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Sir Hugh Lane and the Legacy of his Beliefs

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Lane's vision: fulfilled, but not in the way he planned

Since coming to Dublin two things have struck me. On the one hand, there is the tremendous fact that Hugh Lane's vision has been in large measure achieved, so many years after his death. Art, visual art, is now part of the lifeblood of Irish culture, accepted, talked about, seen, and at home; and flourishing in a diversity of styles and galleries. It has its own life, it makes its own decisions, in an international context, but without too much sense of subservience to what is going on elsewhere. The gallery which Lane founded has become, as he intended, a point of reference, not a model or law for Irish art, but an encouragement and mark of the highest standard, and is held in affection by Irish painters and sculptors who by no means try to work in the styles favoured by Lane and his supporters. The achievement of Lane's vision, which of necessity was longterm since it involved such a radical change in the then perceptions of art, does to a large extent place in diminished proportion the complaints, the ruffled feathers, and the gossip about the way in which he did things, which so often miss the point that without very resolute action, even by a flawed and fallible person such as Lane was, much of this might never have happened.



On the other hand, one could not fail to be struck also by the fact that the manner in which Lane's vision has been fulfilled has diverged very far from his original purposes. To put it simply, the art that his vision has enabled in Ireland, is very different from any definition of art he would have recognised, or indeed from the kind of art he actually enjoyed. His conception of art, the love of which aroused such a sacrificial devotion, was centred in clear values, even for contemporary art, deriving from in his connoisseur's passion for beauty, form, and fine painting and workmanship. Art, for him, did not just go anywhere, but had distinct boundaries, and a centre from which its value came.

Humanism and Modernism

The contrast between Lane's kind of art and that which his vision has enabled to be seen and admired today could not have been more pointedly demonstrated than in the sculptural display in the entrance hall of the Municipal Gallery at the time of this lecture. Placed side by side were a Lane Gift sculpture, Rodin's Age of Bronze, and a modern work by Eilis O'Connell. Rodin's work, though revolutionary in its time for its naturalism, is the embodiment of humanist values. The person and the human being are still centre stage for any serious statement as to life's meaning. It is true, as contemporaries realised, that we are already seeing the removal of the classical 'skin', the idealisation of man by which so many achievements, and probably not a few crimes, were legitimated. We are beginning to see the distinctly modern conception of man as left on this planet to fend for himself, his gods gone, but here with his beauty and some of his idealism still intact. But in O'Connell's work, we have reached something like the end of that track, more like the situation in public religion today, where the human has sunk back into nature, technically superb (as nature itself is), but as far as consciousness goes, no longer feeling able to bear the burden of separation from nature, but wanting only to merge with it. Her work, we are told, relates to old standing stones; and she does indeed capture the sense of a mystery beyond, her polished pyramid pointing like an antenna to an unknown world or being in space. Of classical proportion and harmony her work knows nothing, because there is no external world of ideas, no ideal based on transcendent gods, or on the transcendent creator God, to keep them in place. There is a certain uncanny presence in her work, but its form is by necessity somewhat arbitrary.

Lane, however, stood for beauty of form, and it seems deeply ironical that the movement for contemporary art to which he devoted so much of his strength has given rise to an art which has virtually reversed the good which he intended. One cannot look at Lane's life, moreover, or come into contact with his personality and beliefs, without seeing the need to face up to questions arising from this. Where Lane's values simply the product of time and place, to be by-passed by the road of history?

In facing this nagging issue, one can, of course, practice historical evasion. One could argue, for example, that Lane begot essentially two streams of thought, that of his own personal values based on his love

of art, which issued in purchases around his own taste, and a slightly different set of values based on his love of artists, for which he was willing to widen his taste and to be open to the possibility that the future would see things differently. So the two different streams could be labelled the 'beauty' stream, and the 'modernity' stream, and one could say correctly that Lane believed in both. One could then go on to say that the vision for modernity has been the most successful, going far beyond what he himself had planned. The stream of his own taste, the 'beauty' stream, one could then label simply as the taste of 'a man of his time', whose taste has been outmoded today. In this neat historical relativisation, modernity is the convenient and comfortable winner.

