

The International Role of Art in Revolutionary Times

WILLIAM ERNEST HOCKING

What is lost in the "modern" is not Romantic, nor the Classic, but the Eternal.

IN TIMES of revolutionary change, art has a role of special importance easily overlooked even by the artist himself, a role which calls for a shaking-out of our current views of the nature of art. In broad terms, art is not a copying of the world, nor yet a fantasia on its themes, but a quiet remaking of the world, likely to conceal its proud power under the guise of free fancy.

Art is many things at once: labor and play, the element of aspiration built into utility, of form built into function, of infinitude built into the finite, of the beyond-self built into the living selfhood of things—not as extraneous decor but as the fulfillment of their being. Art is the liveliness of life discerned within the mere factuality of life, lending to those facts the assurance of their meaning. Considering the given situation as the taskmaster we are bound to obey, art is the second mile ("go with him twain") we deliberately add to the mile we are compelled to go—the mile freely added not as a boast, but as a promise of a futuri-

ty in command of circumstances, not their servant.

It is the glory of man's spirit that in the midst of misery and confusion and revolt, art lifts its head, not to deny the evil but to share it; and not alone to report the misery, nor yet to denounce or escape it, but to transfigure it. An art that merely reports or re-enacts the human load of footlessness, dismay, or despair—as what we call modern art tends to do—may be a loyal art, refusing romantic honors to the headless powers of the time. But stopping at that point, it risks becoming itself a *headless art*, refusing to enter on the uniquely responsible function of creation—that element of world-shaping purpose which silently pervades even the care-free play of human imagination, by virtue of a "depth-psychology" mistraced by Freud.

For the true artist, the world always begins at the moment of his work. Art is the infinitely recurring rebirth of life through the free man's dream, and of the world, through life.

Art begins in something less than art, perhaps simply in the animal caper that proclaims caprice, the flourish of limb or voice that turns into dance or song—but always the more-than-necessary, and always with

a subconscious tribute to life running deeper than the play. From the beginning the steps of civilization have been marked by the signs of joy-in-form with which man has lingered over his most compulsory labors, as if to extract from them their tribute to his freedom.

That there is a strand of economic determinism in history no one need doubt: human life is inserted among necessities as tree-roots among stones. But it is the tree, not the stone, that shapes the foliage and the flower: it is humanity, not economy, that dwells on "finishing" its tools and weapons with painstaking ornament, and lends the note of design to its hard-wrought shelters as well as to palace, presidium, temple, and tomb.

Hence it is that the most open book to the soul of a people is the element of "style" in its living quarters, its settlement-planning, its architecture.

Man climbs out of barbarism by way of an accepted dominance signalized in some outstanding structure expressive of "rule" but at the same time of a common desire for unity and joy-in-order. Even underneath the grueling compulsions that built tower and pyramid for the despot, there grew a sense which the despot could neither give nor take away—a sense that "This is ours, not his alone": the finished work became a point of community pride, a tribute not to him but to the human spirit.

When civilization arrives at a nation of free men, the formal centrality in community-planning is not expunged—there is a town hall and a steeple in the New England village. But there is also the homestead. Privacy, as home-right, is built into home-art: not everyone can enter everywhere and always; there is an institution, the "invitation": and this moral factor of controlled association calls on art to embody itself, as in the swinging door, the "yard," the private garden, the hedge or fence, the side-

walk. . . . Leaping forward into new East Asia, free Vietnam seeking to embody in property its conception of individual dignity, hopes to secure to every family its "basic economy," its own house and lot! The task of art here becomes formidable, as industrialism looms ahead, and with it, the apartment house: can its advent be postponed, or can the apartment be subdued to the needs of the human spirit? Miss Ehrenfest tried it in Russia.

It is precisely the Industrial Revolution which most clearly illustrates the power of the human will-to-form as lying beyond "function." Feudal and post-feudal Europe, inheriting Classical motifs in architecture and city-design, reworked them into a "Western" visual language for the new-built cities. The Industrial Revolution came as a triumph of mechanism and at the same time as a defeat of human solidarity. Nothing more effectively damned its early character than the "satanic mills," the deadening identity of living quarters in the mill-towns, and the accompanying murder of landscape beauty in Wales, England, Belgium. The industrial economies of today have profited by the lesson. Industry in America has long since begun to exercise a decent concern for human dignity in the homes of its workers, as well as in its sites and factory-design. Not yet a high achievement (though Joseph Pennell found occasional themes for pictorial art in factory scenes), but a distinct step out of the temper of exploit, a step signalized by a stroke of conscience, as in the ill-fated town of Pullman (1884), intended as an ideal workers' community.

