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# NOTES FROM A DIARY

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## *An inquiry into beauty?*

Beauty is a word that has largely dropped out of use. It is employed today as knowing clannish jargon, in the way technicians talk: "a beautiful job": picture, poem, or jet turbine engine that is "a beauty."

Although fortunes have been spent inquiring into people's sexual habits, how they spend their money, whom they vote for, what they think about their leaders, etc., no one seems to know whether they require beauty in their surroundings nor what enhancing or depressing rôle the beautiful and the ugly play in their lives.

The fact that little seems to be known about all this, makes every endeavour to construct beautiful cities seem a theoretical or dogmatic attempt on the part of people who care, to impose their tastes on those who don't care. When planners and—even—politicians talk about the beauty of new cities, one feels that they may have æsthetic values of their own but they never seem to be addressing themselves to known human needs. All discussions today about rebuilding London seem to fall between fanatical purists, well-intentioned philistines, and senile academic hypocrites. The one thing no one seems convinced of today is that beauty is *necessary*. And since we live in the age of necessity in public affairs, beauty, as a public cause, might as well be abandoned. Perhaps that is why we are ashamed to speak of it.

Yet I am convinced that to write of people being starved of beauty is not just a figure of speech. I think it could be proved that they are starved. The reason why it might even be a worthwhile subject of inquiry is that until this is demonstrated no one will believe it.

## *Architecture is Landscape*

Here, by beauty, I do not mean conscious appreciation of the arts but an immediate enhancement of being which people may or may not get (I think they do sometimes get it) from living in beautiful surroundings.

The difference between conscious æsthetic awareness and such immediate satisfaction of an appetite can be indicated like this. A man who goes into a gallery and looks at a picture—say the *Tempesta* of Giorgione—of another man who is living in very beautiful surroundings, is still outside the world conveyed in the picture. A man who lives in a beauti-

ful city or landscape is a man inside a beautiful picture. This is both an æsthetic and a natural state in which to be. The difference between architecture and the other arts is that architecture is, after all, a form of landscape gardening, and to live in a garden is a different thing from either going to a public art gallery or living in a back yard. Architecture, however rococo, remains the most innocent of the arts, always creating a natural surrounding for its inhabitants. Myths, from the Garden of Eden to that of the late 18th century of the innocent savage, recognise that to live amidst beauty (as apart from going to look at art) is a primary instinctual satisfaction. Without this satisfaction, we are maimed.

Most people agree that blindness is almost the greatest misfortune that can befall any one. The strongest argument for thinking so is that it cuts him off from the beauty of the visible world. When one thinks about the blind one does not wonder how they get about but what visual compensations they develop.

If we live in irremediably ugly surroundings we are living in what is a mockery of vision, a kind of enforced parody of blindness. That this is so, seems acknowledged by the passion of modern town-dwellers to get away from their towns. Tourism is not just "modern restlessness." It is the result of a very understandable wish to satisfy a visual instinct that has been repressed. We are told that French and Italians who live in beautiful cities are not great travellers. Whether this is true or not, we readily believe it. There would be no passionate need to move if we were not starved of things to enjoy with our eyes.

## *The appetite for beauty*

In the mouth of an æsthete, the phrase "I simply live for beauty" sounds insincere, though it may be truer than he himself realises. The fact surely is that a great many people do live more for beauty than for "personal relations" or for anything else. My statistical inquirers here would try to find out how many people think all the year round of their Italian holiday and what proportion of their savings they spend on this.

For such people, beauty must be the one entirely reliable source of pleasure in their lives which does not let them down or betray them, which, if they

are able to experience and then memorise it, is a treasure no government, husband, wife, or tax-collector can take away.

For Italians who live in a beautiful city (I have noticed in Verona) the fact that the city stays there, is outside them, is not subject to their whims, cannot be disregarded—and yet can be entered into, can receive them into its outsideness, thus enhancing their inner life with its outer life—all this provides them with an increasing satisfaction. All other satisfactions are spasmodic, and often disappointing. Beauty is the only appetite that can be permanently satisfied.

When we cover the countryside with hundreds of thousands of houses which offer no satisfaction to this instinct, we are producing a repression which is similar to that of the sexual instinct. It is inevitable that people living in the “subtopias” should want television sets that show them somewhere else, automobiles that get them away from the streets in which they live, more and more holidays. But these things are only added frustrations, because they are of their nature so fleeting. Nothing really makes up for the satisfaction which is cut off at the root of life by hideous surroundings.

So the prevalent idea that in building our cities, there are “needs” which have to be satisfied (which may, after other things have been dealt with, include “culture” piped down from “specialised agencies”) is as repressive to an instinctive natural condition, as the Victorian attitude towards sex.

### *A Visit to Jamini Roy at Calcutta*

His whole house is a shrine devoted to his paintings. The paintings are not hung, they are placed, on the floor, and on shelves. The walls are completely white, and the furniture consists of rectangular box-shaped seats.

