Not merely philosophy but also the fine arts work at bottom towards the solution of the problem of existence. For in every mind that once gives itself up to the purely objective contemplation of nature a desire has been excited, however concealed and unconscious it may be, to comprehend the true nature of things, of life and existence. For this alone has interest for the intellect as such, i.e., for the pure subject of knowledge which has become free from the aims of the will; as for the subject which knows as a mere individual the aims of the will alone have interest. On this account the result of the purely objective apprehension of things is an expression more of the nature of life and existence, more an answer to the question, “What is life?” Every genuine and successful work of art answers this question in its own way with perfect correctness. But all the arts speak only the naive and childish language of perception, not the abstract and serious language of reflection; their answer is therefore a fleeting image: not permanent and general knowledge. Thus for perception every work of art answers that question, every painting, every statue, every poem, every scene upon the stage: music also answers it; and indeed more profoundly than all the rest, for in its language, which is understood with absolute directness, but which is yet untranslatable into that of the reason, the inner nature of all life and existence expresses itself. Thus all the other arts hold up to the questioner a perceptible image, and say, “Look here, this is life.” Their answer, however correct it may be, will yet always afford merely a temporary, not a complete and final, satisfaction. For they always give merely a fragment, an example instead of the rule, not the whole, which can only be given in the universality of the conception. For this, therefore, thus for reflection and in the abstract, to give an answer which just on that account shall be permanent and suffice for always, is the task of philosophy. However, we see here upon what the relationship of philosophy to the fine arts rests, and can conclude from that to what extent the capacity of both, although in its direction and in secondary matters very different, is yet in its root the same.

Every work of art accordingly really aims at showing us life and things as they are in truth, but cannot be directly discerned by every one through the mist of objective and subjective contingencies. Art takes away this mist.

The works of the poets, sculptors, and representative artists in general contain an unacknowledged treasure of profound wisdom; just because out of them the wisdom of the nature of things itself speaks, whose utterances they merely interpret by illustrations and purer repetitions. On this account, however, every one who reads the poem or looks at the picture must certainly contribute out of his own means to bring that wisdom to light; accordingly he comprehends only so much of it as his capacity and culture admit of; as in the deep sea each sailor only lets down the lead as far as the length of the line will allow. Before a picture, as before a prince, every one must stand, waiting to see whether and what it will speak to him; and, as in the case of a prince, so here he must not himself address it, for then he would only hear himself. It follows from all this that in the works of the representative arts all truth is certainly contained, yet only virtualiter or implicite; philosophy, on the other hand, endeavours to supply [pg 178] the same truth actualiter and explicite, and therefore, in this sense, is related to art as
wine to grapes. What it promises to supply would be, as it were, an already realised and clear
gain, a firm and abiding possession; while that which proceeds from the achievements and
works of art is one which has constantly to be reproduced anew. Therefore, however, it makes
demands, not only upon those who produce its works, but also upon those who are to enjoy
them which are discouraging and hard to comply with. Therefore its public remains small,
while that of art is large.

The co-operation of the beholder, which is referred to above, as demanded for the enjoyment
of a work of art, depends partly upon the fact that every work of art can only produce its
effect through the medium of the fancy; therefore it must excite this, and can never allow it
to be left out of the play and remain inactive. This is a condition of the æsthetic effect, and
therefore a fundamental law of all fine arts. But it follows from this that, through the work of
art, everything must not be directly given to the senses, but rather only so much as is demanded
to lead the fancy on to the right path; something, and indeed the ultimate thing, must always be
left over for the fancy to do. Even the author must always leave something over for the reader
to think; for Voltaire has very rightly said, “Le secret d'être ennuyeux, c’est de tout dire.” But
besides this, in art the best of all is too spiritual to be given directly to the senses; it must be
born in the imagination of the beholder, although begotten by the work of art. It depends upon
this that the sketches of great masters often effect more than their finished pictures; although
another advantage certainly contributes to this, namely, that they are completed offhand in
the moment of conception; while the perfected painting is only produced through continued
effort, by means of skilful deliberation and persistent intention, for the inspiration cannot last
till it is completed. From the fundamental æsthetical law we are speaking of, it is further to be
explained why wax figures never produce an æsthetic effect, and therefore are not properly
works of fine art, although it is just in them that the imitation of nature is able to reach its
highest grade. For they leave nothing for the imagination to do. Sculpture gives merely the form
without the colour; painting gives the colour, but the mere appearance of the form; thus both
appeal to the imagination of the beholder. The wax figure, on the other hand, gives all, form
and colour at once; whence arises the appearance of reality, and the imagination is left out of
account. Poetry, on the contrary, appeals indeed to the imagination alone, which it sets in action
by means of mere words.

