

# The Vision of the Fool

At the time of writing this, presumably the artist thought of the works whose subject was the Holy Fool as a limited series. This suggests that he did not envisage a continuing pre-occupation with the theme. Subsequently, however, the Fool was to be the central symbol of his work, one whose inherent possibilities he was called upon to explore for the remainder of his career.

The introduction which prefaces this book of reproductions of my cycle of paintings and drawings,\* 'The Holy Fools', is not intended in any way to be an explanation of them. Paintings and drawings cannot be explained. Like life, they are unexplainable.

All Art brings a message into the world, but it is not the message of morality, or of philosophy, nor of discourse and law-giving. It is the message of life, of life itself, and this message can only be received, and understood, through the form and nature of the medium in which it is created; and not by translating it into another medium, for the message is implicit in the nature of the medium.

Art springing from essence, addresses itself to essence, and is eternal. Just as the essay written here is temporal and transitory, in that the character of the conditions it speaks of will alter either for better or for worse.

This introduction then, is rather in the nature of a series of reflections and meditations upon these drawings and paintings. I am not a philosopher, nor a teacher, nor a thinker; and cannot claim the distinction and originality of any of these gifts. Nor am I a writer, and not being used to writing, I am rather reluctant to put down in words, these things which mean much to me. And I apologise for the numerous imperfections of writing with which this essay is strewn, and hope that the reader will pardon them. Nevertheless, in this clever and disastrous Age, with its vulgar and cheap norm of the useful and respectable person, it is more than necessary for artists, at least occasionally, to speak of their attitude, and of the aims and thoughts of their work, no matter how roughly and inadequately, in order to try and make clear the issues, and the true nature of Art, in the face of the vast ignorance and half-ignorance of our

because the extrovert useful person is the most exploitable type. You cannot exploit so easily the man who is constantly reflecting upon life, and upon his conditions; who questions existence, who is troubled by desires, which seem to the useful person, not only beyond his comprehension, but utter nonsense, to be quelled by a nice practical commonsense society, where things make sense because they are useful.

History shows that you cannot so easily exploit the artist and the poet. The artist and the poet should be an unexploitable element in society.

The artist should have the same functional rights as the priest. For example, the non-participation in the pathological activity of war. The artist's rejection of the activity of war is not done from the point of view of a pacifist philosophy, for although most artists are physically pacific, a lot of them are spiritually belligerent. No, the artist cannot take part in war because, like the priest and the monk, he is the representative of the affirmative integrity of life, and therefore cannot take sides. Why should a Raphael or Rembrandt be forced to fight in a war, and the village parson or priest not have to? The vocational rights of the priest and the scientist should be granted to the artist; he is, as they are (or should be), part of the co-ordinating creative intelligence of human society. And if that be objected to on the grounds that it is difficult for people to judge a sincere artist from an insincere one, the answer is, that that can equally apply to parsons and priests; the important point is that they are exempt from taking part in war, on the grounds of their vocation alone, and not on personal perfections or imperfections. And this brings us to the real reason for the artist being forced to fight in war in this Age; and that is that modern society does not consider that the artist has an important function in its life; they still think the priest has some sort of place, they think this from sheer inertia of habit, although actually he has even less function than the artist. For the innately materialist conception of life of contemporary society has no real place for either of these ancient vocations, nor the approach to life that they represent. Contemporary society exempts the scientist from actual fighting in war, because he is the absolute representative of modern society's view of life. To let him be destroyed would be to destroy themselves. But they do not really mind destroying the artist, for when he has gone this society could still live with pleasure without the vision of Art or of Religion.

The other thing Maritain mentions, which seems to me to be of the utmost importance, is his statement that the modern world is 'ruining the leisure of the soul'. This is one of the main reasons why the art of painting has been neglected. Because the condition of its enjoyment is leisure to look, to

become receptive, to reflect, to absorb; leisure to form a connection, a communion with the painting. And it not only applies to painting; we have no leisure to form a communion with life itself. This 'leisure of the soul' in which things are absorbed and assimilated into the being of a person, is being destroyed slowly and effectively by a despicable utilitarian education, materialist in outlook, and in result, an enormous decay in spiritual fertility, a society without culture, a winter of human life.

