

Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life" (1863)

III. An Artist, Man Of The World, Man Of Crowds, And Child

Today I want to talk to my readers about a singular man, whose originality is so powerful and clear-cut that it is self-sufficing, and does not bother to look for approval. None of his drawings is signed, if by signature we mean the few letters, which can be so easily forged, that compose a name, and that so many other artists grandly inscribe at the bottom of their most carefree sketches. But all his works are signed with his dazzling soul, and art-lovers who have seen and liked them will recognize them easily from the description I propose to give of them. M. C. G. loves mixing with the crowds loves being incognito, and carries his originality to the point of modesty. M. Thackeray, who, as is well known, is very interested in all things to do with art, and who draws the illustrations for his own novels, one day spoke of M. G. in a London review, much to the irritation of the latter who regarded the matter as an outrage to his modesty. And again quite recently, when he heard that I was proposing to make an assessment of his mind and talent, he begged me, in a most peremptory manner, to suppress his name, and to discuss his works only as though they were the works of some anonymous person. I will humbly obey this odd request. The reader and I will proceed as though M. G. did not exist, and we will discuss his drawings and his watercolors, for which he professes a patrician's disdain, in the same way as would a group of scholars faced with the task of assessing the importance of a number of precious historical documents which chance has brought to light, and the author of which must for ever remain unknown. And even to reassure my conscience completely, let my readers assume that all the things I have to say about the artist's nature, so strangely and mysteriously dazzling, have been more or less accurately suggested by the works in question; pure poetic hypothesis, conjecture, or imaginative reconstructions.

M. G. is an old man. Jean-Jacques began writing, so they say, at the age of forty-two. Perhaps it was at about that age that M. G., obsessed by the world of images that filled his mind, plucked up courage to cast ink and colors on to a sheet of white paper. To be honest, he drew like a barbarian, like a child, angrily chiding his clumsy fingers and his disobedient tool. I have seen a large number of these early scribbings, and I admit that most of the people who know what they are talking about, or who claim to, could, without shame, have failed to discern the latent genius

that dwelt in these obscure beginnings. Today, M. G., who has discovered unaided all the little tricks of the trade, and who has taught himself, without help or advice, has become a powerful master in his own way; of his early artlessness he has retained only what was needed to add an unexpected spice to his abundant gift. When he happens upon one of these efforts of his early manner, he tears it up or burns it, with a most amusing show of shame and indignation.

For ten whole years I wanted to make the acquaintance of M. G., who is by nature a great traveler and very cosmopolitan. I knew that he had for a long time been working for an English illustrated paper and that in it had appeared engravings from his travel sketches (Spain, Turkey, the Crimea). Since then I have seen a considerable mass of these on-the-spot drawings from life, and I have thus been able to 'read' a detailed and daily account, infinitely preferable to any other, of the Crimean campaign. The same paper had also published (without signature, as before) a large quantity of compositions by this artist from the new ballets and operas. When at last I ran him to ground I saw at once that I was not dealing exactly with an artist but rather with a man of the world. In this context, pray interpret the word 'artist' in a very narrow sense, and the expression 'man of the world' in a very broad one. By 'man of the world', I mean a man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and legitimate reasons behind all its customs; by 'artist', I mean a specialist, a man tied to his palette like a serf to the soil. M. G. does not like being called an artist. Is he not justified to a small extent? He takes an interest in everything the world over, he wants to know, understand, and assess everything that happens on the surface of our spheroid. The artist moves little, or even not at all, in intellectual and political circles. If he lives in the Breda quarter he knows nothing of what goes on in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. With two or three exceptions, which it is unnecessary to name, the majority of artists are, let us face it, very skilled brutes, mere manual laborers, village pub-talkers with the minds of country bumpkins. Their talk; inevitably enclosed within very narrow limits, quickly becomes a bore to the man of the world, to the spiritual citizen of the universe.

Thus to begin to understand M. G., the first thing to note is that curiosity may be considered the starting point of his genius.

