

On To Hell With Freee

Notes on Kim Crowell's Portrait of Herbert Read

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Kim Crowell's, *Portrait of Herbert Read ('To Hell With Freee')*, marks the first issue of Anarchist Studies devoted to a pivotal figure in the history of modern art (and much more), with a special focus on Read's polemical pamphlet, *To Hell with Culture* (1941). To fully grasp that statement, we need to recall the salient points of Read's biography. Read was the son of a tenant farmer whose mother was forced to commit him to an orphanage in Halifax, England when he was ten (Read's father died suddenly in 1903, leaving his wife destitute with three children).¹ Conditions at the orphanage, where Read lived for the next five years, were brutal: the children washed in cold water and got one meal of meat and vegetables per day; otherwise there was only milk and bread. They had no privacy whatsoever and were educated by rote. Days began at six-thirty in the morning sharp and closed in regimental fashion: 'When "one" was shouted, we all knelt at our bedsides, and in this devout attitude remained until "two" rang out, when we immediately rose and placed our little wire baskets on our beds. At "three" we folded our coats neatly into the baskets and as number followed number slowly disrobed ... "twelve" [would] permit us to clamber hastily into bed and warm our chilled bodies'.²

Upon graduating from the orphanage at age fifteen, Read rejoined his mother, who now lived in the slum-ridden industrial town of Leeds, where she managed a laundry. Read found work as a bank clerk before enrolling in Leeds University (financing his education with borrowed funds) in 1912. During this period he was introduced to modern art and the ideas of Edward Carpenter (Carpenter's Non-Governmental Society turned him to anarchism), Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Max Stirner and Frederick Nietzsche.³ When the war began, Read enlisted and, after training at the rank of Second Lieutenant, was sent to the front at Ypres in November 1915. 'I have now seen "the real thing"' he wrote: 'A trench in winter, wet and cold, the stench of decay, and even ghastly death'.⁴ Read and the soldiers under his command quickly bonded and he later immortalized their shared struggle for survival in a slim book of poetry, *Naked Warriors*.⁵

¹ James King, *The Last Modern: A Life of Herbert Read*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1990), pp9-10.

² *Ibid.*, pp13-14. King is citing the recollections of another orphan who lived there during Read's time.

³ David Goodway, 'The Politics of Herbert Read', *Herbert Read Reassessed*, David Goodway, (ed.), (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), pp177-178.

⁴ Herbert Read cited in *ibid.*, p40.

⁵ Herbert Read, *Naked Warriors*, (London: Art & Letters, 1919).

By 1916 Read was advocating for working-class revolution, a revolution that would restructure post-war society by dissolving top-down government as workers took control of production and socialized the economy.⁶ These politics are the premise for Read's searing critique of culture's subjugation under capitalism.

To Hell With Culture dates art's degeneration into commodity status back two thousand years to the Roman Empire and characterizes the Romans as 'the first large scale capitalists in Europe'.⁷ Greece provided the Romans with their culture of choice for commodification.⁸ The Greeks had no conception of culture as something apart from the organic life of the community. Their architecture, poetry, sculptures and crafts were as integral as their language, as natural, Read emphasises, 'as the complexion of their skins'.⁹ Creativity infused all aspects of the environment, because objects were made for their use value, not as commodities. On this basis, Read drew parallels between the peoples of ancient Greece and so-called 'primitive civilizations'.¹⁰

Like the Greeks, the people of these societies cultivated a refined aesthetic sensibility and took pleasure in 'definite proportions, relationships, rhythms [and] harmonies' attuned to natural growth forms and 'the structure of the universe'.¹¹ Of course Read was not the first to analyse ancient Greek culture in these terms. Karl Marx similarly looked to the pre-capitalist Greeks for his model of a non-alienated society.¹²

How, then, did the Roman Empire pervert these values? Importing Greek culture, the Romans commodified it and churned out rank imitations of its greatest achievements while imposing their rule on colonised peoples.¹³ With the end of the Roman Empire and the advent of the Middle Ages, culture recovered its natural functions. 'Fine art' in the modern sense of the word had no meaning and culture's status as an autonomous sphere disappeared. Artisans worked in guilds and 'art' simply designated something that was pleasing to the senses. Masons, sculptors, illuminators, architects and painters beautified everything from cathedrals to candlesticks, creating achievements that rivalled 'the Age of the Greeks'.¹⁴

The rise of capitalism renewed art's commodification, culminating with the Industrial Revolution and the ideological divorce of culture from work.¹⁵ Read cites nineteenth-century art critic Mathew Arnold to illustrate his point. For Arnold, culture was an elite pursuit divorced from everyday life. Society's educated strata were tasked with distilling 'the best that has been known and said in the world' and codifying it as culture.¹⁶ This process accelerated into the

⁶ King, *The Last Modern*, pp42-43.

