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## Art for Art's Sake<sup>\*</sup>

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Translating the following piece—as with any other by Askari—offered formidable, if not uncommon, challenges. These resided not so much in the complexity of his thought or argument as in his indifference to the conventions—or, perhaps, the mechanics—of scholarly writing. Sometimes it is hard to avoid the feeling that his intended reader is himself, to whom he owes no obligation to substantiate anything. He was by no means alone in this practice. Few Urdu writers, until a few decades ago, paid attention to the necessity of a “critical apparatus” in a critical text. It was assumed that when one ascribed a statement to a writer—even if it was not quoted verbatim but only paraphrased—there was no reason to falsify or distort. Askari, at least, had no reason to do so. Here, even in a truncated, translated form, the quoted or paraphrased material remains admirably close to the spirit of the original French source, which is rarely fully indicated. He quotes a French poem in his own translation, or sometimes just a line or a few words, without any clue regarding the source. With only the name of the poet to go by, it is exceedingly difficult to trace a fragment in Urdu translation back to its source in French. I have tried my best to locate the sources of such quotations and paraphrased snatches and have also sought help from a few friends. Still some bits of quoted material remain elusive. These instances have been recorded in the footnotes.]

SOME HONORABLE PEOPLE COMPLAIN that I tend to make quite scholarly subjects sound banal by using substandard and coarse language. What amazes me is why they have not caught on to another tendency of mine, one perhaps even more annoying and fundamentally trite. In reflecting on major concepts and schools of thought, I have generally kept their more popular, not their most authentic, views before me. During the time that

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<sup>\*</sup> All footnotes, citations, dates, and bracketed information included in this essay have been added by the translator.

heated religious debates were rife, some Muslims felt beside themselves with exhilaration hearing that a bright spirit in America had proved through research that Jesus never existed. However, the Bible's image of the Messiah is so reassuring that had Jesus ever appeared before us, he would hardly have looked any different. If in fact his existence is imaginary—why, that is all the more reason to celebrate human imagination for its power to fabricate stories more real than reality itself, all the more reason to applaud the intellectual grasp of the common man, who can apprehend the underlying reality of stories which remain inaccessible to the dense intellect of freethinking researchers and the learned.

Even while voicing my opinion on Marxist criticism, I have given greater importance to the actual practice of Marxist critics than to the wise counsels of Marx and Lenin. Likewise, I have made no effort to deepen my familiarity with the mild-tempered and even-headed Rousseau; instead, I have exerted myself in maligning Jean-Jacques, the extremist darling and numero uno of Romantic poets. I know these are all dreadful research errors. I can hardly help it. By nature I am compelled to take interest only in thoughts that have stirred—negatively or positively—the minds and hearts of *real* people. It is possible that these thoughts gained currency in a distorted form; nonetheless they are the ones that influenced generation after generation. I care more for stories than reality. Reality is only animated after human imagination has touched it. It acquires meaning only after it has become a story. Of course the glass in the museum display-cases must be kept sparkling clean, but I am preoccupied with the study of the actions and reactions of the human mind.

So as I discuss the concept of “art for art's sake,” I shall make no attempt to dig up who coined the phrase, the year it was coined, or what the weather was like the day it was coined. I shall not even try to learn what, precisely, it meant to its creator or how far he adhered to that meaning. Who were his followers? What modifications and additions did they make to the original concept and why? Whether these questions are simple or complex, I shall not attempt to answer them. I shall instead concern myself mainly with a discussion of the popular assumptions and misconceptions that have become associated with the concept because it is these that have affected the emotional life of ordinary people.

In most countries today, schools of criticism have sprung up which espouse views uninformed by a direct and personal experience of literature and which tend to be, rather, a product of political pragmatism. That people differ in literary taste carries no weight with them. They shove anyone with an extraordinary fondness for literature and art into the herd of aesthetes and believers in art for art's sake. A sheep, goat, ass, or horse

—they are all the same to them because they are all four-legged. I can hardly complain about it. In a way, it helps me to a degree because if a fox were mistaken for a camel's calf and captured, all our jibes about the camel's misshapen form would lose their sting and a person would have no difficulty finding the supple waist, the smooth white coat, the cleverness, and the agility of a fox in a camel. So, however you define "art for art's sake," and whomsoever you include among its devotees, I accept them all.

Three distinct ideas come to mind when I hear this phrase:

1. A potter knows that the water-pot (*gharā*) he is making will be used to store water. This fact is so ingrained in his psyche that he never once desires or thinks of making a water-pot that will not be used for storing water. Just as the use of clay is a prerequisite for his craft, so is the utility of the water-pot. He accepts both almost instinctively. Henceforward he devotes his complete attention to making it as attractive as he possibly can. He does not deny the usefulness of art, because the very thought of making a water-pot was prompted by a material need, but the focus of his attention is the aesthetic element.

A writer and poet can also have the same attitude; indeed it should be *the* attitude of a successful artist to some degree—a disregard for art cannot produce art. At least to this extent every artist believes in art for art's sake. If a society is in accord with itself, satisfied, and well centered, such a regard for art becomes inevitable, even if, from a theoretical point of view, art is believed to have a particular utility. If or when a pure and harmonized communist culture gets established in Russia, its artists will also not be able to escape such a regard for art.

2. In an internally cohesive society every physical and mental act has a fixed purpose, manner, duty, operational style, and place in the scheme of life. No act can seize the essential elements and complements of another act, nor can it surrender its own essentials in favor of another act. This is also the case with art. It too has its fixed place, so that people adopt it as art, not as a substitute for some other activity. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) says that only the people of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries knew the true meaning of art for art's sake. This can only mean that, unlike Matthew Arnold (1822–1888), they did not wish to turn art into religion, nor like Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), into a substitute for the totality of life, or for politics like the communists.

Such a view does not banish usefulness from the domain of art. It is entirely up to a culture whether or not it wants art to have usefulness and, if yes, what type of usefulness. What is this mentality and what kind of concept of art does it produce? People who live in a conflicted society

cannot fully understand these things. Here it is necessary to caution that assigning diverse mental activities their specific place does not necessarily mean that their distinctions are stipulated in the form of political ordinances or a code of offenses. There are some restrictions which, although the members of a balanced society may follow, they cannot articulate their nature. The need to formalize them in words arises only after the society has lost its equilibrium so the restrictions may be supported or opposed. In any case the ability to differentiate between art and life is a necessary expression of the levelheadedness of a well-balanced society.

3. The most popular view of art for art's sake is that an artist should become indifferent to all other preoccupations in life and pursue only his aesthetic gratification. However, this concept is absurd. Considering that a perfect example of pure art cannot be found in literature, it is entirely possible that an artist might limit the parameters of his experiences in his obsession with aestheticism and harm his product, quite like the effort of many today to transmogrify art into life. Likewise, some sixty or seventy years ago a few individuals in the West attempted to make the whole of life into art, or squeeze it so hard it would be distilled to just art—and art in its simplest, soft-hued meaning at that. The effort failed, as it should have. While no preeminent artist would likely have accepted this concept in such a crude form, it did happen that when a need arose to know the difference between art and other mental activities people concluded that art's essence lay in aesthetic gratification. So, artists increasingly tried to produce as much aesthetic gratification through their art as possible. It is also quite likely that some artists may have accepted the principle of art for art's sake at a theoretical level. However, in practice, I hardly find any sensible artist who, after embracing this view, ignored the most important aspects of life, or ceased to take interest in them, or became an addict merely of aesthetic fulfillment. At most, I can vaguely suspect this of Goethe (1749–1832) who fails to excite my interest for some strange reason. I have read very little of his writing and it would not be proper to blame him. On the other hand, Ezra Pound (1885–1972) ignores [Charles] Baudelaire (1821–1867) and includes Goethe in his textbook of the world's great literature. There must be some reason for that. Strange though this may sound, the fact is that almost no one has practiced art for art's sake in its truly harmful form. I am not talking about the ruffraff, but this is how most ordinary people understand art for art's sake, and they oppose it from this perspective. During the past one hundred years artists have worshipped art with the total dedication of hermits and have not flinched from any kind of sacrifice for its sake. Perhaps this is what creates room for this misunderstanding. Then too, it has been customary for a particular political

group to be too quick to denounce any artist who did not subscribe to their political views as an “aesthete.”

