

THE IDEA OF ART*

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I AM ALWAYS ASTONISHED at the way chance events influence our lives, sometimes in order to turn us in altogether new directions.

A few years ago, Phyllis Webb at the CBC suggested that I do six lectures on “The First Person in Literature” for the program “Ideas.” This happened to fall right in the centre of my interest at that time, which turned on autobiography, and I was happy to get my ideas down on paper before they all disappeared.

When John Flood suggested a lecture on “Art and the Artist,” I had the same feeling of a predestined or accidental stroke of luck. It was just the subject I wanted to write about.

But not in the sense of the usual great thoughts, about the value and meaning of art, and the noble role of the artist. This is not a convocation address. Instead, I invite you to consider some rather disturbing truths about the situation of art in our time.

We’ve all heard of “the death of God,” as announced by Nietzsche — and death of the idea of God. What I want to consider here is the prospect of “the death of art,” the death of the idea of art which is being proclaimed today.

It’s a disturbing thought — I must confess that to me personally it is highly disturbing. All my work, my teaching for the past forty years, has been based on the idea of art, as something taken for granted, an absolute, a fact of unquestionable importance. This was the one unshakable reality, the permanent element in our changing lives, the firm touchstone of truth amid the ephemeral, the trivial and spurious, of which so much of contemporary life seems to consist. Art, enduring and timeless, was the one thing we could truly depend on, replacing heaven, replacing the soul’s immortality, replacing that God who was already dead, according to Nietzsche.

In fact, since the Romantic movement in literature, art has been the vehicle that has carried and contained these past glories: permanent beauty, the wisdom and

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curative power of nature, the truth of human feelings, the virtue of distilled religion, the highest truths about our earthly existence.

Suddenly, in the middle of my late life, when I am least prepared to take such a blow, I find everywhere a disparagement of art as such, a contamination from doubtful sources, a complete silence about the real thing — in short, a lot of talk about “the end of art.” First there was “art for art,” an aesthetic over-concentration, that lasted for nearly a century, and then came, quite suddenly, *the end of art*. We have now the claim that popular junk is art, or as good as art; the segregation of genuine art to a separate shelf, as “high art,” away from what people are really interested in; and finally the expulsion of real art, or any reference to it, from the popular media of communication.

I will not make light of this. It is not a matter for satire or invective. It threatens the collapse of everything we believe in — everything, that is, on which our civilization rests. For we define a great civilization as one which leaves a permanent record of itself, for the ages, a record of artistic achievement. Anything else is mere anthropology. The end of art ushers in the total victory of that nihilism which Nietzsche dreaded, and which we have held at bay with the incontrovertible idea of art, that is, with the idea of artists as great men, and the idea of art as something that outlasts time, that conquers the eternal emptiness of space.

I say the incontrovertible idea of art, because art is visible and real, whereas God is an hypothesis, at best a belief. You may doubt in God, you may even say that God is dead; and just as no one has ever proved satisfactorily that God exists, so no one can really prove that he is “not dead.” God does not reveal himself. As Flaubert, a great sceptic, said of the artist in his work, “he is everywhere present and nowhere visible.” But this was first said about God, of course. Therefore you can deny that God exists.

But you cannot deny that Titian’s “Venus” is visible and real; that the “Primavera” is real; that Bach’s Partitas and Sonatas are real to the ear; that the poetry of Shakespeare and Keats, of Goethe and Whitman, is actual and real. Those objects and creations are present before us, to see, to hear, to apprehend, as witness of a transcendent and virtually superhuman reality, that we cannot shake off or deny. For there is something more than human in great works of art, more in any case than what we normally know as human. Some immense power, of awesome beauty, as in the shattering chords in the opening of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony; some deep wisdom, as in the poetry of Hölderlin, or Wordsworth; some wonder that seems to be everlasting, as in a tune by Eric Satie or a startling poem by Emily Dickinson.

And yet all this has been denied, expelled from the public sense in our time. It has been undermined, both theoretically, in the criticism of art, and practically, in the operations of our affluent society. Why? This is a question that deserves long and careful examination.

