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Concerning a Strange City

“Concerning a Strange City” from *The Common Man* (Originally in *The New Witness*, 11-25-21)

Everyone has his own private and almost secret selection among the examples of the mysterious power of words, the power which a certain verbal combination has over the emotions and even the soul. It is commonplace that literature has a charm, not merely in the sense of the charm of a woman, but of the charms of a witch. Historical scholars question how the ignorant imagination of the Dark Ages distorted the poet Virgil into a magician. One answer to the question, possibly, is that he was one. Theologians and philosophers

debate about the inspiration of scripture, but perhaps the most philosophical argument, for saying that certain scriptural sayings are inspired, is simply that they sound like it. The great lines of the poets are like landscapes or visions, but the same strange light can be found not only in the high places of poetry but also in quite obscure corners of prose.

I can only express what I mean by saying that it is the finite part of the image that really suggests infinity. Most worthy and serious people, instead of saying the spiritual place, would say the spiritual world. Some dismal and disgusting people, instead of saying the spiritual place, would say

the spiritual plane. The immediate chill and disenchantment of this change is due to a vague but vivid sense that the spiritual thing has become less real. A world sounds like an astronomical diagram, and a plane sounds like a geometrical diagram. Both of these are abstractions, but a place is not an abstraction, but a reality. The spiritual thrill is all in the idea that the place is a place, however spiritual, that it is some strange city where the sky touches the earth, or where eternity contrives to live on: the borderland of time and space.

In the mind of man, if not in the nature of things, there seems to be some connection between concentration and reality. When we want to ask, in natural language, whether a thing really exists or not, we ask if it is really “there” or not. We say “there”, even if we do not clearly understand where. A man cannot enter a house by five doors at once; he might do it if he were in an atmosphere. But he does not want to be in an atmosphere. He has a stubborn subconscious belief that an animal is greater than an atmosphere. As a thing rises in the scale of things, it tends to localize and even narrow its natural functions. A man cannot absorb his sustenance through all his pores like a sponge or some low sea-organisms; he cannot take in an atmosphere of beef, or an abstract essence of buns. Any buns thrown at him, as at the bear at the zoo, must be projected with such skill as to hit a particular hole in his head. In nature, in a sense, there is choice even before there is will. The plant or bulb narrows itself and pierces at one place rather than at another and all growth is a pattern of such green wedges. But however it be with these lower things, there has always been this spearlike selection and concentration in man's conception of higher things. Compared with that, there is something not only vague but vulgar in most of the talk about infinity. The pantheist is right up to a certain point, but so is the sponge.

Both vitally and verbally, this infinity is the enemy of all that is fine. Such philological points are sometimes more than pedantries or mere puns. And it is more than a pedantic pun to say that most things that are fine are finite. We testify to it when we talk of a beautiful thing having refinement or having finish. It is brought to an end like the blade of a beautiful sword, not only to its end in the sense of its cessation but to its end in the sense of its aim. All fine things are in this sense finished, even when they are eternal.

Poetry is committed to this concentration fully as much as religion: fairyland has always been as local, one might say as parochial, as Heaven. And if religion were removed tomorrow the poets would only begin to act as the pagans acted. They would begin to say “Lo, here”, and “Lo, there”, from the incurable itch of the idea that something must be somewhere, and not merely anywhere. Even if it were in some sense found to be in everything, it would still be in everything and not merely in all.