

1959

Book Reviews

Criticism Editors

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism>

Recommended Citation

Editors, Criticism (1959) "Book Reviews," *Criticism*: Vol. 1: Iss. 3, Article 8.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol1/iss3/8>

Book Reviews

Erratum

This article has been translated by Miss Liselotte Moser.

Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance by Edgar Wind. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958. Pp. 230, plates. \$7.00.

The latest study by the Ruskin Professor of the History of Art is vital reading for anyone seriously concerned with the Renaissance in whatever aspect. The work has bearings far wider than the usual history of art. No student of Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, the Pleiade, John Donne or Milton can afford to ignore its implications and the same applies to those who are pursuing the rise of medical science from its beginnings with Paracelsus, Servetus and Harvey, or for that matter the new fashions in architecture. Indeed one wonders how earlier scholars managed to dispense with that understanding of the Renaissance absorption in Neo-Platonism which has lately been arrived at, and which Professor Wind displays so brilliantly here.

The Italian academies from the time of Ficino onwards were notable for a devotion to Plato and the Neo-Platonists very different from the enthusiasm for classical studies which prevailed in the nineteenth century and which still influences us. The motives of their members were the same exactly as their medieval forbears. They wished to do honour to the "True Religion," the faith which according to St. Augustine existed before the time of Christ but since his Incarnation has been known as the Christian Religion. This truth Plato, the Moses of the Gentiles, possessed. Portions of it were to be found among the Persian magi, the Indian Brahmins, the Egyptian Hierophants, and not least, the Druids. Through the Greeks it entered the classical Mediterranean civilization and flourished, though with distortions; but the essence of it was to be found present among God's own people, the Jews. And not so much in their written law as in their mystical tradition, the Cabbala. This was the theory, and upon it was erected a mass of learning, impressive, though curious, inspiring in its turn some of the greatest creations of Renaissance art.

Professor Wind is careful to point out that not all the artists inspired by this syncretic view of the past were learned scholars; some *were*, indeed, like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. In other cases we have to remember that the artists would have contacts with members of the academies; so there was open to them the "relatively effortless way of acquiring some of [this knowledge] by oral instruction." But he insists that these theories *are* expressed in the greatest splendours of the contemporary art. And, as he puts it, "when ideas are so forcibly expressed in art, it is unlikely that their importance will be confined to art." So far is this from being the case that an attempt to master the rudiments of the symbolism, a willingness to penetrate to some degree the "poetic theology" of Pico della Mirandola and his followers, is essential for an understanding of the whole period. How deeply the Cabbalistic conception of Man's original androgyny impressed itself on the Renaissance mind can be seen from the examples Professor Wind gives in Spenser's poetry and John Donne's. When Spenser wrote of the veiled Venus,

"The cause why she was covered with a veil,
Was hard to know, for that her priests the same
From people's knowledge labour'd to conceal.
But sooth it was not sure for womanish shame,
Nor any blemish, which the work might blame;

But for, they say, she hath both kinds in one,
 Both male and female, both under one name;
 She sire and mother is herself alone,
 Begets and eke conceives, nor needeth none. . . ."

he is insisting on that disproportion, apparently monstrous, that "friendly enmity" without which Pico believed, as Professor Wind expresses it, there would be no creation, only God. And when John Donne exclaims,

"How brave are those who with their engines can
 Bring man to heaven, and heaven again to man . . .
 Both these in thee are in thy calling knit
 And makes thee now a blessed Hermaphrodite . . .,"

