

In Defense of Non-Objective Art

ELISEO VIVAS

A rejoinder to Mr. Wagner: why non-representational art portrays aspects of our time.

LET ME COMMENT on Mr. Geoffrey Wagner's challenging article, "The Organized Heresy: Abstract Art in the United States," which appeared in the Summer (1960) issue of MODERN AGE. I shall confine myself to only two points of interest to conservatives, for a complete analysis of all the issues brought up in Mr. Wagner's angry interdiction—problems of aesthetics, of sociology, of history of art, of theory of culture and of technical philosophy—would call for a long essay, one for which I could not ask MODERN AGE for space.

The word "organized" in the title of the article is purely rhetorical. But the word "heresy" is more than rhetorical. It is intended to alarm conservatives whose sympathy is naturally with orthodoxy, but it also carries substantive meaning. And in

so far as it does, I submit that it obfuscates, if it does not altogether beg, a difficult and important problem. Heresy presupposes orthodoxy in theory, and in art, orthopoesis, or the right way of making, defined by an appeal to tradition. But to define the tradition of Western art is no easy task, since a modicum of innovation is not only permitted the artist but is called for, or artistic creativity is denied. Innovation, of course, is something of which conservatives are suspicious. But right as we are to suspect it, we must be very careful lest we merit the accusation of being endowed with monolithic minds that demand uniformity. To what extent Mr. Wagner's use of the word "heresy" arises from a passion for uniformity I cannot say. Fortunately we do not need to know. The question in-

terests us because one of the facile, and not always undeserved, jibes to which we are exposed is that we tend to espouse authoritarian principles.

But the problem transcends the differences between conservatives and those we disagree with. To dismiss non-objectivist art in anger is to neglect something of great importance to anyone seeking to understand our culture. I refer to the factors that move men to paint and shape wood and metal as the non-objectivists do. Some of these artists are no doubt fakes, others are moved by the wish to be among the avant garde, others enjoy slapping the booboisie. But many of them are working in response to subtle, deeply hidden, but powerful, forces operative in our era. And they are operative not only in the West but even in Russia, as we have lately learnt, where such deviations from the party line are risky. A mind concerned to understand the complex crisis of our moment of history has little time and energy for anathemas at those who express these forces.

I am a conservative. But if conservatism necessarily implies (and I use this expression in its technical philosophic sense) the extrapolation from the past into the present and future of an exclusivistic line of development in art or other activities of the spirit, as drawn by Mr. Wagner, I want out, and pronto. For the manner in which he draws the line, not to speak of the lack of diffidence with which he does it, would deny the autonomy of the artist and would strangle his creativity. It would end up by impoverishing us all. In our society, the autonomy of the artist (within limits, of course) is respected, and conservatives, who are opposed to regimentation of any kind, should be the first to respect it.

Back of extrapolations like Mr. Wagner's there often is, among other factors, the refusal to alter one's mode of perception and of affective response. But to be com-

placent with one's habits one need not lay down lines of development for art. All one need do is not look at the art that does not conform to one's criteria.

But conservatism does not mean monolithic rigidity and the rejection of non-objectivist art. Commenting on Mr. Wagner's essay, the editorial writer pointed out that he numbers among his acquaintances at least two conservatives who disagree with Mr. Wagner. I beg him to note that there is a third, who takes non-objective art seriously.

I do not wish to suggest that the artist should be altogether free from traditional control. Not at all. In any case he could not be, if he tried, although the extent that he is varies from one historical period to another and from one artist to another. My point is that Mr. Wagner's rejection of non-objectivist art is based on an inadmissible conception of the tradition. He takes the tradition to be defined by the artist's loyalty to reality. I shall indicate briefly below that he is not altogether consistent as regards the artist's task. Here let me point out that he conceives the artist's loyalty in terms of imitation. He does not use this word, but there can be no doubt about his meaning. He writes:

Now to a considerable extent all art is an abstraction, or selective re-ordering, of reality. Still, ever since Daguerre's invention in the last century painting has seemed to take an extremely liberating interpretation of this tradition.

A few paragraphs below, writing in language redolent of theology—for he speaks of "the shadow of the whole gnosis of expressionism"—he tells us that these gnostic heretics externalize

occult emotions through non-representational design. Indeed not even by design. By anything. Non-visual equivalents are called for.

Again, elsewhere Mr. Wagner bewails the results of an art "that declines to accept the semantic relationship between man and his world." Other passages could be cited.

In passing it must be acknowledged that non-objectivists and their sympathetic critics have handed Mr. Wagner the stick with which he belabors them, since they often speak and write as if what they were doing was finding objective equivalents of their inward life. Be that as it may, what we have here, obviously, is a variant of T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative," a smartly labeled but radically confused notion that I have examined in detail elsewhere. Suffice it to say here that its root error consists of the assumption that emotions can be imitated by external means; or in a more sophisticated version advanced by a contemporary aesthetician, that the structure of art is similar to the structure of our inward life. This is but a revamped version of the old, the enshrined, the ineradicable error that has vitiated Western aesthetics since the days of Artistotle. The Spaniards say that *hierba mala nunca muere*—weeds never die. The theory of imitation has been and will ever be the worst rankling weed of Western aesthetics.

