

How does a Radical Read Art?

Hank Malone

I.

There is a Saying: "Good writing is counter-revolutionary. According to Ellen Willis (who did a piece on the Chicago Pig Riot in *New American Review* No. 6) good writing "is a reminder that literature is basically an activity of mandarins, that it is all too easy for a writer to start thinking like a mandarin, that literary mandarins will be eager to recruit us, since there are too few good writers around. It is an exhortation not to glory in literacy as an end in itself, but to use it responsibly. And by responsibly I don't mean judiciousness, intellectual respectability, or the balanced view. I mean responsibility to our fellows and our struggle."

II.

The New Left has all but destroyed the practice of "mandarin art" in the last decade. By paying attention to the revolutionary politics the Movement people have left the once-avant-garde "artists" of the past holding the bag. The sweet, overly-literate, existential artists of the recent past have been revealed as irrelevant, often-hypocritical, know-nothings when it comes to the large issues of secular politics and human destiny.

The artist, like the priest of other eras, has been revealed as an important source of conservative political energy taking refuge in guilt, metaphysics and patronizing despair.

It is the rare artist who spends any of his time in the midst of political insurgency. And rarer yet is the artist, engaged in the issues, who has brought to them a sense of "pure passionate experience," an experience at a deeper level than the personal.

III.

For nearly three decades in America it has seemed unwise to remind ourselves that W.B. Yeats (for instance) and T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were essentially fascists.

Somehow we believed that their politics (along with a host of counterparts in other arts) did not ultimately get in the way of their "art." Yet the lie ultimately emerged, for as generations of students and artists (in their studies and in the practice) took up the mandarin preoccupations of these fascist-gurus, their art (during our political crisis) was revealed as morally bankrupt and ethically irrelevant.

In the case of recent American art it has become painfully clear that the "medium is the Message," and that the mediums of fascist-preoccupied mentors ultimately corrupt the "message" of descendants who find themselves in the wilderness, "fiddling" as "Rome burns."

IV.

There is no important art in America (currently) except in the radical (and highly untraditional) mediums of film, comic art, popular music, and journalism. The so-called “radical” painter, poet, novelist, and composer of the past have no real place in the political present, not by exclusion, but by the sheer failure of nerve and form. The forms of the past have simply revealed themselves as conservative, counter-revolutionary forces.

V.

For some it is tempting to say that “art is dead.” What is truer is “traditional art” is dead. And in its place, rising out of comic books, films, underground journalism and rock and roll, is a real popular life for art, a new direction that seeks what is strangely authentic, genuine and whatever registers feeling, candor and joy in our times.

The traditional mandarin forms have about them the stink of decay. It is ironic that scholars would seek to “revitalize” them, using the self-same festering forms to deliver the re-birth. In every classroom throughout America there are teachers who seek the “new poetry” or “the new painting” or the “new novel,” never realizing that the mediums (rather than the artists) are largely worn out and corrupt with traditions that speak only to bankers, princes and octogenarians.

VI.

But can we seriously say that art in America has now become the exclusive property of rock musicians, underground journalists, cartoonists and film-makers? Generally, yes.

The media of popular youth culture, having its obvious disadvantages, has the supreme advantage of little history and no historical affiliation to the mandarin corruptions of the church, the academy and the bank.

If the so-called “traditional arts” in Western society are ever again to have meaning, in the sense that art has always had a deeply-human meaning, it will be necessary for those who practice these “traditional” forms to throw off the arbitrary shackles of political conservatism and personal “uninvolvement” that poison it at the present moment.

For poets and novelists, such an effort to “decontaminate” will require a thorough investigation of new forms and alternative traditions. Technology itself has suggested hundreds of new forms and the generally unexplored literary traditions of the Third World suggest countless alternative traditions.

VII.

It is obvious that some in the “traditional arts” are struggling unsuccessfully with the new forms and new traditions. But the failure of prophets who lack esthetic genius should not detract anyone.

It is popular today among mandarins to point to the dull and incompetent failures of prophets who would seek to revitalize art. The popularity of such criticism itself is corrupt, for it would align itself with the traditions of the dying oppressor rather than seek its own way on the frontier.

The fact that the prophets of the new forms of “traditional art” have generally failed so far is no answer to the problem of our dead arts. Preferring to sleep with a decomposing corpse is in no way preferable to working out your own creative relationship to the new angry hag of the 21st century.

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See exchange in Letters, FE #92, November 13–26, 1969.

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