

ART, MYTH AND SOCIETY

By ALBERT TUCKER

Albert Tucker is one of the leading Victorian Artists. In the recent Anti-Fascist Exhibition in Adelaide and Melbourne his work produced considerable controversy.

"Men Must Dream!"—Lenin

ONE of the most curious phenomena in the history of culture is the time-lag between scientific and artistic achievement and social necessity. Rarely in history does a homogeneity occur in which the most recent achievements of the arts and sciences pass immediately into social usage.

Cultural activity can be divided into two kinds, the immediately useful and the ultimately useful, or the functional and the conceptual. By functional I mean those cultural forms which have passed from the earlier conceptual state into direct social practice; and have become the cultural basis on which that society depends. By conceptual I mean the experimental investigation carried on for its own sake, which has outstripped the social power to absorb, and consequently does not serve any immediate social-utilitarian function.

It is only this human ability to create an ideal mental projection beyond its own immediate day which makes human progress possible. Without this "time dislocation," the overlapping of past, present, and future in human consciousness, human history as we know it could not exist. Mental projections, or conceptual cultural activity is, in this sense, autonomous and independent of society, although it is impeded or stimulated by the existing social circumstances. The flowering of a new social order which is relatively progressive can provide the conditions for an all-round rapid growth and assimilation of new discoveries, but hitherto these conditions have only been the moments of history. At times it may powerfully stimulate one facet of cultural activity and impede the rest; for example, surgery, mechanics, chemistry receive abnormal stimulation at the present time, while art, education, and any experimental science unrelated to the needs of war are neglected and restricted to an even greater extent than before.

When denied social stimulus the cultural workers with any creative power accept their day and retreat into single or group activity of a highly individualistic character, in the face of social interference, tyranny, and persecution. The concrete achievements of this individualistic stand are

its sanction and justification. Such creative persistence, courage, and energy results in the accumulation of new achievements which are beyond the social powers of absorption. A contradiction then arises between the cultural advance guard and society itself. This contradiction is a dialectical necessity, a prerequisite for further growth, for its eventual synthesis causes a mutation within the social organism, leading to an extension of scope and complexity; or to a qualitatively distinct and higher form of society.

The history of cultural development is a history of visionaries and innovators, who in their own day were regarded as cranks and mad-dog revolutionaries, fit subjects for persecution and social ostracism. To-day is no exception. There is no use for the progressive revolutionary artist, right, centre, or, unfortunately, left. I have already given a reason for this: that is, by virtue of his progressiveness such an artist stands partly outside his own time, serving no immediate utilitarian function, and therefore open to hostility, suspicion, and misunderstanding. But it is a mad world, my masters, for this our twentieth century is a political century, witnessing (I hope) the end of economic man. With the cataclysmic social forces loosed upon the individual to-day, the carriers and creators of culture who do not conform to serving the immediate needs of decrepit "democracies," fascism, communism, etc., are also threatened with extinction.

I am concerned here with the artist in particular, therefore some attempt is necessary to clarify his position, to assess the nature and value of his work, and of those social forces which provide the greatest possibilities for his survival as a creative being.

II

Artistic form is derived from constant archetypal forms which are in themselves incapable of change as we understand it. Their origin inheres in the physical structure of the world. They occur as the spontaneous visual symbols of the natural constants of space, mass, and time; symmetries, repetitions, equilibriums; and the constant human sensations of hot and cold, hunger, sex, pain, and the rhythm of bodily processes, which have existed since the world and life began. In this sense constants are not part of history, for history is the data of change. The variable factor we are concerned with is historical; it lies in the evolution of human consciousness, the forces which condition its development and its ever-increasing complexity, scope, and power. This mobility is due to the accumulated human or social creative effort to master reality. As Bukharin put it: "The radius of knowledge is ever increasing in length," and always "moving along the endless path of converting relative truth to absolute truth." This movement proceeds in a purely dialectical fashion by the constant destruction and re-creation of mental categories in order to keep pace with the steady penetration into reality by the cultural vanguard.

Thus human knowledge of the natural constants is always increasing, and the subjective human constants can be evoked by an endless variety of circumstances. Therefore the archetypal forms can be repeated in the art object in an infinite number of ways, and embody an increasingly accurate knowledge of their true nature. The polarity and interdependence of art and science can be appreciated here.

We can now narrow down our enquiry to the relevant point—the influence of the variable factor on artistic form and content. This is the

accumulated effect of changing human knowledge and belief, or, in short, the social factor.

Let us then consider the manner in which society inflects the given formal structure of art. Since art is the plastic equivalent of a state of human consciousness we are not so much concerned with providing an analysis of society itself, but rather with its influence on the human psyche. Diversities and contradictions in the social organism will be mirrored in human thought and belief.

