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Bertram Morris

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# ART AND SOCIETY

*Bertram Morris*

A MAJOR WAR, which is a symptom of a social revolution, affects every area of culture. We cannot expect art to be free from the effects of the cataclysmic upheaval. The disruption of peace-time action leaves art in a precarious position. At one extreme, art tends to become a refuge, a haven, from a world of action that knows only destruction and horror and misery. At the other, it tends to identify itself with the forces of destruction, but to hallow action by "hymns to the gods and songs in honor of virtuous men." The dilemma is untoward, for the artist cannot satisfactorily disjoint himself from the world and from the mass suffering, nor can he happily take to propagandizing, even in the symphonic version of echoing the virtues of the United Nations, the drums of war, the military band, and bombs dropping over Leningrad. The problem of the social function of art, which no doubt has always been with us, but now appears in more intense form, is easier to state than to resolve. I shall not offer a glib resolution: but to focus on some of the issues may help us better to understand a pervasive form of human activity.

The root difficulty may be traced to the age-old problems of what art is and of what the function of the critic is. The problems continually reappear, and precisely because they always reflect deep-seated interests and aspirations in the light of cultural developments that are never static. Our age is more and more becoming accustomed not to seek finalities; but certainly man must ever try to crystallize his attitudes towards things of importance. He always hopes that through his efforts things will come to make sense. In addressing ourselves to some problems of art and art criticism, we should like to assist in the process of orientation.

An ever-recurring and easily misleading theme in art is the siren of pleasure. That art pleases, that it has sensuous qualities which delight.

that it has forms which give enjoyment, is scarcely open to doubt. But aesthetic pleasure is only one dimension of a complex situation, and to insist upon it to the exclusion of all else not only distorts our conception of art, but also has social implications which are not too happy. Perhaps a Roger Fry, because he was more catholic than he desired to appear, could say that all he expects from a painting is the pleasure which is derived from the fine disposition of spatial volumes. But even Mr. Fry could not suppress his insights into a Rembrandt, insights which far outrun the matter of mere disposition of volumes. Aesthetic activity is not without its pleasure aspect, and I do not wish to minimize its importance; but it does not distinguish the peculiar character of art.

For our purposes it is better to concentrate upon art as a form of imaginative expression. Imagination suggests that the activity is human activity, that it flourishes only in the conscious experience of man. However much man may be physiologically conditioned—and to read some of the recent semantic criticism one would think that that is all there is to it—so far as he engages in aesthetic activity he must be aware of the developing potencies of sensuous material. Expression requires that the welter of sensuous material take on form, that it be ordered in satisfying perception. This gives to art at one and the same time a quality of insight and of a socially ordered structure. Coleridge speaks of it as the concrete beauty which is “the union of the shapely and the vital.” Without the vital it is unimaginative; without the shapely it is unexpressed or chaotic. Because art happily combines the two it is intelligible and meaningful.

Art thus grows in a culture and tells us something about that culture. To see what Greek humanism really means we should go to the Greeks' tragic poetry, their sculpturing, and their architecture. To see how the Middle Ages really effected a synthesis, however short-lived, we should go to the gothic cathedral. The concrete beauty, Greek, medieval, or any other, stands as verified testimony of the imaginative possibilities contained in cultures. Yet the insight is tenuous and fades as we try to separate form and content. This may well give us pause as to our conception of art and of criticism.

Borrowing a suggestion from Aristotle that may seem to be a platitude, we may say that art has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This would be a platitude if it were not so often contested. Its truth may seem obvious as regards the temporal arts, but what of the non-temporal or spatial arts? A little reflection should convince us that all the arts

both in creation and in appreciation are temporal. And surely no theory which omits the facts of both creation and appreciation can be on sound footing. The facts are sometimes neglected because the consummatory experience appears as the specious present. But I dare say the specious present would be neither specious nor present did it not implicitly refer back to the process by which it came to be. Though we may iterate that "A poem should not mean but be," yet being can be only because of the becoming by which it came to be. Our thought is that only through its qualitative development does a work of art determinately come to be.

Another seeming platitude about art, necessary but not unambiguous, deserves a word, namely, that a work of art has a "frame." To be sure, a thing must have a relatively substantial identity; and of the things we find in human experience art achieves this to a superlative degree. Yet both its beginning and its end stretch out in the continuity of human action and social culture, in consequence of which art has a context which is trans-aesthetic. It wells from Stygian sources, on which we are just beginning to get light, and it lives on in a culture in which it must be continually resurveyed. Traditional criticism has taken account of the one direction; the origins of the art-impulse have only recently been made the object of concerted study, especially by the Freudians.

