

COMMUNICATIONS

Jim Swan

On Literary Criticism and Political Action

It was a pleasure to read Lawrence W. Hyman's statement: "It is not a moral direction that we must look for in literature but a disturbance" ("Literature and Political Action," *DISSENT*, July–August 1967).

Hyman provides an exciting way for handling moralistic objections—from Left and Right—that art is too often dissociated from our moral and political concerns. Since, however, he styles himself a contextualist critic, Hyman must be aware that with this idea of art he is keeping rather strange company.

The idea that art provides not order but disturbance, that it upsets and exercises the categories of perception we bring to art and to the world in general, belongs to the behavioral sciences, to transactionalism and the New Look in perception theory. With necessary oversimplification, it means that the widely held idea that art provides, reveals or creates order requires the false assumption that reality or, more properly, our perceptions of reality are chaotic or at least disordered. Whereas, in fact, we would be unable to function at all without possessing very highly ordered categories of perception to use every minute of the day. Consequently, it

means that, given such a need for order, we have an equally pressing need for disorder; or, again more properly, for disturbance of our very highly ordered perceptions, so as to avoid hardening into the rigidity of perception that is psychic, and eventually physical, death.

Finally—and this is where Hyman contradicts himself—it means that art provides no special knowledge, as is widely claimed by humanists defending the arts against the sciences. To make this claim is to involve yourself inextricably, as Leavis and Snow did, in the pseudo-problem of "realism" in the arts, which means making a theory of the purely ethnocentric notion that art provides special insight into reality. Such a notion could be held only by those immersed in a culture demanding that its artists "represent" reality and equating art with "imitation." In the history of civilization, which is also the history of art, such a culture has had only a very brief and very local existence.¹

Hyman, then, seems to be taking

¹ For the source of these brief remarks see Morse Peckham's persuasive analysis of the problem: *Man's Rage for Chaos: Biology, Behavior, and the Arts*. New York: Chilton, 1965.

away with his right hand what he gives with his left. He sees the important political (and, we should add, *biological*) function of art as a provider of disturbances. But as contextualist critic, he still holds to the notion that art provides a special sort of knowledge or, in the verses of Wallace Stevens quoted by Hyman:

A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.

The problem here is one that we all, as intellectuals, share, a problem of lifestyle. And the split in Hyman's thinking corresponds—I'm willing to bet—with a split between the way he perceives, as critic and scholar, a novel by Melville, and the way he perceives, as part of our contemporary audience, a novel by Bellow or Ellison, or a movie by Bergman or Fellini. In the transaction between the contemporary artist and his audience, both take for granted that they live in the same time and place, and share essentially the same cultural assumptions. Here, the role of the artist is to disturb those assumptions. After all, we reserve a very contemptuous label, "sentimentality," for the work of art that caters to our naive assumptions about life.

With art of another culture, though, we need some idea of the original audience's expectations. For this we turn to the academic scholar-critic, whose role it is to describe cultural assumptions, as sets of expectations, and thus teach us how to be disturbed—or "moved"—by art not of our own culture. Only in this sense of a set of expectations do we speak with validity of literary "form." Not inhering in any particular work, it is what we as scholar-critics abstract out of a

chronological series of literary works. It is ourselves, and not artists, who are interested in form as such. Artists, as artists, violate form; and it is the violation that an audience responds to. Picasso, understanding this, has remarked that he creates a painting by a series of destructions.

This is a matter of distinguishing between two roles: audience and scholar-critic. In one, we experience the disturbances of art; in the other, the suppression of disturbances is a condition of our work in describing and judging the "form"—or set of expectations—which those disturbances violate. One's role as audience requires a pliancy and quickness of felt reaction; while action and feeling are irrelevant, if not hostile, to the work of the scholar-critic. Hyman confuses these roles. And with the claim that art provides a special sort of knowledge, he hypostasizes literary "form," carrying its intellectual qualities of aesthetic distance and calm into the particular work where they have no place.

It is only such a confusion of roles, and what Whitehead called the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," that, to my mind, will account for statements like the following: "The novelist, unlike the political scientist or the psychologist, tries to 'understand' the situation not in order to act more intelligently, but to bring us to a *level of experience in which all action is irrelevant* [my italics]. Or: "An artist reaches his greatness not by subordinating his impressions to his moral or personal bias, but by getting out of himself."

Though these statements say very little about art or artists, they do say

a great deal about the life-style which our culture values and which we all share as intellectuals, scholars and critics; it is a life-style of non-action (dealing with levels of experience in which all action is irrelevant) and non-emotion (resting in a state of detached calm outside oneself). That phrase, "personal bias," for instance, is one of those mild smears against feeling that, as scholar-critics, we make almost by unconscious reflex. And *feeling* is the necessary third factor missing from the unreal choice that Hyman presents to us, between thought and action, prejudice and experience, in the civil rights situation illustrating his argument. Aside from the obvious special pleading for the artist's (presumably higher) "level of experience in which all action is irrelevant," there is really no reason for distinguishing between novelist and civil rights worker. Though the novelist may understand a Georgia red-neck, it doesn't mean that he can't, as *novelist*, hate the man's cowardly threatening of Negro children. Not to hate an evil act isn't just bad morals, it's bad art.

Again, where Hyman says that the artist performs his role "by getting outside himself," it would be just as sensible to say, with Horace, that the artist does best by getting *inside* himself. Actually, our behavior corresponds more to a dialogue between prejudice and experience; which is what perception is, and it is only by keeping the dialogue alive that we keep acting intelligently, be we novelists or civil rights workers. It is not surprising, after all, that Hyman chooses Wallace Stevens as spokesman for his understanding of art. It would

be hard to find more of a snob, a man more autocratically disdainful of dialogue than the poet of the blue guitar with his aesthete's fantasy of a cool, Apollonian understanding "Of things exactly as they are." Stevens gives us a perfect figure for the manner of knowledge in Western culture: a knowledge "beyond us"—outside us where we can deal with it, as if scientifically, without contaminating it with our feelings—"yet ourselves"; that is, giving us the illusion that, nevertheless, we really are dealing with ourselves. As the Greeks knew, this is an illusion. Our competence at dealing with "reality"—or whatever you wish to call it—however actual as a technology, is like the competence of Oedipus at solving the riddle of the Sphinx, an illusion of competence.

What breaks the illusion is dialogue, politically the democratic interaction of peers with one another; while our role as scholar-critics, to which action and feeling are irrelevant, coincides with the "politics" of the totalitarian state in which political action is as irrelevant as it is impossible, short of revolution. The scholar-critic, working within ideas of order, sees art as a way of understanding culture, while the artist means to change it, to disturb those categories of perception by which we understand and communicate our culture in time and space. Hence Plato's ban on artists from the ideal state: they make disturbances and upset the political order. So, if the artist thus initiates political action, the scholar-critic acts out, and in the classroom teaches by example, a role to which *all* action is irrelevant, to say nothing of political action.