So be it, even I accept this meaning of art for art’s sake, along with the entire inventory of lovers of aestheticism, including Baudelaire, [Paul] Verlaine (1844–1896), [Arthur] Rimbaud (1854–1891), [Stéphane] Mallarmé (1842–1898), Paul Valéry (1871–1945), [André] Gide (1869–1951). I would even put the Surrealists in this category as well, although they were no lovers of art, let alone art for art’s sake. If anything, they were out to annihilate art altogether. The only justification for including them here is that they too were chastised and rejected. Secondly, their gang leader André Breton (1896–1966) said as recently as 1949 that the Surrealists still believe in the tradition of the modern period that begins with Baudelaire. Regardless of the mutual theoretical disagreements of those who are counted in this group, at least on the face of it, it appears that they did consider art an end in itself and only wanted to derive aesthetic pleasure from it. Let’s just consider this assumption to be fact. We shall not discuss theories anymore. We shall allow ourselves to forget that Rimbaud’s concept of art for art’s sake could not have been accepted and Valéry had declared the concept of pure poetry as absurd. We shall consider all of them to be peas from the same pod. We shall ignore theories and look instead at the practice of these people and reflect on how it unfurled in their creative work. Did aestheticism alone satisfy them or did they go beyond it? Did they roam around arduously in search of beauty alone or let their curiosity take them into other fields? Did the experience enrich their lives or make it poorer? Did they completely abandon the concept of goodness and truth? Are traces of any moral conflict totally absent in them? Is it true that if, apart from aesthetic gratification, they incline toward anything it is either base emotions or harmful morals? Have they turned their backs on life and headed toward death? We shall attempt to find answers to these questions, not in concepts but in creative works.

The general and overwhelming tendency in criticism, which persisted until the first half of the nineteenth century, viewed both “reward” and “pleasure” among the goals of literature. Later “reward” was either completely eliminated or mentioned merely in undertones. However lofty and sublime the concept of “pleasure” may be for the theorists, an ordinary man understands it only as an immensely passive kind of enjoyment or exhilaration. Criticism characterized by a particular kind of political tendency stresses only this meaning, to further reinforce among the general public their belief about writers that they lie about day and night indulging in “aesthetic gratification.” Now, it is true that such poets do exert themselves maximally on perfecting the aesthetic form, but here are a few

examples of the “pleasure” they derive as a whole from their creations or creative struggle.

Baudelaire inaugurates this great tradition. Rimbaud calls him “king of poets,” rather “God” (1976, 104). This god has created a mental paradise for his aesthetic gratification. When Baudelaire steps into this paradise to enjoy it—well, see for yourself what he finds there:

*Dans ton île, ô Vénus! je n'ai trouvé debout  
Qu'un gibet symbolique où pendait mon image...  
—Ah! Seigneur! donnez-moi la force et le courage  
De contempler mon coeur et mon corps sans dégoût!*

(1954, 418)

(On your isle, O Venus! I found upright only  
A symbolic gallows from which hung my image...  
—O! Lord! give me the strength and the courage  
To contemplate my body and soul without loathing!)

(*ibid.*, 419)

When Baudelaire turns toward the world created by God, he experiences the following “pleasure”:

*Grands bois, vous m'effrayez comme des cathédrales;  
Vous hurlez comme l'orgue; et dans nos coeurs maudits,  
Chambres d'éternel deuil où vibrent de vieux râles,  
Répondent les échos de vos De profundis.*

*Je te hais, Océan! tes bonds et tes tumultes,  
Mon esprit les retrouve en lui; ce rire amer  
De l'homme vaincu, plein de sanglots et d'insultes,  
Je l'entends dans le rire énorme de la mer*

(*ibid.*, 254)

(Great woods, you frighten me like cathedrals;  
You roar like the organ; and in our cursed hearts,  
Rooms of endless mourning where old death-rattles sound,  
Respond the echoes of your *De profundis*.

I hate you, Ocean! your bounding and your tumult,  
My mind finds them within itself; that bitter laugh  
Of the vanquished man, full of sobs and insults,  
I hear it in the immense laughter of the sea.)

(*ibid.*, 255)

And holding forth about his great love for his beloved, issues her the following instructions:

*N'ouvrant à chacun qu'avec crainte,  
Déchiffrant le malheur partout,  
Te convulsant quand l'heure tinte,  
Tu n'auras pas senti l'étreinte  
De l'irrésistible Dégout*

(1955, 414)

(And tremble at each opened door,  
And feel for every man disgust,  
And shudder at the striking hour—  
Till then you have not felt the power  
Of Irresistible Disgust.)

(*ibid.*, 203)

And here is how the stupor of the Prophet of the modern period, Rimbaud, reaches its high point:

I have just swallowed a terrific mouthful of poison. —Blessed, blessed, blessed the advice I was given!

—My guts are on fire. The power of the poison twists my arms and legs, cripples me, drives me to the ground. I die of thirst, I suffocate, I cannot cry. This is Hell, eternal torment! See how the flames rise! I burn as I ought to. Go on, Devil!

(1976, 198)

Let's leave the Prophet lying half-senseless in his “nest of flames” and move on to steal a glance at his lieutenant, Lautréamont (1846–1870), as he wallows in pleasure:

Maldoror, Lautréamont's fictional character has stepped into the sea, where he meets a shark:

[...] *Ils se regardèrent entre les yeux pendant quelques minutes; et chacun s'étonna de trouver tant de férocité dans les regards de l'autre. Ils tournent en rond en nageant, ne se perdent pas de vue, et se disent à part soi: "Je me suis trompé jusqu'ici; en voilà un qui est plus méchant. [...] Arrivés à trois mètres de distance, sans faire aucun effort, ils tombèrent brusquement l'un contre l'autre, comme deux aimants, et s'embrassèrent avec dignité et reconnaissance, dans une étreinte aussi tendre que celle d'un frère ou d'une sœur. Les désirs charnels suivirent de près cette démonstration d'amitié. Deux cuisses nerveuses se collèrent étroitement à la peau visqueuse du monstre, comme deux sangsues; et, les bras et les nageoires entrelacés autour du corps de l'objet aimé qu'ils entouraient avec amour, tandis que leurs gorges et leurs poitrines ne faisaient bientôt plus qu'une masse glauque aux exhalaisons de goémon; [...] Enfin, je venais de trouver quelqu'un qui me ressemblât!... Désormais, je n'étais plus seul dans la vie!... Elle avait les mêmes idées que moi!... J'étais en face de mon premier amour!*

(1874, 127–29)

[...] For a while they look at one another eye to eye; and each is astonished to find so much ferocity in the aspect of the other. [...] [E]ach murmurs to himself: "Hitherto I have been mistaken: there is someone more evil than I." [...] Arriving within three yards of each other, effortlessly, suddenly they come together like two magnets and kiss with dignity and gratitude in an embrace as tender as that of a brother or a sister.

Carnal desire soon follows this demonstration of friendship. Two sinewy thighs clasp tightly about the viscous skin of the monster like two leeches; and arms and fins interlace about the body of the adored object which they surround with love, while their throats and breasts soon fuse into one glaucous mass exhaling the odors of seawrack.

[...]

At last I had found someone who resembled me! Henceforth I should not be alone in life! She had the same ideas as I! I was face to face with my first love!

(1965, 112–13)

I had no wish to scare you this early in my essay but felt I needed to show this scene to underscore what kind of "aesthetic gratification" was involved. Don't frown, not quite yet; there is plenty of time for anger and reproof. First have a look at the pleasures the two new leaders of the great tradition of the modern period, André Breton and Philippe Soupault (1897–1990), are drowned in:

Our mouths are dry as the lost beaches, and our eyes turn aimlessly and without hope. [...]

The marvellous railway-stations never afford us shelter anymore [...]

Each thing is in its proper place, and no one can talk any more: each sense became deadened and there were blind persons worthier of respect than we were. [...]

The immense smile of the whole earth has not sufficed us [...]

[...] This dish would make an impressive appearance on tables of every description. It's a pity that we are no longer hungry.

(1985, 25–29; original French 1967, 13–20)

These are just a few examples, but a similar expression of intense spiritual pain and agony is found across the board in that period. The presence of this element makes it illegitimate to equate their creative endeavors with mere deriving of pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment. If they accepted such immense spiritual torment for just a modicum of enjoyment, their courage really calls for due appreciation. One possible explanation for the spiritual agony could be that the urge for self-torture was ingrained in their nature and writing poems was a way to satisfy it. It is perhaps hard to deny this, but psychology fails to account for why their self-torture



assumed only this form. These poets ask eminently serious metaphysical questions such as: What is man? What is his place in the universe? Why does evil exist in the world? etc., etc. When no answer, or at least no satisfactory answer is forthcoming, the aforementioned kind of pain and sorrow, torment and agony, and anger stirs up inside them. Had they felt embarrassed about mentioning sexual matters, we could perhaps say that this is how they satisfied their urge for self-torture, and raising a plethora of insoluble metaphysical questions is only a way to inflict pain on themselves. But as you have already seen, they have allowed their mouths to sally forth without hesitation or reservation. Forget about you and me, they do not even care a fig about *babū-bēḡīs* when they start talking about sexual deviations, so psychological acrobatics will not help explain it. If they are carrying such a massive cargo of pain inside them, it can only mean that they are after something far greater than aesthetic fulfillment, or unalloyed pleasure, or self-torture—something which is so immeasurably important that in spite of suffering immense agony they are reluctant to abandon their efforts and keep striving for it.

