

Expression and Appreciation

In a democracy, every man his own politician is acceptable — at least on a five year basis; but every man his own artist is a more dubious proposition. The doings of politicians, after all, affect us all and it is perfectly right that we should be able to take some steps to regulate their activities from time to time. Now it is true that the stuff of artistic enjoyment is the common lot of humanity, but the means through which in the past it has been deployed would seem to involve technicalities and sophistications there is no reason to assume are at the beck and call of everyone. Indeed, there is every reason to suppose that they necessitated apprenticeships and a dedication that no ordinary person otherwise engaged could be expected to afford. How then has the modern notion of artistic ubiquity arisen?

No doubt its origins are to be found in that period of emancipation which dates from the later eighteenth century and culminated in a further period of romantic protest during the nineteenth century. A characteristic feature of this Enlightenment, as it came to be called, lay in its optimistic assessment of human potential once freed from the bonds of 'superstition', 'prejudice' and social inequality which had marked the *ancien régime* of absolute monarchy and traditional religion. Admittedly, such notions existed more as ideology than as implemented actuality: Voltaire, for all his corrosive attacks on the society of his time, certainly regarded the populace with contempt. But the critical impetus of Enlightenment polemics gradually eroded traditional social certainties; and the notion of a potentially creative but currently frustrated citizenry arose — those 'mute inglorious Miltons' of Gray's *Elegy* (which, of course, also drew on a traditional pastoralism): 'Full many a flower', no less, 'born to blush unseen'.

The modicum of truth which no doubt existed in these observations soon received powerful literary support in a more idiosyncratic utterance — no longer in Gray's echoes of a perennial classical theme but in 'the language really used by men'. Both linguistically and experientially Wordsworth opened up a new vein of poeticising which appealed powerfully to the sentimental egalitarianism of the times. In a reaction against a putatively corrupt social order previously signalled by Rousseau, the younger Wordsworth appealed to low and rustic life as the proper breeding ground for a new and profounder wisdom; and he saw in childhood an innocence which appealed powerfully amidst current degradations. Explicitly the notion that Nature was infinitely more profligate with her gifts than men had realised was nurtured: 'O many are the poets that are sown / By Nature'. True, they wanted the 'accomplishment of verse', but this was the outcome of unpropitious circumstances rather than lack of native ability. Similarly, a child is invoked as 'Thou best philosopher', a being to whom 'feeling has imparted power'.

These notions received confirmation in the fevered writings of German romantic contemporaries.

Schlegel, in his *Discourse of Poetry* (1800), asserted that 'as every man has his own nature and his own love, so does he carry his own poetry in him'. The notion of the ubiquity of artistic potential was being fairly launched. It was further encouraged by the Kantian notion that the mind assumed a 'creative' role in perception, assisted by frequently unresolved ambiguities in the use of the word 'creative'. Such ideas persisted during the intervening century and a half, to find influential expression in a work of considerable educational significance, Herbert Read's *Education through Art*, where indeed, it was linked explicitly with the fostering of a democratic social order. It is here that Read made his famous and much publicised comment: 'the secret of our collective ills is to be traced to the suppression of spontaneous creative ability in the individual'. True, Read's exposition is often more cautious than this remark might imply; it includes, for instance, a welcome realisation of the ambiguity of the notion of 'creativity'. Nevertheless, his book afforded considerable support to those initially inclined, on egalitarian grounds, to encourage the idea of the universal incidence of artistic potential.

So the ground was prepared for those who, during the middle years of this century, have been concerned with the importance of making rather than receiving, 'creating' their own art rather than absorbing the achievements of others.

Politics have certainly contributed to this — traditional art and literature are found to be essentially elitist and unsuited to the new egalitarian social order — but the impetus has probably been at least as much in this faith in man's inherent creative power, and its need for expression. At the same time, even at its inception, this notion had received powerful adverse comment. Thus Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria* subjected Wordsworth's theories — and practice — to unfavourable analysis, an analysis all the more striking because it came from someone who was deeply attached to Wordsworth and had the highest respect for his genius. Incidentally, Coleridge's comments introduce a note of wariness into my identification of these beliefs as characteristically romantic: Coleridge was clearly a romantic and he certainly did not share them. Furthermore, as I have indicated, they were no doubt influenced by the classical view of the pastoral. Shall we say that it was the peculiarly romantic stress on the personal, the individual and the inner life that provided them with their most fertile breeding ground?