The distinctive spirit of our capitalist civilization, however, expresses (and confesses) itself less in the actual areas of production than in its great office-centers. Something of the dominance of business in America may be gathered from the skyline of New York, not untouched by grace and

beauty in its older structures, expressive of a pride-of-power willing at once to outrank and to protect the libraries, churches, colleges, the Town Hall, the Metropolitan Museum . . . which cherish a quieter dignity in the shadow of the skyscrapers.

It is a magnificent skyline; and one wonders what would become of it if the varied peaks of those great towers were replaced by squared-off ends like that of the bleak box-housing of the U.N. Secretariat. The notable thing about present American experiments in architecture under the influence of Functionalism and the *Bauhaus*, is that their "monotonous repetition of cellular façades cloaked with vitreous indifference"—if it expresses any social spirit whatever—is far more symbolic of a *communist* ideal all-alikeness than of a society prizing personality and individual difference!

On the other hand, when the Soviets wish to set up an impressive building, they do not hesitate to borrow architectural themes from classic Europe, as the new university in Moscow may witness. Each pays the other involuntary homage!

The Functionalist commonly forgets the most widely used function of a building. He rightly thinks of the functions of the insiders, the occupants, daily users of the internal spaces. If these are numbered by the hundreds, what of those who daily have to *see* the building, numbered often by the thousands? For them, the structure has a further function which neither it nor they can escape: it must visibly indicate its *raison d'être* in that place and among those surroundings, its role in the community. It must do this by way of the silent speech of form and symbol. It has no right either to the idle luxury of saying nothing (as if, like a movable cracker-box, it could *be*, without being a *member* of any specific environment), or by strident egoism of design crying "Look at me and forget all else."

Hence it is that a competent observer like Sir Albert Richardson, former president of the Royal Academy (whose words I have above quoted), could say that while "fifty years ago America led the world . . . in civic art . . . the present state of architecture in the United States, and indeed throughout the world, reveals soulful despair." Sir Albert believes this guideless period destined to pass.¹

There are indeed reasons for considering it a temporary phase. Present novelties in skeletal styling and geometrical virtuosity are due in part to developments in engineering and in available materials whose notable capacities have rightly stimulated large-scale experimentation, with natural temptations to extravagance of conception (as in cantilever-projections intended to startle, or spiral ramps expanding skyward). The misfortune is that astonishment is a fading emotion, essentially barren. It is precisely the engineering precocity of these structures, and their admirable durability, that ensures a long toll of public suffering under their defiance of responsible community membership and meaning.

But in this defiance, which is also partly "despair," architecture is not alone. It is but one illustration of a laming common to all contemporary arts, defeating their world-service at a moment of the world's greatest need. We must enlarge our enquiry into the sources of this laming.

I RAISE THE question whether the present phase in all the fine arts inclining to assume the label "modern"—including music, poetry, fiction, and the graphic arts, together with drama and the screen—is not in the main a departure, especially in U.S.A., from the sound instinct of the nation. And at the same time, whether it is not a *natural* departure, whose motive can be understood and thereby put on the way to remedy.

Is it not due essentially to *an impression of failure in the fundamental assumptions of our civilization*, a failure so radical as to require shaking off all prepossessions and conventions in order to *renew one's sense of being*, from which alone the work of art can be initiated? The world-turmoil cannot fail to bring with it so wide a loss of order and predictable circumstance that *no art can today bear to speak simply in terms of beauty or affirmation*. Art must find human experience where it is: in an era of hardness, art must speak for the hard. In sympathy for confusion, modern art must echo confusion. It thus assumes the first half of the artist's task, that of knowing the burden, in order to prepare for the second half—that of lifting the burden. Has “modern” art perhaps simply failed to reach its second half?

