

E. H. Gombrich, Review of *Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttheorie im 19. Jahrhundert (Probleme der Kunstwissenschaft, I)*, *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. XLVI, 1964, pp.418-20 [Trapp no.1964G.1]

Kunstgeschichte und Kunsttheorie im 19. Jahrhundert (Probleme der Kunstwissenschaft, I), Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1963. Pp. 233; 2 pls. DM 38.00.

The title of this volume is somewhat misleading. It is not at all concerned with the historiography of art and only with one kind of theory of art - the antecedents, that is, of the approach advocated by Professor Hans Sedlmayr, for whose sixty-fifth birthday these seven papers were originally assembled by a group of his disciples. It would perhaps be raising expectations too high even to call this approach scholastic and hence Aristotelian, though it is true that Sedlmayr's method of "Structural Analysis" regards the "structure" of a work of art as a kind of hidden essence that inhabits the painting or building much as the Aristotelian entelechy inhabits the organism. But it is not the original nor even the mediaeval Aristotle who is here encountered but that artificially revived specter that haunted German romantic thought after Hume and Kant had laid the metaphysics of essences to rest. In this book the verbal twists by which Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling turned Kant's critical philosophy into a gnostic exposition of ultimate realities are accepted - as they have to be if the rest is to be of more than historical interest. Accordingly Mr. Rassem's introductory chapter endorses the idea of "science" as a system of concepts within which he locates the "ontological" place of *Kunstwissenschaft* according to the handbooks of C. B. Stark (1880) and F. Piper (1867). To those of us who do not believe in the importance of verbal labels such efforts are not only misguided but even harmful, as they encourage the belief that the art historian must forever stick to his "essential" last which was carved at a time when both shoes and problems were very different.

The same faith in verbal categories marks the chapter by F. Piel on the "Concept of Historical Style and the Historicity of Art." Almost one-half of its eighteen pages is taken up by quotations and summaries of Hegel's definitions. "Style," we learn (p. 23), "is the concept for the negation of the contingent both of the subject and the object. It is through style that the artist arrives at himself and at true objectivity, that is to say true originality." Hegel's metaphysics of history, according to which every phase of development follows logically from its antecedents, is then compared with the more naturalistic version of historical explanation that is found in Gottfried Semper, who is defended against the accusation of "materialism." To the author, in fact, Semper's system provides the dialectical transition to that of Alois Riegl, whose concept of *Kunstwollen* (will-to-art) is acknowledged to be "the final secularized form of the Hegelian World Spirit" (p. 36). Riegl, in his turn, is hailed as the founder of the *Strukturwissenschaft* whose value is seen, in Sedlmayr's words, *inter alia* in the recognition that "Reason is a variable that changes with history" ("Die Vernunft ist eine geschichtlich veränderliche Grosse"). If that is the case, it is unfortunately not possible by rational methods to decide from London in 1964 whether an essay written in Munich some years earlier is the product of reason or unreason. Be that as it may, the evolution of Sedlmayr's doctrines from Riegl's must apparently be seen as one of those "genuine historical wholes and meaningful self-movements of the spirit" (p. 36 - "echte historische Geschehensganzenheiten und sinnvolle Eigenbewegungen des Geistes") which can absolve the individual of personal responsibility and the historian of the need to see history in terms of people and their decisions.

The essay is followed by L. Dittmann's exposition of "Schelling's Philosophy of the Visual Arts." One quotation must suffice: "Only because the work of art is the reconciliation and the unity of the subjective and the objective, the conscious and the unconscious, of spirit and nature, of freedom