he celebrates the state "when all created things return to their maker, the unfolded and divided state of man will be re-folded in the divine essence." That sense of knowledge concealed, indeed of the "Absconded God" which Spenser hints at, derives principally from Pico's theories on the subject of Jewish mysticism. If Pico alluded to the Greek mystery rites embodying the revelation which Orpheus believed should be concealed from vulgar eyes, it was chiefly because he claimed that "the pagan tradition had a virtue in common with the Bible." Why should God need forty days in which "to hand Moses two tablets inscribed with ten commandments and accompanied by a series of liturgical rules"? No, clearly he revealed to him during that time "innumerable divine secrets which were not to be written down. These were transmitted among the rabbis by an oral tradition known as Cabbala." So great was the affinity that Pico discovered between these systems that he was willing to go as far as to conclude, "If the nature of Christian Grace were unfolded in the fulness of the secrets which St. Paul had revealed to Dionysius the Areopagite, it would be found that these theologies differed not at all in substance but only in name." No one can grasp what the Renaissance was about without understanding that the men of that time passionately desired to believe this to be true. Naturally; for it gave them full liberty to explore past glories with an easy conscience.

In virtue of this understanding it is plainly no longer of any avail to dismiss certain aspects of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as minor in significance, under the title of "occultism." This was no side line, but the heart of things. Though it was the preoccupation of only a small circle its influence spread everywhere and Professor Wind has shown that it illustrates a principle at work in history,

the lesson that the commonplace may be understood as a reduction of the exceptional, but that the exceptional cannot be understood by amplifying the commonplace.

Moreover Professor Wind has also displayed how much is added to our appreciation of a Renaissance picture or poem by some insight into this symbolism. Without it our pleasure is incomplete.

Aesthetically speaking, there can be no doubt that the presence of unresolved residues of meaning is an obstacle to the enjoyment of art. However great the visual satisfaction produced by a painting, it cannot reach a perfect state so long as the spectator is plagued by a suspicion that there is more in the painting than meets the eye. In literature, the

same sort of embarrassment may be caused by Spenser's, Chapman's or even Shakespeare's verses in a reader who has been advised to surrender himself to the music of the poetry without worrying whether he understands every line or not. But however justified as a preliminary approach, it is doubtful how long that attitude can be sustained without flattening the aesthetic enjoyment.

His illuminating expositions of Botticelli's *Primavera* and the *Birth of Venus*, above all his exciting chapter on Michelangelo, show in a practical way just how accurate Professor Wind's assessment of the problem is. Though every masterpiece must contain within it timeless qualities which belong to no particular age, yet with each is invariably associated something of the mental atmosphere prevailing in its own period. Until this aspect of the problem is resolved, appreciation can only be partial. Future readers and art collectors will have much trouble in understanding the books and pictures of the Atomic Age unless they possess at least a working knowledge of the theory of Atomic Energy. Should this have been lost, posterity will have to rediscover a most complex and esoteric form of truth with great labour. But it must not be supposed that most artists and writers working today are experts in nuclear physics. On the contrary the number of such experts throughout the world is still comparatively small. Professor Wind himself uses a similar analogy:

A historian tracing the echo of our own debates might justly infer from the common use of such words as microbe or molecule that scientific discovery had moulded our imagination; but he would badly err if he assumed that a proper use of these words would always be attended by a complete technical mastery of the underlying theory. Yet, supposing the meaning of the words were lost, and a historian were trying to recover them, surely he would have to recognize that the key to the colloquial usage is in the scientific, and that his only chance of recapturing the first is to acquaint himself with the second.

It is precisely this sort of activity which is the proper sphere of the scholar. Without such definite knowledge criticism must badly go astray. And if the same mind can combine such mastery of fact with a critic's true delicacy of perception, so much the better. In his presentation of Botticelli's *Primavera*, for instance, as the celebration of the Earthly Venus, of Generation ushered in by Nymph and Zephyr from, as it were, "the Northern Gate," and leading through the three Graces (Chastity harmonized with Joy by Beauty), to the figure of Mercury, symbol of heavenly contemplation; in this brilliant interpretation, Professor Wind has given us both. All civilized persons, to whom the great European tradition has meaning, owe him a debt of gratitude for the deeper understanding of it he has given us through his *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*.

London, England

DÉSIRÉE HIRST

Strains of Discord: Studies in Literary Openness by Robert M. Adams. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958. Pp. ix + 220. \$3.75.

