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# HERBERT READ

(1893–1968)

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In all things, moral and intellectual, we should act on the belief that we really possess only what we have conquered ourselves that we are made perfect by natural habits, but slaves by social conventions; and that until we have become accustomed to beauty we are not capable of truth and goodness, for by beauty we mean the principle of harmony which is the given order of the physical universe, to which we conform and live, or which we reject and die (Read, 1944, p. 25).

## Introduction

Herbert Read was a poet devoted to the evocation of vivid pictorial imagery, especially of his native northern English countryside. He was also a historian of ceramics and stained glass, and was strongly committed to the modern revitalization of industrial design. He was a literary critic, contributing important studies of the English Romantic poets, such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. Twice decorated for bravery in the First World War, he subsequently became a pacifist and theoretical anarchist. His unconventional politics did not prevent his being honoured with a knighthood, nor his belonging to the British cultural establishment, as signified in honorary professorships and prestigious lectureships. But, in spite of this diversity of achievement, he is best remembered as a critic of, and apologist for, the avant-garde art of his lifetime—particularly English and European Modernism (Thistlewood, 1984)—and as a profound explicator and defender of children’s creativity.

His interests in art education, though nascent in his earlier aesthetic theorizing, did not develop fully until he was approaching his fiftieth year. They emerged from his interests in theories and practices illuminating the position of the avant-garde within the socio-political flux. The subject of child art was at first of subsidiary importance: arguments about a ‘pre-logical’ essence within avant-garde creativity could be supported with reference to properties apparent in both primitive art and the imagery of children. However, he became deeply interested in children’s drawings and paintings after having been invited to collect works for an exhibition of British art that would tour allied and neutral countries during the Second World War. As it was considered too risky to transport across the Atlantic works of established importance to the national heritage, it was proposed that children’s drawings and paintings should be sent instead.

Read, in making his collection, was unexpectedly moved by the expressive power and emotional content of some of the younger artist’s works. The experience prompted his special attention to their cultural value, and his engagement of the theory of children’s creativity with seriousness matching his devotion to the avant-garde. This work both changed fundamentally his own life’s work throughout his remaining twenty-five years and provided art education with a rationale of unprecedented lucidity and persuasiveness. Key books and pamphlets resulted: *Education through Art* (Read, 1943); *The Education of Free Men* (Read, 1944); *Culture and Education in a World Order* (Read, 1948); *The Grass Road*, (1955); and *Redemption of the Robot* (Read, 1970).

As these titles suggest, Read elaborated a socio-cultural dimension of creative education, offering the notion of greater international understanding and cohesiveness rooted in principles of developing the fully-balanced personality through art education. Child art was the driving force of this philosophy: the heroic task of education was to prevent the young child from losing access to whatever ancient, ingrained, cultural wisdom he or she was able to manifest in symbolization. Reads last years were devoted to the proclamation of this philosophy throughout the world, especially in the proceedings of the International Society for Education through Art, which he was instrumental in establishing under the auspices of UNESCO.

## **Life and intellectual biography**

Read was the son of a tenant farmer in north Yorkshire, and his first perception of the world was of an utterly stable, conservative, rural community. In 1903, however, when he was 10, his father died and his family was dispossessed of its tenancy. His mother entered domestic service, he being boarded at an orphanage school in Halifax before leaving, at the earliest opportunity, to become a bank clerk in Leeds. The obvious facts of industrial poverty around him challenged inherited political prejudices and, by the time he entered Leeds University in 1912 to study economics (after having matriculated at evening classes), he was a ready participant in socialist debates.

He began to read *The New Age*, among the leading journals of socialist politics and aesthetics of its day. He became a regular contributor to the paper throughout a period in which it was a vehicle for promoting socialist alternatives to Fabianism, a movement dedicated to opposing capitalism by debate and force of argument rather than precipitate action. Read himself differed with the Fabians not so much on questions of revolution as of materialism. In pursuit of improving wages and conditions, and increasing worker's share of goods, the Fabians appeared willing to surrender fundamental socialist principles, notably the aesthetic and spiritual goals of 'Arts and Crafts' reformers, such as William Morris.

