

THE MYTH OF THE ARTIST

Let me begin with a fragment of partial and potted history. In the first quarter of this century certain influential, 'advanced' literary people were arguing that Romanticism was finally dead and a new period of Classicism had begun. T. E. Hulme wrote a brilliant essay on the theme and T. S. Eliot worried away at it off and on for years. By Romanticism they meant poetry that was intensely subjective, yearned for the infinite, distrusted the intellect and paid rather cursory attention to detail. Classicism, in contrast, meant impersonality, intelligence, lucidity, control. The message was: too much whining, too many roses; it was time for an altogether more strenuous and unforgiving style.

Just how powerful and reasonable their case was becomes clear if you compare a poem by, say, Swinburne—full of verbal color and rhythmic excitement, but very vague as to how the pieces fit together—with *The Waste Land*. It becomes even more powerful if you compare it with Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*, which was where the real polemics were; they implied that the reader should have read books which had no obvious connection with poetry, should be able to work out the references, follow an argument, and so on. (My own belief is that if you read the poem itself, you got an utterly different impression: that of a precise, delicate and not at all defended portrait of a man having a nervous breakdown; the notes were a way of confusing the issue.)

As it turned out, Eliot, Hulme and the others were not wrong about Classicism, they were simply optimistic. History was not on their side. Throughout this century the huge rational advances—in science, technology, social justice, the elimination of poverty, etc—have been steadily balanced by crazed eruptions of irrationality and barbarism: World Wars, genocide, endemic totalitarianism, symbolized most clearly and brutally by that



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peculiarly twentieth-century innovation, the death camp, where the technology was used to set up factories for the efficient mass production of corpses. In the face of all that, it became increasingly difficult to believe in the supremacy of reason. Something more complex and less clear-cut seemed to be demanded.

A few years ago, in a book called *The Savage God*, I tried to suggest what that something might be. I called it Extremist art, by which I meant an art which goes out along that friable edge between the tolerable and the intolerable, yet does so with all the discipline and clarity and attention to detail Eliot implied when he talked of Classicism. Where the Extremists—Lowell, Berryman, Plath, above all—part company with Eliot is in his doctrine of impersonality: “the continual extinction of personality,” he called it. On the contrary, Extremist art uses inner strain and personal chaos deliberately, in order to set up a mirror to the chaos out there in the world. In other words, it is an existentialist art form, one in which the barriers between the artist’s work and his life are forever shifting and crumbling.

By this I don’t just mean that the art and the life illuminate each other, which is an idea at least as old as Samuel Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets*, and too obvious to need arguing. For example, you can’t properly understand *The Cantos* until you take into account how Pound dealt with his enormous energy and talent in his life. The force he dissipated in sheer literary busyness—founding magazines, laying down the law, pushing other writers’ work—then later dissipated again in political and economic paranoia—ranting away in defense of fascism and Social Credit—is somehow reflected in what was to have been his great work. The dispersal and deliquescence of the later Cantos is the aesthetic parallel of his own dottiness and fragmentation as a man. That idea is, as I say, self-evident.

What I mean is something more radical and confusing: the general belief—by the public as well as the artists—that the work and the life are not only inextricable but also virtually indistinguishable. Out of this a new and disturbing element has emerged during the last decade. I call it the myth of the artist and it is not, believe me, what I had in mind when I wrote *The Savage God*.

The myth is based, I think, on the terrible precedent set by Sylvia Plath and the tragic way in which her life and her art complete each other. In her collection of essays, *Seduction and Betrayal*, Elizabeth Hardwick has this to say: "She, the poet, is frighteningly there all the time. Orestes rages, but Aeschylus lives to be almost seventy. Sylvia Plath, however, is both heroine and author; when the curtain goes down, it is her own dead body there on the stage, sacrificed to her plot." Sylvia, of course, was by no means the first important artist to die dramatically by her own hand. Almost two hundred years before her, Chatterton committed suicide and became, as a result, a great Romantic symbol. But at least he didn't write about the act. Neither did Hemingway or Hart Crane or Randall Jarrell or even, in so many words, Virginia Woolf. To follow the logic of your art to its desolate end, as Sylvia did, and thereby turn yourself into the heroine of a myth you yourself have created was something unprecedented. It changed the nature of the game. Art, that most stringent and solitary of disciplines, suddenly came to resemble a high risk activity, like hang-gliding.

If nothing else, it was one in the eye for the Freudian theory of art as compensation and self-therapy. Lawrence once wrote, "One sheds one's sicknesses in books—repeats and presents one's emotions to be master of them." I myself believe that this is the exact opposite of the truth: you don't shed your sicknesses, you dredge them up in writing and thereby make them readily available to you, so that you find yourself living them out. In other words, nature always imitates art, usually in a sloppy and exaggerated way.