Mr. Adams' second book (this is the third) was a glorious romp through all of the areas of Milton scholarship and criticism. In subsequent reviews and essays he has directed his attacks elsewhere—mainly against systematic critics. The mere appearance of *Strains of Discord* happily indicates to us that he has not yet been brought home stretched on his shield. In the terms of the archetypalists, whom he dislikes, he is now seeking the holy city, having put various dragons to the sword.

It is startling enough to see Mr. Adams entertaining the idea of a holy city at all, no matter how many gates he may imagine it to have. Recently he has argued vigorously against fire-breathing opponents who seek a "conceptual universe" for criticism. In the *Hudson Review* he has attacked both that two-headed dragon, the Wimsatt-Brooks history of criticism, and Northrop Frye's Saphirothic serpent, *Anatomy of Criticism*, because they have set up symmetrical systems for criticism. Nevertheless Mr. Adams' latest book, while still attacking the enclosure of formalist criticism as an "impulsion to Procrustean ruthlessness" and Frye's theory as "fiery yet cloudy," betrays a slight desire for the possible existence of the very thing that he has recently been so vehement in denying.

In this book Mr. Adams appears to be arguing *for* something, although we may guess from its tone that the original impulse is still negative. His point is that there is a kind of work which may be described as "open," as distinct from what he calls "closed" form: "The open form is literary form (a structure of meanings, intents, and emphases, i. e., verbal gestures) which includes a major unresolved conflict with the intent of displaying its unresolvedness." One is certain that in some of his recent reviews Mr. Adams is attacking all formalist systematic criticism as impossible or impossibly limited, but the words above would suggest that he is simply expressing wariness at a naive formalism which, unlike say Heraclitus or Parmenides, cannot see far enough into things to recognize the form of conflict: "The book undertakes . . . to observe and classify some varieties of open-formed literary works and to define the effects they produce. A corollary to this undertaking is the consideration of whether special criteria may not be appropriate to the judgment of open-formed works or whether a slight adjustment of already existing criteria, a modest shift of emphasis, will not suffice."

With this program, Mr. Adams begins his search for openness, and by increasing the breadth of his definition proceeds to find it nearly everywhere, even though he discounts fragments and unfinished works, automatic writing, and tricks and gadgets such as "The Lady or the Tiger."

Setting forth, Mr. Adams holds up on spearpoint *Oedipus Rex* as a typical or totally closed work and *The Bacchae* as an example of open form. In *Oedipus*, he argues, nothing in the play itself challenges its own aesthetic existence, there is no unresolved or discordant element incompatible with its conclusion, it gives a unified effect. Now we seem to be getting somewhere, although I think we have left the original definition of openness behind. Openness is now not merely to be the formal embodiment in the work of an unresolved conflict but one which the writer himself either was not aware of or simply could not formally overcome—a

conflict which, in more formalist terms at least, really would seem to flaw the work. But, dealing with *The Bacchae*, Adams eventually reverts to his former definition. *The Bacchae* "is divided in its message and impact . . . the whole point of the play is that man exists in a divided and contradictory position, subject to conflicting demands." I think it is clear to anyone that there is a considerable difference between *Oedipus* and *The Bacchae*, but if *The Bacchae* has a point which all of its elements combine to create, no matter what the nature of that point (and Mr. Adams says that it does), then I do not see how the play itself can be described as "divided in its message and its impact," except in the sense that it presents a thoroughgoing ambivalence, which is not what Mr. Adams seems to be leading us toward in his remarks about *Oedipus*. It would seem that Mr. Adams is using one set of criteria to prove *Oedipus* closed and another to prove *The Bacchae* open.

