

# Searching for Goya

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Robert Hughes  
GOYA

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**A**N APPRECIATION OF GOYA, contends Robert Hughes, has become essential for Europeans wishing to make themselves literate in their own culture. Goya's significance is heightened because his works are arguments for humanity, to be balanced against the horrors he depicted. Goya (1746–1828) indeed remains our contemporary. His life, his imagery and his dilemmas resonate at a time when countries are being invaded for their own good, as Europe was by Napoleon, provoking the first guerillas.

Goya's art became pertinent for one strand of modernism, despite the hundred years between his death in 1828 and the acceptance of the visual arts by the Surrealists. Hughes's account of this heritage is weakened by his description of Goya as 'archrealist' when he was a naturalist, as in his depictions of poultry. Naturalists show what is; realists glimpse how 'what is' came to be, and even where it may go. Goya went beyond naturalism mostly through either critical realism or what we now call magical realism, with painting as witchery. Nothing in Goya's oeuvre pointed to a transformed future.

Goya's inability to envisage a different world was another legacy of pagan Spain that saw Franco attack communism as a late manifestation of Freemasonry. A tussle still flickers around Goya's political legacy. To label Goya a liberal, a democrat or an anti-royalist is to misunderstand Spain by forcing its experiences into the box of France.

Hughes never equates his own surgery with the tortures of the Inquisition, yet the parallels are inescapable in the cage of needles that pierced his skin to keep his bone fragments in place. From these travails, Hughes deepened his empathy with the trauma of deafness which struck Goya in 1792. Hughes recognises that aural isolation could make an artist more alert to 'gesture, physical expression, body language. You learn to "read" signs beyond words.' But he consigns this perception to a basement of generalities by failing to follow through with comparisons of details in the portraits, before and after the loss of hearing. The necessary analysis could have proceeded without resort to 'body' theory, and without the semi-idiotic that Hughes despises in cultural studies.

A refusal to conceptualise also vitiates his apprehension of the limits to reputation in Goya's lifetime, before books as handsomely illustrated in colour as this one had conditioned us to collate all paintings as if they were but glossy postcards. Here was the moment to draw in Walter Benjamin's ideas about the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, a linkage apposite because of Goya's printmaking. Similarly, attention to Benjamin would have enriched Hughes's reference of the ubiquity of photographs in explaining why the

hundred-year war that was the twentieth century did not produce a sequence comparable to Goya's *Desastres*.

Hughes is astute on matters of reputation, noting that fame around 1800 was limited to a tiny circle, and was even narrower in Spain. During Goya's lifetime, he gained no reputation for the works that we now value most. A few artists admired the prints for their mastery of techniques, and Hughes explains them well. Only twenty-seven of the 300 sets of *Caprichos* sold in the four years after publication; *Desastres de la guerra* were not printed until 1863, and *Disparates* the following year; *El Tres de Mayo* was not listed as being on view in the Prado until 1872; the *Pinturas negras* returned to Spain only in 1881.

Moreover, Goya might never have become the Goya at whom we marvel. A late starter, he produced no distinguishing works until he was forty-five, an age by which most of his contemporaries were dead. The Inquisition could have melted down his engraving plates; the walls of the house on which he put the *Pinturas negras* could have been demolished, or their transfer to canvas botched.

To highlight how remarkable Goya was in making himself a genius, Hughes contrasts him with the Madrid court painter Anton Mengs:

Mengs is one of those artists who enjoyed, in life, a fame and power that seem totally inexplicable after his death, and it extended all over Europe, not just provincial Spain. Stolid, correct, devoid of charm, insipid where strength was needed, dogmatic where fancy might have helped, thumped into shape as a 'prodigy' by a failed-artist father and relentlessly promoted by the theorist of Neoclassicism, Winckelmann, whose leaden flights of pederastic dogma make even the longueurs of modern 'queer theory' look almost sprightly — Mengs was one of the supreme bores of European civilisation.

This flight is classic Hughes, but, in *Goya*, it floats alone. The bulk of the prose is workmanlike, less clotted than usual with qualifiers and modifiers. Yet Hughes cannot permit himself to protest against 'illiteracy' without the prefix 'dreary', as if his readers might suppose vivacity. Hughes's kitsch baroque style in *The Shock of the New* (1980) left me unable to read more than one chapter at a sitting; its gilded surface could not conceal the gelded analysis. By contrast, the straightforwardness in Hughes's monograph on the London artist Frank Auerbach matched the plain speaking of that painter's subject matter. Or did impasto refuse coruscation?

In *Goya*, one irritant is a rash of asides, excusable at luncheon, but out of place even on television. Harvill's editors have served Hughes poorly by allowing repetitions to stand. In addition, the text is afflicted with now-isms, such as comparing a fashion among Goya's contemporaries with the leather jackets of successful artists in 1960s New York.

As if to make amends for never mentioning Australia in his survey of twentieth-century art, Hughes strains to join the dots in *Goya*. The canal between Madrid and the Atlantic, for instance, is compared with the Snowy Mountains Scheme. As Hughes exposed in his television series, his comments on his

native land are as jaded as they are injudicious, as flaccid as they are faulty. Not only is Hughes wrong about the singularity of the Japanese strike on Darwin, but he is astray in asserting that, before 1942, our mainland had been as virginal as that of North America. Both continents had suffered European invasions, with Spain in the vanguard. In light of these slippery slides into the antipodes, that the author of *The Fatal Shore* (1987) should omit the convict system from his catalogue of horrors during Goya's era is puzzling. Had Hughes kept up to date with Australian art and politics he might have applied Théophile Gautier's description of Goya's portrait of the Spanish royal family as looking like 'the owner of the corner grocery store and his wife' to the portrait of the Howards in Old Parliament House.

Hughes's acquaintance with Spain is known from the volume on Barcelona he got out in time for the 1992 Olympics. The present book further tests his grasp of Spanish history. Having told us that only 4000 people lived in Madrid in 1530, thirty years before it was declared the Hapsburg capital, he assures us sixty pages on that the centralising of power in Madrid had begun from late in the fifteenth century. He names Ramón de la Cruz as the 'most prolific' of Spanish playwrights. Was his output greater than that of Félix Lope de Vega, with 1500? In the domain of Spanish drama, Hughes never mentions Pedro Calderón de la Barca, whose masterpiece, *La vida es sueño*, could have been titled, like Goya's print, *El sueño de la razon produce monstruos*. And was Goya making fun of a bride whose shoes are on the wrong feet, or had the practice of making left and right shoes not yet reached her village?

For the tourist who knows little about Spain or Goya, Hughes's account will serve. It rescues Goya from the Hollywood film *The Naked Maja* (1959), in which he had an affair with the Duchess of Alba, played by Ava Gardner. Readers familiar with the basics can follow Hughes's example by turning to the scholarship of Francis Klingender, Fred Licht or Janis Tomlinson, whose insights Hughes acknowledges. Meanwhile, Hughes might be left to ponder whether he is to criticism what Mengs was to Spanish art before Goya.