The Artist in Society

Barrows Dunham

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The Artist in Society

For Professor Roy,
with kind regards,
Dawson Clinton.
May, 1967.

By the same author

MAN AGAINST MYTH
GIANT IN CHAINS
THINKERS AND TREASURERS

One cannot live in society and be free of society. *Lenin*

By the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtilty and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. *Dr. Johnson*

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Marzani & Munsell, INC. *Publishers, New York, N.Y.*

Printed in the United States of America

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For Clarke and Barbara Dunham,

who understand these things better than I

The Argument

SOME MEN CREATE BEAUTY in order that many may enjoy it: this is the sociology of esthetics. The creators learn various skills, and so discipline their talents. The enjoyers learn delight from many works, and so discipline their tastes.

This happy issue comes only after men have first confirmed the means of their own survival: their food, clothing, and lodging, the bearing and rearing of their children. Thus the fine arts lie upon the general social bosom, there to take what nourishment they may. We desire the nourishment to be plentiful, because the fine arts, which constitute the things people do after they have done the minimum, are the sign of civilization in man. Hence the creator needs to be fed and lodged, and the enjoyer needs leisure to enjoy him. This is the economics of esthetics.

But, further, the creator needs the public (the author his readers, the composer his audiences, the painter those that look upon his work), and the public needs him. There is often much scuffling in these transactions, with the creators sighing and pouting like rival swains and the public alarmed and shy at such compulsive suitors. But in all societies there are arrangements for intercourse between creators and the public, and over these arrangements there preside administrators (editors, publishers, heads of museums, managements of orchestras, government officials), who are such as God made them and the rulers of society desire. This is the politics of esthetics.

No one seems wholly satisfied with the way these things are managed in any existing society, nor is there any general agreement even about the vocabulary to be used. To enter upon this subject, however delicately, is to tiptoe among disasters. Nevertheless, administrators of the arts are always busy, and not on tiptoe either. We who live under their administration are entitled to some view of what it ought to be.

The proper administration of the arts follows from the purpose of the arts. This purpose, though it is achieved amid politics and economics and sociology, is not in itself political or economic or sociological. It is *esthetic:* that is to say, the purpose of the fine arts is to produce things which are beautiful. On any other view, the arts are merely a means of livelihood, or an index of social relations, or an instrument of policy. Which would mean, if I understand correctly, that the fine arts are no longer fine.

Consequently, what we desire of the creators is beautiful works; what we desire of the public is intelligent appreciation. The administrator's task is to serve both of these values: in a word, to make beauty and taste abound. Perhaps we ask more of him than flesh can freely give, for he is to see and know and help—and yet abstain. But if he can be thus selfless and continent of his power, he will leave his fellow men more civilized than he found them.

1. *Esthetic Bias* (I)

PROBABLY the greatest work ever written on esthetics is Kant's *Critique of Judgment, Part One.* It is amazing how much discipline and rigor the old genius was able to impose upon a notoriously lax subject.

Yet the work is full of oddities. For example, when Kant wanted to illustrate the fact that poetry can compress a multitude of meanings within a single image, it occurred to him to quote certain French verses by Frederick II (identified in the text simply as "der Grosse König"). And when he came to the thankless (and unnecessary) task of ranking the fine arts according to "merit," he placed music last, because, as he said, "there is in music a certain lack of urbanity . . . the neighborhood feels the effect more than is desired."[1]

It is pleasant to imagine Kant in the age of jukeboxes. Nevertheless, in respect of noise, he had troubles enough as it was. He lived near the Königsberg gaol, whence, from time to time, issued the sound of prisoners singing penitential psalms. Accordingly, he appended a footnote to the passage I have quoted, which ran like this: "People who recommend hymn-singing at family prayers do not consider what a burden they put upon the public by such *noisy* (and therefore usu-

1. *Kritik der Urteilskraft,* §53: "Ausserdem hängt der Musik ein gewisser Mangel der Urbanität an, dass sie, vornehmlich nach Beschaffenheit ihrer Instrumente, ihren Einfluss weiter, als man ihn verlangt (auf die Nachbarschaft), ausbreitet."

2. *Esthetic Bias* (II)

NOW I must tell you about a hat I never wore. Once upon a time, at a dinner party, I met a highly successful commercial artist whose forte was the advertising of hats. We grew friendly over the cocktails, and by the time the dinner had reached its main course he was promising to send me one of the hats he advertised. He even recorded my head size, which is regrettably large.

But in the aftermath of dinner, in I know not what context of discussion, I chanced to express the opinion that John Singer Sargent was a considerable painter. It is an opinion I then held and still hold, but I would be disingenuous if I did not admit that I also knew it to be provocative. Sargent's work was in the "society" genre. His bankers and bankers' wives and bankers' daughters seem to me to have real presence upon the canvas, but they are not at all to the taste of contemporary painters, who, as I judge, dislike both Sargent's style and the parvenu status of his sitters.

