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## Realities of Modern Sculpture

THE MEANING OF MODERN SCULPTURE. By R. H. Wilenski. New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company. 1933. \$3.

Reviewed by FRANK JEWETT MATHER, JR.

**A**N aggressively bad literary style and worse literary manners do not necessarily make a book valueless, but they do make it hard for a reader accustomed to the traditional amenities of criticism. Somewhat grudgingly, then, I shall try to extract from this little book whatever seems valuable after its cocksureness and shallowness shall have been eliminated. One may recover some gold from a generally shallow sluice.

Mr. Wilenski's description of the antecedents of modernistic sculpture is sharply cut and in general truthful. Appalled at the pressure of a mechanical civilization, the artist has developed defensive reactions in the various assertions of romantic individualism, from Goya to the Fauves. All this I tried to set forth myself six years ago in my book on "Modern Painting." There I took the position that this romantic endeavor was largely an aberration and sterile, in which view I am glad to have Mr. Wilenski's agreement.

My hope of a remedy lay in some reasonable accommodation between the artist and society—a new and fruitful synthesis. Mr. Wilenski advocates instead an esoteric defensive league of the remnant of true sculptors, the program to be an esthetic as objective, scientific, and formidable as the leading ideas of modern science, technique, and invention. Such a league, he holds, virtually exists in the handful of sculptors whom he celebrates in this book—Brancusi, Zadkine, Epstein, Gaudier, Leon Underwood, Barbara Hepworth, Richard Bedford, Henry Moore, and Maurice Lambert. In their work lies the only reality of modern sculpture and the sole hope of the future. If this be so, the case of sculpture is indeed desperate.

At the outset Mr. Wilenski distinguishes between genuine and popular sculptors, sternly discarding the latter from all consideration. The popular sculptor is he who, to a considerable degree, accepts the patron's conception of the job, and seeks to please the public. Obviously the sophomoric idealism of such a view relegates to the mediocre limbo of popular sculpture pretty much all of the great sculptors of the past. It is nowhere in evidence that the Egyptian or Chaldean sculptors, the Greeks, the carvers of the kings of Chaires, Donatello, Michelangelo, the unknown cutters of the ebony fetishes of the Congo—it is not in evidence, I say, that any of these artists were at odds with their public concerning the nature of their task nor yet in any way disinclined to please their public. But with history, as we shall see, Mr. Wilenski always has a wild way.

Rejecting what might seem the wise opportunism of the sculptors of the past, the modern sculptor, who is invariably a carver—all modelling being a mixed and inferior art akin to painting—works under ten articles, or commandments, which Mr. Wilenski is obliging enough to formulate for him. I cite the articles with some slight condensation and my own comment.

1. "Sculpture is the conversion of any mass of matter without formal meaning into mass that has formal meaning as the result of human will."

Agreed, so far as the definition goes, but formal meaning is nowhere clearly defined. The issue, which must be faced later, is whether there is any such thing as formal meaning apart from other meanings.

2. "Essential sculpture is sculpture which has the same kind of meaning as the sphere, the cube, and the cylinder."

What's the matter with the cone, the pyramid, the rhomb, and all the polyhedrons? Is their geometrical meaning the only meaning of sculpture? If a sculptor cuts away a cubic block, into a spheroid, depriving it of one meaning and substituting another, does he enrich or impoverish the geometrical meaning? Evidently he adds human will. But is human will valuable *per se*? Mr. Wilenski seems to think

all will equally valuable when directed towards the creation of formal meaning.

3. "The meaning of naturalistic or romantic imitation, as Socrates said, is merely empirical and conjectural . . . but the meaning of geometric art is universal and everlasting."

This merely moots the old realist-nominalist dilemma. I decline to debate it, merely avowing that I am a nominalist and seriously doubt if a thing cylindrical be necessarily a joy forever just because a cylinder is a sort of universal.

4. "Sculptural feeling is the appreciation of masses and relation."

True, so far as the sculptor is merely a technician. But the sculptor is also a man, and his masses are generally related not merely to each other but to feelings in the general experience of the sculptor and his fellowmen.

5. "Sculptural ability is the defining of those masses by planes."

