

ID QUOD VISUM PLACET?

ART AND UNDERSTANDING, by Margaret H. Bulley (B. T. Batsford, Ltd., 15/-).

The attempts to formulate a theory of Art that can serve as a criterion for art works in all ages and of all kinds, from a building to a flowerbowl, are of comparatively recent date. Every philosopher ancient or modern, of course, has had his say about 'the nature of Beauty,' etc., and has wriggled desperately in trying to squeeze this elusive quality into his scheme of things. More often than not he only succeeded, like the author of *The Power of Judgment*, in squeezing it out altogether. You may search in vain through the whole of Mr. Bosanquet's bulky *History of Aesthetic* for a few practical tips when you are confronted by, say, a carving by Henry Moore, or a hitherto undiscovered canvas that might or might not have been the work of an Old Master. In such a predicament not even Theodor Lipps' immense *Grundlegung der Aesthetik* gets you much forrader. Nowadays we feel that something more is required. And Mr. Santayana, with all his charm and sensibility, can hardly expect to get away with it merely by concluding that 'beauty is a pledge of the possible conformity between the soul and nature, and consequently a ground of faith in the supremacy of the Good.' No, that will hardly do any more. What we want is a yardstick that can be immediately applicable to the things with which we come into daily contact. The visual arts during the last twenty years have shown remarkable vitality, but with such very singular results, that the public cannot really be blamed for becoming confused by the countless warring schools. Moreover, there are signs that the disastrous divorce between the artist and the craftsman is to some extent being resolved. Art and Industry are making friends. They seem to be establishing, with the blessings of Mr. Herbert Read, if not a sinful, at least a somewhat uneasy, liaison. The machine to-day can turn out stuff that often looks suspiciously like the genuine article, and industrialists have to their amazement woken up to the fact that even comeliness can have sales value.

The critic, then, who hopes to say something worth while about the nature of Art in general and modern art in particular, with

the object of helping people to discriminate more accurately between good and bad work, is expected to stick closely to the facts. He must be able to deliver himself with equal confidence about a stream-lined teapot, the outlay of a petrol station or the inventions of M. Héliou. Not by any means a simple undertaking this, and it is one of the chief virtues of Miss Margaret Bulley's new book, that she is at all times prepared, and in fact does, put her notions to the actual test. She states very emphatically that theory, neither hers nor any one else's, can be separated from the experience of art itself. At best it only provides a common basis for understanding. Nevertheless, Miss Bulley spends a lot of time elaborating what she calls a philosophy of life, this according to her being essential to support any theory of art. The first section of *Art and Understanding* is therefore occupied with outlining the main features of this philosophy. Now, that a theory of art is useless unless it is backed by a philosophy of life, is the sort of assertion that at once raises a multitude of thorny questions. And the particular character of Miss Bulley's philosophy, although it has a respectable ancestry, is not calculated to make for clarity and consistency. In the circumstances it is not surprising that this section abounds in cloudy impenetrable passages that would barely survive the strain of a closely critical examination. Fortunately Miss Bulley is much better when she gets down to brass tacks, and it is for this reason that her book may be recommended as a useful, and in some ways unique, contribution to the art literature of our time.

As for the philosophical background, it is sufficient to indicate that Miss Bulley derives her principal beliefs from Platonic and neo-Platonic Idealism. Plato and Plotinus between them furnish her with the general structure of her thought. Reality is assumed to be in mind, not in matter, and art, which is a symbol of reality, is therefore a spiritual affair. In other words, a true work of art, in contrast to a false or counterfeit one, which is concerned only with the impermanent, material nature of things, participates in a hierarchy of Universals. It is a witness to Beauty in its profoundest aspect. 'The awareness of this Beauty is the awareness of the real world, of the underlying spiritual reality of things, hidden behind the clouds of appearance or material sense.' Plotinus had much the same sort of thing in mind when he said

that the artist fixes his eye on Archetypal Logoi. In the sixth book of the first Ennead, the celebrated treatise on Beauty, the condition of æsthetic reception is described as an impassive reading of Ideal-forms. Nor can the production of Beauty, like all other creative activity, be directly willed. The whole of Miss Bulley's system, if it can be called such, hinges on conceptions of this kind. One would certainly be entitled to inquire, if philosophy there must be, what epistemology is behind these assumptions. But one would be ill rewarded for one's pains. Altogether it may be taken for granted that, at a time when the purveyors of neo-Hegelian dialectic do most of the talking, a *weltanschauung* of this order fails to make a strong popular appeal.

It should, however, be urged in her favour, that, whereas Plotinus rarely gets to grips with actualities at all, Miss Bulley is extremely sound when judging and commenting on particular works. For example, with reference to illustrations of the Forth Bridge and the Gothic Church of La Chapelle sur Cr cy, she writes 'The relationship of the parts within the main structure of the bridge has no value for contemplation for it is organized for practical purposes only. The church was also designed to fulfil a practical purpose . . . But when we study the two designs at length we are increasingly aware of two different states of mind . . . The bridge is obviously the outcome of a fully developed and specialized mechanical sense. In the Middle Ages no such sense existed. The science of engineering was not separated from the sense of art, and the two sides of the mind worked in harmony when churches were under construction.' What it boils down to is that the artist, the man of flesh and blood, lives in the world here and now, and so he is inevitably limited and influenced by the situation in which he finds himself. And that situation may not be at all congenial to the exertion of his major efforts. For good or ill he must share the way of life of the society of which he is a part. He cannot hope to produce anything out of the void by separating himself from his fellows. And it may well be that these conditions, imposed on him from without, make it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for the artist to keep his eye fixed on archetypal logoi, or anything else for that matter, save bayonets and income-tax returns. Miss Bulley shows herself to be aware of the difficulty. In the chapter on Modern Art she speaks of

'the grossness of our mentally impoverished society.' And it is only necessary to mention that 'To-day a bored and fearful people, who have lost faith in all but chance, spend in Great Britain in a season thirty million pounds in football bets,' in order to suggest very vividly the sort of problem with which a modern artist has to cope.

Nevertheless, whatever are the prospects for the future, and Miss Bulley for one seems to be fairly optimistic (although she warns us against expecting a 'speedy revival'), we are still enjoying our Indian summer of art. And for aught I know better days are only just round the corner. Meantime it is worth taking trouble to increase people's appreciation of such true art as is still being produced. Miss Bulley's book contains a wide selection of illustrations, which for once in a way form an integral part of the text. They include examples of children's paintings and folk art, furniture and ceramics, all of which are ingeniously arranged with an eye to enabling the reader to test his own judgment. Contemporary painting and sculpture might have been a little more fully represented, but otherwise they provide an admirable survey of the visual arts as a whole. The book should be found especially useful in art schools.

RICHARD MARCH.

MORE KAFKA

THE TRIAL, by Franz Kafka (Gollancz, 7/6).

THE METAMORPHOSIS, by Franz Kafka (The Parton Press, 3/6).

There seems no point at this date in giving Kafka the ordinary short notice. We hope to publish something more adequate on him later. Meanwhile those who have read *The Castle* need only to know that these two books have appeared. *The Trial* is comparable in scale with *The Castle*; *The Metamorphosis* is a shortish *conte*.

CHEAP EDITIONS

The Oxford University Press have brought out cheaper editions of *The Wheel of Fire* (6/-). and the *Poems* of Hopkins (5/-).

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