

TOWARDS A CATHOLIC CRITICISM

CRITICISM begins in an act of reason. Reason separates individual qualities from a previously undifferentiated whole. Judgment then steps in to appraise the result. Criticism in art results from the detachment of the spectator from the artist and from his work. It works in two ways. It gives awareness of the qualities in the object surveyed. It also reveals to the critic his own attitude towards it. Criticism is, therefore, an advance from the unquestioning acceptance or rejection of an undeveloped mind.

The ancient Greeks lived in an age of great sculpture. We do not find in their writings praise or blame of such works. Criticism originally arose with them in connection with the decline of Hellenic drama. In the Middle Ages books of aesthetics, pointing out the aims, the failures or successes of the architectural magnificence springing up in town and country, were unthinkable. When man has lost the power to create things of beauty he becomes aware of the nature of these. He becomes a critic.

To become aware of the nature of any idea or state of being is to have passed, for better or for worse, beyond it. With the loss of innocence came knowledge of both man's physical nakedness and his need for a covering. Constant preoccupation with an idea is usually symptomatic of immediate unattainability.

Was the insistence of the Victorian age upon progress really the expression of a genuine belief in its reality? Might it not have been a symptom of a deep-seated distrust in the fashionable catchword? We have progressed, men of deep honesty might and did say, but is not this perhaps a poor exchange for the *pietas* of a less materialist age? Is not the new emphasis upon 'efficiency and planning' an indictment of the chaos which modern life has become? Can the contemporary vogue for æsthetic criticism be traced to the fact that we have lost a true sense of art? The present separation of art form from a realist basis emphasises its divorce from life.

A work of art is the instinctive expression of a man's philosophy—or, the cynic might add, his lack of one. The cynic is wrong. Lack of philosophy is in itself a philosophy. It is the setting up of the individual ego as an arbiter of life:

'Glory to Man in the highest,
For Man is the measure of things.' (Swinburne).

With the dethronement of God as central in the interest first of Humanism and then of the individual, came the decline in **great art** and the rise of **critical theory**.

The result of this is seen today. The state of art is chaotic and, in certain respects, demoniacal. Books explaining the aims and the theories which inspire the artist pour from the press. No reputable paper lacks its art and literary criticism. Much reviewing can hardly be called criticism. Mere analysis of the contents of a book or description of paintings is not criticism. The word, we need to remind ourselves, derives from the Greek, *krites*, or judge. Criticism is judgment. There can be no judgment without reference to law, and law we know to be above merely human opinion or desire.

Criticism, in the modern sense, began with the Renaissance. The glories of European art sprang originally from the christian tradition. Art was looked on as a means to glorify God and to raise man's eyes from earth to Heaven. Beyond technical problems nothing else was considered. Men accepted a creation in words or in wood, stone or colour by this standard. The function of the artist was taken for granted as naturally as that of that lawgiver, the peer or the peasant as part of the social scheme. The same morality, the same integrity was expected of him as of any other. He was a man with an account to render to God and society as any other. With the growth of scientific enquiry and the revived interest in classical antiquity other standards arose. Flattery of the patron, pleasure to the beholder and, eventually, self-expression of the artist became legitimate aims. As Faith declined critical appeal was made to Aristotle and the classic exponents of form until by the 17th and the 18th centuries art stood or fell by classical standards.

Then came the French Revolution and with it the Romantic movement which swept away traditional standards in art, both christian and pagan. The welcome freshness which this at first instilled into writing, painting and music (we think of the giants of the late 18th and early 19th centuries) logically declined into the chaos of today. The individual became a law unto himself. The slogan, 'art for art's sake', justified all. The origin of this phrase was innocent enough. It sprang from the idea that æsthetic pleasure was independent of anything but pure delight in the contemplation of beauty. It soon declined into the sense that any subject, including the glorification of vice, was a legitimate subject of reproduction in writing or painting. Vice and blasphemy were not new in art prior to Romanticism, but never since the christian era had they been exalted into an end as they were by Swinburne, Baudelaire and their following. Disharmony in music and distortion in painting were slower in establishing themselves. Today they are firmly enthroned. The theory of 'art for art's sake', once hotly debated, is now never questioned. Criticism on any other than empiric grounds is dismissed as old-fashioned prejudice.

[They] bawl for freedom in their senseless mood,
 And still revolt when truth would set them free.
 License they mean when they cry libertie;
 For who loves that must first be wise and good;
 But from that mark how far they roave we see
 For all this wast of wealth, and loss of blood.

wrote Milton. The words are true today.

The purpose of this paper is to ask the artist or the critic (and we are all critics today) to consider the basis and the implications of his judgments, or lack of them, upon contemporary writing and painting.

Is it enough for the intelligent Catholic to praise or to dismiss modern expressions of art upon merely personal grounds of admiration or dislike? Surely, we who claim our house to be built upon a rock, the rock of law, should be able to offer something to a world disintegrating in the sands of opinion. Knowledge of up-to-the-moment critical theory is not really necessary, though it is useful for meeting protagonists on their own ground. Indeed, the biased nature of the theorists, their self-engendered jargon and misuse of words, more often confuse than enlighten the reader. While a knowledge of the history of art is useful, considered opinion based on the truths of the Faith is of far greater importance. The Aristotelian theory of the cathartic value of the emotions of fear and pity inspired by a work of art holds true today. Christianized into reverence for God and love of man, what more can we ask of poetry or painting?

