

THE SUPPOSITION OF UNIVERSALITY IN ART AND LITERATURE

By GORDON ROSS SMITH

THE belief that great art is universal in its appeal was a favorite doctrine of those fine old nineteenth century liberals to whom we owe so many of our lovely, ineffectual (not to say mendacious), ideals. Reasoning from the assumption presumed a fact, they set out to establish those workingmen's colleges, the public libraries and the museums for which some of us are so much indebted to them. To a small degree, they were right. All social strata of the population produce individuals of intellectual and creative abilities, just as all strata produce dullards and half-wits, and the individuals of innate capacity have been immensely benefitted — as has all society — by those unrealistic nineteenth century ideals.

I say unrealistic because the painfully evident twentieth century fact is that to a very large degree they were wrong. Millions of Europeans, whether still resident in their native countries, or transplanted to America, have shown themselves in this century to be completely indifferent to the great art of the past, whether in music, sculpture, painting, architecture, drama, or poetry. Italy, the birthplace of opera and home of its greatest practitioners, has seen upwards of eighty percent of its opera houses closed permanently since 1900. Modern Italians seem to have traded the lyrical ecstasy of opera for the racket and stench of motor bikes. In England, bombed Wren churches remain unrestored, or move to Missouri, and those incomparable cathedrals are inexorably decaying, so much so that Lincoln wears on its south wall a warning to visitors to beware of falling stones. Although the French are chauvinistic about culture, their attitude is part of that Gaullist posture of importance which leads France into the ridiculous position of spending a greater percentage of her gross national income on foreign aid than does the United States, the French have accepted the restoration of some of their great art with contributions from trans-Atlantic Anglo-Saxons — for example, with Rockefeller funds at Rheims and Versailles — but otherwise they have often left great buildings shambles, as are the interiors of the Chateau of Blois and the Petit Trianon. The trashiest newspapers of England, France, or Italy are worse than the worst in America, but certainly they sell better than Milton, Ronsard, or Tasso. Similar but worse things may be said of the Germans, who

as a group of twentieth century Westerners have certainly preferred war to *Kultur*. When one reflects that the twentieth century spectacle Western humanity has made of itself was committed by an enormous population with the highest literacy rate ever attained by so many people, one can hardly be surprised at the revulsion of African and Asian peoples whose own achievements are in comparison nevertheless so picayune.

It might be answered here that the nineteenth century ideal had scarcely been implemented by 1914, that a little literacy may be a dangerous thing, and that among people with a long history of cultivation, such enormities could not occur. However, I am afraid that history will offer no support for this speculation. If we examine the changes in the reputations of great artists who worked before 1900 (anyone later is too recent to contribute evidence), we find that the educated classes were little more discriminating than their twentieth century successors (and no more humane, either, if we remember the massacres of Albigenses, Anabaptists, Huguenots, and Waldenses). Artists whom all recent generations consider good or great were often neglected during their lifetimes, especially for their best work, and the positions of prestige were often given to men now so nearly forgotten that they go unread, unexhibited, or — final damnation — unauctioned.

I will grant some few exceptions: Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, Rubens, and Bernini in art and architecture, Shakespeare, Molière and Goethe among poets. But even those who were continuously acclaimed have often had their extreme detractors, for example, Voltaire and Tolstoi on Shakespeare, or Horace Walpole on Dante: '...extravagant, absurd, disgusting, in short, a Methodist parson in Bedlam'.

Far larger numbers of great artists received only a partial recognition, either at the beginning of their careers or at the end, but in either case recognition came with conventional work and was lost or not acquired upon the appearance of the artist's most individual, characteristic, creative work — his 'greatest'. Thus Rembrandt's earlier work was in the current fashion but, as he grew more original, individual, and creative, he paid the price in utter poverty and complete obscurity. Caravaggio is another who started from contemporary fashion, but the more he attempted original solutions, the more were paintings returned and commissions lost. The fact that he set a style for later in the seventeenth century cannot obscure the repudiation of his greatest work at the time of its appearance. Mozart also received early recognition, later exchanged for neglect and poverty. Although Bernini himself fell out of favor in his last years, he remains far better known and more highly esteemed than his contemporaries Cortona and Borromini, both of whom are greater artists.