At any rate, the effect of my remark was fire and ashes. Controversy flamed for a while; my friend was eloquent, and I incorrigible. There came to pass, I suppose, a silent agreement to disagree. But I never did get that hat. Perhaps the inference was that an admirer of Sargent ought to buy his own.

Nothing can be more usual than this sort of controversy, especially among intellectuals—especially, indeed, among

3. *The Historical Landscape*

I HAVE no doubt that our century, the twentieth, is far and away the most remarkable of all. It has been difficult to live through, even terrifying, but its great achievements are the greatest yet known. If we measure progress by the extent of man's control over physical nature and over his own social relations, then our new-won mastery over the atom and the leap of one billion people into socialism are achievements quite eclipsing any of the past. Between them, they prepare the ground for a world society which will be free from war and weakness, from poverty and despair.

These assertions may seem surprising, though they are true. We who live in the twentieth century are much more struck by its pain than by its promise. We (or some of us) have fought its wars, starved in its man-made famines, erred in its myths, and sunk in its corruptions. We have allowed in places of power not rogues merely but men in whom a humane morality seems never to have developed. The threat of extinction, universal or nearly universal, hangs over us, and it is of our own making. Thus bedded in the strife and turmoil of our time, we cannot easily perceive the enormous gifts we shall leave to posterity. Posterity will duly thank us, and may even reflect, a little enviously, that "there were giants in those days."

Then greetings, fellow-giants! Like every other giant of the past or present, we are plain and simple men to whom circumstances have offered certain opportunities set in certain

4. *The Philosophic Landscape*

THERE was a time in my life when I thought a fine poem to be, on the whole, the most precious thing in the world. I was young then, and perhaps it would have been better for me if I had thought a beautiful woman to be the most precious thing in the world. It wasn't that I lacked awareness of woman's beauty. It was that a fine poem seemed safer.

But, in truth, a fine poem is by no means safe. It calls forth choice, decision, commitment. It asks us to fashion our lives in some measure upon itself; and it utters speech, equally and simultaneously, to what is conscious in us and what is unconscious. This singular power, which the arts possess and science does not, of addressing the whole man is a power dangerous and not carelessly to be endured. Wherefore, to be in the presence of a fine poem is to be at a kind of vortex of personal morality.

"Out upon it," I used to recite to myself on idle occasions,

Out upon it, I have loved
Three whole days together!
And am like to love three more,
If it prove fair weather.

How cool the aloofness, how warm the half-involvement: the mirthful poise upon the edge of enchanting objects, the self-protection of a youth who only wanted to be caught! Words in a musical order? Well, that certainly. But that only? Nonsense, it was the living of a life.

5. *Creativity*

WHAT you might call the private history of any work of art contains two great events: its creation and its reception. There are special conditions for each of these, and in this section and the next we shall try to describe them.

By etymology the word "poet" means "maker." "Artist" comes by way of Latin from a Greek verb (*artuo*) which meant to "devise" or "arrange." A composer, as anyone can see, is a "putter-together." Evidently the root-idea is human activity upon material.

Yet, in our speech, a poet is not a maker in general, but a maker of a particular sort. A composer doesn't put just anything together; he puts together musical notes. And, despite the fact that arts can be technological, the word "artist" doesn't signify an inventor or an engineer. Indeed, the fate of this word is strange, for it has, in our usage, narrowed itself so far as to signify a person who paints or draws or sculpts. It occasionally refers to performing musicians, when they show exceptional quality; but I think I have never seen it applied to composers.

I don't know whether this etymologically absurd result has issued from a competition among creators, with some groups victoriously possessing the name and other groups being rebuffed. In any case, we are sadly lacking a single noun by which to signify every practitioner of every fine art. "Artist" would have done (if I dare say so) beautifully.

6. *Enjoyment*

MR. F. L. Lucas once contrasted the very earliest verses of Tennyson and Browning.[29] Tennyson's was,

I hear a voice that's speaking in the wind.

Browning's was,

Good people all, who wish to see
A boy take physic, look at me.

"The little Tennyson listens," said Mr. Lucas, "the little Browning demands to be looked at."

Well, that's as may be. I think a deeper insight would show that the little Tennyson also asked to be listened to; he already had music enough to command listening. The fact is that creation, though a joy in itself, is in itself a private joy. It needs completion, and it finds it, in the public joy of exhibition. *This* joy is happily shared, for, if the creator likes to be seen, there is no doubt that the public likes to see.

These events are all very natural, in the way that a child's behavior is natural, whose education, however, we do not leave to chance. Nurture, fostering are the techniques required; and, just as one cannot without damage intrude upon the act of creation, so one cannot without damage intrude upon the enjoyment of its results. There always is the risk that administrators, when they attempt these things, will produce not the creator's notion but the creator's notion mauled by

29. *Eight Victorian Poets,* Cambridge, 1930, p. 36.

