Art in Theory
1900–2000
An Anthology of Changing Ideas

Edited by Charles Harrison
and Paul Wood

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Summary of Contents

contain these emotional elements ready made up for us, and all that art need do is to imitate Nature.'

But, alas! Nature is heartlessly indifferent to the needs of the imaginative life; God causes His rain to fall upon the just and upon the unjust. The sun neglects to provide the appropriate limelight effect even upon a triumphant Napoleon or a dying Caesar. Assuredly we have no guarantee that in nature the emotional elements will be combined appropriately with the demands of the imaginative life, and it is, I think, the great occupation of the graphic arts to give us first of all order and variety in the sensuous plane, and then so to arrange the sensuous presentment of objects that the emotional elements are elicited with an order and appropriateness altogether beyond what Nature herself provides.

Let me sum up for a moment what I have said about the relation of art to Nature, which is, perhaps, the greatest stumbling-block to the understanding of the graphic arts.

I have admitted that there is beauty in Nature, that is to say, that certain objects constantly do, and perhaps any object may, compel us to regard it with that intense disinterested contemplation that belongs to the imaginative life, and which is impossible to the actual life of necessity and action; but that in objects created to arouse the aesthetic feeling we have an added conciousness of purpose on the part of the creator, that he made it on purpose not to be used but to be regarded and enjoyed; and that this feeling is characteristic of the aesthetic judgement proper.

When the artist passes from pure sensations to emotions aroused by means of sensations, he uses natural forms which, in themselves, are calculated to move our emotions, and he presents these in such a manner that the forms themselves generate in us emotional states, based upon the fundamental necessities of our physical and physiological nature. The artist's attitude to natural form is, therefore, infinitely various according to the emotions he wishes to arouse. He may require for his purpose the most complete representation of a figure, he may be intensely realistic, provided that his presentment, in spite of its closeness to natural appearance, disengages clearly for us the appropriate emotional elements. Or he may give us the merest suggestion of natural forms, and rely almost entirely upon the force and intensity of the emotional elements involved in his presentment.

We may, then, dispense once for all with the idea of likeness to Nature, of correctness or incorrectness as a test, and consider only whether the emotional elements inherent in natural form are adequately discovered, unless, indeed, the emotional idea depends at any point upon likeness, or completeness of representation.

8 Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*

Kandinsky was born in Moscow and trained in Munich, where he co-founded the group Der Blaue Reiter and where his major treatise was first published late in 1911 as *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Piper Verlag, dated 1912). His theories rest on a series of assumptions which were relatively widespread in modern artistic circles around the turn of the century: that there is a qualitative hierarchy in human experience (a belief central to the doctrine of Theosophy, to which both Kandinsky and Mondrian were attracted); that works of art are united by their possession of an essential expressive or 'spiritual' value; and that this value is a function of art's autonomy with respect to naturalistic appearances. In this text Kandinsky develops a defence of art's 'essential' spiritual function into a programme for abstract painting conceived as an index of social and spiritual progress. First English translation 1914; the present version is taken from the translation of the second 1912 edition, in K. C. Lindsay and P. Vergo (eds. and trans.), *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, London, 1982, pp. 127–61. (See also IB9 and IIIC12.)

A General

1 Introduction

Every work of art is the child of its time, often it is the mother of our emotions.

Thus, every period of culture produces its own art, which can never be repeated. Any attempt to give new life to the artistic principles of the past can at best only result in a work of art that resembles a stillborn child. For example, it is impossible for our inner lives, our feelings, to be like those of the ancient Greeks. Efforts, therefore, to apply Greek principles, e.g., to sculpture, can only produce forms similar to those employed by the Greeks, a work that remains soulless for all time. This sort of imitation resembles the mimicry of the ape. To all outward appearances, the movements of apes are exactly like those of human beings. The ape will sit holding a book in front of its nose, leafing through with a thoughtful expression on its face, but the inner meaning of these gestures is completely lacking.

There exists, however, another outward similarity of artistic forms that is rooted in a deeper necessity. The similarity of inner strivings within the whole spiritual-moral atmosphere – striving after goals that have already been pursued, but afterward forgotten – this similarity of the inner mood of an entire period can lead logically to the use of forms successfully employed to the same ends in an earlier period. Our sympathy, our understanding, our inner feeling for the primitives arose partly in this way. Just like us, those pure artists wanted to capture in their works the inner essence of things, which of itself brought about a rejection of the external, the accidental.

