

THE MEANING OF ART

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As I understand my subject — The Meaning of Art—it does not refer to Trinidad or even West Indian Art but Art as a whole. May I add in passing that we are at the stage now where we can start looking towards international standards in our thinking — the Nationalism is in motion and we must start thinking of the next stage, Universality —thus, taking Art in its complete sense immediately lands us into difficulties. The word Art falls well within the class of those words that have been bandied around and bent so much that now they really have no true precise meaning. In fact, I am going to try to bring my argument to the point where Art as it is popularly understood and in most, if not all, of its connotations should not exist at all.

Before we really get down to it and in order that we all understand my premise, let us clear the air a little bit by a few accepted definitions and quotations.

RUSKIN: *"All great Art is the expression of man's delight in God's work — not his own."*

"All that is good in Art is the expression of one soul talking to another and is precious according to the greatness of the soul that utters it." "The names of great painters are like passing bells ..."

GOETHE: *"The highest problem of any Art is to cause by appearance the illusion of a higher reality."*

DANTE: *"Art, as far as it has the ability, follows nature, as a pupil imitates his master, so that Art must be as it were a descendant of God."*

HENRY JAMES: *"Art does not lie in copying . . . Nature furnishes the material by means of which to express a beauty still unexpressed in nature-----the artist beholds in nature more than she herself is conscious of."*

These random examples each illustrate a different outlook and interpretation of Art. From these I wish to quote more extensively from more serious sources.

I must admit at this stage that I am going to try to swing the discussion towards "Anti-Art." I have in no way consciously gone to references that would put a weak case for Art as we know it. They are all from writers whom I have admired and in most cases still do admire and revere. Let us see where they lead us.

Plato rejected artists from his Republic and apart from a perfunctory oft-quoted passage on cubes, triangles and lines struck by compass. Plato felt that Arts, when uncontrolled by rational law and a sense of responsibility to the community as a whole, tend to weave dangerous spells. On the other hand, when ordered by scientific and moral ideals, they prefigure adult wisdom and are the most useful instruments of education.

St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, gives us the three requisites for beauty. I would like to point out that the philosophers usually use the word beauty rather than the more commonplace Art or aesthetics; the latter, according to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, being by derivation the inquiry into the nature of sense-perceptions, but has been narrowed down in this sense to cover only the experience of beauty and sometimes only that of artistic beauty. Thus, Aquinas' three requisites for beauty are Wholeness or Perfection, Due Proportion or Harmony, and Clarity, which all facilitate true knowledge. By this time, the thirteenth century, I think we can begin to see in these requisites the erroneous self-evident axioms that pervade aesthetic philosophy to the present day in much the same way as Pythagorean geometry erroneously influenced metaphysics and general philosophy up to Einstein and Russell in our day.

From Kant's *CRITIQUE OF JUDGEMENT* we get:

"The experience of beauty affords no kind of knowledge, scientific or philosophical. The only sense in which it can be called true is that in it we become more distinctly aware of the nature of our own mental activity."

In Kant and the German Idealists we see a slight influence of Plato but with the difference that beauty is looked upon as so extremely subjective that it is not only the Aristotelian subjectivity of the artist externalising himself but the subjectivity of introspection. This to me is far closer to the truth and can be seen again in Hegel's *LECTURES ON AESTHETICS, 1835. The ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA* tells us that

"Hegel assumed his metaphysical doctrine that the 'idea' or ultimate reality manifests itself progressively in history, eminently in man and pre-eminently in man's philosophy, where alone it becomes fully conscious of its own nature but aesthetic creation and appreciation belong to the same spiritual sphere as religion and philosophy."

You will remember that Russell defines philosophy as:

"something intermediate between theology and science, and like theology it consists of speculation on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation. But between theology and science there is a No Man's Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man's Land is philosophy."

I myself, as you will hear later, tend to think of Art as a science or vice versa and probably in time, I may eventually allow some speculation eliminating aesthetic philosophy as a separate branch of philosophy.

However back to Hegel who of all the modern philosophers probably reaches furthest to the meaning of beauty.

"Art is one of the ways of expressing or presenting to consciousness the Divine, the deepest interests in man, the most comprehensive spiritual truths. Yet Art must yield to the more explicit truth of philosophy and is destined to fade away. Everything that is beautiful is so only by partaking in something higher (namely mind). In this sense natural beauty manifests itself as only a reflection of the beauty which properly belongs to the mind. The universal need from which Art 'springs' arises from the fact that man is a thinking consciousness, that is, he makes explicit to himself what he implicitly is: every movement of the human heart."

Despite a certain degree of mysticism this is the clearest expression of Art— beauty — to my knowledge. But unfortunately from then on in history, apart from a slight glimmer in the present day to which I will refer later, we dive right back to the romanticism of Schopenhauer.