True in practice, since there has been sculpture, and a truism since Rodin's published *obiter*.

6. "Sculptural energy is the mountain."

Not quite sure what this means. Perhaps an expression of volume in the abstract. If so, I have no quarrel.

7. "Sculptural imagination is the power to organize formal energy in symbols for the universal analogy of form."

Earlier Mr. Wilenski writes that the sculptor's business is "to symbolize the formal principles of life" which seems to complete the meaning of seven.

This seems to me merely to repeat 2 in a dynamic connotation. The dialectic is only a little better than sophomoric. The generally geometrical organization of living matter is a phenomenon and not properly speaking a principle at all. Apparently all that can be meant is that if sculpture is to have vitality it must use the forms of living matter, to wit (article 2), the cube, the sphere, and the cylinder. So far so good. But what of the logarithmic spiral that generally defines growth; what of the cell as a most elaborate polyhedron?

These are the seven essential articles. The remaining three come merely to the commonplace that the sculptor must work understandingly with his material, that in a puristic sense modelling is not sculpture, and to the final, and very doubtful, dictum that all great sculpture gains meaning when increased in scale.

What is true of this last assertion is merely that any well made work of art holds its meaning surprisingly when enlarged. One may easily test this by throwing a thumbnail sketch by Leonardo, a Vermeer, or a good Greek figurine on the screen. Whether any fine work gains through enlargement is very questionable. For every design there seems to be an optimum scale, and there is perhaps nothing more in Article 10, than that any badly designed thing is palliated through minute scale and shown up damagingly through enlargement—a truth after all well within the range of every lantern operator.

It will be noted that when commonplaces have been strained out the new commandments come down to little more than that formal meaning is all that sculpture needs, that formal meaning is epitomized on the three most familiar geometrical shapes, and that other meanings are negligible or at least superfluous. One may be grateful to Mr. Wilenski for his elucidation of Mr. Clive Bell's undefined "significant form," as form, spherical, cubical, or cylindrical, but this doesn't get us very far: On the side of production these maxims come down to insisting that the search for style is the only worthy concern of the sculptor, and that style may and should be attained by conscious endeavor.

Against this austere, not to say pedantic, over-simplification of a really very delicate and complicated matter, let me set the old humanistic and commonsense argument, that style is generally a by-product of an endeavor for something else—truthful representation of something lovingly and admiringly observed, desire to communicate a choice experience to a fit spectator—in short, that the great artist,

while naturally studious of the technical problems of his craft, is equally concerned with experiences which he shares widely with his fellows, and finally that the great artist normally proceeds from the particular to the universal, and rarely if ever from one kind of universal to another—Mr. Wilenski's program. What we actually have in the heterogeneous modern sculptors selected for praise by Mr. Wilenski is so many sorts of mannerism. Save for Epstein, who is great, or nearly so, only when he is offending all Mr. Wilenski's formulas, we have merely the parading of virtual nobodies—at best of eccentric talents—to illustrate a set of hard principles which they by no means consistently follow.

But the defects of Mr. Wilenski's rather irresponsible showmanship should not disguise the fact that in insisting that formal meaning is the only valid meaning in sculpture—and presumably in all the visual arts—he raises a crucial issue in esthetics which a candid critic should face. Formal meaning is that which is inherent in a few geometrical solids. It is the cubicity of a cube, for example.

To argue this issue in the abstract is impossible here, even if there were profit in such a procedure. It may sufficiently be elucidated in a concrete example, that of a very fine Tang sculpture which Mr. Wilenski reproduces with this comment:

From the modern sculptor's standpoint this Tang statue is essential sculpture in that it has the meaning of a permanent universal form—the egg; and the linear treatment of the drapery is approximated to painted decoration on the form. The modern sculptors are not concerned with the other meanings which this statue may have had a thousand years ago. From their standpoint those other meanings are of no service because they regard them (a) as non-sculptural and (b) as dead; whereas the meaning of the statue's form is still alive.

