

that of Gertrude Stein in her atelier, under her Cezanne and Picasso. For she was, in her basic instincts, right: the path of the arts was toward abstraction, which posed a problem for those who worked with words. Yet they would have to follow, and many did, in a revolt against the novel's liberal causality, its tendency to follow the logic of a life, the rhythm of a plot, the sequence of the clock and history. So there was a turn to consciousness and aesthetics, to composition and painting-like sequences. The completion of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is in more than one sense the completion of a painting; Lily Briscoe finishes her canvas, and Virginia Woolf her own, a triptych, three canvasses set in time, but out of history, timeless as an aesthetic object should be.

Yet in this evolution there was a paradox. For most of these writers—like Stein and Woolf—abstraction meant an increased power of penetration, of comprehension of the human being, seen now not as a social agent or a liberal actor but as a reservoir of consciousness. Other writers, though, were decentralising the human figure for

different purposes. In Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, there is no character that draws sympathy, with the possible exception of Stevie, who is, however, an idiot; the other characters are strange, cloaked forces wandering in a hostile landscape. In Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr*, the characters are automata, human machines seen from outside through Lewis's method of "the Great Without." Tarr's mind is full of "sinister piston-rods, organ-like shapes, heavy drills"; he is a figure in a Vorticist painting, a comic machine-man. Lewis rejects "fiction from the inside", the interiorised novel of Stein, Woolf or Joyce, on the grounds that it romanticises and falsifies consciousness, and his deliberate displacement of the human figure is a statement about the modern condition in a world where the landscape is an assailant, man a factor in the environment, not the controlling agent in a sympathetic world.

The paradox of modern abstraction is the paradox in our modern definitions of man, simultaneously liberal and deterministic, heroic and dismissive. It is an art of our uncertainty about the worth of man in the modern world.

Brickbats & Mortar

Arguing about Architecture—By ROGER SCRUTON

DAVID WATKIN'S *Morality and Architecture*,¹ published last year and now reprinting, has derived a certain *succès de scandale*, not from its underlying conceptions (familiar already in the work of Sir Karl Popper, Geoffrey Scott, and Sir Herbert Butterfield) but from its striking historical perspective. With rare insight and directness, Watkin describes the single spiritual force which leads from the moralism of Pugin and Viollet-le-Duc, through the hysteria of Giedion, Taut and Le Corbusier, to the recent crusade against every style of architecture that rejects the forms of the Modern Movement, and hence "the spirit of the age", the *Zeitgeist*, which is supposed to have required them.

The book is short, sharp and to the point, singling out, as principal object of attack, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner (whom the author also praises for the many aspects of his work that do not require the didactic commitment of *Pioneers of Modern Design*). Those of Watkin's critics who seem unable to grasp the proper nature of

intellectual debate have construed the discussion on a personal level. But Watkin's victims are subject to no personal abuse, being criticised, and sometimes ridiculed, only when their writings seem ridiculous or wrong. Of course, to know that Reyner Banham and Charles Jencks have condemned the book, while Osbert Lancaster and John Betjeman have praised it, is already to have a fairly clear idea of its ideological tone. Watkin has a steady aim, and an inquisitorial style, and these will prove highly offensive to those for whom the ravings of Le Corbusier constitute a serious mode of architectural reflection, as well as to many more sensible men, for whom the stylistic changes of the 1920s and '30s seemed to be the necessary outcome of changes in the eye, mind and soul of 20th-century man.

Nevertheless, *Morality and Architecture* should not be read as an attack on the Modern Movement. The author is concerned not with modern architecture, but with the apologetic of which it has stood in need. Watkin discusses the handful of doctrines through which the Modern Movement has been able to convert itself from an aesthetic enterprise into a moral and political

¹ *Morality and Architecture*. By DAVID WATKIN. Oxford University Press, £2.95.

crusade. He argues that the ideology of the movement has been largely materialistic, secular, and egalitarian; it has been against style, ornament, excess, and grandeur; it has been in favour of the collectivity against personal imagination, of historical force against individual will, of the socialist millennium against privilege, patronage and class. (And all this is explicitly reaffirmed by one of Watkin's angry modernist critics—Kenneth Campbell, former housing architect to the London County Council and Greater London Council—in the *Architectural Review* for February 1978.) Nevertheless, in seeking to translate that ideology into architectural form, the Modern Movement has relied on arguments that were used as much by Pugin in his polemics on behalf of a "Christian" architecture, as by the eggheads of the Bauhaus, for whom cleanliness and not godliness had to be first in a builder's thoughts. For 150 years the same collection of fallacies has been invoked to provide each succeeding style, or lack of style, with an appropriate dressing of necessity.