Wordsworth is a good example of a poet who was ill-received at first but who finally saw created the taste by which he was to be appreciated—as he said himself. Yet many living poets think no better of him today than did his first reviewers. Keats and Shelley, had they lived as long as Wordsworth, might have met the acclaim which as it was they died ignorant of. That English-speaking critics should have repudiated Byron in his own day not only in favor of Dryden and Pope but also of Beattie, Blair, and Falconer strains modern credulity but is a matter of public record. In more recent times we have the examples of Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, and Wallace Stevens. All three were neglected for from one to three decades after their first publications, while relative mediocrities like Bridges and Masefield, or T.B. Aldrich and Bliss Carmen, held the public ear with warmed-over Victorian hash. Now all three are recognized as among the very greatest poets of recent times.

Perhaps the most painful examples are artists who could not have hoped to live until their merit was glorified by fame. Many were painters: Vermeer, Guardi, Louis Le Nain, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. Others were poets: Webster, Tournear, Clare, and Poe. From the evidence of extant manuscripts and contemporaneous comment, we may conclude that Donne's verses had considerable recognition among the knowing in his own time, but certainly the coming of the Augustans ended his popularity for two hundred years. Andrew Marvell's verse, first published in 1681, had to wait two hundred years for general recognition also. What chance has a Fantastic poet in an Age of Reason? Others, Traherne and Edward Taylor, waited two hundred years for initial publication.

If we turn to the Greco-Roman heritage, the spectacle of indifference, neglect, and destruction is appalling: Not a hundred plays left out of so many thousands, and those few of such uneven quality they suggest random survival; so little of Sappho we only surmise how great those nine books must have been; only such pieces of the *Satyricon* as to assure us it was a book that for masterly comic narrative surpassed *Don Quixote*; like Lucretius, it survived by chance in a solitary fragment. Examples could be multiplied endlessly, or transferred to art and architecture. At the thought of the glorious marbles burned for lime or thrown into the river in a frenzy of bigotry, of the tons of manuscripts left to rot in buildings themselves abandoned masterpieces, who could call any art universal? Although some Turks and barbarians looked upon the unspoiled monuments of Byzantium and Rome with helpless awe, their posterity certainly gazed with Gibbon's stupid contempt, shelled the Parthenon, plastered the mosaics.

Such indifference has by no means been peculiar to invaders and bar-

barians, but has characterized successive eras within Western society. To artists and the cultivated aristocracy of the Renaissance, Gothic was a collective term of abuse. It was not Spanish Gothic they disliked, not early English or early French Gothic, not Geometric or Perpendicular or Flamboyant, for those discriminative terms were not invented yet. It was simply all Gothic they abhorred. Baroque also was a term of abuse once that era was over, and it still is to some people who cannot cope with all that intricately organized light, movement, and space. Organization is in the mind, and when the baroque organization is not grasped, the experience is confusion. Is the fault in art? Or in the disorganized or differently organized mind? Perhaps there is no fault either place; only difference.

If in literature and art we suppose the critical consensus of the mid-twentieth century to be right, a supposition I have silently employed so far, then we can see that while great artists and styles were acclaimed at one time, and neglected or reviled at another, so also inferior artists were in their day much acclaimed, although now we can see their merits were negligible. The two short-title catalogues include many such writers of before 1700, and a list of England's poets laureate shows an almost exclusive preference for inferiority. In nineteenth century America, Longfellow, Lowell, Riley, Holmes, and Emerson held the centre of attention. Of these, only Emerson maintains anything like his former position; all the rest have been surpassed in general critical esteem by writers whose books failed in their own time and who languished in relative obscurity; Poe, Thoreau, Melville, Whitman, and Dickinson. The art galleries of Rome are crowded to the ceilings with mediocre and forgotten painters, and even the Louvre keeps hanging scores of painters of the utmost one-rous tediousness. I suppose they were acquired in those bad old days of the nineteenth century when influence could get any artist hung (even if he should have been hanged): I doubt if the great art museums of London, New York, and Washington would at the present time give so much as storage space to the sentimental and saccharine effusions of Devéria, Chas-sériau, Guérin, Girodet-Triosan, François Pictor, or Paul de la Roche, all of whom have pictures hung like cenotaphs in the busiest thoroughfares of the Louvre. It reminds one of the Appian Way. Apparently these, gross sentimentalities still appeal to a portion of the French public, along with the theatrical heroics of Jacques Louis David and the Baron Gros. Psychiatric investigators in America assure us that this particular combination of falsities – false sensitivity and false heroics – represents a character syndrome which is not perceptive, not sensitive, not affectionate, not brave, not self-sacrificing, but merely authoritarian and neurotic.