Psychoanalysis has exploited the origins of art, and has been influential in giving rise to both art movements and to art criticism. We are familiar enough with the developments in Surrealism and its descent into the caverns of Dadaism; and more recently we have Joyce's excursion in *Finnegan's Wake*. In these cases the shapely has suffered from emphasis upon the vital, and to a vexing degree, order has given way to disorder. Criticism has kept pace with the quality of the works, and we are asked more and more to turn from art to the formless, blind, libidinous forces which rush to all quarters where overt activity has not repelled them. Pseudo-history, which looks only to chronology of events, though different in many ways from psychoanalysis, has been of the same disservice. Neither throws light on art, and both ask us to look away from art to irrelevant data. Fortunately, this type of criticism is fast being relegated to limbo.

A more enlightened form of criticism is more audibly asking us to look to the way in which art develops—how the beginning reaches the end through the middle. This form of criticism takes more seriously.

the dogma that a work of art has a frame and that criticism must not go beyond the frame. Here is an attempt to formulate the logic of art, and to analyze the way it achieves its individuality (unfortunately, sometimes confused with particularity and sometimes with universality). The problem is perplexing, for on the one hand, art is concrete and specific, and on the other, it has a universality or structure which makes it of more than passing moment. John Crowe Ransom, Arthur Mizener, and Yvor Winters, among others, have made some interesting and valuable studies in this field.

In his discussion of "Criticism as Pure Speculation,"<sup>1</sup> Mr. Ransom provocatively makes the distinction between logical structure (or the prose part of a poem) and the local texture (or that which specifically makes a poem poetic.) The distinction is, of course, not unlike the age-old distinction between form and content, but Mr. Ransom brings his distinction to life, and skillfully puts it to work. Within limits we may expect the analysis to be revealing, but where we may expect it to fall short is precisely in the structure-texture relation. The items of content make for the richness of a poem, but how are items to be analyzed except by enumeration? Enumerate the items and the determinate whole of a poem breaks up into independent atoms which destroy the integrity of the poem as a being. Mr. Ransom recognizes this and says, "The value of the poem is greater than the value of its parts: that is what the critic is up against."<sup>2</sup> Precisely! But then has the method of analysis really provided the drive by which the whole can be understood? A form which is contentless is no form and items cannot be stuffed into the Christmas pudding just because they are delicacies. If the figure were taken more seriously, the shortcomings of the approach would be more painfully apparent. Seemingly, the failing is the ever-present human failing of wanting to be specific. But the place to be specific is with what is by nature specific. Of course we do not question the fact that the poet dwells on things, lingers over them, and mulls them over; but these are breathing spells—"perches" as William James might call them, but perches to be taken in conjunction with "flights." A perch is both consummatory and anticipative. Because of the inherent dynamics of the situation, "items" do not do justice to the movement in art, and items never can make up the whole. Obviously Mr. Ransom is giving an over-simplified version,

<sup>1</sup> In *The Intent of the Critic*, edited by Donald A. Stauffer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

and his theoretical statement is more inexact than the method he actually uses in practice.

The difficulty in analyzing the arts is to achieve a method which respects the cumulative process by which and through which the thing comes to rest as possessing intrinsic meaning. In poetry the special difficulty is in analyzing the metaphor. In an admirable study in practical criticism Mr. Mizener grapples with the problem of figurative language in Shakespeare's sonnets. He emphasizes the movement of poetic language by which the sonnet develops figuratively, provocatively, and precisely, especially through the use of the compound metaphor. He writes that the fusion of "two meanings brought about by the compound metaphor is richer and finer than the sum of them which would be all the poem could offer if the two metaphors did not co-exist."<sup>3</sup> The fact of fusion is recognized, even if the manner of the fusion is not quite susceptible of discursive analysis. Analysis is always easier where a work of art fails than where it succeeds. This is only to be expected, and precisely because failure marks the falling apart of things instead of their fusion. Thus Mr. Yvor Winters can succeed remarkably in analyzing recent experimental modes, but because Mr. Winters is discussing the defects of these modes.<sup>4</sup>

The critic must struggle to be objective and impersonal, and to do justice to the work in its own terms—to ascertain the logic of art. Attempts to apply semantic analysis have not been slow in forthcoming. Though the semanticists recognize a difference between the logic of fact and the logic of art,<sup>5</sup> their efforts have not produced any very conspicuous concrete results. Their hope is, of course, that the future will bring the results. One may with reason remain skeptical of what the future will bring. My own view is that semantics will not prove to be the panacea, because a work of art is always individual, and the individual is constituted by the unique feeling which comes to expression. Semantics reduces the individual to the status of the particular, and then treats it in generalized terms. But surely the essence of art is the unique perception it realizes, which increases our insight; and insight as immediate experience cannot be supplanted by scientific

<sup>3</sup> "The Structure of Figurative Language in Shakespeare's Sonnets," *The Southern Review*, V (Spring, 1940), 732.

