

## REITH LECTURES 1960: Art and Anarchy

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### Lecture 2: Aesthetic Participation

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Perhaps I should briefly restate the chief point of my last talk. I suggested that the wide diffusion of art today, and with it the great expansion of our artistic horizon, is made possible by a light response to art, by a certain ease we have acquired in touching the surface of many different artistic experiences without getting seriously involved in any. And I assumed a connexion between this detached way of looking at art and the fact that art has become marginal in our lives, the centre being occupied by science.

#### The Modern Bogeyman

Since science has become the modern bogey-man, and can be used as a scapegoat for all our failings, it would be tempting to claim that art was pushed into the margin by science, or if not by science alone, then by science combined with a form of commerce that fosters wide and quick distribution. An accusation to that effect was made by André Gide, whose words must, of course, be taken with a grain of salt. In an excessively sharp attack on certain formal exercises with which he saw Matisse preoccupied in his studio, Gide claimed that when a painter cultivates painting for its own sake, and designs patterns for the sake of patterns, concerned with nothing but the formal perfection of his *métier*, he will produce an art shorn of mind, such as admirably suits 'an impatient public and speculative dealers'. Gide boldly called such an art '*une peinture décérébrée*', a brainless and dehumanized sort of painting.

No doubt, Gide was right, and not alone, in thinking that wide stretches of our art have become dehumanized because art has been reduced to a pure *métier*, but it would be an illusion to suppose that art suffered these developments as a victim. Its role has been that of an active partner. Perhaps I may illustrate this point by a parable taken from the past, which has the advantage that we can look at it dispassionately.

In the sixteenth century Ariosto complained that chivalry was being destroyed by the introduction of firearms. He made that statement, which sounds plausible enough, in his mock-heroic epic, the *Orlando furioso*, where the hero, a medieval knight of splendid absurdity, finds one of these nasty unchivalrous engines and throws it, with appropriate declamation down to the bottom of the sea. Now there can be no doubt that the introduction of firearms did contribute to the disappearance of medieval chivalry; and yet, if we are to name one of the strongest and most effective agents in rendering chivalry outmoded, it is Ariosto's poem, the *Orlando furioso*, where the heroes are placed in such a fantastic setting, and act such marvellously ridiculous parts, that the reader can have no doubt of their unreality. Ariosto paved the way for Don Quixote. If chivalry died, it died not by firearms alone; it died in and through the imagination, and particularly by the force of Ariosto's poetry. The artist is an agent in those developments of which he sees himself only as a victim.

### **Chief Task of the Artist**

And that applies to the marginal position of art today. Art has been displaced from the centre of our life not just by applied science, but above all by its own centrifugal impulse. For more than a century most of Western art has been produced and enjoyed on the assumption that the experience of art will be more intense if it pulls the spectator away from his ordinary habits and preoccupations. To cut us loose from our habitual moorings has become the chief task we assign to the artist. If we think, for example, of Manet, Mallarmé, Joyce, or Schonberg, almost all the artistic triumphs in the last century were triumphs of disruption: the greatness of an artist became manifest in his power to break up our perceptual habits and disclose new ranges of sensibility. It is true, of course, that creative energy has always had the effect of transforming or sharpening perceptual habits, but in the past, when artists were still in touch with the central energies of life, their innovations were produced in a manner almost incidental to the vital functions that their art sub-served: but today artistic inventiveness is an end in itself. Art has become 'experimental'.

It is significant that this word 'experiment', which belongs to the laboratory of the scientist, has been transferred to the artist's studio. It is not a casual metaphor: for although artists today understand far less of science than they did in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, their imaginations seem haunted by a desire to mimic scientific procedures: often they seem to act in their studios as if they were in a laboratory, performing a series of controlled experiments in the hope of arriving at a valid scientific solution. And when these astringent exercises are exhibited, they reduce the spectator to an observer who watches the artist's latest excursion with interest, but without vital participation.

It would be silly to assume that this situation can be changed by merely wishing that it were different. The cultivation of art for its own sake, which has had such a long and above all such a creative history, cannot be dismissed with the words 'I do not believe in it' or 'I have changed my mind'. As a great sociologist once said in a moment of anger, history is not a bus from which you can alight at your convenience. If art is again to play a more central part in our lives, it means that our lives will have to change, and that is a process which does not depend on artists and art critics alone; but there is no harm in making a small and very modest beginning. I thought therefore that it might be useful to inquire what we ourselves, as recipients of art, might do, or refrain from doing, to render our participation in art more vital. And being an art historian by training, my thoughts turn, of course, to some of the failings of my profession: for there is no denying that we have made a contribution to the dehumanizing of artistic perception.

