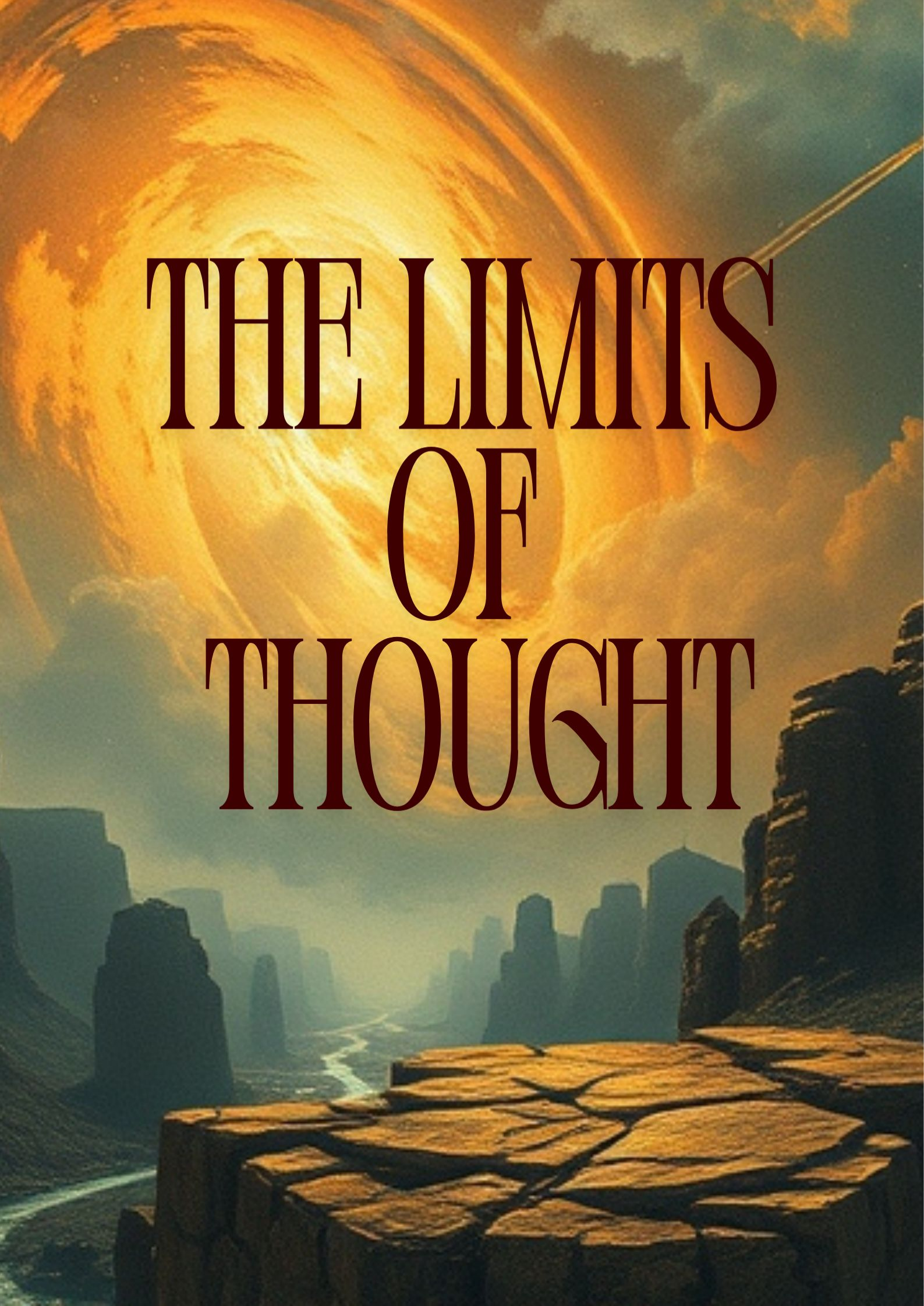
THE LIMITS
OF
THOUGHT

Systematising and speculative zeal have a tendency to run ahead of their data. Bergson has done much to restore to intuition the rights which were being filched or wrenched from it. He has shown (may it be said conclusively?) that systematised thought is quite unequal to grappling with the processes which constitute actual living. Before him, Schopenhauer had poured well-deserved contempt on the idea that the brain, an organ which can only work for a few hours at a stretch, and is dependent on all the accidents of the physical condition of the body, should be considered equal to solving the problems of existence. "Certainly" (writes Schwegler) "the highest truths of reason, the eternal, the divine, are not to be proved by means of demonstration." But this is no less true of the simplest manifestations of reality. Knowledge is compelled to move on the surface when it aims at scientific method and demonstrated results.

