

REFLECTIONS

Art and the Prison of the Unconscious

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The tyranny of the unconscious has become almost an article of faith in modern appraisals of art—an ingeniously manipulable tool in the service of critical strategies of exposure and dismantling. The discovery and understanding of subterranean forces in the human psyche have been a peculiar achievement of our times, challenging comfortable and sentimental notions of art. But obsession with the unconscious has resulted in a false antagonism with the conscious. Originating in a salutary revolt against tendencies ignoring the imaginative and passionate energies of art, this obsession has swung to the other extreme. It has aided and abetted what has been referred to as the 'hermeneutics of suspicion'. The critic has now become an hierophant uncovering, by virtue of his access to hermetic knowledge, the taint of ideological complicity, self-mystification, arbitrary closures and questionable wholeness of form in every work of art.

The tendency is most conspicuous in the inquisitiveness that underlies the marketable packaging of artists' or writers' biographies. But even if privacy is not sacrosanct, the methodology of explaining away an artist's oeuvre in terms of neuroses must fail to capture his unique individuality. These neuroses, if they are to function as analytical tools, must cohere under a universal taxonomy. The biographer today tends to underplay the conscious choices, free acts and their consequences although they are distinctively those of the artist. Deficient as it was in its knowledge of deep-seated motivations and urges, Boswellian-Augustan literary biography nevertheless attempted to see the artist in an increasingly conscious relationship with his world.

By contrast, the modern biographer, in his attempt to decode his subject's buried life, commits himself to a narrowing focus tenuously related to the world outside. This tendency was discernible in New Criticism but can also be seen in literary deconstruction. But if a work of art or an artist is considered in isolation from the outer world, how can the critic-interpreter, who

is in that outer world, succeed in entering this inner domain? The popularity of recording movements within the mind, as if they were movements within the atom, is borne out by Richard Ellmann's essay 'Literary Biography'. Boswell's aim, Ellmann argues, may have been to reveal Samuel Johnson's force of character, but 'today we should ask him to disclose for us the inner compulsions, the schizoid elements' behind that force. To take another example, we may consider how the novelist Henry James moves in his *Prefaces* towards a dislocation of emphasis in favour of an invasive self-sufficiency.

Aesthetics of the Fragment

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Like the modern biographer, the modern critic is not interested in conscious artistry: the excesses of New Criticism may have prompted such a reaction. He focuses upon the gaps, fissures, and fault-lines of a text presumably because they enable the unconscious pressures to erupt like an earthquake. But similar pressures might lie disguised behind his deliberate, willed critical focus. In so far as he exerts his will in the presence of a work of art, never forgetting what he wants, he is debarred from authentic artistic experience: this is a view common to thinkers of diverse persuasion like Kant, Schopenhauer, Coleridge, Bergson, and so on. In opposing expression to craftsmanship, he is still under the spell of a Romantic cult of spontaneity valorizing the involuntary twitches and tics of style. His method is reminiscent of a certain kind of connoisseurship in the visual arts which believes that the artist's stylistic peculiarity is at its sharpest

and purest in the least significant parts of his work because these are the least laboured. On similar grounds, the sketch or the drawing is preferred to the finished masterpiece.

The quest for spontaneity has driven the modern artist to the aesthetics of the fragment of which the mythical prototype is the dismemberment of Dionysius. As Edgar Wind has argued in *Art and Anarchy*, this art of progressive dismemberment involving mutilation, amputation and violent cuts has led the sculptor to devalue the human face as the apex of the body. Such acephalous art is the logical consequence of the mind's absorption in the sub-rational. This is just one instance of the shocking elements resulting from the modern artist's striving for immediate and instant sensation. History acts here like a trap although neither the artist nor the critic is really aware of this unconscious conditioning.

The artist has often been believed to be in touch with larger disturbing forces which find articulation through him. The imagination has a capricious and disruptive power, giving rise in Plato's philosophy to a kind of sacred fear or *theios phobos*. It tends to drive the artist to excess and self-indulgence unless he is able to control it without crippling it. The dilemma is paralleled in the impact of art on civic life: Plato celebrates the divine madness of poetic inspiration and at the same time distrusts its unsettling, anarchic effect on the audience.

