**Read, (Sir) Herbert Edward (1893-1968)**

Herbert Edward Read was one of the most influential theorists and promoters of modern art in Britain, with a career spanning over fifty years. He was born in the North Riding of Yorkshire, the eldest of three sons of a tenant farmer. This rural childhood was to acquire a near-Edenic significance that would shape the development of Read’s creative and critical work. The romantic idyll was lost when his father died, causing the family to be evicted in 1903. Read grew up in a Halifax orphanage/boarding school, leaving in 1909 to work in Leeds as a bank clerk. There he enrolled at Leeds University and became involved with the avant-garde Leeds Art Club, which introduced him to the political, philosophical and artistic ideas through which he would mature: the radical politics of the Labour party; the philosophy of NIETZSCHE; the ANARCHISM of Bakunin and Kropotkin; and, in particular, the EXPRESSIONISM of KANDINSKY and the BLAUE REITER group, which fostered Read’s enduring belief in the role of the unconscious and intuitive self in the creative process.

After serving in WWI Read settled in London, where he moved in the AVANT-GARDE circles of EZRA POUND, WYNDHAM LEWIS and T.S. ELIOT, all of whose influence is evident in the pared-down language and stark images of his war poems. Throughout the 1920s Read established himself as a leading cultural critic in *THE CRITERION* and *THE NEW AGE*, with essays on literary topics, PSYCHOANALYSIS and the UNCONSCIOUS, particularly as explored by JUNG. Read’s editing of the papers of T. E. HULME, published as *Speculations* (1924), affirmed his conviction in the importance of Romanticism and the centrality of emotion in art. During these years Read was also a curator in the Department of Ceramics at the Victoria and Albert Museum, out of which work emerged the synthesis of plastic and formal qualities of art with romantic individualism that defines his aesthetic thought.

Read became Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art at the University of Edinburgh in 1931.There he met his second wife, with whom he moved back to London in 1933. Temporarily homeless, the couple was taken in by the community of artists then working in Hampstead as Unit One—HENRY MOORE, BARBARA HEPWORTH, BEN NICHOLSON and PAUL NASH. Read championed their work for its abstract and formal purity but also its irrational dynamism which he saw as peculiarly Romantic and English. His only novel, *The Green Child* (1935) projects these ideas through an autobiographical lens with a strong sense of SURREALISM, which Read was instrumental in introducing to Britain by organising the 1936 London International Surrealist Exhibition and editing a landmark collection of essays, *Surrealism*, in the same year.

Against the rise of FASCISM Read politicised his aesthetics with his 1937 *Art and Society*, in which he argued that political freedom springs from the same creative impulse as individual freedom in art. These ideas led to ANARCHISM, which for Read best combined the subjectivity of truly Romantic modes like SURREALISM, with the equally important public spirit of community. The greatest social contribution of Read’s anarchism was his education theory, which argued that people are awakened into freedom through art education rather than political or military action. *Education Through Art* (1943) remains one of his most important books, leading directly to the foundation of the UNESCO International Society for Education through Art. By the end of WWII Read was at the centre of the cultural establishment: a position ratified by a knighthood in 1953. He served on government art and education committees; on publishing boards (including Routledge); was a founder of the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London; sat on art panels and juries; and late in life (1965) became a trustee of the Tate Gallery. He died in Yorkshire in 1968.

**List of Works:**

Read published approximately eighty books, including ten collections of poetry and five autobiographies. The following is a selection:

(1926) *Reason and Romanticism*, London: Faber and Gwyer.

(1928) *Phases of English Poetry*, London: The Hogarth Press.

(1930) *Wordsworth*, London: J. Cape.

(1931) *The Meaning of Art*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1933) *Art Now*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1935) *The Green Child*, London: Heinemann (novel).

(1937) *Art and Society*, London : Heinemann.

(1938) *Collected Essays in Literary Criticism*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1938) *Poetry and Anarchism*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1943) *Education Through Art*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1946) *Collected Poems*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1952) *The Philosophy of Modern Art*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1954) *Anarchy and Order*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1955) *Icon and Idea*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1957) *The Tenth Muse: Essays in Criticism*, London: Routledge and K. Paul.

(1960) *The Forms of Things Unknown*, London: Faber and Faber.

(1963) *To Hell with Culture, and Other Essays in Art and Society*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

(1963) *The Contrary Experience*, London: Faber and Faber (autobiography).

**References and Further Reading:**

Read, Herbert (ed.) (1924) *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art by T. E. Hulme.* London: Kegan, Paul.

Read, Herbert (ed.) (1936) *Surrealism*. London: Faber and Faber.

Goodway, D. (ed.) (1998) *Herbert Read Reassessed*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Paraskos, M. (ed.) (2007) *Re-Reading Read: Critical Views on Herbert Read*, London: Freedom Press.

Thistlewood, D. (1984) *Formlessness and Form*, London: Routledge.

Woodcock, G. (1972) *Herbert Read: The Stream and the Source*, London: Faber and Faber (biography).

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