Intuitive knowledge can often penetrate deeper, get nearer to the heart of things and divine their deeper relations. When intuitions can be gripped by conscious reasoning processes, man gains much of the knowledge which is power. But the scope of knowledge in the fullest sense is indefinitely greater than that of science and philosophy. Nor is it hard to see why the sphere of reflective thought is thus comparatively limited. For modern speculations, and even the straitest psychology, have familiarised us with the idea of a larger self that is beyond the reach of conscious analysis. Obscure workings of the mind—emotions, moods, immediate perceptions, premonitions, and the rest—have a potent part to play in the actual living of a life.

Consider in this connection such a passage as the following, taken from Jefferies' "Story of My Heart." It means something, though it is not scientific. "Three things only have been discovered of that which concerns the inner consciousness since before written history began. Three things only in twelve thousand written, or sculptured years, and in the dumb, dim time before them. Three ideas the cavemen wrested from the unknown, the night which is round us still in daylight—the existence of the soul, immortality, the deity. These things . . . do not suffice me. I desire to advance farther, and to wrest a fourth, and even still more than a fourth, from the darkness of thought. I want more ideas of soullife. . . . My naked mind confronts the unknown.

I see as clearly as the noonday that this is not all; I see other and higher conditions than existence; I see not only the existence of the soul, but, in addition, I realise a soul-life illimitable. . . . I strive to give utterance to a Fourth Idea. The very idea that there is another idea is something gained. The three gained by the cavemen are but stepping-stones, first links of an endless chain." Of course, we are here reminded of Wordsworth's "obstinate questionings of sense and outward things"; of his "misgivings of a creature moving about in worlds not realised." Intuition is feeling its way outwards beyond the sphere of the known, and emotion is working in harmony with it, the reason still fails to grip.

Morris' description of a like sense of unrealised possibilities applies, in varying degrees, to men of all sorts and conditions, though the poets of whom he speaks are the most favoured. "Blind thoughts which occupy the brain, Dumb melodies which fill the ear, Dim perturbations, precious pain, A gleam of hope, a chill of fear— These seize the poet's soul, and mould The ore of fancy into gold." Language is thus employed to proclaim its own inadequacy. And who can fail to see that between the rich complexity of the workings of the whole mind and the means by which we would fain render them articulate, there yawns a gap which no effort can bridge over? Even the poet fails—much more the scientist! To refuse to take cognisance of the fresh spontaneity of feeling and intuition is to rob life of its higher joys and its deeper meanings.

Many thinkers of the present day pride themselves upon the growth of what they call the naturalistic spirit. What do they mean by this? They mean that the older ways of interpreting nature, animistic or supernatural, are being supplanted by explanations founded on knowledge of physical facts and "natural" laws. And, up to a point, there are but few natural mystics who will not concur in their feelings of satisfaction that ignorance and superstition are disappearing in rough proportion as exact knowledge advances. At any rate, in this study, the more solid conclusions of science will be freely and gladly accepted. The very idea of a conflict between Science and Natural Mysticism is to be mercilessly scouted. But this concurrence must be conditional. Tait, for example, was scornful of any form of animism.

He wrote thus: "The Pygmalions of modern days do not require to beseech Aphrodite to animate the world for them. Like the savage with his Totem, they have themselves already attributed life to it. 'It comes,' as Helmholtz says, 'to the same thing as Schopenhauer's metaphysics. The stars are to love and hate one another, feel pleasure and displeasure, and to try to move in a way corresponding to these feelings.' The latest phase of this peculiar nonscience tells us that all matter is alive; or at least that it contains the 'promise and potency' (whatever these may be) 'of all terrestrial life.' All this probably originated in the very simple manner already hinted at; viz., in the confusion of terms constructed for application to thinking beings only, with others applicable only to brute matter, and a blind following of this confusion to its necessarily preposterous consequences.

So much for the attempts to introduce into science an element altogether incompatible with the fundamental conditions of its existence." This is vigorous! But how does the matter now stand? Since Tait wrote his invective, many physicists of at least equal rank with himself, and with some undreamt-of discoveries to the good, have subscribed to the views which he so trenchantly condemns. As for the metaphysicians, there are but few of the first flight who do not conceive of consciousness as the ultimate form of existence. Again, the reference to the Pygmalion myth implies the view that mythology was a mere empty product of untutored fancy and imaginative subjectivism.