Do you remember a picture (for indeed it is a picture!) written by the most powerful pen of this age and entitled *The Man of the Crowd*? Sitting in a café, and looking through the shop window, a convalescent is enjoying the sight of the passing crowd, and identifying himself in thought with all the thoughts that are moving around him. He has only recently come back from the shades of

death and breathes in with delight all the spores and odors of life; as he has been on the point of forgetting everything, he remembers and passionately wants to remember everything. In the end he rushes out into the crowd in search of a man unknown to him whose face, which he had caught sight of, had in a flash fascinated him. Curiosity had become a compelling, irresistible passion.

Now imagine an artist perpetually in the spiritual condition of the convalescent, and you will have the key to the character of M. G.

But convalescence is like a return to childhood. The convalescent, like the child, enjoys to the highest degree the faculty of taking a lively interest in things, even the most trivial in appearance. Let us hark back, if we can, by a retrospective effort of our imaginations, to our youngest, our morning impressions, and we shall recognize that they were remarkably akin to the vividly colored impressions that we received later on after a physical illness, provided that illness left our spiritual faculties pure and unimpaired. The child sees everything as a novelty; the child is always 'drunk'. Nothing is more like what we call inspiration than the joy the child feels in drinking in shape and color. I will venture to go even further and declare that inspiration has some connection with congestion, that every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less vigorous nervous impulse that reverberates in the cerebral cortex. The man of genius has strong nerves; those of the child are weak. In the one, reason has assumed an important role; in the other, sensibility occupies almost the whole being. But genius is no more than childhood recaptured at will, childhood equipped now with man's physical means to express itself, and with the analytical mind that enables it to bring order into the sum of experience, involuntarily amassed. To this deep and joyful curiosity must be attributed that stare, animal-like in its ecstasy, which all children have when confronted with something new, whatever it may be, face or landscape, light, gilding, colors, watered silk, enchantment of beauty, enhanced by the arts of dress. A friend of mine was telling me one day how, as a small boy, he used to be present when his father was dressing, and how he had always been filled with astonishment, mixed with delight, as he looked at the arm muscle, the color tones of the skin tinged with rose and yellow, and the bluish network of the veins. The picture of the external world was already beginning to fill him with respect, and to take possession of his brain. Already the shape of things obsessed and possessed him. A precocious fate was showing the tip of its nose. His damnation was settled. Need I say that, today, the child is a famous painter.

I was asking you just now to think of M. G. as an eternal convalescent; to complete your idea of him, think of him also as a man-child, as a man possessing at every moment the genius of childhood, in other words a genius for whom no edge of life is blunted.

I told you that I was unwilling to call him a pure artist, and that he himself rejected this title, with a modesty tinged with aristocratic restraint. I would willingly call him a dandy, and for that I would have a sheaf of good reasons; for the word 'dandy' implies a quintessence of character and a subtle understanding of all the moral mechanisms of this world; but, from another aspect, the dandy aspires to cold detachment, and it is in this way that M. G, who is dominated, if ever anyone was, by an insatiable passion, that of seeing and feeling, parts company trenchantly with dandyism. *Anabam amare*, said St Augustine. 'I love passion, passionately,' M. G. might willingly echo. The dandy is blasé, or affects to be, as a matter of policy and class attitude. M. G. hates blasé people. Sophisticated minds will understand me when I say that he possesses that difficult art of being sincere without being ridiculous. I would confer on him the title of philosopher, to which he has a right for more than one reason; but his excessive love of visible, tangible things, in their most plastic form, inspires him with a certain dislike of those things that go to make up the intangible kingdom of the metaphysical. Let us therefore reduce him to the status of the pure pictorial moralist, like La Bruyere.