This important point of inner contact is, however, for all its importance, only a point. Our souls, which are only now beginning to awaken after the long reign of materialism, harbor seeds of desperation, unbelief, lack of purpose. The whole nightmare of the materialistic attitude, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, purposeless game, is not yet over. The awakening soul is still deeply under the influence of this nightmare. Only a weak light glimmers, like a tiny point in an enormous circle of blackness. This weak light is no more than an intimation that the soul scarcely has the courage to perceive, doubtful whether this light might not itself be a dream, and the circle of blackness, reality. This doubt, and the still-oppressive suffering caused by a materialistic philosophy create a sharp distinction between our souls and those of the 'primitives.' Our souls, when one succeeds in touching them, give out a hollow ring, like a beautiful vase discovered cracked in the depths of the earth. For this reason the movement toward the primitive, which we are experiencing at this moment, can only be, with its present borrowed forms, of short duration.

These two similarities between modern art and the forms of bygone periods are, as can easily be seen, diametrically opposed. The first is external and thus has no future. The

second is internal and therefore conceals the seeds of the future within itself. After the period of materialistic trials to which the soul had apparently succumbed, yet which is rejected as an evil temptation, the soul emerges, refined by struggle and suffering. Coarser emotions such as terror, joy, sorrow, etc., which served as the content of art during this period of trial, will now hold little attraction for the artist. He will strive to awaken as yet nameless feelings of a finer nature. He himself leads a relatively refined and complex existence, and the work he produces will necessarily awaken finer emotions in the spectator who is capable of them, emotions that we cannot put into words.

* * *

II Movement

The spiritual life can be accurately represented by a diagram of a large acute triangle divided into unequal parts, with the most acute and smallest division at the top. The farther down one goes, the larger, broader, more extensive, and deeper become the divisions of the triangle.

The whole triangle moves slowly, barely perceptibly, forward and upward, so that where the highest point is 'today'; the next division is 'tomorrow,' i.e., what is today comprehensible only to the topmost segment of the triangle and to the rest of the triangle is gibberish, becomes tomorrow the sensible and emotional content of the life of the second segment.

At the apex of the topmost division there stands sometimes only a single man. His joyful vision is like an inner, immeasurable sorrow. Those who are closest to him do not understand him and in their indignation, call him deranged: a phoney or a candidate for the madhouse. [. . .]

In every division of the triangle one can find artists. Every one of them who is able to see beyond the frontiers of his own segment is the prophet of his environment, and helps the forward movement of the obstinate cartload of humanity. But if he does not possess the necessary sharp eye, or if he misuses or even closes it from unworthy motives or for unworthy purposes, then he is fully understood and celebrated by all his companions within his own segment. The bigger this segment is (and the lower down, therefore, it lies), the greater is the mass of people who find the artist's language comprehensible. It is obvious that every such segment hungers – consciously or (much more often) completely unconsciously – after its corresponding spiritual bread. This bread is given it by its artists, and tomorrow the next segment will reach for that same bread.

* * *

III Spiritual Turning-point

The spiritual triangle moves slowly forward and upward. Today, one of the largest of the lower divisions has grasped the elementary slogans of the materialistic 'credo.' As regards religion, its inhabitants bear various titles. They call themselves Jews, Catholics, Protestants, etc. In fact, they are atheists, a fact that a few of the most daring or most stupid openly admit. 'Heaven' is empty. 'God is dead.' Politically, these inhabitants are republicans or democrats. The fear, distaste, and hatred they felt yesterday for these political views are today directed at the term anarchy, about which they know

nothing save the terrifying name. Economically, these people are socialists. They sharpen the sword of justice to deal the fatal blow to the capitalist hydra and cut off the head of evil.

Since the inhabitants of this large division of the triangle have never managed to solve a problem for themselves and have always been pulled along in the cart of humanity by their self-sacrificing fellow men standing far above them, they know nothing of the effort of pulling, which they have never observed except from a great distance. For this reason, they imagine this effort to be very easy, believing in infallible remedies and prescriptions of universal application.

The next and lower division is dragged blindly upward by the one just described. But it hangs grimly onto its former position, struggling in fear of the unknown, of being deceived.

The higher divisions, religiously speaking, are not only blindly atheistic, but are able to justify their godlessness with the words of others (for example, Virchow's saying, unworthy of an educated man: 'I have dissected many corpses, but never yet discovered a soul'). Politically they are even more often republicans, are familiar with various parliamentary usages, and read the leading articles on politics in the newspapers. Economically, they are socialists of various shades, supporting their 'convictions' with a wealth of quotations (everything from Schweitzer's *Emma* to Lassalle's *Iron Law* and Marx's *Capital*, and much more).

In these higher divisions, other disciplines gradually emerge that were missing from those just described: science and art, to which belong also literature and music.

Scientifically, these people are positivists, recognizing only what can be weighed and measured. They regard anything else as potentially harmful nonsense, the same nonsense they yesterday called today's 'proven' theories.

In art they are naturalists, which permits them to recognize and even prize personality, individuality, and temperament in the artist, up to a certain limit designated by others and in which, for this very reason, they believe unswervingly.

