I hope that the word ‘anarchy’ in the title of these lectures will not suggest that I shall speak in defence of order. I shall not. A certain amount of turmoil and confusion is likely to call forth creative energies. As we know from the uneasy lives that were led by Dante, Michelangelo, or Spenser, not to speak of Mozart or of Keats, the outward circumstances under which great art is produced are often far from reassuring. And if we look at the great patrons of art, the men of enterprise who cajoled great artists into production, they were rarely distinguished by a restful temperament. Whatever the Medici, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Ambroise Vollard may have had in common, it was not. I believe, a quiet existence. Dissatisfaction and discontent, far from being inimical to the arts, seem, on the contrary, among their inseparable companions.

While I should not like to be dogmatic on this point, and would hate to encourage the completely mistaken view that the best artists and patrons are those who are disgruntled, I would venture on one single generalization: if it is the highest wish of a man to live undisturbed, he might be well advised to remove art from his household.

Art is—let us face it—an uncomfortable business, and particularly uncomfortable for the artist himself. The forces of the imagination, from which he draws his strength, can be very disruptive and he must manage them with wisdom and economy. For if he indulges his imagination too freely it may run wild and destroy him and his work by excess. Yet if he plagues it with the wrong kind of drill, and uses too many contrivances and refinements, the imagination may dry up; it can atrophy.

On the whole, great artists do not fear atrophy, but many of them have feared excess. The notebooks of Baudelaire, for example, abound in prescriptions for a strict regimen by which he hoped to tame and regularize his genius: ‘to find the daily frenzy’, as he put it, trouver la frénésie journalière (where the word journalière suggests the daily toil of a journeyman). And when Goethe wrote his Annalen, a sort of annual account of his occupations, compiled when he was old and supposedly calm and Olympian, he revealed that he was nervously afraid of the wild tricks that a lively imagination might play on an otherwise cultivated man. ‘What is the good’, he writes, ‘of curbing the sensuality, shaping the intellect, securing the supremacy of reason? Imagination lies in wait as the most powerful enemy. Naturally raw, and enamoured of absurdity, it breaks out against all civilizing restraints like a savage who takes delight in grimacing images’.

Goethe and Baudelaire had little in common; and the discipline each imposed on himself as poet is almost the opposite of that chosen by the other: Baudelaire chastising his Muse with acid paradox, Goethe trying to soothe his demon with muted commonplaces. But both felt, and felt with the same intensity, a sacred fear of the imagination which animated their poetry.
The term ‘sacred fear’ is, of course, much older. I have borrowed it from Plato; and from Plato I shall borrow a great deal more. Although no philosopher has praised the divine madness of inspiration more eloquently than Plato, he viewed it (like Goethe and Baudelaire) with grave suspicion. He rated the strength of man’s imagination so high that he thought a man could be transformed by the things he imagined. Hence he found miming a most perilous exercise; and he devised curious laws that would prohibit the miming of extravagant or evil characters. Recitations were to change at such moments from dramatic to narrative language, so that a certain distance would be established between the speaker and what he says, as if we were to speak of evil only in the third person, not the first, for fear we might otherwise become evil.

To us, these regulations seem eccentric. There can surely be no harm in impersonating a grotesque figure? A few extravagant gestures, performed for the amusement of ourselves and others, will not poison us to the root. Indeed, if Plato had his way, all children’s games would have to be supervised by a magistrate.

Plato knew, none the less, what he was saying. The games of children, according to him, are a crucial instrument in the forming of character because it is through imitation that we acquire tastes. As Sir James Harris, a sober Englishman of the eighteenth century, remarked: ‘We feign a relish till we find a relish come, and feel that what began in fiction terminates in reality’. That is, of course, what Plato meant. Edmund Burke, who in the practice of oratory must have been an accomplished mimic, made this experiment on his own person. ‘I have often observed’, he says of himself, ‘that on mimicking the looks and gestures of angry or placid or frightened or daring men, I have involuntarily found my mind turned to that passion whose appearance I endeavoured to imitate; nay, I am convinced it is hard to avoid it, though one strove to separate the passion from its corresponding gestures’.

If we accept these observations as valid—and it would be difficult to deny that innocent games are not always innocent, and that fiction is apt to take root in reality—the consequences are most unpleasant: for we are forced to take art as seriously as Plato, who in the end advises us to appoint a drastic censor. Now we all know what kind of thing effective censorship is; it is a contradiction in terms, because censorship is like pruning: it gives new strength to what it cuts down, and if it attacks the root it destroys the plant which it wants to save. Yet, with all these reservations clearly in mind, we can still learn a good deal if we observe how Plato imagines his censor in action, how he wishes an ideal state to proceed when it officially bans a dangerous poet. ‘If any such man’, he says, ‘will come to us to show us his art, we shall kneel down before him as a rare and holy and wonderful being: but we shall not permit him to stay. We shall anoint him with myrrh and set a garland of wool upon his head, and send him away to another city’.