The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense and impartial spirits, who do not lend themselves easily to linguistic definitions. The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes. The lover of life makes the whole world into his family, just as the lover of the fair sex creates his from all the lovely women he has found, from those that could be found, and those who are impossible to find, just as the picture-lover lives in an enchanted world of dreams painted on canvas. Thus the lover of universal life moves into the crowd as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity. He, the lover of life, may also be compared to a mirror as vast as this crowd: to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with every one of its movements presents a pattern of life, in all its multiplicity, and the flowing grace of all the

elements that go to compose life. It is an ego athirst for the non-ego, and reflecting it at every moment in energies more vivid than life itself, always inconstant and fleeting. ‘Any man’, M. G. once said, in one of those talks he rendered memorable by the intensity of his gaze, and by his eloquence of gesture, ‘any man who is not weighed down with a sorrow so searching as to touch all his faculties, and who is bored in the midst of the crowd, is a fool! A fool! and I despise him!’ When, as he wakes up, M. G. opens his eyes and sees the beating vibrantly at his window-panes, he says to himself with remorse and regret: ‘What an imperative command! What a fanfare of light! Light everywhere for several hours past! Light I have lost in sleep! and endless numbers of things bathed in light that I could have seen and have failed to!’ And off he goes! And he watches the flow of life move by, majestic and dazzling. He admires the eternal beauty and the astonishing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained in the tumult of human liberty. He gazes at the landscape of the great city, landscapes of stone, now swathed in the mist, now struck in full face by the sun. He enjoys handsome equipages, proud horses, the spit and polish of the grooms, the skilful handling by the page boys, the smooth rhythmical gait of the women, the beauty of the children, full of the joy of life and proud as peacocks of their pretty clothes; in short, life universal. If in a shift of fashion, the cut of a dress has been slightly modified, if clusters of ribbons and curls have been dethroned by rosettes, if bonnets have widened and chignons have come down a little on the nape of the neck, if waist-lines have been raised and skirts become fuller, you may be sure that from a long way off his eagle’s eye will have detected it. A regiment marches by, maybe on its way to the ends of the earth, filling the air of the boulevard with its martial airs, as light and lively as hope; and sure enough M. G. has already seen, inspected and analyzed the weapons and the bearing of this whole body of troops. Harness, highlights, bands, determined mien, heavy and grim mustachios, all these details flood chaotically into him; and within a few minutes the poem that comes with it all is virtually composed. And then his soul will vibrate with the soul of the regiment, marching as though it were one living creature, proud image of joy and discipline!

But evening comes. The witching hour, the uncertain light, when the sky draws its curtains and the city lights go on. The gaslight stands out on the purple background of the setting sun. Honest men or crooked customers, wise or irresponsible, all are saying to themselves: ‘The day is clone at last!’ Good men and bad turn their thoughts to pleasure, and each hurries to his favorite haunt to drink the cup of oblivion. M G. will be the last to leave any place where the departing glories

of daylight linger, where poetry echoes, life pulsates, music sounds; any place where a human passion offers a subject to his eye where natural man and conventional man reveal themselves in strange beauty, where the rays of the dying sun pay on the fleeting pleasure of the 'depraved animal!' 'Well, there, to be sure, is a day well filled,' murmurs to himself a type of reader well-known to all of us; 'each one of us has surely enough genius to fill it in the same way.' No! few men have the gift of seeing; fewer still have the power to express themselves. And now, whilst others are sleeping, this man is leaning over his table, his steady gaze on a sheet of paper, exactly the same gaze as he directed just now at the things about him, brandishing his pencil, his pen, his brush, splashing water from the glass up to the ceiling, wiping his pen on his shirt, hurried, vigorous, active, as though he was afraid the images might escape him, quarrelsome though alone, and driving himself relentlessly on. And things seen are born again on the paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and better than beautiful, strange and endowed with an enthusiastic life, like the soul of their creator. The weird pageant has been distilled from nature. All the materials, stored higgledy-piggledy by memory, are classified, ordered, harmonized, and undergo that deliberate idealization, which is the product of a childlike perceptiveness, in other words a perceptiveness that is acute and magical by its very ingenuousness.