A fresh question arises: if all their creative endeavors aimed at something greater than aesthetic gratification, why this hankering and crying themselves hoarse over art for art's sake? If moral problems, universal questions, and a tender eternal longing are the scope of their creative work, what was the point of limiting their art merely to expressions of aesthetic sense? These poets are notorious for assigning art the highest place in life, unwilling to tolerate the imposition of religious, moral, or political standards on their art. As you doubtless already know, it is well-nigh impossible to create a piece of art without some moral preferences of one kind or another. The abandonment of all existing standards imposed the need to create “values” alongside their literary work. If the focus of their quest was merely on aesthetic gratification, they acted quite foolishly in renouncing the current standards and created a double headache for themselves. The easiest thing would have been to accept whatever values were at hand and fashion their aesthetic blueprints on that basis. Why were these lovers of aestheticism so anxious to resist non-aesthetic elements and free their art from all customary notions?

Many educated people had lost their trust in religion during the nineteenth century and the more sensitive among them had become skeptical of other things as well. Since this process and its causes and consequences are well known, I shall try to be brief. The thought is rife among a certain group that all this points to the decline of the middle class. Although not entirely untrue this alone is not enough to convince a student of art. In [Christopher] Marlowe's time (1564–1593), and even a

hundred years before in [François] Villon's (c. 1431–c. 1463), the development of the middle class had not yet properly begun, let alone its decline, although some intimations of this decline were vaguely discernible. Still the personal lives and creative works of these two poets were quite similar to those of the poets under discussion in some important aspects; especially in Villon, the same agony and torment may be found as in Verlaine and Rimbaud.

So if we intend to study the subject of universal skepticism in literature, it is apt that we take our investigation all the way back to the Renaissance, when in fact many diverse influences stimulated dissatisfaction with the Church, rather than with religion itself. Whether one admits the truth or necessity of religion, there is no escaping the fact that it does protect the common man from a few very tormenting questions, such as, firstly, the existence of evil in the universe; secondly, the survival of the individual; and, thirdly, man's place in the Creation. I do not claim that religion solves these problems with the incontrovertibility of  $2+2=4$ , or that faith frees the individual from every type of anxiety at one fell swoop. But it is also true that religion demands unconditional acceptance of a few matters. The acceptance of its basic assumptions results in a logical system that adequately provides satisfactory solutions to an ordinary man's spiritual problems. If, however, these basic assumptions are let go, the problems assume such dangerous forms that the human intellect has so far been unable to deal with them, except to give them a wide berth.

But an artist's curse is that he cannot avoid experience; hence he is condemned to bear soul-crushing agony and torment. Villon and Marlowe had realized quite early what trials and tribulations atheism was likely to expose us to. Marlowe's Satan even admits that loss of God was indeed greater than the torments of Hell. Villon perceived something else too: man's dire fate in the capitalist system. So, in a manner of speaking, the first brick of uncertainty about society had already been laid. Myriad skepticisms, however, appear in their most dreadful forms among the poets of the modern tradition. At this point society has lost its social, economic and even political equilibrium, its structure so weakened that it cannot hold its individual members together or demand their loyalty. Science had edged God out from the universe, but science had failed to provide answers to questions that a concept of God somehow did provide. As a result, artists lost their faith also in science. The nineteenth century had a new God: "progress." If all progress implied was to keep on moving, then, as Rimbaud said, it is possible the world may come full circle.

In short, the artist became progressively disenchanted with everything—religion, science, country and nation, family, and ethical concepts—

because his world lacked a focal concept to provide a fulcrum for all these entities. Since these concepts still exercised some sway over the common man, and different people were exploiting his devotion to them in different ways for their benefit, the artist became even more wary and alarmed. This is why he is seen doing something else too besides seeking and providing aesthetic enjoyment: denying any and every prevailing concept of society. At the very least he does reflect the desire not to be duped or allow anything counterfeit to sneak into his art. If the need arose, he would seek a nonaesthetic concept on his own, rather than trust others.

Now only his aesthetic sense or sensory experience were left, the last things he could trust in his world, though it did not take long before they too became suspect. His consuming desire to be free of all pollutions and entirely true to himself nudged him toward the construction of the notion of art for art's sake. It was not a flight from either life or ethical problems, but only that he was unwilling to accept other people's solutions to them. The new concept was not a refuge, but a veritable battleground. By rejecting all values other than his artistic perception he was exposing himself to myriad difficulties. Artists before the modern period could easily define their art's aim in terms of both "profit" and "enjoyment" because they had a clear conception of "profit." On the other hand, the new artist did not have a ready-made standard of "profit" and "loss." He had to find out about them through personal experience. If he abandoned the thought of "profit," he was compelled to do so.

Reluctance to impose any other kind of standards on art means, in effect, the artist's unwillingness to accept aid from any institution or established concept and his desire to rough it out on his own to discover reality, even if he might eventually find this reality residing in those very institutions. "Art for art's sake" is tantamount to a desire to look for the basic realities of human existence untrammelled by all kinds of conveniences, temptations, and interests. Apparently it does appear objectionable to allow one man's personal impressions to be the sole arbiter of standard, although here it is not a question of just "any man," but rather, an "artist," who is never just any man. An artist is a direct instrument of life—a laboratory where life carries out its experiments. As Rimbaud has it, we must never say "I think," but rather "I'm thought."<sup>1</sup> Hence, an artist's creations are not just any man's opinions; though it is true that one runs into phony artists now and then.

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<sup>1</sup>In a letter to Georges Izambard, dated 13 May 1871: "It's wrong to say: I think. Better to say: I am thought. Pardon the pun" (1976, 100). For the original French see (1997, 384).

Why wonder, the world does not suffer from a shortage of false prophets either! After all Mr. “Qashaq Chapel Gaznagh” of Bihar had descended with a message directly from God, but no one called him “Kalimu’l-Lāh.”<sup>2</sup>

After these clarifications it would be best that I now examine a few statements of modern poets that appear quite dangerous. Baudelaire suggests that it is degrading to “recriminate, to protest, and even to demand justice” (1964, 156). The statement appears to say that an artist should not bother himself with justice and the struggle for freedom. The thing to consider here is that it is not Oscar Wilde but Baudelaire who is saying it. The latter was confronted with a hugely difficult problem, namely, the customary concept of reality had become ineffective, making it imperative for the artist to think about reality afresh. In the absence of a clearly delineated concept of “reality” the meaning of “justice” itself becomes fuzzy. What kind of justice should one then demand? Such skepticism does not negatively affect the vigor and vehemence of the battle for justice, if anything it helps clarify the problem of justice. Had Russian, American, and English men of power allowed just a tiny ingress to this skepticism into their hearts now and then, the U.N.O. would not have become an association of shroud-snatchers.

Likewise Rimbaud’s equation of ethics with mental weakness means only that people who accept every customary ethical law without a why and wherefore and without evaluating the circumstances lack the ability to think. Whether Rimbaud could deliver new ethical values, well, this can be determined by reading his poetry.

Now let us take André Gide’s notorious expression that it is with “fine sentiments” that “bad literature is made” (1951, 44 and 44n48). It would be a mistake to conclude that Gide’s advice to the artist is to throw goodness overboard. Rather he wants to communicate that although society has lost its internal cohesion, the concepts of good and evil, which hark back to a time when it was fully integrated and in harmony, still persist, so they cannot help the artist in genuine creation. It is also the artist’s duty to look for new realities. With exactly the same meaning Baudelaire has described Satan as “the staff of those in exile” and “inventors’ lamp” (“*Bâton des exilés, lampe des inventeurs*”).<sup>3</sup> If a person is searching for fresh standards of morality, the prevailing standards cannot be accepted as they are. Sometimes an individual is called upon to experience good as bad and vice versa in order to know reality. The insistence of a new artist to keep himself free from all types of prevailing concepts springs just from this.

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<sup>2</sup>“One addressed by God,” the Qur’anic title of Moses.

<sup>3</sup>See (1954, 436–37) in the poem “Les Litanies de Satan” (The Litany to Satan).

Indeed, Gide has been uncompromising on this point. He says that if you join a group, you will be hemmed in by it.<sup>4</sup> It is simply impossible to render Gide's original phrase in meaningful Urdu, for one of its implications could well be that if you take a decision, it will hold you its captive. In other words, he wants you to never be satisfied with your experiences and continually distrust the decision you have made.