If this ritual were to be translated into modern terms it would sound like a burlesque: it would mean that before an artist can be condemned he must receive the highest possible honour, something like the Order of Merit. Plato understood what few seem to understand today, that the only dangerous artist is the great one: ‘a rare and holy and wonderful being’. Plato believed—and he unmistakably said so—that great evil ‘springs out of a fullness of nature . . . rather than from any deficiency, whereas weak natures are scarcely capable of any very great good or very great evil’. It is obvious from this remark that Plato was spared the kind of experience which moved Jacob
Burckhardt, the great Swiss historian, to define mediocrity as the truly diabolical force in the world. Since we know the great truth in Burckhardt’s dictum, it is not easy for us to follow Plato when he suggests that only the strong imagination can be destructive, while the troubles caused by the weak one are negligible. But then, Plato lived in Greece, and his own evidence and that of others suggest that the Greek forces of destruction were not mediocre.

At the risk of saying the obvious, I must here recall a fact of ancient history. Plato saw Greek art and Greek poetry achieve their subtest powers of persuasion at the very time when he saw the Greek state disintegrate; and he sensed, and perhaps felt in his own person, a profound connexion between these two developments. If the Greeks had not been so responsive to an exquisite phrase or a beautiful gesture, they might have judged a political oration by its truth and not by the splendour with which it was delivered: but their sobriety was undermined by their imagination. If I am not mistaken, Plato found himself in much the same dilemma as an experienced physician who diagnoses an illness for which no cure is known, but in despair and out of charity for his patient he prescribes a remedy, which does not work. In such cases we do not say that the diagnosis was wrong because the remedy failed. And perhaps that courtesy should be extended also to Plato. His remedy—state censorship—is a desperate one, and an obvious failure. His diagnosis may, nevertheless, be right.

Looking at these events from a safe distance, a modern critic of Plato might concede that the political disintegration of Greece occurred while Greek art reached its highest refinement; but if that critic has read David Hume, he is bound to ask another question: Why claim a connexion between two events merely because they happen to occur together? Could that conjunction not be an accident?

Recurring Accident?
It certainly could, and it would be foolish to deny it; but it is odd that the accident should recur. In the Italian Renaissance, again, the most splendid release of artistic energies was attended by political disintegration. In Burckhardt’s great book The Civilization of the Renaissance, the opening chapter describes the anarchy, strife, and despotism, the violent eruptions of human passion, by which the Italian city-states were lacerated; and Burckhardt gave to this, the most painful chapter of his book, an ironic title. He called it ‘The State as a Work of Art’ (Der Staat als Kunstwerk). He took that title, I think, from Hegel’s Philosophy of History, where a comparable heading—‘The Political Work of Art’—appears over a chapter on the Greek city-states; and here the meaning is unmistakable: it signifies a state swayed by the artistic imagination. ‘Even in its destruction’, writes Hegel, ‘the spirit of Athens appears magnificent. Amiable and serene in the face of tragedy is the gaiety and recklessness with which the Athenians accompany their morality to its tomb’.

It ought to be obvious by now that in connecting the word ‘art’ with the word ‘anarchy’ I was completely unoriginal. I merely continued to reflect on a thought which had occupied Plato, Goethe, Baudelaire, Burckhardt; and a host of other authors could be invoked, equally different from each other and equally close to the sources of art, who have made the same observation. The fact, however, that these thoughts are not new should perhaps recommend them all the more to our attention. If the release of imaginative forces is a threat to the artist, which he must control with
the greatest care, then to a lesser degree the same threat is transferred to us when we share in the artist’s experience. But what precautions do we take, in our busy artistic life, not to be overwhelmed by these forces, or not to choke them? How does our artistic economy avoid excess or atrophy?

I do not mean to ask this question in any narrow professional sense. We are here not concerned with the problem, interesting though it is, how a professional art critic, for example, who is obliged to visit one exhibition after another, manages to keep his sensibility fresh and his judgment sharp; or how a professional historian of art can survey all the medieval ivories in existence without letting his perception of them get stale. That men engaged in these professions do occasionally lose their sense of proportion is one of those occupational risks with which any profession must reckon. My question refers to the general public, whose sense of balance is much more important: for it is essential to the well-being of a society that the whole should be less mad than the parts.

