

COMPLETING THE DIALOGUE

By MARGARET MANION

ART IS A 'three-way' communication. It is initiated when the artist responds to inspirational forces beyond his or her own being. These stimuli go by a variety of names—the muses, nature, God or the human condition. It is commonly agreed, however, that art results when fresh insights or new visions are expressed in striking and distinctive ways through an artist's skill with words, music, gesture etc., or through his or her expertise in the crafting of physical materials. The works of art so fashioned or 'created' characterize their makers as participants in an absorbing dialogue:

These things, these things were here and but the beholder
 Wanting, which two when they once meet,
 The heart rears wings bold and bolder
 And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.
 ('Hurrahing in Harvest')

Paradoxically, this intimate and concentrated relationship between the individual and the source of inspiration involves, perforce, communication with others; indeed, the more powerful and pervasive the primary artistic response the more insistent is the need for this to be universalized. Hence not only are art and artists a self-evident part of human society, but the role of audience or critic is also fundamental to human experience.

It does not follow, however, that because these are concepts that we take for granted, there is no need to reflect on their implications for us individually or for our communities. We often need to cherish and to nurture precisely those skills and activities which are our human heritage so that we may conduct our lives with that blend of natural aptitude and contemplative purpose that is the mark of true vitality. Perhaps especially today when for many of us life is more intense, competitive and pressured than ever before, it is important to stand back and consider the significance of art and artist in our lives. The centenary of the death of Gerard Manley Hopkins provides an appropriate opportunity to do this since Hopkins himself wrote as both poet and critic, and time has

by no means diminished his artistic reputation, rather it has served to show that his work achieved that blend of individualization and universal import after which he strove so passionately.

When we place ourselves in the role of audience, the artist becomes a being apart, almost as stilled and finished as by convention we view the work of art itself. From such a perspective we play no part in art's making. This sense of otherness is important, for it highlights the individuality of a particular artistic creation, wherein lies much of its power to move us, transporting us to places where we have never been before. The quest for this uniqueness was an explicit and dominating preoccupation of Hopkins's imaginative journey. Throughout his poetry and critical writings he consistently sought to define the precise and unrepeatable quality of the source of his inspiration and its effect, using the word 'inscape' to refer to individuation, and developing peculiarities of language to communicate the haunting 'thisness' of things. Favourite poems and passages spring to mind—the cumulative build-up of adjectives, for example, that characterizes the evening sky in 'Spelt from Sybil's Leaves': 'Earnest, earthless, equal, attuneable, vaulty, voluminous . . . stupendous', and establishes a relentless rhythm appropriate to the prophetic intent of the poem, while at the same time reinforcing the image of 'the tool-smooth bleak light' which 'only the beak-leaved boughs dragonish damask' as they show 'black, Ever so black on it'. Thus is provided the distinctive setting so integral to the poet's reflections on the starkness and awesome simplicity of the final things by contrast to the 'skeined stained veined variety' of life's daily round.

In one sense our role as audience, when presented with a work such as this, is to respond as the poet guides us letting his magic work its spell and assuming that 'willing suspension of disbelief' advocated by Coleridge as the appropriate way of becoming attuned to the artist's vision. When we succumb to the beauty and the manifest skill of a work of art the basic response is wonder, delight and admiration. There are simple and widely-shared ways of expressing externally such emotions. At artistic performances the burst of applause is an age-old means of releasing the tension involved in following silently and concentratedly a sustained musical or dramatic event, and at the same time of jointly communicating enthusiasm and joy. While we do not walk around an art exhibition clapping each painting, if the works have genuinely moved us we will be eager to tell others of the experience and if we know the artist or can do so we may offer our congratulations. Such expressions are relatively untutored but they are nonetheless precious and important on several counts. Firstly, it matters to the artist. We know

that it is the fate of many creative people not to receive due recognition in their lifetime, but the encouragement and support of friends, colleagues and some degree of public acclaim are critical for the continuing development of the artist's talents. Secondly, unless they are used as a pure convention, acclamation and congratulations tell us in a universal language that our sense of wonder and delight is shared and thus strengthened. They become bonds that unite members of an audience, and can help us to see the differences that sometimes separate us in the workplace or the home as less menacing. Finally, these are also acts of generosity—we applaud and congratulate another and in that graced moment forget ourselves and our ambitions. Generosity begets largeness and openness of heart which in turn lay one open to the creative process.

