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The Necessity of Communication

When I was a boy, people were always going around the house talking. I don't know why there were talking—what they said seemed to be of no particular importance—but my memories of boyhood seem filled with the swelling of human voices, with the constant flow of words. Here's my sister talking to her Raggedy Ann, here's my mother talking to the cat ("Did you see the way Sally's ears perked up when I said cheese? Oh, you just love cheese, don't you, Sally?"), here's my brother imploring his broken bicycle to fix itself, here's my father's nightly lecture ("You children have entirely too much time on your hands; you children will not watch more than two hours of television."). That boyhood was spent in midwestern suburbia, in a neighborhood as guiltless and unbesmirched as the snow which fell upon it in winter; but even in that far-removed place, people were trying to make connections, establish rapport, investigate consciousness. In the middle of this neighborhood was a stream (we called it a "crick") which ran under bridges, behind houses, dissecting lawns and hedgerows, and in the winter, this stream, scarcely more than ten feet wide, would freeze over, and we would skate on it. What I recall more than anything about that time, was the way human voices would echo through the woods, the way a whisper could carry as far as a softball hit off the end of a bat in summer. These people were not uttering truisms; they were not discussing "Art" or "Culture" or "The Theatre" (theirs were common thoughts, spoken in a common tongue), and yet the memory of their voices sounding out against the fading, violet, February sky is something I have never forgotten. It wasn't just their voices, but the inflections; it wasn't so much what they said, as how they said it. These were people (implicitly, I felt) who cared—and about something other than ice-skating. They needed to speak, that was it! Memory plays tricks on us all (everything seems so

important when you're young!), but I think I'm correct in saying that there was a vehemence of conviction in that wintertime air, a bite from something other than Jack Frost. These were the people of my small world—these were the people I knew—and they, as I, needed to speak.

So, too, does the artist need to speak. He must live to communicte, must be articulation enacted, spirit breathed into movement and form; it's his duty. If he is the lone voice speaking, still he must speak, for artists, whether we know it or not, are our better halves; they are that part of us which remains awake while the rest of us are sleeping, and oftentimes they are the only ones listening to the slow, still, sad music of humanity. Above the roar of the machine and the noiseless thought of the computer, there must be a voice which is reasonable and clear. "The cultivation of poetry," Shelley has written, "is never more to be desired than at periods when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceed the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature." There must be a voice. It must be heard. It may be the end of the world, and there may be one bird left singing in the last tree in our last remaining meadow . . . still, the voice must be heard. It may be shrill, strident and bothersome—it may be something we don't want to hear at that particular moment—but it will come from the center of us all, and it will therefore be most true. It is not a new thought that the universe is void without humanity; I say more: humanity is void without its artists.

If that last tree falls, and that last bird stops singing, who, should we be deprived of our artists, would come back to tell us how the tree sounded, crashing through all that underbrush, unsettling the earth with a dull thud?

You see, what I'm speaking about here has nothing to do with the "accomplishments" or man, but with the "work" of man. There's a difference. The difference is that, in the former, we have an object—a street or a bridge or an airport—which has mass and volume and dimension, and which can, if we wish, be measured (it is a "thing" located in time), whereas the latter has to do with things which cannot be measured—

processes rather than products—which are ongoing as opposed to finite, and which are, by definition, amorphous and undefined. A work of art, although it possesses "thing-ness," is not a thing, for it aspires to more than particularity; it aspires to infinity. The final end of any work of art is to shed new light on human consciousness, to, in Shelley's words, "strip the veil of familiarity from the world" and cleanse our organs of perception.

So we are all skaters on undulating streams of consciousness, and we hear the sounds of other skaters in the woods.

And art receives much by asking little.

And the artist is a friend not only to himself, but to all of humanity.

But the human race, too confused and disturbed most of the time to know what it wants, is going in the wrong direction. Someone has to be out there in the trenches, putting flowers in the gunbarrels, sabotaging the ammo dump, scattering the horses—and the artist is the man for the job. He is by his very nature a recalcitrant, already despised by half or more of the population, so it matters little to him whether he gains a few friends or loses them. He is the upsettor, the bolshevik, the bohemian. And his concern is chiefly human, not with the war but with the man within the war, with what that war does to him, how he changes, how his world changes. His interest is with the sensate, with the inner states of things as opposed to the outer—with "man-ness" as opposed to "thing-ness":

"I walk through the long school room questioning . . ."

"Each mortal thing does one thing and the same . . ."

"Were he not gone,
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his
Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
Or just some human sleep."

Always the human, always the human. We measure the things that are new to us against a backdrop of the things we already know, and what we know best is our own humanity. And continually it has been our artists, our writers, who have

come back time and again to tell us what it was like out there in the world, how the human mind worked, how it felt to be human at such and such a time, how it feels to be human now. All the evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, we are, as a species, pretty much as we were; we have changed little. What has changed has been our environment, and with that indelible upthrust of industrialization which occurred some hundred-odd years ago man has had to twist himself into some fairly ridiculous poses. But what impresses most in the end is man's incredible resiliency, the way he handles it all. Should he be allowed to continue—should he be allowed to survive—he will not, as Faulkner has said, merely survive, he will prevail.

So we are all skaters on this stream . . . somewhere. Voices come through the trees . . . they rise and fall . . . the snow sparkles and shimmers . . . what does it all mean? It means ostensibly nothing, unless we have the ability to shape it into an utterance of our own voice, unless we can look out at this universe which may mean absolutely nothing, and, knowing that it means nothing, proceed without caution, for it is the only world we have. We must learn that to be human is to be flawed, and that in our folly also lies our greatness; for though we were not made perfect, we were at least made capable of a boundless compassion, and it is our compassion afterall which distinguishes us from the other species. Until the time when we come to that last bird on that last tree in our last God-forsaken meadow, it should be remembered that we all have the capacity for song, and that frequently it is in the hearing of another voice—distant, hollow, alone and constrained—that we find our own true way of singing.

"A work of art," the poet Rilke has written, "is good if it has sprung from necessity." It is this necessity, ultimately, which defines us. Man creates, not because he wants or likes to; not because he thinks it will draw favor from his neighbor; not because he believes in any larger sense that he will cheat fate someday and therefore become immortal; not because he desires wealth or comfort or joy or leisure, but because he needs to.

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