



Theses Upon Art and Religion Today

I.

The lost unity between art and religion, be it regarded as wholesome or as hampering, cannot be regained at will. This unity was not a matter of purposeful cooperation, but resulted from the whole objective structure of society during certain phases of history, so the break is objectively conditioned and irreversible. Unity of art and religion is not simply due to subjective convictions and decisions but to the underlying social reality and its objective trend. Such a unity exists, in principle, only in non-individualistic, hierarchical, closed societies—even in Greek antiquity it did not prevail during those phases when the individual had emancipated himself economically and politically. The present crisis involving individuality and the collectivistic tendencies in our society does not justify any retrogression of art to a stage which comes earlier than the individualistic era, any attempt to subject art arbitrarily once more to bonds of a religious nature. Such a reversion would necessarily bear the hallmarks of the individualistic age itself: it would be essentially rationalistic. The individual might still be capable of having religious experiences. But positive religion has lost its character of objective, all-comprising validity, its supra-individual binding force. It is no longer an unproblematic, *a priori* medium within which each person exists without questioning. Hence the desire for a reconstruction of that much praised unity amounts to wishful thinking, even if it be deeply rooted in the sincere desire for something which gives "sense" to a culture threatened by emptiness and universal alienation.

II.

The exalted unity of art and religion is, and always was, highly problematic in itself. Actually it is largely a romantic projection into the past of the desire for organic, nonalienated relations between men, for doing away with the universal division of labor. Probably no such unity ever existed in periods where we might speak of art in the proper sense of freedom of human expression as distinct from the symbols of ritual which are works of art only accidentally. It is characteristic that the idea of that unity has been conceived during the romantic age. The notion that art has broken away from religion only during a late phase of enlightenment and secularization is erroneous. Both objectified religion and art are from a very early age equally the product of the dissolution of the archaic unity between imagery and concept. Since both spheres have been established, their relation was one of tension. Even during periods which are supposed to have secured the utmost integration of religion and art, such as the Greek classical century, or medieval culture at its height, this unity was largely superimposed upon art and was to a certain degree of a repressive character. This is testified by Plato's diatribes against poetry no less than, conversely, by those devil heads and grotesque figures which adorn the Gothic Cathedrals; these last, through part and parcel of the Catholic *ordo*, plainly express impulses of resistance of the rising individual against this very same *ordo*. In other words, art, and so-called classical art no less than its more anarchical expressions, always was, and is, a force of protest of the humane against the pressure of domineering institutions, religious and others, no less than it reflects their objective substance. Hence there is reason for the suspicion that wherever the battle cry is raised that art should go back to its religious sources there also prevails the wish that art should exercise a disciplinary, repressive function.

III.

Any attempts to add spiritual meaning and thus greater objective validity to art by the reintroduction of religious content, for artistic treatment, are futile. Thus religion if treated in modern poetry and with the unavoidable means of modern poetical technique assumes an aspect of the "ornamental," of the decorative. It becomes a metaphorical circumscrip-

tion for mundane, mostly psychological experiences of the individual. Religious symbolism deteriorates into an unctuous expression of a substance which is actually of this world. A good example for this deterioration of religious symbols into mere embellishment is provided by the pseudomysticism of Rainer Maria Rilke. With certain more advanced works of a supposedly religious content, such as Stravinsky's *Symphonie des Psaumes*, the religious attitude assumes the air of an externally enforced and ultimately arbitrary community manipulated by individualistic devices behind which there is nothing of the collective power which they pretend. And I must refer to the best-seller kind of religious novel of which we had some unpleasant examples during the last few years. This kind of literature has done away with any pretension to the ultimate validity of its religious theses. It glorifies religion because it would be so nice if one could believe again. Religion is on sale, as it were. It is cheaply marketed in order to provide one more so-called irrational stimulus among many others by which the members of a calculating society are calculatingly made to forget the calculation under which they suffer. This consumer's art is movie religion even before that industry takes hold of it. Against this sort of thing, art can keep faith to its true affinity with religion, the relationship with truth, only by an almost ascetic abstinence from any religious claim or any touching upon religious subject matter. Religious art today is nothing but blasphemy.