Here also he is out of harmony with the spirit now pervading the science of religion and the comparative study of early modes of belief. It will be well to devote some chapters to a survey of the problems thus suggested, and to preface them by an enquiry, on general lines, into man's relation to nature. We shall best come to grips with the real issue by fastening on Tait's "brute matter." For the words contain a whole philosophy. On the one hand, matter, inert, lifeless: on the other hand, spirit, living, supersensuous: between the two, and linking the two, man, a spirit in a body. Along with this there generally goes a dogma of special creations, though it may perhaps be held that such a dogma is not essential to the distinction between the two realms thus sharply sundered. It is at once obvious that, starting from such premisses, Tait's invective is largely justified.

For if matter is inert, brute, dead—it certainly seems preposterous to speak of its having within it the potency of life—using "life" as a synonym for living organisms, including man. The nature-mystic is overwhelmed with Homeric laughter. But the whole trend of scientific investigation and speculation is increasingly away from this crude and violent dualism. The relation of soul to body is still a burning question, but does not at all preclude a belief that matter is one mode of the manifestation of spirit. Indeed, it is hard to understand how upholders of the disappearing doctrine would ever bring themselves to maintain, even on their own premisses, that any creation of the Supreme Spirit could be "brute"—that is, inert and irrational! Regarded from the new view-point, all is what may, for present purposes, be called spiritual.

And when man appeared upon the globe, he was not something introduced from without, different from and alien to the world of matter, but merely the outcome of a more intense activity of the same forces as were at work from the first and in the whole—in brief, a higher manifestation of the life which is the ultimate Ground of all modes of existence. There are not two different realms, that of brute matter and living spirit; but various planes, or grades, of life and consciousness. Leibniz had the beautiful and profound idea that life has three modes on earth—it sleeps in plants, it dreams in animals, and it wakes in man. Modern thought is expanding, universalising, this idea. Man's relation to nature, in the light of this newer doctrine, thus becomes sufficiently clear.

He is not an interloper, but an integral part of a whole. He is the highest outcome (so far as our world of sense is concerned) of a vast upward movement. Nay, modern science links him on to other worlds and other aeons. Cosmic evolution is "all of a piece," so to speak, and man takes his own special place in an ordered whole. The process is slow, measured by the standard of human life. Countless ages have lapsed to bring us and our world to its present degree of conscious life. Countless ages are yet to elapse. What shall be the end —the goal? Who can tell? Judging by what we know, it would seem simplest to say that the trend of the evolutionary process is towards the increase of internal spontaneity and consciously formed and prosecuted purpose.

In his "Songs before Sunrise," Swinburne calls this spontaneity "freedom." "Freedom we call it, for holier Name of the soul's there is none; Surelier it labours, if slowlier, Than the metres of star and of sun; Slowlier than life unto breath, Surelier than time unto death, It moves till its labour is done." The nature-mystic, then, is bound to reject the "brute" matter doctrine just as decidedly as the doctrine of the unconditioned Absolute. Each, in its own way, robs nature of its true glory and significance. Nature, for him, is living: and that, not indirectly as a "living garment" (to quote Goethe's Time Spirit) of another Reality, but as itself a living part of that Reality—a genuine, primary manifestation of the ultimate Ground. And man is an integral living part of living nature.

There is another aspect of this "brute" matter doctrine which leads to the same conclusions. If matter be held to possess no other properties than those known to the physicist, it might be possible to account for what may be termed the utilitarian side of human development, social and individualistic. Nature makes demands upon man's energies and capacities before she will yield him food and shelter, and his material requirements generally. The enormously important and far-reaching range of facts here brought to view have largely determined the chequered course of industrial and social evolution. But even so, weighty reservations must be made. There is the element of rationality (implicit in external phenomena) which has responded to the workings of human reason.

There are the manifestations of something deeper than physics in the operations of so-called natural laws, and all the moral influences those laws have brought to bear on man's higher development. There is the significant fact that as the resources of civilisation have increased, the pressure of the utilitarian relation has relaxed. According fullest credit, however, to the influence of the purely "physical" properties of nature, has man no other relation to his external environment than the utilitarian? The moral influence has been just suggested; the exploitation of this rich vein has for some time past engaged the attention of evolutionary moralists. Our more immediate concern is with the aesthetic influences. And in nature there is beauty as well as utility. Nor is the beauty a by-product of utility; it exists on its own account, and asserts itself in its own right. As Emerson puts it —"it is its own excuse for being."

As another writer puts it—"in the beauty which we see around us in nature's face, we have felt the smile of a spiritual Being, as we feel the smile of our friend adding light and lustre to his countenance." Yes, nature is beautiful and man knows it. How great the number and variety of the emotions and intuitions that beauty can stir and foster will be seen in detail hereafter. But beauty is not the only agent in moulding and developing man's character. Nature, as will be shown, is a manifestation of immanent ideas which touch life at every point. Ugliness, for example, has its place as well as beauty, and will be dealt with in due course. So with ideas of life and death, of power and weakness, of hope and despondency—these and a thousand others, immanent in external phenomena, have stimulated the powerful imaginations of the infant race, and still maintain their magic to move the sensitive soul.