Students often ask, “What is poetry?” even as Tolstoy asked in his infamous tract *What is Art?* (Tolstoy, a disciple of Rousseau, is the first subversive voice of this kind among the artists.) Art is an idea. You can define it, with other words, and you can talk about it; you can even write a Ph.D. thesis about it — and not know what it is. For of course you can have an idea of it, as an abstract category referring back to many particulars, but you cannot know it except by knowing, or experiencing, some of the particulars, some examples of it. “Art” refers to the experience of contemplating particular works of art. The idea is a generalization, or an attempt at a generalization, about those particular experiences.

Obviously, the definition of art is never much good. It is the experience of listening to Bach’s Chaconne for the violin (sometimes described as the greatest single piece of music ever written), or seeing Botticelli’s “Primavera,” or Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale,” that takes your head off and teaches you forever what art is. If you have never had your head taken off, if you have never stood in tears listening to the music of Mozart, or some analogous experience, you will never truly understand the idea of art, or even the paltry definitions that try to stand in for that experience.

And yet they say art is dead, or is dying. In trying to measure the meaning of such an overwhelming loss I must go back and ask myself how we ever came to value art to such a high degree, how we have come to place art in our civilization as the very highest category of human achievement.

It is a subject that has a long and fascinating history. To abbreviate it I will refer to R. G. Collingwood’s valuable book *The Principles of Art*, which first appeared in 1938, and which throws much light on the history of this difficult term. (I might say that this book has been my standby for many decades, it is a fundamental work.)

That lucid English philosopher points out that neither the Greeks nor the Romans, and certainly not the Egyptians before them, understood the idea of art, as art, in our sense. Art, to them, had the meaning of craft, *techné*, no different in kind from shoemaking or carpentry. *Techné* is only a means to something else, not a good in itself. (That is why Mozart, 2,000 years later, had a seat “just above the cooks.”) To arrive at the modern idea of art, says Collingwood, we had to separate it from the idea of craft.

“The Renaissance artists,” he points out, “just like those of the ancient world, did actually think of themselves as craftsmen.” And craft is of course utilitarian. “It was not until the seventeenth century,” says Collingwood, “that the problems and conceptions of aesthetic began to be disentangled from those of technic or the philosophy of craft. In the late eighteenth century the disentanglement had gone so far as to establish a distinction between the fine arts and the useful arts; where ‘fine’ arts meant, not delicate or highly skilled arts, but ‘beautiful’ arts (*les beaux*

arts, le belle arti, die schöne Kunst). In the nineteenth century this phrase, abbreviated by leaving out the epithet . . . became 'art.'"¹

Collingwood is very good at telling us what art is not. It is not craft. So also, it is not "the art of imitation," as was long believed. Both Shakespeare, "holding the mirror up to nature," and Pope, hoping "to catch the living manners as they rise," reflect this old view which is partial and mistaken. Art is not mere imitation of the created world. It is not a copy, or a speaking picture. Neither is it magic, says Collingwood, nor entertainment. Art is not an amusement, though it may be amusing. And it is not reducible to moral persuasion, or the propagation of any particular idea, or body of ideas.

If art "is not" all these, what is it? Collingwood goes on, in the second part of his book, to define art as "expression of emotion" and as "imagination."² "By creating for ourselves an imaginary experience or activity, we express our emotions," he says, "and this is what we call art."³ Or again: "The value of any given work of art to a person qualified to appreciate its value is not the delightfulness of the sensuous elements in which as a work of art it actually consists, but the delightfulness of the imaginative experience which these sensuous elements awake in him."⁴

All this is fine, but a bit vague. Collingwood is at his weakest when he tries to define for us what "expression" and "emotion" and "imagination" are. These things are by their nature ultimate and undefinable: they are like "redness," or "pleasure," or "negative charges of electricity." No one will ever define what they "are," beyond naming them as ultimate concepts of verbal construction.

However, in Part I of *The Principles of Art* he has performed a great service. He has told us that art, in the modern world, has emerged from the theoretical muddle of the past, where it was perpetually confounded and identified with something else, something lesser, and it has at last risen as something supreme in itself, as art.

We should also take note, in following this story, that it is possible for civilizations to create the greatest art without having the least idea of what art actually is. This should surprise no one. It's true of love, and sex, and board games like chess and backgammon: we have no idea of the depth of meaning that these things may bear, yet we practise and enjoy them for centuries. So it is of art. Not knowing may be helpful in producing the greatest art, as Schiller pointed out in his essay on the naïve and sentimental in art.