In these higher compartments there exists, despite the visible order and certainty and infallible principles, a hidden fear, a confusion, a vacillation, an uncertainty – as in the heads of passengers aboard a great, steady ocean liner when black clouds gather over the sea, the dry land is hidden in mist, and the bleak wind heaps up the water into black mountains. And this is thanks to their education. For they know that the man who is today revered as intellectual, statesman, or artist was yesterday a ridiculed self-seeker, charlatan, or incompetent, unworthy of serious consideration.

And the higher one ascends the spiritual triangle, the more obvious becomes this sharp-edged fear, this insecurity. First, one finds here and there eyes capable of seeing for themselves, heads capable of putting two and two together. People with these gifts ask themselves, 'If this wisdom of the day before yesterday has been overthrown by that of yesterday, and the latter by that of today, then could it not also be somehow possible that the wisdom of today could be supplanted by that of tomorrow?' And the bravest of them reply, 'It is within the bounds of possibility.'

Second, one finds eyes capable of seeing what is 'not yet explained' by modern-day science. Such people ask themselves: 'Will science ever reach a solution to this problem if it continues along the same path it has been following until now? And if it reaches one, will we be able to rely on its answer?'

In these compartments can also be found professional intellectuals, who can remember how established facts, recognized by the academies, were first greeted by those same academies. Here, too, can be found art historians, who write books full of praise and deep sentiments – about an art that yesterday was regarded as senseless. By means of these books, they remove the hurdles over which art has long since jumped, and set up new ones, which this time are supposed to stay permanently and firmly in place. Engaged in this occupation, they fail to notice that they are building their barriers behind art rather than in front of it. If they notice it tomorrow, then they will quickly write more books in order to remove their barriers one stage further. And this occupation will continue unchanged until it is realized that the external principles of art can only be valid for the past and not for the future. No theory derived from these principles can account for the path ahead, which lies in the realm of the nonmaterial. One cannot crystallize in material form what does not yet exist in material form. The spirit that will lead us into the realms of tomorrow can only be recognized through feeling (to which the talent of the artist is the path). Theory is the lantern that illuminates the crystallized forms of yesterday and before.

And if we climb still higher, we see even greater confusion, as if in a great city, built solidly according to all architectural and mathematical rules, that is suddenly shaken by a mighty force. The people who live in this division indeed live in just such a spiritual city, where such forces are at work, and with which the spiritual architects and mathematicians have not reckoned. [. . .]

And higher still we find that there is no more fear. The work done here boldly shakes the pinnacles that men have set up. Here, too, we find professional intellectuals who examine matter over and over again and finally cast doubt upon matter itself, which yesterday was the basis of everything, and upon which the whole universe was supported. The electron theory – i.e., the theory of moving electricity, which is supposed completely to replace matter, has found lately many keen proponents, who from time to time overreach the limits of caution and thus perish in the conquest of this new stronghold of science, like heedless soldiers, sacrificing themselves for others at the desperate storming of some beleaguered fortress. But 'there is no fortress so strong that it cannot be taken.'

On the other hand, such facts as the science of yesterday greeted with the usual word 'swindle' are on the increase, or are merely becoming more generally known. Even the newspapers, those habitually most obedient servants of success and of the plebs, who base their business on 'giving the people what they want,' find themselves in many cases obliged to limit or even to suppress altogether the ironic tone of their articles about the latest 'miracles.' Various educated men, pure materialists among them, devote their powers of scientific investigation to those puzzling facts that can no longer be denied or kept quiet.

On the other hand, the number of people who set no store by the methods of materialistic science in matters concerning the 'nonmaterial', or matter that is not perceptible to our senses, is at last increasing. And just as art seeks help from the primitives, these people turn for help to half-forgotten times, with their half-forgotten methods. [. . .]

* * *

When religion, science, and morality are shaken (the last by the mighty hand of Nietzsche), when the external supports threaten to collapse, then man's gaze turns away from the external toward himself.

Literature, music, and art are the first and most sensitive realms where this spiritual change becomes noticeable in real form. These spheres immediately reflect the murky present; they provide an intimation of that greatness which first becomes noticeable only to a few, as just a tiny point, and which for the masses does not exist at all.

They reflect the great darkness that appeared with hardly any warning. They themselves become dark and murky. On the other hand, they turn away from the soulless content of modern life, toward materials and environments that give a free hand to the nonmaterial strivings and searchings of the thirsty soul.

* * *

IV The Pyramid

And so; gradually the different arts have set forth on the path of saying what they are best able to say, through means that are peculiar to each.

And in spite of, or thanks to, this differentiation, the arts as such have never in recent times been closer to one another than in this latest period of spiritual transformation.