7. *Art as Information*

WE have thus far been trying to describe the act of esthetic creation and the act of esthetic enjoyment in what may be called their "purity"—a purity which cannot be violated without destruction of the acts themselves. This purity is always under some attack from dominant fashions and the people who keep them dominant. That is to say, there always is an effort to make creativity and enjoyment alike conform to the dominant mode. After this manner, salon art of the nineteenth century tried to keep taste from embracing impressionism, and nonrepresentational art now tries to keep taste from embracing realism. I have myself lately seen the alarm of some contemporary painters over an exhibition of Courbet.

There are other weapons than esthetic theory for the conduct of this struggle. A man who wants to paint outside the dominant mode, or contrary to it, will find exhibition difficult and purchasers rare. An observer who likes these deviations will find himself excluded from conversation or admitted to it with tolerant disgust. It would be thus, also, with a man whose poetic tastes embraced something more than the learned obfuscations of Eliot and Pound. Not many intellectuals would now be willing to confess that they liked Whittier's lovely stanza,

I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.

8. *Lilac in the Cosmos*

THE argument of the preceding sections has led to an unexpected result. We began with the most orthodox insistence that the realm of fine art be preserved intact, that esthetics be regarded as an autonomous discipline and not the handmaid of either science or morality. Yet, pursuing the argument, we found that the fine arts have a pedagogic function which they cannot shirk without ceasing to be themselves. They teach and prophesy: in some very lofty sense of the word, they are propaganda. They are, one and all, what Shelley asserted poets to be: "...the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present . . . the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire."[38]

It would seem, then, that if a man desires to avoid the pedagogic and the edifying, he must give up esthetic creation altogether or make sure that his performances in it are failures. For his every success will be one more proof that human beings really can master their environment, and consequently will be one more incitement to do so. The circumstance, indeed, is truly remarkable. We are all acquainted with people who try to teach but cannot; in the fine arts we have people who try not to teach, but teach nevertheless.

Beauty is a value in itself, "it's own excuse for being." For this reason, we must hope that our society and its cultural administrators (or, for that matter, any other society and

38. *A Defence of Poetry*, next to last sentence.

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About the Book

As [illegible] the cave-dwellers show, mankind has always considered the artist [illegible] an important member of society. But in the last period of Western civilization as art became more and more of a commodity, the artist has become progressively alienated from society. In a sense he has been "out" of society.

In recent decades socialist countries have removed the cash nexus from their society and art has ceased in the main, to be a commodity. The importance of the artist to society is fully recognized so much so, that having been called "an engineer of the soul" he is expected to be a spokesman of that society, almost as if he were *the* society.

The fact of course is that the artist is neither wholly a spokesman for any society, nor so removed from it as to have no responsibility for, or toward, that society. The artist is IN society, and Professor Dunham in choosing this proposition as his title emphasizes the nature of his study. ARTIST IN SOCIETY is an exploration of what is the nature of the artist, what is his role in the society, the character and degree of his responsibility as well as that of society towards him.

Contemporary societies, East and West, are becoming increasingly self-conscious and the relationship between the artist and the administrator needs clarification as well as reappraisal. Professor Dunham's expert probing of this problem has resulted in a first rate study, of which we, as publishers, are rather immodestly proud. Its delightful style is matched only by its insights and we recommend ARTIST IN SOCIETY to all those who care about the world they live in and who enjoy an intellectual feast.

About the Author

"I was born in Mount Holly, New Jersey, in the year 1905, the son of a Presbyterian clergyman who, exchanging preaching for teaching, became a professor of philosophy and a university dean. His belief was that the cosmos can be understood, and human conduct guided, by rational principles. To him and to such teachings I owe most of my merits and none of my faults.

I was graduated successively (and successfully) from the William Penn Charter School (1921), the Lawrenceville School (1922), Princeton University (1926), and I took the Ph.D. degree at Princeton in 1933. There was never any doubt that college teaching was my vocation; and, accordingly, I taught English at Franklin and Marshall College, 1926-1928 and 1930-1937, and Philosophy at Temple University 1937-1953.

My wife Alice Clarke Dunham and I, thirty years married, have a son Clarke, a daughter-in-law Barbara, various amiable *machatunim*, and two grandsons of prodigious charm. So far as our family and friends are concerned, there is nothing to suggest that this is not the best of all possible worlds.

Nevertheless our world is plainly not the best possible, and the effort to make it so has turned me into a socialist of (as I suppose) the Marxian sort. I therefore tend to regard philosophy as *Biou Kubernetes*, the guide of life. This notion has led to two books, *Man Against Myth* (1947) and *Giant In Chains* (1953), to a pamphlet *Thinkers and Treasurers* (1955 and 1960), to various magazine articles, and to this present small treatise. Since many of these have been translated into various languages around the world, I am bound to think that they have been useful, and that there is no present blessing comparable to that of being on the side of the future."

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