Art then is something in itself. Whereas in the past art could be harnessed in the service of orthodox religion (as in Dante, or Milton), or it could be made to serve the purpose of imitation, enacting the drama of life, as in Shakespeare, or in depicting contemporary society, as in the realistic novel, art is now seen as most truly itself in the concept of art-for-art, which emerged in the early nineteenth century, in Blake, Coleridge, and Keats, and culminated in writers like Baudelaire, Mallarmé,

Valéry, Pater, and Wilde, and early Ezra Pound and Eliot, or Cummings and Wallace Stevens.

This concept, of an identifiable entity, separable from morality, from religion, from politics, even from “human interest” and drama — essentially separable yet capable of including them (there’s the rub!) — an entity unique in itself, that was always the secret glory of human creation, in sculpture, in painting, in architecture, in music and poetry, and that has now been isolated for our understanding, as art, the true essential in all these works: this is the idea that has emerged from the Renaissance, with modern secularism, as the highest of human values. It is the measure of civilization. It is the measure, and the only measure, of the greatest men, the artists: Beethoven, Bach, Leonardo, Shakespeare, Goethe.

And yet it is just this concept, of art as the supreme human expression, the glory of all high civilization, that has come into question, that has come under attack, from critical theory, and erosion by mere commercial process.

THE IDEA OF ART reached its peak early in the present century. It permeated all the work of Marcel Proust, and inspired his novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*. It is the idea behind the immense construct of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the aesthetic “blaze of being” in that novel corresponding to Aquinas’ *haecceitas*, the “thisness” of God’s creation. It was the inspiration of Thomas Mann, from *The Magic Mountain* right on to *Death in Venice*, though everywhere in Mann the idea of art is already being brought into question. It is the source of the most luminous passages in the poetry of Ezra Pound, a supreme artist, despite his madness and his fanaticisms. All these men believed in the permanence of art, the one enduring artifact in time, that would last —

’Till change hath broken down
All things save Beauty alone.

Edgar Allan Poe called it “Supernal Beauty”; Baudelaire sought for eternity in the “immortal sense of the beautiful”; Stéphane Mallarmé dreamed of “glorious fictions” (“*ces glorieux mensonges*”); Wallace Stevens echoed the same thought in his “supreme fictions.” But everywhere, it was the one criterion that somehow comprised all past human glory, all genius, all enduring achievement.

And yet this very idea has crumbled. It no longer holds the mind, in the marketplace or the university. In our popular culture it has evaporated from public view. This is the shame and poverty of modern culture.

The collapse has come on two fronts. First, art has been discounted at the level of general culture, in the media, in education, in entertainments. And second, it has been undermined in the very evolution of art itself, in critical theory, and in

the production of artists. There is also a connection between these two forms of decadence which we must try to uncover.

The first sort of erosion of art is one I have studied throughout my academic life, beginning with the realization as a young poet, convinced of the supreme importance of poetry, that in modern society the poet has no place, no income, no status, no effective outlets of publication, no proper recognition or understanding from critics or readers. I began to study the historic reasons for this, trying to explain the discrepancy between the vast importance given to literature in the history of our culture, in education, in books, and the utter insignificance of literary art in our actual society. The result was a historical study entitled *Literature and the Press*, which was published jointly by the Ryerson Press and Contact Press in 1960.

The argument of that book was that the mass production of printed matter since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, in other words through the mechanization of printing and paper manufacturing, had brought about, not an improvement in literacy and enlightenment, as might be expected, but an extraordinary degradation of literate values, a popularization of books, magazines, and newspapers, and an exploitation of the market, that has drowned the arts in a flood of trivia and journalistic entertainment. I argued that the profit motive, applied to the production and distribution of books, where it had never before held a dominant role, worked steadily at the erosion and degradation of literary values. I argued, also, that scholarship and criticism had proved deaf and blind to the decay of the media, for reasons which any reader may explore for himself. (Scholars are drawn to radical leftist ideologies, to spice up their lectures, but they are not so firm in the defence of the literary and civilizing values to which they ought to be professionally committed.)