In all that we have discussed above lie hidden the seeds of the struggle toward the nonnaturalistic, the abstract, toward inner nature. Consciously or unconsciously, they obey the words of Socrates: 'Know thyself!' Consciously or unconsciously, artists turn gradually toward an emphasis on their materials, examining them spiritually, weighing in the balance the inner worth of those elements out of which their art is best suited to create.

B Painting

V Effects of Color

Letting one's eyes wander over a palette laid out with colors has two main results:

1 There occurs a purely physical effect, i.e., the eye itself is charmed by the beauty and other qualities of the color. The spectator experiences a feeling of satisfaction, of pleasure, like a gourmet who has a tasty morsel in his mouth. Or the eye is titillated, as is one's palate by a highly spiced dish. It can also be calmed or cooled again, as one's finger can when it touches ice. These are all physical sensations and as such can only be of short duration. They are also superficial, leaving behind no lasting impression if the soul remains closed. Just as one can only experience a physical feeling of cold on touching ice (which one forgets after having warmed one's fingers again), so too the physical effect of color is forgotten when one's eyes are turned away. And as the physical sensation of the coldness of the ice, penetrating deeper, can give rise to other, deeper sensations and set off a whole chain of psychic experiences, so the superficial effect of color can also develop into a [deeper] form of experience.

Only familiar objects will have a wholly superficial effect upon a moderately sensitive person. Those, however, that we encounter for the first time immediately have a

spiritual effect upon us. A child, for whom every object is new, experiences the wor
in this way: it sees light, is attracted by it, wants to grasp it, burns its finger in t
process, and thus learns fear and respect for the flame. And then it learns that light h
not only an unfriendly, but also a friendly side: banishing darkness and prolonging t
day, warming and cooking, delighting the eye. One becomes familiar with ligh
by collecting these experiences and storing away this knowledge in the brai
The powerful, intense interest in light vanishes, and its attribute of delighting th
eye is met with indifference. Gradually, in this way, the world loses its magic. On
knows that trees provide shade, that horses gallop quickly, and that cars go even faste
that dogs bite, that the moon is far away, and that the man one sees in the mirror i
not real.

The constantly growing awareness of the qualities of different objects and beings i
only possible given a high level of development in the individual. With further
development, these objects and beings take on an inner value, eventually an inne
sound. So it is with color, which if one's spiritual sensitivity is at a low stage of
development, can only create a superficial effect, an effect that soon disappears once
the stimulus has ceased. Yet, even at this stage, this extremely simple effect can vary.
The eye is more strongly attracted by the brighter colors, and still more by the brighter
and warmer: vermilion attracts and pleases the eye as does flame, which men always
regard covetously. Bright lemon yellow hurts the eye after a short time, as a high note
on the trumpet hurts the ear. The eye becomes disturbed, cannot bear it any longer,
and seeks depth and repose in blue or green.

At a higher level of development, however, there arises from this elementary
impression a more profound effect, which occasions a deep emotional response. In
this case we have:

2 The second main consequence of the contemplation of color, i.e., the psycho-
logical effect of color. The psychological power of color becomes apparent, calling forth
a vibration from the soul. Its primary, elementary physical power becomes simply the
path by which color reaches the soul.

Whether this second consequence is in fact a direct one, as might be supposed from
these last few lines, or whether it is achieved by means of association, remains perhaps
questionable. Since in general the soul is closely connected to the body, it is possible
that one emotional response may conjure up another, corresponding form of emotion
by means of association. For example, the color red may cause a spiritual vibration like
flame, since red is the color of flame. A warm red has a stimulating effect and can
increase in intensity until it induces a painful sensation, perhaps also because of its
resemblance to flowing blood. This color can thus conjure up the memory of another
physical agent, which necessarily exerts a painful effect upon the soul.

If this were the case, it would be easy to find an associative explanation for the other
physical effects of color, i.e., its effects not only upon our sight, but also upon our other
senses. One might assume that, e.g., bright yellow produces a sour effect by analogy
with lemons.

It is, however, hardly possible to maintain this kind of explanation. As far as tasting
colors is concerned, many examples are known where this explanation does not apply.
A Dresden doctor tells how one of his patients, whom he describes as 'spiritually
unusually highly developed,' invariably found that a certain sauce had a 'blue' taste

i.e., it affected him like the color blue. One might perhaps assume another similar, and
yet different, explanation; that in the case of such highly developed people the paths
leading to the soul are so direct, and the impressions it receives are so quickly
produced, that an effect immediately communicated to the soul via the medium of
taste sets up vibrations along the corresponding paths leading away from the soul to the
other sensory organs (in this case, the eye). This effect would seem to be a sort of echo
or resonance, as in the case of musical instruments, which without themselves being
touched, vibrate in sympathy with another instrument being played. Such highly
sensitive people are like good, much-played violins, which vibrate in all their parts
and fibers at every touch of the bow.