In Read's earliest childhood memories, even the most severely exploited workers had experienced the satisfactions of working with the land, with growth and harvest and with animal husbandry, and even the meanest tasks had been acknowledged periodically in thanksgivings, seasonal festivities and other kinds of common celebration. His images of work were of hard toil cheerfully endured in the countryside, of industrial processes centred upon the village forge or, and of urban employment housed in small scale machine sheds—an imagery very similar to Piotr Kropotkins, whose writings he admired.

Read's early contribution to socio-political thought, published in the relatively obscure periodical *The Guildsman* in 1917, was to propose a theory of economic groupings and networks that would have fused both localized and internationalized interests. Rural industries would have run on anarchistic principles, while the world's urban centres would have formed such an interlocked system of economic mutual dependence as to have made any future international conflict—such as the war he had recently fought in—impossible. He saw trade unions and industrial federations as prototype economic groups which, with only a little more purpose, could be the regulators of an international economy; and, like the Marxists, he could foresee the withering of the State, though not into extinction but to a size commensurate with its remaining responsibilities, virtually all of which, to Read, would have been cultural.

Read political beliefs had roots in these convictions another war is unthinkable; the State has no economic purpose; and the ideal form of government is one which guarantees the utmost equality while preserving individual freedoms, including the right of an individual to become detached from those community interests into which he or she had been accidentally projected by birth. This is precisely what had happened to Read as a result of his father's premature death, his own dislocation from the locality of his birth, and his having found a role outside the agricultural community. His position was summarized in his critical appreciation of Julien Benda's book *La*

*Trahisson des clercs* [Treason of the Intellectuals] (Benda, 1928) in which a series of propositions were found to be so strikingly familiar that they came as self-revelations.

All real human existence is the existence of an individual, either of an individual person or of a common-interest group, and is competitive and necessarily aggressive. The *clerc* or disinterested person of learning is one who protests against a morality of aggression by proclaiming ideal values revealed in contemplation of matters abstract, universal and infinite. Civilized humanity is made possible by the coexistence and synthesis of aggressive expediency and disinterested philosophy. A world observing only a code of practical necessity would be barbarous: one that practised only a code of ideals would cease to exist. Real existence admits the gradual softening of aggression with idealism.

Read (having left the Army with the rank of Captain, having worked for a brief time as a government civil servant at the Treasury, and then having transferred his employment within the civil service to an Assistant Keepership of Ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum) naturally identified with the dislocated individual who, while leading an ostensibly unproductive life, had the special purpose of divining abstract principles for the benefit of the wider community in an age of idealism following, and counteracting, a period of great international aggression. At this time in his life, like his poet friend T.S. Eliot, and the classicist T.E. Hulme, whose collected works he had edited (Hulme, 1924), Read considered the goals of aesthetic contemplation to be formal precision, harmony and elegant proportion principles which, he firmly believed, when evident in literature, art and conduct, offered the world the prospect of an international medium of understanding.

This was in the 1920s. In the following decade he also advocated the very opposite of formal precision, harmony and elegant proportion, urging society's artists and art theorists to cultivate the irrational and imprecise. This new dimension was stimulated by Read's discovery of the celebration of the irrational creative act in Surrealism (Read, 1936), besides his own liberation from the civil service first in order to be subsequently to be Editor of *The Burlington Magazine* (1933–39). But a prime contributory factor also was his perceptions of changes taking place in European politics, in particular the rise of aggressive German nationalism. He saw it as no coincidence that this nationalism attempted to eradicate avant-garde art of both Abstract and Surrealist tendencies. It seemed obvious to Read that Communism and Fascism were about to hold a confrontation for the domination of Europe, and that, even if the United Kingdom was not directly involved, individuals at least would be obliged to take sides. Though he recognized the repressive State Capitalism that was the Soviet reality (Read, 1937, p. 266–73), Read was prepared to countenance Communism for he saw in it an essence which promised respect for disinterested ideals.

He flirted with philosophical Communism, but was finally dissuaded from close association with this movement because of its antipathy towards all realities of art, except the one it had contrived in social realism. He was appalled to discover that, like Fascism, it had stamped out avant-garde art; and his conclusion was that contemporary art had to become active rather than contemplative, partisan rather than disinterested, and subliminal rather than super-evident. In other words, artists and theorists had to adopt a militancy of a sort that was, in the 1930s, most apparent in Surrealism, and contemporary aesthetics had to assume less easily victimized forms. The most prominent themes of *Art and Society* (Read, 1937) were that the greatest art of the past had belonged to communal societies, and that the modern artist, conscious of an ability to transform the world by his or her visions of a new reality, had to become a more consistent Communist than those, so-called, who would compromise with the aesthetic conventions of a last phase of capitalism.