As of today, all human life stands in the shadow of the cruel and the meaningless. The quest for sense in the world-process encounters a blank factuality nowhere better expressed than in the work of Sartre and Camus: it is, they report, “The Absurd” in which human existence is set. Man is subjected to the pressure of a faceless universe, silent as to his Whence or Whither. If he feigns to hear voices from within, they can be the voices only of arbitrary powers, tempting him to equally arbitrary treatment of his fellows, whether through exploit, or war. Whereas for those who hear no voices, believe no gods, and yet refuse exploit, revolution promising violent relief proves deceptive, driven as it is to replace tyranny by tyranny. Camus rejects faith, and equally rejects Nihilism: he rejects revolution and equally rejects exploit; for he has a new answer to the exploiter—a personal revolt, which asserts equality with the tyrant and restores the solidarity of mutual respect. But how can the spirit of personal revolt become a world-force able to curb or dominate the “collective

passions” driving mankind to desperate action? Here Camus sees the authentic function of art, the sole available curative agency that can reach the minds of men with a speed and on a scale commensurate with that of the ills that menace them. In his great work, *The Rebel*, he asserts the mission of art to be addressed to the present world malady—nothing less.

“When the passions of the time put the fate of the whole world at stake, creation (the function of art) wishes (and is called upon) to dominate the whole of destiny.”²

This analysis might seem a pure extravagance, were we not witnesses in our own day of the instantaneous uniting force, across the deepest chasms of “collective passion,” of a notable musical event in Moscow, or of a ballet, or of a literary masterpiece, or for that matter of the art-element in the near-universal devotion of scientists to the community of truth, as in the Geophysical Year—itself a form of the creative passion invoked by Camus.

To generalize his meaning, let us say that the mission of art is the *Redemption of the Absurd*, overcoming the irrational brute-fact-aspect of existence, not by legality nor by other-worldly hopes, but by the immediate attraction of a vision of human nobility in creating solidarity. The mission of art is to evoke images that universally persuade, and thus create the will to unite.

The power of art in the political arena has never been more highly rated, unless by Plato, who paid the poets of his day the oblique compliment of wishing to exclude them from his ideal Republic, or by Confucius, who declared of the music of his day that there were sounds that dispose men to fair conduct and others that dispose them to disorder: both recognized that there is such a thing as bad art, which can undo the best work of lawmakers. Tolstoi, the artist, would excommunicate art: and the socialists from Saint-Simon onward

sought to control art in the interest of social progress. This sense of danger is an admission of its power. But Camus sees clearly that while art, for every reformer, is on trial, it can only exist as free, never as the instrument of a specific polity or diplomacy. As the voice of human hope, art precedes diplomacy, and makes it possible.

It is Friedrich Schiller who most clearly sees art in its historic efficiency. In his *Lectures on Aesthetic Education*, he comments on what he considered the failure of the French Revolution.³ Writing in 1793, all he could see of the outcome of 1789 was that a great attempt to gain Liberty and Fraternity had resulted in a new barbarity and terrorism (as if anticipating Camus' judgment on revolution as fated to beget a new tyranny). Schiller took definite issue with Kant's prescription, namely, to "subordinate the senses," the natural impulses and passions, to reason and law, as an ideal Napoleon might have done, and as the actual Napoleon hoped to do while serving his own ambition. As Schiller saw, "subordination" is not the word. For civilization is not a subduing of impulse: it is a *harmonizing of impulse and reason*. This harmony, he held, is the precise achievement of art: art alone can educate mankind, for only art can act on feelings directly.

Schiller and Camus see art in its most complete scope. To educate is even more than to cure discord; though the curing Camus calls for is perhaps the severer task. For both, the question arises, who or what will educate the artists?

For while this heavy leaning on art for the civilizing and healing movements of history does not rate art too high it does make art *unduly self-sufficient*.

It is wholly right in holding cultural advance to be due to a force of attraction, not solely to compulsion such as economic necessity: the pull and the push commonly act together. But the pull, the prefigured

goal of the striving intrinsic to human life, is not a creature of the artist's imagination: it is first of all a trait of reality present in experience to all men, felt by the artist as member of the race, and hence incorporated by him in symbols he could know to be universal.

For the reality we immediately feel is not blank "sensation:" it is also *incentive*. Let me venture—as an essay in "depth psychology"—to describe your nuclear awareness of being: there is a life-pulse, a biological directive like Bergson's *élan vital*; but more than that; more, too, than Whitehead's primordial "lure" (so akin to that *ewig Weibliche* of Goethe which "draws us onward"). There is at once a persuasion and a summons, a promise and a task, a sense of destiny and a duty: if you like, a female and a male element, a Yin and a Yang. The Chinese have a remarkable name for it, *Ming*, the "Appointment of Heaven." *Art is a response to the incentive* of this reality as directly felt.

