Foreword

Brian Fallon

Art and philosophy have often been unhappy bedfellows, so much so in fact that a possible divorce seems periodically to have threatened their relationship, or at least a separation *a mensa et thoro*. The philosopher and the artist appear to stand too far apart from one another to allow for genuine, sustained understanding and mutual sympathy, yet much too close to permit mere indifference or neutrality. This intermittent hostility can be found as early as the early, pre-Platonic Greek philosophers, with whom it mainly shows itself in the form of gibes at Homer and at poets in general. And who does not know that Plato in his *Republic* excluded most artists and poets from his ideal community? Yet Plato was also a gifted poet in his own right, and in other – and better – Dialogues he discourses as eloquently on the arts as anyone in history has ever done.

This curious duality is a recurrent feature among thinkers, including – as this book shows – Kierkegaard, who himself was a considerable literary artist. As that fine writer and musician, Cecil Gray, wrote seventy years ago in his (badly neglected) *History of Music*:

It certainly could not for a moment be denied, even by their most fervent admirers, that the vast majority of those who are by universal consent regarded as the greatest thinkers of all time cut a very sorry figure indeed when they attempt to explain or define the nature and *raison d'être* of art. Aesthetics, indeed, is perhaps of all possible fields of philosophic enquiry the one in which most nonsense has been talked and written. There must, one feels, be something about art which completely upsets philosophic equilibrium. However much at his ease the sage may be with those plain and homely sisters, the Good and the True, he is completely *bouleversé* when he is suddenly confronted with that fascinating and enigmatic third sister, the Beautiful. In fact he seems to lose his head, and to behave in much the same way as when he encounters her in real life, in concrete female form. It is almost pathetic to see the way in which he becomes either fatuously ecstatic or puritanically disapproving,

according to his temperament; he either falls at her feet in adoration, like Schelling or Bergson, or, more often, calls her a slut and turns her out of the house like Plato or Tolstoy.

In many cases this antipathy of the sages and wise men appears to arise out of their difficulty in fitting art securely into any overall, balanced moral system, or even into any system of ultimate values. The almost automatic hostility of Puritans and utilitarians may be taken for granted, more or less, since from their respective viewpoints art is either a corrupting influence which endangers man's moral behaviour, or a frivolous diversion from the tough realities of existence. The hostile stance of so many fine thinkers over the centuries, however, has a much deeper psychological and spiritual root and has also been stated in far more considered terms. Yet against this, who has written better and more illuminatingly about aesthetic matters than such thinkers as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Leon Shestov, Ortega Y Gasset, Heidegger, Croce, to mention only a select few?

This book for which I have been asked to contribute a Foreword is a bold, erudite, insightful and witty attempt to fill a void in English writing. Why English thinkers as a whole (there are exceptions) have fought so shy of the matter, at least in recent centuries, is something which is rather too complex to discuss here. But the separation of theory from practice seems to me a thoroughly wrongheaded and even dangerous heresy, since ultimately the one cannot exist without the other. To state what is fairly obvious, without a theory of architecture there could be no architecture beyond mud cabins, and without a theory of government no state could be governed effectively for any reasonable period of time. Engineering and virtually all fields of science similarly depend on theory and its application. In most fields of human activity, in fact, thought has preceded action, or at least played a decisive role in it. Our modern system of democracy, for instance, existed in theory before it was ever applied in practice and was discussed, written about and argued over for many years before it became established fact.

People who despise theory, or affect to despise it, are merely acting according to the theories of others who have done their thinking for them, though they rarely realise this and usually are very reluctant to admit it. They not only register themselves as intellectual philistines, they also reveal a crippling lack of self-knowledge. Virtually all pragmatic knowledge is the fruit of previous theorising; civilisation is not built on pure instinct. With the arts, the position is similar. Great periods of art and literature were almost always great periods of thought and criticism as well – and criticism is simply aesthetic theory, or theories, applied *in concreto* to individual works of art. Sometimes the

best and most trenchant criticism is produced by the writers and artists themselves, as in the cases of Racine and Boileau during France's *grand siècle*, or by Pope and Dryden in England. In art as in life, very little of real value is achieved without hard, precise thinking.

Speaking as someone who was a practising art critic for thirty-five years, I can only wish that I had had the guidance of a book such as this. To write criticism without a definite intellectual setting and background, or basis of thought, is too much like flying blind, as I recognise now and (though only intermittently) recognised then. But what applies to the critic applies much more forcibly, and on a higher level, to the artist or writer. Fortunately, a number of them have risen to the challenge, most notably Delacroix whose *Journals* are not only a literary masterpiece but a considered attempt to establish or codify a whole philosophy for painters, both practical and theoretic. There is no equivalent in English – Haydon's *Journals* do not measure up to it either as literature or philosophy, and in any case Haydon was too marginal a figure.

Coleridge had all the necessary qualifications to produce a definitive work on poetics, but he diffused his energies in heterogeneous writings or else spent them in continual talk. Keats's letters and certain essays by Shelley, such as his *Defence of Poetry*, contain many splendid insights, but not a coherent system of aesthetics. Among all of the early English Romantics, perhaps the most complete and satisfying writings in this field are contained in Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*. Unlike many or most of his fellow-countrymen, Landor took ideas seriously and the dialogue form he uses allows for the thrust and counter-thrust of constructive debate. Certain of Hazlitt's essays, too, in spite of their short timespan contain genuine efforts to come to terms with first principles in art and literature.

