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The Authority of M. Derain

SOONER or later the critic who wishes to be taken seriously must say his word about Derain. It is an alarming enterprise. Not only runs he a considerable risk of making himself absurd, he may make a formidable and contemptuous enemy as well. "On ne peut pas me laisser tranquille?" grumbles Derain: to which the only reply I can think of is—"on ne peut pas."

Derain is now the greatest power amongst young French painters. I would like to lay stress on the words "power" and "French" because I do not wish to say, what may nevertheless be true, that Derain is the greatest painter in France, nor seemingly to forget that Picasso's is the paramount influence in Europe. For all their abjurations most of the younger and more intelligent foreigners, within and without the gates of Paris, know well enough that Picasso is still their animator. Wherever a trace of cubism or of tête de nègre or of that thin, anxious line of the "blue period" is still to be found, there the ferment of his unquiet spirit is at work. And I believe it is in revolt against, perhaps in terror of, this profoundly un-French spirit that the younger Frenchmen are seeking shelter and grace under the vast though unconscious nationalism of Derain.

For the French have never loved cubism, though Braque uses it beautifully. How should they love anything so uncongenial to their temperament? How should that race which above all others understands and revels in Life care long for an art of abstractions? How, having raised good sense to the power of genius, should France quite approve aesthetic fanaticism? What would Poussin have said to so passionate a negation of common sense? Well, happily, we know the opinion of Molière:

*La parfaite raison fuit toute extrémité,
Et veut que l'on soit sage avec sobriété*

Did ever Frenchman sympathize absolutely with Don Quixote? At any rate, because at the very base of his civilization lies that marvellous sense of social relations and human solidarity, no French artist will feel entirely satisfied unless he can believe that his art is somehow related to, and justified by, Life.

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Now Picasso is not Spanish for nothing. He is a mystic; which, of course, does not prevent him being a remarkably gay and competent man of the world. Amateurs, who knew him in old days, are sometimes surprised to find Picasso now in a comfortable flat or staying at the Savoy. I should not be surprised to hear of him in a Kaffir kraal or at Buckingham Palace; and wherever he might be I should know that under that urbane and slightly quizzical surface still would be kicking and struggling the tireless problem. That problem his circumstances cannot touch. It has nothing to do with Life; for not only was Picasso never satisfied with a line that did not seem right in the eyes of God—of the God that is in him I mean—but never would it occur to him that a line could be right in any other way. For him Life proves nothing and signifies not much; it is the raw material of art. His problem is within: for ever he is straining and compelling his instrument to sing in unison with that pitiless voice which in El Greco's day they called the voice of God. Derain's problem is difficult, and perhaps more exacting still.

It seems odd, I know, but I think it is true, to say that Derain's influence over the younger Frenchmen depends as much on his personality as on his pictures. Partly this may be because his pictures are not much to be seen; for he is neither prolific nor particularly diligent, and always there are half a dozen hungry dealers waiting to snap up whatever he may contrive to finish. But clearly this is not explanation enough: and to appreciate Derain's position in Paris one should be, what I unluckily am not, a psychologist. One should be able to understand why his pictures are imitated hardly at all, and why his good opinion is coveted: why young painters want to know what Derain thinks and feels, not only about their art, but about art in general, and even about life: and why, instinctively, they pay him this compliment of supposing that he does not wish them simply to paint as he paints. What is it Derain wants of them? I shall be satisfied, and a good deal surprised, if I can discover even what he wants of himself.

A year or two ago it was the fashion to insist on Derain's descent from the Italian primitives: I insisted with the rest. But as he matures, his French blood asserts more and more its sovereignty and now

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completely dominates the other elements in his art. Assuredly he is in the great European tradition, but specifically he is of the French: Chardin, Watteau, and Poussin are his direct ancestors. Of Poussin no one who saw *La Boutique Fantasque* will have forgotten how it made one think. No one will have forgotten the grave beauty of those sober grays, greens, browns and blues. It made one think of Poussin and of Racine too; French painting and literature being never quite so far apart as one would expect, and perhaps wish, them to be. And yet the ballet was intensely modern; always you were aware that Derain had been right through the movement—through fauvism, negroism, cubism. Here was an artist who had refused nothing and feared nothing. Could anyone be less of a reactionary and at the same time less of an anarchist? And, I will add, could anyone be less gavroche? *La Boutique Fantasque*, which is not only the most amusing but the most beautiful of Russian ballets, balances on a discord. Even the fun of Derain is not the essentially modern fun of Massine. Derain is neither flippant nor exasperated; he is humorous, and tragic sometimes.

