

# AESTHETICS

LECTURES ON FINE ART

BY

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*Translated by T. M. Knox*



VOLUME I

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

*Oxford University Press, Walton Street, Oxford OX2 6DP*

*Oxford New York Toronto*

*Delhi Bombay Calcutta Madras Karachi*

*Petaling Jaya Singapore Hong Kong Tokyo*

*Nairobi Dar es Salaam Cape Town*

*Melbourne Auckland*

*and associated companies in*

*Berlin Ibadan*

*Oxford is a trade mark of Oxford University Press*

*Published in the United States*

*by Oxford University Press, New York*

*ISBN 0 19 824498 3*

*© Oxford University Press 1975*

*First published 1975*

*Reprinted 1988*

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*Printed in Great Britain by*

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*Chippenham*

(c) In fact art does have also this formal side, namely its ability to adorn and bring before perception and feeling every possible material, just as the thinking of ratiocination can work on every possible object and mode of action and equip them with reasons and justifications. But confronted by such a multiple variety of content, we are at once forced to notice that the different feelings and ideas, which art is supposed to arouse or confirm, counteract one another, contradict and reciprocally cancel one another. Indeed, in this respect, the more art inspires to contradictory [emotions] the more it increases the contradictory character of feelings and passions and makes us stagger about like Bacchantes or even goes on, like ratiocination, to sophistry and scepticism. This variety of material itself compels us, therefore, not to stop at so formal a definition [of the aim of art], since rationality penetrates

this jumbled diversity and demands to see, and know to be attained, even out of elements so contradictory, a higher and inherently more universal end. It is claimed indeed similarly that the final end of the state and the social life of men is that *all* human capacities and *all* individual powers be developed and given expression in every way and in every direction. But against so formal a view the question arises soon enough: into what *unity* are these manifold formations to be brought together, what *single* aim must they have as their fundamental concept and final end? As with the Concept of the state, so too with the Concept of art there arises the need (a) for a *common* end for its particular aspects, but (b) also for a higher *substantial* end. As such a substantial end, the first thing that occurs to reflection is the view that [art has the capacity and the vocation to mitigate the ferocity of desires.]

(α) In respect of this first idea, we have only to discover in what feature peculiar to art there lies the capacity to cancel rudeness and to bridle and educate impulses, inclinations, and passions. Rudeness in general is grounded in a direct selfishness of the impulses which make straight away precisely and exclusively for the satisfaction of their concupiscence. But desire is all the ruder and imperious the more, as single and restricted, it engrosses the *whole man*, so that he loses the power to tear himself free, as a universal being, from this determinateness and become aware of himself as universal. And if the man says in such a case, as may be supposed, 'The passion is stronger than I', then for consciousness the abstract 'I' is separated from the particular passion, but only in a purely formal way, since all that is pronounced with this cleavage is that, in face of the power of the passion, the 'I' as a universal is of no account whatever. Thus the ferocity of passion consists in the unity of the 'I' as universal with the restricted object of his desire, so that the man has no longer any will beyond this single passion. Now such rudeness and untamed force of passion is *prima facie* mitigated by art, in that it gives a man an idea of what he feels and achieves in such a situation. And even if art restricts itself to setting up pictures of passions for contemplation, even if indeed it were to flatter them, still there is here already a power of mitigation, since thereby a man is at least made *aware* of what otherwise he only immediately *is*. For then the man contemplates his impulses and inclinations, and while previously they carried him reflectionless away, he now sees them outside himself and already begins

to be free from them because they confront him as something objective.

For this reason it may often be the case with an artist that, overtaken by grief, he mitigates and weakens for himself the intensity of his own feeling by representing it in art. Tears, even, provide some comfort; at first entirely sunk and concentrated in grief, a man may then in this direct way utter this purely inward feeling. But still more of an alleviation is the expression of one's inner state in words, pictures, sounds, and shapes. For this reason it was a good old custom at deaths and funerals to appoint wailing women in order that by its expression grief might be contemplated. Even by expressions of condolence the burden of a man's misfortune is brought before his mind; if it is much spoken about he has to reflect on it, and this alleviates his grief. And so to cry one's eyes out and to speak out has ever been regarded as a means of freeing oneself from the oppressive burden of care or at least of relieving the heart. The mitigation of the power of passions therefore has its universal ground in the fact that man is released from his immediate imprisonment in a feeling and becomes conscious of it as something external to him, to which he must now relate himself in an ideal way. Art by means of its representations, while remaining within the sensuous sphere, liberates man at the same time from the power of sensuousness. Of course we may often hear favourite phraseology about man's duty to remain in immediate unity with nature; but such unity, in its abstraction, is purely and simply rudeness and ferocity, and by dissolving this unity for man, art lifts him with gentle hands out of and above imprisonment in nature. For man's preoccupation with artistic objects remains purely contemplative, and thereby it educates, even if at first only an attention to artistic portrayals in general, later on an attention to their meaning and to a comparison with other subjects, and it opens the mind to a general consideration of them and the points of view therein involved.