⁷ Herbert Read, 'To Hell with Culture' (1941) reprinted in *The Politics of the Unpolitical*, (London: Routledge, 1943), p47. *The Politics of the Unpolitical* incorporates a number of previously published articles and pamphlets and is Read's most succinct statement on the politics of art during World War Two.

⁸ *Ibid*, p48.

⁹ *Ibid*, p47.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p62.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p51.

¹² Marx's *Gymnasium* education (he was raised in a wealthy middle-class family), introduced him to the Greek classics as well as the critical writings of, among others, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Hölderlin. See Chapter One, 'Karl Marx: Athenian Democracy and the Critique of Political Economy', in George E. McCarthy, *Classical Horizons: The Origins of Sociology in Ancient Greece*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2002), pp15-59.

¹³ Read, 'To Hell with Culture', p48.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p49.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

twentieth century, as culture was commodified as fine art for the wealthy or appropriated for the production of cheaply produced mass-marketed goods, such as furniture ‘in the manner of Chippendale’.¹⁷

Society fared no better under authoritarian-socialist regimes. They not only subordinated aesthetics to the expediencies of industrial production: they added another layer of subjugation by bringing culture to heel in the service of government dictatorship.¹⁸ Writing in the midst of the Nazi aerial bombing of London, Read declared:

To hell with such a culture! To the rubbish heap and furnace with it all! Let us celebrate the democratic revolution with the biggest holocaust in the history of the world. When Hitler has finished bombing our cities, let the demolition squads complete the good work. Let us go out into the wide open spaces and build anew.¹⁹

Read ends by calling for an anarchist social order suffused with ‘a plenitude of freedom and all the economic essentials of a democratic way of life’.²⁰ Only then could culture be renewed as a natural outgrowth of society. In such an order the artist would shed the elitism imposed by capitalism, for ‘when every man is an artist, who should claim to be a superman?’²¹ Freed from churning out shoddy goods designed to maximise profits, workers could become artisans on the factory floor: mobilising industry to serve humanity’s needs, they could beautify everything, right down to ‘pots and pans’.²² This brings to mind my own experience working on an assembly line in an aluminium factory (where my stepfather was an oiler) and the ways in which the quality of what we produced was constantly compromised for the sake of profit.

We had no say over what we produced, but our innovative maintenance of aging machinery was crucial to the operation. What, then, if we had been able to participate in designing the products we produced and fully controlled the production process? Might artistry have figured in our efforts, as Read envisaged? I am certain of it. Reconciling modern society with a free order that mirrors the life force in nature was foundational for Read’s anarchism. The partisan of working-class revolution was also a poet who eulogised human freedom in ecological terms:

A Song for the Spanish Anarchists²³

The golden lemon is not made
But grows on a green tree:
A strong man and his crystal eyes
Is a man born free.
The oxen pass under the yoke
And the blind are led at will:
But a man born free has a path of his own
And a house on the hill
And men are men who till the land

¹⁷ Ibid., pp54-55.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp58-59.

¹⁹ Ibid., p66.

²⁰ Ibid., p67.

²¹ Ibid., p70.

²² Ibid., p67.

²³ Herbert Read, ‘A Song for Spanish Anarchists’, *Thirty Five Poems*, (London: Faber ad Faber, 1949), p41.

And women are women who weave:
Fifty men own the lemon grove
And no man is a slave.

Isn't it time we took our cue from Herbert Read? Serious engagement with Read's legacy might renew our understanding of modernism and his interventions in its development.²⁴ As Michael Paraskos argues in 'The curse of King Bomba: or how Marxism stole Modernism', hostile critics have held forth long enough.²⁵ Let's add our voices to what Read had to say.

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²⁴ See, for example: Benedict Read and David Thistlewood, (eds.), *A British Vision of World Art: Herbert Read*, (London: Lund Humphries, 1993); David Goodway, (ed.), *Herbert Read Reassessed*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998); and Michael Paraskos, *Rereading Read: New Views on Herbert Read*, Michael Paraskos, (ed.), (London: Freedom Press, 2007).

²⁵ Michael Paraskos, 'The Curse of King Bomba: or how Marxism stole Modernism', *Rereading Read*, pp44-57.

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