To which it may be answered that the "other meanings" are not unsculptural, inasmuch as precisely the artist's reverent concern for them made the statue the masterpiece of sculpture it is. It is absurd even beyond Mr. Wilenski's wont to suppose that a Tang sculptor creating a symbol for Buddhist perfection was interested only in expressing the egginess of the egg. Moreover the "other meanings" are alive—not in all their original peripheral richness, but in a generic way. I cannot imagine even a modern sculptor, or the most ignorant of laymen, being so dead of heart as not to see in this statue a benign and holy denizen of a higher and more serene world than ours. Now this is the central generic truth of those "other meanings" which to Mr. Wilenski are negligible. It will live as long as the stone, then no residual formal meaning will keep the statue alive. It will die utterly. In short, formal effect apart from associational value is psychologically impossible, and significant form is largely shaped by associational values and without them is inconceivable.

The adept of Mr. Wilenski's sort, when he professes to abstract the form from all other meanings, is merely fooling himself—is a poor analyst of his own processes of appreciation. What he is really doing is to minimize the associational range. The way of esthetic wisdom lies in broadening the associational range to the limits that conditioned the artist's creative art.

Characteristically the most amusing part of Mr. Wilenski's book is the least important—namely his attack on those archaeologists who have ever held back young talent through inculcating the classical prejudice. The assault is conducted with more vigor and adroitness than fairness. To the positive merit of the sculpture that is surely Greek he is blind. The derivatives of Roman date are called "ninepins" with tedious repetition. That Mr. Wilenski cannot see beyond these ninepins the great statues they at once represent and travesty is merely his misfortune and an index of a certain bluntness as a critic. A sensitive layman, a good archaeologist, most practising sculptors from Donatello to Rodin, have made this act of imaginative interpretation without difficulty. That Mr. Wilenski thinks this all reactionary moonshine will neither surprise nor perturb any well-balanced reader of his brilliant but shallow book.

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# Two Books on Childbirth

ABORTION! LEGAL OR ILLEGAL? By A. J. Rongy, M.D. Vanguard. 1933. \$2.

THE STORY OF CHILDBIRTH. By Palmer Findley, M.D. Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1933. \$3.

Reviewed by MABEL S. ULRICH, M.D.

PERHAPS only a member of the medical fraternity can fully appreciate the courage involved in the writing and publishing of Dr. Rongy's volume. Although the layman may suppose that the doctor may say anything and get away with it, every physician knows how far this conception is from the facts—how inhibitory are the taboos, the medical mores which surround the medical man who is impelled to take up the cudgels of a cause feared by his colleagues, execrated by the church, denounced by the respectable.

No one who reads what Dr. Rongy has written can question the sincerity of his motives, or the profound need of bringing the facts he has collected out from their dangerous obscurity into the light of public knowledge.

Despite everything which law and church have been able to do in nearly two thousand years, the number of illegal abortions annually undergone, has markedly increased in every country of Western civilization. It is conservatively estimated that in the United States alone nearly two million "illegal operations" are performed annually. Of this number 15,000 die. Now, such an operation properly performed, under aseptic conditions and by a competent operator, is practically without danger—as indicated (says Dr. Rongy) by the fact that in Russia where these conditions are met under state control, out of 40,000 cases there were only two deaths. No country has been able to meet the situation by law enforcement. The midwife and déclassé doctor who have been the "bootleggers" for desperate women, have proved as difficult to arrest and convict as have been the bootleggers of prohibition. In recent years the decrease in the use of midwives and the increasing insistence of women have brought new pressure to bear on the doctor. The result has been the spectacular rise of the "abortion specialist," followed inevitably by the "abortion racket," with its attendant "protection," the cooperation of druggists, the passive compliance of the public—in short by all of the consequences of a legal code in conflict with our national manners.

After a careful analysis of the present-day attitude from the point of view of religion, the law, society, and the doctor, the author concludes that the only possible melioration of this appalling situation lies in the liberalizing of the law and in the broadening of the scope of the physician. At present "the American laws on abortion embody a restriction that may be summed up in one sentence. No physician may interrupt a pregnancy unless he is convinced that its continuation will endanger the life and the health of the patient. The law admits no other extenuating circumstances." Every physician knows that there are economic, social, and psychological injuries resulting from an unwanted child, quite as dangerous to the well-being of a mother and her family as are a bad kidney or a leaking heart. But of these the law takes no cognizance, and he has no alternative but to hand her platiitudes when she implores his help.