### **Heinrich Wölfflin's Approach to Art**

Historians of art are themselves part of history and reflect the artistic temper of their age. Hence it is not surprising that the greatest art historian of the last generation, the Swiss scholar Heinrich Wölfflin, busied himself with refining his powers of dissociation to the point at which they yielded a recondite abstract technique. His outlook is perfectly summarized in his famous remark that the essence of the Gothic style is as evident in a pointed shoe as in a cathedral. Wölfflin was not the kind of man who needed to be told that a shoe, however Gothic in style, is not the equivalent of a cathedral, and that a theory of style is incomplete if it fails to allow for the

difference. He knew that very well, but he was preoccupied with a far more embarrassing and revolutionary observation. He had found that the more loaded an object is with religious emotions, the more obstacles it offers to a purely visual grasp. Gothic cathedrals excite fuzzier visions than Gothic shoes; and the cause lies not only in their greater formal complexity, but in the fact that their devotional aura overwhelms us. Wölfflin insisted that the eye must be trained on forms which are emotionally less distracting. Hence he was never satisfied with tracing a master's style in the design of a human figure or head. 'In the drawing of a mere nostril', he wrote defiantly, 'the essentials of the style should be recognized'. His ideal was what he called 'an art-history of the smallest particles' which would trace developments of form by comparing 'hand with hand, cloud with cloud, twig with twig, down to the lines in the grain of the wood'.

This sort of discipline is reassuring. By the time we have descended to the curve of the nostril, we can feel certain that we are studying the form for its own sake, and not for the sake of the object; and thence we may re-ascend to the face and the figure without fearing the usual distractions. Even a cathedral may then become safe. And yet, a rather primitive question remains unanswered: Why should any man in his senses look for artistic safety in a cathedral? Great art never seems to be quite so clean• as our aesthetic purists want to make it, since it invariably involves us in the kind of 'emotional nonsense' from which Wölfflin's method was designed to save us. In fact, a cathedral surveyed with Wölfflin's eyes is no longer a cathedral at all, but a crystalline system of visual forms. As for the drawing of a human face, the mouth and the eyes may have expressive features for which the study of a nostril does not fully prepare us.

By ruling these illicit intruders out of court, Wölfflin reduced his artistic perception to an emotionally untainted sense of form, and that made it possible for him to move with enviable ease from Raphael to Rubens and from Holbein to Rembrandt without concern for the imaginative forces which their designs were intended to release. The benefits that have accrued to the study of art from this kind of attitude should not be underrated. It brought freshness and breadth and a freedom from prejudice, a willingness to explore the unfamiliar, even the repulsive, and to risk new adventures of sensibility. We owe to it that we no longer judge one style of art by the canons of another. The art of the late Roman Empire or Baroque art, formerly despised as arts of decline, are now appreciated for their peculiar quality. Words like 'decadent', 'primitive', 'barbaric', 'mannerist', have lost their pejorative meaning. The barrier between minor and major arts has fallen: an Egyptian lotus ornament is studied with the same care as the monument of an Egyptian king. Michelangelo's drawings receive no less, perhaps even more, attention than his frescoes. And to return to Wölfflin's formula, a pointed shoe can instruct us about a cathedral.

If it is true, as suggested before, that the general public has acquired a certain ease in touching the surface of many different arts without getting seriously entangled in any, there can be little doubt that this approach was encouraged by the art expert. Whether it was Wölfflin or the great founders of the Vienna School, or Roger Fry and Clive Bell, or Bernard Berenson or Henri Focillon or Max Friedländer, they all developed an exquisite skill in skimming off the top of a work of art without necessarily making contact with its imaginative forces, often even shunning that contact because it might disturb the lucid application of a safe technique.

It was to be expected that these extreme refinements would produce a reaction of some violence. And we have that reaction with us today in a new and rather coarse philosophy of art which claims that the failings of the theory of pure art can be remedied by simply turning it upside down. In the place of an art of disengagement, which rejoiced in its separation from ordinary life, we are now to have an art which completely involves us in real life—what in France is called *art engagé*. If I am sceptical about this doctrine, it is because it seems to me to make essentially the same mistake as the theory which it opposes. Both try to escape, in opposite directions, from the plain and fundamental fact that art is an exercise of the imagination which engages and detaches us at the same time: it makes us participate in what it presents, and yet presents it as an aesthetic fiction. From that twofold root—participation and fiction—art draws its power to enlarge our vision by carrying us beyond the actual, and to deepen our experience by connecting it with the real, but it brings with it a persistent oscillation between actual and vicarious experience. Art lives in this realm of ambiguity and suspense, and it is art only as long as the ambiguity is sustained: but suspense is an awkward condition to live in, and we are persistently tempted to leave it for a more positive, tangible, and safe state. And yet we know very well that as soon as the artistic imagination begins to work on us, we leave the safe shore for the open sea.