Ideas like those in *Literature and the Press* have never caught on in a big way. Occasionally, some well-known writer will make a devastating comment on the state of print culture, but it passes by unnoticed. The media, and Madison Avenue, find Marshall McLuhan's speculations far more absorbing. After all, McLuhan decried "making value judgments" and cheerfully announced that they, the media themselves, are "the message." He found positive values in TV watching, showing how TV "alters the ratio of the senses" and so unifies the personality, and he made much of concepts like "hot" and "cool." Fads are more effective than prophecies, or realistic comment, in the world of media razzmatazz. Nobody wants to hear that they themselves are in fact responsible for the death of art, or the degradation of modern man. Instead, "We pause briefly for station identification . . ." or "We will return after this break" — an advertisement for Maxi Pads or Soap Suds. The gods can wait behind the curtain forever.

I have said there are always confirming voices. One of these is the historian Arnold Toynbee, who states the whole case succinctly:

Universal compulsory gratuitous education was inaugurated . . . in A.D. 1870; the Yellow Press was invented some twenty years later — as soon as the first generation of children from the national schools had come into the labour market and acquired some purchasing power — by a stroke of irresponsible genius which had divined that the educational philanthropists' labour of love could be made to yield the newspaper king a royal profit.⁵

This is quoted by R. P. Blackmur, in 1967, who thoroughly agrees with it. In fact he quotes further from Toynbee:

In the latter-day perversion of our Western Press, we see the 'drive' of Western Industrialism and Democracy being employed to keep the mass of Western Humanity culturally depressed at, or perhaps even below, its pre-industrial and pre-democratic spiritual level.⁶

You did not hear this from McLuhan, because he refrained from making value judgments. In medicine, if you do not make value judgments the patient dies. "By Golly, we did not realize that thing was a cancer! It looked like such an interesting growth."

As teachers in the humanities, dealing with literature and the arts, we must make value judgments. Show what we love. Show some scorn. This is what makes teaching dramatic, controversial, and helps to transmit the idea of a hierarchy that must be personal and newly defined.

But to return to our subject: concomitant with the degradation of art at the public level — of which the current craze of non-music and drug culture are familiar signs — we have the disintegration of art in the galleries and the schools of criticism. And there is of course a connection between the two.

Throughout the nineteenth century, as urban industrial society evolved, writers and artists began to shudder and pull away into a separate and superior self-isolation. This was in fact a movement of art becoming intensely conscious of itself, or "art for art" as it was then called. Coleridge, one of the key sources for the idea of pure poetry, already saw this separation in terms of "three silent revolutions in the history of England: 'When the professions fell off from the Church; when literature fell off from the professions; and when the press fell off from literature.'" And Flaubert, who despised the entire culture of the middle class growing up around him, turned to an intense and purely artistic sense of style and form in the novel, as a way of withdrawal from middle-class society. (The influence of Flaubert on James Joyce and Ezra Pound is familiar in literary history, but its deeper meaning is easily forgotten.)

The end result of this process of withdrawal has been the self-conscious idea of art, but it has also produced an inward-turning art and a mode of theorizing about art which have been devastating to the very idea of literature.

In two essays on this subject, "The Meaning of Modernism" (in the book *Technology and Culture*, 1979)⁸ and "The Theory of the Image in Modern Poetry"

(in *Open Letter*, Summer 1981)⁹ I show how the focus of art as an all-important subject *per se*, to the neglect of its social connections, led to an analysis of art as art, that is, to the question of 'What is art' with such an inquisitive persistence, that every art was broken down into its atomic constituents, so to speak, and these have been experimentally rearranged, to yield novel and shocking effects. This is the raccoon parade of the avant garde through the modern cornfield, until there is nothing left but noise, flea-market junk, and the separate letters of the alphabet as evidence that art had once existed.

It is a double-pronged story: the disappearance of art from the media of communication, from the culture of modern society, and subsequently, the disintegration of art itself in the hands of the artists and theorists.

In recent weeks, in the *Globe and Mail*, I have seen various art objects displayed and discussed in the Art section of that newspaper. In one of these, several black oil cans standing on some white tiles were offered as a modernistic work of art. In another, a rectangular box resembling a humidifier or a standard Xerox machine was shown as the Canadian offering at exhibitions abroad. In a third, a photograph of "a woman's hand wrapped around an erect penis" was displayed in the window of an art gallery and was confiscated by the police. A shocking case of "censorship" and denial of artistic freedom. Allan Bloom's book, *The Closing of the American Mind*, points out that freedom of thought was originally proposed in order to defend the voice of reason against fanaticism and other special interests, but that ironically it has now been turned around to defend the so-called rights of fanaticism and special interests — including those of obscenity.¹⁰

