

RHYTHM AND HABIT

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THERE are two ways in which habit may be considered. In its first or material sense habit has been called an application of the law of inertia, which is the tendency of inorganic matter to retain indefinitely its conditions of rest or movement until acted upon by some contrary force. William James writes that "the philosophy of habit is in the first instance a chapter in physics rather than in physiology or psychology." When one applies the word to the movements and conditions of organic matter, it takes on a broader but not an essentially different meaning. This can be shown in the tendency of organic matter to respond in a certain unvarying way to a given stimulus — as the ear, for example, responds to sound. But when we speak of habit in connection with the intellect and will the notion becomes inseparable from a principle of choice between different and even contrary modes of action and response. This principle of choice must be allowed as governing the habit's formation — as a man may develop patience or impatience, speaking the truth or lying.

In short, whereas habit, in its first sense, implies a fixed disposition in the subject, in its latter sense it implies a basis of indetermination and plasticity. There are countless fields in which the intellect can exercise its powers — medicine, art, law, mathematics, etc. And there are countless forms of action — or of inaction — that the will can determine on; it may consent to tyranny or rebel against it; it may decide whether "to be or not to be."

These two meanings of the term habit suggest an analogy with rhythm in music, which is also, in its first sense, a kind of application of the law of inertia. Generally speaking, music cannot dispense with a certain underlying regularity of pulse. This may be obvious, as in dance music, or barely perceptible, as in certain contrapuntal forms. Being a principle of sameness, of symmetry in time achieved by equidistance between beats, like recurrent pangs of hunger or getting sleepy at the same hour every night, it might be said to bear the same relation to a musical work as a man's physical habits do to his life.

And just as physical habits are merely a background for the free and limitlessly varied habits of the mind and will, so the pulse of music is a background for that limitless variety of accent, timing and proportion on which rhythmic interest depends.

Gregorian Chant is perhaps a unique example of a musical style reaching a high degree of order and perfection without, so to speak, making any concession to the physical nature of rhythm. True, the mensuralists claim that the Chant had a pulse based on exact time-values of long and short notes, the longs being invariably twice the length of the shorts. But the monks of Solesmes, in opposition to this school, have evolved an intricate theory of a free Gregorian rhythm that is esthetically so satisfying that no one approaching the problem from a purely musical standpoint is likely to doubt the correctness of the Solesmes interpretation. Is it not moreover appropriate to suppose that Gregorian Chant should reflect in its rhythmic freedom the wholly un-material values of those who composed it? It could attain this freedom only, of course, by virtue of the fact that it was monodic; and in this respect also it seems the perfect expression of the monastic ideal, vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience, and the renouncement of the world for Christ. Counterpoint, which did not reach the peak of its development until the Renaissance, could never, even in its purest form reflect such complete self-abnegation. Indeed, with its blending of different strands of independent melody, even a Palestrina Mass seems by comparison to reflect rather an individualistic and social life. Harmony, which grew out of counterpoint, reflects in its turn the material wealth that is one of the chief fruits of an individualistic society. It is worth noting that harmony did not attain its full development until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the industrial revolution was an accomplished fact and had brought on an era of material prosperity unparalleled in the world's history. At the risk of over-straining the analogy, one might even add that social justice is reflected in good voice-leading, and the slave state reflected in music that aims solely at harmonic effect, sacrificing the individual liberty of the component voices to this end. The resulting wealth may devolve upon some poor little rich girl of a melody decked out in tink harmonies and herself enslaved to them – anyhow not an interesting person *per se* nor up to her position.

The path that rhythm has followed during the gradual expansion of musical resources has been more and more to re-assert the pulse. Some need for it is of course inescapable whenever different voices or instru-

ments have different things to do. But from being the merest practical concession it can go also to the extreme of glorying in itself as pulse, and this is what one finds in dance music, along with a corresponding *ethos* expressing physical *joie de vivre*.

In recent times there has been rebellion against the "tyranny" of a regular pulse. Perhaps this rebellion was a symptom of surfeit. For though we have for some time enjoyed instrumental and harmonic resources undreamed of three centuries ago, our horizons, instead of broadening, appear to have shrunk. The exploitation of a broken pulse of constantly changing measures might perhaps be likened to a desperate bolt for freedom. A kind of athletic skill was developed in the attempt. At the same time, such emphatic denial of regularity seemed to imply recognition of its existence in principle. It was like trying to break down a door that could only be opened with a key – and the key had somehow been lost. The attempt, at least in one important quarter, seems now to have been abandoned, for we find even such an acrobat of rhythm as Stravinsky returning once more to a comparatively normal and regular measure. And I believe the following quotation, from a little-known song by Fauré,

CYGNE SUR L'EAU

Andantino *snacc* 2 3 2 3

Ma pensée est un cygne harmonieux et sa - ge qui glis - se bon - te - ment

4 3 2 2 2 3

aux vira - ges d'un rui sur les on - des sans fond du ré - se de mi - ra - - ge, de l'é -

3 3

clo, du brouillard, de l'ombre de la nuit. Il glis - se voi - lant

might serve as an example – to me, indeed, a model – not only of discretion in the use of riches, but more especially of the way a regular pulse may be humbly accepted as a necessary quasi-physical “habit” of music and then quietly absorbed and transcended in the more plastic rhythms of the mind.

Note the curious instance of an anacrusis coming on a down-beat – for the natural melodic and verbal inflection is *ma pensée* rather than *ma pensée*. And observe the way the melody falls into two, three and four beat groupings; and in the second half of the first period how rich in poetic suggestion is the expansion from two to three beats on the last syllable of *mirage*. All this rhythmic finesse – and more – flowers spontaneously out of a simple $3/4$ measure.

If the key to perfect rhythmic freedom was held by the masters of Gregorian Chant alone and was afterwards lost, we have little to gain by envying the good monks or repining over the loss. Gregorian Chant has aptly been called “the language of prayer.” And I have suggested that its free pulseless rhythm reflects detachment from wordly and physical cares. But just as detachment of this sort cannot be attained by external means, so merely to lower our musical “standard of living” would not of itself bring us any closer to the creative secret of those soaring disembodied melodies that are as free as air and as wild. On the other hand, the notion of imparting perfect rhythmic freedom to our complex musical language without sacrificing any of its riches is clearly a case of wanting to have our cake and eat it too.