At no stage in history has man had absolute knowledge. There has always been a quantity of real or practical knowledge, hypothesis—and myth. Man has always striven for a framework of knowledge and belief which will incorporate all the social and natural phenomena of which he is aware. From the standpoint of art the role of the myth is of first-rate importance.

I am not concerned here with the popular interpretation of myth as signifying something completely illusory and unreal, but in its real meaning as a symbolic reflection in the minds of men of the forces of nature and society, a picture of reality, compressed and imaginatively completed in accordance with men's desires; its realization becoming the object of his behaviour.

The function of the myth is to imaginatively complete that which the intellect does not know, to explain the unexplained, thus enabling us to fill in and complete our image of reality. It is a means by which people express and systematize their fundamental notions of life and nature. In Maxim Gorky's definition, "Myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery—that is how we got realism. But if to the idea extracted from the given reality we add—completing the idea, by the logic of hypothesis—the desired, the possible and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way." Myth is the fantasy into which humanity projects its ideal solutions and gratifications. Its roots lie in the deepest levels of the collective unconscious. This imaginative completion of man's concept of reality operates as a co-ordinating principle, unifying his intellectual, emotional, and active life into a coherent pattern. Contradictions within the mental personality, and between the individual and his environment are resolved and no longer exist as an obstacle to effective action. Cognition, feeling, and conation occur as a fluid, integrated process, destroying the distinction between the objective and subjective realities and fusing them into a dialectical unity.

In this sense every ideological system, method, or belief which professes to interpret and explain life, every philosophy of action, contains its conscious or unconscious mythological extension; for none of these systems or methods are founded on absolute knowledge for the simple reason that absolute knowledge does not exist. A mythological system can only persist when it is consistent with and permits the bedrock human practical activity. When it becomes an obstacle to practical activity the myth becomes ineffective and dies.

It is necessary to emphasize here that a myth has its history and can change its form many times before it is finally destroyed. It is important to note the active power of a myth, as Gorky noted, but not necessarily, as he suggests, in a beneficial manner.

The modern fascists translated the growing irrationality of their system of economic production into an elaborate mythological system. Objective social reality determined the subjective irrationality of their thinking, and this irrational myth, issuing forth in action, reacted back on the social system in order to reciprocally sustain its irrationality. In other words, fascist activism externalized the myth into the social structure, and thus objectified it became an objective as well as a subjective reality. Fascism was a myth in the nineteen-twenties, to-day it is a social reality.

I have dealt with the myth in some detail because of the important role it plays in social life and in artistic production. Gorky also described the myth as a "reflection in broad artistic generalizations of the phenomena of nature, of the struggle with nature, and of social life." An adequate mythological theme is indispensable for artistic production. By adequate I mean the myth which incorporates in its structure the greatest quantity of demonstrable scientific truth and similarly based scientific hypotheses. Any mythological extension which is inconsistent with existent scientific truth and knowledge cannot provide an authentic image of contemporary reality, and is therefore false.

Without such a myth the progressive artist cannot achieve that integration between thinking, feeling, and acting which is necessary for creative artistic action. The contradictions within his mental personality and consequently with his environment would either render him impotent, or cause his work to become aimless, reactionary and eclectic, lacking in direction and fullness of content.

On the other hand, when the artist possesses a fully integrated picture of reality, which is consistent with his experience, the formal elements of art group and pattern themselves in its image, receiving selection, emphasis, and orientation.

The question now arises: which of the mythological systems available to-day can provide an authentic picture of reality and operate as a co-ordinating principle for artistic creation?

In this political century, the two principal images which exist express themselves mainly in political action. These are the communist and fascist myths, each completely antithetical to the other. I do not propose to spend any time here in dealing with the pathology of Fascism. It is anti-science and anti-reason, and consequently does not contain the necessary maximum objective truth in order to achieve the slightest degree of validity.

An authentic mythological theme can only come from the political left, because it is here that natural and social phenomena exist in demonstrable scientific terms, supported by logical hypotheses. And of the left-wing movements the party with the "maximum objectivity" is the Communist Party. But that "maximum objectivity" is only relative to other organized beliefs. In the field of social psychology and in its appreciation of the role of the myth, religion, and of art, the Communist Party betrays a serious weakness. The tendency here is towards an unconscious economic determinism, an over-emphasis on the directness of the effect of economic events on the minds of the people, and an insufficient appreciation of the influence of non-economic factors, of religion, myth, art, and psychological factors.

One of their authorities here is undoubtedly A. A. Zhdanov, who said "that people's consciousness lags behind economic life." This may be a correct observation of a tendency, but as a statement it is false. Economic necessity is a major determinant of human behaviour which in turn creates their particular mode of economic life, and as history shows, the mass

consciousness can at periods reach a point where they change their modes of economic behaviour and organization by an act of will. The Communist hypothesis itself is based on that belief—that at certain periods their consciousness can leap ahead of their economic life. Trotsky said the same thing as Zhdanov, although a little more specifically in our case, when he said that "the mind of the artist will limp after the reality they (the politicians) are creating." And in that sentence Trotsky summed up the present attitude of the Communist Party towards art. Because of the importance of this attitude to the progressive artist, it is worth treating it in some detail.