He hesitated to use the term connotations of violence. But he came to believe that he had no choice because other concepts were even more tainted. Communism, in its Soviet form, opposed individual creativity while shoring up the State and its bureaucracies. Fabianism was unredeemably materialistic. And socialism was either soulless or soaked in nostalgic mock-mediaevalism. In spite

of the fact that he knew he would thus forfeit any serious consideration of his views in the United Kingdom (Read, 1940, p. 136), he took the concept anarchism to be the most appropriate encapsulation of his beliefs because it embraced principles of individual freedom, self-determination, and a social framework of common-interest groupings, to which he himself added the idea of an avant-garde, agitating on behalf of free creativity (Read, 1938; Read, 1954; Read, 1968, pp. 76–93).

The fundamental changes in intellectual direction which affected Read at around his fortieth year, persuading him to identify with theoretical anarchism (Woodcock, 1972) and also to recognize the apparently contradictory claims of Abstraction and Surrealism in avant-garde art, also prompted his critical revision of the formative stages of his own philosophical development. Read recalled that his earliest contact with art had been with avant-garde painting. He had been an utterly conventional nineteen-year old (conservative, Christian, and with bourgeois aspirations) when he had encountered works by Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Klee and, particularly, Wassily Kandinsky—in the house where a friend of his mother had become housekeeper—and these had so shocked and fascinated him that he had been driven to an equally shocking and subversive literature for explanations. He had read Bergson and Nietzsche, Hegel, Marx and Kropotkin, discovering explanations linking the aesthetic and the socio-political. This experience sowed the seeds of those moral and spiritual convictions that would become fully realized in early middle age, and his retrospection on this fact confirmed for him the authority of the aesthetic imperative.

The explanations he had found in philosophy were, he believed, weaker versions of truths perceptible in their most potent forms in the works of art themselves. This initiated a number of subsequently consistent beliefs: human concepts, of all kinds whatsoever, originate aesthetically by virtue of insight, and only subsequently percolate through philosophy and other forms of interpretation and use, eventually to become effective upon general life and conduct. Society needs special individuals—members of avant-gardes—possessing heightened sensibilities necessary for engaging such truths or realities. Ordinary people, too, require some awareness of this process of origination and dissemination. In the short term, this was to be provided by Read and others like him intermediaries between society and its most creative artists. In the longer term, however, interpretation would be largely superfluous, because by virtue of reformed educational practices everyone, in some special way, would be an artist, and comprehension of the work of avant-gardes would be so much the more direct.

As for the avant-gardes themselves: their authentic creativity, though invariably individual in conception, would not be the property of individuals. It would be effected by individuals who happened (Read would have said involuntarily) to be the sensitive registers of an evolving intelligence comprising the whole social body. His vision of society required the special creativity of certain accomplished individuals, and also the special creativity latent within everyone, because it would only be by extraordinary means that new aesthetic perceptions might be won on behalf of society as a whole, as a vital aspect of a constant, necessary process of social renewal and reinvigoration.

His concept of the avant-garde was therefore not élitist: it simply referred to the extraordinary insight required to give shape to some value or truth newly perceived or perceived anew. And it referred to a cohort functioning as if it had no choice in the matter, for an occupation demanding constant nervous activity, and erratic fluctuation between achievement and despair, would surely have been the conscious choice of very few. It became Read's vocation to speak for such necessary 'outsiders', those exerting perceptive shaping influence upon the stream of ordinary events they could never join or rejoin, and to attempt to influence some co-ordination of their creative originality. It became a consequent objective to raise the consciousness of ordinary people by means of education through art; and his amused realization that this was considered subversive (while encouragement of really subversive avant-garde art was not) reinforced his inclination to call himself an anarchist.

