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A PERSONAL LOOK ON LIFE AND LEARNING THROUGH MY OWN WORK

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I hate having wasted nineteen years going to school. Formal education left me little of personal value other than elementary language skills. Much of what was taught cluttered my mind with irrelevant information. Arbitrary injunctions inhibited my imagination in efforts to learn anything new and different.

My parents raised ten children in conformity with the conventional wisdom of their communal culture. Years of formal schooling funnel individual diversity into the same narrow channel. The intended outcome is a well-adjusted adult who will not make trouble.

In school I always felt inadequate. I was bright enough to master assigned studies, but what I was learning made no sense to me. Unaware of alternate courses of unbounded study, it took me a long time to undertake a solitary search for the particular meaning of my personal life. The uncharted explorations of this independent voyage of self-discovery involved avoiding regular routes and scrapping scheduled stopovers. In the absence of an assigned curriculum, answers offered by my earlier education were often useless.

Once I gave up pursuing the predicted proof of explanations imposed by others, unexpectedly I happened on intuitive understandings. This encouraged my voluntary suspension of disbelief in all that till then I had been taught to ignore. The

immediacy of my own imagination turned out to be the most reliable touchstone for what was worth learning. It served me better than reality agreed on in advance by other people. To my delight, I discovered that openness to the undermined meaning of each individual moment transformed ordinary external experiences into extraordinary personal experiences.

Going to college was an extended adolescence, with a never-ending amount of alternate routes. I spent much of my time either alone or in the company of other misfits. Being from a rural background and a community that time had forgotten about, I was fascinated by the seedy underside of urban life and discovered that after twenty years, I was still emotionally a virgin.

Unexpected opportunities for enlightenment appeared everywhere. I became exposed to songs and stories from different times and faraway places. Hearing strange voices awakened my ears to the sounds of everyday life. Seeing shapes and colours of statues and paintings opened my eyes wide enough to watch the drama and dance performed both in the theatre and on the city streets; the sum of all this was exciting enough to shake the foundations of my rural upbringing in a few short years.

Throughout my years in college I continually returned home to the farm and additionally explored land- and seascapes all over Ireland. Summers were my own, a time for wondering, because travelling restored my mind to being a beginner once more, I found that almost everything I encountered extended my education.

Every person in his first trip to a foreign country, where he knows neither the people nor the language experiences childhood. [1]

Avoidance of social contacts empty of personal meaning left the

unfilled space of solitude equivalent to touching moments of contact with a few close friends.

It never really mattered where I travelled, Europe, America, Australia, Thailand and India. Each summer was a time for renewal, to renew my understanding that this life is mine to live as I please I need only lose interest in distinguishing between reality and fantasy, rational and irrational, good and bad, or between work and play. The creatively imaginative work I now play at, I once demeaned as "doing nothing". Every personal encounter offers something worth learning. Any experience can be enlightening. Still, each situation requires its own solution. It remains my responsibility to recognise, to accept, and ultimately to choose that particular aspect of instruction to which I will respond. This response is what concerns me most as an 'artist, realising that all significant battles are waged within myself. Knowing I know nothing for sure yet I am free to do whatever I like needing only to face the consequences.

CHAPTER TWO

WHY AN ARTIST?

Long ago, Paracelsus wrote that a guru should not tell the naked truth [2]. He should use images, allegories, figures, wondrous speech or other hidden roundabout ways. This is still good advice. It is true that metaphor orients the mind towards freedom and novelty - encourages - daring and pure joy. But more than that, metaphor offers a kind of vision and truth not open to computer-bank reduction.

In order to be certain and "scientific", modern psychology has thrown away much of the wisdom of thousands of years of humanity's struggle to understand itself, to be with one another, to find meaning in our lives. It has denied the immediacy of individual experience, man's encounter with metaphor. It has reduced beyond recognition the concerns that make people human. Modern psychology has lost the vision of life and growth; instead it is preoccupied with psychopathology and conditioned responses.

Some people would return us to ourselves and take us beyond. Who is to guide us on this journey? Who will be the new guru? We cannot go further in this search without a return to metaphor, without a recommitment to intuitive subjective experience. It may not be measureable, but it is the measure of our humanity. We must transform our ways of things if need be. The change we need is "the change from imitation to expression" [3]. By including our personal selves once more, we will come upon the world, and

upon ourselves and each other, like explorers in a new land. Wonder will be upon us once more, and we must live with it "until the world becomes a human event" [4].

It has always been true that in seeking guidance, the many have depended on the few. In every time, in every place, there is always a creative minority to whom others turn for leadership, for guidance, for courage, for understanding, for beauty. Answers may change, the questions remain eternal. The few who guide stand before the many, not as the ideal bearers of final truth, but simply as the most extraordinarily human members of the community.

Men differ, one from another, within each society. And surely they differ more radically from one culture to another. Yet certain aspects of the human situation remain common to us all. In the final analysis, perhaps we are more alike than we are different.

Each person begins life in need of care and must find his place in the family or in the group on which he depends for survival. Each develops skills in order to cope with physical environment and with other people. Each makes clear his identity as a child, only to be confronted with the many flowerings and sexual awakenings of puberty. Then comes the struggle through the adolescent changes of becoming an adult.

Grown-up roles and demands for achievement must be met. The pleasures and pains of courtship and marriage, the bearing, raising and giving up of children, and the eventual decline of sexuality and vitality, all must be met. And finally, death must be faced - the death of loved ones and of enemies, and, at the

centre, the ever-present inevitability of one's own death.

In unspoken recognition of the turmoil that attends these crises, each culture provides institutions, rituals, and agents to help the individual through these transitions to ease his passage. The artist, in all his forms, is the contemporary Western agent who helps others in the midst of struggles or those who are unhappy about failing to find satisfactory resolutions to common human crises.

The "guru" appears to introduce his disciples to new experiences, to higher levels of spiritual understanding, to greater truths. Perhaps, in reality, he gives them the freedom that comes with accepting their imperfect, finite human situation. The guru is able to pierce the vanity of the conventional wisdom of the group. He understands that reason and laws and customs of the moment offer only the illusion of certainty. The people may believe that what they "must do" or "must not do" constitutes something real. The guru can see that these formalities are no more than games. His is the language of prophecy, not of a fatalistically fixed future which can be predicted but of an understanding of what man is like or where man has been, and of where man is going. He knows that people cannot escape themselves without destroying themselves. Only by facing their fears, at times with the help of the guru, can they become what they are and realise what they might.

