The Way of the Modern World

In its ultimate analysis the balance between the particular and the general is that between the spirit and the mind. All that the Greeks achieved was stamped by that balance. In a sense, it was the cause of all they did. The flowering of genius in Greece was due to the immense impetus given when clarity and power of thought was added to great spiritual force. That union made the Greek temples, statues, writings, all the plain expression of the significant; the temple in its simplicity; the statue in its combination of reality and ideality; the poetry in its dependence upon ideas; the tragedy in its union of the spirit of inquiry with the spirit of poetry. It made the Athenians lovers of fact and of beauty; it enabled them to hold fast both to the things that are seen and to the things that are not seen, in all they have left behind for us, science, philosophy, religion, art.

But since the days of Greece that balanced view has been the rarest of achievements. The Western world has not taken outright the way of the spirit, nor the way of the mind, but wavered between the two, giving adherence now to one, now to the other, never able finally to discard either yet powerless to reconcile their claims.

When the Greek city-state came to an end, in the bewilderment and insecurity that followed, men turned away from the visible world of the mind to the Stoics and the unshakable security of their kingdom of the spirit. In like manner, during the first centuries after Christ the trend of the Church, poor and weak and persecuted, was strongly away from the visible. Those were the years that saw the anchorites of the desert; the saint who lived upon a pillar; they saw self-torture and self-mutilation exalted. The things that are seen began to be viewed not only as negligible but as evil, drawing men away from the pure contemplation of the invisible. With the coming of the great monastic orders, that extreme tendency was checked; learning and art had a place and austerities were moderated, but the misery that underlay the lovely superstructure of the Middle Ages worked as misery has always done, turning men against the bitter reality of life, and freedom of thought was as unknown as if Greece had never lived. With the Renaissance and the rediscovery of Greece the pendulum swung far over to the other side. Grim wretchedness had ceased to be a matter of course in the Italian cities. People had begun to enjoy themselves and they were using their minds. They demanded liberty to think and to love life and the beauty of earth, but in their turn they ended by regarding as negligible the things that are not seen and they made their gain finally at the cost of morality and ethics. The Reformation asserted both morality and man's right to think for himself, but

denied beauty and the right of enjoyment. The last great swing of the pendulum was in the late nineteenth century when the battle was fought for scientific truth, and in the victory religion and art and the claims of the spirit were all slighted or discarded.

Never since Greek days has the balance been maintained throughout; only very seldom has it been achieved even in a single field. Here and there through the ages, however, it has come to pass in this matter or in that, and always, even when so circumscribed, it has accomplished something great and of lasting good. When the wisest of Roman lawgivers said that the enforcement of an absolutely just law without any exceptions, irrespective of particular differences, worked absolute injustice, he was declaring in effect that Rome had been able in this one matter to perceive the balance between the individual and the general, between the claims of the single man and the majority, between men's sympathy and their reason. In this one field Rome reached the balance Greece reached in every field she entered, and Rome has been the lawmaker for the world.

The only balance we can see with any degree of clearness that we are struggling toward to-day is in some sort like that achieved by Rome. The opposition between the spirit and the mind which we are chiefly conscious of is that between the individual and the community. Our great achievement, that which our age will stand for above all, is Science, but modern science, unlike that of

Greece, has kept to the mind alone, and the balance there between the law and the exception, the particular and the general, is only intellectual; the spiritual does not enter in. As regards our art and our literature nothing certain can be perceived. The trend toward the individual reached its height in Shakespeare and the Renaissance painters; nothing since has approached in greatness what was then done, but the individual has continued to be the focus of all our art.

At the moment, there seems to be discernible a turning away from this extreme individualization, but the movement is too new for us to know whether it has any real importance or promise for the future. The balance we are seeing more and more distinctly before us will be, if ever it is achieved, a new one, because we are directing our chief energies toward new fields of social and economic forces, and, most of all, because we have a knowledge and a point of view about the individual which have never been in the world before.

For nineteen hundred years the West has been undergoing a process of education in the particular versus the general. We have been in school to the foremost individualist of all time who declared that the very hairs of each man's head were numbered. That intense individualization has molded our spirit, and it has brought to us problems new in the history of mankind, together with trouble of mind and bitter disagreement where once there was ease and unanimity. It is not men's greed, nor

their ambition, nor yet their machines, it is not even the removal of their ancient landmarks, that is filling our present world with turmoil and dissension, but our new vision of the individual's claim against the majority's claim.