Coleridge's comments are, indeed, worth a brief examination, for he succeeds in placing his finger on the central weakness regarding any such claims. He points to the paucity of talent manifest in his own day, at a time when the spread of literacy would seem to afford opportunities unequalled in former ages: 'but one Burns, among the shepherds of *Scotland*, and not a single poet of humble life among these *English* lakes and mountains', from

which he concludes 'that POETIC GENIUS is not only a very delicate but a very rare plant'. He also diagnoses why this should be so, and it is here that our interest is stimulated. 'I am convinced, that for the human soul to prosper in rustic life a certain vantage-ground is pre-requisite . . . Education, or original sensibility, or both, must pre-exist, if the changes, forms, and incidents of nature are to prove a sufficient stimulant'. He proceeds to analyse Wordsworth's diction and linguistic order and shows how far it departs from that of common life; and then he asks how in fact a poet is to regulate his style if he does not 'adhere closely to the sort and order of words which he hears in the market, wake, high-road or plough-field?'

By the principles of grammar, logic, psychology! In one word by such knowledge of the facts, material and spiritual, that most appertain to his art, as if it have been governed and applied by good sense, and, rendered instinctive by habit, becomes the representative and reward of our past conscious reasonings, insights, and conclusions, and acquires the name of TASTE.

Now Coleridge's use of the word 'art' evokes echoes of a humanist past. The dominant role of that literary and artistic movement which for several centuries had constituted the prevailing educational ideal (from the late fourteenth to the seventeenth century) was its commitment to 'art' (as artifice) and the cultural assimilation of past achievements. Both elements appear in Coleridge's criticism of Wordsworth, in his references to 'past conscious reasonings' and the assumed historical principles of grammar, logic and psychology, and in his explicit evocation of the poet's art'. If we dig below the surface of his quarrel with Wordsworth we reveal, in essence, the conflict between two major artistic – and indeed, educational – theories which have in turn dominated European thought from the time of the renaissance until our own day. The humanists saw creativity as something which resulted from a prior assimilation of the best models of the past, the romantics (with exceptions noted) have increasingly seen creativity more in its original sense of something made out of nothing, as a power, that is, of the innocent mind uncorrupted by cultural contamination from the past. Even Wordsworth himself was capable of seeing the mind as 'lord and master – outward sense / The obedient servant of her will'.

Neither theory can be held in its purity. Pushed to extremes, as with the lesser writers it sometimes was, the outcome of the humanist view was a lifeless copying which made their alert brethren like Erasmus stigmatise their more pedantic colleagues as 'apes of Cicero'. The outcome of romantic excesses can be seen most vividly in the empty, sterile manifestations of personal idiosyncrasy which disgrace the walls of so many of our museums of modern art.

Clearly, it is the latter phenomenon which should exercise us today. True, there are indications that its worst excesses are over; but the theory behind

it continues to have sufficient currency to affect a good deal of the work done in schools. The eddyings which accompanied Cizek's famous dictum: 'Every child is a law unto himself and should be allowed to develop his own technique' have not yet come to rest. Especially does hostility towards looking at and learning from traditional art persist. To a romantic ideology which stresses the 'tradition of the new' and which therefore consciously applauds a break-away from traditional modes as a mark of 'authenticity' (so that among the avant-garde fashion supplants fashion with breathless haste) is added the afore-mentioned political conviction which resents the art of the past as essentially elitist. The one is symbolised in that supreme gesture of artistic egotism, Marcel Duchamps' identification of the urinal as a work of art, on the grounds that any individual gesture of however arbitrary a nature is sufficient to distinguish an art object, even one performed 'with visual indifference' and therefore explicitly lacking any technical expertise. Here can be found a justification for that arbitrary application of paint to canvas which has characterised various forms of expressionism and has, in some cases, explicitly appealed to chance. The political argument is clearly manifest in Soviet realism but has played a significant role in avant-garde flirtations with mass culture (the strip cartoon and advertising for instance).

Such art is nothing if not expendable, though part of the difficulty of rejecting it on those grounds is that its progenitors would happily accept the indictment and indeed claim it as a virtue. Temporary ebullitions of feeling or passing social fashions, they would urge, form the parameters of our individual-collective world and become the proper objects of artistic attention – a perpetual 'shock of the new', as it were. The world is different today from what it was yesterday and therefore demands – or at least permits – a new art form for its interpretation. As M. Alain Robbe-Grillet proclaimed: 'The essence of modern man is no longer to be found within a hidden soul, but plastered on hoardings . . . Therefore, study the surface, the object, for it contains the only answer'.

But, in thus rejecting the past, the avant-garde is on much weaker ground than it thinks it is. It is perfectly possible to challenge its assessment of what constitutes the 'essence of modern man' just as it is possible to challenge its categorisation of art objects – and on similar grounds. Man is after all an *historical* being and both memory and socially acquired characteristics prevent his being totally identified with 'the surface', the immediate present. Similarly, to re-categorise an object of utility as an 'art' object is, if language is to have anything other than a purely arbitrary significance, to re-assess in a way which lays itself open to demands of justification. Only in *Nineteen Eighty Four* is meaning totally arbitrary, at the will of the Party ('War is Peace') and only in such circumstances can an object of utility be equated with an artistic

creation, for what is useful in normal conventions of speech cannot always be equated with what is artistic. In other words, there is an historical problem to be faced, the historical difference between the useful and the artistic which acts at least as a potential barrier to Duchamp's arbitrary act. This is not to play with words – it is in fact simply to reassert the unavoidable historical dimension to all linguistic usage. It is possible that a re-examination of the urinal will reveal unexpected artistic virtues of design, though Duchamp's habit of choosing his objects with 'visual indifference' makes it difficult to attribute them to his artistic percipience.

