

## Art and Culture

*R.G. Collingwood*

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This is a collection of essays and lectures that were never published during his lifetime. It is a tricky business to ravage the body of work of some deceased for the benefit of the public eye, never knowing whether this ever was the intention of the author. Nevertheless in this case it makes for interesting reading.

The main part consists on a discussion of art and the philosophy of art, which complements his treatment in 'Principles of Art'. Secondary we have an essay on the problems of setting music to words, and two essays on Austen in which he can display his deep admiration for her. And then a short piece containing some reflections on language, but as the main interest is on art let us start with that.

Is there a philosophy of art, and if so is it merely descriptive or actually normative? The answer is short. There is bound to be a philosophy of art, and as such it is also bound to be normative. A bad theory of art, would effect art in bad ways, unlike a bad theory of astronomy, which would not effect astronomy at all. Astronomy is of course nature, and hence outside man and independent of him, but art is a human endeavor and any thoughts on what it is, invariably influences it. If it would be so that a good theory of Art leaves Art alone, and a bad one actually would hurt it, the obvious conclusion is to leave it alone. But obviously if one type of theory, however, limited to the purely passive recording of description of practice, would have an influence, then any other theory is bound to have one to, as after all the practice of art does constitute art, unlike the practice of mathematics does not constitute mathematics itself only its human pursuit. Thus any theory of art as to be normative, as it goes to the core of what art really is, and thus sets up an ideal to strive for. In other words provides a norm. In fact an artist needs to know what he wants to do, so any artist is bound to have some conception of a philosophy of art, even if it is subjective, on the other hand what else could it be? However, it would be preposterous to think that professional philosophers should develop a theory of art and impose their views on artists, especially if they are not artists themselves, just by virtue of being professional philosophers. Philosophy as little as art is not confined to philosophers. When philosophers communicate, they do not do so only to their professional colleagues, but to everyone, because in everyone there is a philosopher, just as there is an artist. Philosophy and art are universal and engages every human to at least some extent.

But what is a philosophy of art? Is there somebody who is sufficiently accomplished as an artist and sufficiently articulated as a philosopher to make it worth the trouble to inquiry into his aesthetic philosophy? Collingwood decides to settle for a movement, the faibless for naturalism prevalent during the 19th century and championed by Ruskin. The naturalists thought of Nature as the only source of real beauty, and the duty of an artist was to copy it. But Art is not a question of imitation, it is one of design. You draw a line where it makes sense, not because Nature has told you to do so. This is what art is about. To design pleasing shape. He brings up Cezanne as a model of modern art. An art

of design. It was not the case that those modern artists did not now how to draw, they knew perfectly well, as they were able to draw the shapes they wanted.