Now it is true that Lane, living in a time of artistic ferment, died before fully having ever to face these issues. We do not know what things he was pondering on the Lusitania, having talked to John Quinn in New York about modern art. It is hard to imagine someone of his aesthetic delicacy even setting eyes on a Picasso, but apparently at that stage he was confident that what Picasso was doing was 'rubbish'. But he must have been aware of the earthquake beginning to shake the world of art, and that his own era of confident aestheticism was about to end. At his death, his library contained books of reproductions of Cezanne and Gauguin, so evidently he was starting to acclimatize himself to the new art. He had been offered a Cezanne to buy, but had not yet bitten. Whatever his concerns at the end, what is certain is that the two streams to which he had devoted his life were diverging, and that had he lived he would have had to face some very difficult decisions. How far could this Old Master dealer continue to commit himself to the very best of contemporary art? For certainly he was not someone who would have been long satisfied with anything meretricious or second-rate, simply because it accorded with the styles he liked.

Lane's taste: of period and class, or of conviction?

The assumption that one might make, then, is that had Lane lived, he would have adapted, and switched his energies from the pre-war Beauty stream, into the post-war stream of Modernity, which has carried the day. His taste for beautiful objects would then be relativised as the product of period and class, and not something of permanent commitment and importance, unlike the stream of contemporaneity, in which being up to date and authentically of its time is always the priority.

However, to relativise Lane's taste in this way is almost certainly to fail to come to terms with Lane the man, and to assume that his taste had no grounding beyond temporary fashion. And yet we cannot spend very long in his company, whether in Robert O'Byrne's, or the earlier biographies, without realising that taste for him was nothing superficial, but was of the very integrity of his being, which affected every aspect of his life. My favourite story of him is one which O'Byrne quotes from Bodkin's account, about his visit to the hypnotherapist.

In the last few years of his life, Lane sought treatment for a nervous condition, brought about by stress, then known as neurasthenia. On one occasion, Bodkin accompanied him to an expensive specialist, and sat in the car 'while the patient was supposed to be undergoing hypnosis. At the end of the session, his friend emerged and told Bodkin the experience had been "ineffectual as far as he could judge, and yet rather funny". It transpired that after talking to Lane for a while, the specialist had left him alone with instructions to count to one thousand. But "when he went out I just popped up and arranged his beastly mantelpiece for him, and when I heard him coming back, I lay on the couch and pretended to be asleep".' (O'Byrne, p 192).

This story shows that for Lane, correcting and redeeming bad taste, bringing order into disorder, was more important to him than his own health. Clearly the love of beauty was for him something at the core, not the surface, and it was for this cause that he was prepared to persuade and cajole, give and threaten, and bear notoriety and abuse.

So far we have used words like 'love of art, of beauty, of good taste', very loosely, hoping that we are indicating an idea which will be familiar to us from Lane's own patronage and activities. However, if we are going to consider what Lane was really about in making this concept of art his cause, we will need to try to be a bit more definite. What was this 'art' for which he was prepared to expend his life and fortune, and yet which, as we have seen, has not been seen by subsequent generations as in 'the true line of descent' which has given us the official sequence of modern art? And to put it even more sharply: if Lane was a man of conviction rather than of fashion, were his convictions simply wrong, or was there something in his beliefs which is of importance today?

In considering this issue, I am sure that we are enormously helped by historical distance. For example, it is far easier today to begin again to look at the art of the period on its own terms and without the prejudice of 'Progressive' and 'Conservative' party labels. For example, Wilson Steer was a painter, a friend and supporter of Lane, who was not ashamed to paint somewhat in the style of Constable, and later to drop historical anchor somewhere in late Impressionism. That is to describe his paintings solely in terms of how 'advanced' they were. But in terms of the content of the pictures, what they were trying to convey in whatever style, here is a painter who did not lack fresh vision or a certain integrity in relation to nature. In other words, he does not necessarily have to be modern in order to enable us to see. But, it

may well be that Steer's beliefs, that is, his conviction that landscape, light, the weather etc. were worthy of attention, were in his time becoming outmoded, and that with this erosion of belief his paintings have started to look different. One of the things we need to learn repeatedly is to see paintings in terms of what they are, rather than in terms of what they are not. I have found Steer's paintings have, for me, started to look 'fresh' again, perhaps as Lane himself once saw them.