CHAPTER THREE

PREACHING

PART ONE

PRACTICING WHAT I PREACH

The differences between the Western Judeo-Christian traditions and their Oriental Hindu-Buddhist counterparts may be partially understood as a contrast between a straight line and a circle. In the West, the secular ideals of hard work, achievement and progress fit well within the religious burden of avoiding temptation, living the good life, pursuing the straight and narrow course, and striving to imitate the never-to-be-achieved perfect nature of Christ. The straight line that we must follow if we are to be saved is that awesome difference between the badness of who we are and the goodness that is Jesus.

In the circular way of the Orient, we need only recognise that each of us is already the Buddha; we need only surrender to our true nature. The guiding principle of the Western cosmos is the higher intelligence called the Logos toward whose perfection we may ascend along that straight line. In the East, the Sanskrit word Lila is used in place of Logos. Lila is the term for the Lord's cosmic playfulness through which He creates the illusion of the world by casting all of us (and indeed all that is) in varying modes of his Divine Energy. All that separates anyone from the bliss of Nirvana is the maya of illusion. Our true nature is at the centre of the circle of ourselves. As we find ways to give up the struggle to change our ways, we may let go of our passionate attachments to the bondage of trying to be what we are not.

In life, family and culture encourage us to "improve" ourselves, to develop a "good character". Too often the distinction between character and personality is really the doctrine of the mask. At best it covers the differences between the ways other people conceive of our personalities and the ways we know them to be. At worst, the defensive armour of the mask goes even deeper, obscuring the differences between our own noble idealised conceptions of ourselves and the angel-beast of the double soul we really are at heart.

I believe that biological inheritance and later arbitrary circumstance provide opportunities for joy and necessities for suffering. But just how happy or unhappy I am to be with my personality and my life is largely a matter of how well I accept my fate rather than one in which I demand a reshuffling of the cards, or a new deal, or a better hand. I may not always win, but I must continue to play. After all, its the only game there is. Fighting fate, trying to will that which cannot be willed, or wanting to be someone else living some other sort of life, is an absurd demand to get my own way. This can only invite needless suffering. It's quite enough to experience the suffering that is absolutely required without whining away what pleasures I do have with cries of "Why me?", "Why did this have to happen to me?".

Character-building is the denial of the true nature of the self, a search for an improved model. I no longer hope to achieve a good character. My aim is not to improve my Self but only to know it more clearly and to celebrate all that I am I need no more change my personality by building my character, than change my fate by trying to be so good that someone will save me.

This distinction between character and personality is akin to the distinction between fate and destiny. If I am not willing to know what I feel, to say what I mean, and to do what I say, than my life is that of a passive object of fate. However, to the extent that I am willing to fully accept, to own, to treasure that fortune (or misfortune) which is my own personality, which is myself, than I am able to turn my fate into my destiny. Only then can I become who I am by surrendering willingly to my life as it is given to me instead of trying to be someone or something else.

In order to transform my fate into my destiny, I must give up the romantic habit of telling a bit more than the truth. I must be willing to present myself, as I am, to myself and then when it is safe, to others. There is no need to hide my strength, my virtue, my special beauty. Yet all of these must be presented in the context of the ordinariness of my weakness, my grey hair, my warts. William Butler Yeats counsels us well when he tells that "soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirrow turn lamp" [5].

We must not mistake manners for morals. Life can be merciless and pain a necessity. John Steinbeck once pointed out that we need only look in a tidal pool to see life in the raw: there we may observe the predatory Law of the Fishes in action. The big ones who eat the little ones is part of man's animal nature as well. We may build temples, offer charity for our fellow man, make paintings and play music, but first we must survive! And at times, that means one of us is going to get hurt;

if it's going to be you or me, I promise that it will be you.

You need only discover who you are, and act according to the tendencies of your own nature. The most important aspect of your life and your personality is simply that it is your's and no one else's. As Krishna tells us:

It is better to do your own duty, however imperfectly, than to assume the duties of another person, however successfully. Prefer to die doing your own duty; of another will bring you into great spiritual danger. [6]

Better your own life, imperfectly performed, than the life of another, well performed.

We make a mistake if we ask ourselves "Am I good enough?" or "Is it worthwhile to be me?". Whoever or whatever we are or do is who and what we are supposed to be. It is our act of truth. Psychologically, many of our problems began when, as children, someone let us to question the worth of our particular existence or performance. Whoever heard of a baby who was inadequate or a child who did not know just exactly how to be a child? How could it not be all right for me to be me? How could it not be just right for you to be you?

PART TWO

PRETENDING WHAT I PREACH

Though certain kinds of pretending may lead to neurotic character styles, pretending is by no means destructive in and of itself. Without some measure of pretending, how would we escape life's uncaring harshness, its impersonal buffeting, and its tedious sameness? Creative pretending in the form of fantasy and daydreaming, affords pleasure, excitement, relief, and even hope. Pretending can fill personal needs at times, and in places in which we would otherwise have to do without. Each culture provides sanctioned ways of pretending which take people beyond the frustrations of everyday life. Such is the wonder of storytelling, the enthrallment of theatre, and the grandeur of ceremony.

Pretending is the mining of the mother lode of imagination. In fantasy we may find inspiration for new ways to live. In daydreaming we may rehearse future actions so that they can be approached with less fear and more grace. Reflection may even involve the practical planning which maps undeveloped projects by effectively solving problems in advance with a minimum of wasteful trial and error bungling.

It is one thing to get information, and quite another to become conscious of it. In our brains there are many mansions, and most of the doors are locked, with the keys inside. Usually, from our first meeting with a person, we get some single main

impression, or like or dislike, confidence or distrust, reality or artificiality, or some single vivid something that we cannot pin down in more than a tentative, vague phrase. That little phrase is like the visible moving fin of a great fish in a dark pool; we can see only the fin: we cannot see the fish, let alone catch it or take it out. Or usually we cannot. Sometimes we can. And some people have a regular gift for it.

I remember reading that the novelist H. E. Bates was in the habit of inventing quick brief biographies or adventures for people he met or saw who struck his imagination. Some of these little fantasies he noted down, to use in his stories. But as time passed, he discovered that these so-called fantasies were occasionally literal and accurate accounts of the lives of those very individuals he had seen. The odd thing about this, is that when he first invented them, he had thought it was all just imagination, that he was making it all up. In other words, he had received somehow or other accurate information, in great detail, by just looking - but hadn't recognised it for what it was. He had simply found it lying there in his mind, at that moment, unlabelled.

The great Swiss psycho-analyst Jung describes something similar in his autobiography. During a certain conversation, he wanted to illustrate some general point he was trying to make, and so just for an example he invented a fictitious situation and described his probable actions - all to illustrate his point. The man to whom he was speaking, somebody he had never met before, became terribly upset, and Jung could not understand why until later, when he learned that the little story he had invented had

been in fact a detailed circumstantial account of that man's own private life. Somehow or other, as they talked, Jung had picked it up - but without recognising it. He had simply found it when he reached into his imagination for any odd materials that would make up a story of the kind he wanted.

