

THEME 2

ART CRITICISM AND PHILOSOPHY

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Truth, as any epoch perceives it, is stated in terms of the intellect by philosophy and in terms of the imagination by art.

Obviously philosophy may include an element of imagination as art may include an element of intellect. But an imaginative philosopher like Plato remains primarily a philosopher and an intellectual artist like Poussin remains primarily an artist.

Before we come to the question of art criticism in relation to philosophy and to art itself, we may ask, at the risk of seeming not only to digress but to digress into mere dialectic and possible casuistry, whether in point of time the philosophy of an epoch precedes the art, the intellect the imagination, or vice versa. Or whether they coincide.

At last year's Congress I suggested that the philosophic key to Picassism might, perhaps, be found in Nietzsche and that Impressionism could be linked up with the secularist philosophy of pre-revolutionary France.

At the 1948 Congress when a delegate said that "...l'intelligence (de la critique) vient loin en arri re" (de l'oeuvre d'art) I was provoked to point out that the imaginative expression of the spirit of the Middle Age through architecture and the arts subsidiary to it only began when the movement of the intelligence, Scholasticism, was already far advanced with Abelard and St. Bernard; and similarly that the High Renaissance began with the thinkers since it was the study of Plato's philosophy and the foundation of the Platonic Academy in Florence that provided the artists with a fresh stimulus and a new point of departure.

I might also have pointed out that the great age of Early Christian art came after, not before, the restatement of Neoplatonic philosophy by Saint-Augustine (died 393); that the Hellenistic movement comes after, not before, Plato; and that the earlier lines on which Greek philosophy was to develop were clearly perceptible before the age of Phidias.

If these facts have significance, it would seem that a philosophy which has taken definitive or quasi-definitive shape tends to give a direction to artistic tendencies.

Recently, reading Burckhardt for the first time I noted a passage in which he says that each artistic movement is preceded by a corresponding movement in the general culture of the age. But I do not admire Burckhardt to the point where I think I am necessarily right because my processes of thought have led me to conclusions somewhat similar to his.

As to art criticism in the more specific sense : all origins are mysterious, and if the critics is incapable of explaining the artistic impulse and artistic creation, so is everybody else, including the artist himself. All the calculation in the world and all the reasoning in history have not succeeded in providing an explanation or providing a recipe according to which they may be produced. The origins of the critical instinct are just as mysterious. We know, of course, that a man of some sensibility who also has some facility in the use of words can learn to distinguish and to

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write about the plastic qualities, composition, drawing, colour, perspective, atmosphere, etc., in the works of the artists of the past. But most of that is only critical journalism just as most academic painting is only artistic journalism. Even in critical journalism, however, there are degrees of perception and of self-expression. And then as a crown to the hierarchy there are the free, the creative, critical intelligences. The obvious examples are Baudelaire who could recognise and interpret the qualities of great art in the works of Delacroix and Huysmans who could recognise and interpret in words the qualities of great art in the words of Cezanne.

It has to be noted that, in both cases, they were not merely looking back at something an artist in a medium other than their own literary medium had achieved. They were, themselves, innovators in thought, in their attitude to vital truth, and their appreciation of Delacroix and Cezanne meant, not discipleship, but recognition and public affirmation of the fact that imaginative genius in a less intellectually conscious art than literature, was moving in the same direction as they, (Baudelaire and Huysmans) were moving. Baudelaire the critic and Huysmans the critic were, in fact, helping the art of painting in their different epochs to become conscious of its own goal. They were not "loin en arriere". They were, rather, pioneers, clearing the road in front of Delacroix and Cezanne.

I do not really wish to insist too much on the casuistical question as to whether reason has priority over imagination or imagination over reason. Both may well be regarded simply as servants, twin servants, of something greater than themselves which is the Spirit of Truth. But it is important to get rid of the inferiority complex from which, ever since the triumph of romanticism, the critical intelligence has seemed to suffer.