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Thème 1

THE RELATIONS OF A WORK OF ART TO THE ARTISTIC CULTURE  
OF THE TIME

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It is generally agreed that great works of art are eternal. No one would deny that the works of Homer, Phidias or Dante are less vital today than they were during the lifetime of these great men. It is true also that artists who are too intimately associated with their own period or who have received complete recognition in their lifetime have never really achieved greatness. One could hardly do better than instance Boucher or Metastasio.

The problem is to decide if the really universal artists are such because they are detached from their epoch or because they best exemplify that epoch. In general the supreme artists seem to be independent of fashion and we admire them for their sense of form (what one might describe as their essential beauty) and we find that their unifying quality is the relationship of their minds rather than some common quality in the content of their work. This affinity of great artists has been called the classic spirit in the sense that the classic is the supreme quality. One speaks of Phidias and Raphael as possessing a perfection which places them in a world apart, in spite of the fact that Raphael's forms are based on a style deriving from that of Perugino rather than from Phidias.

On the other hand if we consider the perfection of Cezanne we are forced to recall the world of France between 1865 and 1905 with all its implications, political, moral, literary and musical. The perfection of Cezanne is the result of the creative imagination of the painter but it is also the culminating point of a precise moment in French civilisation.

If as a result of our experience of Cezanne we reflect on the supreme quality of Raphael and Phidias, we can readily perceive that their astonishing achievement derives from the creative imagination as well as from their background. Consequently the everlasting quality of Phidias and Raphael is something of which we have need today and of which our successors will have need - an ambience which might be called their civilisation.

In regard to Dante the spirit of his work lives, where as we have forgotten his ideal of an Empire. But the ideal of an Empire was not the essential matter of Dantes poetry - this was rather the

presence on the earth of Christ the Redeemer, the noble endowment of the religious spirit with human grace, the resumption of confidence in the creative impulse of man as well as many other things which constitute the terrain in which the creative imagination of Dante took wing.

On the other hand if we think of the invention of Cezanne, despised and ignored by the public during his lifetime, in contrast to Bougereau with all his worldly success, we see clearly that it is Cezanne who has expressed the character of his world and that Bougereau has said nothing. One must search therefore for a new method of assessing the eternal quality of an artists work and his relation to the life of his time, lest one might come to consider form as though it were detached from life, shut up as it were in the ivory tower of an academy.

This new method would be in my opinion the capacity possessed by all great artists to create a personal style in which the germane form arises out of the inner being, while at one and the same moment the inner being gives new life to that form.