What Schiller and Camus alike neglect is the truth that art is derivative—a response rather than pure origination. It is a creative response, because its proposal is clothed in imagery devised by the artist. Art, let us say, is a creative response to a felt purposive factor in the world-process as always present.

If, as I put the matter many years ago, religion is the "Mother of the arts,"⁴ we can understand the historical circumstance that the arts are the first language of religion: myth and song, drama and dance, temple and tomb, sculpture and painting, yes, and the primitive laws and sciences as well . . . all appear first as attendants upon the world spirits, and only later fight their way to independence and maturity. And in many ways, the arts remain the most natural, freest, least dogmatic expressions of faith. The poetry of the world not only precedes its philosophy but in many ways re-

mains the most vital expression of our metaphysical sense.

Art must always be free to play, partly because the real demands the widest variety of imagery for its full truth: one might almost venture the paradox that the play of art is too serious for the superficialities of analysis. What Rilke said of his early master, Rodin, touches the essential purport of art: "For him, making a portrait meant seeking eternity in a face, that fragment of the eternal with which that person took part in the great process of eternal things . . . an effort at holding the ultimate court of justice!" And the beginning of *doing* justice, man's creative task adding to the creative work of the world-power.

It may seem at first sight an inversion of the true functions to define the province of art as a type of *justice* ulterior to that of the courts. Yet consider a work like Tolstoi's *Resurrection*, or—to leap into the present moment—like Cozzens' *The Just and the Unjust*. The Greek tragedy was at once play and judgment on the human situation. But come directly to the essential point; consider the words of the ancient story of the woman taken in adultery, "Neither do I condemn thee"—the story itself a work of art, whatever its relation to actual happening: the mind of the race continues to be stirred by it to a deeper justice, because touching a more germinal level of reality-in-the-moral-life. It is, in brief, the region in which art and religion refuse separation: together they carry philosophy nearer to its goal.

And to see this as the great opportunity in our day of fiction, the drama, the screen, is to groan over the waste, whether of the writers or the critics, spending themselves on the trivia of sophisticated psychology. They are misled, no doubt, by the two prevalent learned superstitions of our time—buzzing close to truth—the Freudian unconscious, and the Existentialist being-

without-essence. The impact of *Dr. Zhivago* should open their eyes to the fact that art is an act of attempted justice, and in its responsible exercise stirs the ultimate issues even when it cannot decide them. Stirs the statesman as well!

It becomes clear that the apparent irrelevance of art to the fateful decisions in public affairs is deceptive. For policy must win response from the faiths of a people; and the faiths rest on what they intuitively trust to, as the ruling powers of history. If Charles Malik, president of U.N. Assembly, is right in saying that "the Western mind has . . . been softened and undermined from within and without . . . losing faith in itself . . . seeking other gods than those which have so faithfully protected and nurtured it" . . . and that "the deepest thing at stake is its faith in its values and its ability to justify and defend them" . . . the fault is not solely in our thinking: it is in our seeing and our feeling, in the groping incertitude which, shared by the artist, he, the artist, is unable to correct.

But let us be clear that the fault is not in his "modernism," nor the cure in reversion to an earlier era, whether of style, or of faith. What is lost in the "modern" is not the certitudes of yesterday, not the Romantic, nor the Classic, but the Eternal. It is the peculiar advantage of art, that surrendering the exactitudes of science and the fixities of theology for the elastic imagery of metaphor and myth, it is able through its localisms and its periods to *mean* the changeless and universal. It is the undefined identity of all the faiths. It is, as Plotinus says of beauty, "recognized by the soul as something long familiar, arresting and beckoning"—a tie to the timeless, a tie without bonds. It is for this reason that "works of art" never lose their speech. It is not yesterday that is better than today; it is vision and truth that are better than blindness and pretence.

HOWEVER WE define it, the world function of art is momentous, and the more fateful, because its power can only be exercised in responsible freedom. A dictated art loses at once the magic of universality. This does not mean that art has no discipline of its own, and that unbridled frivolity can hold the secret of the artist's sway. That secret is lost the moment the artist identifies his whim with his message; it is lost to any public which—as the U.S.A. now tends to do—allies its arts primarily with holiday-from-sobriety, escape, loose-ends.

Play indeed it must be, in the sense of passing beyond necessity, doing what no one could compel it to perform, bearing a fruit of superabundance. Like grace and beauty of body, art is the more-than-required, yielded by the human vital-over-flow.