Dr. Rongy lists seven causes which should be added to the present justifications for abortion. They include: illegitimate pregnancies, cases of incest, pregnancies of the mentally defective, cases of desertion, cases of women widowed while pregnant, too large families for the mother's health, and, when having provided for several children, the father finds himself economically unable to provide for another.

The author is fully alive to the part the birth control movement has played in the liberalizing of public opinion. He feels, however, that abortions belong socially in the same category, and that since investigations have not yet evolved any form of contraceptive which is 100% dependable, we can not in honesty close our eyes to the next step.

This little book then, is heartily commended to all thoughtful persons for their serious consideration. Whether or not one agrees with the author at every point is of little consequence. The importance of his contribution lies in the fact that he has unsentimentally presented an appalling situation with facts heretofore not available to the lay public, and has offered an

intelligent suggestion for meeting it. It is to be hoped that the reward of his courage may be an awakened awareness to the need of clear-sighted action.

Perhaps the most outstanding contrast between the medical profession of the old school and that of today is seen in its attitude toward the public. Before the days of preventive medicine, there was practically no disposition to initiate the man-in-the-street into the mysteries of either his health or his diseases. With the rise of preventive medicine, however, the need of lay cooperation became inescapable. The physician no longer desired to remain the sole repository of the secrets of the human flesh. He became not only the healer but the teacher of mankind. Today every physician struggling to rid his art and his patients of superstition and infantilism, is reminded many times a day that this public education, despite the use of books, articles, lectures, radio, is still in its kindergarten stage. Yet the man-in-the-street must be an eager pupil as witness the manner in which he not only suffers but supports—and enthusiastically—these educational advances in his direction.

In Dr. Findley's "Story of Childbirth," there is another admirable book of informative purpose, and one in which the author has confined himself to the perhaps most dramatic specialty of all medicine, obstetrics. Dr. Findley is ideally equipped for his undertaking both by training and by experience. He has made use of a vast amount of historical data regarding ancient customs and tribal taboos, the history of midwives, the discovery and use of anaesthesia. He begins his book with primitive man and ends it with descriptions (and photographs) of the most modern lying-in hospitals. He writes clearly and well. His accounts of the processes of gestation and the stages of birth are complete and easily comprehended. His advice abounds throughout with helpful and sensible suggestions. The illustrations, mostly from old woodcuts, are profuse, and add much interest. He is warily approving of birth-control, and views the widespread practice of abortion with alarm. An excellent bibliography and index bespeak the scientifically trained author, and increase materially the book's value. The format, too, is attractive.

In short here is a book which might well serve as required supplementary reading for all college seniors with a not unreasonable hope that it would make for more intelligent parenthood.

## Satanism and Sadism

THE ROMANTIC AGONY. By Mario Praz. Oxford University Press. 1933. \$7.50.

Reviewed by ARNOLD WHITRIDGE

THE aim of this book," as the author says, "is a study of romantic literature made under one of its most characteristic aspects, that of erotic sensibility." The title in the original Italian, "La Carne, La Morte e il Diavolo nella Letteratura Romantica," gives perhaps a more exact idea of the contents than the English paraphrase, *Romantic Agony*. Professor Mario Praz has not attempted to prove any thesis but his exposition of the literary manifestations of the flesh and the devil, illuminated with copious quotations gathered from three literatures, English, French and Italian, leaves the reader with all the information necessary to form an intelligent judgment for himself. In spite of the current interest in abnormal psychology Professor Praz is the first scholar to undertake a comprehensive survey of literary decadence.

In the first chapter, entitled "the beauty of the Medusa," he shows how in the minds of the romantics beauty became tainted with pain, corruption, and death. Shakespeare and the other Elizabethans knew that exquisite poetry might be extracted from materials generally considered base and repugnant, but the idea of pain as an integral part of desire had in the early nineteenth century a certain novelty about it. Socrates had ruminated on the close affinity between pain and pleasure, as he rubbed his leg where the prison chain had chafed it, but he would have been very much surprised if Plato or anybody else had deduced from those reflections that beauty must necessarily be insipid unless tempered with bitterness. Professor Praz quotes Shelley's poem on the Medusa in the Uffizi Gallery, as

amounting almost to a manifesto of the romantic conception of beauty.