In a respectable practical society, where everybody is useful, the poetic imagination in man is an anachronism, an irritant which disturbs the chemical sleep of habits of such a society by making it conscious of the degradation of its mechanisation, by the appearance of extraordinary desires; by overshadowing it with the supra-reality of poetry,\* by unsettling it with a thirst and a hunger for eternal beauty, just at the moment when this society thought that everybody was satisfied. This is the affirmation of poetic imagination, which is, and always will be, the natural activity of the poet and the artist.

See 'The Eternal Presence' herein, p.87.

We have lived to see everywhere the triumph of the enemies of the imagination, the despisers of the spirit, the philistines. We have lived to see the Church become the corpse of Christianity. The Church which believes in war in war-time, and in peace in peace-time. Seeing that this is about the most convenient position the Church could take up in this Age, the only thing that need be said is that it has nothing whatever to do with the passion of Christ, nor with His martyrs and Saints; when they lived they were crucified. No one would think to crucify the Church; there is nothing to crucify. Potency, integrity, and fertility of faith are the only things that can be crucified, because they are faith. The crucifixion of the poetic imagination in man by the Machine Age is a religious fact. And modern society has succeeded very well in rendering poetic imagination, Art, and Religion, the three magical representatives of life, an heresy; and the living symbol of that heresy is the Fool. The Fool is the poetic imagination of life, as inexplicable as the essence of life itself. This poetic life, born in all human beings, lives in them while they are children, but it is killed in them when they grow up by the abstract mechanisation of contemporary society and by the teaching of the norm of the 'ordinary man', 'the man in the street'. Today these abstract phantoms have come to tyrannise all the natural creative speculation that exists in beings that are human. This norm of the 'ordinary man' is in reality the philosophy of mediocrity, into which, with a sigh of relief, the general heavy inert mass of mankind desires to sink. This is the deadly myth of the 'little man', the law-abiding citizen who obeys all laws faithfully, no matter what the laws are. The 'little man' whose servitude makes

all wars possible. No individual can make war without the consent of the mass will of the 'little man'. Wars happen, because the 'little man' carries them out, and makes them happen. The 'plain and ordinary man' has made the philosophy of mediocrity a power, and this philosophy has an army, armed with guns, bombs, gas, atomic rockets, and other effective instruments for the destruction of the human race. They will allow the artist and the poet a place in their society if he is a respectable earnest educationalist, who has reassured the populace that he really is an efficient sensible fellow, like any other dull righteous worker, and that Art, Poetry and Religion are not so difficult or important; they, too, can be made mediocre, it only needs education. Yes, this society is troubled by the inexplicable sorrows and joys of the Fool. The Saint, the artist and the poet are all one in the Fool, in him they live, in him the poetic imagination of life lives.

The greatest Fool in history was Christ. This great Fool was crucified by the commercial pharisees, by the authority of the respectable, and by the mediocre official culture of the philistines. And has not the church crucified Christ more deeply and subtly by its hypocrisy, than any pagan? This Divine Fool, whose immortal compassion and holy folly placed a light in the dark hands of the world.