Watkin writes at a considerable distance from the ideological conflicts of the '20s and '30s, and he can no more be blamed than the rest of his generation if he fails to admire the baggage of egalitarianism placed on the public market in those years. Nor can he be blamed if he rejects the attitude that has sought for progress and novelty in everything, even in art, which, because it values not novelty but originality, is necessarily among the most backward-looking of human enterprises. The tone of *Morality and Architecture* will come as no surprise to any member of the generation that has witnessed universal desecration in the name of progress, justice, and artistic truth. Why, then, should Sir John Betjeman call Watkin's tract "a brave and lonely book"? Certainly there have been reviewers whose hostility might seem to justify the remark. Reyner Banham (*Times Literary Supplement*, 17 February 1978) attributes to Watkin the kind of vindictiveness "of which only Christians seem capable" (a view which sheds surprising light on Banham's own religious views), while Richard Wollheim (*Architectural Review*, February 1978) regards the welcome given to *Morality and Architecture* as yet one more sign of the poverty of architectural theory, resolving his seemingly ambivalent and circumlocutory review on a sudden note of passionate distaste. But these reactions—while being those of an established intelligentsia—are untypical. The book has indeed been welcomed, and sometimes with an enthusiasm as intemperate as Banham's and Wollheim's abuse. It is somewhat odd, therefore, that neither side has seen fit to discuss the central argument.

WATKIN ASSERTS THAT a long tradition of fallacious reasoning has not only obscured the true nature of aesthetic judgment, but also has made possible the wholesale subjection of architectural values to the exigencies of moral or political thinking, often by practical men, for whom thinking of any kind is a mistake. (And if Watkin singles out Pevsner as his principal target, it is surely because Pevsner is a thinker, and not just a jobbing builder with an eye for the market.) Architecture, Watkin claims, is an autonomous enterprise, in which individual taste and cultural tradition are the major legitimate guides; the attempt to reduce architecture to a by-product of social need, or of historical force, or of the *Zeitgeist*; the attempt to see it only as a moral or political instrument—all these are ways of denying to architecture its essential nature as a decorative art.

As a diagnosis of a curious episode in intellectual history, *Morality and Architecture* is persuasive and highly entertaining. But some of its admirers, grateful for a book that pours scorn on the gibberish of modernism, have sought for more in Watkin's pages than the historical vision which they contain. Thus Paul Johnson, writing in *The Daily Telegraph* (17 December 1977), declares that "all sensible and sensitive people know that modern architecture is bad and horrible, almost without exception. Mr Watkin explains why." But how can fallacies in the theory of modern architecture explain the disaster of its practice, when the same fallacies were invoked in support of the highly successful styles of the Gothic revival? Watkin's opponents have also taken him to be writing, not of the history of architectural dogma, but rather of the relation between theory and practice. Much of Wollheim's antipathy rests on the assumption that Watkin is out of sympathy with the stylistic changes of the '20s, and that he has no sense—as Wollheim puts it—of the "tiredness" of styles. But surely the first of these accusations is entirely irrelevant, even for someone who can muster the kind of sympathy for the "international style" that Wollheim intimates.

THE SECOND OF Wollheim's accusations is, however, more interesting, in that it betrays a lingering attachment to one of the theories that Watkin attacks, the theory that an architect is compelled to be "of his time" in some way beyond the mere fact of living in it. Styles suddenly become "tired", and hence unavailable to the architect who wishes to maintain his status as a modern man. The trouble with such a view is not that it is false, but rather, as Watkin points out, that there is no way in which an artist can be

seriously influenced by it. Suppose the Gothic style really was "tired" when Pugin, Butterfield and their predecessors revived it. Should that have deterred them? And should it deter the builders at Bury St Edmunds and Lancing College? Moreover, how can we say that the classical tradition was "tired" when the Modern Movement set out to destroy it? It is certainly not exhaustion that we witness in the exuberant classicism of the Edwardians, in the proud city palaces of Fleet Street and Piccadilly. We may see bad taste here, but we can see no exhaustion comparable to the dismal emptiness of the *cité radieuse* and all that it engendered. Something is wrong if we see only "tiredness" in the Edwardian style, and "freshness and youth" in the sterile forms that were engineered to replace it.