If one accepts this explanation, then admittedly, sight must be related not only to taste,
but also to all the other senses. Which is indeed the case. Many colors have an uneven,
prickly appearance, while others feel smooth, like velvet, so that one wants to stroke them
(dark ultramarine, chrome-oxide green, madder). Even the distinction between cold and
warm tones depends upon this sensation. There are also colors that appear soft (madder),
others that always strike one as hard (cobalt green, green-blue oxide), so that one might
mistake them for already dry when freshly squeezed from the tube.

The expression 'the scent of colors' is common usage.

Finally, our hearing of colors is so precise that it would perhaps be impossible to find
anyone who would try to represent his impression of bright yellow by means of the
bottom register of the piano, or describe dark madder as being like a soprano voice.

This explanation (that is, in terms of association) is, however, insufficient in many
instances that are for us of particular importance. Anyone who has heard of color
therapy knows that colored light can have a particular effect upon the entire body.
Various attempts to exploit this power of color and apply it to different nervous
disorders have again noted that red light has an enlivening and stimulating effect
upon the heart, while blue, on the other hand, can lead to temporary paralysis. If
this sort of effect can also be observed in the case of animals, and even plants, then any
explanation in terms of association completely falls down. These facts in any case prove
that color contains within itself a little-studied but enormous power, which can influ-
ence the entire human body as a physical organism.

If association does not seem a sufficient explanation in this case, then it cannot satisfy
us as regards the effect of color upon the psyche. In general, therefore, color is a means
of exerting a direct influence upon the soul. Color is the keyboard. The eye is the
hammer. The soul is the piano, with its many strings.

The artist is the hand that purposefully sets the soul vibrating by means of this or
that key.

Thus it is clear that the harmony of colors can only be based upon the principle of
purposefully touching the human soul.

This basic tenet we shall call the principle of internal necessity.

9 Wassily Kandinsky (1966–1944) The Cologne Lecture

Kandinsky here gives a summary account of his own work and of its development. He had
been invited to lecture on his work at the opening of an exhibition in Cologne in 1914, and
responded by sending a typescript text. A transcription of the original manuscript was

must be complete too. I am bound to accord you, in the name of free speech, the full right to shout, lie and write to your heart's content. But you are bound to grant me, in the name of freedom of association, the right to enter into, or withdraw from, association with people advocating this or that view. The party is a voluntary association, which would inevitably break up, first ideologically and then physically, if it did not cleanse itself of people advocating anti-party views. And to define the border-line between party and anti-party there is the party programme, the party's resolutions on tactics and its rules and, lastly, the entire experience of international Social-Democracy, the voluntary international associations of the proletariat, which has constantly brought into its parties individual elements and trends not fully consistent, not completely Marxist and not altogether correct and which, on the other hand, has constantly conducted periodical 'cleansings' of its ranks. So it will be with us too, supporters of bourgeois 'freedom of criticism', *within* the Party. We are now becoming a mass party all at once, changing abruptly to an open organization, and it is inevitable that we shall be joined by many who are inconsistent (from the Marxist standpoint), perhaps we shall be joined even by some Christian elements, and even by some mystics. We have sound stomachs and we are rock-like Marxists. We shall digest those inconsistent elements. Freedom of thought and freedom of criticism within the Party will never make us forget about the freedom of organizing people into those voluntary associations known as parties.

Secondly, we must say to you bourgeois individualists that your talk about absolute freedom is sheer hypocrisy. There can be no real and effective 'freedom' in a society based on the power of money, in a society in which the masses of working people live in poverty and the handful of rich live like parasites. Are you free in relation to your bourgeois publisher, Mr Writer, in relation to your bourgeois public, which demands that you provide it with pornography in frames and paintings, and prostitution as a 'supplement' to 'sacred' scenic art? This absolute freedom is a bourgeois or an anarchist phrase (since, as a world outlook, anarchism is bourgeois philosophy turned inside out). One cannot live in society and be free from society. The freedom of the bourgeois writer, artist or actress is simply masked (or hypocritically masked) dependence on the money-bag, on corruption, on prostitution.

And we socialists expose this hypocrisy and rip off the false labels, not in order to arrive at a non-class literature and art (that will be possible only in a socialist extra-class society), but to contrast this hypocritically free literature, which is in reality linked to the bourgeoisie, with a really free one that will be *openly* linked to the proletariat.

It will be a free literature, because the idea of socialism and sympathy with the working people, and not greed or careerism, will bring ever new forces to its ranks. It will be a free literature, because it will serve, not some satiated heroine, not the bored 'upper ten thousand' suffering from fatty degeneration, but the millions and tens of millions of working people – the flower of the country, its strength and its future. It will be a free literature, enriching the last word in the revolutionary thought of mankind with the experience and living work of the socialist proletariat, bringing about permanent interaction between the experience of the past (scientific socialism, the completion of the development of socialism from its primitive, utopian forms) and the experience of the present (the present struggle of the worker comrades).