The present book, I assume, is largely addressed to students of aesthetics, but that does not exclude a more general readership – in fact anyone who cares about the history of ideas and the eternal relevance of art in our lives can profit by it. It ranges over classical times, with Plato and Aristotle prominent (and of course Plotinus too). It deals learnedly and wittily with the intellectual stances and theories of medieval and Renaissance times. Then it progresses to the modern age which may conveniently be said to start with Hegel. Or perhaps it really started with Kant, as no less a man than Goethe (a mighty thinker in his own right as well as a great poet) realised in retrospect. In a letter to his composer-friend Zelter, dated January 29th, 1830, Goethe wrote:

The world – and I may include myself – is infinitely indebted to our old Kant for the energetic way in which he ranges art and

nature alongside each other in his *Critique of Judgment* and accords to both the right to act from great principles, without purpose . . . Nature and art are too great to envisage purposes. They can do well without [them].

In these words, so it seems to me, we have an entirely new attitude (well, perhaps not entirely new, since glimmers of it have appeared in all great ages) concerning the basic autonomy of art and the arts. For centuries they had been largely the handmaid of religion and politics, or the ornament of courts and the aristocratic boudoir, or celebrations of the deeds of great men in peace and war. It was not generally understood, or allowed, that art lived off its own primal energy and did not depend for its validity on the various creeds or codes of value which it had served so well over the centuries. Later in the nineteenth century, as this liberating process slowly advanced, it gave rise to furious debates in which the artist's right to create independently of morals or utility, and free from any obvious aim of bettering society and human nature, was challenged and often condemned by many people who viewed this as a declaration of irresponsibility and amorality. The artist, as they saw it, was claiming a place apart from and above society in general, and the phrase 'ivory towers' came more and more into currency. Yet in spite of loud jeers from moralists and social reformers, traditionalists and crusading journalists, and the whole massed phalanx of public stupidity, the process could not be stopped once its initial momentum had been generated.

This independence, to a great extent, was the fruit of the Romantic Movement, though it had its roots farther back than that (just as many of the socio-political freedoms we take for granted nowadays had their origin in the French Revolution and, further back, in the *philosophes* who were its prophets). In the first half of our century there was a violent reaction against 'aestheticism' as it had come to be called, but if I have read the score correctly, this reaction in turn has been discredited and we are now slowly turning back to the Romantics and their concept of individual liberty applied to artistic creation. Almost anyone who looks over the many cases in the last sixty years or so in which writers and artists (many of them highly gifted) have thrown their talents into the political arena, must admit it has been a sad business on the whole. Sick and tired of their own individuality – the most precious thing they possessed – they were prepared to sacrifice it on what Salvador de Madariaga has called 'the altar of collectivism'.

In middle and late Victorian England the labours of Ruskin, William Morris and other brave prophets drove a wedge of artistic awareness into the stolid roast-beef-and-broadcloth philistinism of the middle

classes in particular (the aristocracy by then had largely forfeited their old position as patrons). For a time England, always a creative country but usually a philistine one, became as culture-conscious as France or Germany. To an extent, however, this aestheticism was always a foreign body and with the jailing of Oscar Wilde for homosexuality, the average philistine felt avenged on the Arty Set and what he saw as its subversive affectations. On the Continent, however, the intelligentsia in almost every country felt itself involved in his downfall and Wilde became a martyr-hero of art in France, Belgium, Austria and various other countries. In the eyes of many people today, his wit and frivolity and the fact that he was a successful writer of comedies still overshadow or even veil the fact that Wilde was an exceptionally clear, even innovative thinker on aesthetic questions. For instance, in the dialogue between two young men entitled *The Critic as Artist*, Gilbert says to his friend Ernest:

Aesthetics are higher than ethics. They belong to a more spiritual sphere. To discern the beauty of a thing is the finest point to which we can arrive . . . Aesthetics, in fact, are to ethics in the sphere of conscious civilisation what, in the sphere of the external world, sexual is to natural selection. Ethics, like selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change.

Elsewhere in his writings, Wilde remarks that he is sick and tired of people telling him that beauty is superficial; in his opinion, it is far less so than the morality preached and practised by millions. True beauty, in fact, is lasting whereas most moral systems decay inevitably by the nature of things and the advance, or at least the change, of human thought and behaviour. In historical retrospect, this 'religion of beauty' is one of the most remarkable productions or developments of the whole nineteenth century. Amongst other things, it produced a new type of solitary, dedicated artist and writer willing to work all his (or her, as in the case of the poet Emily Dickinson) life in obscurity and public neglect, or even poverty, purely for the sake of fulfilling his own vision. Such a phenomenon had scarcely existed before in Europe, and to the eighteenth century, which was preoccupied above all with man as a social being, it would have seemed ridiculous or incomprehensible, like the preaching of some isolated religious crank, hermit or mystic.

As this book makes clear, it is largely to the ancient Greeks that we owe the birth of aesthetic thinking. The Romans, while certainly not

philistines, were less sensitive to beauty in the higher or ideal sense and more inclined towards political and social areas of thinking, where their practical genius could fulfil itself. (They had, in any case, little flair for the plastic arts apart from architecture, and relied mainly on Greek importations or copies.) In the Middle Ages, religion did not rule out considerable awareness of the beauties of nature and of art. In more recent centuries, it is interesting to watch how national character asserts itself – the Germans tend to theorise too much and the English too little, the French are more critical and analytical, the Italians in general are philosophically humanist and less fond of abstractions than Northern Europeans. No doubt these are generalisations, but at least it will be admitted that just as all the great European nations have their own artistic traditions, they also have their own traditions of thought. Almost all of these, however, are ultimately growths or offshoots of the great Graeco-Roman tree. It was the Greeks – or at least their artists and philosophers – who first made European man intellectually aware of Beauty. They lit a lamp which cannot be put out, in spite of persecutions and heresy-hunting over centuries and, in our own time, the fearful lunacies of mass political ideology and the destructive powers of modern technology when used by the wrong hands.