John Berryman, for instance, began his great cycle of *The Dream Songs* as a kind of poetic daybook, recording his gripes, hangovers, alcoholic guilts and very occasional highs. Then gradually he deepened it into an extended act of mourning for various friends tragically dead before their time. That, in turn, led back to what was, for him, the primal suicide: that of his father, who shot himself when Berryman was twelve. And so on, back and back, deeper and deeper, until in the end—particularly in the beautiful series of Dream Songs entitled "Opus Posthumous"—he seemed to be writing his own epitaph, as if

there were no one else he could trust with the job. At which point, the way was clear to taking his own life. Which he did. It seemed—perversity notwithstanding—the most logical means of completing his magnum opus.

That, anyway, is how the public seems to have read the story of Berryman's desperate and messy last years. Portrait of the artist painting himself into a corner. Portrait also of a situation which has got out of hand, for it is based on a total misunderstanding of the nature of art. It is utterly untrue to believe that Extremist art, or any other art, has to be vindicated or justified by an Extremist life, or that the artist's experience on the outer edge of the intolerable is in any way a substitute for creativity. In fact the opposite is true, as I have written elsewhere again and again: in order to make art out of deprivation and despair the artist needs proportionately rich internal resources and proportionately strict control of his medium. We have the collected works of Samuel Beckett to prove the point. An artist is what he is not because he has lived a more dramatic life than other people but because his *inner* world is more substantial, variable and self-renewing. I think it was Camus who once remarked that Nietzsche proves that you can live a life of wildest adventure without ever leaving your desk. With all due deference to R. D. Laing, schizophrenia is not necessarily a state of grace and there is no short cut to creative ability, even through the psychiatric wards of the most progressive mental hospitals.

But schizophrenia, alas, is a good deal more common than creative ability, so it is not hard to understand why Laing's theories should be so appealing. What is baffling is that real poets should have gone along so readily with them. How else, for instance, to explain the astonishing lack of professionalism in Anne Sexton's books? Her trouble was not that she wrote bad poems, as every poet does from time to time, but that, instead of throwing them away, she printed them cheek by jowl with her purest work. The reason was that the bad poems were bad in much the same way as the good were good: in their head-on intimacy and their persistence in exploring whatever was most painful to her. She was unable to resist the temptation to leave the effect to the material, as though whatever was sufficiently

naked and overwhelming could not fail. As Randall Jarrell once wrote in an essay about unreviewable verse, "it is as if the writers had sent you their ripped-out arms and legs, with 'This is a poem' scrawled on them in lipstick." The truth is, great tragic poems are not necessarily inspired by great tragedies. On the contrary, they can be precipitated, like pearls, by the smallest irritants, provided the poet's secret, internal world is rich enough: Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," for instance. By the same token, the more exposed and painful the theme, the more delicate and alert the artistic control needed to handle it. According to a psychoanalyst, Hannah Segal, there is one fundamental difference between the neurotic and the artist: the neurotic is at the mercy of his neurosis, whereas the artist, however neurotic he may be outside his work, has *in his capacity as an artist* a highly realistic understanding both of his inner world and of his relationship to the material of his art.

For example, Anne Sexton's good poems have an expressive tautness and inevitability in the rhythm which not only drives them forward but also keeps them whole. In her bad poems the need to express gives way to an altogether less trustworthy inspiration: the sheer pleasure of confessing in public, of letting it all hang out. Rhythmical control is replaced by a kind of hypnotic chanting. What begin as real poems often end in an operatic no man's land, the one between Grand Opera and soap opera, that shadow zone where it is hard to distinguish Giacomo Puccini from Al Pacino.

That in itself, you may say, is nothing very new. All sorts of talented writers have had their moments on the borderline of hysteria: Shelly, for instance, Lawrence, Dostoyevsky. To lose one's poise is an occupational hazard for the experimental artist, trying to make it new. The specifically modern ingredient Anne Sexton and lesser poets like her have added to the mixture is not that they occasionally lose control and thus become hysterical, but that they are hysterical *on purpose*.

This perhaps is the major danger of existential art. The theory can become a justification for letting go the art—by which I mean the solitary discipline and self-abnegation, the craftsman's patience and concentration in the face of his material. In the

end, the poetry not only becomes indistinguishable from the psychopathology, it becomes secondary to it.

No doubt some of the blame lies with the media and their insatiable hunger for news. Art fashions may be news of a kind, but the scandalous lives of artists make much better news. "Real art," said Susan Sontag, "has the capacity to make us nervous." But real artists, God knows, do not. They tend to be battered, fallible, vain, boringly self-centered and often seemingly stupid. So by concentrating on them and their unspeakable lives, you can sidestep the effects of their art. Nearly everyone, for example, knows about Sylvia Plath's broken marriage and despair and suicide. But I wonder how many of the thousands who fervently study the intensely autobiographical *The Bell Jar* have ever bothered with her sardonic, demanding, unforgiving, yet curiously detached poems?

