

# The Cult of the Unintelligible

THOSE of our readers who sympathised with our recent contributor, T. D. H. Hall, in his struggles to appreciate modern art will probably respond to this article by a French writer, JULIEN BENDA, which has been made available to "The Listener" by the French Press and Information Service. Those who don't sympathise will nevertheless be interested.

MANY people deplore the undeniable preponderance to-day accorded to the unintelligible in art, whether literature, painting, or music. It is a quality which can be justified all the more readily because the artists concerned lay claim to it. Usually the artists are accused of fomenting the cult. But in our opinion this is to mistake the true culprit, which is the public whom it may be possible, in some small way, to correct on the matter.

First of all there is that group which declares its admiration for this art just because it is unintelligible, at least to the man in the street, upon whom they pour their scorn for that very reason. This tribe, which thus claims for itself a warrant of intellectual superiority, has

always existed. It is they whom the rhetoric teacher, spoken of by Quintilian, had in mind when he told his pupils to "cast a shadow" over all their writings, and made the leitmotif of his lectures obscurity. It is they whom Montaigne pillories when he speaks of those men who, he says, "will esteem me the more highly the less they understand what I have to say, and will use my obscurity as a yardstick of my depth of reasoning." It is they whom Lesage portrays when he makes Gil Blas say: "If this sonnet is not intelligible, all the better. Sonnets, odes, and similar works which aim at the sublime are not consonant with the simple and the natural; it is their obscurity which is the foundation of their value." However, this tribe is convinced of the correctness of its attitude and no amount of reasoning will weaken it.

But there is another section of the public—a greater number—which upholds this literature not through admiration, but merely as an attitude, whose lack of foundation can be easily exposed with some hope of exacting agreement.

One attitude is to declare, apparently in all good faith: "We don't understand you, undoubtedly because we haven't sufficient intelligence." How preferable it would be to hear these people tell our artistic reformers: "We're quite intelligent enough to understand you, if you were comprehensible; if we don't understand you, it is because you are not comprehensible." Humility on our part always plays into the hands of our pundits who look down from an even greater height on these clods, because they have admitted that they are such.

## The Time-Will-Come Argument

A similar attitude with the same public is to let themselves be impressed by another argument constantly put forward by our misunderstood artists, namely, that they are unintelligible only now, that with time uninitiated humanity will accept them, that the majority of the old masters who to-day

enjoy world-wide renown were at first only appreciated by the select few who were ridiculed by the mob. Our answer should be that if indeed many artists of world-renown began as the butt of the crowd, the contrary is far from true, and that we no longer take account of those literary revolts whose leaders, promised the adulation of the crowd by their myrmidons, interest only our contemporary book-worms; and, moreover, those leaders of artistic cliques who were destined for world fame—like Hugo, Baudelaire, Wagner, or Cesar Franck—lost no time in proving their worth, whereas our surrealists, for example, who have been operating for half-a-century, are still only savoured by themselves or their coterie, and have not yet made the slightest contact with the mass of humanity, which steadfastly refuses to swoon over their creations.

There is another factor which impels this section of the public, not indeed to admire this art, but to give it some consideration, instead of the scorn it merits from a sincere audience. This factor is the fear of not being "up-to-date," of being considered as a "dated Philistine."

I would prefer to see the enemies of unintelligibility no longer contented with isolated protests. I would like to see

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