and necessity, is it able to reflect the absolute, the self-identical, the eternally one essence; only insofar as the work of art is a reconciliation of all contradictions, a perfect synthesis, is the absolute enabled to reveal itself through it" (pp. 52-53). Within the rules of ordinary logic it would be easy to deduce from this mumbo-jumbo that art being both everything and nothing is not a fit subject for a "science," or for any discussion, since all statements we may be able to make will equally apply, as will their contradictions. But it is really useless to argue where argument itself is rendered suspect as against some alternative mode of knowledge that is grounded in "myth" and "images." This conclusion is made explicit in the third and longest essay, by H. Schade, devoted to a critique of Wilhelm Dilthey's theory of art. Despite his derivation from Hegel, Dilthey presents a problem because in his version of *Geistesgeschichte*, a mythology and metaphysics are both seen as lower stages which are overcome by the rise of a rational approach that acknowledges the relevance of psychology and sociology for the understanding of the past. His loss of any metaphysical anchorage led Dilthey to search for a new foundation of consciousness "in the depths of the Germanic soul" (p. 103). The variable of reason happens to have moved away from this particular solution, and so Dilthey's historical relativism is made the occasion for a new search for absolutes, since Schade still believes that science must be "founded on concepts which are both necessary and embracing" (p. 122). The philosophical illiteracy of this demand is matched by the author's historical illiteracy, for in contrasting his two modes of knowing the author tries to adjudicate between Galileo and the Church: "It was the mistake of the believing scientists that they unreflectingly applied the image-insights (*Bilderkenntnisse*) of the Holy Writ to the realities of natural science, that is to say that they posited them as absolute. The mistake of Galileo and others lay probably in their opinion that they had fully exhausted cosmic reality by means of empirical science" (p. 127 - *Erfahrungswissenschaft*). Quite apart from the historical fact that Galileo in his *Dialogue* explicitly distinguished between the way his Platonic God apprehends the world and the groping advances of discursive reason, the imputation that it is the scientist rather than the Hegelian who believes himself in possession of ultimate explanations must not be allowed to stand. Granted that the author's uneasiness in the face of Dilthey's approach is legitimate and that what Wolfgang Kohler called "the place of value in a world of facts" presents a real problem to the student of art, his remedy of founding a renovated *Geisteswissenschaft* on the romantic belief in the "analogical nature of Being" (p. 132) will hardly commend itself to many readers of this journal.

The remaining three essays are less pretentious and therefore more interesting to the historian, but they suffer from another shortcoming that vitiates the contributions to this volume - their ignorance of ideas and movements outside the narrow circle of German Idealism. It is true that Mr. Rassem's preface explicitly acknowledges this shortcoming. "It goes without saying that the history of any science reaches beyond all national horizons" (pp. 16-17), but this afterthought does not dispose of the question whether it ever makes sense in the history of historiography to confine one's attention to the literature of one country or language. Can one really discuss Dilthey's interest in sociology without even mentioning the name of Hippolyte Taine? Can one pose the question of naturalism in the nineteenth century without showing oneself aware of the existence of Darwin, of Spencer, of Wundt? Mr. Bauer's essay on "Architecture as Art" may bring together quite interesting quotations and definitions from Schinkel, Goethe, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Schelling, but can one seriously discuss nineteenth century ideas about that art without mentioning Viollet-le-Duc or Ruskin? B. Rupprecht's final essay on "Plastic Ideal and Symbol in the Dispute about Images in Goethe's Era" may also contain some illuminating extracts from the polemics of classicists and romantics about the suitability of pagan and Christian subjects for sculpture and painting, but can one forget that Friedrich Schlegel published his romantic manifesto in his journal "Europa" in Paris in 1803, one year after Chateaubriand had championed the superiority of Christian themes in his

Génie du Christianisme? Can one discuss Runge's and Creutzer's ideas about symbols without thinking of Blake and his sources? The only essay of the volume which treats its subject in a European context is W. Messerer's "Remarks on Some Extreme Ideas about Funerals and Tombs around 1800." Its presence in this volume is probably due to the importance which Professor Sedlmayr attaches in his book on "Art in Crisis" to the utopian projects of the French Revolution. Unfortunately the project here discussed can hardly be taken seriously. It is P. Giraud's plan of a new kind of cemetery in which the bones of the dead are processed into a vitreous substance used for columns and images round the inevitable pyramid. Still, as a historical curiosity this plan deserves perhaps as much attention as do the weird systems of Schlegel and of Hegel.

Nobody who appreciates the enormous contribution which German scholars have made and continue to make to the history of art will deny the historical importance of German romanticism in this development. Science often starts from myth. Chemistry owes much to alchemy, astronomy to astrology. The fact that Columbus discovered America is not affected by his mistaken belief that he could sail westward as far as India. But if there are geographers who still cling to the belief that it was India where Columbus landed, they do not usually find a serious publisher. These are harsh words, I know, but failure to speak out against the enemies of reason has caused enough disasters to justify this breach of Academic etiquette.

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