To earliest antiquity the poet was the teacher. He was the *Vates*, the wise man to whom the *Musæ*, the inspiring goddesses, revealed truth. That poetry was destined to give pleasure was a later development. Aristotle made a tentative effort to reconcile the two views by stating that pleasure in a normal and healthy state is complete only when the requirements of morality are satisfied. At the Renaissance this was applied to the visual arts.

Down the ages we see the field held now by one, now by the other camp. Today there is no question which is the victor. Art is considered first and foremost as a means of self-expression. There need be no attempt to pander to the public. 'Advanced' poetry and painting have become exhibitions of private pleasure in shapeless and distorted forms. Herein lies the grand blasphemy.

It is not that we seek naturalism in art. Distortion and symbolism are not in themselves blasphemy. The elongations of medieval painting and carving, the symbolic tropes of the poetry of the ages of Faith prove this. Nor is the showing up of ugliness and vice in itself evil. Where evil lies is in the denial of goodness and beauty to God's handiwork in man or in nature. What advanced poets and painters are saying in effect is that You, the public, think man is beautiful, wise

and good, whereas I, the artist, show you that he is ugly, lecherous and cruel. Nature, far from being a *Benedicite*, a hymn of glory to God and a mirror of his attributes, is a diabolic creation reproducing man's own depravity. Or the world is seen as a vast system of mechanics denying dignity or free-will to man.

Calling the Rocks Atomic Origins of Existence, denying Eternity
By the Atheistic Epicurean Philosophy of Albion's Tree.

They call the Rocks Parents of Men and adore the frowning
Chaos . . .

Ashamed to give Love openly to the piteous and merciful Man
Counting him an imbecile mockery. (Blake).

And from the fundamental pessimism of a world without meaning or purposes rises the logical corollary: let us cheat this world by snatching what we can of happiness, from whatever source, before the grave closes on us.

Therefore it is good that the Christian should face the implications of modern art and letters, that he should consider these in the light of the doctrine of Original Sin and of the Redemption. We should be able to distinguish between a noble presentation of man's present decline from morality and the glorification of adultery, brutality and soft living. We can all recognize the artistry of a performance such as Swinburne's *Proserpine* without subscribing to his doctrines. But in works where the statement is not so obvious we are apt to be off our guard. We enjoy and admire works which prove under analysis to be the direct negation of all for which our Faith stands. How many films or novels can be said to be positively Christian in outlook? Or, we might ask ourselves, how much time and money do we subscribe to the doctrines of anti-Christ in our hours of 'relaxation'?

The Christian faith is a unity. The modern heresy is dichotomy. The divorce of morality from business is paralleled in the arts. If we were sure of the grounds of our Catholicism we would not be deceived by the atheistic materialism of modern 'culture'.

The more moderate among writers on æsthetics assure us that the way to approach a work of art is with a mind free from prejudice. We must, they say, ask ourselves two questions. Firstly, what is the artist trying to express, and secondly, does he succeed in doing so? Evaluation of the subject should be based on this, success or failure gauged by it. The criterion is specious but does it bear investigation?

If for the word prejudice we substitute principle, we see the basic fallacy. For while we may hold judgment temporarily in suspense we cannot obliterate from our minds the moral or æsthetic steps by which the judicial faculty has been nurtured. Certainly the Christian cannot do so. If the subject is blasphemous, indecent or frankly pagan, its very success is its own indictment.

Here then we have, I submit, the basis of a truly Catholic criticism. Appraisal of technical competence should always be accompanied by awareness of the philosophy underlying the work. Such ventilation of the subversive in art among a section of the public should pave the way towards a reconsideration of the nature of artistic creation. It could prove a timely check on the uncritical attitude of less thoughtful members of the community as to where heedless acceptance of books, pictures and films is leading them.

For he knoweth not that the dead are there: and that her guests are in the depths of Hell. (*Proverbs* iv. 18, A. V.)

JANET CLEEVES

PAUL HARRIS

PAUL HARRIS presents a new and very vivid approach to religious painting. He does not see the life of our Lord in the conventional way and his pictures are powerful in their originality. He has the gift of catching real light in paint and does not merely paint in lighter or darker shades. His style was greatly influenced by several years spent with the army in Iraq—many of his figures are brown and move with Eastern grace.

In his picture entitled *Adam and Eve* there is no angel with a flaming sword: Adam and Eve are driving themselves out of the paradise which their false choice has destroyed. Helplessly they stumble out of their realm, but behind them in the landscape there is no vagueness. It is clear that chaos has broken out. No longer is there an underlying principle of inviolable order, and the hills and trees are frightened. A horse rears and neighs in terror. Yet Adam and Eve still hope they are only dreaming.

The Holy Family is shown to us in a most delightful and unorthodox family group. Our Lady, wearing a brilliantly green frock, is hanging up washing in the garden. The child Jesus, playing at her feet, holds out a flower to her. Saint Joseph, in labourer's clothes, just stands and watches, resting on a spade and looking very solid and protective.

In *The Three Kings* we are given a beautifully devout group of brown people adoring in prayer, silence and awe. The magi are half afraid to offer their gifts, yet they are confident that they will not be refused. Our Lady looks at the Child restfully, and there is peace. This picture has a unity necessarily absent from some of the others which call for action or want to stir and wake us up. Here all of us forget our differences in our common love of the divine Child.

One feels rather ashamed of not having recognized at once why the