I have heard eminent and intelligent men speak on Art and Society, and on Art and the State, and the problem which preoccupied Plato all his life did not cross the threshold of their awareness. They rested their case on the generous assumption, that the widest possible diffusion of art can have only a benign and civilizing effect, a view which Burckhardt, on the historical evidence, would have dismissed as silly and shallow optimism.

Alarming Surrender
The late Mr. Kussevitzky used to say that we can never have too much music: the more music is performed and heard, the better for everybody. It is clear, I think, that he has had his way. More music is offered and heard today than in any age in history; and presumably the same is true of the diffusion of literature. It is certainly true of the visual arts. We are flooded with exhibitions, and glutted with picture-books, and these vast aggregates of available images are absorbed with an eagerness and, I may add, with a degree of intelligence which leaves the older generations speechless. The instances are now extremely rare in which a person faced with an unfamiliar idiom of painting will dismiss it as the trick of a buffoon who cannot draw. These tantrums we are now happily spared; but the surrender to art, on almost any terms, is equally alarming. It is as if the floodgates of the imagination had been opened and the waters were streaming in without meeting resistance. The sacred fear is no longer with us.

But perhaps the fear has become superfluous. Diffusion brings with it a loss of density. We are much touched by art, but it touches us lightly, and that is why we can take so much of it, and so much of so many different kinds. If a man has the time and the means, he can see a comprehensive Picasso show in London one day and the next a comprehensive Poussin exhibition in Paris, and—what is the most amazing thing of all—find himself exhilarated by both. When such large displays of incompatible artists are received with equal interest and appreciation it is clear that those who visit these exhibitions have acquired a strong immunity to them. Art is so well received because it has lost its sting.

Artists working today are aware, I think, although not many are so unwise as to say so, that they address themselves to a public whose ever-increasing willingness to
receive art is matched by a growing atrophy of the receptive organs. If modern art is sometimes shrill, it is not the fault of the artist alone. We all incline to raise our voices when we speak to persons who are getting deaf. Artists as different in character as Arp, Picasso, Rouault, Klee, have all made use, at one time or another, of what André Gide has called ‘the gratuitous act’, a cruel shock which we ought to feel when we meet the patently absurd or the repulsive. Bertolt Brecht invented for a comparable purpose the dramatic technique of ‘alienation’; and we know how earnestly the Angry Young Men have tried to shock their public into attention—but these effects have little chance of lasting. The shock wears off when it becomes familiar, and the device by which it was first achieved receives a place in the long gallery of modern devices where, well classified and clearly labelled, it attracts and contents the dispassionate pilgrim, or just arouses his curiosity.

A Demon Tamed
It might be thought that Plato ought to envy the condition in which we find ourselves. That dreaded demon of the imagination, which he tried to exorcize, has finally lost the power to hurt us. Those savage masks of grimacing idols which frightened Goethe out of his wits have all been safely domesticated. We have them with us, and they give us pleasure. Isaiah’s prophecy of the peaceable kingdom, that ‘the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox’, has been fulfilled in our vision of art, but of art alone: for in no other phase of our existence are we prepared to make the peculiar sacrifice which is required here. In Isaiah’s paradise the kid and the ox remain as we know them, but the leopard and the lion are obliged to shed their teeth.

And that may possibly be the cause of our present discontents. As Plato and Baudelaire and Goethe saw rightly, the glories of art are inseparable from its risks. But however wildly our lions and leopards may act, we know they are tame, and their leaps will not frighten us.

It is fortunate that this form of apathy was explored again by a great philosopher. About a century and a half ago, when these symptoms first began to appear, they were clearly recognized by Hegel, and he studied this modern malady with the same care as Plato had studied the ancient. He explained that when art is removed to a zone of safety, it may still remain very good art indeed, and also very popular art, but its effect upon our existence will vanish.

It is worth listening to Hegel on this point. Whatever the weakness of his metaphysics, as an observer of the world of men he was as sharp-sighted as Montaigne. The artistic life that he saw about him resembles ours in many ways. It was the height of romanticism, and of Berlin romanticism at that. Imagination had been released from the restraints of convention, and it was felt that art had finally come into its own. The displays showed great freedom and variety. One could see sombre, diabolical pictures with a touch of fairytale and sinister wit, comparable to the art of Fuseli in England; and next to them chaste, abstemious, neo-classic designs, much like the outline drawings of Flax-man. And then there were, of course, the New Primitives, noble savages communing with nature and lovers of folk-art and medieval antiquities, and above all the so-called Nazarenes, who founded their art on religious conversion.
Hegel saw it all, and he found it wanting. He did find it interesting, but in his view that was not a compliment. To apply the word ‘interesting’ to a work of art was, in fact, a romantic invention; and in carrying on that habit today we inadvertently adopt a romantic attitude. In Hegel’s day it was new, and he saw what it meant. An ‘interesting’ object has an arresting quality; it arouses our attention; we take cognizance of it and then let it go. An ‘interesting’ experience is one that has no lasting effect.