Our society has rejected the Fool, not only because he cannot be exploited, not only because they judge everything by its usefulness; but they are frightened and disturbed by the Fool, because he is the child of life, and not of abstract virtue. The Fool is purity of consciousness. This purity is a cosmic folly that is utterly detached from what most of the world thinks worth doing; it is detached from the deadening edifice of clever ambitions, of power, and of the incredible vanity of knowledge, that has already dulled the capacity for the poetry of life in contemporary society. For to be a success in the mechanical jungle of the contemporary world, the Fool must not exist in men, for the Fool is interested in life, in being alive, and not in power, nor in the accumulation of knowledge, nor in the passing of examinations, nor in being clever. The Fool, because he is troubled by longings transcending the world, is a hindrance to an ambitious career. The contemporary world certainly has no use for this kind of being in its society. For even the educationalist of our society is in the racket with the utilitarian commercial view of life of our time, when by education they try to produce what is called 'a useful citizen'. In other words, a sheep that believes that work is the sole purpose of life, and is educated to believe this, and is conditioned to a mechanical servitude, that is lost without continual work. For only those who believe that work is the be-all and end-all of life can be

exploited successfully in the commercial, political, non-religious conception of life of modern society. The philosophy of mediocrity, and the philosophy of technical cleverness, and mechanical efficiency, understand one another very well, and the specifically materialist irreligious mentality that dominates our time, understands them both, and uses them both; wanting by education to produce from them the complete extrovert type, who finds life only in continual activity. This mentality desires in fact to breed the ant in place of the human being, and a world of paid officials directing the form of society in place of an aristocracy of the spirit and the co-ordinating power of cultural intelligence. And in that direction contemporary society is rapidly decaying. Thus is poetic imagination more and more outlawed by subtle neglect, or imprisoned by mediocrity into official forms. But poetic imagination still flowers in the irony and eternal innocence of the Fool, which is the heresy of the artist and the poet. There is the element of the insect, of the mechanical in man, which degrades men into making an abstract society without leaven, a sterile state of efficiency, whose facile justice does the greatest injustice to life, because it destroys the person in men, and the person in men is the leaven by which life fertilises society. It is the person in men that creates a society which is a living organism a society made of personal beings, whose various different degrees of growth, and radiation, leaven the organic body of civilisation. This is the exact opposite to the imprisoning of life into the insect colony of utilitarian justice. It is the element of the Fool in every man that can redeem him from this degradation, this ancient element of the eternal Adam still exists deep inside a man, the element in him that holds converse with the essence of life. Spiritual joy, that is essential joy, arises from innocence, from purity of consciousness—this is the Fool. The Fool in man is a divine debonair spirit, whose careless empirical gaiety and overflowing mercy, embraces life; but the Fool is more than this, he is the sorrow of life.

Where there is no reverence, or respect, for the creative impulse of Art or Religion, there can be no civilised society. Civilisation exists only where conscience exists. And conscience is individual; one individual with an awakened conscience towards life is civilisation; and where there are a thousand people without conscience there is no civilisation; even if they are all very clever scientists who can make aeroplanes that can fly to the moon, or produce bombs that can destroy whole nations. A spiritual betrayal is on—it is the betrayal of the love and worship of life by the dominance of the scientific technical view of life in practically all the fields of human experience, including a large part of education. And education itself is becoming a substitute for Religion, and is

regarded with almost superstitious respect, as the only solution for modern society.

Where a real civilisation exists there also exists some degree of reverence for the Fool in men, and an understanding of the vocation of the Fool, by allowing him to love and move through society, clad in the ironic beauty of his devotion and compassion to the heart of man. But the ideal of our education, and of our society, is the clever scientific technician, his human emotions data laden, and atrophied by objective technicality. This ideal is becoming realised, and holds more and more power over society; dominating the education of mankind with the scientific technical view of life; yes, the tyranny of this one method of approaching existence, dominates all other approaches to the mystery of life, including those ancient and eternal ways of perception, Art and Religion. So that the meaning of the life work of the artist has fallen into the background of society, as something odd, not quite to be accounted for, which at best is a kind of almost extinct and uneasy amusement. A society moving along this line of direction will have no use or need for Art, and still less for Religion. Were there a real need for these things it would mean that the main direction of thought and attitude to life had already begun to alter. A society that has lost its reverence for poetic imagination has in reality lost its creative pride in life; with this gone, it has dropped into the universal welter of a vulgar search for mechanical pleasures of an incredible stupidity, and has forgotten the immortal goal of life. Soon everything will be cancelled out. Our disillusionment will be complete. And from complete disillusionment there can come only two things; final decay and death, or the birth of a faith.

