

A SINGLE UNITY OF CONCEPTION

Churchill knew a lot about painting, and he could write and speak about it and about himself without obvious boasting, a gift for which the readers and audiences of modern politicians may pine. In a 1925 essay entitled "Painting as a Pastime," Churchill depreciated his ability to paint—never mind that his paintings are competent enough. It is a fact that some famous painters gave him instruction. By the time he was finished, his paintings, including many that he had painted prior to 1925, were exhibited at the Royal Academy of the Arts on no fewer than thirteen occasions, the last a one-man exhibition devoted to his works. Yet Churchill wrote that "there is no subject on which I feel more humble" and "at the same time more natural."

"Just to paint is great fun," one paragraph begins. "The colors are lovely to look at and delicious to squeeze out." But this paragraph is not about the fun of painting or the delicious-ness of squeezing out the colors; rather Churchill violated his habit of announcing his paragraphs with clear topic sentences. From the fun of painting, the paragraph proceeds to launch a battle. Churchill wrote that as one "slowly begins to escape from the difficulties of choosing the right colors . . . wider considerations come into view." Churchill "slowly" began to escape from the difficulties of painting. Though not obvious, this is a claim to competence. Having begun to escape those difficulties, Churchill could understand painting more fully. For him

painting a picture is “like fighting a battle; and trying to paint a picture is, I suppose, like trying to fight a battle.” It is, he wrote, “more exciting than fighting it successfully.” Did Churchill mean that?

It appears that Churchill had something serious to say in this funny essay, but he did not want the essay to seem serious. Otherwise he might be vaunting his experience fighting and his experience painting, which would not work so well for any of his purposes.

Churchill fought battles successfully, and he painted many pictures. One wonders whether he was more excited as he painted than he was in the heat of battle. He continued, “But the principle [of painting and fighting a battle] is the same.” How so? “It is the same kind of problem as unfolding a long, sustained, interlocked argument.” It seems then that painting a picture is not only like fighting a battle but also like making an argument. Moreover “it is a proposition which, whether of few or numberless parts, is commanded by a single unity of conception.” Painting and arguing and fighting have to do with more than details, although details are essential to the problem presented by each. The details have no order without “a single unity of conception.” Painting a great picture requires an “all-embracing view which presents the beginning and the end, the whole and each part, as one instantaneous impression retentively and untiringly held in the mind.”

Churchill used the paintings of the masterful J. M. W. Turner as an example. He painted canvases “yards wide and tall.” They were done in one piece and represented one single moment of time. The details were innumerable, and the canvases were huge. Yet each detail, “however distant, however subordinate, is set

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forth naturally and in its true proportion and relation, without effort, without failure.” That, Churchill wrote, was “an intellectual manifestation the equal in quality and intensity of the finest achievements of warlike action, of forensic argument, or of sci-entific or philosophical adjudication.” The statesman, like the painter and the general, must achieve a “unity of conception” and an “all-embracing view.”

At the same time Churchill pointed in his writing to the sovereignty of circumstances, to the weight of necessity, that shape the choices of statesmen. In his 1927 essay “Consistency in Politics,” he defends the changing of policy whenever new facts arise, including facts arising from failure of previous policy. He also defends changes “of mood or heart” that come over nearly everyone in the course of their lives: “the normal progression is from Left to Right.” We will show evidence that Churchill became more conservative, in some respects, as he aged. The differences have to do chiefly with constitutional practice, and they are differences of emphasis and degree. In “Consistency” Churchill also says there are limits to these changes of mood and heart. Dealing differently with the same facts and the same principles at different stages of life leads to “self-stultification.” The statesman who is led to “divorce himself from a great body of doctrine to which he formerly sincerely adhered” is “unlucky.”