Neither of these two men would have realised what they had learned if they had not both had occasion to invent stories on the spot, and if they had not by chance discovered later that what had seemed to them pure imagination had also somehow been fact. Neither had recognised their own experience. Neither had known what they really knew.

LAST NIGHT by Ted Hughes

She would not leave her dead twins. The whole flock
Went on to into the next field, over the hill,
But she stayed with her corpses. We took one
And left one to keep her happy.
The North wind brought the worst cold
Of this winter. Before dawn
It shifted a little and wetter. First light, the mist
Was like a nail in the head. She had gone through
Into the next field, but still lingered
Within close crying of her lamb, who lay now
Without eyes, already entrails pulled out
Between his legs. She cried for him to follow,
Now she felt so much lighter. As she cried
The two rams came bobbing over the hill,
The greyface and the blackface.

They came straight on,
Noses stretching forward as if they were being pulled
By nose-rings. They milled merrily round her,
Fitting their awkward bodies to the requirement
That was calling, and that they could not resist
Or properly understand yet. Confusion of smells
And excitements. She ran off. They followed.
The greyface squared back and bounced his brow
Off the head of the surprised blackface, who stopped.
They greyface hurried on and now she followed.
She had stopped crying to her silent lamb.
The blackface caught them up on the steepness.
The greyface shouldered her away, drew back
Six or seven paces, dragging his forelegs, then curling his
head
He bounded forward and the other met him.
The blackface stood sideways. Then the greyface
Hurried to huddle with her. She hurried nibbling,
Making up for all she'd missed with her crying.
Then blackface came again. The two jostled her,
Both trying to mount her simultaneously
As she ran between them and under them
Hurryi He'd done something quite slight but necessary
And mounted her as she nibbled. There he stayed.
The blackface ran at her and baffled, paused.
The greyface withdrew and flopped off,
And she ran on nibbling. The two rams
Turned to stare at me
Two or three lambs wobbled in the cold.

CHAPTER FOUR

LEARNING TO THINK

PART ONE

LEARNING TO THINK FROM SCRATCH

Now first of all I had better make it quite clear that I am going to talk about a certain kind of thinking. One of the odd wonderful things about this activity we call thinking is that to some extent everybody invents their own brand, has his own way of thinking, not only his own thoughts. You do not ever have to worry that you are not thinking properly - not unless you enter some very specialised job, where a very specialised kind of thinking is required. All you have to do really is think.

And thinking, as we know, is as natural as breathing - some sort of thinking is generally going on in us all the time. So what is all the fuss about? Well, the terrible fact is that though we are all thinking about something or other all the time, some of us are thinking more and some less. Some of us are more energetic about it.

Just as some people are bustling all the time, getting things done, while others just sit around - so it is inside peoples' minds - some brains are battling and working and remembering and puzzling things over all the time, or much of the time, and other brains are just lying around snoring and occasionally turning over. Now I am not speaking to that first kind. There is not much I can say to them. It is to the lazy and secret minds that I am now speaking, and from my own experience I imagine this includes nineteen people out of every twenty, I am

one of that clan myself and always have been.

At school I was plagued by the idea that I really had much better thoughts than I could ever get into words. It was not that I could not find the words, or that the thoughts were too deep or too complicated for words. It was simply that when I tried to speak or write down the thoughts, those thoughts had vanished. All I had was a numb blank feeling, just as if somebody had asked me the name of Julius Caesar's eldest son, or said "7,283 times 6,956 - quick. Think, think, think". Now for one reason or another I became very interested in these thoughts of mine that I could never catch. Sometimes they were hardly what you could call a thought - they were a dim sort of feeling about something. They did not fit into any particular subject - history or arithmetic or anything of that sort, except perhaps English. I had the idea, which gradually grew on me, that these were the right sort of thoughts for essays, and yet probably not even essays. But for the most part they were useless to me because I could never get hold of them. Maybe when I was writing an essay, I got the tail end of one, but that was not very satisfying.

Now maybe you can see what was happening. I was thinking all right, and even having thoughts that seemed interesting to me, but I could not keep hold of the thoughts, or fish them up when I wanted them. I would think this fact was something peculiar to me, and of interest to nobody else, if I did not know that most people have the same trouble. What thoughts they have are fleeting thoughts - just a flash of it, then gone - or, though they know they know something, or have ideas about something, they just cannot dig those ideas up when they are wanted. Their

minds, in fact, seem out of their reach. That is a curious thing to say, but it is quite true.

There is the inner life, which is the world of final reality, the world of memory, emotion, imagination, intelligence, and natural common sense, and which goes on all the time, consciously or unconsciously, like the heart beat. There is also the thinking process by which we break into that inner life and capture answers and evidence to support the answers out of it. That process of raid, or persuasion, or ambush, or dogged hunting, or surrender, is the kind of thinking we have to learn and if we do not somehow learn it, then our minds lie in us like the fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.

Now you see the kind of thinking I am taking about. Perhaps I ought not to call it thinking at all - it is just that we call everything that goes on in our head thinking. I am talking about whatever kind of trick or skill it is that enables us to catch those elusive or shadowy thoughts, and collect them together, and hold them still so that we can get a really good look at them. I will illustrate what I mean with an example: If you were told: "Think of your uncle" how long could you hold the idea of your uncle in your head? Right, you imagine him. But than at once he reminds you of something else and you are thinking of that, he is gone into the background if he has not altogether disappeared. Now get your uncle back. Imagine your uncle and nothing else - nothing whatsoever. After all, there is plenty to be going on with in your uncle, his eyes, what expression? His hair, where is it parted? How many waves has it? What is the exact shade? Or if

he is bald, what does the skin feel like? His chin - just how is it? Look at it. As you can see, there is a great deal to your uncle - you could spend hours on him, if you could only keep him in your mind for hours; and when you have looked at him from head to foot, in your memory you have all the memories of what he has said and done, and all your own feelings about him and his sayings and doings. You could spend weeks on him just holding him there in your mind, and explaining the thoughts you have about him. I have exaggerated that, but you see straightaway that it is quite difficult to think about your uncle and nothing but your uncle for more than a few seconds. So how can you ever hope to collect all your thoughts about him.

At the same time you obviously could not do that with everything that came into your head - grip hold of it with your imagination, and never let it go till you had studied every gram of it. It would not leave you any time to live. Nevertheless, it is possible to do it for a time. I will illustrate the sort of thing I mean with a poem called "View of a Pig". In this poem, the poet stares at something which is quite still, and collects the thoughts that concern it.