Associated with this we have the demise of literature as an academic study. Literature, as we must all know, has been infected with literary theory to the point that humane literary response is now hardly possible for most students in English departments. Linguistic analysis and theorizing — structuralism, post-structuralism, intertextuality — have taken the place of intelligent response and imaginative experience. After reading Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan you do not try to understand literature on its own terms, least of all enjoy it; you undermine it, or you enter into the sub-text. Much of this French-derived theory is Marxist inspired and aims to destroy the humanistic and liberal premises of scholarship. The deconstruction of "texts" and of the artistic persona, as practised by Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, is in fact neatly designed to eliminate from our culture the most resistant individualist, the artist, from the stage, and to destroy the rich educative effect of art, which maintains and nourishes the humane tradition. "The 'death of the author' is a slogan that modern criticism is now confidently able to proclaim," says Terry Eagleton.¹¹ Robespierre could not have said it better. (Eagleton is obviously citing Barthes' essay "The Death of the Author.")

The method called deconstruction is simply an immense elaboration of the old Marxist trick of reading, not what a literary work intends, but its so-called ideo-

logical implications. Men have been stood up against the wall, or sent to concentration camps, with this kind of criticism. It does not interpret, or read out, the meanings from a work, it reads them in. A highly complicated and pretentious technique of linguistic analysis, it is like making love, not by whispering in a lady's ear, but by examining her pores under a microscope and taking samples of her blood and mucus, in order to 'deconstruct' her — that is, to kill her. The intention is to destroy literature as such, and to replace it with a doctrine or a thesis.

This point is worth pursuing, to make it perfectly clear. It is common nowadays to sneer at "high art," and there is perhaps a deep justifying reason for this. What we think of as serious art, high art, has come down to us through the culture of gentility, the upper bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century, which in turn emulated and aped the manners of an aristocracy of that and earlier times. These are the people who attended the opera, the classic concert hall, the ballet, and frequented the art museums of the nineteenth century. The arts always have real people, a social class, to sustain them. With the collapse of that prestigious and moneyed class, the plutocracy of art patrons, the centre of interest and activity has moved in the direction of democracy. And therefore new claims are made for the popular arts of democracy, as having primary artistic value, over and above the high arts of the past.

Henry Pleasants' book *The Agony of Modern Music* argues that the tradition of classical music is now finished, and that the true music of the twentieth century is not so-called "modern music" — which he says is neither modern nor music — but jazz, or popular music. "The experiments of the twentieth century moderns," he explains, "are harmoniously disintegrative and destructive, and have been so for a hundred and fifty years."¹² Henry Pleasants offers a lively and provocative argument about the death of an art. It is well worth reading.

Leslie Fiedler's abominable book *What Was Literature?* puts forth a similar argument about literature, stating the case for every kind of popular trash, from comic books to popular romances. "What used to be 'literature,'" says Fiedler, putting the word in quotation marks, "divides us against ourselves; while what used to be called 'trash,' rooted like our dreams and nightmares in shared myth and fantasy, touches us all at a place where we have never been psychically sundered each from each."¹³ In Circe's pigsty we share the same fantasies and desires.

BUT THERE IS WORSE TO COME. In the immense scepticism of modern thought — a philosophical doubt, where not only language but all human understanding, even perception, have been analyzed and remain under question, leading to a great abyss of silence, "mute, soundless, wordless" — it should be no surprise that "the destruction of the book has declared itself in all domains";¹⁴

that is, the destruction of art is one of the consequences. I am quoting from Jacques Derrida, in his book *Of Grammatology*.

Like McLuhan, Derrida in 1967 announced the death of literacy. "The end of linear communication (*écriture*) is clearly the end of the book."¹⁵ Both Derrida and Lévy-Strauss write, of course, from a profound Marxist bias. The very origin of language, for them, begins in the exploitation of man by man.¹⁶ Therefore the aim of Derrida, through deconstruction, is to send the whole edifice crashing.