Thus in their spiritual journey they do not accept a predetermined point of arrival. They feel that creative thoughts occur spontaneously and without deliberation. A new movement called "responsible literature" is becoming popular in France. Gide's comment about it was that today you are making literature responsible; tomorrow you will demand that "thoughts" should also be responsible.<sup>5</sup> In other words, if bars were placed on thinking in ways other than the established ones, it would smother the seed of creativity. Gide happens to hold the view that the thoughts that have proved beneficial for mankind are the ones that generally emerged during the course of spiritual or intellectual sport; art for art's sake should be considered a similar sport. The fundamental desire of those who were convinced in one way or another about the superiority of art was not aloofness from life. These people were playing a game which was no different than countless others games which artists have played from the genesis of the world until now in order to formulate new thoughts and concepts and to experience new feelings; it is just that the rules of this game are somewhat different. It started with first shattering the world into smithereens and then fashioning a new one—more beautiful, cohesive, harmonious, and meaningful than its predecessor. Whether the new artists won or lost the game, at least they played it.

Likely the concept of art for art's sake is immensely dangerous, but at least I tried to dress it up a bit. Don't take my word for it, just read the works of those who are associated with it. The essence of whatever "modern tradition" has thought, comprehended, and felt; whatever it has endured; its failures, triumphs, in short everything, is described in Rimbaud's poem "Une Saison en Enfer" (A Season in Hell), which he wrote in 1873. All the good presumptions one had about aestheticism did not take long to evaporate. Every artist found out in his own way that if the concept of beauty was not founded on some inelegant and universal values and moral con-

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<sup>4</sup>Source not found.

<sup>5</sup>The concept of "responsible (or committed) literature" was introduced in an article by Jean-Paul Sartre (see English translation, 1945, 307–12). It caused much consternation in French literary circles and Gide was the first one to attack it. See, for example, his "Existentialisme" (1945, 6). [French journal available on microfilm at Yale; not able to check if this quote itself is actually there].

siderations, the very feeling of beauty became a gross vexation. Rimbaud opens the poem with the lines:

*Jadis, si je me souviens bien, ma vie était un festin où s'ouvraient  
tous les coeurs, où tous les vins coulaient.  
Un soir, j'ai assis la Beauté sur mes genoux.—Et je l'ai trouvée  
amère.—Et je l'ai injuriée.*

(1964, 117)

(Once, if memory serves me well, my life was a banquet where all  
hearts opened, where every wine flowed.  
One evening, I sat Beauty down on my knees.—And I found her  
bitter.—And I insulted her.)

(2004, 3)

The crux of the entire matter is summed up in these lines. This is the fate one suffers by seating Beauty on one's knees without a marriage certificate sanctioned by morality and religion or a completely harmonized and universal way of life. Anyway, let us hear Rimbaud's own words about what transpired next:

*Je me suis armé contre la justice.  
Je me suis enfui. Ô sorcières, ô misère, ô haine, c'est à vous que mon  
trésor a été confié!  
Je parvins à faire s'évanouir dans mon esprit toute l'espérance humaine.  
Sur toute joie pour l'étrangler j'ai fait le bond sourd de la bête féroce.  
J'ai appelé les bourreaux pour, en périssant, mordre la crosse de leurs  
fusils. J'ai appelé les fléaux, pour m'étouffer avec le sable, le sang. Le malheur  
a été mon dieu. Je me suis allongé dans la boue. Je me suis séché à l'air du  
crime. Et j'ai joué de bons tours à la folie.  
Et le printemps m'a apporté l'affreux rire de l'idiot.*

(1964, 117)

(I steeled myself against justice.  
I fled. O witches, O misery, O hate, my treasure was left in your care ...  
I have withered within me all human hope. With the silent leap of a sullen  
beast, I have downed and strangled every joy.  
I have called for executioners; I want to perish chewing on their gun  
butts. I have called for plagues, to suffocate in sand and blood. Unhappi-  
ness has been my god. I have lain down in the mud, and dried myself off  
in the crime-infested air. I have played the fool to the point of madness.  
And springtime brought me the frightful laugh of an idiot.)

(1976, 193)

Not just Rimbaud, other poets of this tradition had to go through similar crushing experiences when they pursued Beauty divorced from all

other concepts. Only two ways were now open: either forfeit their treasure to “*sorcières*,” “*misère*,” and “*haine*” and become indifferent to what may come, or construct anew their lives on a set of fresh moral values so that such love of beauty did not produce horrific consequences. They tried both. They sometimes gave up in desperation, sometimes rose up with courage. I have already furnished examples of their despondency and lack of interest, and even if I had not, others have done their best to malign them up and down. I shall now show their intense longing to build, to construct.

In the same poem Rimbaud has Verlaine say the following words about him:

“[...] *Quand il me semblait avoir l'esprit inerte, je le suivais, moi, dans des actions étranges et compliquées, loin, bonnes ou mauvaises: j'étais sûre de ne jamais entrer dans son monde. À côté de son cher corps endormi, que d'heures des nuits j'ai veillé, cherchant pourquoi il voulait tant s'évader de la réalité. Jamais homme n'eût pareil voeu. Je reconnaissais,—sans craindre pour lui,—qu'il pouvait être un sérieux danger dans société. —Il a peut-être des secrets pour changer la vie? Non, il ne fait qu'en chercher, me répliquais-je.*”

(1964, 127–28)

“[...] Whenever he seemed depressed, I would follow him into strange, complicated adventures, on and on, into good and evil; but I always knew I could never be a part of his world. Beside his dear body, as he slept, I lay awake hour after hour, night after night, trying to imagine why he wanted so much to escape from reality. No man before had ever had such a desire. I was aware—without being afraid of him—that he could become a serious menace to society. Did he, perhaps, have secrets that would *remake life*? No, I told myself, he was only looking for them.”)

(1976, 201–2)

The phrase “*remake life*” is such that it should be made the benchmark of all modern literature. The reality Rimbaud and his ilk are trying to evade is only reality in its prevalent sense, which includes everything from morality to the political and economic structure of society. These poets are laboring to be indifferent to the current “reality” in order to construct a new one of their own. Even in Gide, otherwise increasingly chastised for his overbearing concern with only his personal satisfaction, one repeatedly finds the notion that man must stand up against nature with his full vigor, tame it and thus *remake his life*. He loves the story of Prometheus dearly because the latter had stolen fire from the heavens for the good of man and it did *change his life* significantly.

Rimbaud was so infected with the ardor of discovering all natural and supernatural mysteries that the blaze never left his heart. In two of his

letters he has methodically laid out the idea that a poet must also be an “*‘arīf*” (Gnostic). He should have the ability to see into the depths of things, as much as into the future. This “Gnostic” is encumbered with a special duty to enlist the supra-rational forces within himself to sunder the veil of external reality and reach out to the eternal light behind it. In Rimbaud’s opinion, Baudelaire was the first such Gnostic. Rimbaud declares that henceforward poetry will not walk along but ahead of action, which of course does not imply a complete disregard for action and a total absorption in absolute thought. He calls a poet the “thief of fire” (*Donc le poète est vraiment voleur de feu*) (1962, 12)—i.e., the realities a poet unveils do not serve to gratify the sense of beauty alone; they change man’s life and make it better.

The thought of making life over was not confined to mere wishing and desiring. These poets also exerted themselves to their utmost to realize that goal, regardless of whether they met with failure or success, or whether, indeed, the effort was entirely absurd. Here, the accent falls only on effort, not on its nature. Rimbaud says: “I tried to invent new flowers, new planets, new flesh, new languages. I thought I had acquired supernatural powers” (1976, 213), (*J’ai essayé d’inventer de nouvelles fleurs, de nouveaux asters, de nouvelles chairs, de nouvelles langues. J’ai cru acquérir des pouvoirs surnaturels*) (1964, 140). And [Guillaume] Apollinaire (1880–1918) in his poem “La Jolie Rousse” (The Pretty Red-Head):

*Nous voulons vous donner de vastes et d’étranges domaines  
Où le mystère en fleurs s’offre à qui veut le cueillir  
Il y a là des feux nouveaux des couleurs jamais vues  
Mille phantasmes impondérables  
Auxquels il faut donner de la réalité*

(1971, 194)

(We wish to offer you vast and strange domains  
Where flowering mystery offers itself to whoever wishes to pick it  
There are new fires there and colors never yet seen  
A thousand imponderable phantasms  
To which reality must be given)

(*ibid.*, 195)

Saint-Pol-Roux (1861–1940) has expressed the same desire thus “In the world yet unknown we must build new colonies for man.”<sup>6</sup>

As these quotations also demonstrate, new literature was not a worshipper of the *present* and a devotee of *permanence*; rather its eyes were

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<sup>6</sup>Source not found.



unwaveringly trained on the future. In fact these artists unequivocally stated that poets should develop the faculty of clairvoyance, and some have even gone so far as to say that they should purge the mind of all memories of the past in order to obtain the most direct vision of the future. This led to the coinage of a new, and apparently absurd term, “future memory.”