Under these notions, it is hard to see what change might not be justified by the demands of circumstances. Nonetheless Churchill pointed to something beyond circumstances that must affect what the statesman does. In a beautiful statement in 1941 he explained why it was necessary to send relief to Greece as the Nazis invaded. Never mind that Britain was besieged. Churchill said,

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By solemn guarantee given before the war, Great Britain had promised them her help. They declared they would fight for their native soil even if neither of their neighbors made common cause with them, and even if we left them to their fate. But we could not do that. There are rules against that kind of thing; and to break those rules would be fatal to the honor of the British Empire, without which we could neither hope nor deserve to win this hard war.

Where might we find these “rules” that command people to risk their lives and the life of their nation? Apparently, they can be known. Apparently, they are beyond the power of circumstances, and in some cases they too must decide “alone.”

In the Marlborough biography, Churchill wrote about events that happened two hundred years before his lifetime. He directed us to the details, to their commanding nature, to the necessity they represented. When we are studying history or evaluating the actions of others, especially in politics, these details are distant from us. We know our own circumstances very well. We act in accord with them. We forget that others, including powerful statesmen, must do the same. For this reason we lose proportion. Great achievements diminish in our eyes; we fall into the easy and satisfying habit of thinking we could do better. We expect utopian solutions.

When he spoke about the relief of Greece, Churchill was acting as a statesman in desperate circumstances. The life of the nation was threatened. Death, wounds, and servitude awaited the population, man, woman, and child, and they knew it. London was in flames. Churchill called on them never to surrender. Circumstances were urgent. If the circumstances were to decide

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“alone,” what could they possibly decide? The British could not save the Greeks; they would fall anyway. The British forces were needed desperately at home. So why send them? Because there were ultimate principles beyond any circumstances that must not be violated. Those things were more precious than victory, more precious than life itself. Would those things demand that everything be sent to the Greeks, not just a force, but also the whole force? Apparently not. But something sufficient must be done to satisfy honor and keep faith, or the very desiring of victory would be sacrificed.

In his speculative writings, then, Churchill pointed in some cases to the most immediate practical necessities. Yet in pursuing the most urgent tasks, he pointed in some cases to the heavens. When did he do which? That, too, seemed to depend upon the circumstances, and it seemed, as if by order of heaven, to be right that it be so.

In “Painting” Churchill gives an example from his own life how the useless activities of the higher arts, including painting, can provide a satisfying end even to the statesman. After he lost his place in the Cabinet and his ability to help direct the war, Churchill was left “gasping.” He “knew everything and could do nothing.” Of course he did not know or claim to know “everything”; he knew everything about the war and the choices required. This is practical knowledge, and the purpose of such knowledge is not knowing, but doing. The result of prudential reasoning is a choice, and the result of a choice is an action. The kind of knowledge Churchill possessed had become useless, and he was “like a sea-beast fished up from the depths, or a diver too suddenly hoisted.” His veins “threatened to burst.” He was at “leisure,” against his will.

Then Churchill found utility in a useless kind of knowledge: “And then it was that the Muse of Painting came to my rescue—out of charity and out of chivalry, because after all she had nothing to do with me—and said, ‘Are these toys any good to you? They amuse some people.’” In fact such useless things as painting provide an ultimate solace, and an ultimate purpose, for human beings. Churchill criticizes the Nazis on many grounds, high among them that “Venerable pastors, upright magistrates, world-famous scientists and philosophers, capable statesmen, independent-minded, manly citizens, frail, poor old women of unfashionable opinions, are invaded, bullied, and brutalized.” Notice how the list alternates between people of practical effect and people of useless or relatively useless activity. The Nazis oppress them all. It is obvious why they would oppress the useful arts: capable statesmen and independent-minded citizens are formidable; they can overturn regimes and resist despots. But useless things are powerful too, and the Nazis know this at least by instinct. The Nazis are “afraid of words and thoughts: words spoken abroad, thoughts stirring at home—all the more powerful because forbidden.”

Indeed useless things are the most powerful things. In “Fifty Years Hence” Churchill imagined a world in which people were manufactured to specific tasks, their “mental development” interfered with to confine them to those tasks. He imagined also that people had so much power that they could live as long as they wanted, go where they pleased in interplanetary space, and enjoy pleasures “incomparably wider” than we enjoy. They had “mastered nature.” Then Churchill asks: “. . . what was the good of all that to them? What did they know more than we know about the answers to the simple questions which man has asked

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since the earliest dawn of reason—“Why are we here? What is the purpose of life?” Churchill continues: “No material progress, even though it takes shapes we cannot now conceive, or however it may expand the faculties of man, can bring comfort to his soul.”