Modern society rejects the Fool because of his faith in the essential holiness of life itself; contemporary society has mutilated the holiness of life by concentrating upon almost everything else but that, and by its neglect of the very means by which the sense of the holiness of existence is developed, namely Religion and Art.

The artist is a Fool, and Art is a cosmic folly by which purity of consciousness can be attained. For the Fool, the artist, and the priest, are the victims of the radiance of life. The true priest is a Fool whose purity of spirit is the folly by which the world grows and becomes enlightened. But modern society, by its concentration upon Science to the point where it threatens to sterilise the growth and life of the human psyche, has outlawed the priest, the artist and the Fool; and has consequently outlawed an entire field of human vision. Proof of this is the condition of society, which in spite of scientific efficiency and of the scientific outlook and education, is bankrupt and full of faces that were once

human. Now people living in a desert of a thousand machines and gadgets, show the huge unhappiness of emptiness. What need have they of the magical vocation of the priest and the artist, of the poet and the Fool? Do they know that they are starving, in spite of the word progress? For just as the body needs living vitamins to feed it in order to live, so, too, does the human psyche need to be fed by the mysteriously potent vitamins of Art and Religion, given through and by those illuminated instruments, the artist and the priest. The withdrawal of these vitamins, means decay at the core and the root of the culture of man.

But there always exist in society some men and women whom the Fool touches, who respond to the Fool. For the Fool awakens the Fool in others, but in many the Fool is stifled, or sleeps. There are human beings living in isolation and loneliness in the society of men who realise suddenly that they belong to the Fool, that they exist in the Fool, that in the Fool they have found their race, and their kind, to whom they belong; and that they are united in the communion of all Fools, which includes the communion of Saints, the communion of all creative souls, and the communion of the visible with the invisible. They are united in the enigmatic and universal compassion of the Fool. The Fool is near to them, and is their emblem. The Fool is the symbol of the lost ones of this world who are destined to inherit eternal life. The Fool is not a philosophy, but a quality of consciousness of life, an endless regard for human identity; all this lives in the fun of the Fool. The Fool is the essential poetic integrity of life itself, clear and naked, overflowing in cosmic fun; not the product of intellectual achievement, but a creation of the culture of the heart. A culture of the genius of life. I believe that there is in life, and in the human psyche, a certain quality, an inviolate eternal innocence, and this quality I call the Fool. It is a continuous wisdom and compassion that heals with fun and magic. It is the joy of the original Adam in men.

Society is creative when it is ruled by creative spirits, when it is directed by an aristocracy of the spirit. For the creative impulse is an aristocratic one, that is, one of quality, and not quantitative. The artist is one of the few remaining natural aristocrats left in our society. His inevitable belief in the individual personal act of creation makes him one with the tradition of the peasant and the aristocrat. And this often enough makes him an object of contempt with our society, which is largely composed of commercial technicians, who have no tradition of the aristocratic view of life. Civilisation is only sustained by the degree of wisdom in it; progress, as it is called, cannot sustain it. And wisdom is vision and perception of life, created out of quality of spirit. Wisdom has many

forms; in Religion it is the development and culture of Charity in the human soul. In Art, wisdom is the passion of Beauty. The culture of Charity and the passion of Beauty are blended in the wisdom of the Fool.