To work, then, comrades! We are faced with a new and difficult task. But it is a noble and grateful one – to organize a broad, multiform and varied literature inseparably linked with the Social-Democratic working-class movement. All Social-Democratic literature must become Party literature. Every newspaper, journal, publishing house, etc., must immediately set about reorganizing its work, leading up to a situation in which it will, in one form or another, be integrated into one Party organization or another. Only then will 'Social-Democratic' literature really become worthy of that name, only then will it be able to fulfil its duty and, even within the framework of bourgeois society, break out of bourgeois slavery and merge with the movement of the really advanced and thoroughly revolutionary class.

4 Henri Bergson (1859–1941) from *Creative Evolution*

Bergson achieved an extensive intellectual influence, particularly in France, in the years preceding the First World War. In particular, his ideas on memory, the *élan vital*, and the subjective construction of reality, pervaded the avant-garde, having an impact on Cubism and, more explicitly, Futurism. *L'Evolution créatrice*, was originally published in Paris in 1907; an authorized English translation by Arthur Mitchell was published in London in 1911. The present extracts are taken from pp. 171–3, 194–6 and 296–9.

Fabricating consists in carving out the form of an object in matter. What is the most important is the form to be obtained. As to the matter, we choose that which is most convenient; but, in order to choose it, that is to say, in order to go and seek it among many others, we must have tried, in imagination at least, to endow every kind of matter with the form of the object conceived. In other words, an intelligence which aims at fabricating is an intelligence which never stops at the actual form of things nor regards it as final, but, on the contrary, looks upon all matter as if it were carvable at will. Plato compares the good dialectician to the skilful cook who carves the animal without breaking its bones, by following the articulations marked out by nature. An intelligence which always proceeded thus would really be an intelligence turned toward speculation. But action, and in particular fabrication, requires the opposite mental tendency: it makes us consider every actual form of things, even the form of natural things, as artificial and provisional; it makes our thought efface from the object perceived, even though organized and living, the lines that outwardly mark its inward structure; in short, it makes us regard its matter as indifferent to its form. The whole of matter is made to appear to our thought as an immense piece of cloth in which we can cut out what we will and sew it together again as we please. Let us note, in passing, that it is this power that we affirm when we say that there is a *space*, that is to say, a homogeneous and empty medium, infinite and infinitely divisible, lending itself indifferently to any mode of decomposition whatsoever. A medium of this kind is never perceived; it is only conceived. What is perceived is extension coloured, resistant, divided according to the lines which mark out the boundaries of real bodies or of their real elements. But when we think of our power over this matter, that is to say, of our faculty of decomposing and recomposing it as we please, we project the whole of these possible decompositions and recompositions behind real extension in the form of a homogeneous space, empty and indifferent, which is supposed to underlie it. This space is therefore, pre-eminently, the plan of our possible action on things, although, indeed, things have a natural tendency, as we shall explain further on, to enter into a frame of

this kind. It is a view taken by mind. The animal has probably no idea of it, even when, like us, it perceives extended things. It is an idea that symbolizes the tendency of the human intellect to fabrication. [. . .] Suffice it to say that *the intellect is characterized by the unlimited power of decomposing according to any law and of recomposing into any system*.

* * *

Instinct is sympathy. If this sympathy could extend its object and also reflect upon itself, it would give us the key to vital operations – just as intelligence, developed and disciplined, guides us into matter. For – we cannot too often repeat it – intelligence and instinct are turned in opposite directions, the former towards inert matter, the latter towards life. Intelligence, by means of science, which is its work, will deliver up to us more and more completely the secret of physical operations; of life it brings us, and moreover only claims to bring us, a translation in terms of inertia. It goes all round life, taking from outside the greatest possible number of views of it, drawing it into itself instead of entering into it. But it is to the very inwardness of life that *intuition* leads us – by intuition I mean instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely.