He does it quite rapidly and briefly, never lifting his eyes from the pig. Obviously,, he does not use every thought possible - he chooses the thoughts that fit best together to make a poem.

Here is the poem: View of a Pig (poet unknown to me).

The pig lay on a barrow dead.
It weighed, they said, as much as three men.
Its eyes closed, pink white eyelashes.
Its trotters stuck straight out.

Such weight and thick, pink bulk
Set in death seemed not just dead.
It was less than lifeless, further off.
It was like a sack of wheat.

I thumped it without feeling remorse
One feels guilty insulting the dead,
Walking on graves. But this pig
Did not seem able to accuse.

It was too dead. Just so much
A poundage of lard and pork.
Its last dignity had entirely gone.
It was not a figure of fun.

Too dead now to pity.
To remember its life, din, stronghold
Of earthly pleasure as it had been,
Seemed a false effort, and off the point.

Too deadly factual. Its weight
Oppressed me - how could it be moved?
And the trouble of cutting it up!
The gash in its throat was shocking, but not pathetic.

Once I ran at a fair in the noise
To catch a greased piglet
That was faster and nimbler than a cat,
Its squeal was the rending of metal.

Pigs must have hot blood, they feel like ovens,
Their bite is worse than a horse's -
They chop a half-moon clean out.
They eat cinders, dead cats.

Distinctions and admirations such
As this one was long finished with.
I stared at it a long time. They were going to scald it,
Scald it and scour it like a doorstep.

Now where did the poet learn to settle his mind like that on
to one thing? It is a valuable thing to be able to do - but
something you are never taught at school, and not many people do

it naturally. I am not very good at it, but I did acquire some skill in it. Not in school, but while I was fishing. I fished in still water, with a float. As you know, all a fisherman does is stare at his float for hours on end. I have spent hundreds and hundreds of hours staring at a float - a dot of red or yellow the size of a lentil, ten yards away. Those of you who have never done it, might think it is a very drowsy pastime. It is anything but that.

All the little nagging impulses, that are normally distracting your mind, dissolve. They have to dissolve if you are to go on fishing. If they do not, then you cannot settle down: you get bored and pack up in a bad temper. But once they have dissolved, you enter one of the orders of bliss.

Your whole being rests lightly on your float, but not drowsily: very alert, so that the least twitch of the float arrives like an electric shock. And you are not only watching the float. You are aware, in a horizonless and slightly mesmerised way, like listening to the double bass in orchestral music of the fish below there in the dark. At every moment, your imagination is alarming itself with the size of the thing slowly leaving the weeds and approaching your bait. Or with the world of beauties down there, suspended in total ignorance of you. And the whole purpose of this concentration of excitement, in this arena of apprehension and unforeseeable events, is to bring up some lovely solid thing like living metal from a world where nothing exists but those inevitable facts which raise life out of nothing and return it to nothing.

PART TWO

LEARNING TO THINK FROM ANIMALS

The Small Box

The small box gets its first teeth
And its small length
Its small width and small emptiness
And all that it has got

The small box is growing bigger
And now the cupboard is in it
That it was in before

The small box remembers its childhood,
And by over-great longing
It becomes a small box again

Now in the small box
Is the whole world quite tiny
You can easily put it in a pocket
Easily steal it easily lose it

Take care of the small box.

Vasco Popa

I spent most of my time up to the age of sixteen or so learning from the observation of animals. All the stories, old sayings and metaphors my parents used always involved animals and to them they signified perfection (they lived in perfect harmony with their environment). I recall one story my father told me explaining the "dangers" and "falseness" of city living, when he described how, if a fox was to discover the conveniences of living off a city's rubbish he would become dependent on it and one day would not be able to survive on his own should the need ever arise. I also remember how my mother explained the word rape to me. I must have been about fourteen and I was reading this

case in the paper of how a man broke into a house one day where there were two very young children, a boy and a girl, he locked the boy in a cupboards and raped his sister. It was very explicit and detailed and etched deeply into a very impressionable young mind. Innocently I asked her what the word rape meant and she explained "if the boar outside was to cover a sow without her being in heat, he would be raping her. Which of course," she explained, "would be impossible in the animal world but not so for humans." I also remember a story my father told me about man's interference with nature:

One year on the lake near our house a pair of swans reared five cygnets. All the local people fed them every day and they became very tame. When the time came for them to fly away for the winter months, only the parent swans flew. Their offspring all died one night when the freeze set in and the lake bacame frozen over.

I never recognised the importance of animals in my life until I started to draw. It is not possible to appreciate the light without knowing the darkness, the heavens without the earth, the dry lands without the sea, warmth in the absence of cold. Human lacks meaning if animal is unknown, just as being a man takes shape most fully in the presence of woman. Angel and devil are Janus faces. Cain cannot be understood without knowing his brother Abel, and much of Jesus is incomplete without Judas.

The transformation brought about by the recognition and acceptance of the hidden shadow-identity does not turn the person

into someone else so much as it completes him. So it is that I would amend the traditional Hindu story of the King's Son:

There was a king's son, once upon a time, who having been born under an unlucky star, was removed from the capital while still a babe, and reared by a primitive tribesman, a mountaineer, outside the pale of the Brahmin civilization (i.e. as an outcast, uneducated, ritually unclean). He therefore lived for many years under the false notion: "I am a mountaineer". In due time, however, the old king died. And since there was nobody eligible to assume the throne a certain minister of state, ascertaining that the boy who had been cast away into the wilderness some years before was still alive, searched the wilderness, traced the youth, and having found him, instructed him: "Thou art not a mountaineer; thou art the king's son". Immediately, the youth abandoned the notion that he was a mountaineer and took to himself his royal nature. He said to himself "I am King" [7].

I believe that nothing changed in the sphere of facts, only his awareness was transformed. Was he a Prince who believed he was a mountaineer or a mountaineer who at the moment realised he was also the King's son? Perhaps it was only that "he is united at last with the hidden fullness of his own true nature" [8].

That is why I have a reborn interest in animals. You might not think that my two interests, observing animals and drawing pictures have much in common. But the more I think back the more sure I am that with me the two interests have been one interest. My pursuit of mice and pheasant chicks in the barley stubble after baling the straw when I was a young boy, capturing them and setting them free is very closely linked to my present pursuit of

images, it seems to me to be different stages of the same fever. In a way I suppose I see drawings as a sort of animal. They have their own life like animals, by which I mean that they seem quite separate from any person, even from me, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them. And they have a certain wisdom. They know something special - something perhaps which we are very curious to learn. Maybe my concern has been to capture not animals particularly and not drawings, but simply things which have a vivid life of their own, outside mine. However all that may be, my interest in animals began when I began. From the aid of photographs my memory goes back pretty clearly to my fifth year, when I had a huge collection of plastic animals but no amount of plastic could keep up with reality (the situation with animals as I knew it) or my imagination.