Schopenhauer is quoted time and time again when Art is under discussion. He is the artists' philosopher, being himself— alone amongst the philosophers — as much interested in Art as in ethics. Russell describes him:

"His appeal has always been less to professional philosophers than to artists and literary people in search of philosophy that they could believe."

For him the essential of aesthetic experience is a state of activity of pure contemplation, when we become so absorbed in the characteristic quality of what is sensuously presented to us that, for once, the "will", the life force, the source of all organic and inorganic nature is still, and we neither desire, nor envy, nor regret, but escape both lust and satiety. Short of an ultimate Nirvana these brief glimpses are our only escape from the tyranny of the Will... and so it goes on and on —a very familiar and seductive philosophy, the complete escape; until we remember how thrilled and enthused we were recently by Camus, "To create is to create dangerously."

I think at this stage I will branch off from quotations and will bring in the modern philosophers as we go along. Before doing so let us look at a man who has done probably more than anyone to establish by writing the modern movements in Art and we may possibly see how he even surpasses Schopenhauer in sickness. Herbert Read in his book, *THE MEANING OF ART*, says:

"The simple word Art is most usually associated with those Arts which we distinguish as plastic or visual; but properly speaking it should include the Arts of literature and music. There are certain characteristics common to all the Arts, a definition of what is common to all the Arts is the best starting point of our enquiry ... Only the composer of music is perfectly free to create a work of Art of his own consciousness, and with no other aim than to please. But all artists have this same intention: the desire to please; and Art is most simply and most usually defined as an attempt to create pleasing forms. Such forms satisfy our sense of beauty, and the sense of beauty is satisfied when we are able to appreciate a unity or harmony of formal relations among our sense-perceptions."

We can take Herbert Read as one of our most authoritative contemporary poets, art historians and critics, and yet he still brings in such phrases as "With no other aim than to please the desire to please ... an attempt to create pleasing forms unity, harmony of formal relations among our sense-perceptions."

I will return more fully to such clichés. Sir Herbert Read for all his greatness is grinding his own 'abstract' axe but suffice it now that sense-perceptions are basically of animal instinctiveness or have been acquired from experiences and teachings within a man's life. The former we assume do not enter into what we call aesthetic sensibility whereas the latter have been thrust upon us. More on this later. Herbert Read finishes his book:

"If Art is not entirely the product of surrounding circumstances and is the expression of an individual will, how can we explain the striking similarity of works of art belonging to distinct periods of history?"

The paradox can only be explained metaphysically. The ultimate values of Art transcend the individual and his time and circumstances. They express an ideal proportion of history which the artist can grasp only in virtue of his intuitive powers ..."

This to me is not an explanation, it is dogmatic and evading the problem, if indeed the problem exists, by meaningless metaphysical clichés. There is no reason to believe in "Ultimate Values, Intuitive Powers"—they could be right but I personally do not accept them.

Finally, to come more down to earth, we have the *SHORTER OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY* which tells us:

Art.. .

Skill, as the result of knowledge and practice; the application of skill to subjects of taste as poetry, music etc. . .

An Art Or Arts ...

Certain branches of learning, which are of the nature of learning, which are of the nature of instruments for more advanced studies or for the work of life.

Before we get too disappointed that no mention of "Harmony of formal relations among our sense-perception" appears, a quick glance at the word "Skill," which plays a dominant part in the Dictionary definitions of Art, does not help us but only emphasises the absence of any adjectives which spring to the minds of twentieth century artists.

Skill...

Reason as a faculty of the mind; the power of discrimination; that which is reasonable, proper, right or just; practical knowledge in combination with ability; cleverness; expertness; an Art or Science, etc.

All this so far represents a few of the present day attitudes to Art. I could perhaps, having just quoted all these authorities — certainly a more impressive lot than my own opinion—call this the end of this paper and settle back with the weight of the last 2,000 years behind me. Unfortunately for myself, this existing mystic state (excepting the dictionary's definition and probably Hegel's) has worried me for the past few years and unfortunately for you I have been given the opportunity tonight of speaking, without interruption I hope, and in all honesty I must air my doubts, and what may be even more confusing, I must also tell you the conclusions I have reached at the moment.

The first of my doubts probably came three or four years ago when independent from my own — for want of a better phrase — aesthetic philosophy, the thinkers were arguing strongly on this vexing question of "Communication." We may note incidentally hardly any mention of Communication in any of the philosophers. I believe this must be a modern coinage. Anti-communication had raised its ugly head many times and especially so in the last fifty years when the angry young men of the 1910s went shooting up the blind alley of Futurism, then Automobilmism, then Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism etc., etc. But eventually, as in the recent controversy, there was a loving reconciliation and the poor artist could once more fall back on his mission of communicating his emotion, experiences, and

general mumbo jumbo to a public just as confused and just as willing to follow the newest religions of the newest high priests.