Good taste, or risk-taking?

For Lane, art was certainly not just a matter of 'good taste', or he would never have had such a profound and practical involvement in contemporary art. Good taste thrives on negatives: on not having the 'wrong' colours or the 'wrong' things in one's house. But Lane was a risk taker, far too interested in what was new and in helping to bring it into being to be stuck into negative thinking as he approached art. Otherwise, we would never have seen him involved with such difficult and quixotic characters as Mancini and Augustus John. You will remember that John was supposed to be painting decorative panels for the entrance hall in Lindsey House, the home which Lane restored with old panelling and filled with Old Masters, and could very well have decorated in something far more tasteful than John's family of Gypsies draping themselves along the wall in superhuman scale; a scheme that was never finished.

Mancini, portraits of Ruth Shine, Lady Gregory and Hugh Lane

For Mancini's art Lane also put himself out, taking on enormous social risks and the inconvenience of an eccentric Neapolitan who might prove a loose cannon, but who in fact worked with immense diligence under Lane's direction. Mancini's paintings have never passed all the tests of taste; there is something about the thick and apparently careless impasto, erupting into the room like the irrepressible gestures of the voluble Italian himself, that can never be completely contained within notions of high breeding. But Mancini's portraits, even if they are not about staying within the bounds of taste, do, in retrospect, seem to be about something. When we look at them carelessly, they seem like Annigoni - or early Picasso - to have a rather literal vision, but encased in a crust of modernity. But looked at more closely, we can see a method to the madness. Certainly he turns out to be a colourist, and when we see his juxtapositions of pure, and very beautiful tints which contrast and coalesce from a distance, we realise that there is nothing arbitrary about them. Yet it is when we begin to realise his serious engagement with his sitters and their personalities that we see that here is a man who has gone a long way beyond style. Obviously it makes no sense that an embarrassingly extrovert southern Italian, unable to speak English, let alone to read the nuances of Anglo-Irish culture, could be other than a superficial observer of his too-easily impressed patrons, and if that is so, then of course Lane made a huge mistake in placing such a large number of his works in Dublin, not least because those Irish artists to whom he was attempting to give a lead by importing the best modern continental work, such as Orpen and Yeats senior, were deeply unimpressed by Mancini. And yet if, after 90 or so years we look again at these paintings which have lain in the dust of disregard (but which have actually remained in surprisingly good condition), we can see that Mancini was not, after all, an exponent of affectation, but that in all his profusion of paint he was strangely economical: in that all his effects seem to have been ordered by that plain and humble business of the portraitist, character.

In looking at the portrait of my great aunt, Ruth Shine, I was amazed to suddenly recognise the very person, almost the 'scent', of the old lady whom I used to visit as a child. Her almost bony face in the portrait betrays quite a strength of character, which indeed was true of her, and of her management of her brother's effects and his memory in the years following his death. As Lady Gregory recalls in her 'Hugh Lane', Ruth had trained as a horticulturalist, and I remember her with her vegetables and flowers, with that certain decisiveness that makes one realise she had missed much by not having children. The portrait of her aunt, Lady Gregory, is also unusual in that Mancini has not been overwhelmed by her 'august' personality, in the way that Orpen seemed to see her too much from the outside, as a figure one had to deal with, and JB Yeats has perhaps also been too frightened to get close. But Mancini's portrait is the only one which, allowing that she could be formidable, also shows that she could be a friend. He has not had to belittle her to do this: but he has somehow grasped her humour, and that there could be something like being on an equal footing with her: a status she certainly extended to her nephew Hugh.