Let’s now have a look at a few examples of the futurism of these artists. Saint-Pol-Roux says that “art is not just to observe and feel the present moment; rather its main duty is to go beyond the limits of the present and observe and perceive those ideas that have not yet been acted upon.”<sup>7</sup> Charles Cros desires “only one path, only one god—the future!”<sup>8</sup> And in Apollinaire’s view the “new spirit demands that one assume such prophetic tasks” (1994, 312). Among all these poets, Apollinaire has the most optimistic point of view. He has expressed great expectations about the future—and right in the thick of war at that—as in the following lines of one of his poems (“Les Collines”):

*Profondeurs de la conscience  
On vous explorera demain  
Et qui sait, quels êtres vivants  
Seront tirés de ces abîmes  
Avec des univers entiers*

(2004, 6)

*C’est le temps de la grâce ardente  
La volonté seule agira  
Sept ans d’incroyables épreuves  
L’homme se divinitera  
Plus pur plus vif et plus savant*

(*ibid.*, 14)

(Tomorrow explores  
Deep consciousness  
And tomorrow new beasts  
Whole universes  
Will be torn from it living)

(*ibid.*, 7)

(It will be a time of avid grace  
Fire refining human will  
Seven years incredible labor  
And then godhood  
Pure increase and pure knowledge)

(*ibid.*, 15)

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<sup>7</sup>Source not found.

<sup>8</sup>Source not found.

Even Rimbaud, who considers “happiness” a “curse”—because it deflects us from the spiritual struggle and quest for reality—who interprets his intellectual life as veritable hell, eagerly waits for the day when life will appear in a new form: “When will we go, over mountains and shores, to hail the birth of new labor, new wisdom, the flight of tyrants and demons, the end of superstition, to be the *first* to adore ... Christmas on earth!” (1976, 212) (“*Quand irons-nous, par delà les grèves at les monts, saluer la naissance du travail nouveau, la sagesse nouvelle, la fuite des tyrans et des démons, la fin de la superstition, adorer—les premiers!—Noël sur la terre!*” (1964, 139)). He is not just waiting but is also absolutely confident that the night of hell will end. “And at dawn, armed with glowing patience, we will enter the cities of glory” (1976, 213). (“*Et à l’aurore, armés d’une ardent patience, nous entrerons aux splendides villes*” (1964, 141)).

In the wake of the desire to reshape life comes the crucial question of the means required for the undertaking. The thought to remake life with the help of religion generally came to be considered quite laughable in the nineteenth century, although one did expect to accomplish it through science. The artist raised the question: suppose man did acquire full control over external milieu, the knowledge of everything, and every possible skill—would that transform life? Thus Rimbaud imagined that all these had come into his grasp:

*Je vais dévoiler tous les mystères: mystères religieux ou naturels, mort, naissance, avenir, passé, cosmogonie, néant. Je suis maître en fantasmagories.*

*Écoutez!...*

*Ja’i tous les talents! [...] Veut-on des chants nègres, des danses de bouris? Veut-on que disparaisse, que je plonge à la recherche de l’anneau? Veut-on? Je ferai de l’or, des remèdes.*

(1964, 124–25)

I will tear the veils from every mystery—mysteries of religion or of nature, death, birth, the future, the past, cosmogony, and nothingness. I am a master of phantasmagoria.

Listen!

Every talent is mine! [...] Shall I give you Afric chants, belly dancers? Shall I disappear, shall I begin an attempt to discover the *Ring*? Shall I? I will manufacture gold, and medicines.

(1976, 199)

For one thing, a man in Hell, who, in spite of possessing every talent, is unable to set himself free, is uttering these words. For another, notice how Rimbaud has reduced the achievements of talent and skill to mere jugglery. Knowledge and art have not transformed life; hence he does not

consider them any worthier than just tricks of an illusionist.

Toward the end of his poem he concludes: "*J'ai cru acquérir des pouvoirs surnaturels. Eh bien! je dois enterrer mon imagination et mes souvenirs!*" (1964, 140) ("I thought I had acquired supernatural powers. Ha! I have to bury my imagination and my memories" (1976, 213)). By now he has found out why knowledge and talent failed to avail him anything. "*Moi! moi qui me suis dit mage ou ange, dispensé de toute morale, je suis rendu au sol, avec un devoir à chercher, et la réalité rugueuse à étreindre! Paysan!*" (1964, 140) ("I! I called myself a magician, an angel, free from all moral constraint. ... I am sent back to the soil to seek some obligation, to wrap gnarled reality in my arms! A peasant!" (1976, 213)). "Angel" means, "complete man." One who thinks he is complete cannot change his life. Likewise knowledge too cannot offer the principle required to integrate life into a cohesive unity. Knowledge alone cannot order and train instincts; rather it has a profound predisposition to be manipulated by instincts. Rimbaud feels that Hell is the turning loose of instincts. Thus reliance on knowledge and art can neither bring salvation nor transform life.

Despairing of both agents, but loath to give up his desire to remake life, it becomes even more incumbent on the artist to look for the catalyst anywhere he could find it, even in forces beyond reason, if reason has failed him; hence this blind striving that permeates overwhelmingly the balance of modern tradition, "travel" being its central metaphor. Well, François-René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848) and Romantic poets such as Byron (1788–1824) also had a passion for travel, but their travels were for amusement or to relish new feelings, not a search for reality. Baudelaire was the first to lay down the desiderata for the new kind of travel. His traveler is consumed by an inner passion. He does not even know where he is headed or why. Yet he keeps moving on. His is a special kind of voyage, requiring neither sail nor steam, the only condition being that man must seek that which is new and unknown. The element of physical immobility increases alongside the development of the modern tradition. André Salmon (1881–1969) says that he "dreams of a station where trains depart for nowhere ... Immobility is such a nice travel. One must patiently sit atop one's baggage" ("*Je rêve de la gare d'où les trains ne partent plus, / [...] Bab! l'immobilité c'est encor un beau voyage, / Il faut se résigner et s'asseoir sur les bagages...*" (1907, 102–4)). One might conclude from these lines that the poet is counseling "inertia," but such an interpretation would be wrong. The poet rather finds physical movement irrelevant in the search for a new and unknown reality. The question is not one of "traveling," as Paul Claudel (1868–1955) has it, but of "discovering." Just as this new brand of travel is indifferent to movement, it also has no concern for the ensuing

consequences. True, the main objective is the transformation of life, but when you do not know how you might change it, all you can do is try out whatever you can lay your hands on. The artist is so struck with this quest that he fears nothing. Baudelaire has revealed the nature of this search in just two lines: “*Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu’importe? / Au fond de l’Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!*” (1954, 462) “To the abyss’ depths, Heaven or Hell, does it matter? / To the depths of the Unknown to find something *new*” (*ibid.*, 463).

What abyss? Of course the artist’s self, relentlessly reviled as “self-love” and “egoism.” But these poets were compelled to take the plunge because personal experience had convinced them that the tidy order and composure of external life did not end spiritual turmoil, imbalance, and agony, perhaps such *order* even heightened despair, so they wanted to plunge deep inside their selves to discover the reason for the disorder permeating their inner lives. Could it be brought to order? Through what principle? The plunge did not mean that having had their fill of worldly enjoyments, amusement must now be sought within the self. Rather, they aspired for an objective examination of their inner life. [Jules] Laforgue (1860–1887) defined “travel” as “descent inside oneself”<sup>9</sup> and Saint-Pol-Roux as “walking with eyes turned inward” (“*marcher les yeux en dedans*”) (1901, 117). Such characterizations do create suspicion that, whether “escape” or “pursuit of enjoyment” is the purported goal, in reality the true aim is merely to find out what constitutes “inner life.” In a well-known Biblical parable the son of a man runs away from home and returns after enduring much hardship. Gide has given the parable a new meaning: When the son returns, his mother asks, “Why did you leave me for such a long time?” to which the son replies, “I was looking for ... who I was.”<sup>10</sup> Gide does not consider such searching merely the artists’ whim; why, it is even essential for rulers. In his novel *Thésée*, the protagonist’s old father advises him to first find out who he is and only then familiarize himself with the traditions of his ancestors. Elsewhere Gide has even laid out the recipe for how to conduct this search: “As you endure suffering, look at yourself as someone else who is enduring it.”<sup>11</sup> Baudelaire, as we have seen previously, prays to God to give him the strength “To contemplate my body and soul without loathing!” (1954, 419) and Rimbaud has delineated the characteristic of his “Gnostic” and poet thus: “he seeks out his soul, he inspects it, he tests it, he learns

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<sup>9</sup> Source not found.