Unfortunately, the artists themselves cooperate in this degradation. Writing is, after all, the most solitary of pursuits. It is easy, in your lighthouse keeper's isolation, to be taken in by your own propaganda and begin to believe the myth you yourself have created. Moreover, fame is addictive, particularly if you practise a non-paying, minority art like poetry. Somebody—maybe Kenneth Patchen—once said, "The trouble with poetry is, there's no money in it." He meant, I assume, that the only rewards, apart from those of the art itself, are the most slippery ego-gratifications: fame, if you can get it, and, if you can't, notoriety, malice, envy, backbiting and jostling for a place on the ladder. Whence the phenomenon of the stars of the poetry reading circuit, like Allen Ginsberg or the Liverpool poets, who, like American presidential candidates or the sacrificial kings in Fraser's *The Golden Bough*, offer their persons, their bodies, to the masses and simply use verse as an excuse for this strange, primitive, ritualistic exchange.

Ultimately, it is a form of sacrifice. The general public does not want poetry, but it does have a taste for licensed buffoons, scapegoats and tragic heroes, or for a mixture of all three, such as Dylan Thomas. I wonder to what extent his so-called "friends" and admiring, ox-eyed public secretly envied him his genius and therefore encouraged him to drink himself to death

in the name of good companionship and the Romantic idea of what a Bohemian poet's life should be like.

What, in all this, is the problem for the critic and the reader? In this age of public scandal and private psychoanalysis, the neo-classical solution convinces no one. Unless you approach literature simply as an excuse for an intellectual discipline like linguistics, it is impossible to brush the personal elements under the carpet and pretend they don't exist, as the New Critics did in the Forties and Fifties, or as Eliot (whose private life was for years unspeakable) wanted. They do exist, inescapably, and the artists seem determined that their audience should recognise this fact. Perhaps it is a way of insisting that what they are doing is deadly serious. Why else should they be willing to pay such a high personal price? So in the purest modern writing there is a curious two-way movement: the reader looks through the work to see the artist as he or she is, then out of it again to see just how perfect and detached and artistically self-contained the work is, how untroubled by the artist's nagging private disasters.

This is what happens in Sylvia Plath's late poetry or in the novels of Jean Rhys. Rhys's heroines move in an unremitting continuum of misery and drunkenness which, presented simply as such, would be not so much unbearable as merely boring. She redeems it with her elegantly casual, pared-down prose and her unwavering determination to fix the emotions in observed detail. By underpinning all that misery with the ordinary, indifferent business of living, she makes it, in the end, sharper and more painful. The detachment necessary to write as well as she does reflects back on the quality of the emotion portrayed.

Coleridge described this process eloquently in the *Biographia Literaria*: "himself meanwhile unparticipating in the passions, and actuated only by that pleasurable excitement, which had resulted from the energetic fervor of his own spirit in so vividly exhibiting what it had so accurately and profoundly contemplated." From this came what he called "the alienation, and, if I may hazard such an expression, the utter *aloofness* of the poet's own feelings, from those of which he is at once the painter

and the analyst." Since Coleridge was writing about Shakespeare, the implication was that creative detachment of this order was the final criterion of great art.

It is not, alas, a criterion we seem to find particularly attractive at present. Even a poet as devoted, intellectually resolute and lavishly gifted as John Berryman flinched away from it. He remarked, in a *Paris Review* interview: "the artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him. At that point, he's in business." This, I suggest, is the old Romantic Agony buttressed by peculiarly twentieth-century theories: a theory of existentialist aesthetics, a primitive psychoanalytic theory of the therapeutic relationship of art to life. If you think about this kind of statement, then remember how Berryman died, how Sylvia Plath died, how Anne Sexton died—all of them passionately believing that this was how the game was played—you have to conclude that no poetry, however fine, is worth that cost.

But there is another element involved, less tragic, less heroic: Berryman's remark, that is, was also influenced by his intense, competitive involvement with the media and with the idea of fame. He wrote an indifferent autobiographical novel about alcoholism called, ironically enough, *Recovery*. The hero is Alan Severance M. D., Litt. D., a Professor of Immunology and Molecular Biology, who also teaches a Humanities course on the side. Like Berryman, he is being dried out. Like Berryman too, he has been interviewed by *Time* and *Life* and can't get over it. He has this to say: "He had really thought, off and on for twenty years, that it was his duty to drink, namely, to sacrifice himself. He saw the products as worth it." I put it to you that the reverse may also be true: given Berryman's belief in the connection between art and agony, given also the public's taste for bad behavior in its artists (which deflects it from the necessity of taking their work seriously), it may be that, for Berryman, the poetry was an excuse for his drinking.

At that point, art itself becomes a sideshow of no genuine intrinsic value. All that matters is the disturbance from which art might emerge, given the right talent and the right, disastrous circumstances. In other words, the contemporary artists whom

the public finds most alluring are those who knowingly cooperate in their own destruction. Having created myths of themselves as a by-product of creating art, they finish by sacrificing themselves to those essentially trivial myths.

I may be wrong, I may be unduly pessimistic. But if I am right and that is, in fact, what is now beginning to happen, then, as they say in a ceremony rather different from the Hopwood lecture, God help the arts and all who sail in them.

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