The portrait which outshines them both, however, is the full length of Lane seated, done in Rome in 1904, which even Mancini's detractors agreed had caught his sitter's nervous manner and pent-up energy. What I find remarkable too, apart from the striking colour essay, and the fact that at a distance the whole seems almost three-dimensional, is Mancini's very direct ways with his patron. Sargent had made his fortune in projecting his sitters' ideal or self-image, seldom showing a trace of reserve on his own part, but willingly playing along with the Imperial or moneyed roles his patrons had adopted. Mancini has not chosen to flatter, or indeed to criticise; instead he has taken Lane as he found him, almost seeming to have picked him up bodily and placed him down in a not entirely tasteful studio interior, to see how he would react. Lane not looking at ease seems, probably, to be more generally true of his deportment in the world than any of the more conventional depictions in which his sense of not belonging was covered up. Mancini has also unsettled our expectations by lighting the figure from above, as if Lane is

at the bottom of a well, so that his face is in darkness. The sense, slightly, of being trapped, even among furs and luxury, and of being in semi-darkness, seems to say quite a lot about a figure who still seems obscure in some of his dealings and motives.

None of this interest in character, of course, seems quite adequate to the intellectual demands of modern art, where the scrambled cubes of Picasso's Kahnweiler portrait were soon to set a new standard, by which anyone who appeared to know directly what character was, came to be seen as naive about the perceptual difficulties. Anything as simple as doing a job which any non-artist could criticise, if a likeness failed, came to seem outmoded, compared to a new portraiture to which only the artist, with a more sophisticated insight than the ordinary man, held the key. And in this sense Mancini was old-fashioned: there is an integrity in his work in which he really seemed to be trying to integrate what he was saying, in terms of character, with the means of saying it. But the way in which he did it, showing so clearly and uninhibitedly the presence of the artist (even leaving his marking threads intact on the canvas), does seem to have foreshadowed some of the concerns of today.

Mancini, the clue to Lane's taste?

Now if it is true that Mancini is not Lane's unfortunate aberration, as I used to believe, but is in a sense central to the sort of aesthete Lane was, then looking at Mancini will help us understand what it was that Lane meant by art, and why it was such an important cause. It may, I know, seem perverse to take the one modern master that is liked least, when we have the Impressionists and all the Old Masters to choose from to illustrate Lane's taste, and my doing so may result largely from a sense of challenge! However it is also from the unexpected that we may perhaps observe what in other painters we would miss, simply by taking it for granted: for it is something to do with art itself that we are trying to isolate. Everyone these days, after all, admits to liking art: but what we are trying to grasp is what it was that was distinctive in Lane's liking of art, that made it so important to him, not just for himself, but as a benefit he was convinced he should provide for others.

So we have established that art, for Lane, meant more than good taste, since we cannot include Mancini within any very tight canon of good taste. Art had to go beyond the negative, or even of the positive good taste of 'doing things right'. Lutyens, as an architect at this time, was a very stylish exponent of 'doing things right', though for him personality and expression were very soon to burst the bounds of this tidy scheme, and he was to invent powerful modernist expressions, albeit still in semi-classical language. But with Mancini we can see Lane as going beyond good form into an art which was prepared to take huge risks, for the sake of an end in view. Robert O'Byrne describes other aspects of Lane the risk-taker: the intrepid rider, the lover of speed, the gambler. Lane was perhaps drawn to an art which sailed close to the wind as Mancini's did. But the main purpose of risk was not just the thrill but the chance to win, and that meant, for Lane living life at a heightened level, often by daring to acquire works of art by painters who themselves had done just the same. An aspect of the 'art', then, he was after, was probably something like what he experienced in music, where life is lived totally, in an expressive and articulate way, uniting colour and form and feeling, as he tried to do in the handling of his own life.