To me all this uncertainty is much more a sign of a false and outmoded historical basis. A history which finds a very close analogy in the history of philosophical thought. As in philosophy (until recently) so called self-evident axioms have been built up, layer on layer. They have been termed absolute and to question them is completely unthinkable. The Art Schools still teach in terms of proportion, rhythm, movement, form, space, composition, emotions and expression. Not only the visual arts but most of the other artists feel safe within the sound of such theorising. These are what are termed "abstract" qualities and the intellectuals can keep at them for centuries. On top of these wonderful "abstract" red herrings we have the emotional, Irrational, romantic and national precepts. The two opposites of the historians and critics—classicism and romanticism. The supposedly subjective and the objective. When these two camps are not in cohesion they are bitterly fighting. Whichever it is, it is still most successful in strengthening these centuries old "self-evident axioms" without in the least casting doubt on their validity.

The great theorists with all the integrity in the world produced their own particular brand based on that which went before, flavoured with their own moral aspirations which are themselves flavoured by the times in which they lived. But to me this is not good enough when we have broken down so many false beliefs in man's intellect through the theories of evolution, relativity then the quantum and in the main stream of logical or empirical analysis. So much deadwood has been jettisoned in mathematics, physics and philosophy, and yet in Art, (apart from the modern philosophical references from the Humanists and Semanticists,) the very few bold minds are wondering what it is all about, whilst the other greats are playing variations — revolutionary or reactionary— on old themes and the mass of us grasp hold of the latest and then proceed to stand on our pedestal over the less informed public.

One has seen so much sham and hocus pocus in the name of Art—Truth — that one could go on damning Art in general until kingdom come. But as in all strong beliefs one must be very guarded that fanaticism does not carry oneself away and the baby is washed down the drain with the bath water. I must be quite honest and admit that at the moment I would like to see the whole sorry mess abandoned so that people can go ahead with some straight rational, scientific thinking without woolly aesthetics intervening. In any thought, however, we must always recognise that not only is the thinker at a certain stage of his own intellectual development but also we are part of mankind and mankind itself is also at a certain stage of intellectual evolution. For instance, one of the surest definitions of Art, or let's call it creativity, is the desire, the urge for unity, the creation of order out of chaos. This to me is as noble as we can get, but then this desire can quite easily be a result of our animal instinct of self-preservation. This view was held by Albert Einstein when he wrote:

"Man tries to make for himself in the fashion that suits him best a simplified and intelligible picture of the world; he then tries to some extent to substitute this cosmos of his for the world of experience, and thus overcome it. This is what the painter, the poet, the speculative philosopher and the natural scientist do, each in his own fashion. He makes this cosmos and its construction the pivot of his emotional life, in order to find in this way the PEACE and SECURITY which he cannot find in the narrow whirlpool of personal experience."

If I were an out and out cynic it would not be at all difficult to put the motive of any action you care to mention at the altar of self-preservation. I am not a cynic and so in my damnation of what many of you consider as a worthwhile pursuit, I have a slight sneaking feeling that there may be such a term as beauty. I find it extremely loathsome to regard the great acts of good men as self interested. On that evidence I base my hope.

But before tearing off on an idealist dream, we must be cruelly critical and only if a premise can stand up to the harshest, coldest logical analysis can it then be used as a basis for further belief. I have not found anywhere near an answer to justify Art. I want to, but that is no reason at all why I shall. It is reason for questioning and questioning everything in the romantic hope — you see we are still very romantic animals — that good men are good men. As an antidote for this cold-blooded approach that I am stressing I will finish with Camus. He has this idealism that my head tells me to reject, but I think we must read him in order to see where .we may reach when all the poppycock has been eradicated.

Albert Camus has a most noble sincerity about his reasoning but still the hankering after indefinable terms which although they may be inherently indefinable by nature, they have been so confused in the past and so much evil has been committed in their name that we can only wipe the slate completely clean and reason our way upwards, back to more logical conclusions. Camus, however, is too beautiful to miss and he represents a certain school of Art thought; one that appears much truer than most that went before although, I fear, not so true as many that will follow. However, here is Albert Camus on *REVOLUTION IN ART* with its total reliance on "beauty" as the passive instrument towards the dignity of man!

"But hell can endure for only a limited period and life will begin again one day. History may perhaps have an end; but our task is not to terminate it but to create it, in the image of what we henceforth know to be true. Art, at least, teaches us that man cannot be explained by history alone and the order of nature. For him the great God, Pan, is not dead."