I had a gift for modelling and drawing so when I discovered 'morla' (plasticine) my Zoo became infinite, and when my mother bought me a thick green-back animal book during a spell in hospital when I was seven I began to draw the glossy photographs. The animals looked good in the photographs but they looked even better in the drawings and were mine. I can remember very vividly the excitement with which I used to sit staring at my drawings, and it is a similar thing I feel nowadays since I started drawing animals again.

My zoo was by no means an indoor affair only. I lived on a farm which had over the period of my life growing up there been through the transition of a very large flock of sheep to a herd

of up to a hundred cows to a herd of a thousand pigs and now a stud farm. So to say I lived closely to animals was an understatement. When a sow was farrowing one of the children would sleep with the sow to make sure she didn't reject, lie on or eat her young: for this we were paid fifty pence.

My brother, who probably had more to do with this passion of mine than anyone else, was a good bit older than I was, and his one interest in life was creeping about on the hillsides with hunting dogs and a rifle. He took me along as a retriever and I had to scramble into all kinds of places collecting pigeons, rabbits, pheasants, the odd fox and badger and hundreds of rats. I also hunted on horse back which created an excitement parachuters must feel when they jump out of an airplane.

My friends were mostly town boys and with them in school I led one life but all the time I was leading this other life in the country. I never mixed the two lives up except once or twice disastrously. Anything I ever made at home was to me, perfect, it meant everything, even sand castles in the sand pit in the farm yard, I never had to consider an audience. Art in school was something of a different kettle of fish. It was something with rules and wasn't a natural ability but I mastered it very easily and I was praised but never pleased. I always felt I was cheating, nothing was ever mine, a shark swimming around a desert island, or two lovers looking into the sunset meant nothing to me except the importance audiences placed upon them. My personal drawings meant everything to me but had no importance placed upon them by audiences and soon became a secret, an embarrassment.

At about the age of sixteen my life grew more complicated and my attitude to animals changed. I accused myself of disturbing their lives. I began to look at them, you see, from their own point of view. And about the same time I started drawing seriously for my own purpose. Not animal drawings at first. It was years before I drew what you could call an animal drawing and several years before it occurred to me that my drawing pictures might be partly a continuation of my earlier pursuit. Now I have no doubt. The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerised and involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new drawing in your mind, the outline, the mass and colour and clean final form of it, the unique living reality of it in the midst of the general lifelessness, all that is too familiar to mistake. This is hunting and the drawing is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own.

We do not have to describe to ourselves every step, very carefully, before we are able to take it. Words need not come into it. We imagine the whole situation, and the possible ways of dealing with it, and then proceed in the way that seems best. Our imagination works in scenes, things, little stories and peoples' feelings. If we imagine what someone will say, in reply to what we intend to say or do, we have first to imagine how they will feel. We are as a rule pretty confident we know how they will feel. We may be terribly wrong, of course, but at least we never doubt that it is what they feel which counts. And we can think like this without ever forming a single word in our heads. Many

people, perhaps most people, do think in words all the time, and keep a perpetual running commentary going or a mental conversation about everything that comes under our attention or about something in the back of our minds. But it is not essential. And the people who think in dumb pictures or dim sensings seem to manage just as well. Maybe we manage even better. You can imagine who is likely to be getting most out of reading the gospels, for instance: the one who discusses every sentence word by word and argues the contradictions and questions every obscurity and challenges every absurdity, or the one who imagines, if only for a few seconds, but with the shock of full reality, just what it must have been like to be standing near when the woman touched Christ's garment and he turned round.

But of course one way of thinking doesn't exclude the others.

CHAPTER FIVE

ILLUSTRATIONS OF MY OWN WORK



HEN DRAWINGS (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



HEN (Feathers, straw etc. on board 5' x 3')



DUCK DRAWING (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



DUCK (Feathers, duck dung etc. on paper 3' x 4')



MARE FOALING (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



MARE AND FOAL JUST AFTER BIRTH (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



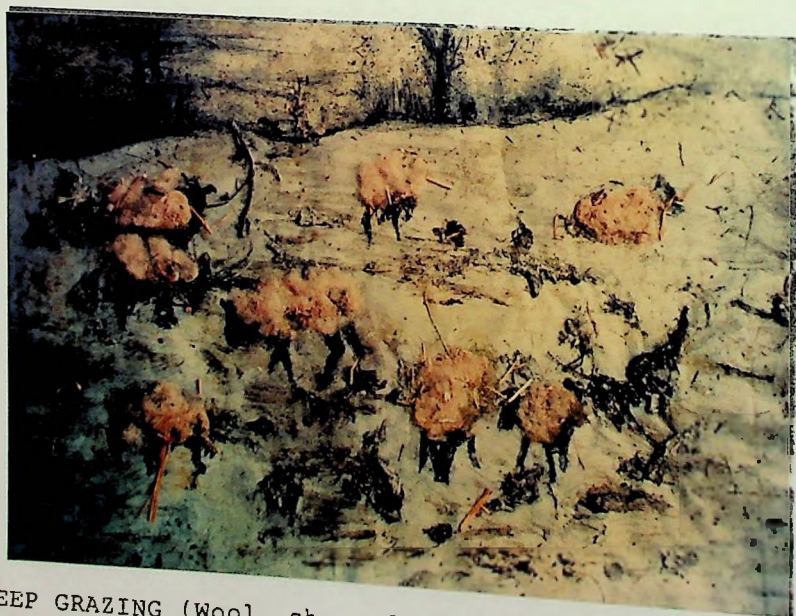
FOAL ATTEMPTING TO STAND (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



MARE LICKING FOAL (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



SHEEP DRAWINGS (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4' each)



SHEEP GRAZING (Wool, sheep dung etc. on board 5' x 3')



SHEEP (Wooden frame, sack, tar, 3' in height)



COW AND CALF (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



COW AND CALF (Straw, mixed media on board 5' x 3')



HEIFER STANDING AND STRETCHING (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4' each)



HEIFER LICKING HER RUMP (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



THREE BULLOCKS (Grass, mixed media on board 5' x 3')