The wonderful mythological systems of the past enshrine science, philosophy, and poetry—and they were prompted by physical phenomena. The philosophy and poetry of the present are still largely dependent on the same phenomena. So it will be to the end. That the revelation of Reality is a partial one—that the highest summits are veiled in mists—this is freely granted. But the very fact constitutes in itself a special charm. If what we see is so wonderful, what must that be which is behind! The general character of the nature-mystic's main contention will now be sufficiently obvious. He maintains that man and his environment are not connected in any merely external fashion, but that they are sharers in the same kind of Being, and therefore livingly related.

If this be sound, we shall expect to find that wherever and whenever men are in close and constant touch with nature they will experience some definite sort of influence which will affect their characters and their thoughts. Nor, as will already have been obvious, are we disappointed in this expectation. Let us turn to a somewhat more detailed study of the evidence for the reality and potency of the mystic influence continuously exercised by physical phenomena on man's psychic development. As has been stated, the nature-mystic lays considerable, though by no means exclusive, stress upon what he calls "intuition." His view of this faculty or capacity is not quite that of the strict psychologist.

Herbert Spencer, for instance, in his "Psychology," uses the term intuition in what he deems to be its "common acceptation"—"as meaning any cognition reached by an undecomposable mental act." Of course much would turn on what is implied by cognition, and it is impossible to embark on the wide sea of epistemology, or even on that of the intuitional controversy, with a view to determining this point. Spencer's own illustration of an intuited fact for knowledge—relations which are equal to the same relation are equal to one another—would appear to narrow its application to those so-called self-evident or necessary truths which are unhesitatingly accepted at first sight. The nature-mystic, however, while unreservedly recognising this kind of intuition (whatever may be its origin) demands a wider meaning for the term.

A nearer approach to what he wants is found in the feats of certain calculating prodigies, who often seem to reach their astounding results rather by insights than operations. The celebrated mathematician, Euler, is said to have possessed, in addition to his extraordinary memory for numbers, "a kind of divining power," by which he perceived almost at a glance, the most complicated relations of factors and the best modes of manipulating them. As regards the calculating prodigies, a thought suggests itself. It has been almost invariably found that as they learnt more, their special power decreased. Has this any bearing on the loss of imaginative power and aesthetic insight which often accompanies the spread of civilisation?—or on the materialisms and the "brute matter" doctrines which so often afflict scientists? But even this expansion of meaning does not satisfy the nature-mystic. Perhaps the case of musical intuition comes still nearer to what he is looking for, inasmuch as cognition, in the sense of definite knowledge, is here reduced to a minimum.

On the other hand there is more at work than mere feeling. The soul of the music-lover moves about in a world which is at once realised and yet unrealised—his perceptions are vivid and yet indefinable. And it is important to note that the basis is sense-perception. And thus we say of mystical intuition that it is a passing of the mind, without reasoned process, behind the world of phenomena into a more central sphere of reality—an insight into a world beyond the reach of sense—a direct beholding of spiritual facts, guided by a logic which is implicit, though it does not emerge into consciousness.

It is intuition of this fuller and deeper kind which in all likelihood forms the core of what some would call the aesthetic and the moral senses. And here an interesting question presents itself. The older mystics, and the more orthodox of modern mystics, would have us believe that the intuition for which they contend is purely passive. The mind must be quieted, the will negated, until a state of simple receptivity is attained. Is this contention valid? It is difficult to break away from venerable traditions, but the nature-mystic who would be abreast of the knowledge of his day must at times be prepared to submit even intuition itself to critical analysis. And in this instance, criticism is all the more necessary because the doctrine of pure passivity is largely a corollary of belief in an unconditioned Absolute. If union with such an Absolute is to be enjoyed, the will must be pulseless, the intellect atrophied, the whole soul inactive: otherwise the introduction of finite thoughts and desires inhibits the divine afflatus!

Now it was noted, when intuition was first mentioned, that, like sensation (which is an elementary form of intuition) it provides "matter" for the mind to work upon. So far, it may rightly be deemed passive—receptive. But only half the story is thus told. The mind reacts upon the "matter" so provided, and gives it context and meaning. Even the sense-organ reacts to the physical stimulus, and conditions it in its own fashion; much more will the mind as a whole assert itself. Indeed it is only on condition of such action and reaction that any union, or communion, worthy of the name, can be effected. And should it be suspected that the distinction between "matter" and "form" is too Kantian and technical (though it is not intended to be such) the matter can be stated in more general terms by saying that in all forms of intuition, from the lowest to the highest, the mind goes out to meet that which comes to it—there is always some movement from within, be it desire, emotion, sympathy, or other like affection. In short, the self, as long as it is a self, can never be purely passive.