An arbitrary playing with the means of art without a proper knowledge of the end is, in
every art, the fundamental characteristic of the dabbler. Such a man shows himself in the
pillars that support nothing, aimless volutes, juttings and projections of bad architecture, in the
meaningless runs and figures, together with the aimless noise of bad music, in the jingling of
the rhymes of senseless poetry, &c.

It follows from the preceding chapter, and from my whole view of art, that its aim is the
facilitating of the knowledge of the Ideas of the world (in the Platonic sense, the only one which
I recognise for the word Idea). The Ideas, however, are essentially something perceptible,
which, therefore, in its fuller determinations, is inexhaustible. The communication of such an
Idea can therefore only take place on the path of perception, which is that of art. Whoever,
therefore, is filled with the comprehension of an Idea is justified if he chooses art as the medium
of its communication. The mere conception, on the other hand, is something completely
determinable, therefore exhaustible, and distinctly thought, the whole content of which can
be coldly and dryly expressed in words. Now to desire to communicate such a conception by
means of a work of art is a very useless circumlocution, indeed belongs to that playing with
the means of art without knowledge of its end which has just been condemned. Therefore a
work of art which has proceeded from mere distinct conceptions is always unenuine. If now,
in considering a work of plastic art, or in reading a poem, or in hearing a piece of music (which
aims at describing something definite), we see, through all the rich materials of art, the distinct, limited, cold, dry conception shine out, and at last come to the front, the conception which was the kernel of this work, the whole notion of which consequently consisted in the distinct thinking of it, and accordingly is absolutely exhausted by its communication, we feel disgusted and indignant, for we see ourselves deceived and cheated out of our interest and attention. We are only perfectly satisfied by the impression of a work of art when it leaves something which, with all our thinking about it, we cannot bring down to the distinctness of a conception. The mark of that hybrid origin from mere conceptions is that the author of a work of art could, before he set about it, give in distinct words what he intended to present; for then it would have been possible to attain his whole end through these words. Therefore it is an undertaking as unworthy as it is absurd if, as has often been tried at the present day, one seeks to reduce a poem of Shakspeare’s or Goethe’s to the abstract truth which it was its aim to communicate. Certainly the artist ought to think in the arranging of his work; but only that thought which was perceived before it was thought has afterwards, in its communication, the power of animating or rousing, and thereby becomes imperishable. We shall not refrain from observing here that certainly the work which is done at a stroke, like the sketches of painters already referred to, the work which is completed in the inspiration of its first conception, and as it were unconsciously dashed off, like the melody which comes entirely without reflection, and quite as if by inspiration, and finally, also the lyrical poem proper, the mere song, in which the deeply felt mood of the present, and the impression of the surroundings, as if involuntarily, pours itself forth in words, whose metre and rhyme come about of their own accord—that all these, I say, have the great advantage of being purely the work of the ecstasy of the moment, the inspiration, the free movement of genius, without any admixture of intention and reflection; hence they are through and through delightful and enjoyable, without shell and kernel, and their effect is much more inevitable than that of the greatest works of art, of slower and more deliberate execution. In all the latter, thus in great historical paintings, in long epic poems, great operas, &c., reflection, intention, and deliberate selection has had an important part; understanding, technical skill, and routine must here fill up the gaps which the conception and inspiration of genius has left, and must mix with these all kinds of necessary supplementary work as cement of the only really genuinely brilliant parts. This explains why all such works, only excepting the perfect masterpieces of the very greatest masters (as, for example, “Hamlet,” “Faust,” the opera of “Don Juan”), inevitably contain an admixture of something insipid and wearisome, which in some measure hinders the enjoyment of them. Proofs of this are the “Messiah,” “Gerusalemme liberata,” even “Paradise Lost” and the “Æneid;” and Horace already makes the bold remark, “Quandoque dormitat bonus Homerus.” But that this is the case is the consequence of the limitation of human powers in general.

The mother of the useful arts is necessity; that of the fine arts superfluity. As their father, the former have understanding; the latter genius, which is itself a kind of superfluity, that of the powers of knowledge beyond the measure which is required for the service of the will.


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