That an effort of this kind is not impossible, is proved by the existence in man of an aesthetic faculty along with normal perception. Our eye perceives the features of the living being, merely as assembled, not as mutually organized. The intention of life, the simple movement that runs through the lines, that binds them together and gives them significance, escapes it. This intention is just what the artist tries to regain, in placing himself back within the object by a kind of sympathy, in breaking down, by an effort of intuition, the barrier that space puts up between him and his model. It is true that this aesthetic intuition, like external perception, only attains the individual. But we can conceive an inquiry turned in the same direction as art, which would take life *in general* for its object, just as physical science, in following to the end the direction pointed out by external perception, prolongs the individual facts into general laws. No doubt this philosophy will never obtain a knowledge of its object comparable to that which science has of its own. Intelligence remains the luminous nucleus around which instinct, even enlarged and purified into intuition, forms only a vague nebulosity. But, in default of knowledge properly so called, reserved to pure intelligence, intuition may enable us to grasp what it is that intelligence fails to give us, and indicate the means of supplementing it. On the one hand, it will utilize the mechanism of intelligence itself to show how intellectual moulds cease to be strictly applicable; and on the other hand, by its own work, it will suggest to us the vague feeling, if nothing more, of what must take the place of intellectual moulds. Thus, intuition may bring the intellect to recognize that life does not quite go into the category of the many nor yet into that of the one, that neither mechanical causality nor finality can give a sufficient interpretation of the vital process. Then, by the sympathetic communication which it establishes between us and the rest of the living, by the expansion of our consciousness which it brings about, it introduces us into life's own domain, which is reciprocal interpenetration, endlessly continued creation. But, though it thereby transcends intelligence, it is from intelligence that has come the push that has made it rise to the point it has reached. Without intelligence, it would have remained in the form of instinct, riveted to the special object of its practical interest, and turned outward by it into movements of locomotion.

How theory of knowledge must take account of these two faculties, intellect and intuition, and how also, for want of establishing a sufficiently clear distinction between them, it becomes involved in inextricable difficulties, creating phantoms of ideas to which there cling phantoms of problems, we shall endeavour to show a little further on. We shall see that the problem of knowledge, from this point of view, is one with the metaphysical problem, and that both one and the other depend upon experience. On the one hand, indeed, if intelligence is charged with matter and instinct with life, we must squeeze them both in order to get the double essence from them; metaphysics is therefore dependent upon theory of knowledge. But, on the other hand, if consciousness has thus split up into intuition and intelligence, it is because of the need it had to apply itself to matter at the same time as it had to follow the stream of life. The double form of consciousness is then due to the double form of the real, and theory of knowledge must be dependent upon metaphysics. In fact, each of these two lines of thought leads to the other; they form a circle, and there can be no other centre to the circle but the empirical study of evolution. It is only in seeing consciousness run through matter, lose itself there and find itself there again, divide and reconstitute itself, that we shall form an idea of the mutual opposition of the two terms, as also, perhaps, of their common origin. [. . .]

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Matter or mind, reality has appeared to us as a perpetual becoming. It makes itself or it unmakes itself, but it is never something made. Such is the intuition that we have of mind when we draw aside the veil which is interposed between our consciousness and ourselves. This, also, is what our intellect and senses themselves would show us of matter, if they could obtain a direct and disinterested idea of it. But, preoccupied before everything with the necessities of action, the intellect, like the senses, is limited to taking, at intervals, views that are instantaneous and by that very fact immobile of the becoming of matter. Consciousness, being in its turn formed on the intellect, sees clearly of the inner life what is already made, and only feels confusedly the making. Thus, we pluck out of duration those moments that interest us, and that we have gathered along its course. These alone we retain. And we are right in so doing, while action only is in question. But when, in *speculating* on the *nature* of the real, we go on regarding it as our practical interest requires us to regard it, we become unable to perceive the true evolution, the radical becoming. Of becoming we perceive only states, of duration only instants, and even when we speak of duration and of becoming, it is of another thing that we are thinking. Such is the most striking of the two illusions we wish to examine. It consists in supposing that we can think the unstable by means of the stable, the moving by means of the immobile.

The other illusion is near akin to the first. It has the same origin, being also due to the fact that we import into speculation a procedure made for practice. All action aims at getting something that we feel the want of, or at creating something that does not yet exist. In this very special sense, it fills a void, and goes from the empty to the full, from an absence to a presence, from the unreal to the real. Now the unreality which is here in question is purely relative to the direction in which our attention is engaged, for we are immersed in realities and cannot pass out of them; only, if the present reality is not the one we are seeking, we speak of the *absence* of this sought-for reality wherever we find the *presence* of another. We thus express what we have as a function of what we want. This is quite legitimate in the sphere of action. But, whether we will or no, we keep to this way of speaking, and also of thinking, when we speculate on the nature of things independently of the interest they have for us. Thus arises the second of the two

illusions. [. . .] It is due, like the other, to the static habits that our intellect contracts when it prepares our action on things. Just as we pass through the immobile to go to the moving, so we make use of the void in order to think the full.

We have met with this illusion already in dealing with the fundamental problem of knowledge. The question, we then said, is to know why there is order, and not disorder in things. But the question has meaning only if we suppose that disorder, understood as an absence of order, is possible, or imaginable, or conceivable. Now, it is only order that is real; but, as order can take two forms, and as the presence of the one may be said to consist in the absence of the other, we speak of disorder whenever we have before us that one of the two orders for which we are not looking. The idea of disorder is then entirely practical. It corresponds to the disappointment of a certain expectation, and it does not denote the absence of all order, but only the presence of that order which does not offer us actual interest. So that whenever we try to deny order completely, absolutely, we find that we are leaping from one kind of order to the other indefinitely, and that the supposed suppression of the one and the other implies the presence of the two. [. . .]