It is perfectly evident that good judgement in the arts is by no means

universal, and that even the greatest art has been and is subject to judgement of extreme divergence in the course of time; in such circumstances there can be no art which is universal because no one knows demonstrably what universality is. Since judgement of works of art is so far from being uniform or 'universal', what we appear to have is a succession of criticisms which are descriptions or indications of people's *reactions* to the works of art, not objective descriptions or evaluations of the works themselves. The reason for the variations of judgement lies not in the work of art, but in the mind of the critic. At best, the work of art is thought to be a revelation of absolute Truth, carried alive into the mind by passion or technique, or at least a glimpse of eternity, or of an eternal verity. At the other extreme it is a conglomeration of pernicious lies, and at worst, a shapeless hunk of battered marble, or peeling pigment on a square of canvas, or black marks on a mildewed page. And in all Truth we must admit that objectively it is only marble, pigment, or print. All significance that invests those material means is *understood* by the artist, but is *not* inherent. If he is both good and lucky, it will be understood by his audience also. The more different he is from them, the less they will understand him. These generalizations bring us to three concrete reasons why no art is or ever has been universal.

1. Art is a system of conventions. The soliloquy and aside in drama, the blue robe of the virgin, her seated or recumbent position, are all conventions in the most superficial sense, and yet even these are enough to bring a rejection of a work of art. For several decades after Ibsen's great problem plays, the use of soliloquies and asides was a good way to ruin the reception of a new play. But it cannot really be said that those two conventions are unrealistic, for everyone enjoys his own internal monologues, and that very real aspect of human existence can be represented dramatically only with those conventions. The facts of having a play at all is a set of conventions, whether with or without a Greek chorus or a god in the machine. There is no really realistic theatrical art: all is convention. Fulminations against the 'artificiality' of ballet, like Tolstoi's tantrum over Italian opera, are not sensible at all but merely naive. Music also is a system of conventions, from elements of notes and scales, and means of arbitrarily constructed instruments, to forms like the sonata and fugue. Painting is conventions of placement of figures, of representation of face, flesh, cloth or trees, of closed form and sourceless light, or open form and point-source light, of linear or painterly styles. Each time some artist deviates from the established conventions of his day, whether for greater precision, for greater expressiveness, or whatever reason, he makes more effort necessary for his audience. The greater the effort, the

more trouble for himself. Similarly, when conventions change, old styles become stale, or apparently crude, and 'begin to disgust this refined age', as John Evelyn said of *Hamlet*. The new age *considers* itself superior to the old, and the old artist's stock sinks, although a later age may reverse the judgement.

2. Art is also a system of abstractions, like language and science. The abstractions of language are indistinguishable from conventions because they are static, and the abstractions of science do not seem so because they have been subjected to verification and seem like that old but impossible human ideal, absolute truth. In all art both the form of representation and the ideas the representations are meant to convey are abstractions. At the Byzantine extreme the form or representation and the idea are doctrinally mandatory, and the artist's only option is within the required limits. At the modern nonrepresentational extreme, the form and the idea are individual, original, and private. The latter style is as rigid in its exclusions as in the former. By the dominant Western standards of art for the last six or seven centuries, the abstractions of a work of art should be new, or at least apparently so, and must also have some form of validity, not verifiable and not otherwise apprehended.