Beauty, truth and life: 'aesthetic righteousness'

Deriving loosely from Mancini, then, we can identify three aspects of the art that Lane pursued: the element of colour and form, or beauty; the element of truth, as in the meaning of character; and the element of risk or of life. Such phrases, of course, could be applied to almost any of the great masters represented by Lane's purchases for the National Gallery in Dublin, and also, in varying degrees, to those 'modern' painters whose work he was trying to search out and represent when he formed the Dublin and Johannesburg 'modern' collections. What, as phrases, they miss, is perhaps the one quality which unites them, and which unites them with the idea of taste in general, but which is difficult to put in modern terms. It is a feeling of things being 'right', not, as we've said, in a negative way, but more in a joyful sense of 'this is how things are meant to be'. Obviously one cannot demand of a picture that its colour, for instance, is beautiful and surprising, but with certain passages of colour, even in the despised Mancini, there is what seems a gift of something absolutely 'right', that, once thought of, 'has to be there'. Lane's passion could be defined as a passion for an art of this kind, for a rightness which seems both external to the ordinary world, and yet which, once given, seems absolutely essential to it. One could use the rather old-fashioned term, not usually applied to aesthetics, 'righteousness'. Lane's calling in the world of art was a passion for aesthetic righteousness.

All who knew Lane must have been struck by an 'all or nothing' approach in his taste. As Robert O'Byrne points out in his biography, one of Lane's difficulties with his opponents was his insistence, for example, on having complete control in matters of aesthetic choice, as when he wanted to have the final say in the gallery design and site in the plan for the Dublin Municipal Gallery of Modern Art. He could be quite dictatorial in his opinions, and others could sometimes wonder if their own judgments had any validity besides his own. Likewise in matters of connoisseurship, he believed his own intuitions on, say, a Rembrandt authorship, had final validity. We could, and indeed must, note a weakness in him here, in which the power of his great gift was being abused to exclude other points of view. There is no such

thing as a perfect taste, nor indeed of an absolutely final word on questions of attribution (and nor is the latest opinion necessarily the best). There must be many who would like to be allowed absolute authority in matters aesthetic, and no doubt some who could handle the power better than others.

The grounds of aesthetic authority

But what I think we need to focus on, with Lane's 'all or nothing' absolutism, is to try to establish in what his authority was based. Because while it is easy to regard it as merely a personal taste somehow grown totalitarian, which the First World War justifiably swept away, along with the social structure which supported it, that does not quite allow for the kind of taste it was. Because what we have seen is that the kind of things that Lane enjoyed in pictures, on which his passion was based, are things that are really there. His authority, then, was not an undisciplined extension of his own subjectivity, but was based on his life as a 'seer', someone who sees what he believes to be there.

We can allow that there were merely social and temporary aspects to his taste. He moved with people who used paintings for self-flattery, who bought eighteenth century portraits in order to elevate themselves, and their diamond-gained fortunes, to a kind of gentlemanly innocence which was supposed to reside in land, tradition, and class. We can allow that much of Lane's activities, in dressing drawing rooms, and dressing ladies to adorn them, had to do with social image as much as with aesthetics. Yet the common thread to all this activity was the desire always to find the point at which the mundane became beautiful, and to elevate and make distinctive every space he was in. In other words, his was as well as a private passion, a profoundly objective taste, concerned usually with objects and the entirely rational consideration of shape, texture and colour, a passion which took him into very diverse fields, such as oriental porcelain, for his purchases. This meant that disagreeing with Lane, for him, meant not just disagreeing with his personal judgment or opinion, but with his very strong convictions about the way things were, about aesthetic right and wrong in some sort of absolute sense.

In what sort of absolute sense, however, could Lane's kind of aesthetic judgments be considered to have validity? Here we are at the nub of the issue which his taste raises, as we confront the extreme divergence between his sort of taste and the art which became dominant after his death. Was he simply wrong, or do his beliefs have a coherence which we can, albeit in a less exclusive way, hold onto?