Upon its lips and eyelids seems to lie  
Loveliness like a shadow, from which  
shine,  
Fiery and lurid, struggling underneath,  
The agonies of anguish and of death.

It would certainly not be safe to assert that the Romantics were the first to be aware of this particular kind of beauty. The existence of the Medusa proves the contrary but they were the first to discuss it and to analyze it.

Another chapter deals with the metamorphoses of Satan. In Tasso's "Jerusalem Delivered" Satan is depicted as a grotesque monster. His appearance in the "Strage degli Innocenti" of Marino is very similar except that Marino's Satan is sad because he is conscious of being a fallen angel. Milton goes a step further when he confers upon Satan the dauntless courage of a gallant rebel. It was this quality which the Romantics seized upon when they substituted for Satan the traditional type of generous outlaw or sublime criminal. There are a great many of these Fatal Men in nineteenth century literature. Among the best known are Byron's heroes, the Giaour, Lara, and the Corsair, all of whom of course are portraits of Byron himself, not exactly as he was but as he liked the world to picture him. The mysterious origin, the suspicion of ghastly guilt, the pale face and the unforgettable eyes, are the invariable characteristics of these sinister heroes. Schiller's "Robbers" and Lewis's "Monk" are members of the same family. Occasionally the type degenerates into a merely picturesque bandit, but at its best or worst the Byronic hero becomes a demoniac creature dominated by passion. After exhausting himself in the pursuit of the usual vices he discovers a fearful joy in incest.

Though it would be absurd to make any comparison from an esthetic standpoint between Byron and the Marquis de Sade they have both exercised a tremendous influence on modern French literature. Sainte-Beuve speaks of Sade as one of the greatest inspirers of the moderns, while the innumerable Byronic heroes of the *romans-feuilleton* show that Byron had penetrated far beyond the literary élite down to the rank and file of the reading public. Once we accept the theory of the divine right of passion, as Byron did, it is impossible to escape the conclusions of sadism. Moral values are inevitably inverted until vice comes to represent the positive, active element, virtue the negative and passive. Swinburne was not drunk with words when he wrote about exchanging the lilies and languors of virtue for the raptures and roses of vice. He was merely transcribing into poetical language the contrast formulated by Sade between apathetic virtue and triumphant vice.

The apologia of crime as the fundamental principle of all spiritual exaltation is not as convincing to our generation as it was to the nineteenth century. Black Masses, sacrilegious and obscene practices before the altar, inspire us with a sensation of boredom and disgust rather than fear. Such authors as Barbey d'Aureville, Flaubert, and d'Annunzio, widely as they vary in the scope of their genius, were alike in one respect. The emotion they wanted to excite in the reader was fear, and fear cannot withstand the onslaught of ridicule. It is difficult for our generation to realize that the poet Gray was honestly frightened by the "Castle of Otranto," and that Coleridge dared not go to sleep after reading "The Robbers." Our standard of conduct may be lower in some ways than it was fifty or a hundred years ago but the saving grace of laughter has delivered us from the nineteenth century insincerities of satanism and sadism.

Professor Praz is to be congratulated on steering the reader through a jungle of eroticism without ever losing his way. Beginning with the cult of the strange and the horrible he has traced the literary descent of such ideas as the fatal woman and the satanic man, with the accompanying embellishments of cruelty and pain, from Monk Lewis and Byron down to Baudelaire and d'Annunzio. He pursues the macabre with unflagging energy in the painting of Delacroix and Moreau as well as in the novels of Flaubert and Barbey d'Aureville. The result of this research is not an indictment of the romantic moment such as Irving Babbitt would have welcomed, but a logical explanation of pathological phases of romanticism which scholars have hitherto ignored.

Arnold Whitridge is master of Calhoun College, Yale University. He was until recently assistant professor of English at Columbia University.