This restless quality in Western standards has had five general consequences. 1. It has produced a succession of new styles because truth was considered infinite. 2. It has rendered new styles initially unacceptable so long as they were not recognized as forms of truth. 3. It has made for the repudiation — after enthusiasm — of styles that have staled. 4. It has rehabilitated long dead styles. 5. It has assimilated styles of alien cultures. These patterns have made the West unique in the multiplicity of new styles created and old or alien styles assimilated. Although Egyptian art experienced discernable changes through its three millenia, it was singularly static compared to Western art; it assimilated little from surrounding cultures and could not be assimilated to them; it died instead. Byzantine art was not concerned with new truths, for all truths that mattered were thought revealed already. Chinese art has experienced changes intermittantly, but Sung dynasty artists were no more concerned with new truths or ways of expressing them than the Byzantines; indefatigably Sung artists copied the T'ang. Meantime the West has grown steadily less dogmatic, steadily more assimilative and tolerant of incompatible styles; no society but our own nineteenth and twentieth century Western has ever been so nearly cognizant of all historical styles. The uncomfortable consequence of our knowledge is that it exacerbates the problem of determining merit. The existence of an extreme multiplicity of mutually exclusive standards always make possible the selection of some by which any

work of art can be accepted or rejected, deified or damned. The only sense in which Western standards are universal is that all previous standards are included in Western cognizance.

3. The art we commonly call 'great' is that which says things we do or can believe, and it does so with a force, economy and complexity that other art cannot summon up. This force, economy and complexity, which together produce its power, are achieved through an elaborate compound of conventions and abstractions, all of which must be understood and accepted for that power to be felt. The conventions and abstractions are themselves assumptions, and where they are accepted, the play of them against each other produces intended and perhaps unintended implications. Both from the deliberate intellectual structure, such as the various levels of meaning in Dante and Spenser, and from the intended and accidental implications, the audience perceives successive major meanings like mountain ranges one beyond the other, or waves coming in to shore, and the major meanings are rendered iridescent with the implications that flash and disappear.

However, when the audience does not accept some portion of the conventions or abstractions, that portion of the work of art goes dead. For example, *Paradise Lost* has begun to lose the power and hence the audience it once had; the loss is a consequence of the evaporation from the minds of the audience of the conventions and abstractions of which it was composed, in this case, the epic convention and the doctrinal certainties (abstractions), of puritanism. The poem suffers additional losses because of its stylistic affinities with the high baroque which has been staled not by its seventeenth century creativity but by its eighteenth century imitation in literature and its nineteenth century imitation in other arts. The shift from what Northrop Frye has called mythic and romantic modes of the middle ages and the sixteenth century to the low mimetic and ironic modes of the nineteenth century has further lowered not only Milton's great epic but the epics of Homer and Virgil and the romance of Boiardo, Ariosto, Tasso, and Spenser. It may be that *Paradise Lost* will follow the course that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* had already taken. Modern profundity pundits label Ovid glib and superficial. From the middle ages through the eighteenth century his audience was immense. Every educated person had read the *Metamorphoses*, but how many educated people today can summarize the stories of Ocyrhoë, Aëacus and Hesperia, Iphis and Ianthe, Caunus and Byblis?

I doubt that modern audiences are either more or less discerning than the audiences of past centuries who so greatly acclaimed poems now unread. On the contrary, the conventions and abstractions out of which those

poems were built are either absent from or unacceptable to the modern minds that ignore them. Such works may be said to have drifted out of focus; they may drift back in, as has Gothic art or Lucretius' poetry, or they may drift out of sight, irrevocably as Praxiteles and Zeuxis, or as hopelessly as Du Bartas and *The Golden Grove*.

This phenomenon of inadequate focus and consequent drift may also operate in reverse, as is the case in the West with Persian, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian art. Upon first encounter, Westerners found oriental art chaotic and incomprehensible. As understanding increased, oriental art became better appreciated, until in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it influenced Western artists, sometimes heavily. Though Persian and, far eastern arts have become widely understood, Indian remains exotic and unintelligible for most people, the buildings like great piles of modeled mud, the music like caterwauling from the back fence, the literature when not adapted, naturalized, domesticated and amply footnoted by some translator, a mass of incomprehensible allusions and events without significance or emotional impact. Explanation and long education might in time allow us to appreciate Indian art as well as we do Chinese, but certainly we cannot 'read' it cold, any more than the Renaissance could 'read' Greek plays and appreciate their immense superiority to Roman.