Beyond the audience response that springs from recognition of a particular gift or talent, we have the more measured reaction of the critic. Mixed with emotional reaction is the exercise of comparative judgement; certain standards are established by which a particular performance or work is assessed, and the critic enters into an interlocutory dialogue with the art or artist, in which both presences and absences are identified, and strengths and weaknesses isolated. Such critique forms the backbone of the study of the liberal arts throughout the history of Western culture. It encompasses the establishment of authentic texts or art objects, their interpretation or translation to other ages and other societies, and their relationship to particular contexts. The importance of the critical stance cannot be underestimated. It may be seen as bringing to bear on the creative process an element of objectivity of which the artist at the moment of involvement is incapable—at least relatively speaking, since the imaginative energies are foregrounded in an engaged rather than impartial dialogue.

Yet, to speak in these terms is to adopt a particular theoretical and artificial definition of art and art criticism. For the wonder of the human mind is that when we perform as creative artist we can also reflect on the process, indeed weave critique into creation and provide to some degree our own audience. It is no less true that the role of audience and critic is far from being simply an objective sounding board. Throughout Shakespeare's *King Henry V* runs the conceit that the imagination of the audience is partner in the play's unfolding:

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;
Into a thousand parts divide one man,
And make imaginary puissance. (Act I, Prologue).

Thus with imagined wing our swift scene flies,
 In motion of no less celerity
 Than that of thought . . . Suppose that you have seen
 The well-appointed king at Hampton pier
 Embark his royalty; . . .
 Work, work your thoughts, and therein see a siege;
 Still be kind
 And eke out our performance with your mind. (Act 3 Prologue)

Shakespeare, here, as so often, brings home in telling fashion a fundamental truth, namely that we are all called to be artists and to participate in the creation of art. For the notion of the perfected work of art is a half-truth. Precisely because art has to do with communication, with stimulus and response, it is in one sense always asking for completion or continuation from new audiences. The role of critic, too, is multi-faceted; often it involves not simply an effort to assess objectively the artist's work, but also to interact with the creative challenge from a new stance and thus elicit fresh insights not previously articulated. A further layer of complexity is involved when we recall that all these roles—artist, audience, critic—may be either public and professional, or more personal and in varying degrees amateur. Even in one individual the balance or the mix of roles will vary according to particular circumstances and commitments.

Artistic or critical comment is also frequently related to other goals or functions. Poetry or plays can be devised or commissioned to celebrate particular events—a ruler's wedding, for example, the victory of a nation or a special anniversary of its founding. The visual arts may be closely tied to utilitarian needs—the story of early Greek painting is part of the saga of the export trade in ceramics in the ancient Mediterranean world, ceramics that were used for a host of purposes, for storing grain and oils, for serving food and drink, or for more ceremonial and ornamental use. Indeed, much painting and sculpture throughout the ages has been designed for a particular use or context. The medium of fresco or mosaic usually predicates a building to be decorated for domestic, state or religious purposes, and themes and programmes reflect these emphases. The custom of displaying works of art in museums or galleries independently of their function or basic decorative context is relatively recent in the history of Western culture, with our earliest museums going back only as far as the Renaissance. Thus, there is a sense in which art may be seen as permeating the social environment and being used or directed for purposes outside itself. This is even more the case when we consider art and

patronage. Often artists are dependent on the wealth or support of people whose experiences and way of life are far removed from theirs, and questions arise as to what degree the artist is affected by the anticipated response of the patron.

All these diverse relationships of the art and artist with audience, critic, recipient or patron indicate the complexities of the communication we are considering. Let us turn now to examine in more detail the practical implications involved in participating in the artistic process.

Firstly, how important is education in the arts for us to be able to respond appropriately? I believe that every society should provide the opportunity for its people to experience art and respond to it. In Western culture this means that both at school and at home there should be increasing opportunities to be introduced to works of the past and present—to poetry, drama, prose, music, dance, song and the great range of the visual arts, in ways that bring home the value and the attractiveness of art. This will happen only if the people responsible for the young—teachers and parents—themselves care about these things. We have said that it is natural to respond to art, but this can also be exacting and require effort. Perhaps the most necessary quality and condition for art to communicate is attentiveness and openness on behalf of the audience. It is not difficult today to provide access to artistic experience, the challenge lies rather in persuading people to give art the time and attention it requires. However great the natural talent of an artist, success will be achieved only by sustained and concentrated work. This is no less true of the artistic audience. Reading, looking, memorizing, reflecting and articulating responses can all be both pleasurable and exacting tasks. If insufficient time is given to them or value placed on them, then the artistic activity of us all is weakened. Paradoxically, response to art involves freedom, one cannot coerce response or appreciation. That is why role models are an important element in art education. If children see that those whom they love and admire give time to art and enjoy it, then their interest and enthusiasm will grow. Art must be received as a natural part of our lives, not something that is so special that it seems alien. Active enjoyment and critical response should begin early. We need perhaps to remind ourselves that relaxation and enjoyment do not usually mean doing nothing or remaining completely passive, rather the energetic but unpressured focussing of attention and perception of eye or ear can restore and refresh. The element of critical reflection is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges for our society. We are deluged with information and stimuli by the media, and communication through newspapers,

journals, magazines and television calls for little response as we submit to the bombardment of disparate words and images often evocative of distressing and conflicting emotions or of fantasies that lull the mind into a false sense of security; but true art is not an escape from reality, it is rather the human effort to respond to the beauty and suffering that is so much part of our existence.