But to the point: sensible and sensitive men no more say that *all* modern architecture is horrible than that all preceding architecture was good. The trouble is that in architecture the rewards are vast and multifarious, and the desire to obtain will always exceed the power to justify. The enthusiasm that surrounded the death of style in architecture made it inevitable that there should be no serious consideration given to the arguments of those who had signed its death warrant. As Watkin's polemic shows, the question of the nature of architecture is rich and complex; at the

same time, every unscrupulous intellectual trick has been used to simplify it, so as to represent the "international" style as historically, socially, politically, morally and technologically necessary.

It becomes apparent that for 150 years stylistic changes have sought to justify themselves, and to justify themselves in identical, or closely related, terms. Besides establishing this important historical conclusion, Watkin also hints at his own aesthetic position, a position which involves a defence of the autonomy of aesthetic values. In a brief and unfriendly review (*RIBA Journal*, February 1978), Lord Esher pointed out that the case for the autonomy of architecture had been effectively put by Geoffrey Scott (in *The Architecture of Humanism*, a finely written book that deserved to have more influence on the thought of the '20s than the *Zeitgeist* would permit). However, this similarity with Scott ought not to be regarded as a defect; the doctrine of the autonomy of aesthetic values is essentially rhetorical, a question of emphasis. It must be put afresh for every generation in the language most suited to the time. Modern students of architecture will be grateful for a renewed statement of the position, a statement that chooses as its principal target, not the romanticism of the late Gothic Revival, but the more deadly spirit of comprehensive development,

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urban renewal, the technological revolution, and, as its crowning aesthetic embodiment, the Festival of Britain.

But their gratitude will also go to show that the arguments are not all on the side of Scott and Watkin. If you hate those things, then it is partly because of their moral and political meaning; the ugliness of the Smithsons' project at the Elephant and Castle is not separable from the contemptuous conception of life's value that it conveys. It is important, therefore, to try to see behind the high-toned irony with which Watkin presents his opponents' dogmas, to the real intellectual issues upon which he too must take a stand.

SO FAR AS I CAN SEE, there are two issues, intimately connected. First, there is the issue which focuses on the term "historicism" (used one way by Popper, another by Pevsner); secondly there is the issue just mentioned, the autonomy of aesthetic values. In discussing the first of these, Watkin persuasively argues that the Hegelian view of history, which has been so important an instrument of architectural criticism, has been also applied as a rule of practice, in which sphere it is strictly nonsensical. Giedion, Pevsner, and many others have all argued that the spirit of the age, being compelled by all that preceded it and propelled towards its *Aufhebung* in the world to come, must dictate the forms of architecture, making it impossible, retrograde or dishonest to build in the manner of the past. That view relies on a discredited notion of history. It is also necessarily selective. (How, Watkin asks, do we know that Gropius was essential and Lutyens only accidental to the spirit of the time which fostered both of them?) Moreover, the view has the stunning consequence that all Western architecture, from the Romans to the Edwardians, could not, or should not, have happened.

Nevertheless, for all its exaggeration, the Hegelian view of history has a legitimate critical use. (It would now be difficult to discard the Hegelian distinction between Renaissance and Baroque, however much one may wish to qualify it.) Perhaps Watkin, like Popper and Gombrich, does not sufficiently appreciate this fact, or sufficiently acknowledge its intellectual implications. But for Watkin the really obnoxious feature of the view is not the possibility of its legislative (as opposed to its critical) employment, but its almost inevitable degeneration into "progressivism"—into the view that the movement of history is necessarily *forward*, from worse to better. Following Sir Herbert Butterfield, Watkin castigates this outlook as the "Whig view of history." The concept is a crude one, partly because of the crudeness of what it

describes, but also because discussion of these issues requires more serious consideration of what "better" and "worse" consist in than was ever to be heard in the Smoking Room of the Reform Club (incidentally, one of London's greatest, and most thoroughly backward-looking, classical buildings). As a rhetorical instrument, Butterfield's label is effective, but blunt; Watkin's ironical tone would have benefited, perhaps, from the use of something finer. Applied to the doctrines of national and international socialism, as these became entangled with the apologetic of modern architecture, the "Whig view of history" begins to obscure as much as it clarifies. Can we really believe that the mad rationalism of the Jacobins, the evolutionism of Spencer, the dialectical materialism of Engels and Lenin are all adequately subsumed under a label invented to ridicule an English aristocratic faction? This is not to reject the truth of what Watkin means, but rather the over-schematic way in which he displays it.