If we examine this pattern of cultural contact from the non-Western side, we find the same phenomena. Africans and Asians must make a major effort to understand Mozart or Beethoven, Donatello or Michelangelo, Racine or Shakespeare, and often they do not think the reward is worth the effort. Laura Bohannon has described quite beautifully how a West African Negro tribe took her account of *Hamlet*: they found it ridiculous beneath contempt. Indeed, most people, Western or non-Western, appear cheerfully ready to give up Shakespeare for telly programs of American westerns, which are designed to involve the minimal number of assumptions about conventions and abstractions. The product is intellectually poverty-stricken, but that quality is exactly what makes it internationally — inter-culturally — intelligible.

Between nations and language groups within Western society we can see a comparable phenomenon taking place. The worst commercial trash from America — *Life*, *Time*, *Reader's Digest* — have large European circulations, and presumably much appeal. American commercial and journalistic writers like Sinclair Lewis have a smaller circulation, but it is still larger than that of the best. Melville, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Emily Dickinson, all of whom have great power for educated Americans, seem to be the least read abroad, for their complexity is exclusively in American terms. More recent American writers of power and beauty, Sarah Orne Jew-

ett, Euroda Welty, D.C. Peattie, Richard Wilbur, appear to me to be virtually unknown outside of America. Their virtues derive from purely American experience, which is in some respects unique. Strident newspaper headlines about police dogs in Mississippi, gang wars in Chicago, or Negro riots in New York often obscure the silent but vastly more pervasive fact that most of America lives in a degree of security, peace and well-being that has few parallels on earth. No American ports have been blockaded, no hostile aeroplanes have invaded the skies, or foreign troops the land within any living memory. No really irresponsible political party has threatened the orderly processes of government for a hundred years, and there is no sign that any will, although some ill-informed European intellectuals seem to think so. The conditions of civil peace and security are so pervasive in most American lives that many people seek a vicarious escape in the literature of violence. 'Gunsmoke', a telly program, serves a psychological purpose similar to Marie Antoinette's playing shepherdess. But the dominant conditions of security and well-being have also produced writers like those last mentioned. They may seem only trivial to continents recently subject to general war, revolution and famine, invincible superstition, and thugs in power. For many non-American writers, existentialism may be as necessary today as excruciating mannerism was for sixteenth century Florentines. To many Americans existentialism is a temporary foreign phenomenon, the natural result of a ghastly but transitory experience. How can existentialism and the art that embodies it be thought any more 'true' than the Apollonian art of fifth century Greece, the serene and vital Old Kingdom sculpture of ancient Egypt, or the still and harmonious serenities of fifteenth century Florentine art, Brunelleschi and Donatello? An atomic holocaust might make existentialism worldwide, or might end it in favor of compensatory philosophy and art. The fifth century in ancient Greece was hardly serene, and Florentine politics were not placid. One would like to think that in some quieter and happier century than the twentieth these quiet American writers may be found to have handled language with such evocative precision, such beauty of sound and density of idea that some future critic will find in them the greatness that transcends time.

However, I do not expect them to be so fortunate. The prospect before us is of a single, world-wide civilization with minor regional differences induced by history and geography. The achievement of universal education will make most historical ages widely known and understood, preserved even if not admired. Educated Men will acquire a kind of world parochialism in which everything is familiarly from the back yard and nothing is strange. Artists will be obliged to struggle both against the accumula-

ted weight of many moribund traditions and against the lack of established conventions, the thriving and complex tradition out of which great art with all its wealth of meaning and power has always been made. If greatly complex art with all its consequent power is to appear in such circumstances, it must appear not as it did among the ancient Athenians, for everyone present, but as it has in recent times in the West: for a segment of society only. In the course of history on the whole world's stage, the greatest art has been universal only within the limits of the society that produced it; to alien societies it has generally remained incomprehensible. The emergence of a world society does not seem likely to produce very soon conditions favorable to a great art age, and great art is likely to remain for a long time inevitably fugitive.