So Hegel drew up his bill of particulars. As he saw it, the moment had arrived in the world’s history when art would no longer be connected, as it had been in the past, with the central energies of man; it would move to the margin, where it would form a wide and splendidly varied horizon. The centre would be occupied by science—that is, by a relentless spirit of logical inquiry. The kind of science which Hegel foresaw bears no resemblance to the science of today: in that he was a bad prophet. But the place of science in our lives he foresaw correctly, and he was equally foresighted in the place he assigned to art. He explained that in an age of science people would continue to paint and to make sculptures, and to write poetry and compose music, and in so far as they did these things it would be desirable they should do them well. But let us not be deceived, he writes: ‘however splendid the new effigies of the Greek gods may look to us, and whatever dignity and perfection we may find in the new images of God the Father, Christ, and the Virgin Mary, it is of no use: we no longer bend our knees’. What Hegel meant was beautifully illustrated some forty years later by Manet when he painted ‘The Dead Christ Mourned by Angels’. This picture was not intended to force anyone to his knee. It was painted for an exhibition, not for a church. Manet wanted it to be admired as sheer painting.

It should be clear, then, that by moving into the margin, art does not lose its quality as art, it only loses its direct relevance to our existence: it becomes a splendid superfluity. An art thus detached from the realities of living does not cease to be widely and intensely enjoyed. On the contrary, nothing gives us greater pleasure than to commune with images which are so free. As Baudelaire explained with incomparable clarity, the laughter aroused by a comedy of Moliere, which is significant laughter because it refers to life, is narrower and less intense than the pure, disengaged and uncontrollable laughter which may seize us before an extravagant drôlerie engraved by Callot, a fantasy unrelated to our existence. According to Baudelaire, this is ‘art for art’s sake’, a proud art which is no one’s servant and which poses all its problems from within.

Although Hegel relegated this art to the margin, he was fascinated by its inherent powers. His language grows eloquent and almost poetic when he describes the plastic freedom and freshness of adventure which an artist or poet is likely to gain when he allows his imagination to roam without fear, entering lightly into diverse experiences, some familiar, others remote, without allowing himself to be caught in any. A poem of love, conceived in this spirit, will be a poem of imagined love and draw its tone and form from the imagination only. In such productions, Hegel says, ‘we find no personal longing, obsession or desire, but only a pure pleasure in the phenomenon’; and he describes that state of detachment as ‘an inexhaustible self-abandon of the imagination, an innocent frolic, and with it an inward warmth and joy of sensibility raising the soul, through the serenity of form, above any painful involvement in the limitations of reality’.
Any modern believer in ‘pure art’ must admit that this description is compelling. Hegel was no stranger to that rarefied experience which Mr. Clive Bell enjoyed in what he called ‘significant form’, but Hegel’s language was more radical. He explained that the absolute freedom of art, by which art can attach itself freely to any substance it chooses in order to exercise the imagination on it, has made of the new artist a tabula rasa. Infinitely susceptible to new shapes because no shape can be regarded as final, he is in a state of perpetual self-transformation, engaged in what Hegel quaintly calls unendliche Herumbildung, an infinite plasticity.

It is clear that Hegel foresaw developments of which we now have the full confirmation, but in spite of the brilliance of his description, in one respect his analysis is an incomplete as Plato’s. Plato did not foresee that the dangers of art, which he feared so greatly, might not affect a people who had come to immune them. Hegel, on the contrary, could not imagine that art would ever again become dangerous. Although he envisaged an art of the future which might be richer and subtler than the art he had seen, he supposed that, no matter how varied our art might become, it would always remain disengaged from reality because, as he put it, ‘art has worked itself out’. According to Hegel, when art becomes pure it ceases to be serious, and that is, in his view, its final splendour.

I have drawn a rather dark picture of the immunity to art which we seem to have acquired. We touch the surface of many different artistic experiences without getting seriously involved in any. If Hegel were right, that state of safety would continue for art in perpetuity: but here it is possible that he overshot the mark. To make statements about perpetuity is one of the failings of Hegel’s philosophy, and we may say without pride that this is a weakness to which we are no longer prone. When Hegel observes that in our civilization, no matter how lively and varied art may seem, it remains a marginal occupation, we must admit that the statement is true: but when he adds that art will remain marginal for ever, we have every right to be sceptical, and thus more hopeful than he wanted us to be. ‘At certain times’, if I may quote Burckhardt again, ‘the world is overrun with false scepticism… Of the true kind there can never be enough’.