English criticism is puzzled by Derain because very often it is confronted by things of his which seem dull and commonplace, to English critics. These are in fact the protests of Derain's genius against his talent, and whether they are good or not I cannot say. Derain has a supernatural gift for making things: give him a tin kettle and in half a morning he will hammer you out a Sumerian head: he has the fingers of a pianist, an aptitude that brings beauty to life with a turn of the wrist; in a word, that sensibility of touch which keeps an ordinary craftsman happy for a life-time: and these things terrify him. He ties both hands behind his back and fights so. Deliberately he chooses the most commonplace aspect of things and the most unlovely means of expression, hoping that, talent thus bound, genius will be stung into action. Sometimes, no doubt, Achilles stays sulking in his tent. I suppose Derain can be dull.

But what does he want this genius of his to do? Nothing less, I believe, than what the French genius did at its supreme moment, in the seventeenth century, what the Greek did in the fifth. My notion is that he wants to create art which shall be perfectly uncompromising and at the same

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time human: and he would like it none the worse were it to turn out popular as well. After all, Racine did this, and Molière and La Bruyère, and Watteau and Chardin and Renoir. It is in the French tradition to believe that there is a beauty common to life and art. The Greeks had it, so runs the argument, and the Italians of the high renaissance, but the English poets tended to sacrifice art to beauty, and the moderns—so Derain may think—sacrifice beauty and grandeur to discretion. The motto "Safety first" did, I will admit, just float across my eyes as I walked through the last salon d'automne. And then, Derain may feel that there is in him something besides his power of creation and sense of form, something which philosophers would call, I dare say, a sense of absolute beauty in things, of external harmony. However we may call it, what I mean is the one thing at all worth having which the Greeks had and the Byzantines had not, which Raphael possessed more abundantly than Giotto. In Derain this sense is alive and insistent: it is urging him always to capture something that is outside him: the question is, can he, without for one moment compromising the purity of his art, obey it? I do not know. But if he cannot, then there is no man alive to give this age what Phidias, Giorgione and Watteau gave theirs.

The French are not unwilling to believe that they are the heirs of Greece and Rome. So, if I am right, the extraordinary influence of Derain may be accounted for partly, at any rate, by the fact that he, above all living Frenchmen, has the art to mould, in the materials of his age, a vessel that shall contain the grand classical tradition. What is more, it is he, if anyone, who has the strength to fill it. No one who ever met him but was impressed by the prodigious force of his character and his capacity for standing alone. At moments he reminds one oddly of Johnson. He, too, is a dictator, at once humorous and tragic like the mirific doctor, but, unlike him, infinitely subtle. He, too, is troubled, and not by any sense of isolation nor yet by the gnawings of vanity and small ambition: it is the problem that tortures him. Can he do what Raphael and Racine did? Can he create something that shall be uncompromising as art and at the same time humane?

Face to face with that problem, Derain stands

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for what is today most vital and valid in France—a passionate love of the great tradition, a longing for order and the will to win it, and that mysterious thing which the Athenians called *σπουδιότης* and schoolmasters call “high seriousness.” He accepts the age into which he has stumbled with all its nastiness; vulgarity and cheek. He accepts that woebegone, modern democracy which could not even make its great war fine. He believes he can make something of it. Because he has a first-rate intellect he can afford to mistrust reason; and so sure is he of his own taste that he can brush refinement aside. Yet neither his scepticisms nor his superstitions alienate the intelligent, nor are the sensitive offended by his total disregard of their distinctions. And though all this has nothing to do with painting, or painters, I surmise, it has its effect.

CLIVE BELL.