The root error of this theory is that it denies genuine creativity. Abstractive selection from the real and re-ordering of what is abstracted—these activities exhaustively define, for Mr. Wagner and all those who accept the notion of imitation, the task of the artist as exhibited in our tradition. Where is there room for creativity in this conception? Genuine creativity means an addition to what the artist selects and re-orders, real novelty not accounted for by the clever manipulation of what he selects and re-orders, however subtle and complex that manipulation be. A conception of art to which genuine creativity is central must of course acknowledge that the artist ab-

stracts and re-orders. But his product is art only if what he abstracts is transformed or re-ordered and, if I may be allowed the term, if it is transubstantiated. New form or order and new substance, made of course from the matter taken from the real, but subjected to the creative process—if the object does not possess, or rather, to the extent that it does not possess, *creatively* informed, in-formed, or re-ordered substance, it is not art. The upshot is that the similarity between the made object and that which it is said to resemble is of relatively minor importance—for those interested in art. To the question "Who is that lady?" Matisse is said to have given the well-known reply: "That's no lady, that's a picture." In a few words the great Frenchman put where it belongs, in the trash can, the weed of imitation.

Many technical problems emerge at this juncture which delight as much as they baffle the aesthetician. For instance the question: Where does the artist get that which he adds to what he selects from the real? If he creates it out of nothing, he is God. If he does not, it would appear that all that creativity involves is the subtle and complex manipulation of what he selects from the real. Note that on this view, a machine that can play chess can write tragedies and rival Cézanne and Renoir. But this is no place to examine this and other problems of this nature. There is one question, however, that must be faced, since it is the alternative to imitation, namely: What relation is there between the work of art and the real world, if the former does not imitate the latter? Let me sketch the answer as simply and as briefly as I can, and let me do it by indirection.

I agree with Mr. Wagner that human life is symbolic. But when he speaks about the semantic relation between art and the real, I recoil and remind myself, as I have had to often in my life, that verbal agree-

ment may mask radical disagreements. For as I conceive of a symbol, it is neither an icon nor a sign. An icon imitates the object of which it is iconic. Cézanne's *Card Players*—in any one of its versions—looks like the card players that sat for it—even if the finished work happens to be (and in this case I do not know whether it is) a combination of diverse sketches and remembered images. A sign is anything that stands for something else. The flag is a sign for the nation. Objectivist art is both iconic and signfic—another term for which I must apologize. But it is much more, and it is this more that makes it art and that brings non-iconic and non-signific art into line with it. Both kinds are symbolic, in the sense that both transubstantiate and transform or re-order or in-form the real. Both take the matter of experience and by means of the creative process give us something new. And here lies the function of both kinds of art: to the extent that we enter into serious intercourse with it, art gives us the means of grasping our world. Objectivist art gives us the means of grasping the external world; non-objectivist, the means of grasping what, in one of Santayana's happy phrases, we may call the inward landscape.

Mr. Wagner is right when he tells us that the non-objectivists have forsaken the outer world. But this is not the only world there is. And Mr. Wagner comes close to seeing what contemporary artists are attempting to do when he writes that "the reality of life is one constantly accorded to us, and to give form to that reality *in its own terms* may well be the highest function possible for art today." The italics are Mr. Wagner's; I would prefer to emphasize "to give form to reality." But close as he comes to what I take to be the true concept of the function of art, he does

not come close enough, for he assumes that the artist can give form to reality *in its own terms*. Since by the words in italics he means that the artist finds the form reality has in itself, and not that with which the artist endows it, Mr. Wagner, with all the followers of the Aristotelian theory of imitation (for Plato, I have a hunch, defended a view that comes considerably closer to the truth) are chasing a realistic chimera.

Yes, the thrusts and energies so violently splashed and slashed by the non-objectivist artist on to the surface of his canvas or masonite board, the shapes, often weird, into which he welds his metal or hacks his wood, are related to the inward life of the artist and therefore to our own. But they do not imitate the inward life. They in-form it, give it form or order. And if the order we find in non-objectivist art is the only order the artist can give his inward life—an order that seems to conventional folks utter chaos—we ought to be grateful to him for the sincerity with which he exhibits the brutality, the violence, even the hatred of the inward landscape in our moment of history, as well as the serenity, the stasis, the complex tensions in subdued repose and balance, that he often enables us to decry. I can understand why people are repelled by direct confrontation with non-objectivist art: it has much more of the id in it than Ingres put into his figures. And we know what stinkhole the id is. But to ask the artist today to draw like Ingres or to shape figures like Maillol is to ask him to lie. And this is tantamount to asking him to commit suicide for our comfort. If we do not like what he paints, we do not have to look at it. Who am I to tell you that you ought not to be ignorant of things I do not wish to be? Blessed be the ostrich, for his is the kingdom of the happy and the complacent.

REVIEWS

Human Liberty: Its Nature and Conditions

WILLIAM H. CHAMBERLIN

The Constitution of Liberty, by Friedrich A. Hayek. Chicago: *The University of Chicago Press*, 1960.

TOWARD THE END of the Second World War, when collectivism in varying shades and degrees was the prevalent economic doctrine on both sides of the Atlantic, an internationally famous economist published a little book with a message as clear as the call of a trumpet from a gallantly resisting fortress. The author was Friedrich A. Hayek; the book was *The Road to Serfdom*. Many books, large and small, have

been written on the general theme that freedom is preferable to state compulsion in economic relations; but I know of none that ranks with *The Road to Serfdom* in its combination of closely reasoned exposition with moral passion.

Fifteen years have passed since *The Road to Serfdom* conveyed the impression of an eloquent voice crying in the wilderness. During that time there has been a turn of the tide. Today it is socialism that is on the defensive, that is being criticized and rejected as obsolete and inapplicable to modern conditions. There has been the tremendous object lesson of the transformation of Germany's economy from a battered derelict into the most prosperous and dynamic going concern in Europe—and as a result of the substitution of free competition for bureaucratic planning. In the two