This hints at my sneaking feeling that there may be beauty but it is, as so often with Camus, wishful thinking optimism which logically is just as dangerous and misleading as pessimism. He goes on:

"His most distinctive act of rebellion, while it affirms the value and the dignity common to all men, obstinately claims, so as to satisfy its hunger for unity, an integral part of the reality whose name is beauty. One can reject all history and yet accept the world of the sea and stars. The rebels who wish to ignore nature and beauty are condemned to banish from history everything with which they want to construct the dignity of existence and of labour. Every great reformer tries to create in history what Shakespeare, Cervantes, Moliere and Tolstoy knew how to create, a world always ready to satisfy the hunger for freedom and dignity which every man carries in his heart. Beauty, no doubt, does not make revolutions, but a day will come when revolutions will have need of beauty. The procedure of beauty, which is to resist the real while conferring unity upon it, is also the procedure of rebellion."

"Is it possible eternally to reject injustice without ceasing to acclaim the nature of man and the beauty of the world? Our answer is yes. This ethic at once unsubmitive and loyal is in any event the only one which lights the way to a truly realistic revolution."

"In upholding beauty, we prepare the way for the day of regeneration when civilization will give first place — far ahead of the formal principles and degraded values of history—to this living virtue on which is founded the common dignity of man and the world he lives in, and which we now have to define in the face of a world which insults it."

And again he writes:

"What then is Art? Nothing simple, that is certain.... And Balzac suggested this in a sentence —'the genius resembles everyone and no one resembles him.' So it is with Art, which is nothing without reality and without which reality is insignificant... Art, in a sense, is a revolt against everything fleeting and unfinished in the world. Consequently, its only aim is to give another form to a reality that it is nevertheless forced to preserve as the source of its emotion. In this regard we are all realistic and no one is. Art is neither complete rejection, nor complete acceptance of what is. It is simultaneously rejection and acceptance, and this is why it must be perpetually renewed wrenching apart. The artist constantly lives in such a state of ambiguity, incapable of denying reality and yet eternally bound to question it in its eternally unfinished aspects ..."

And finally:

"After all, perhaps the question of art lies in the perpetual tension between beauty and pain, the love of man and the madness of creation, unbreakable solitude and the exhausting crowd, rejection and consent. Art advances between two chasms, which are frivolity and propaganda. On the ridges where the great artist moves forward, every step is an adventure, an extreme risk. In that risk however, and only there, lies the freedom of Art. A difficult freedom that is more like an ascetic discipline. What artist would deny this? What artist would dare to claim that he was equal to such a ceaseless task? Such freedom pre-supposes health of body and mind, a style that reflects strength of soul and a patient defiance. Like all freedom, it is a perpetual risk, an exhausting adventure, and this is why people avoid the risk today, as they avoid liberty with its exacting demands in order to accept any kind of bondage and achieve at least comfort of soul."

I do not wish to appear arrogant in criticising Camus. I hazard an opinion that Camus, engrossed and struggling first with freedom and dignity for his homeland and then his harassing struggle with Sartre's Existentialism, has shown his great genius in coming out of both with the greatest nobility one can possibly conceive. I hazard a further opinion that if he had lived longer — and let's face it, man's time is the essence of experience and knowledge — had he been exposed beyond optimistic existentialism to the hopefulness so near to his optimistic soul of the recent years of logical analytical philosophy, he would have eventually rejected his fanatic love of writing, of Art, of freedom purely for their own sake and rid his work of the naive romanticism that every now and then throws him completely off most brave and exciting statements.

And to close, I have some unanswered propositions that I would like to trouble you with. Art is possibly a means for a person discovering and knowing himself. That was the backbone of my anti-communication thesis, what Kant calls "Aware of the nature of our own Mental Activity." What Hegel calls "Every movement of the human heart." What the Dictionary calls "The work of Life." Then every serious work of Art is a development or more truly an experiment based on a former work. The artist must be aware of deficiencies in his work even before he has completed it. His completed work is faulty. The man of integrity — and without that he cannot start— the man of integrity should be the last one to display his faulty work and yet this is what we know of Art. Can't we be excused for thinking that the display of Art is only a self-glorification, an exhibitionism of "how clever am I." Where is the other requisite of man — humbleness? We have no right to publicise something which we know is not true. We have no right to expect that our subjective views, and indeed all Art be it labelled classic or romantic is subjective, are any more right than the next person's. Our first responsibility is to ourselves and, if mankind's progress is of any interest to us, the only man whom we can start to know is oneself. Walcott's essential loneliness; Camus' unbearable solitude.

Having taken up so much of your time proselytising you into my point of view that other peoples' points of view are not important, I do not apologise; I throw myself at your mercy.

Colin Laird