjects is not their "relevance" to something or other, but their depth, which is the depth or otherwise of the culture itself. Schooling was about finding out the extent to which the pupil will *cotton on, and join in*,* where this is: join in the spiritual world of the culture.

But in this, schooling is only a special case of life generally. In *The Metaphysics of Mind* (Oxford 1989) Anthony Kenny argues that the educated man is he who has had his innate human *capacity to acquire capacities* trained up. On this view, in life as distinct from school it would I think be the "trained adult" (my phrase), not the *tabula rasa* sometimes imagined, who is the educable person. I would include in this anything that enables a man to move in his culture. It is not his mere human endowments that will permit a man to stand on his own two feet or form a just estimate of what he encounters. Still less will his capacities suffice to enable him to put his view, or listen to the other man's. But if this begins to sound too like *discourse*; so that (looking about you,

* I borrow the phrase from Rush Rhees, "Language and Reality", *The Gadfly* vol. 5 no. 2, May 1982, p. 22, where he is describing the child learning to speak or, as he puts it, beginning to have something he wants to tell you.

perhaps) you wonder whether it can really be believed that human life consists in *discourse*; as some of our best philosophers have sometimes seemed to maintain; I am still only pointing to some fairly ordinary matters. It is only my “trained adult” who can exercise any independence of mind. Unless you have acquired the humility to know when you have nothing to say; if you have no idea of what lies beyond your purview; you cannot be polite. Only in so far as you are polite can you strictly speaking have a view, let alone give it. A view is something brought to a discussion. A discussion is something in which people are meeting.

I have to be trained up in language, only in the broader sense of the word that encompasses *forms of life*. This is not the sense in which the sophist, or Master of Business Administration as he now is, is trained up, always to be ready with some cure-all folksy nostrum taught at the *phrontisterion*, or university as it is now to be.* My conduct will be mean and wretched. If I am to stand any chance of confronting this, it will not come through taking a course in it, even if that were to help. It will come as I begin to recognise in others what I am myself; which is, by learning shame. I might *then* come to judge myself: to see, perhaps, that I was subject to a fear, that I ought to try to master. A critique won't on its own do the job. The man who, in the sense I sketch, *lacks language*, is not educable, in that he has no shame. He lacks the capacity to see what he is in what he can see others to be.

Something of the sort can be said of love. Every one knows this much at least, that it is love where the heart is in it and you do not walk away. The difficulties will in any case include ones that you bring yourself. The other wants more of you than is comfortable.—She

* Cf. the Australian Labour Party's slogan (in 2006) for its education policy: *The Knowledge Nation*. Every citizen is to receive a guaranteed amount, like the Minimum Wage, that we may have an Australian people rich in knowledge.

brought intelligence, but to bear on me! Well: and did you not want that? When I fought, she would on occasion laugh and admit. No one is more than an ordinary human being. Only every human *life* is a queer business, that will bear just as much scrutiny as can be brought. Where this arises in relations with others we contemplate human communion, a form of trust, that each must for himself acquire. To walk away from this where one has had the fortune to meet it does seem to me the sin against the holy ghost. *By my fault; by my most grievous fault.* But is this not also enjoyment of life?

Look about you and in some mood you will surely marvel what people can see in one another. The question, though, is wrongly put. We should do better to notice that we all do see with one another, and that that way horrors lie. People see with one another, and they see with the mind of the human world into which they were delivered: dismaying notions, both, except as they make the options stark: sink into this, or strive into shame and learn trust. This striving would I imagine be life as discourse, because life as learning—and not learning at the *phrontisterion*. As much as it would be wrong to say, *here the life, there the art*, would it be wrong to say, *here the life, there the discourse*.

Call this the unity of life and if, as we have been arguing, art is an embodiment of life, the attention to true art is necessarily attention to a whole. Attention to a whole is not “attention to everything”. Neither do I believe there could be a true “Nietzschean” art, one that pretended to celebrate the *Übermensch*. This would not embody life as it is, necessarily a whole. It would be a simulacrum of life. In so far as I assumed its gesture, I should do so falsely. In this sense, the attention I pay true art must deepen more than just the attention I am able to pay art. The attention demanded by true art, a grasp of a whole, is necessarily a deepening of life. Thus it is that true art goes on being discovered anew by every generation. You could no more understand true art for

me than you could learn shame for me, or learn love for me. This is not because it is *so* difficult, but because art, like shame or love, is a form of grasp, so something *I* have to learn and make.

All right—you might say—but the trouble with this is that *art* dances free. It seems to be the very nature of art, that it dances free. Mozart wrote his five violin concerti when he was a teenager. They are better than just formulaic eighteenth-century music. But the slow movement of no. 3 in G major K. 216, as I say, dances free. Its perfection of mind is that it opens like a flower and is as simple. The impression it gives is that there is nothing very much there but what requires perfect purity of articulation and intonation of the violinist, and an equal purity of attention of the listener, to make there.

One might answer that this slow movement grew out of Mozart's work in writing the set of better than just formulaic eighteenth-century violin concerti; and that they in turn grew out of his other two hundred-odd compositions up to that point, as well as out of the work of Haydn and others before him. *That work* is what this slow movement "dances free" from—or, better, within. It would be a sort of optical illusion to see this slow movement as dancing free, as it were, from just life. If this example shows us anything about the relation that art bears to life, it is in what it shows of what "the life of art" is. In the example I have just given we see "the life of art" issue, as it sometimes may, in what I called previously the pure gesture. This is what is very human, and bears relation to what I called above the unity of life.

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