Similarly, the English Marxist Terry Eagleton, in his book *Literary Theory*, presents a full-scale argument against the literary tradition, but in a much more direct ideological form. Not only the literature, but the criticism of literature goes. "If literary theory presses its own implications too far, then it has argued itself out of existence," he says. "This, I would suggest, is the best possible thing for it to do. The final logical move in a process which began by recognizing that literature is an illusion is to recognize that literary theory is an illusion too." But in the meantime these literary theories are to be used to demolish the liberal tradition: "Any method or theory which will contribute to the strategic goal of human emancipation, the production of 'better people' through the socialist transformation of society, is acceptable. Structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, reception theory and so on."¹⁷

You could hardly ask for a more candid and open statement than that. Eagleton goes so far as to propose the abolition of English departments, although he writes within an English department and is published by a university press: "Departments of English as we presently know them in higher education would cease to exist."¹⁸

So we seem to be in a terrible muddle. One could indulge in Spenglerian prophecies of despair, or in cosmic pessimism like that which affected T. S. Eliot and his followers, or Céline and Henry Miller in the thirties of this century. There were also the revolutionary sixties. But we are now in the nineties, and a *fin de siècle* is approaching. Perhaps we are due for a change of heart.

How do you respond to this kind of thing? For myself, I have never been a pessimist, I've managed to affirm my own confident belief, after a time, against anything that contemporary reality had to offer. It's a matter of temperament.

A Samuel Beckett or a T. S. Eliot will groan no matter what you set on the table. A William Carlos Williams will find human joy and vitality even in a cemetery or a funeral. The twentieth century, if you read Paul Johnson's *Modern Times*, has been a century of terror, genocide, cruelty, and war. Some writers have recorded this with extreme revulsion, Louis Ferdinand Céline in *Journey to the End of the Night* or Henry Miller in *Tropic of Cancer*. Others have wept through tears and laughter: Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, or John Updike in his current book *Roger's Vision*. (Here a communications expert tries to prove by computer that God exists, while a theologian sceptically observes.) All this is a matter of temperament.

Some years ago I defined what I called “The *Dies Irae* Syndrome” or the “Doomsday Complex.” It is the belief that overcomes mankind periodically that the world is coming to an end, that things are so bad that soon they must blow up and everything will be finished for good.

This is a very natural state of mind. The Egyptians must have had it when the Hittites came. The Romans when they saw the Visigoths against the skyline. Certainly people thought the world would end around the year 1000. There have been many historic moments, throughout time, when a sense of doom possessed mankind. Many people now are in such a state. Others seem to carry on. These things tend to pass. The world never really ends.

And if the whole world should perish,
do you think the powers that made us would fold up and die?¹⁹

Now, to return to our subject, there is no question but that the arts have moved from their home amid an aristocratic bourgeoisie to a more ramshackle domicile within democracy, at some risk. The great task of art today is to translate the tradition of art from the values of the past to those of democracy; to create a high democratic art. This is the best meaning of modernism, lost in the confusions of sham art and befuddling ideology.

But in addition to that, we need a context for our meditations. Perhaps poetry will do. The writing of poetry is a lot like being in love. It’s walking out in the soft night, in early summer, with the big moon out there, and lilac smells in the air, and the stars blinking overhead. It comes in waves, as a delicious impulse that leaves heaps of words; comes from a deep source, makes the hand shake and the lips tremble with words bubbling under your breath.

In other words, poetry — or any art may we speak of — is not easy to bring to a halt. It is a natural urge in man, like sex or appetite. If in our present society, in criticism, we fall into confusion with ideas of anti-art, if the artists go astray and write extravagant nonsense, if the world is what the newspapers tell us it is, a mad scramble for power and money, still we know that whatever motivates and underlies the creative impulse will remain and continue. The source of art is forever there.

In the face of the present assaults on the idea of art, assaults which are clearly part of a crisis in western civilization, a fateful and turbulent transition from the old monarchic-aristocratic past to a democratic present, what are we to do? Are we to throw up our hands? Assume that art and literature will no longer be possible?

There was a time, as recent as the age of Milton and Shakespeare, when men could see the past only as another kind of present time. As in *Star Trek*, you were “beamed down” into Caesar’s Rome or Hamlet’s Denmark, and nothing was changed but the language and clothing of the inhabitants. People in the past were exactly like people in the present.

In a fundamental way they are. But we now believe, or know, that just as overtones make a sound specific, and cause the violin to sound different from a whistle, though both play the same notes on the scale, men in another age felt, talked, and imagined differently from us. Knowing this, and trying to understand the difference, is what we call having "a sense of history." It is something that men came to perceive gradually with the birth of modern history, really only since the seventeenth century.

