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THE PROBLEM OF REALISM AND ABSTRACTION IN MODERN ART

If forced to declare his philosophical position, the modern artist, whether realist or abstractionist, would be prepared to admit that what we call "reality" is a chain of images invented by man. There are philosophers, no doubt, who would not agree with him, but for the artist the significance of art depends on the assumption that reality is man-made, and the maker is the image-maker, the poet. Reality accords with the images the artist makes, and ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ these images derive their validity from such characteristics as integrity, self-consistency, viability, pragmatic satisfaction, aesthetic satisfaction, etc.

An age, a civilisation, may accept a particular series of images as concordant, as expressive of its needs. In that way - for images, which are personal images, beget reflections and imitations in other minds - in that way a style is created; in that way a religion is created; in that way a science is created. A style, a religion, a science - each is a self-consistent, coherent image-series. The mistake - a mistake which mankind makes with tragic frequency - is to assume that a particular series of images is eternally real. The reality changes with our circumstances.

In the circumstances of our own time is there any particular reason why the artist should adopt one or the other of the various types of imagery or symbolism represented by the terms realism and abstraction?

In the Soviet Union there is, of course, the very good reason that realism is enforced, with extinction as an artist as the alternative. I do not think that this prejudice in favour of socialist realism is quite so stupid as the Russians themselves make it seem. There must be in that country a vague realisation of the existential dilemma of modern man, and a fear that the solutions which seek the creation of a reality in Art or God, offer an escape from the reality which should be Stalin, or the State. It is not a style of art which is feared by the communist dictatorship: it is art itself, in any form forceful enough to compel the allegiance of men's minds. Accordingly, they have striven to reduce art itself to insignificance.

I believe that the same iconoclastic tendency is present in certain phases of modern thought not confined to the Soviet Union. Among theologians, for example, there is always the recurrent fear that Art might in some sense replace God, and ever since Kierkegaard formulated his Either/Or, these religious philosophers have been busy telling us that a reliance on the reality created by the artist leads ultimately to despair. That, as I see it, is the attitude of an age that has lost all contact with the actuality of art - an age that can only conceive art as idea, and is utterly divorced from the creative experience, even in the humble form of handicraft.

Personally I reject the Either/Or of Kierkegaard, or any theory of life or ontology which insists on a single and exclusive reaction to experience. There are various modes of understanding and various constructions to express this understanding. Why should we assume that

life, which has evolved into such a diversity of creatures, should be expressed in a single category of understanding? The way of art and the way of religion, and equally the way of science or dialectical materialism, are equally valid alternatives, and the only question, in any comparative evaluation, is whether a particular construction furthas the continuance and intensification of life itself. It follows that the imposition of any particular system of reality on any particular society, or the mere prejudice in favour of any particular system, is due to a kind of stupidity, to a lack of tolerance in the presence of life itself. Any construction which has positive meaning for the individual, or for the community, or for life as a whole, has value, has meaning, has relevance. It is what Richard Woltereck, in his Ontologie des Lebendigen, calls a "mode of resonance" in face of the incomprehensibility of existence, and there is certainly more than one such mode of resonance - not only "dread" (as Heidegger supposes), but also amazement, joy, curiosity, affirmation - what Nietzsche called a "yea-saying".

Various as the forms of these resonances are, they may perhaps be arranged along a polar axis, with transcendental metaphysics at one end and an intense self-awareness of physical vitality at the other end. It is along the same axis that we can place abstraction and realism in art. But again, the choice is not imposed on the individual artist. The axis exists within the individual artist, if only he can become conscious of it.

I would like to propose, therefore, a theory of reciprocal tensions, which tensions, whether we call them realism-abstraction, conscious-

unconscious, life-death, are expressive of the total world-process. The consciousness of the artist alternates between the two poles of such a tension. One pole may be left unexpressed, and then the artist is wholly realistic, or wholly abstract. But it seems reasonable to suppose that a better balance, if only in the mental personality of the artist, will be achieved by the open expression of both polar extremes of expression.

Somewhere in this psychic shuttle, this alternation of the positive and negative forces of life, freedom intervenes - the freedom to create a new reality. Only on that assumption can we explain any form of evolutionary development in human consciousness, any kind of spiritual growth. A novelty-creating freedom exists by virtue of the intensity generated by aesthetic awareness; an evolutionary advance emerges from the act of expression.

What wider philosophical implications these facts of aesthetic experience may have is a question for open discussion. But if I may conclude with a personal point of view, I would confess that it has always seemed to me that the opposition which we make in critical theory between reason and romanticism, and in wider philosophical terms between pragmatism and idealism, cannot be resolved and should not be resolved. It is merely the difference of the particular resonance expressed in that moment when, naked and comfortless in the abyss of nothingness, we question the meaning and the nature of existence. We answer as answer we can - that is to say, according to our particular psycho-physical constitution. We answer with wonder and we answer with dread; and for

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each answer there is a separate language, a separate style or form. But the poetry is in the freedom with which we answer; the art is the affirmation, the acceptance and the intensification of life itself.

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