Although Aristotle does not prescribe state censorship of art, he aspires to a non-repressive but conscious mastery of the upsurge of unconscious forces. Mimesis, by virtue of its transformative power, is the specific mode of this mastery. Its cathartic effect has a therapeutic value for the *polis*, the consciously crafted form or design enabling the audience to achieve greater awareness and control of unconscious energies. Art, in this view, exorcises the psyche, individual and collective, of its unconscious demons. That is a mode of deliverance specific to art provided it recognizes that all depth must be visible on its surface,

in its form.

As Hegel saw it in his *Aesthetik*, art loses this central position as Europe moves into modernity: the centre is now increasingly occupied by science, technology and commerce. By being pushed to the margin, a zone of safety, art loses the old *theios phobos* but acquires in its place an unprecedented splendour and freedom. Its effect on our existence diminishes: we have here pure or fine art in the making. The artist is no longer a threat or support to the *polis* but is accepted in a role of domesticated and benevolent neutrality. The audience or viewer develops an immunity to *theios phobos*, perceiving art as a comfortable diversion, the product of that peculiar division between work and leisure that characterises bourgeois ideology. It is not a coincidence that the very word 'aesthetic', which meant 'sentimental', began to be applied specifically to art in the eighteenth century.

Trapped in the marginalised position of a beautiful superfluity, modern art has collaborated with catastrophe, sensationalism, and the sub-rational in order to resist the immunization of its consumers. The cult of the unconscious thus began as a legitimate but violent reaction against an art of disengagement and a criticism of fastidious preoccupation with crystalline forms. But frenetic engagement has taken artists and theorists to the other extreme undermining the doubleness that is involved in art.

Vulnerable to the onslaught of the imagination, poets have nevertheless been wary of sheer immersion in the violent energies: they have clung to what Baudelaire calls '*la frenesie journaliere*'. They have testified to that curious power of self-division which enables the artist, through a split consciousness, to live in two worlds. Engulfed by the actual world, he is detached enough to authenticate its fictive re-fashioning. But the relentless exposure of unconscious ideological conditioning has the potential for demoralizing the artist who cannot survive without a minimal creative freedom manifest in his conscious struggle for articulation.

Interrogation of the Conscious

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It is one of the ironies of recent intellectual history that the progressive subtlety of literary theory has widened the gap between professional and non-professional consumers of art. But the practitioners of exposure ought to introspect on the applicability of their theories to themselves: perhaps unwittingly they have become collaborators in the historical process of alienation. The psychological and ideological espionage and subversion they have been engaged in has consolidated the power equations in western society by devaluing the constructive and transformative energies of human rationality. The theorists themselves are not to blame: very rarely have they been absent-minded about the role of reason in any form or mode of discourse. Yet among the academic acolytes of critical theory there is a kind of modish irrationalism, a self-indulgent attempt at making dismantling an end in itself. Originating in the search for psychological liberation, the unconscious has become a suitably disguised, modern substitute for the older concept of fate: that is the strange source of its appeal as an explanatory tool.

The paradox of the unconscious is that it is available only to the interrogation of the conscious: its conceptualization involves the tools of reflection. Even the attempt to understand madness on its own terms must proceed with reason at its centre. In recent European memory, Renaissance scepticism offered an oblique vindication of reason in and through systematic doubt and questioning. Perhaps the antagonism of the conscious and the unconscious is yet another case of the powerful hold of dualism on the course of western philosophy. Instead of opposition, the relationship between the two may be one of continuity—as is borne out by artistic practice—and the difference between them qualitative, one of degree. Human experience and its artistic representation occupies an intermediate territory of untrammelled

mobility bounded by the fully conscious and the fully unconscious, the two absolutes of the infinite and the infinitesimal.

Not unrelated to the pattern of antagonistic dualism is the phenomenon of repression and its therapy in western culture. While there may be many contributory factors, including Protestant ideology, behind repression, its pervasiveness, especially among the bourgeoisie, is perhaps tied up with that project of manners ably documented by Norbert Elias. The increasing gap in the eighteenth century between the polite and the demotic hastened the process of repression which affected a wide cross-section of society because of social mobility. Repression may well be the obverse of oppression—the aggrandizing will and appetite for power—even of the cultural imperialism of the west. The predicates of racial mastery have resulted in the warping of the instinctual and irrational energies of the European elite. Therapies and even artistic uprisings have usually trapped themselves into acknowledging the anteriority of repression.