Each room represents a different phase of his work. In the earlier rooms, there are some conventional studies, and even exercises in the manner of the French impressionists. But the European manner is alien to him. Instead, he has tried to assimilate Christian symbolism into Hindu mythology, in a style based on village art. The most recent paintings, in very broken colours, are of a goddess, and of a cruci-

fixion, painted in earth colours, on palm-leaf matting.

Jamini Roy is 66, with white hair, a rather pale complexion, a lined, yet almost boyish, acolyte's face. Here he is amongst his “things” which he shows you joyously. His English is monosyllabic but it conveys subtleties, as well as essentials. All his life he has been painting the metamorphosis of myth into myth. With his brush he has gently tried to develop the Christian myth (there are here the Last Supper and the Flight into Egypt as well as the Crucifixion) towards Eastern ones.

I noticed a recent painting of a man in a loin-cloth seated cross-legged on the ground. “Is that Gandhi?” I asked. He smiled: “It might become that.” I said: “If it were not for photographs which have fixed too much the literal appearance of Gandhi in our minds, he would perhaps be your painting.” “I try to paint the essentials, and naturalism has nothing to do with these.

“Living in this time, I disagree.” Several times he repeated the phrase, “I disagree.” He disagreed most of all with the tendencies of other Indian painters. Showing me some recent paintings of a horse, cows, and calves, a cat with a lobster in its mouth, he said: “Now that I am an old man, and because I disagree, I go back to painting like a child. I have learned to paint again from my five-year-old grandson.” He showed me a very Indian-looking study of Shiva by his grandson. “I am very alone,” he said. “Other painters want to introduce European ideas into their painting. I want to paint India.”

### *Postscript on an important book*

Richard Lannoy's photographs in *India* (Thames and Hudson, 42s.) do not just display—as so often happens with modern photography—Mr. Lannoy's skill. They are the real India—a scene in which every extreme of life and death, wealth and poverty, beauty and ugliness, seems always to be on show at every moment. Mr. Lannoy's India is a theatre with scenery, costumes, temples, interiors—and, above all, the players. It extends from the north to the extreme south. It never shrinks, and is extremely lively—and, one might add, deathly. It is at once beautiful, calm, agitated and terrifying. These are, in their way, the best photographs I have seen.

*Stephen Spender*

# Discussion

## Troubled Dialogue

If Mr. Beloff's arguments on under-developed countries [February ENCOUNTER] are valid, one may well wonder why any Western nation should at all agree to help the industrially backward countries of Asia and Africa with capital and technicians, unless these countries commit themselves in advance to be militarily/politically on the side of NorthAtlantica. As regards private capital, why should Western countries "risk more Abadans"? As to financial aid on an inter-governmental basis, or channelled through international institutions, "this depends on the willingness of the taxpayers of NorthAtlantica to accept this as a continuing burden," and why should they accept such a burden unless there are tangible gains, or "considerations of interest," to justify this course? As to technical aid, why should a Western expert, "with many opportunities of employment nearer home, seek it in a strange climate and alien atmosphere if he has neither the impulse of imperial service, nor the lure of a larger personal income"?

To withhold Western aid from the "under-developed" countries is to increase the chances that a large part of the world, as yet uncommitted, would turn towards Communism. To this argument, Mr. Beloff's reply is two-fold. First, the argument assumes that "poverty equals Communism," but this equation is "by no means self-evident." Secondly, the "under-developed" countries, in embracing Communism, stand to lose national freedom, "which is what they presumably care about most." Western aid or no aid, it would be always against the best interests of the "under-developed" countries to fall for Communism.

Mr. Beloff's contention calls for critical scrutiny.

"One of the characteristics of a healthy social order is a rate of economic growth not too hopelessly out of accord with the expectations of the more active and more vocal parts of the population," he writes, and other things being equal,

a healthy social order is more resistant to Communist infiltration. Now, in recent decades, there has occurred a substantial change in the state of expectations in the "under-developed" countries with regard to future economic development. On the one hand, these countries have been brought into increasingly closer contact with the industrially advanced countries of the West, with the result that leaders of public opinion in the poorer countries have started feeling, with an intensity unknown before, the contrast between their own standards of living and the much higher standards prevailing in the West. Moreover, the spectacularly rapid industrialisation of the U.S.S.R. and Japan has persuaded many that the gap between the West and the industrially backward countries can be closed much more swiftly than was once supposed possible.

Mr. Beloff denounces in Asian countries "a certain inferiority complex which often manifests itself by lofty claims to cultural or even moral superiority as against the West". I am inclined to agree. There can be little doubt that the claims to cultural superiority made by many Asians represent, partly, a pathetic attempt to seek an illusory consolation for what Asia lacks in the material sphere. (One might, at the same time, add that the West, in the last few centuries, owing to a combination of historical circumstances into which one need not enter here, does seem to have lost to some extent certain qualities of consciousness which can broadly be described as "spiritual": to restore some of these qualities, though on a different plane, would be, one supposes, one of her more creative endeavours in the coming decades.) But the very fact that such unreal compensation should be so insistently sought indicates the intensity, and the bitterness, with which many Asians feel the inferiority of their material situation.

Behind all these protestations of spiritual superiority, there lies, imperfectly concealed, an