As to Art it is primitive. It is based on imagination. Imagination is different from thought. In the case of thought there is always the question of true and false, but not in the case of imagination. We imagine things and do not care whether they are true or false, this is not the issue. The workings of the imagination are mysterious, unlike thought which we can make the subject of thought itself, imagination cannot imagine itself. Thinking is a case of selection between the true and the false hence it is discriminating and can be used to reflect on something and thus to achieve knowledge. Imagination does not supply knowledge. To imagine and to know are two different things. As we do not understand imagination and its workings, we tend to think of it as something external to ourselves. The beauty which we thus create takes on something terrifying, as it has imposed itself upon us without either our permission nor our invitation. The term for such a beauty is *sublimity*. We may, however, become aware of our imagination, our awe subsides and we find some relief, a comic relief, expressed in laughter devouring sublimity and out of its ashes, in the words of Collingwood, arises pure beauty. Thus true beauty arises out of a synthesis of the sublime and the comic, and only the artist that has discovered that he is the source of his imagination will be able to both imagine and to know. But still, although he is able to view himself from the outside, he does not understand the workings of his imagination, only that it is his imagination. Thus he speaks about *inspiration*, he becomes the vehicle for powers external to himself. This is the experience of all artists, according to Collingwood. Whether he attributes the source to God or to his unconscious does not matter, it is just a translation of a mundane fact of the impossibility of imagination to understand itself into mythological and fantastic terms. The main thing is that he puts the source of his inspiration to some external to him, and that his attitude becomes passive. He is not to interfere with the working of his inspiration, he has to submit to it. And what is its source, if not Nature itself, which becomes, as noted above, the inexhaustible source of all beauty. It is the duty of the artist to discover the beauty in nature, if he fails, the onus is entirely upon himself. Nature is by definition what is outside human control, but many aspects of humanity are indeed outside human control and hence to be considered part of Nature and hence by default beautiful. Thus not only mountains, forests and lakes are beautiful, but also traditional villages and pastoral scenes, as long as they are not self-consciously so. But once villagers dress up or try to beautify their cottages the charm is gone and the beauty is no more. And of course only an alien eye can find beauty in a peasant village, a peasant being part of it cannot, because as soon as he would, the beauty would no longer be devoid of self-consciousness. The same goes for designed objects such as machines. As long as they are designed on purely functional considerations and no conscious aesthetic intentions interfere, they should be thought of part of Nature and hence in possession of the natural beauty inherent in it. Thus what is simple and unaffected partakes of beauty. But let the village become the focus of interest as a source of beauty, and its function not the original of nourishing its inhabitants but to provide aesthetic pleasure to alien visitors, the magic is gone. The same thing goes for natural scenery, once it is swarmed by tourists, alien spectators arriving to admire its beauty, the beauty is spoiled, the magic is gone. Shepherds make for lovely pendants to

a scene, gloating tourists do not. Thus natural beauty is a fragile thing indeed, always threatened by being spoiled hence always to be protected against contamination. But this is a futile quest, because there is one threat the spectator cannot guard against and it is his own presence, his own enjoyment that inevitably kills it. But what man can destroy he must also be able to create, thus the realization that the beauty of an external object lies in the eye of the beholder, and with this realization man can take a more active part, instead of waiting for beauty to come his way, he can create it himself.

Artistic activity is really very primitive. The spontaneous scribbles of a child, as well as the decorations of a savage, are all in a sense art. Hence art can ensue before there is any maturity of development or any sophistication of society. In fact in a savage uncivilized society only art can thrive. But art too can be developed, it must rise above the mere random movement, which is nothing but an expression of an artistic urge, to be more controlled, to become aware of what it is doing. The art of learning to control your expressions results in the acquisition of a technique. Technique not only allows you to do what you want to do, it also makes you aware of discrimination, of not only being able to discriminate between success and failure, but also unable not to do so. In short infusing imagination with knowledge. And concomitant with a sense of discrimination is at least an implicitly conceived idealization. The artist knows, at least locally, what he is striving for. Also, in order to make progress, there must also be an ability to improve, of discarding mistakes and provide alternatives. But in order to speed up the learning process, it is not enough to have a local understanding of the ideal, the ideal must be in front of the learner, in order to make the comparison easier and the directions more focused. This is why apprentice students are taught by being made to copy already existing works. This can be seen as mindless but the hard lesson to learn is that the artist has to know certain schemata, how to draw certain shapes, as having something to start out with and modify when confronted with reality, or whatever object he has in mind. This idea of having a visual vocabulary so to speak, is something Gombrich emphasizes in his 'Art and Illusion'. It should be compared to learning vocabulary and grammar of a language before you are able to create original works yourself. In other words to acquire a certain intimacy with the medium. And copying is after all not that slavish process it is often disparaged as, Collingwood is careful to point out; it is in fact a creative act in which not only the hand is tried but also, maybe even more importantly the eye.