In modern western culture, the framework of antagonism has stamped an oneiric dimension and chthonic character on the unconscious. The latter has been pushed to the margins of reality from where it may surge back but only to the dream/nightmare world of much modern art. On the other hand, the uprush of the unconscious has been determined by the framework of the master and the servant in which they stand in a mutually dominating relation. This is probably why Hegel in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* makes use of the master-slave analogy in defining the nature of consciousness. Interestingly, the framework becomes important with its progressive dissolution in European social and economic life. Perhaps egalitarianism was tainted, if not materially made possible, by the simultaneous enterprise of colonialism with its consolidation of the master-servant framework. It is the elision of the latter that may well lie behind repression in western culture.

Embodying the Abstract

Modern art often attempts to capture brute, immediate sensations springing from the artist's instinctive impulses. But immediacy is not the same as concreteness. Most sensations remain abstract till consciousness gives them embodiment. The

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faith and vision behind the Gothic cathedral would have remained unrealized without the calculations of engineering. Even the most primitive artist needed an instrument—chalk or charcoal—to give shape to his ideas and emotions. In releasing into ordinary consciousness the upsurge of energies originating in the subliminal parts of the mind, the modern age has freed the imagination from volitional restraints. Depth psychologists and philosophers of similar persuasion have made the model of a buried life erupting into the primary fields of consciousness a commonplace, thereby enshrining the phenomenon of repression.

It is true that in the creation and experience of art there is a need for temporary suspension of the will. The obtrusive will and its accomplice, the ego, must undergo a genuine and complete effacement. But the suspension of the will is reserved only for the exceptional moments of artistic intuition. When it becomes a model of daily therapy as well as of art, the latter aspires to a lowering of mental attention. This is a state of mental decomposition or dissociation particularly hospitable to incursions from the unconscious. The shrinking of the field of consciousness is believed to release sudden and acute impulses of an elementary kind. According to Wind, Jung's psychology of myths relies on this class of phenomena. For Jung, myths are formed in a primitive state of consciousness in which concentration and attention are numbed. But a lowering of mental attention does not seem to be necessary to decompose the upper strata of a rational intelligence which supposedly obstruct the myth-making impulse. In a more primitive state, where the myth-making impulse is unimpeded, it does not have any of the haziness caused by mental inattentiveness. On the contrary, keen outward observation seems an essential ingredient of primitive myths, as recent anthropological research has shown.

Unlike Jung, the pioneers of depth psychology (Janet, Breuer, and Freud) had no illusions about the quality of some of the psychic material thrown

up from the unconscious. Their methods, as Wind observes perceptively, were designed to uncover pre-conceptual types of emotional life. But these types are also pre-artistic. The psychoanalytic method thus tends to blur the distinction between good and bad literature, reducing the formal preoccupations of increasingly conscious perception to the diffuse subliminal level.

Sophocles: The Oedipus Myth

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I would like to end with Wind's analysis of Sophocles' use of the Oedipus legend. It has been commonly believed that the otherwise merely revolting story of the Oedipus myth is invested with a mysterious quality by the evocation of a latent memory. This quality then gives the story a tragic potential. But why should a revolting story become less so by being latently remembered?

Far from being an ideal subject of art, the stubborn sort of symbol that survives in the unconscious and is released with the lowering of mental attention is artistically the most obtuse and recalcitrant. If, on psychoanalytical evidence, the Oedipus legend is one of those monstrous tales deeply embedded in our unconscious life, then it must be supremely difficult to make great dramatic art out of this subject. Sophocles succeeds not by collusion with the unconscious but, on the contrary, by forestalling any incursions from that region. In the construction of this tragedy, the sheer artistry of unravelling the crime of Oedipus—the plot as analysed by Aristotle—transfigures the fierceness of the conclusion. The horrifying revelations are so carefully prepared that the final effect on the spectator is the very opposite of an uprush from the unconscious. In the process both the artist and the audience remain free from the tyranny of the latter.

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