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Theme I

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

In the résumé which has been circulated, I suggested that the relativity of values, which we all admit to be the crux of this question, was due to the intrusion, in any period, of the distorting element which we agree to call the *Zeitgeist*.

The contributions which have been made to the discussion by my colleagues seem to me to emphasize the importance of this aspect of the problem.

Whether "eternal values" exist or not, in the ethical realm or in the aesthetic realm, is a philosophical question which we are not competent to decide. But in our own realm of aesthetic values we know that each age has its own definition of what is beautiful; and if the aesthetic value of "beauty" is denied, then we are ready with a substitute value which we may call "vitality" or "realism".

The values of art are subject to variations in esteem, and what is for the moment fashionable may seem eternal. There are no values in art which have not, at one time or another, been challenged. But this general condition of relativity should not blind us to the fact that there are certain values to which the world keeps returning.

These values may be few, but they are fundamental. I would mention, as examples, the geometrical proportions which are common to forms of organic life as well as to the forms of art - the so-called Divine Proportion, etc., - and those qualities of harmony and serenity/which mankind returns after every period of storm and strife. If these values are regarded as eternal, then the variations may be ascribed to certain distortions of a temporary nature.

The origin of such distortions must no doubt be sought in the economic sphere, which is the most unstable element in society. The cultural values of a dominant class/always correspond to their social status.

In period of social change, a hiatus exists for at least a generation between society and culture. A rising élite in the economic sense brings with it a low level of taste - perhaps a non-existent taste. It is not at ease in manners, speech, clothes, or any form of expressive possession. Hence for a time this new social class, its own taste uncertain or unformed, will attempt "to buy culture". The middleman intervenes. He exploits a favourable situation. Dealers have their "hunches" or intuitions; fashions are more or less deliberately created to feed a new market. In that situation the Zeitgeist is born - a spirit, an illusion, ^{for which} the new élite will fall.

It follows that the Zeitgeist is not a phenomenon susceptible of rational explanation. At a certain moment there exists a certain conjunction of events - of wants, desires, objects to satisfy these wants and desires; middlemen to act as catalysts

in this portentous situation. We might adopt the terminology of Jungian psychology. The collective unconscious is in need of certain stimuli, of certain releases of tension. A significant pattern exists in the social psyche - a synchronicity of otherwise discrete phenomena. The Zeitgeist finds expression in certain expressive forms, in works of art ~~which~~^{that} are suddenly fashionable, and ~~which~~^{that} no power of reason or good taste can prevent from becoming fashionable. The likelihood is that even we, men of good taste that we are, will be deceived.

Moral

What is the moral of all this - what lesson of humility should we learn from a sober realization of the facts of history. Two, I think -

Firstly, that the fashionable is always to be suspect - the fame of the greater part of the most fashionable artists of any period does not survive that period.

Secondly, which is the contrary proposition, that the greater part of the best artists of any period have a posthumous fame out of all proportion to their contemporary fame.

Finally, in view of these general considerations, can we venture to characterize the features of our own Zeitgeist? I will give you my own diagnosis, under four headings:

1. EGOISM - the prevailing subjectivism of all forms of art.

2. GREGHISM - by which I mean excessive excitation of the sensibility, the absence of serenity.

5. ECLECTICISM - the tendency to make, both of poetry and of painting, a mythological salad. I might instance, without any critical intention, poems like "The Waste Land", paintings like "Guernica", the theatre of Giraudoux and Cocteau.

4. ESCAPISM - which is the ~~savagery~~^{tendency to evade} of the human dilemma, the tragic sense of life.

But it is easier to describe the general characteristics of our Zeitgeist than to decide which particular artists best represent it. In any case, it would be an invidious task, which I do not propose to undertake.