## The prevailing condition of creative education

In what sense did Read's educational beliefs threaten conventional practices? When Read began to take an interest in educational philosophy in the mid-1930s, art education in the United Kingdom had been stabilized around certain conventional principles for over fifty years. In spite of decentralized authority in matters of curriculum, with responsibility for subject content resting with individual head-teachers, the maintenance of standards was effectively in the hands of professional bodies such as the National Society of Art Masters (NSAM) and to a much lesser degree—the Art Teachers Guild (ATG). The NSAM was dedicated to the preservation of drawing as an academic discipline, and possession of its certificates indicated a teacher's competence both in classical draughtsmanship and in design allied to the industrial arts. The interests of the ATG centred on the specific educational needs of young children; but, largely confined to infant application, they were thus of little threat to a system of drawing education that began seriously when pupils were old enough to apply intellectual rigour to their work.

There was a tacit distinction between the higher discipline of teaching drawing and design, and the lower discipline of teaching art. The former was associated with national economic purposes and aspired to academic respectability; the latter evoked play and rather modest learning. The former had historic justification for calling itself Art (with a capital) and a sense of belonging to traditions of classical scholarship. The latter had a romantic outlook that, along with such things as simple dress, vegetarianism and a belief in the spiritual value of craftwork, had been a by-product of the English Arts and Crafts Movement.

The aims of the NSAM were effected by encouraging its members to pursue high levels of technical accomplishment as measured by its own examination system the true descendant of a Victorian system of achievement-recognition in which the most demanding exercises required months of unremitting attention to the copying, shading and rendering of prescribed images circulated by the Victoria and Albert Museum (Macdonald, 1970, p. 143–252). The ATG, on the other hand, was much more concerned with tactical approaches necessary for encouraging an essential creativity—an 'originating' activity—in children not specifically destined for an aesthetic way of life. The ATGs referents therefore included theories of child-centred creativity, and it became its prime purpose to propagate the ideas of such innovators as Ebenezer Cooke and Franz Cizek, whose arguments centred on the proposition that art was an aspect of human development, the absence of which impaired mental growth and social fitness. Before the 1930s such beliefs were regarded as peripheral to the main educational tasks of teaching drawing and design, and their attendant practices were considered at best 'preparatory' to this mission.

The values embedded in the NSAM—what may be termed the 'classic thesis' of twentieth-century art education—had been confirmed in recommendations for this discipline following the government's Education Act of 1918. These recommendations affected not only the United Kingdom, but also its Dominions and all other countries of Anglo-centric culture. They were the NSAM initiative, and they comprised an emphasis on drawing (both conventional and observational) and design (the realization of artefacts through practical involvement with materials), the twin features of a specifically modern, industrially strategic education. For example, the 1918 Act enabled local government to provide extensive post-school continuation classes for young workers entering art industries, and also to admit apprentices to half-time courses in art schools. Such trainees had special courses devoted to their crafts and industries, but their diets also included the kind of drawing fostered by the NSAM.

Thus they would participate in 'figure drawing', 'drawing from nature', and 'architectural and ornamental drawing', in which great emphasis would be placed on the received methodologies of tracing, hatching, shading and rendering that formed the disciplinary spine of the NSAM own standards of competence. This linked academic drawing to the perceived needs of industry and thus directly to conceptions of the national well-being. Individual centred values could be

accommodated to this scheme only if confined to the education of the young child. This was regarded as the ATG's province: throughout the 1920s and early 1930s this organization had persevered with a defence of free, spontaneous creativity as both obviously-present in the drawings and paintings of young children, and also desirable in continuation beyond adolescence—that is, beyond the stage in an individual's development when 'unstructured' creativity was normally to cease.

Marion Richardson (Richardson, 1948) was the champion of this proposal, and her work with young, adolescent and teenage pupils was regarded as proof that inherent, spontaneous creative aptitudes could be protracted beyond their stage of supposed decline. Her approach was based upon stimulation of the pupil imagination with unconventional teaching, evoking vivid mental images through verbal discourse and cultivation of pictorial memory (Macdonald, 1970, pp. 320–54). Richardson enjoyed the support of theorists such as Roger Fry, who compared the work of her children to that of expressionist avant-garde artists. Such comparisons dignified 'child art' as being in some sense a natural or proper creativity, lost in conventional education, and regained only with the greatest difficulty by those few adult artists sufficiently motivated to eliminate intellectual processes from their art-making. This emphasis on individualism, especially in the 1930s when it emerged as an equally well-argued alternative to the conventional, may be regarded as the 'romantic antithesis' of twentieth-century art education. What was thus established by the time Read took an intense interest in the field were: (a) an overtly subject-centred system in operation, comprising individualist art in the earliest years of education, via conventional art and design in the later years, to continuing education and training in tandem with craft trades and industries; and (b) a growing body of theory and practice supporting the proposal that it was precisely the intervention of conventional teaching that extinguished spontaneous creativity in and beyond adolescence.