I would suggest that we need a sense of history in regard to the idea of art. Art too has a particular character in every age and period of time. So that the very idea of art, the meaning of art, seems also to change with time.

The drama of Shakespeare's day is not the drama of the Restoration. In fact Dryden and his contemporaries had to revise and adapt Shakespeare's plays to suit the art of their own time. Romantic art, after the French Revolution, is yet another aesthetic. And modern art of the twentieth century, with all its hysterical mimicry of the past, its collage and reassembly of an exploded tradition, is something else again.

We must try to study and to formulate the dynamics of changing art history, the hypertrophy or exhaustion of forms and styles, the process of boredom with specific forms (*Formermüdung* as one German theorist called it) that leads to innovation, and the incomprehension that develops between one period and another. We must realize that we are living in a time of great turbulence and change.

But we must also have confidence in the permanence and continuing resurgence of art. Art is a form of energy. (Even the word energy, I have heard, was at first applied primarily to the divine or to spiritual powers, to the Creator, and only later was transferred to man, and to physical nature.²⁰) Man is a creature who lives and acts to survive, but who also makes superfluous objects and engages in behaviour which contains expressions of his deepest fears, strivings, and desires. These objects and actions guide and direct his future, they connect his past with his present, they make infinite possibilities actual and conceivable, so that he can meditate upon them and choose among them. The urge to make art, or to generate an expression beyond the real and the actual, is irrepressible in man, it was born with him at the dawn of time, and it will continue until the race expires, or man becomes something other.

That is why we need not despair about the death of art (or, for that matter, about the death of God). We need to ask, rather, what the new forms of art will be; that is, how the idea of art may change, to be reborn in a new form.

And to establish our balance, in this rocky culture of ours, we need to stand on first principles. Just as there is creativity in nature, so there is creativity in man. They are analogous, or perhaps the same. This is a matter of philosophy, or of faith, since the question of who we are, what kind of world we live in, lies at the root of modern art and its problems. The argument between science and religion has been

one of means, whether the creation comes out of blind atoms, which the scientists can barely conceive, or from an omniscient being; from randomness, or from hidden purpose. There can be no doubt that the universe has been created, and continues to be created, of itself, in mysterious ways that we cannot hope to explain. The world of inanimate and of living forms is there. And the mind of man contemplates that scene, in order to put forth a replica, or a net of meaning, or simply a song-accompaniment to the whole.

In other words, we will not properly think of man, or the art he makes, unless we can reconceive the creative process in nature from which art derives. If you cannot think the living world, with all its manifold forms, and the mysteries and complexities it contains, you will not experience the works of man, which are a mere echo and reflection of what is there.

But if you do grasp the relation of art to creative nature, you will have no fear that art will die, or that the making of art will come to an end. For it is precisely a failure at the level of thought that has led to the impasse of modern art. As evolutionary ideas led to Hardy's pessimism, as a religious dilemma tortured Eliot's poetry, and scientism made Lawrence hysterical, so the existential "nothingness" and the nihilist vision are what we inherit. And the way out of that impasse must be through "mental strife," for there is no other way.

The extreme arrogance of some modern artists, of Eliot in his young age, of Pound and Yeats — their anti-human tendency — was also part of this dilemma. They had withdrawn from mankind, and had risen superior to common humanity, in Axel's Castle of isolation. In fact they had excluded too much of toil and trouble from their art, in order to make it strut art-as-art. But the greatest art is not an act of withdrawal. It is one of surrender and of participation. The artist cannot be contemptuous, for the greatness of art has to do with the greatness of man — the greatness of every man. And the artist cannot be proud, for it is not he himself who has been the source of that greatness. It is something larger than his own ego, that is the source of power. He is only a voice, an expression of a larger nature.