(β) Now on this there follows quite logically the second characteristic that has been attributed to art as its essential aim, namely the *purification* of the passions, instruction, and *moral* improvement. For the theory that art was to curb rudeness and educate the passions, remained quite formal and general, so that it has become again a matter of what *specific* sort of education this is and what is its essential aim.

( $\alpha\alpha$ ) It is true that the doctrine of the purification of passion still suffers the same deficiency as the previous doctrine of the mitigation of desires, yet it does at least emphasize more closely the fact that artistic representations needed a criterion for assessing their worth or unworthiness. This criterion [on this view] is just their effectiveness in separating pure from impure in the passions. This effectiveness therefore requires a content which can exercise this purifying force, and, in so far as producing such an effect is supposed to constitute the substantial aim of art, the purifying content will have to be brought into consciousness in accordance with its *universality* and *essentiality*.

( $\beta\beta$ ) From this latter point of view, the aim of art has been pronounced to be that it should *instruct*. On this view, on the one hand, the special character of art consists in the movement of feelings and in the satisfaction lying in this movement, lying even in fear, in pity, in grievous emotion and agitation, i.e. in the satisfying enlistment of feelings and passions, and to that extent in a gusto, a pleasure, and delight in artistic subjects, in their representation and effect. But, on the other hand, this aim of art is supposed to have its higher criterion only in its instructiveness, in *fabula docet*,<sup>1</sup> and so in the useful influence which the work of art may exert on the individual. In this respect the Horatian aphorism *Et prodesse volunt et delectare poetae*<sup>2</sup> contains, concentrated in a few words, what later has been elaborated in an infinite degree, diluted, and made into a view of art reduced to the uttermost extreme of shallowness.—Now in connection with such instruction we must ask at once whether it is supposed to be contained in the work of art directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly. If, in general, what is at issue is a universal and non-contingent aim, then this end and aim, in view of the essentially spiritual nature of art, can itself only be a spiritual one, and moreover one which is not contingent but absolute. This aim in relation to teaching could only consist in bringing into consciousness, by means of the work of art, an absolutely essential spiritual content. From this point of view we must assert that the more highly art is ranked the more it has to adopt such a content into itself and find only in the essence of that content the criterion of whether what is expressed is appropriate or not. [Art has in fact been the first *instructress* of peoples.]

<sup>1</sup> See below, Part II, ch. III, A 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ars poetica*, 333. 'Poets wish alike to benefit and to please.'

If, however, the aim of instruction is treated as an aim in such a way that the universal nature of the content represented is supposed to emerge and be explained directly and explicitly as an abstract proposition, prosaic reflection, or general doctrine, and not to be contained implicitly and only indirectly in the concrete form of a work of art, then by this separation the sensuous pictorial form, which is precisely what alone makes a work of art a work of art, becomes a useless appendage, a veil and a pure appearance, expressly pronounced to be a mere veil and a mere pure appearance. But thereby the nature of the work of art itself is distorted. For the work of art should put before our eyes a content, not in its universality as such, but one whose universality has been absolutely individualized and sensuously particularized. If the work of art does not proceed from this principle but emphasizes the universality with the aim of [providing] abstract instruction, then the pictorial and sensuous element is only an external and superfluous adornment, and the work of art is broken up internally, form and content no longer appear as coalesced. In that event the sensuously individual and the spiritually universal have become external to one another.