5 Alexander Blok (1880–1921) 'Nature and Culture'

Blok was the leading Russian Symbolist poet. In his mystical apprehension of 'the distant thunder', and the contradiction between the age-old world of the soil and the modern world of the city and technology, he prefigured the upheavals of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. 'Nature and Culture' uses the eruption of Mount Etna in Sicily as a metaphor for this social cataclysm. It was read as a paper to the Religious-Philosophical Society in St Petersburg on 30 December 1908. The present translation by I. Freiman is taken from Alexander Blok, *The Spirit of Music*, London, 1946, pp. 50–2 and 55. (See also IIIB7.)

The telegraph hammers all over Europe, but it tells hardly a word of the glory that once was Messina. The vulgar words of the news-telegrams acquire the force of ancient Italian chronicles; but from Etna columns of yellow smoke are escaping. Sicily continues to tremble, and we cannot appease her tremors.

Is it really necessary to be optimistic in the face of these facts? And is it really necessary to be a pessimist or a superstitious person in order to point out that the flag of culture can always be lowered whenever the distant thunder of approaching storm is heard.

The earth has been shaken by underground ferments more than once. And more than once have we celebrated our infirmity before the plague, before hunger and rebellion, before the coward. What sort of frightful vindictiveness has been accumulated in us down the centuries? Human nature becomes more and more rigid, mechanized, more and more resembles a gigantic laboratory in which the vengeance of the elements is prepared. Science flourishes in order to subjugate the earth; art flourishes in order – like a winged day-dream, a mysterious aeroplane – to fly away from the earth; industry flourishes in order that people may part company with the earth.

Every promoter of culture is a demon, cursing the earth and devising wings in order to fly away from it. The heart of the advocate of progress breathes vengeance on the earth, on the elements; on the earth's crust not yet sufficiently hardened; vengeance for

all its difficult times and endless spaces, for the rusty onerous chain of cause and effect, for the injustice of life and the injustice of death. Persons of culture, advocates of progress, choice intellectuals, foaming at the mouth, construct machines, move science forward in secret spite, trying to forget and not to hear the rumbling of the elements, subterranean and terrestrial, which are stirring, now here now there. Only sometimes they awake and look around them and see the same earth – cursed, yet with its tranquil moments – and look upon it as upon some theatrical performance, some absurd, attractive tale.

There are others for whom the earth is not a tale but a wonderful and enduring fact, who know the elements and know themselves as having come forth from them. They are 'elemental people'. They are tranquil, like the earth, but for a while their activity is similar to the first faint rumblings of subterranean jolts. They know that 'to everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under the sun: a time to be born and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up.' (Ecclesiastes.)

Some practical profession is more necessary and appropriate to them than industry and culture.

They also live in a dream. But their dream is unlike our dreams, in the same way as the fields of Russia are unlike the brilliant bustling of the Nevsky avenue. We see in our dreams and we dream in reality, how we may fly away from the earth in a plane, how, with the help of radium, we may explore the bowels of the earth, and of our body, how we may reach the north pole, and, through the last synthetic energy of our intellect, how we may subordinate the universe to a single, supreme law.

They, the elemental people, dream and create legends about the earth. They dream of temples, dispersed over the earth's face; of monasteries, where stands, behind a curtain, unseen by anyone, the statue of Nikolay, the worker of miracles; of the wind which sways the rye in the night – 'she who dances through the rye'; of the planks which rise to the surface from the bottom of a deep pond – fragments of foreign ships, because the pond is 'a ventilator of the ocean'. The earth is one with them and they are one with the earth, indistinguishable from it. It seems now and then that the hill is animate, and the tree is animate, and the church is animate, as the peasant himself is animate. Only, everything in this plain still sleeps but, when it stirs – everything as it stands will go: the peasants will go, the groves and the churches will go, and the incarnate Mothers of God will go forth from the hills, and the lakes will overflow the banks, and the rivers will flow backwards, and the whole earth will go.

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[. . .] Between the two fires of infuriated vengeance, between two camps, we are living. Therefore it is so frightful. What kind of fire is it which breaks out into the light from under the 'crusted lava'? Is it such as devastated Calabria, or is this – a purifying fire?

Whichever it is, we are living through a terrible crisis. We still do not know exactly what events await us, but, in our hearts, the needle of the seismograph is already deflected. Already we see ourselves, as if against the background of a glow, flying in a light, rickety aeroplane, high above the earth; but beneath us is a rumbling and fire-spitting mountain, and down its sides, behind clouds of ashes, roll streams of red-hot lava.