We may think it a gloomy fact that we cannot settle the questions that beckon us to the highest places. Churchill does not. Rather it is “more wonderful than any[thing] that Science can reveal,” and it “gives the best hope that all will be well.” Even when we deal with forces that are “terrific” and “devastating,” our “hearts will ache” and our “lives will be barren” without “a vision above material things.” No powerful Science, and no Nazi, can erase that fact or satisfy that need. Resistance to despotism is therefore written in the nature of man.

Painting places the painter in contact with something above any human authority. The painter, Churchill wrote, must be an attentive observer of “Nature.” His “reserves” consist in proportion and relation. In other words, he must see things as they relate to one another in magnitude, significance, and causality. Seeing in this way is not just seeing the details but seeing the order in the details. These are shifting constantly, as the sea battles and the ships in stormy seas that Turner painted are scenes of constant motion. Turner’s paintings took hours and days and weeks to complete, yet the scenes that he painted lasted only minutes. He transformed the actual event into something two-dimensional and static, and yet he captured the whole and its dynamism. Somehow that was the same feat that the general and the statesman achieved in their minds as they surveyed the unfolding events around them.

Like the details, the conception of the work must be true.

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For the painter, nature appears on the canvas with “startling obedience,” but only when the painter studies it attentively and faithfully. He must not commit the error of the French painters, who painted their seas with up-and-down strokes and their tree trunks with side to side. They were guilty of “falling in love with one’s theories, and making sacrifices of truth to them in order to demonstrate fidelity and admiration.” The painter’s art—and also that of the general, the philosopher, and the statesman—does not consist in admiration for or faith in theories. That art is rather a service to the truth as it is to be observed in nature, in the natures of things and in the nature of things. This nature is more than and different from the details of which it is composed. The nature of the thing seems to bring in *qualitative* factors, factors that are apparent only in the details, but factors that are not the same as the details. Thought and action are different, and they demand different sacrifices and capacities.

Action, then, depends for its direction and purpose on thought, specifically upon thinking about things that are useless. And yet these useless things do not live in a dimension by themselves. The urgent actions of the here and now may depend upon them, but also they depend upon those actions. They represent the pinnacle of civilization, but civilization does not begin with them nor stand upon them. They are not, for Churchill, the foundation.

Churchill was the longest serving chancellor of the University of Bristol. In 1938 he spoke at the University to its graduates, about to enter a world of strife. He entitled his short speech “Civilization.” He said:

There are few words which are used more loosely than the word “Civilization.” What does it mean? It means a society

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based upon the opinions of civilians. It means that violence, the rule of warriors and despotic chiefs, the conditions of camps and warfare, of riot and tyranny, give place to parliaments where laws are made, and independent courts of justice in which over long periods these laws are maintained.

Hitler, whose power loomed over the ceremony at Bristol, dressed in military uniforms and spoke in military language as a matter of course in his civic offices. Churchill here manifests the opposite spirit. For him the world of action can never bring the ultimate satisfaction available from an appreciation of the purest beauty. At the same time our appreciation of that beauty in friendship, and our transmission of that beauty to those who follow us, depends upon the conduct of politics and the outcome of war. "A society based upon the opinion of civilians" is a society in which the strong, in their uniforms and bearing their weapons, obey and protect the weak, who practice the arts of peace. This is the heart of the rule of law, and from it grows, Churchill says, "freedom, comfort and culture."

For Churchill, practice makes no sense apart from the principles of right, and they have no protection except in the rule of law. The statesman is the guardian of things that supply the end of all action. Those principles cannot protect themselves against the likes of Hitler, unless someone as strong and fierce as he fights on their behalf. The statesman lives and judges amidst the details of action. He serves a master beyond all particulars.