I wish that his book kept to the definition of openness negatively implied in his discussion of the closed *Oedipus*. In some of his discussions—of *Don Quixote*, *The Tale of a Tub* and Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, in the brief remarks about Whitman and Dylan Thomas—this definition seems to be in his mind. It is too bad that he did not consider at length some of the unfinished works of the romantic movement which apparently carried within them a contradiction so strongly felt by the author that he could not complete the poem. It is works of this kind that seem to me to be his real subject. Here he could truly say that formalist principles prevent the critical acceptance of important literature. Instead Mr. Adams seems often to be ruled by an unresolved contradiction in his own book. Unsympathetic to systematic criticism, as he has shown himself to be elsewhere, he has sought to present its limitations but has impaled himself on his own spearpoint. Most of his discussions simply lead to the delineation of a large scale formal ambivalence in the work being considered, and this, as he seems to admit in his last chapter (p. 201), is rather old hat. Clashing of swords still ringing in the ears of readers of the *Hudson Review* has resulted primarily in a "modest enlargement of existing methods," though even this seems to me not a new departure; and certainly it is a retreat back into systematic criticism. This is by no means to deny the effectiveness of Adams' usually conventional method. In his chapter "Two Plays by Ibsen" Adams argues convincingly that *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts* are worked out to a complete pattern but that the effect on the audience is not an "emotional equilibrium," that as a result the plays seek not an "aesthetic" effect of purgation but an effect of unrelieved tension. Openness here refers to the effect on the audience; openness is the continued withholding of relief. Mr. Adams writes: "An open literary structure may . . . be the expression of a closed philosophic structure which assigns to literature itself an inferior status. Such a literary work tries to surmount its categorical inferiority by a kinesis which grows out of the entrapment structure (the audience committed, then attacked), combined with a deliberate failure to close off the end of the pattern. This structure may aim at causing the work of art to overflow its aesthetic condition and to exist in an ethical non-structured capacity within the audience's mind." Reading these sentences, we remember wistfully Mr. Adams' pledge in the preface to write as plainly as possible. For the most part, however, the writing is lucid, and interesting insights are abundant.

It seems to me that there is a divorce between feeling and method in this

book. Mr. Adams dislikes critical systems, but one finds him for the most part clinging to conventional methods. There are, I think, two kinds of "open" works, those which really are unresolved and those which are resolved simply on a higher level than we often are inclined to look. A study of the former would send the critic into a new and strange area; a study of the latter seems to return him to present modes of analysis. What Mr. Adams seems mainly to have done is set out to interpret works of the former kind only to encompass them after all in system. I am not against the results of all this, but it seems to me that the theoretical arguments of the book have little to do with the effectiveness of the interpretations.

The weakness of Mr. Adams' argument as it has developed in his recent writing is the assumption that because certain literary works are "open" then criticism too must be totally "open" instead of "scientific" and provisionally "closed." I do not see how this conclusion necessarily follows. This basic distrust of system seems to permeate what theory there is in the book and accounts perhaps for the fact that the term "open" finally takes on so many meanings that it ultimately seems to mean either nothing or several different things for which many formalist theories allow plenty of room. The moral of this is perhaps that without a position oneself one can possibly poke quite large holes in the systems of others, but that one's own creative remarks will not easily be gathered into unity. It would seem that the critic is like Blake's Los, who was an artist. He must create a system or be enslaved by another man's. Between these alternatives there is quicksand.

Michigan State University

HAZARD ADAMS

The Art of Painting by Leonardo da Vinci, 1957, plates. Pp. 224. \$4.75;

The Writings of Albrecht Dürer, 1959, plates. Pp. xviii + 288. \$6.00;

On Art and Artists by August Rodin, 1957, plates. Pp. 252. \$6.00.

Intros. by Alfred Werner. New York: Philosophical Library.

These three writings by three great artists are long established as indispensable for the study of art history. They belong to the most valuable sources written by artists which enable us to reactivate the intent of art. Beyond this they are "classics" in the history of technic and criticism of the arts. The contents of the three books are familiar to all students of art and need therefore no thorough reviewing. Only the prefaces written by the same author, Alfred Werner, Lecturer at Wagner College, will be considered here.