We need only watch a theatrical performance to find ourselves entering willingly into dramatic situations to which we would not want to be committed even if we could; and yet they can engage our compassion with such force that they might be difficult to endure without an ingredient of make-believe. If all the tragedies we see on the stage were experienced by us as *art engagé*, it is unlikely that we would survive them. Our aesthetic fundamentalists do not abide by their own rules. If they really lived their doctrine, they would be dead.

Some ten years ago, the same point was made much better, and more politely, in an editorial on Pure Art in The Times Literary Supplement which was directed against the revival of an old error about how to appreciate Fra Angelico. It had been said that this painter is so saintly in his art that, in order to feel that quality of saintliness, the spectator must be in a good moral state. The writer replied that an understanding of goodness may well be needed to appreciate Fra Angelico, but that this did not mean that one has to be good. ‘Is it then necessary’, he asks, ‘to be full of superstitious fears in order to be moved by Mexican sculpture or eager for meat in order to understand the caveman’s art?’

John Ruskin, who might easily be mistaken for a dogmatic prophet of artistic commitment, was struck with admiration when he observed an unexpected power of detachment in certain Northern masters of the sixteenth century who excelled in grave or terrible subjects. ‘Those masters’, he wrote, ‘were much too good craftsmen to be heavily afflicted about anything; their minds were mainly set on doing their work, and they were able to dwell on grievous or frightful subjects all the more forcibly because they were not themselves liable to be overpowered by any emotion of grief or terror’.

And some of that freedom from affliction and fear must be ascribed also to primitive artisans. In superstitious tribes the ritual performers enjoy the benefit of particular spells which protect them against the terrors they administer. Snake-dancers do not fear the poisonous snakes they handle; and the Mexican sculptor would hardly have

been able to render the terror of his gods so effectively if he had been overcome by that terror while carving the stone. The most barbaric of craftsmen thus seems in command of that curious power of self-division which Baudelaire regarded as indispensable to art: 'The artist', he writes, 'is artist only on the condition that he is double, and that he will not ignore any aspect of his double nature'.

It seems to me true that no theory of art is complete if it ignores the split of consciousness which enables the artist to live in two worlds: to sense what is real and to feign that he senses it, and thus to give to facts the authority of fiction, in which others can partake vicariously. It follows from this that our response to art will, in its turn, not be a true and full response if we fail to reproduce in ourselves something of the artist's double nature.

How difficult this is to accomplish I still vividly remember from a typical error of judgment which I committed as a young man when for the first time I saw an exhibition of German Expressionist painting. The walls were filled with apocalyptic pictures painted in violent colours and incongruous shapes. I found this aggressive art singularly exciting and consumed it with the fresh appetite and strong stomach of youth. In the midst of these pleasures I was struck with a thought which troubled me greatly; and it might still trouble me now, were it not that I have become less serious. It occurred to me that if all these intense pictures, one after the other, had been experienced by me with the intensity they demanded, I ought to be out of my mind, but I clearly was not. And as I extended this thought to the numerous visitors who had been exposed with me to the same exhibition, I came to the conclusion that something was wrong; that these painters produced an illusion of intensity, but were not so intense as they pretended.

At that time I thought that this was a valid analysis, but I think so no longer. The aim of any artist is to produce an illusion, and if he succeeds, why call that his failure? There is nothing wrong with an illusion of intensity, provided the illusion is sustained. The trouble, as I can now see in retrospect, was that the illusion was not sustained; and having since seen many expressionist paintings, I think the causes were twofold, and played on two entirely different levels. In the first place, that early exhibition included aesthetically mediocre pictures painted by Heckendorf, Jäckel, or Melzer, whose names, I trust, are less well remembered than those of the greater expressionists. While mediocrity would tend in any style to weaken or destroy the aesthetic illusion, mediocrity which claims to be intense has a peculiarly repulsive effect. But that sort of repulsion, and this is important, can be inspired also by an aesthetically forceful and valid picture in that style, because we may find ourselves out of sympathy with the apocalyptic attitude of the painter. You can blow the trumpet of the Last Judgment once; you must not blow it every day. When the peak of excitement is produced with clockwork regularity, it cannot help being slightly strained: and by 'strained' I mean a human rather than an aesthetic failing: it entails a lack of balance, a hankering for extremes, and the complete absence of a sense of humour, all of which may contribute toward rendering the aesthetic illusion all the more compelling.