<sup>10</sup> See his “Le Retour de l’Enfant Prodigue” (The Return of the Prodigal Son) (1971, 386).

<sup>11</sup> Source not found.

it" (1976, 102).

What has been branded as their "decadence," "self-indulgence," and "bad morals" should be understood in light of these clarifications, though it cannot be denied that the obsession with new experiences did drive these poets to transgress all limits of morality, reason, and humanity in thought, if not actually in their actions. A small example of this is that one day, all of a sudden, Rimbaud asked Verlaine to put his hand flat on the table and acquire a new experience. When Verlaine did that, Rimbaud stabbed it with a knife.<sup>12</sup> This is not for the sake of enjoyment; these people really wanted to understand every aspect of their being directly, regardless of whether that aspect was part of being human, or was bad, or was contrary to reason. Their only goal lay in acquiring a true knowledge of man and to penetrate his depths. They carried out experiments on themselves. Some of their actions did appear to be motivated by eroticism, but this eroticism was far removed from anything faintly resembling sensuality and libertinism. They even studied their own Eros with punishing hermetic asceticism. Gide's Thésée loved scores of women, but did not allow his heart to be lost to any one of them. Admitting his weakness he says that at least this helped him immensely to know himself. And Baudelaire said that "I seek emptiness, darkness, and nudity!" (1954, 255), which of course does not imply that henceforth debauchery will be his sole purpose in life. Baudelaire is adamant to betake himself to the regions that are left unexplored because they are considered beyond the pale of human experience or nonbeing or void. He wants to try everything forbidden by prevailing morality, just to discover their reality and how they relate to human existence. "Nudity" stands for the desire to tear all mental veils away and behold reality as is, even the most dangerous instincts. Such a demand often led them to the commission of some atrocious acts—hardly any in practice but liberally in imagination; in fact they consider bad actions committed mentally to be absolutely essential for their investigation. So Rimbaud has this to say about his "Gnostic": "But the problem is to make the soul into a monster [...] where he becomes [...] the great criminal, the great accursed—and the Supreme Scientist! For he attains the *unknown!* Because he has cultivated his soul, already rich, more than anyone!" (1976, 102).

The discovery of his self causes an artist incredible hardship. He assumes every type of persona and character, experiences life in all its forms, and admits as much. This endeavor becomes even more essential in a society that has lost its centrality, so that the center could be rediscovered or a new one created in its place. This is such an exhausting

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<sup>12</sup>This incident is recorded in Enid Starkie (1968, 189).

undertaking that in our time even the most accomplished thinkers, to say nothing of politicians, give up in desperation and seek refuge in some ideology. Only the artist does not recoil or admit defeat. If he cannot find God, he is not about to start worshipping a speaking-calf either. In fact he is the only bright spirit in our times that can recognize the speaking-calf in any guise. See how Rimbaud describes the artist's search for reality through frightening experiences and his gallant resistance to give up. "Well, let's pretend [...] dreaming of [...] acrobat, beggar, artist, bandit—priest! [...]" (1976, 211). "Hire myself to whom? What beast adore? What sacred images destroy? What hearts shall I break? What lie maintain? Through what blood wade?" (*ibid.*, 195).

Such relentless exertion does not make the artist impatient to enjoy the fruits of his labor. If all his toil is wasted, so be it, but he would not try to hide his failure. Rimbaud tries different ways to redesign life, but each time finds out that "it's the same old life." The "real life" is missing. He admits his failure and frustrations without waffling. He even senses that the reason for failure lies in him. Hence Lautréamont says: "Free as the storm, one day he will be wrecked upon the indomitable coast of his terrible will!" (1965, 172). In spite of their inebriation they are aware that the scale on which they seek to transform life is in effect impossible for man, but they are doing their best at any rate. Rimbaud has clearly stated, "The battle for the soul is as brutal as the battles of men; but the sight of justice is the pleasure of God alone" (1976, 213). They display a heightened self-observation not just in metaphysical but also in ordinary human matters. One cannot criticize them for something they have not already leveled against themselves, to the extent of admitting the difficulty of contemporary society in accepting them, however lofty the aim of their pursuit might be. Rimbaud has Verlaine say about him: "He doesn't know a soul; he will never work; he wants to live like a sleepwalker. Can his kindness and his charity by themselves give him his place in the real world" (1976, 202; original French 1964, 128). It would seem that these artists were endowed with an additional sense for self-observation. Regardless what state they are in, how confused and muddled their other senses, the additional sense remains forever alert. Lautréamont has summed up this state in one sentence: "My reason never deserts me, as I said a moment ago to confuse you" (1965, 110). This additional sense may be called basic skepticism that is not satisfied even with itself; that does not excuse or forgive itself. Baudelaire had called his "—Hypocrite reader" his "fellow" and his "brother" ("—*Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!*" (1954, 4–5)). This attitude permeates the mindset of the entirety of modernist poets.

Earlier I said that these artists wanted to study themselves objectively. One might think that it was merely a claim with no substance, an excuse for debauchery. So let me quote a slightly longer passage from Rimbaud's poem mentioned above. Should a sensible man leave his wife and children and his home and chase after a teenage lad from city to city and country to country, it would really be something quite immoral. What I want to show is what Verlaine and Rimbaud gained from this dissoluteness. In a part of this poem Rimbaud has written the saga of their relationship, calling himself "Infernal Bridegroom" and Verlaine "mad bride." Now listen to what this "mad bride" has to say:

"Oh, I cry, I'm suffering! [...]

"I am a slave of the Infernal Bridegroom; [...]

[...] "He was a child—or almost.... His delicate, mysterious ways enchanted me. I forgot all my duties in order to follow him. [...] I go where he goes; I *have* to, And lots of times he gets mad at me—at *me*, poor sinner! That Devil! (He really *is* a Devil, you know, and *not a man*.) [...]

"I listen to him turn infamy into glory, cruelty into charm. [...] Several times, at night, his demon seized me, and we rolled about wrestling! [...] And, oh, those days when he wants to go around pretending he's a criminal!

"Sometimes he talks, in his backcountry words, full of emotion, [...] In the dives where we used to get drunk, he would cry when he looked at the people around us—cattle of the slums. He used to pick up drunks in the dark streets. He had the pity of a brutal mother for little children. He went around with all the sweetness of a little girl on her way to Sunday school. He pretended to know all about everything—business, art, medicine— [...]

[...] "I would follow him into strange, complicated adventures, on and on, into good and evil; but I always knew I could never be a part of his world. [...] But of course his charity is under a spell, and I am its prisoner. No one else could have the strength—the strength of despair!—to stand it, to stand being cared for and loved by him. [...] Ah, *really*, I used to depend on him terribly. But what did he want with my dull, my cowardly existence? [...] I get so sad and disappointed; sometimes I say to him 'I understand you.' He just shrugs his shoulders.

[...] "and still more and more I craved his affection.... His kisses and his friendly arms around me were just like heaven [...] I was getting to depend on it. [...] But then, after a piercing embrace, he would say: 'How funny it will all seem, all you've gone through, when I'm not here anymore. When you no longer feel my arms around your shoulders, nor my heart beneath you, nor this mouth on your eyes. Because I will have to go away some day, far away. Besides, I've got to help out others too; that's what I'm here for.' [...] I made him promise that he would never leave me. And he promised, twenty times; promised like a lover. It was as meaningless as my saying to him: 'I understand you.'

[...] “There are moments when I forget the wretched mess I’ve fallen into.... He will give me strength; we’ll travel, we’ll go hunting in the desert, we’ll sleep on the sidewalks of unknown cities, carefree and happy. Or else some day I’ll wake up and his magic power will have changed all laws and morals, but the world will still be the same and leave me my desires and my joys and my lack of concern. Oh, that wonderful world of adventures that we found in children’s books—won’t you give me that world? I’ve suffered so much; I deserve a reward.... He can’t. I don’t know what he *really* wants. He says he has hopes and regrets: but they have nothing to do with me. Does he talk to God? Maybe I should talk to God myself. I am in the depths of the abyss, and I have forgotten how to pray.

“Suppose he did explain his sadness to me—would I understand it any better than his jokes and insults? He attacks me, he spends hours making me ashamed of everything in the world that has ever meant anything to me, and then he gets mad if I cry.

