

UNTITLED*

By M.G. Taylor

It was not long ago, in fact just over a month, that I was being taken on a Saturday tour of some of the small down-town art galleries in New York. Many and diverse were the objects (to use a broad term) on view. They ranged from some very fine African primitive art, totemic figures and dance masks to sheets of handmade paper with things embossed, embroidered and embedded in them, to Man Ray lithographs, to geometrical constructions like a page from Euclid painted on a wall (you buy the instructions, not the work, and do the painting yourself), to abstract oils on canvas (very conventional). It was one of these latter which led me, most indirectly, to the topic of this address. It was about six feet high and four feet wide and it was painted an absolutely uniform light grey, and called "Untitled". I wondered, rather unkindly, whether the artist had run out of paint or run out of ideas. I thought no more about it until very shortly after my return, when your courteous but insistent secretary said that having accepted your invitation to talk I should not only write it all down but give her a title in advance. My response – I hope she will forgive me – was a trifle irritable. I had been flying around in pressurised cattle trucks for contracted days and elongated nights and my circadian rhythms were still syncopated. "Why", I said to myself, "should they want a title? What's the use of a title, anyway?" And then the image of the uniform grey painting recurred – "Untitled" – hence this address.

Now, *why* was it called "Untitled"? What's in a name? Was the artist, whose name I have already forgotten, as I am sure he would wish me to do, seeking only to place before his viewers a Thing? And, insofar as he had any intentions to which a name might be given, were these irrelevant? What difference would it have made if, in fact, he had called the painting "Grey Surface"? I suppose in that case I might at least have said "Yes, so it is". But suppose he had called it "Green Surface"? Anything is possible these days and I suppose I might have respectfully saluted a paradox.

* An address delivered to the Association on 17 November, 1976 by Michael G. Taylor, M.D., B.S. (Adelaide), Ph.D., D.Sc. (Lond.), F.R.A.C.P., Professor of Physiology and Deputy Vice-Chancellor in the University of Sydney.

Fashions in these matters change, and they certainly differ among the arts. Musicians, on the whole, do without names — they use numbers instead and sometimes more than one. Thus we have not only the composer's opus number but a catalogue number determined by a later scholar; so there is Mozart with Köchel, Schubert with Deutsch, while Scarlatti is pursued not only by Longo but Kirkpatrick as well, and Bach has something called B.V.W., so that a list of his works sounds like a catalogue of spare parts for a motor car.

This numbering can be very useful in giving one a pretty fair indication of the placing of a work in the composer's output. But it is not always *entirely* reliable and care is needed. Beethoven's first piano concerto is Opus 15, while the second is Opus 19, which sounds sensible, but in fact they were written a couple of years apart *in the reverse order*; one has therefore to be careful with remarks about the greater maturity and development of a characteristic style as between the one and the other.

Apart from songs and operas, composers are pretty sparing with titles — indeed, things have got to the point where “programme music”, which has not only a title but a plot as well, is regarded as being a bit inferior; music is apparently supposed to confine itself to expressing the inexpressible. In any case, even where compositions have names, these frequently turn out to be nicknames — it was Beethoven's publisher who called the Sixth Symphony the “Pastoral”. Sometimes it is the dedicatee whose name becomes attached to the work as in the Goldberg Variations, the Rasoumoffsky Quartets (but not, I think, the Trout Quintet). But sometimes even this failed: Elgar's First Symphony was dedicated with such extreme reticence that not only was the heading in Spanish, “Aquí está encerrada el alma de . . .”, but the name of the person whose soul was thus enshrined was encoded into three dots. Mind you, Elgar was fond of this sort of mystification; you will recall the Enigma Variations, so called because they have no stated theme (unless we take the Zen view that each is the theme for the remainder).

Despite the advantages of the musicians' system of numbering, neither writers nor artists seem to have felt the need to follow it. Although Henry Moore, for example, has produced numerous pieces called “Reclining Figure”, “Family Group” or “Mother and Child”, rather as Beethoven might have produced sonatas, duos and trios, there is no associated indication of their place in the canon, though sometimes the date of the work is given. To say this is not, of course, to deny the usefulness of the names he has used for the different types. In their more abstract manifestations the name is really quite a help, as there are considerable similarities. I suppose that the great masses of the Reclining Figure in the pool at the Lincoln Centre *could* be a Family Group; and such is the erotic intensity of some of the Reclining Figures, the transition to Mother and Child appears inevitable.

Moore is a great master in the modern tradition. But sculpture has moved in this century to embrace modes of expression which, if one were not told otherwise, one would think of as graphic art. At our very own Biennale, held in alternate years at

irregular intervals, you may inspect splendid examples of this wider interpretation of sculpture and see many instances in which a title is not only an assistance in coming to terms with the work but an essential part of it. Indeed, there is an extreme example of a title which *is* the work, which consists of the words "Site for an optional square" painted in red letters on the wall. Rather like the grin of the Cheshire Cat!

As I said, in many cases in the exhibition (and it may be true more generally) a title is just an element in an assemblage of elements, no more and no less. The total work consists of the interplay of images, items and evocations, and the title does not seek to summarise the whole but to contribute a part to it. "Untitled" is, in this sense, as much a part of the assemblage as any other word or words would be, even imparting a kind of logical tension: if a thing is without a name, is it logical to call it untitled?

If we turn now briefly to the literary arts, we find that apart from a few poems most works have titles, usually quite explicit. But as far as I know writers do not use opus numbers; and even when Eliot says that he is composing *Four Quartets*, there is nothing to assist the reader in determining their order. Did *Little Gidding* come before or after *East Coker*? Finding one's way about Eliot's land, waste or otherwise, requires a literary strip-map. Even within a sequence of novels there may be no indication of the order. I defy anyone to arrange Anthony Powell's twelve books *A Dance to the Music of Time*, in sequence by titles. Does *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* go before or after *Books Do Furnish a Room*?

The title is also a sort of advertisement inviting you to step right up. The show is about to begin: *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*, by Lemuel Gulliver, first a Surgeon, and then a Captain of several Ships. In Four Parts. Some titles are pithier: *Emma: A Novel in Three Volumes*; at least we know the name of the principal character and as I have said before this aims us in a particular direction. Had *Hamlet* been called *Gertrude, Queen of Denmark*, our whole approach to the play would have been totally different. Producers would soon have found a way, despite the obviously corrupted stage directions, to keep her on the stage throughout most of the action of the play. Psycho-analytical criticism would have had a field day, explaining the deep significance of her silence in certain scenes and expounding this in articles like "The Mobled Queen: A Study in Relapsing Alienation".

But I must come to my conclusion. Things do not have a name until we name them: as we are told in *The Book of Genesis*, when God had made the animals he paraded them before Adam to see what he would call them. Now, once a name exists it has a mysterious quality. There was a time when the phrase "a name to conjour with" meant just that, and no parlour tricks either. A name was power and to use the name called on that power. I think that people, choosing a name for a creation, whether it is a book or a painting or (more rarely) a musical composition somehow follow this magical tradition whereby the incantation of the title at the start will have a magical effect on the reader or viewer or listener, so that he will fall under the creator's spell and be instantly enthralled.

In general I think the magic works. I shall never forget that Saturday afternoon in New York and a grey painting entitled "Untitled".