IV. MODERNITY

And so, walking or quickening his pace, he goes his way, for ever in search. In search of what? We may rest assured that this man, such as I have described him, this solitary mortal endowed with an active imagination, always roaming the great desert of men, has a nobler aim than that of the pure idler, a more general aim, other than the fleeting pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call 'modernity', for want of a better term to express the idea in question. The aim for him is to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory. If we cast our eye over our exhibitions of modern pictures, we shall be struck by the general tendency of our artists to clothe all manner of subjects in the dress of the past. Almost all of them use the fashions and the furnishings of the Renaissance, as David used Roman fashions and furnishings, but there is this difference, that David, having chosen subjects peculiarly Greek or Roman, could not do otherwise than present them in the style of antiquity, whereas the painters of today, choosing, as

they do, subjects of a general nature, applicable to all ages, will insist on dressing them up in the fashion of the Middle Ages, of the Renaissance, or of the East. This is evidently sheer laziness; for it is much more convenient to state roundly that everything is hopelessly ugly in the dress of a period than to apply oneself to the task of extracting the mysterious beauty that may be hidden there, however small or light it may be. Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the—eternal and the immovable. There was a form of modernity for every painter of the past; the majority of the fine portraits that remain to us from former times are clothed in the dress of their own day. They are perfectly harmonious works because the dress, the hairstyle, and even the gesture, the expression and the smile (each age has its carriage, its expression and its smile) form a whole, full of vitality. You have no right to despise this transitory fleeting element, the metamorphoses of which are so frequent, nor to dispense with it. If you do, you inevitably fall into the emptiness of an abstract and indefinable beauty, like that of the One and only woman of the time before the Fall. If for the dress of the day, which is necessarily right, you substitute another, you are guilty of a piece of nonsense that only a fancy-dress ball imposed by fashion can excuse. Thus the goddesses, the nymphs, and sultanas of the eighteenth century are portraits in the spirit of their day.

No doubt it is an excellent discipline to study the old masters, in order to learn how to paint, but it can be no more than a superfluous exercise if your aim is to understand the beauty of the present day. The draperies of Rubens or Veronese will not teach you how to paint watered silk d [‘antique, or satin a la reine, or any other fabric produced by our mills, supported by a swaying crinoline, or petticoats of starched muslin. The texture and grain are not the same as in the fabrics of old Venice, or those worn at the court of Catherine. We may add that the cut of the skirt and bodice is absolutely different, that the pleats are arranged into a new pattern, and finally that the gesture and carriage of the woman of today give her dress a vitality and a character that are not those of the woman of former ages. In short, in order that any form of modernity may be worthy of becoming antiquity, the mysterious beauty that human life unintentionally puts into it must have been extracted from it. It is this task that M. G. particularly addresses himself to.

I have said that every age has its own carriage, its expression, its gestures. This proposition may be easily verified in a large portrait gallery (the one at Versailles, for example). But it can be yet further extended. In a unity we call a nation, the professions, the social classes, the successive centuries, introduce variety not only in gestures and manners, but also in the general outlines of

faces. Such and such a nose, mouth, forehead, will be standard for a given interval of time, the length of which I shall not claim to determine here, but which may certainly be a matter of calculation. Such ideas are not familiar enough to portrait painters; and the great weakness of M. Ingres, in particular, is the desire to impose on every type that sits for him a more or less complete process of improvement, in other words a despotic perfecting process, borrowed from the store of classical ideas.

In a matter such as this, a priori reasoning would be easy and even legitimate. The perpetual correlation between what is called the soul and what is called the body is a quite satisfactory explanation of how what is material or emanates from the spiritual reflects and will always reflect the spiritual force it derives from. If a painter, patient and scrupulous but with only inferior imaginative power, were commissioned to paint a courtesan of today, and, for this purpose, were to get his inspiration (to use the hallowed term) from a courtesan by Titian or Raphael, the odds are that his work would be fraudulent, ambiguous, and difficult to understand. The study of a masterpiece of that date and of that kind will not teach him the carriage, the gaze, the come-hitherishness, or the living representation of one of these creatures that the dictionary of fashion has, in rapid succession, pigeonholed under the coarse or light-hearted rubric of unchaste, kept women, Lorettes.