## **Read's philosophy of education through art**

Read's interest in child art was at first peripheral to his interpretation of the significance of the avant-garde. In an early engagement of the subject, he suggested (Read, 1933, p. 46–47) that more could be learned of the essential nature of art from its origins in the primitive, and its continued rehearsal in childhood imagery, than from its intellectual elaboration in great periods of culture—an elaboration conventionalized in formal education. Children, he wrote, do not distinguish between the ideal (the conventionalized) and the 'real'. Child art was to be regarded as an intensification of children's elementary perceptions of the reality of the world around them, which he considered also a paramount purpose of the avant-garde.

However, in this discussion there is no evidence that Read supported the notion of a necessary 'continuity' of child and mature creativity. Their common feature he recognized as 'play', which in the adult realm was confined to 'special individuals who have special faculties—not of feeling or of thought—but of expression, of objectification'. In other words, authentic creativity in adults is confined to individuals of particular, pre-logical disposition. This was not, for the time being, to countenance the possibility that all members of the adult community might aspire equally to creative fulfilment.

Instead, Read at first seemed to endorse the legitimacy of one kind of educational provision for children who would become artists and another for future artisans and all the rest. It is not difficult to detect Benda influence in suggestions that society required some external shaping guidance provided by disinterested visionaries, but that there had to be safeguards against a proliferation of visionaries too great to be supported by productive labour. Read argued this case in *Art and Society* (Read, 1937), maintaining that a consequent responsibility of art teachers would be to distinguish between the education of positive, creative capabilities in the few who would be initiators, and the encouragement of taste, discrimination and appreciation in the many who would be consumers. This view accommodated the Freudian conception of the artist as a potential neurotic

who had chanced upon ways of evading this fate by expressing what would have been repressed fantasy in plastic form.

One of the most original features of Read's philosophy in its perfected state was the extension of this principle to embrace everyone. The artist is no longer to be regarded as unusual in his or her potential neurosis: modern humanity in general suffers this propensity. *Education through Art* (Read, 1943), published only six years after *Art and Society* everyone, that is, every child, is said to be a potential neurotic capable of being saved from this prospect, if early, largely inborn, creative abilities were not repressed by conventional education. Everyone is an artist of some kind whose special abilities, even if almost insignificant, must be encouraged as contributing to an infinite richness of collective life. Read's newly expressed view of an essential 'continuity' of child and adult creativity in everyone represented a 'synthesis' the two opposed models of twentieth-century art education that had predominated until this point.

What prompted this change of outlook was Read's direct (more than theoretical) encounter with the work of the very young. He was invited to advise the British Council on a collection of children's art for wartime exhibition overseas, and in the course of this he had come across an image, drawn by a five-year-old girl, which she called *Snake around the World and a Boat* (Read, 1943, p. 187; Read 1968, p. 44–45). He was deeply moved, he said, upon immediately recognizing this image as a mandala, an ancient symbol of psychic unity, universally found in prehistorical and primitive art and in all the principal cultures of history. The child, of course, could not attach meaning to what she had done; but Read, aware for some time of what until now had been merely an interesting hypothesis of Carl Gustav Jung's, was shocked to find phenomenal evidence of archetypal imagery. He then discovered an astonishing consistency in children's art of symbols Jung had associated with community stability, and he also found them replete in the paintings and sculptures of the adult avant-garde.

The most significant of these images, to Read, was the mandala, invariably a unified shape, perhaps in the form of a flower or some other four-fold arrangement, with a distinct centre, the appearance of an unfolding, and a gathering perimeter. Especially in Eastern philosophy, though also for example in Christian iconography, these images had been held to symbolize collective thought and mutual belonging. Other archetypes which gave Read shocks of recognition were the tendency to fabricate a ark shadow from aspects of a personality opposed to those personified in the self; and the tendency to protest against isolation, individuation and independence by creating mother images, earth forms, and other symbols of dependence.