Because, then, the notion of 'art' has inescapable historical associations, associations we can only abandon at the risk of total linguistic chaos, associations which the humanists fully recognised but which the romantics in their search for the 'new' have increasingly tried to avoid, Duchamp's art object must willy-nilly be subjected to criteria of assessment which draw on a long tradition of similarly identified objects. The vulgar notion – which yet has a wide currency – that in their application these criteria simply reveal the subjective preferences of those deploying them cannot be seriously maintained. For what one is arguing is the goodness or badness of the work under review, and this cannot be reduced to psychological statements of preference without committing the naturalistic fallacy, which operates when ethical statements are reduced to statements of fact (If I say 'I know this is good but I don't like it', I am making what everyone would recognise as a meaningful statement, so clearly the first assertion cannot be reduced to the second without residue).

We are now in a position to see the force of Coleridge's objections to Wordsworth's stated practice. He shows that Wordsworth in fact doesn't perform what he preaches – his words in their sequence and choice are very far from being those obviously used by men in the ordinary intercourse of life: this is an empirical point. But it also convicts Wordsworth of what is in effect a conceptual error – of failing to categorise as art what is clearly artificially constructed and which, indeed, *must* be artificially constructed.¹ Thus he asks in a passage immediately following that already quoted, how a poet comes to distinguish between the language of suppressed from that suitable for indulged, anger. 'Or between that of rage and that of jealousy?'

Is it obtained by wandering about in search of angry or jealous people in uncultivated society, in order to copy their words? Or not far rather by the power of imagination proceeding upon the *all in each* of human nature? By *meditation* rather than by *observation*?

What Coleridge evokes is at least the need for a minimum of internal process ('meditation') on the part of the artist and the consequent transcendence of the immediacies of 'observation'.

Indeed, he might have pointed out that even if one were to think of solving one's artistic problem by wandering about, notebook in hand, taking down the words of angry or jealous people, one can only do this as an act of choice inevitably involving a degree of meditation. One must have opted for this method as the best method of solving one's artistic problem. In however embryonic a form, it is always necessary, as Coleridge recognised, to consider 'such knowledge of the facts . . . that most appertain to his art'. And, of course, it must not be forgotten that these productions all sought public exhibition; Duchamp sent his 'object' for public display and, to take another example from another field, John Cage offered his 4' 33" for public performance. They are thus unavoidably open to historically evolved publicly assessable criteria of relevance and value. The 'tradition' of the 'new' does not comprise art objects which are totally *sui generis*, but art objects which, by their mode of categorisation unavoidably take their place within an historically evolved system of recognition and assessment and can claim no exemption from comparison with previous artefacts whether 'elitist' or not.

Thus any attempt to deny a special categorisation to art or to deny it a history can only spring out of an act of totalitarian political intolerance. Once we abstract something from the every day world and make of it an art object, whether a urinal or a form of speech – ironically, Wordsworth's claim is in essence the same as Duchamp's: the new is not so new after all – we inevitably bring into operation criteria of assessment which spring out of a publicly evolved tradition of relevance and value. There are thus some limitations, at least, on what either the individual or the collective can identify as artistic creativity. For instance, the modern artist's acceptance of the ephemeral nature of his art cannot at least avoid the questioning of an older artistic tradition which looked for the permanent beneath the changing surface – as did much renaissance art. This is not to pre-empt the outcome of the controversy – it is merely to point to its legitimacy and indeed, unavoidability as a potential focus for discussion.

Sir Roy Shaw, then, the Secretary-General of the Arts Council, was right when, in his National Theatre speech, 'What shall we do about the arts?', he urged the need for both 'expression and appreciation' as educational strategies. Appreciation of past artefacts is essential not in order to encourage a sterile reproduction of former models but because some such absorption forms an essential element in what becoming an artist *means*. The teacher who hesitates to saturate his charges in the art of the past on the grounds of its lack of contemporaneity risks betraying what the present day can contribute to specifically artistic achievement. He will impoverish that 'meditation' which constitutes an essential element in artistic choice and hence risk

1. In defence of Wordsworth it may be urged that he did at least attempt to throw over his 'ordinary' words and incidents 'a colouring of the imagination'. This may point to an embryonic realisation of a profound artistic problem, but it constitutes a far cry from the rigorously 'artificial' procedures of the humanists, as Coleridge realised (cf. *Biographia Literaria Chapter XVI*)