What art needs, more than anything, is a return to its full subject matter. We cannot lose the idea of art as the supreme human achievement, and as the secret key to man's connection to the mysteries. But this high idea must not become empty of content, it must include whatever pertains to human life, and whatever the artist may need, no matter how strange or eccentric. It must include everything observed and everything imagined:

Poetry must be seen as poetry, but that does not mean it is without social, political, or other relevant meaning. In fact, it is the mark of a great culture to be aware intensely of art as art, and at the same time as the vehicle for civilized values and for the manifold energies of life.²¹

This is the unity to which we have to make our return. And yet there is no great hurry. The maelstrom of this present age is already hugely prolific, and rich with

possibility. There is no word more resonant, in the discussion of current affairs, than the word open. Open society, open mind, open form. We are open to every possibility. And if the present situation is a chaos, let us remember that it was out of the chaos of modernism, the collapse of nineteenth-century values, that some of the greatest works of art have emerged: in music Stravinsky, in painting Picasso, in fiction Thomas Mann, in poetry Ezra Pound and all the moderns. So, too, out of the chaos of the present, art will come: it must challenge this society of "Men Without Art" and of theories of anti-art, with new creation. It must be shining and triumphant. It must say "Yes" to existence, despite every obstacle.

NOTES

- ¹ R. G. Collingwood, *The Principles of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), 6.
- ² *Ibid.*, 115.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.
- ⁵ Quoted in R. P. Blackmur, *A Primer of Ignorance* (New York, 1967), 7.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁸ *Technology & Culture* (Ottawa: Golden Dog, 1979), 78-96.
- ⁹ *Open Letter* (Fourth Series, Nos. 8-9, Spring & Summer, 1981), 261-82.
- ¹⁰ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 261.
- ¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983), 138. The full implications of this radical revolutionary involvement may be judged from the opening of Roland Barthes' *Le Degré Zéro de L'Écriture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953), translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith as follows: "Hébert, the revolutionary, never began a number of his news-sheet *Le Père Duchêne* without introducing a sprinkling of obscenities. These improprieties had no real meaning, but they had significance. In what way? In that they expressed a whole revolutionary situation." This opening is like a series of chords at the beginning of an orchestration. Later chapters deal with "The Triumph and Break-up of Bourgeois Writing" and "Writing and Revolution." Barthes writes with a marked contempt for "Literature" as such, which he sees as "abstract" — "a Utopia of language" — increasingly removed from social realities, and he has a preference for spoken language. He writes: "It is the existence of Literature itself which is called into question; what modernity allows us to read in the plurality of modes of writing, is the blind alley which is its own History." "For Literature is like phosphorus: it shines with maximum brilliance at the moment when it attempts to die." *Writing Degree Zero & Elements of Semiology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967), 51, 32. From the Marxist point of view all this is deducible from the ideology. After the revolution, if literature is not "dead" we may be sure the writers will be.
- ¹² Henry Pleasants, *The Agony of Modern Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 101.
- ¹³ Leslie Fiedler, *What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 140.

- ¹⁴ “La destruction du livre, telle qu’elle s’annonce aujourd’hui dans tous les domaines. . . . Cette violence nécessaire répond à une violence qui ne fut pas moins nécessaire.” Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967), 31.
- ¹⁵ “La fin de l’écriture linéaire est bien la fin du livre.” *Ibid.*, 129.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 174-75.
- ¹⁷ Eagleton, 204, 211.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 213.
- ¹⁹ *Atlantis* (Montreal: Delta Canada, 1967), 27.
- ²⁰ I owe this thought to Professor Antonio D’Andrea, of McGill University.
- ²¹ *Ideas for Poetry* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1983), 65.

PERHAPS

Robert Kendall

There are bookmarks lurking among the pages of these premises.
 Locked desks in the well-thumbed corners.
 I wander from coffee machine to coffee machine, hoping to spill
 a little on the place where you find out who did it. Sometimes
 I can feel the breathing of those curled up in bed
 late at night under their reading lamps.
 All they’ll have to go on is a coffee stain, a few dead chrysanthemums.
 When I pluck one from a secretary’s vase, she looks up, startled.
 Always give them something to suspect.
 The deed was done too long ago for anyone to remember, yet
 the curtains in our voices could open onto it at any moment.
 A colleague tells me of a place up north, describing mountains
 released
 into the blue squares of the bedroom windows when she woke alone.
 She smiles, pretending to conceal the empty space beside her in bed,
 but we all leave our clues like five-dollar bills carefully
 half-hidden on cabinets. If the inexorable, winding trail
 passes us by, there’s no second chance.
 She tells me she likes chrysanthemums. I glance out the window
 and am surprised to see the people who phoned in sick emerging
 from the train station with their suitcases. I turn back
 and my colleague is searching my face.
 At that moment I can hear someone pull a blanket closer
 while continuing to read far into the night.