All of these projections—beyond self—a fixing upon abstract unities; a collation of personality traits in externalized forms; the celebration of maternity; an acknowledgement of belonging to the land—Read thought, were fundamentally anarchistic. Manifest in the work of the avant-garde, their purpose was to guide the collective unconscious into normal patterns of aspiration and behaviour and away from those sinister alternatives (mass hysteria, nationalistic pride, dumb subservience to the State) to which the unnatural mode of modern life had left people prone. This remedial function, however, would wither into obsolescence if the self-same imagery, evident in child art generally, could be protracted into adulthood for everyone.

Read's encounter with the archetypal content of child art demanded explication. It was this research, conducted at the University of London in 1941–42, that resulted in his seminal work *Education through Art*, the central premises of which were: that the general purpose of education is to foster the growth of what is individual in each human being, at the same harmonizing the individuality thus educed with the organic unity of the social group to which the individual belongs. (Read, 1943, p. 8). The organic principle, signifying normal, unhampered development of individual creativity, and a corresponding development of society through collective creative enterprise, was thus adopted as both generator and evaluative principle.

This book provided art education with a rationale, a defence and an optimistic programme. It comprised: (a) definitions of authenticity in art and art-making; (b) offered explanations of the

materializing of images from the imagination; (c) compared typologies discernible in the literature of psychology and in the study of children's drawings and paintings; (d) and proposed that the variety evident within such typologies supported the principle that everyone could be regarded as a special kind of artist. Realization of this principle obliged Read to revise the relevant passages of future editions of *Art and Society* (Read, 1945, p. 107).

In *Education through Art*, then, the 'organic' principle was deployed in defining 'art' which—reasonably interpreted as 'good form'—could be illuminated by scientific analogy. Good form is perceptible in all manner of natural organisms at microscopic, normal and macroscopic scales, and exhibits such attributes as structural order, elegance, harmony, economy, and dynamic equilibrium as revealed to Read by the scientific philosophy of D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson (Thompson, 1942; Read, 1943, pp. 18–19).

Objectified in art making, such properties evince balance, symmetry and rhythm, thus suggesting the comparability of growth in nature and composition in art. But for Read their applicability was not confined to objective art (that is, an art of purely formal relationships). The subjective also respects these principles to the degree that it is 'externalized' (objectified) feeling, intuition or emotion; and, Read speculated, the subjective may also tend to formal relationships even when internalized, for phantasy and dreaming may be instigated by pathological complexes akin to force systems, and be subject to intrinsic dramatic unities and patterns of organization (Read, 1943, p. 32).

He therefore maintained that a comparability of nature and art extends across the whole range of creative faculties that produce and appreciate art. He presented a digest of psychological research demonstrating the inherent complexity of the human mind, especially in its great variety of 'forces', 'impulses' or 'drives', and he suggested correlations between mental types recognized by psychologists, their characteristic impulses, and the sorts of imagery these impulses might manifest (Read, 1943, p. 28). Enough of a consensus was evident for Read to generalize on the basis of his undoubtedly profound knowledge of the avant-garde creative processes he had studied at length—of contemporary artists in great number (Read, 1933); of the Surrealists (Read, 1936); and of English artists and Europeans working in Britain, particularly Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Paul Nash and Naum Gabo—studies of whom he published retrospectively (Read, 1952). He therefore proposed that a distinction of avant-garde creativity as between (i) realism, (ii) superrealism, (iii) expressionism and (iv) constructivism offered a comprehensive categorization of all evident modes, and that these correlated directly with the psychological functions of (i) thinking, (ii) feeling, (iii) sensation and (iv) intuition. He was particularly interested in the idea of an impulse-driven emergence of imagery from the subconscious into conscious attention by the reflex co-ordination of mental, physical and perceptual faculties. Conjoining Freudian and Jungian philosophy, he wrote of the 'calling-up' of images—images with primordial significance—from hidden depths of the mind. This formed theoretical connections between the artist's command of eidetic visualization (mental evocation or recall of images in vivid detail) and an archetypal significance (deep-seated social and cultural symbolism) that could be divined in the images so evoked. It also associated socio-cultural symbolism with modes of creativity that rejected conventional, long-implemented methods of art education, concerned as they were with replication of 'given' realities rather than evocation of the 'new'.