When an artist has learned his craft he is free to become a creative artist. This means that he is creating by design, forming patterns. This is formal art, which is art that does not refer to anything outside of itself. Its beauty is wholly intrinsic, and here one may be tempted to add the comment, that the formal design of patterns is actually akin to visual music. Architecture after all being a case in point, initially referring to nothing but itself, and by Goethe characterized as frozen music. But of course no art can be wholly formal, there are always externally imposed constraints, at least the ones of the medium itself. However, as I am fond to point out, the existence of constraints provokes the imagination into action and stimulates the inspiration, and Collingwood refers to those restraints as collaborators. But there is one external constraint of utmost importance, namely that of tradition. Without a tradition against which a work of art can be measured there is no such thing as an ideal or hence no sense of beauty. Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder,

but the beholder is not just an individual but a collective, and what can be thought of as subjective in terms of the collective, is not so in the case of the individual. One standard example is money. Art is not just an individual effort, it is a collective one. Now tradition is not a fixed thing, it develops through the actions of the individuals. It becomes liable to influences, either to be resisted or to be digested. The tradition of naturalism, discussed above, is about depicting the beauty of the natural world, and by so fixing it, as we have just pointed out, natural beauty is ephemeral, if constantly renewed. It may be tempting to oppose formal art with naturalistic art, but that is a mistaken view, according to the author. There is always an element of naturalism in any art, as well as there is formalism in naturalism. Naturalism cannot be reduced to the copying of nature, because that is a futile quest if taken literally. Also any copying is selective, and the beauty we find is to a large extent a formal beauty. One is here tempted to add the comment that we sometimes express that a scene is beautiful because it reminds us of a picture. The copying is selective for a variety of reasons, an obvious one is that there are simply too many details, nature being inexhaustibly rich. To try and recover this richness in all its details is only pedantic and leads to parody. Thus, as already commented, by leaving out inessential details and emphasizing the essential, the artist can improve upon nature, meaning improving upon the formal aspects of nature, those that give us visual pleasure.

What to do with a work of art when finished. Exhibit or turned backwards leaning onto the wall? In either case it is to be forgotten and the artist is to move on to other things. If it is published it will enter the realm of the collective and be seen by eyes others than that of the creator, who has a special relation to his work. Other viewers may look at it in the way you look at nature, but with the difference that a painting is designed to be beautiful, nature is not. There is a tendency to divide the collective into creating artists, ostensibly endowed with a divine touch and call them geniuses, and the larger public, whose only asset is taste, i.e. the ability to discriminate. This form of idolatry is fine to be cultivated by the immature, but once taste is developed to some degree, this taste partakes of the genius of the artist, otherwise the latter would not be able to communicate with you. It would all be gibberish. But once taste discovers its own strength there is an impulse to rebel. To rebel against everything it admired before and put on a pedestal worshipped as the classic. This is a phase that has to be gone through before a more mature appreciation of art has been achieved.

Finally he claims that art is childish, that the artistic temperament goes against the temperament necessary to a grown-up man in the world. Maturity and Civilization is anathema to art. And as art strives to develop there is an intrinsic contradiction at play. Art is essentially self-destructive, but that does not mean that art will die away, as the childish and savage impulse in man can never be repressed, and it will arise again phoenix like out of its ashes. True the artistic ability an individual will enjoy as a child will fade away when he grows up, just as many poets do their best work in the unfolding of their youth. To summarize. The artist is both creator and critic, imaginative as well as thinking. In those we find a contradiction and every artist eventually faces a crisis. Who am I? According to Collingwood the resolution lies in religion and science. To resist those he must cling to his childishness and primitiveness and claim that art only exists for itself, that imagination trumps thinking. The life of the spirit is a trinity whose three terms are

art, religion and thought, or otherwise put, the beautiful, the holy, and the true. But it must start with art. In art lies the potential of growth of the spirit. And as long as there is life in the spirit, there will be art.