Now, further, if the aim of art is restricted to this usefulness for instruction, the other side, pleasure, entertainment, and delight, is pronounced explicitly to be inessential, and ought to have its substance only in the utility of the doctrine on which it is attendant. But what is implied here at the same time is that art does not carry its vocation, end, and aim in itself, but that its essence lies in something else to which it serves as a means. In that event art is only one amongst several means which are proved useful for and applied to the end of instruction. But this brings us to the boundary at which art is supposed to cease to be an end in itself, because it is reduced either to a mere entertaining game or a mere means of instruction.

(γγ) This boundary is most sharply marked if in turn a question is raised about a supreme aim and end for the sake of which passions are to be purified and men instructed. As this aim, *moral* betterment has often been adduced in recent times, and the end of art has been placed in the function of preparing inclinations and impulses for moral perfection and of leading them to this final end. This idea unites instruction with purification, inasmuch as art, by affording an insight into genuinely moral goodness and so by

instruction, at the same time incites to purification and only so is to accomplish the betterment of mankind as its utility and its highest aim.

Now as regards art in relation to moral betterment, the same must be said, in the first place, about the aim of art as instruction. It is readily granted that art may not take immorality and the intention of promoting it as its principle. But it is one thing to make immorality the express aim of the presentation, and another not to take morality as that aim. From every genuine work of art a good moral may be drawn, yet of course all depends on interpretation and on *who* draws the moral.<sup>1</sup> We can hear the most immoral presentations defended on the ground that one must be acquainted with evil and sins in order to act morally; conversely, it has been said that the portrayal of Mary Magdalene, the beautiful sinner who afterwards repented, has seduced many into sin, because art makes repentance look so beautiful, and sinning must come before repentance. But the doctrine of moral betterment, carried through logically, is not content with holding that a moral may be pointed from a work of art; on the contrary, it would want the moral instruction to shine forth clearly as the substantial aim of the work of art, and indeed would expressly permit the presentation of none but moral subjects, moral characters, actions, and events. For art can choose its subjects, and is thus distinct from history or the sciences, which have their material given to them.

In order, in this aspect of the matter, to be able to form a thorough estimate of the view that the aim of art is moral, we must first ask what specific standpoint of morality this view professes. If we keep more clearly in view the standpoint of the 'moral' as we have to take it in the best sense of the word today, it is soon obvious that its concept does not immediately coincide with what apart from it we generally call virtue, conventional life, respectability, etc. From this point of view a conventionally virtuous man is not *ipso facto moral*, because to be moral needs *reflection*, the specific consciousness of what accords with duty, and action on this preceding consciousness. Duty itself is the law of the will, a law which man nevertheless freely lays down out of himself,

<sup>1</sup> e.g., for one reader the moral of Goethe's *Elective Affinities* is approval of marriage, while for another reader it is disapproval (G. H. Lewes, *Life of Goethe*, bk. vii, ch. iv). In a work of art, as in life, the greater a man's character the more are different interpretations put on it by different people.



and then he ought to determine himself to this duty for the sake of duty and its fulfilment, by doing good solely from the conviction he has won that it is the good.<sup>1</sup> But this law, the duty chosen for duty's sake as a guide out of free conviction and inner conscience, and then carried out, is by itself the abstract universal of the will and this has its direct opposite in nature, in sensuous impulses, selfish interests, passions, and everything grouped together under the name of feeling and emotion. In this opposition one side is regarded as *cancelling* the other, and since both are present in the subject as opposites, he has a choice, since his decision is made from within, between following either the one or the other. But such a decision is a *moral* one, from the standpoint we are considering, and so is the action carried out in accordance with it, but only if it is done, on the one hand, from a free conviction of duty, and, on the other hand, by the conquest not only of the particular will, natural impulses, inclinations, passions, etc., but also of noble feelings and higher impulses. For the modern moralistic view starts from the fixed opposition between the will in its spiritual universality and the will in its sensuous natural particularity; and it consists not in the complete reconciliation of these opposed sides, but in their reciprocal battle against one another, which involves the demand that impulses in their conflict with duty must give way to it.<sup>2</sup>

Now this opposition does not arise for consciousness in the restricted sphere of moral action alone; it emerges in a thorough-going cleavage and opposition between what is *absolute* and what is external reality and existence. Taken quite abstractly, it is the opposition of universal and particular, when each is fixed over against the other on its own account in the same way; more concretely, it appears in nature as the opposition of the abstract law to the abundance of individual phenomena, each explicitly with its own character; in the spirit it appears as the contrast between the sensuous and the spiritual in man, as the battle of spirit against flesh, of duty for duty's sake, of the cold command against particular interest, warmth of heart, sensuous inclinations and impulses,

<sup>1</sup> With this Kantian passage compare my article 'Hegel's attitude to Kant's Ethics' (*Kant-Studien*, 1957-8, 70 ff.).