The same remark applies precisely to the study of the soldier, the dandy, and even animals, dogs or horses, and of all things that go to make up the external life of an age. Woe betide the man who goes to antiquity for the study of anything other than ideal art, logic and general method! By immersing, himself too deeply in it, he will no longer have the present in his mind's eye; he throws away the value and the privileges afforded by circumstance; for nearly all our originality comes from the stamp that it impresses upon our sensibility. The reader will readily understand that I could easily verify my assertions from innumerable objects other than women. What would you say, for example, of a marine painter (I take an extreme case) who, having to represent the sober and elegant beauty of a modern vessel, were to tire out his eyes in the study of the overloaded, twisted shapes, the monumental stern, of ships of bygone ages, and the complex sails and rigging of the sixteenth century? And what would you think of an artist you had commissioned to do the portrait of a thorough-bred, celebrated in the solemn annals of the turf, if he were to restrict his studies to museums, if he were to content himself with looking at equine studies of the past in the picture galleries, in Van Dyck, Bourguignon, or Van der Meulen?

M.G., guided by nature, tyrannized over by circumstance, has followed a quite different path. He began by looking at life, and only later did he contrive to learn how to express life. The result has been a striking originality, in which whatever traces of untutored simplicity may still remain take on the appearance of an additional proof of obedience to the impression, of a flattery of truth. For most of us, especially for businessmen, in whose eyes nature does not exist, unless it be in its strict utility relationship with their business interests, the fantastic reality of life becomes strangely blunted. M.G. registers it constantly; his memory and his eyes are full of it.

IX. THE DANDY

The wealthy man, who, blasé though he may be, has no occupation in life but to chase along the highway of happiness, the man nurtured in luxury, and habituated from early youth to being obeyed by others, the man, finally, who has no profession other than elegance, is bound at all times to have a facial expression of a very special kind. Dandyism is an ill-defined social attitude as strange as dueling; it goes back a long way, since Caesar, Catilina, Alcibiades provide us with brilliant examples of it; it is very widespread, since Chateaubriand found examples of it in the forests and on the lake-sides of the New World. Dandyism, which is an institution outside the law, has a rigorous code of laws that all its subjects are strictly bound by, however ardent and independent their individual characters may be.

The English novelists, more than others, have cultivated the 'high life' type of novel, and their French counterparts who, like M. de Custine, have tried to specialize in love novels have very wisely taken care to endow their characters with purses long enough for them to indulge without hesitation their slightest whims; and they freed them from any profession. These beings have no other status but that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons, of satisfying their passions, of feeling and thinking. Thus-they possess, to their hearts' content, and to a vast degree, both time and money, without which fantasy, reduced to the state of ephemeral reverie, can scarcely be translated into action. It is unfortunately very true that, without leisure and money, love can be no more than an orgy of the common man, or the accomplishment of a conjugal duty. Instead of being a sudden' impulse full of ardor and reverie, it becomes a distastefully utilitarian affair.

If I speak of love in the context of dandyism, the reason is that love is the natural occupation of men of leisure. But the dandy does not consider love as a special aim in life. If I have mentioned money, the reason is that money is indispensable to those who make an exclusive cult of their passions, but the dandy does not aspire to wealth as an object in itself; an open bank credit could suit him just as well; he leaves that squalid passion to vulgar mortals. Contrary to what a lot of thoughtless people seem to believe, dandyism is not even an excessive delight in clothes and material elegance. For the perfect dandy, these things are no more than the symbol of the aristocratic superiority of his mind. Thus, in his eyes, enamored as he is above all of distinction, perfection in dress consists in absolute simplicity, which is, indeed, the best way of being distinguished. What then can this passion be, which has crystallized into a doctrine, and has formed a number of outstanding devotees, this unwritten code that has molded so proud a brotherhood? It is, above all, the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions. It is a kind of cult of the ego which can still survive the pursuit of that form of happiness to be found in others, in woman for example; which can even survive what are called illusions. It is the pleasure of causing surprise in others, and the proud satisfaction of never showing any oneself. A dandy may be blasé, he may even suffer pain, but in the latter case he will keep smiling, like the Spartan under the bite of the fox.