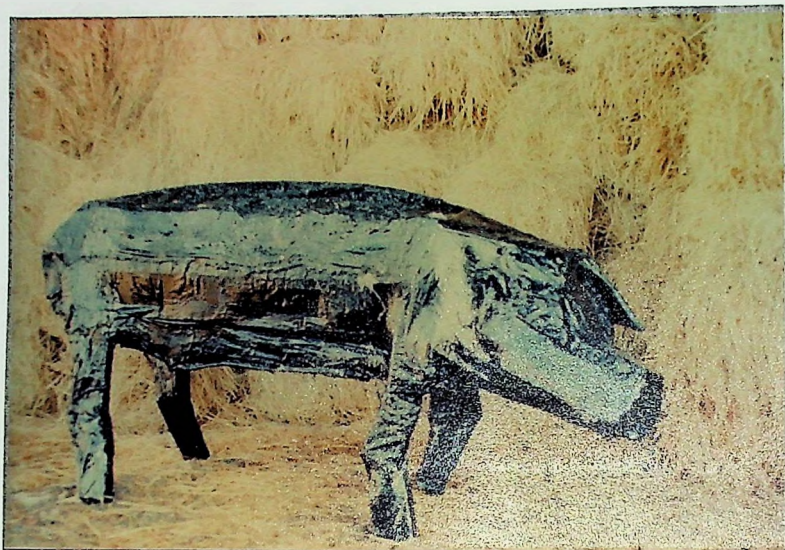
BULL (Wooden frame, sack, tar 5' in height)



MARE WITH FOAL FEEDING (Mixed media on paper 5' x 3')



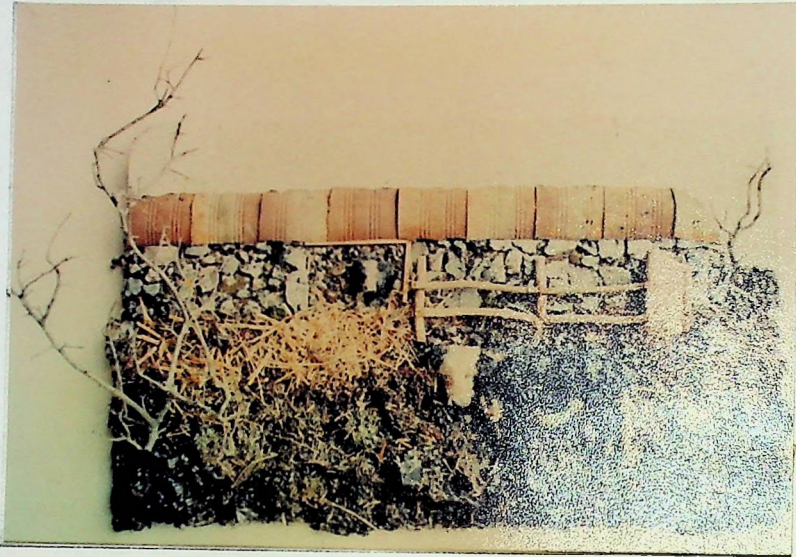
HORSE (Wooden frame, sack, tar 16 hands)



SOW (Wooden frame, sack, tar 3' in height)



BULL (Bull hair, grass, mixed media on board 5' x 3')



COW SHED (Tin, cow dung stone, straw etc. on board 5' x3')



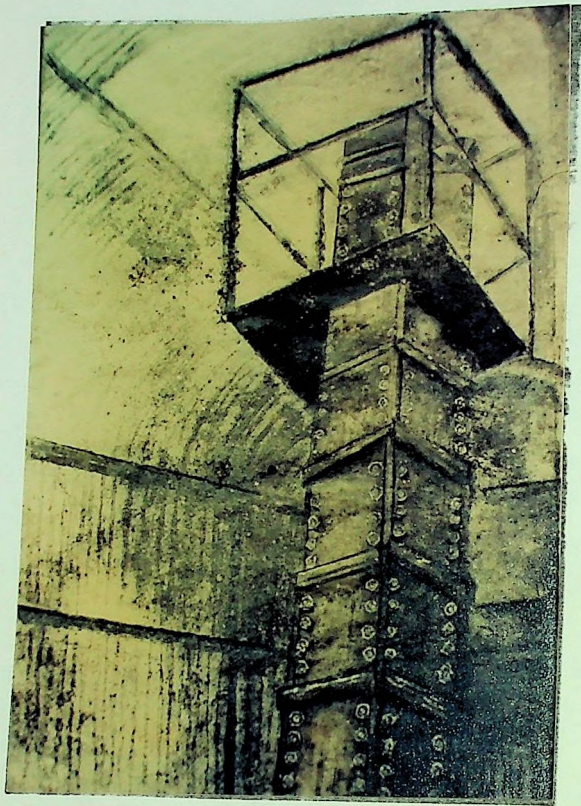
CATTLE AND SHEDS
(Tin, cow hair, dung, cement etc. on board 6' x 3')



SHEDS WITH CATTLE (Mixed media on board 5' x 3')



SHEDS WITH CATTLE (Mixed media on board 5' x 3')



COALMINE DRAWING (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



OPEN CAST MINE (Coal, mixed media on board 3' x 4')



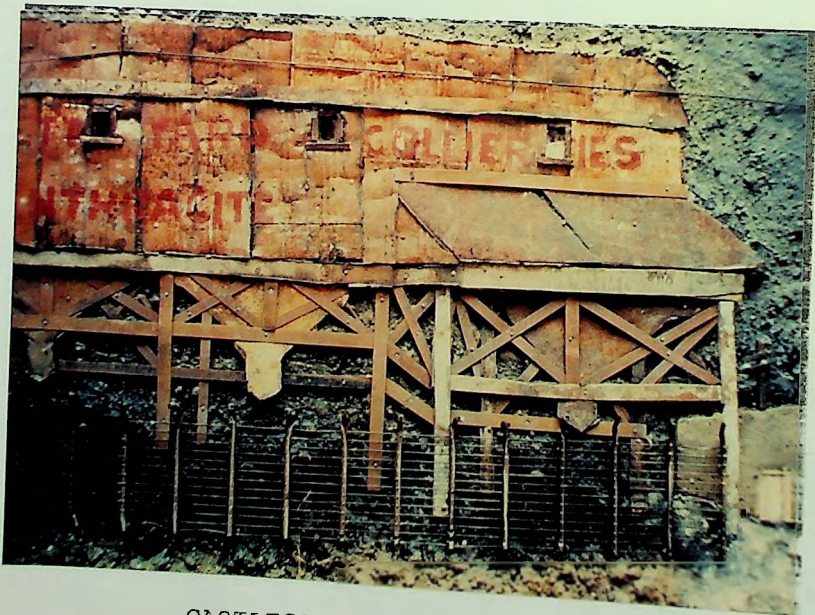
COALMINE DRAWING (Charcoal on paper 3' x 4')



CASTLECOMER COALMINES
(Tin, grass, wood, mixed media on board (4' x 8'))



COALMINE DRAWING (Mixed media on paper 6' x 5')



CASTLECOMER COALMINES (Detail)
(Tin, glass, grass, wood on board 4' x 8')

CHAPTER SIX

LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE THROUGH WORDS

I have told you what I believe to be the origins and growth of my interest in drawing and making things, I have simplified everything a great deal, but on the whole that is the story. Some of it may seem a bit obscure to you. How can a drawing, for instance an abstract drawing with the feeling of walking in the rain, be like an animal? Let me turn my attention to poetry to explain since we are using the language of words. And let me say that it is through poetry and music that I understand my own drawing rather than other paintings or drawings. So let's say, how can a poem, about a walk in the rain, be like an animal?