In our Age, one of the greatest feast days of the whole year should be April 1st—All Fools' Day. A day that should be kept and celebrated religiously and universally. A holy day, when no work is done. A day given over to the divine fantasy of holy gaiety. A day of the giving away in unending foolish non-rational generosity, of gifts clothed in the marvels of the imagination. The entering of strangers' houses, and the placing of gifts upon their tables. A day of mystical jokes concealing deep mercy. A day when all the mercies of the year gather to manifest themselves. At night there should be fireworks, the night sky strewn with holy signs of divine fun written in streams of fire, and whirling catherine wheels that light up the dancing of all the Fools. And the golden glow of the roman candles, with their fountains of soft fire curving in the air. Then there would be the poetic absolution of the heavy abstract machine of public morals, by the charity of the Fool. For lovers this is the day in the year to celebrate Love; their patron saint is the Fool, for all lovers are one with the Fool, as they are one with the artist and the poet, they are of the same race. Eros and Psyche live within the protection of the Fool. All Fools' Day should be celebrated everywhere by everyone; some with dancing, some with feasts, some with fasting. A day when all the failures in life, the misfits, the deformed ones, the simple-minded ones, should be revered by all men with awe, and to them should be given gifts, gifts piled at their doors in the morning, gifts given all day. They would be celebrated as one of the mysteries of life. Yes, this would be the one day in the year during which all human beings could dissolve the cruel monotony of the utilitarian principle of work and respectability, that with the plausible teeth of its mechanism, tries to destroy the mysterious wonders of life. A day when all men, the successful, the failures, the Saints, misfits, heroes, weaklings, businessmen, artists, poets, are united in the mystical charity of the Fool. The Fool who, wearing his fantastic garments of love, makes his wild painful gestures of tenderness before the suffering of all the living ones in the Universe. A day when all men share the Fool's joy in the entertainment of strong mercy. The day of the compassionate irony of the Fool, clad in the debonair clothes of subtle joy, his face full of the gaiety of the wine of life, drawing its lights from the source of tears and sharp sorrow; the Fool, who in an ecstasy of happiness bows down with his gay garments, down into the dust, with a humility that touches the bottom of the abyss of life.

It is a rudimentary type of mind that believes that the problems of



human society can be solved by politics. Politics are abstract, they can never be a way of life. The idea of uniting the nations, and of the unity of mankind has not worked, because it is only an abstract rational idea; the idea of unity is abstract, in life things don't unite for the sake of unity itself; they unite because in doing so they fulfil a higher idea than themselves; the unity is only an element in that higher idea. Thus if the nations of the world unite in God, and for the sake of honouring and glorifying Him, they are united in a concrete reality, and become a living body united to fulfil a purpose higher than themselves. This applies to everything. Being abstract, politics are incapable of creating a culture, and are therefore sterile. Thus the human being and the artist must reject all politics, for the artist is essentially concrete in his view of life, and he rejects that which is sterile. It is better that there should slowly grow in society a larger and larger body of people who are neutral to politics; neutral, in order to slow up the headlong rush into the abstract solutions of politics. Once the facile outlook of this perpetual activity has been slowed up, it may be possible to create in society a contemplative condition by which society can realise its state of being, becoming more spiritually alert and detached from politics. This realisation would make the life of contemporary society more sensitive to the existence of God, and thus to a conception of life, higher than itself. This contemplative condition would prepare society and make it viable and more receptive to the only meaning that life can have, that is, union with God. The only hope is to increase the contemplative condition in society; and this can only be done by putting before society the idea of the contemplative life; a life that is more living than the life of action. The hope is for contemporary society to become more deep in its perception, and the way to make it deeper is to slow it up.

In our Age one of the great tasks for Art and Religion is the strong re-affirmation of the supreme holiness of all human identity, above all generalisations and abstractions like state, class, politics; the person in every living being, whether useful or useless, is the reality of life. Because the person in us is the mystery of existence itself. Above all ideas exists the person. The reality and significance of the Fool, and of the poetic imagination of Art, is that it is the principle of personalising life, of individualising life; as against the most active principle of our time, which is the de-personalising, de-individualising of all life, and its destruction by the abstraction of mechanisation.