But just on this account, it emerges from the secret places of generic piety: the reverse of Riot, Fling, Drip, Abandon. And to grasp even partially the magnitude of the import of art for the human advance, and for the crux of history today, is to see the abysmal treason of an art which reverses the direction of its function, and instead of redeeming the Absurd in human destiny, steeps the soul in Absurdity, as by a deliberate suicide.

There is valid reason for a wide experimentalism in art, and for an abstraction which—like five-finger exercises—plays among the analytical factors of form. There is valid reason also for a subjectivism which turns the thought of the artist—partly—away from the object to the inner impulse, provided that in expressing his feeling he does not forget that art has to be a language intelligible—without excessive puzzledom—to mankind at large.

There is always valid reason for rebellion against purely conventional limitations of theme and style and symbol, assuming that the rebel is not simply trying to cover,

and thus confessing, his own poverty of resource. It has been said, for example, that “in our century, western music has turned to Asia and Africa to save itself from rhythmic and melodic stagnation.”⁵ When I think of Ravel and Sibelius, yes and even of Elgar and Grieg, I doubt the crisis of impoverishment; but I am sure that there are opening to us wide fields of new resource in the interplay of systems of music long developed in isolation. When Constant Lambert notes the difference between “the modal tunes of European Russia and the chromatic tunes of Eastern Russia,” he pays tribute to an Oriental influence which has riches to offer; and such riches are surely more significant than can be found in vacuous tonal drift or non-peaceful competition in cacophony and “barbaric yawp.”

A responsible experimentalism has endless promise—responsible to the world-function of a deeper justice. An irresponsible experimentalism—tolerable in lighter times as exploration of the sportive end of the wide spectrum—may in the present human pass amount to the potential betrayal of a tacit trust. For the peoples—all of them—must look to their artists—not for policies, programs, doctrines—but for their most immediate rapport with the moving energy of the world, the *feel* of its purposive drive and meaning. Through an art adult to its calling, they may sense that hidden glory, beneath the forbidding mask of Fact, wherein the discords of the nations are, in the “anticipated attainments” of the spirit, already resolved.

¹Letter to *New York Times*, March 1, 1959.

²*The Rebel*, tr. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), p. 274f.

³Cf. Walter Grossmann, “The Idea of Cultural Evolution in Schiller’s Aesthetic Education,” *The Germanic Review*, Feb. 1959.

⁴*The Meaning of God in Human Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1912), pp. 13-26.

⁵Fred Grunfeld, in *The Reporter*, April 30, 1959.

*From 1760 to 1826 two civilized men lived and to
a considerable extent reigned in America.*

The Jefferson-Adams Letters as a Shrine and a Monument

EZRA POUND

OUR NATIONAL LIFE might, at least provisionally, be divided into four periods:

1. American civilization, 1760 to 1830.
2. The period of thinning, of mental impoverishment, scission between life of the mind and life of the nation, say 1830 to 1860.
3. The period of despair, civil war as hiatus, 1870 to 1930. The division between the temper, thickness, richness of the mental life of Henry Adams, and Henry James, and that of say U. S. Grant, McKinley, Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover.
4. The possibilities of revival, starting perhaps with a valorization of our cultural heritage, not merely as something lost in dim retrospect, a tombstone, tastily carved, whereon to shed dry tears or upon which to lay a few withered violets, in the manner of, let us say, the late Henry (aforementioned) Adams. The query being: should we lose or go on losing our own revolution (of 1776-1830) by whoring after exotics, Muscovite or European?

*Copyright © 1960, Henry Regnery Co.

"As monument" or I should prefer to say as a still workable dynamo, left us from the real period, nothing surpasses the Jefferson correspondence. Or to reduce it to convenient bulk concentrating on the best of it, and its fullest implications, nothing surpasses the evidence that CIVILIZATION WAS in America, than the series of letters exchanged between Jefferson and John Adams, during the decade of reconciliation after their disagreements.

It is probable that I could pick one crow a week with the American university system "for the rest of my natural," but two immediate crows are quite obvious, one with the modus of teaching history omitting the most significant documents, and second the mode of teaching literature and/or "American literature," omitting the most significant documents, and assuming that the life of a nation's letters is restricted mostly to second-rate fiction.

From 1760 to 1826 two civilized men lived and to a considerable extent reigned in America. They did not feel themselves isolated phenomena. They were not by any means shrunk into a clique or dependent on