Aesthetics

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Edited by Mahesh Gupta
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WITH THE EDITOR'S COMPLIMENTS

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OEUVRE

by NICHOLAS ROERICH

A clear yet at the same time an almost untranslatable French word. One can say “creative work”, yet for all that one has to be agreed in the understanding that the word “oeuvre” has entered from the French literature.

About art in all its manifestations, people are accustomed to judge very light-mindedly. Some have read two verses and already speak with authority about the poet. Some have seen three or four pictures or reproductions of pictures and already pass judgment on the artist. From one novel, they fix the position of a writer. One book of sketches is enough for an irreproachable opinion over a cup of tea.

More than once it has been noted in literature that the celebrated “cup of tea” binds one to nothing. And perhaps the pronouncements at the table likewise are not binding: yet, in the meantime, they often have very profound consequences. In such conversations over a “cup of tea”, people do not think about the fact that the separate productions are only as the petals of the entire “oeuvre”. Even an experienced horticulturist or botanist would hardly undertake to form a judgment about the design of a necklace from merely one or two links of it.

Each one has had occasion to listen to most definite opinions about an author, yet it proved upon verification, that only some one volume of all his writings had been read by the speaker, not to mention those in general who do not take the trouble to do any reading themselves, but pronounce their judgments according to the newspapers critiques. But the concept “oeuvre”, the concept of all of a person’s creative work, should be set forth with special clearness. Not only a single admirer, but for making a just estimate it is necessary also to assimilate his productions in the chronological order of their creation.

The whole creative work— it is like a necklace, put together in a definite order. Each production belongs to this or that psychological moment of the creator. The life of the artist has been composed of such moments. In order to understand a result, one must know the cause. One needs to understand why such and such a sequence of creation took place. Whatever internal or external circumstances were stratified and produced fragments of the whole creativeness, to leave them out would mean to form an opinion about the design of a necklace from merely one or two links of it.

In all kinds of creativeness—in literature, in music, in the graphic arts, an attentive and careful correlation is decidedly necessary. Each one has had occasion to read and to hear, how much has been attributed to authors, which was entirely alien to them, by quoting snatches from their uninterrupted train of thought. You know that not only casual people take it upon themselves to pass judgment. In each domain dwells a self-appointed judge.

I recall how in the law faculty the students were considering how they would apply their assimilated knowledge. One, who was attracted to the bar wished to be an administrator. Another aspired to the role of prosecutor, but a third, a fun-loving student, said: “For my part, it would certainly suit me to pass judgment on all of you.” Who knows perhaps, this jest really impelled him to a juridical career, for which in last analysis he had no special aptitude.

The same happens in many professions; in judgments about creativeness, much is contrived completely accidentally. But from this casualness often spring almost irreparable consequences.

It is said that the valuation by critics changes three times in a century,—that is, by generations. To observe these, deviations of evaluations is very instructive. How many irrelevant considerations will influence public opinion. Competition of publishers or greed of the dealers in artistic productions, finally of any of the various forms of envy and enmity which are so completely reflected in appraisals, that for the future investigator-historian it is often completely impossible to discriminate. A great number of examples of this could be adduced.

Let us recall how two competing publishers tried to disparage an author whom they had in view, in order to secure more cheaply the right of publishing his work. You know that such specific belittlements are to be found in any annals. Let us recall how a certain dealer in pictures tried by all means to depreciate for a time the value of an artist, with the end in view of buying up enough of his productions and then commissioning someone to resurrect anew the forgotten or discredited artist!

Let us not bring up certain episodes out of the world of collectors, when competition led
and all the paths of its expression. Thus once again we see how significant in its meaning.

In a time when music and the graphic arts have been subjected to mechanisation, precisely then must the appraisals of creativity be still more precise, profound, and well-grounded. At this very moment, when it is the modern practice to strive for the brief, the staccato, and the casual, it is especially necessary to aspire to evaluations on the basis of the entire oeuvre. Though it is difficult to translate, the word "oeuvre" is a very expressive one.

Let us recall my prolific writer. Can one form a judgment about him without knowing the sequence of all his works? One can, indeed, estimate separate productions of the author, but then this will be an opinion which concerns the author, but then this will safeguard for the glory of the nation entire imitations on the basis of the entire oeuvre.

The civilization of the Indus Valley represented a perfect adjustment of human life to a specific environment which could only have resulted from years of patient endeavour. It has endured through the ages and forms the basis of modern Indian culture. It is an amazing fact that any civilization or culture should have had this continuity for five or six thousand years or more. But this did not mean that India was static. She was changing and progressing all the time. Coming into contact with Persians, Egyptians, Chinese, Arabs and the peoples of the Mediterranean, she influenced them and in turn was influenced by them, but always her rural and self-sustaining country basis remained strong enough to endure.

The people who lived in those ancient times had among them men and women who understood life as it should be understood. It was out of their wisdom that a structure was built which gave India to us. It stated this and lasted these thousands of years.

There are many gaps between the old civilization and the India of today and may be the links that join us are not very evident. Nevertheless, there is a sense of continuity, of an unbroken chain which joins modern India to the civilization that began five or six thousand years ago.

The dominant feature of Indian culture and outlook in the past was an inner urge towards synthesis derived essentially from the Indian philosophic outlook. Each incursion of foreign elements was a challenge to this culture but it met it successfully by a new synthesis and a process of absorption. "Whatever the reason", says C. E. M. Joad, "it is a fact that India's special gift to mankind has been the ability and willingness of Indians to effect a synthesis of many different elements, both of thoughts and peoples, and to conserve in fact, unity out of diversity".

In India, there have never been two different departments for the art and life of the common man. They have always merged into one. Beautiful sculptured images formed part of the daily worship in every household. The rhythm of life was expressed in dancing which was an integral part of music. The ancient arts of our country, which were renowned the world over, died the day that the common man lost his individuality and perished under the heel of economic exploitation.

Today when a new era has dawned in our country many changes will take place. So far, being under foreign domination, we have tried to escape from the present in dreams of a vanished age, and have tried to find consolation in visions of past greatness. It is a dangerous pastime to indulge in but many years of such an imagery have taught us that we are still a spiritually great people is foolish, for spiritual or any other kind of greatness cannot be founded on lack of freedom, or on starvation and misery. But now all that is changed. We are masters of our own destiny and it is up to each and every one of us to try and shape the new India in such a way that it some day achieves the heights it once had known and may be, reach greater ones. But, in the process of creating a new and better India let us not be forgetful of the deep debt of gratitude we owe to our ancestors. It is due to their great wisdom and knowledge that we have survived all these years of foreign domination. In the joy of our newly acquired freedom let us not become arrogant, but let us retain some of that humility and graciousness that was the hallmark of our civilization and culture thousands of years ago and which has withstood the onslaught of time, giving to our outlook a uniqueness which is unknown elsewhere in the world. Throughout the early period of the Vedas there was still the theme of the "worthwhilness" of life It was still the theme of both young and old, thus enabling us to develop once again the arts, music, dancing and literature of which we were once so proud.