What place is there then for the artist, for the Fool, the poet, or for any human being, in a society based on the principle of the depersonalisation of life by the ideal of mechanical efficiency, and the success of publicity values? There

is no place, the human and the creative are in danger of dying out. From the standpoint of life, the principle of poetic imagination, of which the Fool, the artist, and the priest are the vocational representatives, is a compensation by the creative powers of life to balance such a society, to re-personalise it and thus to satisfy the universal human hunger for a poetic consciousness of life. The poet, the artist, the Saint and the Fool are outlawed by this society because they desire the unknown, the marvellous, the poetic. Because they desire with passion those elements in the universe which they know to be among the most magnetic attributes of God. The Saint finds the marvellous, the unknown, the poetic, under the aspect of Charity. The artist finds these attributes under the aspect of Beauty. The Fool finds them in the virginity of spirit. All these three attributes are enfolded in the principle of poetic imagination.

Today this great principle in Art and life is being crucified by the triumph and dictatorship of the norm of a commonplace mediocre mentality, its flattery, and the placing in authority of its view of life. But death is the planting of the seed of birth. For the mechanised society of modern life, with its vanity of knowledge, its cruel respectability, and its inhuman rejection of poetic consciousness, has defeated its own ends. It has collapsed in the violence of its own sterile brutality, showing clearly the fact that a society cannot exist by such a view of life. If you don't believe in a reality higher than man, or the society of men, the result you get is the modern world. Now that the civilised world has almost been destroyed by the illness of uncontrolled, merciless animal forces at work in most of mankind; now that the abstraction, utilitarianism, and the mechanisation have brought forth death and sterility, the ruins of society may yet prove more fertile than the barren days of its so-called progress and splendour. For we understand life not through knowledge, but through humiliation. The hour of humility is the victory of poetic imagination, when there can be born with fresh and wounded signs, a new poetic consciousness of life. It can be born when the hard crust of the habitual reality of modern society is melted, and its materialistic factuality becomes a great emptiness. Then can the world's horizon widen with the signs of a new time. For poetic imagination is only born when mankind is ready for it, ready to receive it, when men are hungry for its gifts, when they reach the supreme point of realising that they are actually starving in spirit, and are empty. It is then they realise truly the nature and substance of that of which they are starved. For a living truth shows its reality through its absence. And soon mankind will become so empty and desolate, so remote from the sap of life, that we shall be ready to say, 'Veni Sancte Spiritus' [Come Holy Spirit]. It is then that poetic imagination will enter

into this world, it is then that the Fool will appear among us, to be received and revered in all men, and the nature of freedom understood; for liberty is the control of life by Faith, Hope and Charity. Freedom is the sense of the privacy and holiness of all human identity. Liberty is the wisdom of Art, and it is then that human society will desire to drink of its poetry and to eat of its wisdom. But until that moment, society will continue to disfigure the gifts of life. Meanwhile, now and in the immediate future, in spite of the optimistic plans of idealists, we face the degradation of mankind, unless by a miracle of creative effort we can bring about a universal awakening of conscience towards life. The old world having passed away, no other world will be possible to us; we shall have no world at all, unless we change fundamentally our attitude towards life. Before a new world can be made, first the conditions of spiritual fertility must be created in society. And one of the most important of these conditions of spiritual fertility is 'the leisure of the soul', without which there can be no flowering of life, without which no civilisation can be built.

I do not believe in surrealism, precisely because I do believe in a surreality, universal and eternal, above and beyond the world of the intellect and the senses; but not beyond the reach of the humility and hunger of the human heart. And the human heart will find no meaning in life until it returns to eat of the source from which it came; and that source is the Eternal Person of all persons—God. For there is no meaning in life or art excepting that which springs from the immortal surreality of that Eternal Person.

The Saint, the artist, the poet, and the Fool, are one. They are the eternal virginity of spirit, which in the dark winter of the world, continually proclaims the existence of a new life, gives faithful promise of the spring of an invisible Kingdom, and the coming of light.