[...] “There were days when all men of action seemed to him like the toys of some grotesque raving. He would laugh, horribly, on and on. Then he would go back to acting like a young mother, or an older sister.... If he were not such a wild thing, we would be saved! But even his sweetness is mortal.... I am his slave....

“Oh, I’ve lost my mind! [...]

(1976, 201–3; for original see 1964, 126–29)

Rimbaud has not allowed any grand notions about himself to creep into this portrayal. He has presented all aspects of his persona, whether good or bad. Precisely this kind of objectivity in relation to oneself was the aim of these artists. If a more detailed version of this characteristic is desired, refer to [Marcel] Proust (1871–1922) or [James] Joyce (1882–1941). Surely they fell into moral perversion, but they also turned such perversion into an instrument of the moral sense and offered themselves for strict moral scrutiny. Without such self-detachment the creation of moral sense is impossible. It is likely that they wrought destruction in prevailing morality, but they also paved the way for a new and higher morality. In their time, no one else reached even this level of morality, at least not in the field of politics. Swimming through external reality our intellectuals have no doubt reached all the way to the atom, but at this time none except a few artists had the grit to plunge into their inner self, though it is the power of self-scrutiny that alone can keep the destructive power of the atom at bay. But self-awareness—alas!—has been viewed as a precursor of decadence in our politics.

This literary tradition has also accomplished something even more momentous. During the Renaissance, man thought that he could do without any concept of religion and God. By conducting experiments on them-



selves these writers made it abundantly clear that a well-balanced and well-integrated life is not possible without some all-encompassing concept, if not religion. At the outset of this movement a certain critic had already guessed that the way to aesthetics eventually led to God. And that is what actually happened. Marlowe's Satan had cried out that living in separation from God is like burning in Hell, which is precisely Rimbaud's experience; on the other hand, Marlowe feels that fleeing from God is entirely impossible. "I have become hidden, then again not." This tradition does not merely have a negative aspect, it is also filled with an intense metaphysical yearning, which is generally true of most new poets, but especially of Laforgue and Max Jacob (1876–1944). The latter's poetic subjects very nearly approach those of the Sufis. All of them reflect an impatient desire to transcend the restrictions imposed by external nature and human senses; rather they consider such vague concepts as reality and the illusion of reality, dreams, human experience and the like nothing less than a restraining wall. According to Pierre Reverdy (1889–1960), "Where the senses are, sovereign reality fades and disappears" (see original in 1968, 18–19). So from the vantage of these people a poet is a captive, dreaming to break out of captivity. One poet has compared even the concept of God to a wall that prevents us from reaching a reality still subtler than He. So these people aspire for gnosis through an entirely different method. Their objective is that matter should include some element of spirituality and spiritual reality some element of matter. The boundless should become a little concrete. Laforgue asks: Wouldn't we have to create God all over again?—meaning, the search for a consciousness that would lead to gnosis but that has so far evaded the seekers of gnosis. He has expressed the same thought somewhat differently in the words: "O our Heavenly Father ... give us our daily bread; better still, allow us to sit at your dinner table."<sup>13</sup> Likewise Gide's Thésée wonders: after all, what is the need to consider the spiritual world and external reality two discrete things? (2002, 49)

It is as if these artists are, on the one hand, transforming our views about nature and, on the other, creating a new kind of mysticism. The scientist has indeed gone very far with regard to nature; however, the common man still perceives it exactly as common man did two hundred years ago, and perhaps scientists also; their concepts, if not their mode of perception, have changed. Radical transformation in the mode of perception has been the hallmark only of artists. For instance, take the simple matter of limits: they try to perceive them where there are none, and ignore them where they do exist. The other is the matter of elements such as sound

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<sup>13</sup>Source not found.

and light. They attempt to perceive them in their pristine form and to blend solid and insubstantial entities together—a process which Saint-Pol-Roux calls “the visible geometry of the invisibles,” or, “that invisible reality ... which man’s desire has turned into something concrete.”<sup>14</sup> Yet another effort was made to render invalid the binary opposition of darkness and light, real and unreal, living and dead. This would require an entirely new kind of ability and abandonment of mind, feelings, and memory as no longer usable. Paul Éluard (1895–1952) describes this new ability as: “I became a slave of the pure faculty of seeing, slave of my unreal and virgin eyes, ignorant of the world and of themselves. Quiet power. I suppressed the visible and the invisible” and lost myself in a mindless mirror (qtd. in Nugent 1974, 104). (*“Je devins esclave de la faculté pure de voir, esclave de mes yeux irréels et vierges, ignorants du monde et d’eux-mêmes. Puissance tranquille. Je supprimai le visible et l’invisible, je me perdis dans un miroir sans tain”* (1939, 11).

After scrambling their external nature and ego by subjecting them to relentless analysis they extracted powers out of them that go beyond reason, for instance, chance coincidences, evil, disorder. Perhaps they exerted themselves with regard to these far more than was necessary, but at least they refused to lie about their experience: If they discerned disorder, they refused to accept the world as orderly. Instead they searched for an all-embracing concept of man, nature, the universe, and a higher reality expansive enough to accommodate every element I have mentioned above. Such a search might be called entirely absurd and meaningless, or it might be said that such a concept (or concepts) already exists, or that they faced tremendous disappointments in their quest and their art became dangerous for humanity. These are separate questions and I do not wish to get involved with them here. I only want to underscore that they did not indulge in hollow aestheticism but rather sought to change the entire mode of human perception. They took the first step to incorporate in man’s consciousness the latest discoveries of science without which knowledge becomes one’s double run amuck; and they strove to build a new mysticism on the basis of empiricism—the overwhelming element of the spirit of contemporary times. This effort is perhaps so inclusive and comprehensive that man’s existing skills cannot realize it. In which case we should take pride in the fact that man at least dreamed of such a magnificent undertaking. And then we may raise whatever objections we want. I will accept them all; in fact I have often raised such objections myself.

A necessary offshoot of the effort to create an eye capable of observing

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<sup>14</sup>Source not found.

nature and what lies beyond nature is the necessity of creating a new art. The commonly understood meaning of aestheticism becomes totally ineffective here. One should not be content to merely describe reality; these artists go beyond describing to actually creating a new reality through words. Their aim was not “rebirth,” as Saint-Pol-Roux says, but “birth.” In a manner of speaking, this element has always been present in poetry. What makes it different for these artists is their conscious effort to project it maximally in their work. They seemed to be totally committed “to set the word free.” Saint-Pol-Roux elucidates the process in these words: “Like words have acquired wings for the first time, which enable them to cross over from reality to metaphysics, from illusion to the domain of objects.”<sup>15</sup> This should clarify that such action was not an escape from life or mere aesthetic gratification, but a part of the comprehensive effort to radically transform nature and reality—an action Rimbaud has described as the “alchemy of the word” (1976, 205; 1964, 131), or that poetic word that all senses might profitably use. In regard to his creative efforts he mentions, “I turned silences and nights into words. What was unutterable, I wrote down. I made the whirling world stand still” (1976, 204; 1964, 130). If you want to understand this process with greater clarity, refer to Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). He says that a poet does not use words at all. A prose writer can enter inside words and examine them closely. This is beyond a poet. He observes words from the outside only. Like a prose writer he cannot describe any object. Instead he creates a new object in words opposite that object. He presents verbal substitutes of objects. His lines are not therefore just descriptive sentences; they are objects. Poets are thus “creators” in the strict sense of the word. As an example Sartre quotes the following lines of Rimbaud:

Oh seasons! Oh castles!  
 What soul is faultless?  
 (*O saisons! O châteaux!*  
*Quelle âme est sans défaut?*)

Sartre says:

Nobody is questioned; nobody is questioning; the poet is absent. And the question involves no answer, or rather it is its own answer. Is it therefore a false question? But it would be absurd to believe that Rimbaud “meant” that everybody has his faults. As Breton said of Saint-Pol Roux, “If he had meant it, he would have said it.” Nor did he *mean* to say something else.

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<sup>15</sup>Source not found.

He asked an absolute question. He conferred upon the beautiful word “soul” an interrogative existence. The interrogation has become a thing as the anguish of Tintoretto became a yellow sky. It is no longer a signification, but a substance. It is seen from the outside, and Rimbaud invites us to see it from the outside with him. Its strangeness arises from the fact that, in order to consider it, we place ourselves on the other side of the human condition, on the side of God.