III

In one of his rare references to aesthetics, Marx confined himself to observing "an unequal relationship between the development of material production and artistic production," but hoped that the contradiction would eventually be resolved by the dialectical method.

Undeterred by Marx's cautious and non-committal attitude over this question, the political left, in their narrow, obsessive political activism, "reconciled" the contradiction without the dialectical method. The function of the artist is interpreted as that of a glorified cartoonist and banner-maker. The injunction is—serve the people here and now, inspire them on to great deeds on the battlefield and in industry, as political expediency dictates, and tell them in a language they understand. Only political action has validity to-day. Therefore art can only achieve validity when it functions in a direct and immediate political sense. It must be socially utilitarian consciously carrying out a correct political duty. Art is only art when it is politics.

The fallacy of this nihilistic attitude towards aesthetic values is obvious, or should be obvious, but it exists as the policy of the Communist Party, expressing itself as a demand for "socialist realism," or, actually social utilitarianism.

I have indicated that art, bankrupt under capitalism, required a working myth. And that such a myth can only come from the left. Consequently such an arbitrary designation of function coming from the left itself is fraught with danger for art.

Particularly so when left politicians who paint as a secondary activity, become their "art experts" and, exhuming Trotsky, show in their work and behaviour the outlines of a new art-dictatorship, backed by the considerable but misguided political power available.

The moralist has returned to art, this time a political moralist, bent on making art conform. This obsession with politics as politics leads to many serious theoretical distortions when attempting to evaluate non-political activities. Stephen Spender recently wrote: "Politics have become so obsessive to-day that we are in danger of regarding them as an end and not as a means. . . . The ultimate aim of politics is not politics, but the activities which can be practical within the political framework of the state. Therefore an effective statement of these activities—such as science, art, religion—is in itself a declaration of ultimate aims around which the political means will crystallize."

In art this obsession with politics as politics leads to a demand for "content"—a demand that would be correct if it meant integration achieved through an authentic myth, but instead it is vulgarly interpreted as signify-

ing a correct socio-political statement around which the artistic means must revolve. This is simply throwing out the baby with the bath-water.

By denying the validity of artistic perception, left politicians debase art by demanding forms which are accessible to the widest masses of the people—a people whose aesthetic sense has been corrupted and stunted by decades of living under monopoly capitalism.

It is obvious that the artist, as a social being, is affected by the political events of his day, but as an artist he is not concerned with them as politics, but as a certain type of experience which affects him in a definite way. This political conditioning merges into his total natural and social experience, which as a whole, determines the character of those intro-psychic conflicts which eventually find their synthesis in the art-object. The art-object will, of course, from time to time refer directly or obliquely to various facets of that total experience.

From this angle, the political event no longer remains a political event as such, but is assimilated into the artist's personal myth and transformed into the terms of aesthetic experience.

It then exists in a form which is accessible to other levels of the human psyche, the level at which art is born and to which art speaks. He is not concerned with the inane repetition of the abstract concepts of political science, valid or otherwise.

Like everyone else, the artist ". . . experiences the contradictions of life, but instead of trying to solve them on the plane of inductive or deductive reasoning, solves them in the imagination. The imagination is the faculty by means of which we can encompass the antithetical terms of our experience, thus bringing the widest oppositions within a single focus, under a light which fuses them into a wholeness, a coherence, a plastic and sensuous integrity which is the work of art. . . ."

Herbert Read here reaffirms the necessity for the myth as a co-ordinating principle, enabling the artist to achieve an authentic integration of all those environmental, physical, and mental states which culminate in the creative act itself. Art can then fulfil its own unique and vital role. It can assimilate and condense experience into the form of a valid myth, which embodies the artist's total organic response to his total, socially reinforced awareness of reality, and transmit it back into society, thus raising human consciousness to a higher magnitude of fullness and complexity.

Therefore society is dependent for its growth on the assimilation of these many "myths."

It follows that full creative freedom is absolutely essential for the reciprocal growth of the individual and society. The artist must be free from violence, regulation, coercion, want, and moral blinkers. If, in his role as a social being, he is to co-operate with any political movement, he must be assured of creative freedom at all times. Rest assured, his interpretations and beliefs will assert themselves through his work.

Without this assurance of freedom, intellectual and artistic workers are forced into political impotence, for they are not going to work for their own destruction.

Just as the official bourgeois artist is the only artist who is free under capitalism, so, apparently, would the artist whose work is "thematically" communist be the only artist who would be free under communism.

The communist slogan for art has been: Take art to the people. I would say: Take the people to art, by creating for them the conditions necessary for their cultural growth. That is a job for the politicians.