IV.

It is equally futile to borrow religious forms of the past, such as the mystery play or the oratorio, while abstracting from the religious contents with which these artistic forms were bound up. Today, the obsolescence of individualistic art and its replacement by collectivism are taken for granted. It is this formula which engenders the most passionate attempts to mobilize once again the artistic forms of past religious ages. It is highly characteristic, however, that none of the attempts made in this direction has as its basis a true and concrete reconciliation between subject and object, between individual and collectivity, but that they reach their collective character only at the expense of the individual whose freedom of expression is more or less curtailed. This is closely connected with totalitarian tendencies in our society which I cannot dis-

cuss in these brief remarks. Conversely, it should be acknowledged, however, that there is no way back to individualistic art in the traditional sense either. In its relationship with collectivism and individualism art today faces a deadlock which we might try to overcome concretely but which certainly cannot be mastered by any general recipe and even less by "synthesis," by selecting the middle road. This deadlock is a faithful expression of the crisis of our present society itself.

V.

In an era such as ours, torn asunder by group antagonisms and all kinds of social discrimination, an era in which positive religion as well as traditional philosophy has lost a great deal of its mass appeal, to many the idea sounds alluring that the integrating force of those realms should have passed on to art. Art should, as the word goes, "convey a message" of human solidarity, brotherly love, all-comprising universality. It seems to me that the value of these ideas can only consist in their inherent truth, not in their social applicability, and even less in the way they are effectively propagated by art. In other words, to cope with them as such remains a matter of autonomous philosophical thinking. To make today those ideas the subject matter of works of art would be little better than modernistic mural paintings of saints or novels about dubious miracles—the ultimate ideas of philosophy would be distorted into a species of election slogans. If we are told that art, religion, and philosophy are, in the last analysis, identical, this does not suffice to justify the view that art should translate philosophical ideas into sensuous imagery. For the supposed identity of art, religion, and philosophy, even if it be true, is so utterly abstract that it virtually amounts to nothing and remains almost as thin as the truisms pronounced in Sunday schools and Philharmonic Committee meetings. What seems to be high-flown idealism actually presupposes the complete emasculation of all the contents in question, religious, philosophical, and artistic. They all become identical, or at least reconcilable with each other, as "cultural goods" which are no longer taken quite seriously by anybody. They are rendered harmless and impotent. It is the reduction towards something generally acceptable within the conformist pattern of given culture which produces the illusory appearance of spiritual identity. The apparently humanistic

emphasis on it has turned into a mere ideology. Art that wants to fulfill its humane destination should not peep at the humane, nor proclaim humanistic phrases.

VI.

I have stressed so far the sharp distinction between art and religion as well as between art and philosophy as it was brought about historically. This should not blind us, however, to the intimate relationship which existed originally between them and which led again and again to productive interaction. Every work of art still bears the imprint of its magical origin. We may even concede that, if the magic element should be extirpated from art altogether, the decline of art itself will have been reached. This, however, has to be properly understood. First, the surviving magic trends of art are something utterly different from its manifest contents or forms. They are rather to be found in traits, such as the spell cast by any true work of art, the halo of its uniqueness, its inherent claim to represent something absolute. This magic character cannot be conjured up by the desire to keep the flame alive. The actual relationship may be expressed paradoxically. Artistic production cannot escape the universal tendency of Enlightenment—of progressive domination of nature. Throughout the course of history the artist becomes more and more consciously and freely the master of his material and his forms and thus works against the magic spell of his own product. But it is only his incessant endeavor towards achieving this conscious control and constructive power, only the attack of artistic autonomy on the magic element from which this selfsame element draws the strength to survive and to make itself felt in new and more adequate forms. The powers of rational construction brought to bear upon this irrational element seem to increase its inner resistance rather than to eliminate it, as our irrationalist philosophers want to make us believe. Thus the only possible way to save the "spell" of art is the denial of this spell by art itself. Today it is only the hit composer and the best seller writer who prate about the irrationality and inspiration of their products. Those who create works which are truly concrete and indissoluble, truly antagonistic to the sway of culture industry and calculative manipulation, are those who think most severely and intransigently in terms of technical consistency.

