

**OBITUARIES**

**Peter Fuller**

PETER FULLER, the art critic and founder of the magazine *Modern Painters*, who has died at the age of 42, was a provocative and stimulating presence in English intellectual life.

The sworn enemy of the slipshod obfuscations of modernism, Fuller pounced on anything that smacked of mental sloth or moral vacuity.

Yet perhaps he had not altogether sorted out his own position. He knew that he hated the malign effects of materialism and commercialism, but his efforts to produce a comprehensive theory of art grounded on a spiritual basis, appeared to conflict with his convinced atheism.

The word "evil" came naturally to his pen. Gilbert and George, for instance, represented "the evil of banality"; as for Francis Bacon, "his evil genius demands a moral refusal". Without a God and a Revelation, though, "evil" is a debatable term rather than an absolute principle.

Interestingly, a few weeks ago Fuller, while explicitly denying that he himself could adopt Roman Catholic beliefs, quoted with seeming approval Cardinal Newman's definition of Catholic dogmas as "but symbols of a divine fact, which far from being compassed by those very propositions, would not be exhausted, nor fathomed by a thousand".

The subtitles of two of Fuller's books also shed light on his growing, if still hostile, preoccupation with religion. *Images of God* (1985) was described as "Consolations of Lost Illusions", while *Theoria* (1988) dealt with "Art and the Absence of Grace".

Fuller's search for a guiding intellectual precept had been lifelong. As a young man his need to be cured of a gambling obsession had led him into psychoanalysis, which did indeed reduce the addiction to manageable proportions.

Instead, he became for a time obsessed with Freud, characteristically reading every scrap of psycho-analytic literature he could find. The fruits of these studies were to be found in his books: in *The Psychology of Gambling*, in *The Champions* — a study of games players — and, more weightily, in *Art and Psychoanalysis* (1980).

After Freud came Marx. In the early 1970s Fuller worked on two short-lived radical papers, the *Black Dwarf* and *Seven Days*. It was at this time that he met the art critic John Berger, by whom he was greatly influenced.

His early writings on art, like Berger's, had a Marxist slant, and one of his first books was called *Seeing Berger*. True to his principles, he lived in extreme poverty and grew his hair to extraordinary length.

Alas for intellectual enthusiasms. Fuller found a new mentor in John Ruskin, made a violent break with Berger, and in 1989 brought out a revision of his previous work entitled *Seeing Through Berger*.

The main themes of his later writing were drawn from Ruskin. He became obsessed with the spiritual importance of art, and of the value of the romantic and figurative tradition in English art, causes which he fiercely upheld against what he regarded as mindless modernism.

He wrote for many magazines and newspapers, while his later books included *The Australian Scapegoat* (1986), about Australian painting, *Marches Past* (1986), an autobiographical work, and *Theoria* (1988) a long and important work of criticism.

Even so, it was only in the last two or three years that he became a widely-known critic. Encouraged by Bernard Jacobson, he started *Modern Painters* (named after the book by Ruskin) in February 1988, and used the magazine as a pulpit for his views.



He proved an ideal editor, relishing debate and ready to print articles which took issue with his own standpoint. *Modern Painters* was not only a success from the point view of art criticism; it even made money.

Peter Fuller was born in Damascus, where his father, a doctor, was working for the Red Cross, in August 1947, although the family later lived in Hampshire.

Fuller was brought up as a strict Baptist, even unto total immersion. Although he rejected the tenets of faith, he retained an instinctive awareness of the spiritual life.

He was educated at Epsom College, which he loathed. A schoolfriend remembers him taking a pocket-book about Modigliani on to the rugby pitch and studying it in slack moments. After Epsom he went on to Peterhouse Cambridge, where he read English.

As an art critic Fuller revelled in battle, never resisting an opportunity for a triumphant jibe at an opponent, and making many enemies. Unlike so many others, though, he had a clear idea of what he valued and what he despised, which he expressed in pungent and always intelligible prose.

Fuller helped to give art historians the courage to make value judgements, and artists the awareness that they were part of a great tradition of English painting. He was delighted when, in the spring of 1989, he became art critic of *The Sunday Telegraph*, as this gave him the public platform he had longed for.

The long-haired student had long since been left behind. A stocky man, with a slow patient voice, Fuller was described by Derwent May, former arts editor of *The Sunday Telegraph*, as blinking through the world through very thick spectacles "which were like some magic device he had invented for taking a new look at the world".

With success he blossomed, expanded and even mellowed a little. He had always had his convivial side, and those who worked with him on *Modern Painters* delighted in the experience. The last editorial in the magazine gave a ringing endorsement to the changes made at the Tate by the new director Nicholas Serota, who had formerly been berated as an enemy.

Undoubtedly his second marriage in 1985 to Stephanie

Burns, and the birth of his son Laurence Ruskin, had helped, if not to still his savage indignation, at least to direct it onto the appropriate target instead of scattering shot promiscuously. He adored his son, and also his daughter Colette, child of an earlier marriage.

**Maurice Cowling writes:** I did not teach Peter Fuller while he was at Peterhouse, but I was his tutor (in the Cambridge sense) and had long and unusually interesting conversations with him about himself, about painting and about literature, all conducted in that flat, self-deprecating tone which was his hallmark in private and has been his hallmark in all the conversations we have had since.

As an undergraduate Peter was unpolitical, but on leaving Cambridge he turned himself first into a Marxist journalist and then into the Marxist critic of painting who eventually became famous on the Left. His more recent criticisms of aesthetic Left, while registering the judgement that the aesthetic Left is a fraud, issued politically not in a retreat to the Right but to the discovery that there was a lot to be said for Mr Denis Healey.

Intellectually and publicly, Peter identified himself with ideas and allowed them to work themselves through him. The foundation of *Modern Painters* was an achievement, not the promise of an achievement, but his books — all 15 of them — project an unfinished odyssey and should be read in that light.

Personally Peter had four leading characteristics. He was immensely intrigued by himself, a bit surprised by his success, and slightly apologetic about it. He was capable of great loyalty and kept his friendships in very good repair. He was a devoted father both to his daughter by his first marriage and to his son by a singularly happy second marriage to Stephanie Burns, whom he had met in Australia and who transformed his life both materially and with support and affection.

Above all, Peter had a singularly sweet disposition which those who only saw him on platforms may not quite have understood. Yet the public manner was merely an intensification of the private manner. And those who knew mainly the private manner will remember him with the greatest respect and affection.