For these reasons there is much to be said for the art-historian Carl Justi, who in the late nineteenth century was one of the first to rediscover the artistic importance of El Greco. His judgment was distinguished by the fact that it consisted of two parts: an

acute awareness of El Greco's quality as a painter, which Justi expounded in a masterly way, and with it a carefully considered rejection of his artistic character. There are many persons, including myself, who react in precisely this way to Wagner's music, acknowledging the power of a supreme genius but recognizing it as the kind of power to which one should not surrender. And it is not impossible that much of Mexican art, both ancient and modern, might be open to this form of criticism all the more because its artistic force is undeniable. When we see with what splendour the savagery of the Aztec warriors directly issues from their superb effigies, we may well remember the warning of Plato that artists of such power are 'rare and holy and wonderful beings', but that we should beware of their spell. The same sort of reservation might apply to Picasso.

I have chosen these cases to suggest not only that we can but that we should react to a work of art on two levels: we should judge it aesthetically in its own terms, but we should also decide whether we find those terms acceptable. The fact that we recognize an art as great is not a sufficient reason for disregarding its human implications; and the fact that we may reject the human implications of a work of art is no reason for denying its artistic merits. The advocates of art engage would like to persuade us that it is not only wrong but wicked to praise a work of art aesthetically if we disagree with its presuppositions; whereas the adherents of pure art would like us to accept every great work of art on its own terms and never to question the underlying assumptions. As Croce rather brusquely put it, there is no 'double-bottom' (*doppio fondo*) to the suit-case of art. And rarely has a fallacy been conveyed with such gusto.

As one reads that remarkable phrase of Croce's, one feels the current of fresh air which that immensely well-read author thought he was letting into his library. All those secondary meanings, overtones, undertones, forgotten allusions, silent assumptions, which persistently obstruct our vision of art, are swept away with a magnificent gesture: art is all primary, and primary throughout. We must feel it directly, or not at all.

In fairness to Croce and Wölfflin, and also to Roger Fry, it should be said that, like most great men, they did not feel bound by their method; they had a grand way of brushing it aside. And perhaps that has been the saving grace of many propounders of pure art. As a rule they were much too intelligent not to suspect that art was rarely quite so pure as they made it, but they thought it was a wholesome doctrine to propound, particularly at a time when sentimentalism about art was rampant. And yet they have succeeded almost too well. I remember seeing many years ago an elegant exhibition of primitive masks and other ritual objects at the Burlington Fine Arts Club, where they were relished for their sheer formal beauty by a group of intelligent connoisseurs; and I must say that in that tasteful setting they looked as harmless and wholesome as a basket of fresh eggs. There was not a drop of poison left in them. They had all become pure art.

The temptation is great to embrace pure art because it is so refreshing. Since the imaginative forces embodied in a figure are likely to disturb our pleasure if we do not know how to respond to them, it is always encouraging to be told that they are irrelevant. And there has been no want of such encouragement. The great spring-cleanings of art, from which art is to emerge pure and fresh, have become a regular festival; and here we are again, far more than we know, both the dupes and the agents

of a scientific age. For purposes of stylistic classification the treatment of art *as if it were pure* has proved a useful and economical fiction, not unlike the construction of models in science. Whoever studies the history of styles knows how helpful it is to think in morphological classes. There is no harm in moving among such abstractions as long as the model is not confused with the thing; but the theory of pure art is prone to that error. Intent on establishing an artistic experience that is clear, tidy, and direct, it over-cleans the work of art and transforms it into an aesthetic dummy. As Le Corbusier thought of a house as a machine a vivre, so hedonistic connoisseurs think of a painting as a machine a *sentir*, a figment endowed with all the splendour and luminosity which Yeats, in the poem which he called 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', ascribed to the show pieces of his fancy, to those masterful puppets conceived, as he says, by 'pure mind' but which will not serve him any longer because he has gone back to the 'rag-and-bone shop of the heart'.

*Players and painted stage took all my love,  
And not those things that they were emblems of.*