Ultimately, however, *Education through Art* as received as proof that a number of distinct types of child artist could be identified in education, and a varied diet offered them that would both strengthen their natural affinities and credit their unique achievements. In his study of children's images Read discovered eight distinct categories, all transcending age or stage development. He suggested they corresponded to the four composite categories of mature creativity 'realism: thinking'; 'superrealism: feeling'; 'expressionism: sensation'; and 'constructivism: intuition—if each of these were considered in both introverted and extroverted modes (Read, 1943, p. 145).

By this means Read constructed a co-ordinate system that would account for the characteristics of all apparent tendencies in child art. Moreover, this categoric division related directly to tendencies perceptible in the works of mature avant-gardes. The pursuit of authentic avant-garde creativity, Read had long maintained, was so emotionally and nervously demanding that it was the conscious choice of very few. In the adult's realm it was an 'obsessional' activity, while paradoxically in the child's realm it manifested the effortless of inherited reflex behaviour. This suggested a normality of creative identification shared between all children and those adults who would strive to regain pre-logical sensibility. It also suggested a fundamental abnormality in what had been considered normal in conventional education, namely the intervention of logical, intellect-dependent education at around the age of 10. If education were to go with the grain of the biological imperative, ways needed to be found of encouraging the perfection and protraction of pre-logical creative states.

Read did not offer a curriculum but a theoretical defence of the genuine and true. His claims for genuineness and truth were based on the overwhelming evidence of characteristics revealed in his study of child art. But they were founded also in speculative extrapolation of a kind that was most welcome during the Second World War (when his ideas received first publication), in the period of reconstruction (when they were recognized in the 1944 Education Act), and in succeeding decades dominated by Cold War politics. This extrapolation focused on the apparent fact that authentic creativity was an inherent human necessity. The question was why was it so necessary as to be universally present (though in eight complementary modes) in all children, and potentially present in the citizens they were to become?

Read discovered the answer in social psychology, at the same time confirming his predilection for anarchism and his recognition of profundity in Jungs conception of the archetype. The biological necessity has two aspects—to call up imagery from the subconscious and to externalize it in communicable form—the second of which is served by the originating activity and is therefore the more important. He argued that this is not an outpouring for its own sake, nor is it evidence of children conversing with, and confirming, their own individual subconscious experience: it is essentially 'an overture demanding response from others' (Read, 1943, p. 164, quoting Suttie, 1935). It is thus to be regarded as an integrating activity, a 'spontaneous reaching-out to the external world, at first tentative, but capable of becoming the main factor in the adjustment of the individual to society' (Read, 1943, p. 164–65). This not only establishes art—an authentic, non-intellectualized art—as of profound significance in education, it downgrades all other subjects in the curriculum that are intended to develop 'individuation', or rather maintains that they too may serve 'integration' if taught with artistic focus.

## **Impact and influence**

When published, Read's philosophy gave new meaning to the work of many thousands of art teachers. Instead of merely assisting technical expertise, recreational skill and consumer discrimination, their role would be to take command of the larger curriculum, and help innate creative abilities survive in an uncongenial world for the sake of individual well-being and also for the health of a collective social harmony. The potential for success was evident in Read's observation that children quite naturally give forth imagery which maintains contact with the deepest levels of social experience, and with times when social cohesion was the normal order.

A corollary, which armed the art teachers and explains the enormous, immediate and continued, success of his book was that defects of modern life—injustice, immorality, harsh competition, even war, had roots in prevailing systems of education and, specifically, in an emphasizing of intellectual development to the exclusion of everything else, visited upon children from around the age of 10. Because of this, the infant with inborn access to ancient, collective experience became a rootless 10-year-old and a centre of self-interest. What the authorities

considered to be liberal education was nothing more than systematic repression, the elimination of which would give rise to recovery of individual creative fulfilment, mutual communication, and collective social health.

These combined objectives and ambitions disseminated rapidly, but outside Read's direct control. While this took place, he readdressed his other great purpose, encouragement of the avant-garde, which he could engage directly because of its finer focus. It was of temporary, but no less vital, importance as he saw that avant-garde enterprise had to retain its effectiveness until such times as its forms of creativity would cease to be exceptional. This was the objective which, as its first president, he projected into the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), when it was established in London in 1947.

The ICA's founding purpose was both propagandist and educational. It brought accomplished artists into contact with those who, as a result, became the next generation of accomplished artists. Ordinary members could tap current creative research at source and effect its dissemination throughout the wider community. It was not a place where art was made, but where the most tentative beginnings of its translation into other forms of thought and action—by exposition, argument and debate—took place.