<sup>4</sup> See *Primitivism and Decadence* (New York: Arrow Editions, 1937), especially Ch. 2, "The Experimental School in American Poetry."

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Charles Morris' "Science, Art, and Technology," *Kenyon Review*, I (Autumn, 1939), and his "Aesthetics and the Theory of Signs," *Journal of Unified Science*, 1939. Also the long, semantical discussion, *The Nature of Literature*, by Thomas Clark Pollack (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942).

treatment. The logic is the logic of imaginative perception, which must not be confused with the logic of techniques. Art may give way to draughtsmanship, but then it is no longer art.

We can be grateful to the critic whose intent is concretely to understand the art-work in its own terms, and who persistently shuts his eyes and ears to the bilge which is written and spoken about art. The critic who refuses to take the whole universe for his province may better enlighten us on specific things. Such a critic apparently takes seriously the intent of the artist and tries to make it his intent. Yet the limitation cannot but be disturbing, for the frame of the art-work is not defined by mechanical or merely temporal devices.

This raises the perplexing and embarrassing question of what the "end" of art is. We should like to think of it as some determinate entity of quality. This suggestion, however, rears the ugly head of art for art's sake. On the other hand we cannot remain content, despite all the recent agitation, with the alternative that art should serve the purpose of propaganda. With some hesitation, I should like to suggest that the issue has been misconceived. Is not the artist's real intent to find a way of coming to terms with his world? If art is not a cloistered activity shut up in one's brain cells, neither is it an exhortation to act for God or country. Artists are human beings who live in a social milieu and usually have keener sensitivities to the qualities of their culture than the layman. They are not social reformers in the narrow sense but moral teachers in the sense of displaying more clearly their insights into the world of culture. One cannot, of course, be indifferent to the formalist's protest to this view. But at least to mitigate his protest, it is not unfair to observe that formalism itself flourishes only in a mature culture, and that the critic who looks only or primarily for formalistic values has developed sensitivities which, even if esoteric, themselves emerged from that culture.

Though a work of art has a relatively determinate being, that such a being is entirely determinate is far from certain. The very fact that appreciators—and critics—must read a work in their own way, that they always find something less, something different, and something more in the work than does the artist, should give us pause. In any event, we have the right to know what the critic's own metaphysical prepossessions are, so that we can evaluate his criticism accordingly. Once we perceive the significance of the enlarged frame of the work of art, we may with reason assess such issues as escapism, the art of protest and

revolt, decadence in art, and myriads of other not trivial issues.<sup>6</sup> In the expanded context a work of art may lose some of its purity of structural form, but in forcing us to wrestle with the live problems of literature and culture it cannot but gain in moral significance, and in aiding the development of our own implicit philosophical orientations.

When art is viewed in the welter of cultural issues, it is always present art. The art of the past becomes alive not by our ignoring our own culture and living in the past, but by our taking account of our culture in understanding the past in terms of it. History is pregnant and full only as we begin at the only place we can with conscience begin, namely, with the contemporary, and read the past in terms of it. This is so whether it be political or social history or art-history. For this reason history and art can always be brought to life. History is rewritten and art reinterpreted, not so much because of the detailing of more facts or because we become more "impersonal," but because we live through new problems and have new orientations; and history and art consequently mean something different to us. We must not overlook the fact, also, that the present is always a new present. It is always transitional, though some times more so than others.

The great artist helps us to understand. The philosophical poet gives us an orientation, not as logical dogma, but as pervasive attitudes built in the fabric of experience. Technical philosophy, as Norman Foerster has pointed out, may take us too far from the concrete and sensuous, it may belabor the literary, and it may be too closely systematic; but the philosophical must be operative in our urge to come to terms with things. The philosophical is derived from the ingrained attitudes which are built from experience, and it in turn helps to constitute a culture as opposed to a cult. It helps us to become at home in our world. Perhaps the greatest bar to satisfactory art-analysis is the failure to see art in the context in which it flourishes. Perhaps the more clearly we understand art the more clearly we understand the society in which art moves and lives and has its being. No cavalier solution will remove the difficulties, but the problem is challenging and is not unworthy of sustained effort.

<sup>6</sup> *Vide* the admirable study on "Aspects of the Relations between Philosophy and Literature," by Joseph W. Cohen in *University of Colorado Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 117-167. Professor Cohen has done an outstanding piece of work, especially in discussing a writer's relation to his age, including both the writer who accepts and the writer who rejects his age.