Consider from this point of view the following passage from Jefferies. "With all the intensity of feeling which exalted me, all the intense communion I held with the earth, the sun and sky, the stars hidden by the light, with the ocean—in no manner can the thrilling depth of these feelings be written—with these I prayed, as if they were the keys of an instrument, of an organ, with which I swelled forth the notes of my soul, redoubling my own voice by their power.

The great sun burning with light; the strong earth, dear earth; the warm sky; the pure air; the thought of ocean; the inexpressible beauty of all filled me with a rapture, an ecstasy, an inflatus. With this inflatus, too, I prayed." How strong throughout the activity of the soul—culminating in prayer! And by "prayer," Jefferies distinctly states that he means, not "a request for anything preferred to a deity," but intense soul-emotion, intense aspiration, intense desire for fuller soul-life—all the marks of the highest forms of mysticism, and proportionately strengthened soulactivities. And what, then, shall be said of Wordsworth? "I deem that there are Powers Which of themselves our minds impress; That we can feed these minds of ours In a wise passiveness.

Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum Of things for over speaking, That nothing of itself will come, But we must still be seeking." Is not this, it may be asked, in harmony with the older doctrine? Not so. There is a rightful and wholesome insistence on the necessity for a receptive attitude of mind. Jefferies, too, was intensely receptive as well as intensely active. But Wordsworth is contrasting concentration of the mind on definite studies and on book-lore with the laying of it open to the influences of nature. He calls this latter a "wise passiveness"—a "dreaming": but is nevertheless an active passivity —a waking dream. All the senses are to be in healthy working order; a deep consciousness is to be gently playing over the material which nature so spontaneously supplies.

And so it comes that he can tell of "A Presence that disturbs me with the joy Of elevated thoughts." Is not this the same experience as that of Jefferies, only passing through a mind of calmer tone. And if at times Wordsworth also is lifted into an ecstasy, when "the light of sense Goes out, but with a flash that has revealed The invisible world," his mind is not in an Absolutist state of passivity, but, on the contrary, is stirred to higher forms of consciousness. The experiences may, or may not be such as subsequent reflection can reduce to order—that is immaterial to the issue—but at any rate they imply activity. We may safely conclude, therefore, that intuition in all its grades necessitates a specialised soul-activity as well as a specialised soulpassivity. It will have been apparent in what has preceded that there are many grades of intuition, rising from sense-perception to what is known as ecstasy.

Some may doubt the wisdom of admitting ecstasy among the experiences of a sane, modern nature-mystic. Certainly the word raises a prejudice in many minds. Certainly the fanaticisms of religious Mysticism must be avoided. But Jefferies was not frightened of the word to describe an unwonted experience of exalted feeling; nor was Wordsworth afraid to describe the experience itself: "that serene and blessed mood In which the affections gently lead us on— Until the breath of this corporeal flame, And even the motion of our human blood Almost suspended, we are laid asleep In body, and become a living soul; While with an eye made quiet by the power Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, We see into the life of things."

This is in many respects the same type of experience as that described by Plotinus—"the life of the gods, and of divine and happy men"—but shorn of its needless degradation of the body and the senses, which, with Wordsworth are still and transcended, but remain as a foundation for all the rest. There is yet another and very significant point of difference. Porphyry, a disciple of Plotinus, tells us that his master attained to the ecstatic condition four times only in the six years which he spent in his company. How often Wordsworth attained to his form of ecstasy we do not know. But there is the little word "we" which occurs throughout his description: and this evidently links the past on to his readers. That is to say, he does not sever his experience from that which is open to ordinary humanity. He called for and anticipated genuine sympathy.

Nor was he wrong in making this demand, for there are few sensitive lovers of nature who are not able to parallel, in some degree, what the English high-priest of Nature Mysticism has so wonderfully described. And as for the lower and simpler grades of feeling for nature, given that the conditions of life are "natural," they are practically universal, though often inarticulate. Although the outstanding mark of intuition is its immediacy, that does not imply that it is independent of mental development, of culture, or of discipline. So far all classes of mystics would be agreed. Nevertheless a certain amount of comment and criticism will be useful even in this regard. For erroneous conceptions, especially in matters so largely influenced by belief in an unconditioned Absolute, may frequently issue in harmful practices.