Things were simple in days of old when the single man had no right at all if a common good conflicted, his life taken for any purpose that served the public welfare, his blood sprinkled over the fields to make the harvest plentiful. Then a new idea, the most disturbing ever conceived, dawned, that every human being had rights. Men began to question what had been unquestioned since the world began: a father's authority, a king's, a slave-holder's. Perplexity and division came where all had been plain and simple. The individual had made his appearance and nothing was to be plain and simple again; no clear distinction could be drawn any more between what was just and unjust. To-day we see, fitfully and dimly, but more constantly and clearly, the individual sacrificed to the greatest good of the greatest number—the coal miner, the criminal in the death-house. Everywhere we are distracted by the claim of the single man against the common welfare.

Along with this realization of each unit in the mass has come an over-realization of ourselves. We are burdened with over-realization. Not that we can perceive too clearly the rights and wrongs of every human being but that we feel too deeply our own, to find in the end that what has

meaning only for each one alone has no real meaning at all.

Greek scientists in their century or two of life remade the universe. They leaped to the truth by an intuition, they saw a whole made up of related parts, and with the sweep of their vision the old world of hodge-podge and magic fell away and a world of order took its place. They could only begin the detailed investigation of the parts, but, ever since, Science has by an infinite labor confirmed their intuition of the whole. Greek artists found a disorganized world of human beings, a complex mass made up of units unrelated and disordered, and they too had an intuition of parts all belonging to a whole. They saw what is permanently important in a man and unites him to the rest.

We cannot recapture the Greek point of view; the simplicity and directness of their vision are not for us. The wheels of time never turn backward, and fortunately so. The deep integration of the idea of the individual gained through the centuries since Greece can never be lost. But modern science has made generalizations of greater truth than the Greeks could reach through a greater knowledge of individual facts. If we can follow that method and through our own intense realization of ourselves reach a unity with all men, seeing as deeply as the great tragic poets of old saw, that what is of any importance in us is what we share with all, then there will be a new distribution in the scales and the balance held so

evenly in those great days of Greece may be ours as well. The goal which we see ourselves committed to struggle toward without method or any clear hope, can be attained in no other way: a world where no one shall be sacrificed against his will, where general expediency which is the mind of mankind, and the feeling for each human being which is the spirit and the heart of mankind, shall be reconciled.

"For we war not against flesh and blood," wrote St. Paul, "but against principalities and powers…." The bitterest conflicts that have divided the minds of men and set family against family, and brother against brother, have not been waged for emperor or king, but for one side of the truth to the suppression of the other side. And yet, as our struggle to-day is again proving, there is something within us that will not let us rest in the divided truth. Even though the way of the West since Greece has been always to set mind against spirit, never to grasp the twofold aspect of all human beings, yet we are not able to give ourselves wholly up to one and let the other drop from our consciousness. Each generation in turn is constrained to try to reconcile the truth the spirit knows with the truth the mind knows, to make the inner world fit into the ever-changing frame of the outer world. To each in turn it appears impossible; either the picture or the frame must go, but the struggle toward adjustment never ends, for the necessity to achieve it is in our nature.

The East can let the frame go and give up the struggle.

We of the West, slaves to the reason, cannot. For brief periods we have thought that we could let the picture go, but that negation of the things each man knows most surely for himself is always partial and of short duration. In our present effort after adjustment which not only seems to us, but is, more difficult than any before because we are aware of so much more, it is worth our while to consider the adjustments achieved in the past. Of them all, the Greek was the most complete. The Greeks did not abstract away the outside world to prefer the claims of the world within; neither did they deny the spirit in favor of its incarnation. To them the frame and the picture fitted; the things that are seen and the things that are not seen harmonized.

For a hundred years Athens was a city where the great spiritual forces that war in men's minds flowed along together in peace; law and freedom, truth and religion, beauty and goodness, the objective and the subjective—there was a truce to their eternal warfare, and the result was the balance and clarity, the harmony and completeness, the word Greek has come to stand for. They saw both sides of the paradox of truth, giving predominance to neither, and in all Greek art there is an absence of struggle, a reconciling power, something of calm and serenity, the world has yet to see again.