More importantly, there are attitudes which no one could describe as "progressivist" and yet which cannot be characterised in terms of the parochial conceptions of Whiggery. Consider the architects of the Italian Renaissance. They worked within and towards a tradition, with their minds firmly fixed on a classical ideal. At the same time they worked in a spirit of improvement, a spirit to which Hegelians have rightly attributed a world-historical significance, compelled towards a new architecture by self-conscious spiritual change. The Renaissance architect did not articulate this change as we (with hindsight) would articulate it, and it is true, as Watkin points out, that the distinction between the Renaissance and the Mediaeval attitude to building has often been grossly exaggerated. Nevertheless, one could not characterise Brunelleschi's artistic intention if one did not recognise that his style was seen as an improvement, consonant with the social, moral and intellectual changes among which it was conceived. Clearly, criticism of such a style will require sharper distinctions than that between, on the one hand, the Whig view of history, and, on the other, the respect for tradition, custom and individual will.

AS WATKIN DEMONSTRATES, the *Zeitgeist* enthusiasts of our time, in so far as they have inspired and justified the forms of modern architecture, have usually done so out of strong political convictions. Watkin refers to these convictions dismissively and briefly, using the word "collectivist" many times, and always as though it had a clear political meaning. Since the reference to these political attitudes is not intended to preface

any full analysis of them (Watkin's contention being that politics is one thing, architecture another), the argument comes to rest on the second major assumption, the assumption of the autonomy of aesthetic values.

One of the many virtues of Watkin's book is that it shows how difficult it is either to affirm or to deny this assumption, particularly when considering the useful and decorative arts. How far can one separate those aesthetic values which Watkin assigns to "taste", "tradition", and "the way it looks" from the moral, political and functional considerations which animate the architect and his public? Watkin argues pithily against what Scott called "the ethical fallacy", and against every other view which seeks to explain architecture away, as a means to an end, or as a by-product of some independent force or interest. Wisely, however, he refrains from providing an aesthetic theory of his own. Scott's attempt—a messy concoction out of bygone psychology—provides the weakest chapter in his brilliant essay. But Scott's failure is a necessary result of the obscurity in the doctrine of aesthetic

autonomy, a doctrine whose value will always be more rhetorical than intellectual. While Watkin is right to insist that one cannot pass from moral maxims to clear aesthetic rules, he cannot be right if he thinks that there is *no* connection between these things. How else can one explain his own (and Paul Johnson's) anger at the Modern Movement? The reader is left, then, with an intellectual puzzle, and Watkin's effective dismissal of a tradition of nonsense still does not solve the puzzle which served to generate it.

The lesson of Watkin's book deserves to be absorbed, not only by students of architecture, but by everyone interested in the *Zeitgeist* in its surprising most recent form. Here, for once, is a young man writing intelligently and perceptively about architectural theory; and the spirit which he expresses is high-toned and élitist, as contemptuous of fashion as it is respectful towards "tradition and the individual talent." If this is the *Zeitgeist*, then the established pundits of architectural theory must look forward to an early overthrow. And I doubt that many will mind.

Heads, Tongues & Spirits

New Poetry—By ALAN BROWNJOHN

IT IS CERTAINLY A TRIBUTE to the elegant assurance—and, yes, the startling inventiveness—of the poems in Craig Raine's first volume that one reads them forgetting how often a nice derangement of metaphors has been called in during the last few decades to enliven the surface of English poetry. A lot of it seems remarkably new and fresh in Raine; but it was already there, for example, in Louis MacNeice:

*The foam in the curving bay is a goose-quill
That feathers . . . unfeathers . . . itself.*

It reappeared as a recurring mannerism in Norman McCaig:

*the wind
has moulded the sand in pastry frills
and cornices*

And it provided a temptation for the early Seamus Heaney; whose "Trout"

*slips like butter down
the throat of the river.*

¹ *The Onion, Memory*. By CRAIG RAINE. Oxford University Press, £2.25.

One doesn't swallow butter in the shape of fish, and fish don't melt in water—but there's no refuting Raine with such bits of Johnsonian niggling. Or very rarely: ice-cream cornets do not nibble "down to thimbles" so much as miniature cornets, and traffic lights surely only resemble "three sisters longing for Moscow" by being stationary and in threes. Otherwise, he is almost flawlessly exact and continually surprising; and he safeguards himself against pretentiousness by tying his metaphors firmly to the objects described and to the moment of perception.

*The Onion, Memory*¹ is about the drunkenness of things being transmutable: transmutable not into symbols (which is a comfort) but into other things which can be cajoled or laughed into seeming ridiculously like them:

*He shakes the air into a paper bag and,
eggs pickpocketed inside, trapezes it.*

"The Grocer"

*Cups commemorate the War
of Jenkins' Ear*

"An Enquiry into Two Inches of Ivory"