As with all education, responsibility rests with a variety of individuals, groups and institutions. Artists themselves are all called to some degree to educate their audience in creative response or participation. Many writers, painters, sculptors are today perforce also teachers, teachers not simply of their craft but of literary criticism, art history and other such intellectual disciplines. This may be work that is undertaken largely for economic reasons and if it is too time-demanding or draining it can be counter-productive for the artist. When the appropriate balance is struck, however, and at particular times in an artist's career, such an arrangement can be most productive for both artist and the audience-critic in formation. Schemes such as artist-in-residence at universities, colleges and other public institutions concerned in some way with education are proving most effective in this regard. Artists will vary in their ability and their inclination to speak critically about their own work or the artistic process, but some input is valuable, particularly since it bridges what can be a too artificial gap between artistic initiation and response.

Cultural institutions clearly have a major role to play in this area. Art galleries and museums are entrusted with preserving the artistic heritage of the past and of making it accessible to the present generation. This involves not simply ensuring that works of art are appropriately conserved and available for viewing. As with the effective teacher or scribe to whom Christ refers in the gospel, the art museum must constantly seek our attention by displaying from its storehouse old things and new. Very much part of the responsibilities of the modern museum or gallery is a consistent series of exhibitions or events which highlight certain aspects of our artistic heritage or focus on particular modern movements and initiatives. In this way the museum helps orchestrate continuing communal participation in artistic discourse, and fosters that element in a work of art that has the capacity to develop in fresh contexts and new ages. Renaissance artists who were among the first to reflect on art in modern theoretical language commented on the power of the painter to bring together in one composition things that are by nature separate and discrete. Analogously, an art exhibition enables works from different stages in an artist's career or pieces from distinctive countries and periods

to be shown side by side, thus illuminating and sharpening the comment of each item as well as making an integrated impact. Such exhibitions have very much something of the creative performance about them; context and arrangement affect our response. Their effect is, nevertheless, enduring, especially when they are accompanied by detailed catalogues, critical commentaries and symposia that are perpetuated in print. They also exemplify the close nexus that exists between artistic creativity and intellectual knowledge; one is stimulated by the other, and both approaches are mutually reinforcing.

A similar interaction exists between the performance of music, poetry, drama, and engaged criticism. This continuous dialogue in the public arena must be encouraged for art to make its invigorating impact on our quality of life. It is particularly important for the industrialized world to be reminded that art cannot be divorced from the well-being of society as a whole. One often hears today of the need for greater specialization in science and technology to achieve economic prosperity, and some who are dedicated to this cause give the impression that the arts and the critical disciplines associated with them will somehow flourish of their own accord. This is short-sighted and unimaginative thinking. History has shown that creativity in the arts, sciences and technology goes hand in hand. In the last analysis neither art, intellectual curiosity nor technological invention are absolute goals. However dedicated and single-minded the pursuit of an individual or a society, there is always a dimension of human living that calls for integration and the incorporation of specific achievements into the pursuit of the common good. This perspective is singularly difficult to achieve, and nowhere is its exercise more important than in the sphere of government, where often, it seems, the political impetus to carry out successfully a particular programme negates balanced objectives. The leaders and wielders of power in society are amongst those most in need of being equipped with an education which is grounded in respect for and sensitivity to the arts. Since in a democracy our leaders may come from virtually any walk of life, it follows that such education should be common to all—lest Shakespeare's warning fall on deaf ears: 'the man that has no music in his soul is fit for treasons, stratagems and wars'.

