

Sixpenny Art

December 4, 2010

The French painter Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) repudiates modern society for the sake of art, yet the art he made himself free to create does not seem to have brought him peace (EC 175). The English novelist Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) writes a version of Gauguin's life a few years later which seems to confirm both the repudiation and the lack of peace (EC 176). But why is the modern artist at odds with the society that he reflects, and that supports him? And why is the modern art he produces normally so ugly? And why do people persist in supporting ugly art?

The artist as rebel goes back to the Romantics. Romanticism flourished alongside the French Revolution, which merely broke out in 1789, but has been pulling down throne and altar ever since. Modern artists, reflecting the society in which they live, as artists cannot help doing, steadily more repudiate God. Now if God does not exist, then surely the arts should have flourished serenely in their new-found liberty from that illusion of God that has dominated men's minds from time immemorial. Yet is modern art serene? Or is it not rather suicidal?

On the other hand, if God exists, and if the artist's talent is a gift from God to be used for his glory, as countless artists from the past used to proclaim, then the godless artist will be at war with his own gift, and his gift will be at war with his society, and society will be at war with his gift. Is this not rather what we observe all around us, for instance the deep scorn of modern materialists for all the arts, beneath a pretence of respect?

If God exists, at any rate the questions asked above are easy to answer. Firstly, the artist is at odds with modern society because the breath of God within him that is his talent knows

that his society is despicable insofar as it is godless. The fact that society supports him despite his scorn makes it merely more despicable. As Wagner once said when his increased orchestra meant eliminating a row of seats in the theatre, "Fewer listeners? So much the better!" Secondly, how can a gift from God that is turned against him produce anything harmonious or beautiful? For anyone to find modern art beautiful he must reverse the meaning of words: "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (Macbeth) – yet when did even a modern artist mistake ugliness for beauty in a woman? And thirdly, modern people will persist in their reversing the meaning of words because they are making war on God, and have no intention of letting up. "Rather the Turk than the tiara," said the Greeks just before the catastrophic fall of Constantinople in 1453. "Rather Communism than Catholicism," said American Senators after World War II, and they had their wish.

In brief, Wagner, Gauguin and Maugham and thousands of modern artists of all kinds are right to scorn our sixpenny Christendom, but the answer is not to make even more war on God with modern art. The answer is to stop making war on God, to give him again the glory due to him and to put Christ back into Christendom. How much more ugliness will it take for men to turn back to the tiara and to choose once more Catholicism? Will even World War III be enough?

Kyrie eleison.