Art history as embodied belief: evolutionism and relativism

The only way I can see to answer this question, is to begin by noting that the divergence we have been describing, between one kind of art and another, also represents a divergence of belief. This is not always seen in the art histories, and certainly was not in the histories with which I grew up, where Art History was told as a continuum from Giotto to Pollock, in which one movement succeeded another in a natural evolutionary sequence. The main issues were vision, perception, change for its own sake, and progress. Art was supposed to be about art, generating its own concerns from within its own tradition. One could consider colour, or form, or texture, or any manner of specialisms, and art had its own boundary within which all these could be explored. Moreover, it could drag more and more of the external world within the 'Art' boundary: but art itself remained self-sufficient and self-defining. What we did not see, however, in this view of art, was that in itself it expressed a belief position on the question of ultimates.

This is most easily seen if we consider the question at the heart of our discussion, that of beauty. Beauty matters. That is the heart of the perception of beauty: not only that it is enjoyable, but that in some sense it is valuable and important. In other words, the perception of beauty includes some kind of 'understood' external referent. But this is where we see the divergence in modern art. For what is there externally for beauty to refer to? On the one hand, in the history of modern art, almost all the description tends to relate to art internally, or to human psychology. Colour, for example, is described in terms of its effects on our emotions, as if works of art were therapeutic tools. Form is described as if relationships were important for their own sake, or in terms of relationships with other works of art. But what we do not hear is anything of the ideal of form or beauty as having an intrinsic value or importance. The reason for this is more than obvious if we take account of history. Beauty is no longer considered true. It can only be considered as a 'leisure asset', a consumer durable, since after civilization's self-image came apart in two world wars, beauty is no longer considered to have any meaning.

Beauty and the Great War

During the First War, artists, like their fellow soldiers, were propelled straight from the drawing rooms of polite society where they collected their sitters, to the front line, and for many, what they had taken for granted of the meaning of art ceased to make sense. Orpen was one of those who found himself completely unprepared, intellectually, for the horrors into which he was thrown. His whole artistic language had developed in a tradition in which man continually looked towards an ideal, developed in the sculpture of Greece and Rome, and in the classical art which derived from it. And yet here, that ideal was exposed as completely inadequate to the remaking of helpless humanity in the machinery of a modern war which no one had desired or designed. Lavery, we learn from a picture label in the Hugh Lane Gallery,

carried on with scenes of sybarite upper-class relaxation regardless of the guns overseas: but which was more true: guns or punts? In some ways, they were both crazy. The beauty of a lazy afternoon on the river at home could have been something that the war was being fought for: but was it 'true' enough to be worth the price? Such were questions which the mere love of feeling, of pleasure, were unable to answer.

The split between taste and truth

Therefore it is not surprising that a divergence began to take place between an art that seemed to have to subsist on its own, without external explanation or validation, and a kind of devotion to taste, good living, which was cut adrift from any serious reference to truth. Thus in our own time, instead of a unity of the arts, as in the way Chardin, or Snyders before him, might paint the elements of a gourmet meal, linking together art, beauty and luxury, there is now a schizoid split between say, Delia Smith's cheerful view of meat, on one side, and Damien Hirst's portentous solemnity when it comes to flesh. There is still a serious approach to beauty in life, but it is disguised in something we take very seriously, food, but not intellectually seriously or in relation to truth.

To liken art to food, however, is not good enough, not least when our subject is Lane, for whom food had no importance whatever when compared to art. The question we need to consider is whether there is not after all something in beauty which has an intrinsic importance and authority. This can only be considered from the point of view of faith.

The proposition is this. One cannot really explain beauty, the sheer goodness of art, in a gustatory way. It diminishes art, beyond its own nature, to regard it only as a form of recreation, or as a kind of caffeine for the soul. It makes Lane out to be a mere addict, and his gallery founding achievements as little more than the building of coffee houses, pleasant, good, useful, but hardly worth the pain and sweat. On the other hand, the history of the last century has firmly rejected beauty as true. As an ideal, it has seemed too far away from humanity's real condition. Art, drama, and film have concentrated far more on the devil within than on the ideal to which civilization has sought to attain. But where, then, does that leave the beauty of art? It must be a hope that is false: a brief truce at Christmas for 'good feelings', before normal hostilities resume at new year. It is on this ground that architecture has been able to espouse the 'brutal' as more authentic, more real, than the civic virtues of the classical style. But here we have two contradictory statements: on the one hand, beauty has an intrinsic authority and sense of worth, and on the other, when we look at history today, hope and joy seem to many a lie. What is the solution?