In effect, it was an echo of Read's own formative experience when, as a young man, the shock of unprecedented abstract images had sent him rushing to philosophy. But now the philosophical context had considerably altered: Jung and D.W. Thompson had influenced the present *Zeitgeist* (Thistlewood, 1982), and theories of collective mind and organic formation were in the air. Artists, by whose efforts the organization of society was to be incrementally changed, needed to be alive to such philosophy, the full range of aesthetic principles which had nurtured it, and its ramifications for a cross-section of human understanding. Thus, the ICA embraced a comprehensive spectrum of avant-garde art, including Abstraction, Surrealism, and every shade or tendency between them (Thistlewood, 1989); and it also provided a forum for advanced scientific philosophy, as well as the latest researches in sociology, anthropology and other disciplines. It was in Read's special sense an 'anarchist' cell, an organic community dedicated to the constant revision and reinvigoration of its essential values, and to the integration of diverse interests meeting in the common sphere of art.

But while Read took direct action in relation to the avant-garde, his general educational philosophy—spread by means of his lecture tours but principally through his writings—affected practices throughout the world. *Education through Art* was translated into over thirty languages and is still regarded as a seminal text in countries as diverse as Egypt, Brazil and Japan. Dissemination relied upon remote conviction, but in the United Kingdom was assisted by the popularization of Read's ideas through cheap pamphlets. In one of these (Read, 1944), he acknowledged his belonging to a tradition first given authoritative shape by Plato, simplified Platonic theory for popular consumption, sketched out a strategy for building an authentic communal culture by perfecting parent/child, teacher/child and individual/group relationships, and argued against the curbing of schools freedom to determine curricula appropriate to localized circumstances.

Yet there was also within Read's scope a form of direct influence on national and supranational institutions. From 1946 until his death in 1968 he was president of the Society for Education in Art (SEA), the renamed ATG, in which capacity he had a platform for addressing UNESCO. He was extremely welcoming of policies expressed at UNESCO's launching conference in 1946 policies devoted to the cultivation of worldwide understanding through education, and the elimination of international conflict at the point of its normal origination, mutual ignorance—but he was nevertheless critical of an automatic reliance on conventional modes of education, and a perceived confusion of culture with learning, education with propaganda.

In a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (timed to coincide with a sitting of the United Nations), he delivered a devastating critique of attempts to prevent war with card indexes and documentary films (Read, 1948). He argued that UNESCO's desired moral revolution

could not be secured by arguments addressed to minds corrupted with individuated intellectualization: a moral revolution required the total reorientation of the human personality, which could only be secured by integrative education. On the basis of such representation Read, with others, succeeded in establishing the International Society for Education through Art (INSEA) as an executive arm of UNESCO in 1954.

No doubt the most compelling argument he proposed to UNESCO was that art provides the best prospect of an international medium of cultural exchange and understanding, for the comparable internationalism of science is always to be confounded by national interests. While almost all other enterprises are intended to address the removal of barriers—of sovereignty, custom, language or trade—the visual arts know no such barriers. They constitute ‘a language of symbols that communicates a meaning without hindrance from country to country across the centuries’ (Read, 1970, pp. 233–54). This posthumously published assertion has continued to be the cornerstone of INSEA philosophy until the present day. But it has required of officialdom a remarkable investment in faith, for what Read proposed was not a means of transforming states of mind by propaganda.

Education through art is in effect a reverse propaganda, for it begins with the felt truth which is then expressed as symbol the feeling finds its equivalent in a plastic image (Read, 1955, pp. 88–89). Images originate in collective experience and create correspondences in shared realities: the social bond is rehearsed and reinforced. That a virtual metaphysics should frame a supra-national programme is evidence of its conviction and sincerity.

So we must begin with small things, in diverse ways, helping one another, discovering one’s own peace of mind, waiting for the understanding that flashes from one peaceful mind to another. In that way the separate cells will take shape, will be joined to one another, will manifest new forms of social organization and new types of art. From that multiplicity and diversity, that dynamic interplay and emulation, a new culture may arise, and mankind be united as never before in the consciousness of a common destiny (Read, 1948. p. 15).

#### Note

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