

Art for My Sake

or

the Authority on Lowry

THERE ARE innumerable ways of talking beside the point and Richard Dorment, art critic of the *Daily Telegraph*, proves himself master of them all. This week (24 June 2013) he was given half a page to review the Lowry exhibition at Tate Britain. I was pleased to see his headline because I should like to know more about Lowry. Having read Dorment's piece, I find I know nothing more about Lowry but I am in danger of qualifying as an expert on Richard Dorment.

He begins, as he means to go on, with an example of how to talk beside the point: "Anyone trying to evaluate Lowry's work has to take into account the Manchester-size chip on the shoulders of his many fans as well as the sincerity of those who can't understand what there is to get excited about."

"Has to"? Why? If I wish to learn more about any other art—say the art of playing cricket—I need to observe in their close operation the skills of those playing the game. I don't need to "take into account" the emotional dispositions and prejudices of the crowd at the match. But Dorment tells us that in order to "evaluate" Lowry we have to "take into account" the class, politics and provenance of everybody else who has an opinion about Lowry. With a single exception. From a great height Dorment proceeds to tell us that he himself is exempt from this sociological conditioning which so predisposes the judgement of ordinary mortals: "I have baggage when it comes to Lowry but it has nothing to do with class, politics, where I was born or where I live now."

Clearly, Dorment is going to speak to us from a very great height, as a man granted privileged exclusion from those usual human handicaps. Before he gets properly started, he goes up even higher: "My baggage has to do with the many long years I have spent studying the history of art." So there! Dorment, as he tells us so vividly, is not as other men, class-bound, possessed of phoney sincerity or even from Manchester. In short, he is a man of education and an expert.

Following what we must regard as this confessional introduction, there follow a few hundred words in which we learn more about the artistic tastes of Richard Dorment, a

sprinkling of mostly *ad hominem* dismissals of Lowry's admirers, but very little about the alleged subject of the review, L. S. Lowry (1887–1976). There, you see, I have noted Lowry's dates, and that is more information about him than Dorment gives us in his whole review.

Perhaps I am myself guilty of Dorment's own very obvious shortcoming, that of being not quite fair? Let me try to put this right then by attending to the one specific judgement which Dorment does offer: "The mediocrity of Lowry's painting technique is blindingly obvious." Now that is a definite artistic judgement, but in what does this mediocrity consist? "Painting technique", whatever it is, is not an abstracted thing concocted out of the tendentious opinions of talkative art critics. Painting technique has a different criterion from that pretended by these professional gawpers in their self-referential chit-chat. Painting technique is nothing else except that by which the painter succeeds in expressing what he intends. In the judgement of a great many, Lowry achieves this.

Dorment's concluding paragraph—his auto-hagiographical peroration, you might say—is such a perfect model of personal inflation and *ignoratio elenchi* that it's worth quoting at length:

"One explanation that would account for much of what I find so difficult about Lowry's work is that he suffered from some form of Asperger's. Many will not agree with this, or with anything else I have said in this review."

So it's all down to Asperger's is it? This is not the painterly evaluation of art but its forensic or medical aiteology—what, as for instance in the presentation of Mozart, might be called the Schaffer or *Amadeus* method. Unfortunately, this is the usual method of art or historical criticism we are offered in these prurient times as when we find Cromwell explained entirely in terms of his warts or Napoleon on the pathological unpredictability of the last eight inches of his alimentary canal. Is Dorment paid for his art criticism or as a clinical psychologist?

Is this the best you can do, Mr Dorment after "... the many long years I have spent studying the history of art"? You should ask for your money back.

Peter Mullen