Especially in the context of the celebration of the anniversary of Gerard Manley Hopkins, priest and poet, it is appropriate to conclude this reflection on the importance of participation in the artistic process, by discussing briefly the relationship of religion and art. The history of the response of the Christian Church to art is both fascinating and complex. On the one hand, there has

always been an intimate connection. Christian liturgy is in a sense sacred drama, and the mysteries of Christ's saving life, passion, death and resurrection are made present to succeeding generations in ways that are analogous to artistic communication. The ultimate purpose is different, however, for art is concerned with process, together with the expression of human and natural limitations and longings, without being necessarily directed to specific religious beliefs, although sometimes it seems to be almost totally absorbed by the sacred. For Australian Aborigines, for example, art is an essential part of religious ceremony, and is so bound up with ritual enactment that it is often communicable only to initiates. Christianity had from its beginnings a complex relationship with art. Judaism was rich in literature—both poetry and a wide range of prose genres. It also had a strong tradition in building and ornamental craftsmanship. Embedded in its religious tenets, however, was an explicit interdiction against the making of images: 'You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, Yahweh your God, am a jealous God . . .' (Deut 5,8-9). The context of this prescription clearly indicates that it is directed against the idolatrous practices prevalent in neighbouring peoples. It had the effect, however, of helping to shape Judaic artistic expression in ways distinctive from the classical and Hellenic culture with which Christianity also soon came into contact; but the fact that the Church adopted a highly visual and figurative mode for the expression of its religious mysteries and, despite the upheaval of iconoclasm, established a strong tradition of sacred images, was not due to a victory of Hellenic culture over that of Judaism. Christianity devised its own distinctive relationship with art and images. This was based primarily on the doctrine of the incarnation—the enfleshment of God—which made the whole of the natural world reflective of the divine in a new way, and at the same time rendered God directly accessible through the humanity of Christ. Moreover, belief in his bodily resurrection meant for the Christian that the new creation had begun, and that paradise could already be experienced on this earth as well as being the goal towards which all nature tends. Thus Christian culture, while absorbing pre-existing images and themes from local sources and diverse traditions, initiated a fresh phase in imaginative and critical discourse because of a new perception of reality.

Throughout the history of Christianity the arts have proved a powerful stimulus to worship and contemplation. The portrait presented of Christ himself in the gospels shows him capturing the

hearts and minds of his disciples and followers by both his words and deeds. 'Never man spoke like this man spoke.' It is not simply the power and authority of his utterances that moved his audience; he is revealed as the one who can hold crowds rapt by his stories, by parables and telling comparisons drawn from nature and common experience or from Judaic literature and tradition. Christ is both messiah and artist.

But art, within the Christian context, has also caused anxiety and concern to individuals and institutions, because of its potential to distract and to be sought as an end in itself. Indeed, there is a consistent element of tension in the Church's relationship to art, a tension which is tellingly highlighted in the contrasting attitudes of two great twelfth-century monks, St Bernard of Clairvaux, leader of the Cistercian reform, and the Abbot Suger, enthusiastic renovator of the great abbey church of St Denis, Paris, and a key contributor to the rise of the French gothic cathedral. For Bernard—whose writings reveal him as a literary genius of sensitive and penetrating imagination—the exuberances of medieval sculpture and painting were distracting and inappropriate for the monastic complex:

The church is adorned with gemmed crowns of light . . . we see candelabra standing like trees of massive bronze, fashioned with marvellous subtlety of art, and glistening no less brightly with gems than with the lights they carry. What, think you, is the purpose of all this? The compunction of penitents, or the admiration of the beholders? O vanity of vanities, yet not more vain than insane (E. Holt, *Documentary sources of art history*, vol 1, Princeton, 1957, p 20).

For Suger, the splendour of materials and the artist's craftsmanship were a means to enter into the glory of the Lord:

Often we contemplate, out of sheer affection for the church our mother, these different ornaments both new and old and when—out of delight in the beauty of the house of God—the loveliness of the many-coloured gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that, by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner (*Abbot Suger on the abbey church of St Denis and its art treasures*, ed E. Panofsky, Princeton, 1979).

This tension lies at the heart of all art, and it is our response and participation—emotional, critically aware and reflective—that continually define its limitations, achievements and potential, whether the context be religious or otherwise.

Hopkins experienced personal conflict and tension between his calling to the priesthood in the Society of Jesus, and the expression of his great poetic gifts. This was rooted as much in his personality and the choices he freely but painfully made, as in the distinct objectives of his twofold calling. Paradoxically his creative talent was nurtured through these very circumstances, and resulted in poetry that is characterized by its unique blend of religious and artistic integrity. Such testimony is of critical importance for the Church today where the challenge for the Christian is not simply to discern between the worldly and spiritual in art, but rather to give artistic creativity the respect and attention it requires. Only then can our minds and imaginations continue to engage in wondering and reflective communication with a world that is 'charged with the grandeur of God', and in which, despite anguish and suffering and the possibility of disasters of cosmic proportions: 'There lives the dearest freshness deep down things'.