VII.

I am fully aware of how unsatisfactory these fragmentary theses are. I am particularly conscious of one objection which will certainly be raised and which I have to accept. You will say that art, in spite of everything, is related to the universal; that one must not hypostatize the division of labor by regarding art as a self-sufficient tightly closed realm of its own. You may even suspect me of attempting to revive good old aestheticism, the idea of *l'art pour l'art* which has now been pronounced dead so many times. Nothing of this sort is my aim. As firmly as I am convinced that the dichotomy between art and religion is irreversible, as firmly do I believe that it cannot be naively regarded as something final and ultimate. But the relationship between the work of art and the universal concept is not a direct one. If I should have to express it boldly, I should borrow a metaphor famous from the history of philosophy. I should compare the work of art to the monad. According to Leibniz each monad "represents" the universe, but it has no windows; it represents the universal within its own walls. That is to say, its own structure is objectively the same as that of the universal. It may be conscious of this in different degrees. But it has no immediate access to universality, it does not look at it, as it were. No matter what we think about the logical or metaphysical merits of this conception, it seems to me to express the nature of the work of art most adequately. Art cannot make concepts its "theme." The relationship of the work and the universal becomes the more profound the less the work copes explicitly with universalities, the more it becomes infatuated with its own detached world, its material, its problems, its consistency, its way of expression. Only by reaching the acme of genuine individualization, only by obstinately following up the desiderata of its concretion, does the work become truly the bearer of the universal. I will call the name of an artist of our time who has followed this axiom to an extreme, who as many believe made a spleen of concretion, but thus achieved a degree of universality which I think unsurpassed in modern literature. I am thinking of the work of Marcel Proust. His glance at men and things is so close that even the identity of the individual, his "character," is dissolved. Yet it is his obsession with the concrete and the unique, with the taste of a madeleine or the color of the shoes of a lady worn at a certain party, which becomes instrumental with regard to the materialization of a truly theological idea, that of

immortality. For it is this concentration upon opaque and quasi-blind details through which Proust achieves that "remembrance of things past" by which his novel undertook to brave death by breaking the power of oblivion engulfing every individual life. It is he who, in a nonreligious world, took the phrase of immortality literally and tried to salvage life, as an image, from the throes of death. But he did so by giving himself up to the most futile, the most insignificant, the most fugitive traces of memory. By concentrating upon the utterly mortal, he converted his novel, blamed today for self-indulgence and decadence, into a hieroglyph of "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"



A Title

Rohwolt has reissued Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrat* in one of its low-priced paperback series,* and we should be grateful for that. The novel's fluorescence becomes all the more menacing the more outdated its material basis begins to seem—the stuffy *Gymnasium* room with the "Kabuff," the childish and sadistic professor, the vices of the beer cabaret and the disreputable suburban villa, the provincial demimondaine: it is as though the petit-bourgeois narrowness of daily life in Lübeck had become concentrated into the garish monstrosity that is its essence through the verve with which it is depicted. Sex turns into atmosphere and the citizens and their dependents throw off the masks of normality and display demonic grimaces and at the same time the helplessness vulnerability that is usually banished from the order of their existence. In the strength of its enchantment, whose aim is enlightenment, the novel is comparable only to Wedekind's *Frühlings Erwachen* [*Spring's Awakening*]; often it reads as though the bizarrely exaggerated resemblances of Daumier's caricatures had been dissolved in linguistic gestures. The description of the flag song performed before a frenzied audience on the *variété* stage says more about the ontology of neo-German nationalism than any historical tractatus could. From the French, Heinrich Mann learned the cutting quality of the unclouded gaze, the polemical force of coldness, and he refrained from the self-righteous conciliatory humor whose stock is so high in Germany. He demonstrated the

* Cf. Heinrich Mann, *Der blaue Engel* (Hamburg: Rohwolt, 1951;rororo Taschenbuch 35).