'The meaning of art is not in the art'

The solution seems to me clear if one accepts this paradoxical statement: 'the meaning of art is not in the art'. There is nothing strange about this, but it does mean that very often we have been looking for meaning in the wrong place. Meaning is to do with mind, with thought, with value: and these things we do not find in nature. The meaning of a sunset is not in the dust particles illuminated by light; it is in something external to it, something like the sheer surprise and welcome of beauty and colour as gift in the middle of predictable daily existence. For its meaning its surface offers little help; we need to see its place in the whole existential mix. In the same way, one can take a great picture, like the National Gallery's Vermeer; and if you look too close, not only the surface dissolves into blobs, but its meaning too becomes flat and incoherent, for the meaning it co-ordinates on its frail surface is all to do with assumptions we may share in common about the world outside: the value of humanity and domesticity, the majesty of light, the beauty of things. If none of these things had meaning, the picture itself would fail.

Beauty and transcendence

So it is with beauty. The 'righteousness', the 'way things should be' that describes Lane's kind of fine art taste is dependent on a belief about the world that is really external to art. It follows a belief that 'the way things should be' is worth pursuing because it is, intrinsically, more true, than the ugliness and disorder in which the world commonly finds itself. Where does such a belief come from, that truth and beauty are, as it were, guaranteed from the outside? The belief comes, perhaps it is no surprise, from our inherited (in these islands) Christian religion, which rests on perhaps two central pillars: God is, and He will vindicate: what is seen is not how things will always be. Such a belief still exists residually wherever life is sacrificed for the sake of truth, in the belief that truth will prevail. The central point of this belief - though it is often just a folk memory today - is the story of Jesus Christ, the best man pitted against some of the worst, who appeared to be defeated and then turned the tables by rising from death. By doing so his life shows us the authenticity of the real thing (goodness in the world), and by contrast, the inauthenticity of the evil which has often assumed the places of authority in this world. From the memory of this story - and, better still, living faith in it - comes a belief that things like goodness are worth fighting for, even when they do not appear to succeed, because their authority is transcendent. Beauty, then, can refer to goodness; since goodness (we believe) is really there. The beauty that keeps appearing in art, then, is both something given, that cannot be fully accounted for by nature, and something worth striving for because it represents a 'wager' (as I think George Steiner puts it) on how things really are.

The consequence of this view from faith (which is a faith many hold implicitly) is that we do not need to confine our truth to what we see, and we do not need to consider ugliness or moral ugliness to be the only true account of the world. The rationale for beauty may seem to have been undercut in our culture, but that is only the case if it is linked to an unattainable ideal; which a more sober estimate of human nature shows we are better without. But if beauty is linked to transcendence, which, historically (in the pre-modern era) it always has been, then it is more like a call into the kind of life we are made to have, and which the Creator intends to be restored to us.

Art not redemptive

This is very far from saying that art itself is redemptive. Art gives a taste of redemption, it gives a sense of how things might be, but it is not in itself any sort of elixir of life. It may be that for Lane, perhaps trying to feed his inner self from the masterpieces he owned, art seemed to have the power to redeem; though the picture we have of him in his later years was of someone empty and spent. The sarcasm and bitterness which, we are told, came to characterise his speech tells of someone whom neither ownership nor friendship could renew. Neither, however, could hostility to his cause diminish his burning inner conviction about the value of art.