Clearly, then, dandyism in certain respects comes close to spirituality and to stoicism, but a dandy can never be a vulgar man. If he were to commit a crime, he might perhaps be socially damned, but if the crime came from some trivial cause, the disgrace would be irreparable. Let the reader not be shocked by this mixture of the grave and the gay; let him rather reflect that there is a sort of grandeur in all follies, a driving power in every sort of excess. A strange form of spirituality indeed! For those who are its high priests and its victims at one and the same time, all the complicated material conditions they subject themselves to, from the most flawless dress at any time of day or night to the most risky sporting feats, are no more than a series of gymnastic exercises suitable to strengthen the will and school the soul. Indeed I was not far wrong when I compared dandyism to a kind of religion. The most rigorous monastic rule, the inexorable commands of the Old Man of the Mountain, who enjoined suicide on his intoxicated disciples, were not more despotic or more slavishly obeyed than this doctrine of elegance and originality, which, like the others, imposes upon its ambitious and humble sectaries, men as often as not full of spirit, passion, courage, controlled energy, the terrible precept: *Perinde ac cadaver!*

Fastidious, unbelievables, beaux, lions or dandies: which ever label these men claim for themselves, one and all stem from the same origin, all share the same characteristic of opposition and revolt; all are representatives of what is best in human pride, of that need, which is too rare in the modern generation, to combat and destroy triviality. That is the source, in your day, of that haughty, patrician attitude, aggressive even in its coldness. Dandyism appears especially in those periods of transition when democracy has not yet become all-powerful, and when aristocracy is only partially weakened and discredited. In the confusion of such times, a certain number of men, disenchanted and leisured 'outsiders', but all of them richly endowed with native energy, may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy, all the more difficult to break down because established on the most precious, the most indestructible faculties, on the divine gifts that neither work nor money can give. Dandyism is the last flicker of heroism in decadent ages; and the sort of dandy discovered by the traveler in Northern America in no sense invalidates this idea; for there is no valid reason why we should not believe that the tribes we call savage are not the remnants of great civilizations of the past. Dandyism is a setting sun; like the declining star, it is magnificent, without heat and full of melancholy. But alas! the rising tide of democracy, which spreads everywhere and reduces everything to the same level, is daily carrying away these last champions of human pride, and submerging, in the waters of oblivion, the last traces of these remarkable myrmidons. Here in France, dandies are becoming rarer and rarer, whereas amongst our neighbors in England the state of society and the constitution (the true constitution, the one that is expressed in social habits) will, for a long time yet, leave room for the heirs of Sheridan, Brummell and Byron, always assuming that men worthy of them come forward.

What to the reader may have seemed a digression is not one in fact. The moral reflections and musings that arise from the drawings of an artist are in many cases the best interpretation that the critic can make of them; the notions they suggest are part of an underlying idea, and, by revealing them in turn, we may uncover the root idea itself. Need I say that when M.G. commits one of his dandies to paper, he always gives him his historical character, we might almost say his legendary character, were it not that we are dealing with our own day and with things that are generally held to be light-hearted? For here we surely have that ease of bearing, that sureness of manner, that simplicity in the habit of command, that way of wearing a frock-coat or controlling a horse, that calmness revealing strength in every circumstance, that convince us, when our eye

does pick out one of those privileged beings, in whom the attractive and the formidable mingle so mysteriously: 'There goes a rich man perhaps, but quite certainly an unemployed Hercules.' The specific beauty of the dandy consists particularly in that cold exterior resulting from the unshakeable determination to remain unmoved; one is reminded of a latent fire, whose existence is merely suspected, and which, if it wanted to, but it does not, could burst forth in all its brightness. All that is expressed to perfection in these illustrations.