<sup>2</sup> Here Hegel's interpretation of Kant, like Schiller's, is based on a measure of misunderstanding. See, e.g., translation of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (Oxford, 1942), § 124, of his *Early Theological Writings* (Chicago, 1948), p. 211, and H. J. Paton: *The Categorical Imperative* (London, n.d.), pp. 48 and 84.

against the individual disposition in general; as the harsh opposition between inner freedom and the necessity of external nature, further as the contradiction between the dead inherently empty concept, and the full concreteness of life, between theory or subjective thinking, and objective existence and experience.

These are oppositions which have not been invented at all by the subtlety of reflection or the pedantry of philosophy; in numerous forms they have always preoccupied and troubled the human consciousness, even if it is modern culture that has first worked them out most sharply and driven them up to the peak of harshest contradiction. Spiritual culture, the modern intellect, produces this opposition in man which makes him an amphibious animal, because he now has to live in two worlds which contradict one another. The result is that now consciousness wanders about in this contradiction, and, driven from one side to the other, cannot find satisfaction for itself in either the one or the other. For on the one side we see man imprisoned in the common world of reality and earthly temporality, borne down by need and poverty, hard pressed by nature, enmeshed in matter, sensuous ends and their enjoyment, mastered and carried away by natural impulses and passions. On the other side, he lifts himself to eternal ideas, to a realm of thought and freedom, gives to himself, as *will*, universal laws and prescriptions, strips the world of its enlivened and flowering reality and dissolves it into abstractions, since the spirit now upholds its right and dignity only by mishandling nature and denying its right, and so retaliates on nature the distress and violence which it has suffered from it itself. But for modern culture and its intellect this discordance in life and consciousness involves the demand that such a contradiction be resolved. Yet the intellect cannot cut itself free from the rigidity of these oppositions; therefore the solution remains for consciousness a mere *ought*, and the present and reality move only in the unrest of a hither and thither which seeks a reconciliation without finding one. Thus the question then arises whether such a universal and thoroughgoing opposition, which cannot get beyond a mere ought and a postulated solution, is in general the absolute truth and supreme end. If general culture has run into such a contradiction, it becomes the task of philosophy to supersede the oppositions, i.e. to show that neither the one alternative in its abstraction, nor the other in the like one-sidedness, possesses truth, but that they are both self-dis-

solving; that truth lies only in the reconciliation and mediation of both, and that this mediation is no mere demand, but what is absolutely accomplished and is ever self-accomplishing. This insight coincides immediately with the ingenuous faith and will which does have precisely this dissolved opposition steadily present to its view, and in action makes it its end and achieves it. Philosophy affords a reflective insight into the essence of the opposition only in so far as it shows how truth is just the dissolving of opposition and, at that, not in the sense, as may be supposed, that the opposition and its two sides *do not exist at all*, but that they exist reconciled.

Now since the ultimate end, moral betterment, has pointed to a higher standpoint, we will have to vindicate this higher standpoint for art too. Thereby the false position, already noticed, is at once abandoned, the position, namely, that art has to serve as a means to moral purposes, and the moral end of the world in general, by instructing and improving, and thus has its substantial aim, not in itself, but in something else. If on this account we now continue to speak of a final end and aim, we must in the first place get rid of the perverse idea which, in the question about an end, clings to the accessory meaning of the question, namely that it is one about utility. The perversity lies here in this, that in that case the work of art is supposed to have a bearing on something else which is set before our minds as the essential thing or as what ought to be, so that then the work of art would have validity only as a useful tool for realizing this end which is independently valid on its own account outside the sphere of art. Against this we must maintain that art's vocation is to unveil the *truth* in the form of sensuous artistic configuration, to set forth the reconciled opposition just mentioned, and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling. For other ends, like instruction, purification, bettering, financial gain, struggling for fame and honour, have nothing to do with the work of art as such, and do not determine its nature.