Well perhaps it cannot look much like a giraffe or an emu or an octopus, or anything you might find in a menagerie. It is better to call it an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit. The living parts are the words, the images, the rhythms. The spirit is the life which inhabits them when they all move together. It is impossible to say which comes first, parts or spirit. But if any of the parts are dead - if any of the words or images or rhythms do not jump to life as you read them - then the creature is going to be maimed and the spirit sickly. So as an artist you have to make sure that all those parts over which you have control, the words and rhythms and images, are alive. That is where the difficulties begin. Yet the rules, to begin with, are very simple. Words that live are those which we hear, like

"click" or "chuckle", or which we see like "freckled" or "veined", or which we taste like "vinegar" or "sugar", or touch, like "pickle" or "oily", or smell, like "tar" or "onion". Words which belong directly to one of the five senses. Or words which act and seem to use their muscles, like "flick" or "balance".

But immediately things become more difficult. "Click" not only gives you a sound, it gives you a notion of a sharp movement - such as your tongue makes in saying "click". It also gives you the feel of something light and brittle, like a snapping twig. Heavy things do not click, nor do soft bendable ones. In the same way, tar not only smells strongly, it is sticky to touch, with a particular thick and choking stickiness. Also it moves, when it is soft, like a black snake, and has a beautiful black gloss. So it is with most words. They belong to several of the senses at once, as if each one had eyes, ears and tongue, or ears and fingers and a body to move with. It is this little goblin in a word that is its life and its poetry, and it is this goblin which the poet has to have under control.

Well, you say this is hopeless. How do you control all that? When the words are pouring out, how can you be sure that you do not have one of those side meanings of the word "feathers" getting all stuck up with one of the side meanings of the word "treacle" a few words later. In bad poetry this is exactly what happens, the words kill each other. I do not have to bother about it as long as I do one thing.

That one thing is, imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell

it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic. If you do this you do not have to bother about commas or full-stops or that sort of thing. You do not have to look at the words either. You keep your eyes, your ears, your nose, your taste, your touch, your whole being on the thing you are turning into words. The minute you flinch, and take your mind off this thing, and begin to look at the words, and worry about them - then your worry goes into them and they set about killing each other. So you keep going as long as you can, then look back and see what you have written. After a bit of practice, and after telling yourself a few times that you do not care how other people have written about this thing, this is the way you find it; and after telling yourself you are going to use any old word that comes into your head so long as it seems right at the moment of writing it down, you will surprise yourself. You will read back through what you have written and you will get a shock. You will have captured a spirit, a creature.

After all that, I ought to give you an example:

STRUGGLE

TED HUGHES

We had been expecting her to calve
And there she was, just after dawn, down,
Private, behind bushed hedge-cuttings, in a low rough corner.
The walk towards her was like a walk into danger
Caught by her first calf, the small-boned black and white heifer
Having a bad time. She lifted her head,
She reached for us with a wild, flinging look
And flopped flat again. There was the calf,
White-faced, lion-coloured, enormous, trapped
Round the waist by his mothers's purpled elastic
His heavy long forelegs limply bent in a not-yet-inherited
gallop

His head curving up and back, pushing for the udder
Which had not yet appeared, his nose scratched and reddened
By an ill-placed clump of bitten-off rushes,
His fur dried as if he had been
Half-born for hours, as he probably had.
Then we heaved on his forelegs,
And in his neck, and half-born he moored
Protesting about everything. Then bending him down,
Between her legs, and sliding a hand
Into the hot tunnel, trying to ease
His sharp hip-bones past her pelvis,
Then twisting him down, so you expected
His spine to slip its sockets,
And one hauling his legs and one embracing his wet waist
Like pulling somebody anyhow from a bog,
And one with hands easing his hips past the corners
Of his tunnel mother, till something gave.
The cow flung her head and lifted her upper hind leg
With every heave, and something gave
Almost a click -
And his scrubbed wet enormous flanks came sliding out,
Coloured ready for the light his incredibly long hind legs
From the loose red flapping sack-mouth
Followed by a gush of colours, a mess
Of puddled tissues and jellies.
He moored feebly and lay like a pieta Christ
In the cold easterly daylight. We dragged him
Under his mother's nose, Her stretched-out exhausted head,
So she could get to know him with lickings.
They lay face to face like two mortally wounded duellists.
We stood back, letting the strength flow towards them.
We gave her a drink, we gave her hay. The calf
Started his convalescence
From the gruelling journey. All day he lay
Overpowered by limpness and weight.
We poured his mother's milk into him
But he had not the strength to swallow.
He made a few clumsy throat gulps, then love, and tried to pour
Warm milk and whiskey down his throat and not into his
lungs.
But his eye just lay suffering the monstrous weight of his
head
The impossible job of his marvellous huge limbs.
He could not make it. He died called Struggle
Son of Patience.

CHAPTER SEVEN

LEARNING TO IMPROVISE THROUGH MUSIC

My approach to the practice of drawing and painting is one I have recently understood for myself. I have always been more interested in music as a means of expressing myself but recently through music I have come to understand my passion to draw as well. Through playing music I have learnt or felt the freedom of improvisation. So how then are we to gain the freedom to improvise? First we must learn to give up our studied, well-scripted, often miscast, bigger-than-life tragic roles.

It is so easy to be tempted to remain stuck in a limited life role which offers little reward beyond its safe sense of familiarity. No matter how dangerous the consequences of staying in character, each of us is tempted to live out his tragic role rather than risk a new part or an unfamiliar who-knows-what-will-happen-next improvisation.