They are most lucidly written. Mr. Werner stresses the important facts in the life of the artists and brings out the main ideas of their writings or conversations. He puts these ideas into the time frame but shows also the importance of the work and thought of the respective artists for *our* time. Beyond this the reader is informed about the history of the translations of the three writings into English, the last editions of which were long out of print and out of reach to the American art student.

Leonardo's *Trattato della Pittura* had never been a book or even a finished manuscript but a loose collection of observations and thoughts without much organization. It had first seen print in the original Italian in 1651, but was published in Paris by Rafael Trichet Dufresne, who dedicated the book to Christina, Queen of Sweden. Dufresne relied on two 16th century copies of the original notes by Leonardo which are lost to us but which were disseminated in partial handwritten copies during the lifetime of the great artist. The French editor and translator arranged Leonardo's scattered observations on art into a sequence which to him seemed the logical one. This edition in the Italian language was illustrated by engraved reproductions after the designs by no less a painter than the great Nicolas Poussin, at least as far as figures and figural compositions are concerned. One can hardly think of greater differences in drawing style and handling of the human figure than exist between the slender, vivid, elegant drawings by Leonardo and the heroically-muscular, academically-formulative ones by the French Baroque Classicist Poussin. But we welcome seeing these illustrations about which, up to now, we have only read.

The text of the present edition follows the fine English translation by John Francis Rigaud of 1802 which appeared in London. Rigaud was a French Huguenot born in Turin, Italy, later a member of the Royal Academy in London. Thus Leonardo's appeal had been at all times an international one.

Among the early readers of some of Leonardo's notes was probably his contemporary Albrecht Dürer, since there exist almost verbatim parallels between the two artists' written thoughts on art and even more striking similarities among their art work. Anyway Dürer was similarly theoretically and universally inclined and has rightly been called the "German Leonardo," as mentioned in Mr. Werner's preface.

The *Writings of Albrecht Dürer* were selected, translated, and published by the British scholar W. Martin Conway in 1889 (Cambridge, England) under the guidance of Moritz Thausing of Vienna, who had been Director of the Albertina Collection there, the largest receptacle of Dürer's drawings. Thausing had five years earlier, in 1882, published the first scholarly monograph on the German artist on which Conway relies.

Though the scholarship in Dürer research has since been immensely enriched by such men as Heinrich Wölfflin (1928), Erwin Panofsky (1943) and Wilhelm Waetzold (1950), Conway's elaborate introductions to the "Literary Remains," which make up more than half of the book, are masterly essays on Dürer's art and time. There is nothing else comparable to them in the English language except Campbell Dodgson's writings on *Dürer's Engravings and Etchings* (London and Boston, 1926) and of course E. Panofsky's standard work, originally conceived in German.

Rodin's *On Art and Artists* is a reprint of the adequate translation by Romily Fedden of the French journalist Paul Gsell's conversations with the French sculptor. Since this important book has been long out of print in the English language, the Philosophical Library fulfils an urgent need, though some of the French sparkle of the interviews would of course be missing even in the most excellent English translation. Indeed the skill of Gsell to make "le grand maître" talk, his change of scene from Rodin's studio in Meudon to the collections of the Louvre and from there to a small, typically Parisian restaurant is admirable. The conversations are written with the greatest skill of French journalism, keep a

high level and have the ring of authenticity. Rodin was a writer on art in his own right; thus ways of comparing his ideas expressed in the written and the spoken word exist.

What was around the turn of the century most revolutionary and shocking aesthetics, namely to define *beauty* as *character* (realized in Rodin's "Vieille Heaulmière," the old courtesane of Villon's poem, reproduced among many other works by Rodin in the book under review), is now almost standard belief.

Mr. Werner's preface in general does well in giving an account of the re-evaluation of Rodin's art by the critics of the 20th century and states rightly that to us the convenient label of Rodin the Impressionist is no longer satisfactory, that it should be replaced by Rodin the Post-Impressionist. Rodin opened with his "Balzac" the road to abstract art and with his "Prodigal Son" has anticipated the "space" art of Henry Moore.

Wayne State University

ERNST SCHEYER