Collingwood nourishes a deep admiration for Jane Austen. He puts her literary abilities on par with those of Shakespeare, at least as far as the ability to create a variety of individual and believable comic figures. One reason for that is that neither she nor Shakespeare dismisses the comic character, they are in fact deeply amused by them, and hence respect them. She died early, but from some disease that struck her, more as a case of accident than destiny. She was tall and healthy, and full of fun and energy, like her siblings and parents, who attained respectable ages. She grew up in the country side, which was very fortunate. The life of a country squire was idyllic. You spent your youth improving your mind at Oxford or Cambridge. When you had tired of it you retreated to the country giving sermons and tending pigs, or if you were of an enterprising bent, did science or scholarship in your spare time, which was generously endowed. You may find a pretty and vivacious woman of good sense and a quick mind and raise a family. The children would enjoy a lot of fresh air and space and have to rely on their own resources as far as amusement. And of course there is a great difference between amusement you provide yourself or that which is imposed on you. There will be many books for those hungry to read, and exciting conversation at the table, not only gossip. If there is talent it can be nourished by drawing or music. Austen grew up in such a home, and she did early on amuse herself and others by writing and telling stories. This is nothing by itself very remarkable, many children will be moved to do so in such congenial surroundings, so it is not necessarily a sign of precocity, and will in most cases, like the uninhibited urge to draw dry up by the onset of puberty. But Austen was something extra. Most children will imitate a style when they write or narrate, but being rather oblivious of it. Austen was not, she was able to take a detached view and actually parody a style. This is something extraordinary in a child. And she did not dry up at puberty, the urge to write was too strong for that, although she did not necessarily have a so called artistic temperament, so conducive to second-rate art, and such an impediment to real art. Her novel 'Pride and Prejudice' written at twenty is remarkably mature and accomplished for someone that young, although Collingwood admits to some weaknesses, at least when compared to the mature 'Emma' which he considers as good a novel as it ever gets. The plot of it is well thought out, and the characters well-rounded, especially Mr Bennet, a clever man trapped with a stupid wife and mindless progeny, except for his daughter Elizabeth. Thus he keeps a low profile expressing himself in subtle sarcasms. Maybe a portrait of Austen's father? There are some exaggerations, and a loss of momentum brought about by an unmotivated change of location, but in the end it picks up again. 'Emma' on the other hand is pure perfection, and Collingwood waxes. It may not be so popular as many of the other works, as the reading public cannot quite decide whether they like the eponymous protagonist after all. The other four do not come up to par compared with those two, according to Collingwood. 'Persuasions' despite its obvious qualities is marred by the shadow of Austen's final illness, 'Mansfield Park' is a bit too sentimental, and Fanny Price is too insipid a character. 'Northanger Abbey' has its points as a brilliant parody on the fiction prevalent in her days, but 'Sense and Sensibility' is a rather failed reworking of an earlier epistolary ms. And

of course posterity has to some extent confirmed his opinions in the sense of those two being the ones most filmed and serialized on TV. Finally Austen has often been faulted for her narrowness of vision, that no larger themes enter her field of attention than those of marriage and wealth. That she admitted that her work was nothing but miniatures made with a very fine brushes. But such censure, according to Collingwood misses the point of literary work, it is the execution that matters, not the subject, be it as mundane as mere gossip.

In the initial chapter on words and tunes Collingwood reflects on the problems of setting a tune to words. It cannot be done in disregard of the words, it must interpret the words conveyed by them and amplify and clarify. It can never be a case of translation, because if so either the words or the music would be superfluous. It is a kind of parallelism but in different media. Hence the poet, who knows the words and their intended meaning the best, may normally not be the best to compose the tune, for this we need someone who commands the medium of music. Then of course music and poetry are intimately connected, as in both cases the formal aspects of sounds are essential. There may be sense to a poem, and as long as it does not detract from the sound it may enhance it. But a poem, unlike prose, does not live and die by sense. Just like prose does not live and die by sound. Speech and singing are intimately related, one arising from the other in tandem. Language is essentially musical but it is encoded in a very different way from music. To make sense of a text it has to read by the right intonation, the right stress, the right rhythm. Such matters are well conveyed by musical notation, but not by textual coding, the reader has to supply it himself through sensing the meaning of the text. If he does not understand the text, he is unable to read it aloud to others in the appropriate way.

In a short piece he lists systematically in a numbered way some standard misunderstandings about the nature of language. One being that one cannot separate language from its use. Unlike an instrument it does not exist beyond its use. Hence it was never invented to be used. It was used before being invented, or maybe better, its use and inventions were and are contemporaneous.

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