As a performing art, music has always seemed particularly instructive to me as a model for what a freely improvised life (and subsequently my art) can be like. I remember reading one musician's description of when he gave up playing the flute. On the first instrument he played competently in a well-trained but timid style. The flute was frightening but it opened him to a new freedom of improvisation. Here is how he described the experience:

Wandering over the unfamiliar terrain of a new instrument, my fingers broke free of their recorder habits, to new rhythms and patterns, reflecting what I'd heard but born from the moment. I could wave them freely - not always, but enough to express what was in me. Sometimes still, jamming with others, when I am down or ill at ease. I can hear myself "going through the motions", appearing to make music in a whole when actually my mind is checking off the chord changes and dragging familiar licks out of storage for my fingers to permute. But if we start cooking together, I can feel almost a click in me as another system takes hold in response, and energy flows from within through my fingers, which leap their baroquish walls to skitter across the keys, chasing the wind.

He goes on to explore the experience of allowing himself this freedom:

What are the traps? If I am anxious for the next note, or about it, I do not listen to the note I am in. Be where I am. If I am anxious to hang on to the goodness of where I am, for fear any change may make the note more sour, my body translates this into frozen fingers and lips that cannot move. Don't be afraid to let go; learn to have nothing to lose. To move in holy indifference is not to be passive - yet sometimes the music itself leads me forth, embracing even my tremors and contradictions in something whole. Playing free, every so often I realise that the note I have just begun is not the one "I" had intended and sent out orders to produce, but a different one, chosen confidently by my body to extend the music - quite independently of the listening-and-scheming me who flashes with resentment at the mistake. [9]

Freedom to improvise requires a radical shift from familiar patterns, risking the displeasure and discouragement of the audience. It means giving up familiar pain for unfamiliar pain. Sometimes it requires being able to laugh at oneself and endure the ridicule of others. Often it requires hard work. Other times it demands that we give up working hard so that we may begin to play .

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION

What has art meant to me? It has made my life more interesting and more often than before it all seems worth it (which seems a strange thing to say). One thing that art (in all its forms) teaches to most of us is that we are not looking at things as closely as we ought to and we are not understanding them as deeply as we ought. It is perhaps only when you sit down to write out, say, an account of the most interesting thing that has happened to you since Christmas that you realise that you remember almost none of it: you cannot remember seeing what people wore, what they did exactly, what they said exactly. Most of us just retain a vague impression of an event, with one or two details that affected us directly, And when we ask someone else to give their account of the same event it is highly probable that their memory will contradict ours. This could mean we both saw different aspects of the event and are both in our way right. But it is certain that we both saw almost nothing and made our judgement of all the facts after seeing only one or two of them. How would you like to be condemned by a jury who when they go into a jury room remember about as much of your case as you do of the film you saw last week?

In this noisy, busy, easy modern life we are bombarded by sights and sounds that have no important meaning for us - either they are utterly meaningless, like traffic noises, or they simply

entertain us, like T.V. noises. And so we develop lazy habits or not really listening and not really looking, just letting it all slide off us, knowing that it does not really matter whether we see or hear these things or not - we shall not get hurt and we shall not go hungry.

And so most of us drift through life not really attending to anything, like fat grampuses in an aquarium, where there are no sharks and no killer whales, where the keeper brings all the food we need, where the people on the other side of the glass are creatures from another world and do not matter at all. That is the easy most of us are by the time we are eighteen or nineteen or so, and the only thing that troubles us then is boredom.

I recently read an account of an experiment. A film of a submarine manoeuvring under water was shown to a mixed audience of American and African tribesmen. America, as you know, is a fat easy country, like England and for the most part Ireland. Africa is not: for most Africans life is still terribly hard, and if they do not keep as wide awake to their surroundings as animals, they are finished. After the film was shown, the people in the audience were asked to write out what they had seen. What do you think the results were like?

The Americans, as I have said, live much as we do, they look at things much as we do. From their accounts you would think they had seen almost nothing - they had seen a submarine, of course, moving. But what moves it made for the most part they were not sure, and you could not guess what kind of a submarine they had seen or whether it was even under water. The African accounts were quite different. The Africans, almost to a man, had seen every

single thing and remembered it - the shape of the submarine, all its visible fittings; they described its movements precisely; they described in detail the appearance of the water and the sea-floor over which the submarine moved. You would think their lives depended on it. What do you think your account would be like?

A short time ago, a beggar came to our door and asked for money. I gave him something and watched him walk away. That would seem to be a simple enough experience, watching a beggar walk away. But how could I begin to describe what I saw? Words seem suddenly a bit thin. It is not enough to say "The beggar walked away" or even "The beggar went away with a slinking sort of shuffle as if he wished he were running full speed for the nearest corner". It would have missed the point - the most important factor: that what I saw, I saw and understood in one flash, a single 1,000v shock, that lit up everything and drove it into my bones, whereas in such words and phrases I am dribbling it out over pages in tinglings that can only just be felt. That's where I substitute images for words.

And so with my beggar, I was aware of a strong impression all right, which disturbed me for a long time after he had gone. But what exactly had I learned? And how could I begin to delve into the tangled rather painful mass of whatever it was that stirred in my mind as I watched him go away.

And watching a beggar go away, even if you just been subliminally burdened with his entire biography, is a slight experience compared to the events that are developing in us all the time, as our private history and our personal make-up and

hour-by-hour biological changes and our present immediate circumstances and all that we know, in fact, struggle together, trying to make sense of themselves in our single life, trying to work out what exactly is going on in and around us and exactly what we are or could be, what we ought and ought not to do, and what exactly did happen in those situations, which though we lived through them long since still go on inside us as if time could only make things fresher.

And all this is our experience. It is the final facts, as they are registered on this particular human measuring instrument. I have tried to suggest how infinitely beyond our ordinary notions of what we know our real knowledge, the real facts for us, really is. And to live removed from this inner universe of experience is also to live removed from ourself, banished from ourself and our real life. The struggle truly to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self, has been man's principal occupation, wherever he could find leisure for it, ever since he first grew this enormous surplus of brain. Men have invented religion to do this for others. But to do it for themselves, they have invented art - music, painting, dancing, sculpture and the one which pinpoints it more clearly for others, poetry.

Because it is occasionally possible, just for brief moments, to find words or images that will unlock the doors of all those many mansions inside the head and express something - perhaps not much, just something - of the crush of information that presses in on us from the way a cow calves to the way a crow flies, to the way a man walks, and from what we did one day a dozen years

ago. Words and images that will express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are, from the momentary effect of the barometer to the force that created men distinct from trees. Something of the inaudible music that moves us along in our bodies from moment to moment like water in a river. Something of the almighty importance of it and something of the utter meaninglessness. And when images, words or sound can manage something of this, and manage it in a moment of time, and in that same moment make out of it all the vital signature of a human being - not of an atom, or of a geometrical diagram, or of a heap of lenses - but a human being - I call it art.

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