Was Lane himself religious? Can we situate his love of art in a personal theological framework? Lane's parents had been drawn to each other out of a shared concern for faith, his mother inheriting her mother's firm Protestant convictions, so it seems, and his father turning from law to ordination, as would one of Lane's brothers. Lane's diaries as a young man reveal that he continued to attend church. The plaque placed in his memory by Sarah Harrison recalls his 'sincere and devout faith'. Alongside this one must set his gambling, his dabblings in the occult, and his superstition. We do not know how influenced he was by Yeats, who seemed to have cast him in the role of a Nietzschean aristocratic hero, a superior person continually under threat from lesser mortals; an identity not particularly helpful for Christian humility. We can see that his most obvious form of religion was art; that it was art which gave him his own sense of worth, and art which he felt most profoundly had saving power for others. But in distress, as when last seen 'helping women and children to the boats' on the Lusitania, he may well have been resourced by his childhood faith. His integrity of action and uncompromising dedication certainly must have had deep foundations.

However, the point about beauty is not that it is, or could be, 'Christian': it is a gift, a free gift. It does not need a theological framework to be enjoyed. It is part of the experience of art in every culture of the world, whatever its belief, just as is good cooking. It does thrive in cultures where goodness as gift, as 'the real thing', is believed in, and this certainly has been true of Western culture over its many centuries. Many have been content to cash cheques on that inherited bank account of common faith in goodness, without the associated belief in and fear of God. However it is when scepticism comes in that the framework of belief needs repairing.

Public truth not to be avoided

When philosophy and science become deliberately sceptical about God, then the soil in which art can flourish, as creative form and beauty, is eroded. That is the time when religion has to become self-conscious again. That is the time when we need to consider afresh who we believe in, and what public beliefs are likely to be able to sustain a true and good art in the future. The same is true in the political arena. Everything good that the state is supposed to do has to have, in the end, some basis in ultimate beliefs about what is good and who we are responsible to. Otherwise, as we have seen with fascist and communist regimes, the public definition of what is good begins to slide, until the 'good people' cease to be able to tell good from evil.

Two kinds of truth in the gallery: the role of curators

Finally, where does this leave those with charge of galleries today? We began by looking at two streams of art curating deriving from Lane's ideas: the 'beauty' stream, and the 'contemporaneity' stream, and we considered that had he lived, he might have observed the divergence of those two, and had to face some hard choices. If beauty actually has a transcendent importance, what is a gallery director to do? Make this a rule of exclusion?

We are really looking at two kinds of truth here. The best of contemporary art is 'true', true to an authentic sense of how the world seems to be to moderns, living life without a sense of God, believing in a lonely and unfathered planet in which we have to make our own meanings. As a Christian I question whether that actually is 'true truth', and whether a view of the world which ignores revelation from its maker can actually make good sense of it. So for me, this contemporary art which sidelines the traditional qualities of form and beauty as inauthentic and untrue, has begun to seem not so much exciting and relevant, as predictable and lacking in life. I have little doubt that Lane would have thought the same.

‘Inclusive towards goodness’

We do have a difficulty here. It is important for voices to be heard, and it is not good for galleries to act as censors, trying to control taste. The art we have is the art we have. However, it is also important that when we try to be ‘inclusive’, we do so sincerely, not thinking merely of the margins, but warmly giving space to the centre. And we do need to know that we have choices. We are not, as we sometimes think, helpless riders on the runaway horse of culture. Each one of us affects the direction in which culture goes. The choices we make, in the art we do or the art we sponsor, will affect each other and generations to come. Our choices reflect our commitments. Goodness is a discipline, it is far easier to go along with the current or mediocre, to continually say ‘yes’ and never ‘no’, or not to give support to the thing that is good. So we should make a definite commitment to be ‘inclusive towards goodness’.

Art, then, is a strange thing which, if expected to generate meaning and value out of itself dries up. If too much is expected of it in terms of perfection or redemption, it is apt to cause quarrels, pain and stress. But if held on a light hand, seeing its meaning as coming from the Giver who made it, it is pure pleasure and delight - a tangible hint of the hope to come, with the weight of something which will, in God’s good time, become ever more solid and real.

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