(1949, 18)

Even if we accept this effort to create new art as a supreme achievement, still one can raise the objection that, instead of expressing life, some of them turned the act of expression and its means into the subject of expression. In fact, Valéry went so far as to say that he only cared for the method—if one can find the method of expression, there is no need for expression.<sup>16</sup>

If you confined yourself only to theories, it would certainly appear that these artists had become indifferent to life. But it is not a question of you and me but of the artist, and artists of the rank of Mallarmé and Valéry. If such illustrious artists delve into the nature of expression, how and by what it is obstructed and how the obstruction might be removed, it is impossible that they would fail to comprehend the human mind and the fundamental element of human existence. Life and death, body and soul, good and evil, being and nonbeing—in short, what basic human problem is there that is not found in the poetry of Mallarmé and Valéry! Especially in Valéry’s poems on problems of expression we find profound revelations about man, enough, in fact, to construct a veritable philosophy of life on their basis. As for the observation that life has become progressively so diminished in the verses of these two poets that the difference between it and death has become practically nonexistent, this then is a problem that cannot be settled through discussion. For that one must read Mallarmé’s [“Aye Rūdyād”]<sup>17</sup> and “Shepherd’s Dream”<sup>18</sup> or Valéry’s poem “Serpent.”<sup>19</sup> These people too have wrestled with death and triumphed over it, but they have not torn their collars running and shouting deliriously, “Life! Life!” They possess a particular mental culture, a particular style of expression, and say what they have to say within its confines. Mallarmé expresses his

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<sup>16</sup>Source not found.

<sup>17</sup>The poem could not be located. Askari gives the title in Urdu as “Aye Rūdyād,” which is incomprehensible.

<sup>18</sup>The French title of the poem is “L’Après-midi d’un Faune” (“A Faun in the Afternoon”) (2006, 38–47).

<sup>19</sup>The reference may be to the poem “Ébauche d’un Serpent” (Silhouette of a Serpent) (1971, 184–205); no poem by Valéry titled “Serpent” was found.

desire to live in such exquisitely refined words; “*Mais, ô mon cœur, entends le chant des matelots!*” (“Still, my soul, listen to the sailors sing!”) (2006, 24–25). And Valéry expresses his triumph over the death-wish in these words: “*Le vent se lève! ... il faut tenter de vivre!*” (“The wind is rising! ... We must try to live!”) (1971, 220–21).

These poets receive a horrific dressing-down especially for ignoring social problems. The truth is different. Indeed they did not deem the politics of any special group worthy of regard. I have already explained why they were so adamant in keeping themselves free of all kinds of frozen concepts, and aloofness from politics and political groups was all the more necessary because political people had no qualms about sacrificing even the dearest concepts for the sake of pragmatism. The fear was not ill founded or imaginary; Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud had participated in revolutions and experienced the politically-minded from up close. Baudelaire had even said: who can escape not loving democracy; it is fused in our blood like the germs of syphilis.<sup>20</sup> From this statement it would be wrong to conclude that Baudelaire was an enemy of people. It only implies that we know how the politically-minded clamor about “democracy” to exploit it for their venal goals, and yet we are compelled by nature to desire a democratic system. If the accusation of aestheticism can be leveled to a degree on someone, it is [Louis Mans]. But even he had perceived this reality. One of his characters says that if he keeps deceiving himself, what of it? The middle class has been making a fool out of the poor in the name of democracy. His self-deception is still far less.<sup>21</sup>

The question of politics-mongering aside, the new artists have been acutely aware of the problem of poverty, perhaps more acutely than those who are directly involved with social problems. If I started to count the examples, I could easily whip up a whole essay on the subject. Alone in Rimbaud a good dozen poems could be found that deeply commiserate with the plight of the poor—poems such as “Kids in a Daze,” “The Ladies Who Look for Lice,” “Poor People in Church,” etc. And in his “Parisian War Cry” he has subjected the contemporary political and social system to such caustic irony that a second example could scarcely be found in literature (1976, 56–57).

The new tradition did not rest content with only its expression of either protest or sympathy but, rather, dreamed of an all-embracing justice and

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<sup>20</sup>Source not found; a similar sentiment is quoted by Walter Benjamin (2006, 48): “All of us have the republican spirit in our blood, just as we have syphilis in our bones. We have a democratic and syphilitic infection.”

<sup>21</sup>Unable to identify a writer by this name, source not found.

freedom in entirely apolitical terms. It did not just destroy, it also built. By the time the new tradition reaches Proust and Joyce, it has begun to affirm certain essential human institutions. Hence both of them have insisted relentlessly and vehemently on the necessity of basic human relations as embodied, for instance, in family, etc. Likewise in his latest novel *Thésée*, Gide does not consider mere “individualism” enough, but thinks that “tradition” is also essential for the full growth of man. Moreover, in the same novel, he also directly praised such an order of life that strives for equal distribution of wealth among all its members and where a man’s social status is determined by his personal ability. The world Gide has fashioned is not only a *just* world but also a *free* world. Even though *Thésée*, the king, does not consider the spiritual world and external reality two separate things, his afflicted guest Oedipus does, yet the difference does not prompt *Thésée* to assume a hostile posture; he believes instead that Oedipus’s arrival in the city has been a blessing.

Such then is the world that these aesthetes are trying to fashion. Only among the devotees of “art for art’s sake” would you find a world in which an opponent is treated with courtesy and considered a blessing.

Gide has presented an exceedingly healthy concept of man’s growth and perfection in the same book. Man must set a purpose for himself and then go all out to achieve it. Occasionally losing one’s way is not something that can be helped, but one should not allow being lost forever. He must consider his goal dearer than his family and relax only after it is accomplished. And the goal must seek to benefit the whole of humanity. This is what gives a sense of fruition to man’s existence. To abandon the goal midway is the greatest sin in Gide’s eyes, and man’s assigned punishment in hell would be to do over and over again what he had left half done.

All right, good that Monsieur Gide got wise finally—one might say—but have not he and the other lovers of beauty been writing things all along which, although vaguely satisfying, do not provide any clear benefit to humanity. Political people are not the only ones who have raised this objection, even people working hard to extricate themselves from the morass of politics have done so. Thus [Arthur] Koestler (1905–1983) mentions disapprovingly that Gide’s books lack any thought; an ill-defined taste, a faint smell of something; by themselves not enough to make his work great literature, because taste alone cannot benefit humanity.<sup>22</sup>

Let me counter Koestler through my own experience. The greater part of Gide’s journal written during the war is not made up of thoughts but of

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<sup>22</sup>Source not found.

precisely this “taste.” Strangely, just when the massacre of Muslims got underway,<sup>23</sup> I happened to lay my hands on parts of this work. The external conditions Gide had before him at the time of writing his journal, I had far worse conditions before me at the time of reading it. However, a solid and incontrovertible fact stood out for me. What with the harrowing conditions, Gide did not lose his peace of mind and composure; his expression did not betray any impatience or disquietude. Perhaps Gide has never written anything in a more elegant prose in all his life! It is likely that he was never intensely affected by external reality. His allegiance was rather to an unswerving preference for absolute life over the transient turmoil and confusion. He did not allow despair to get the better of him or become overwhelmed by the state of fear and apprehension that had swept across his milieu. Even in those devastating conditions he was busy nurturing life. The ability to maintain such balance within oneself and to inspire it in others—if this is not service to mankind then what is? Is it not a solid achievement to not allow the force of life to weaken? Does not this attitude betray an unconditional belief in life?

I do not deny that there may be some unhealthy elements among the artists associated with the tradition that began with the concept of “art for art’s sake.” But I do refuse to accept that taken as a whole this tradition is an enemy of people, or of a better life, or of a pure life, and that it leads man toward decadence or death. On the contrary, it enjoys the status of a magnificent investigative undertaking that has set itself the task of searching for life and life’s fundamental requirements, and with a courage and self-confidence that solicit no support from any inherited concepts whatever. It does not deny the existence of “good” and “truth,” but it does seek their complete affirmation—perhaps such that it is not even possible for man.

These artists have eagerly welcomed torment and agony to the extent man’s nervous system can bear them, all in a desire to introduce man to reality. In their obsessive pursuit, they have not looked for ease and convenience and have not compromised with any interest. They have not considered anything except the truth worthy of their attention. It is possible that they have met with total failure in some of their efforts, but art is not an arena of politics. Here success or failure plays no part in judgment. Here, constant movement is everything, regardless of whether one arrives anywhere at all. European consciousness was gradually drifting away from life. The new artists did their best to keep it alive. They did not evade their duty and they did not go about their job willy-nilly. They endeavored

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<sup>23</sup>Askari is here referring to the riots in which a sizeable number of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs were killed in the wake of the partition of India in 1947.

unremittingly to bring fire from the heavens to keep humanity warm. This, in fact, was their basic motivating force. We cannot judge them by disregarding it. They have not failed to live up to the responsibility that the conditions of their time and place had imposed upon them. Like Thésée their city too has been built and they are barred from entering Hell. □

—Translated by Mubammad Umar Memon

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