

Art, Politics and the Force of Painting

University of Columbia, 4 May 2006

I The End of Art

My subject is intended to pay tribute to the art department of perhaps the most famous teachers' college in the world, the more so as being part of its great university, and in virtue of that membership, lending authority and renown to the subjects of public education and to the students who graduate as its public practitioners and representatives. In my own country, the University Schools of Education in which I spent my career are habitually condescended to by the grand viziers of more powerful subjects – Physics, say, or the vast and preposterous empire of Business and Management – and so it is an honour of which I am particularly sensible to be invited here today to argue for and celebrate the significance of art in the everyday life of educational institutions, from the classroom of five-year-olds to the doctoral seminar.

Accordingly, my topic addresses one of the fundamental practices of art education and one main indicator of cultural energy and wellbeing. It is my assumption that when a modern society sufficiently cherishes, as this one does, the practice of painting in its relevant institutions of social life – its schools, for sure, and its art galleries, its public buildings, its airport terminals, its cafés and restaurants, its seaside promenades and little art shops and, come to that, its domestic staircases and sitting rooms – then something communal and reassuring, some familiar narrative connecting past to future, is being affirmed and confirmed. I take it that such an affirmation is present even when the painting in question is the merest kitsch, or worse, when it is wholly in thrall to the rhythms of fashionable celebrity and market obsolescence.

These latter forces – which seize upon painting as a fashionable commodity and subject it to the cycle of innovation, promotion, standardised production and controlled replacement – have been more or less contemporaneous with the entire modern movement since Picasso and Matisse came to prominence, and are ineliminable, indeed intrinsic to capitalism itself. Their definition of the art world – the waves of new movements, manifestoes, magazines, the murderous intensity of competition, the sheer, brief fame – is itself an indication of a crazy

sort that society still takes its art seriously and counts painting among the thriving practices of its cultural life.

Fame and modernity, the painter as celebrity, the intertwining of art and political propaganda, the invention of what has come to be called, following Guy Debord,¹ "spectacularity" in social life, all these arbitrary presences certainly constitute unignorable evidence of the lockstep in which painting and history have moved together over the past century.

It is not to be doubted of course that that same conjunction of painting and history held for many centuries before the 20th, back at least as far as the discovery of secular subjects and therefore of political painting in late Renaissance Venice and early bourgeois Holland. But 20th century history grasped painting in a peculiarly iron grip. This is obviously true not only of the fatally short but astonishing efflorescence of revolutionary utopianism in post-1920 Russia at the hands of Malevich and El Lissintzky, but just as true of Braque's and Picasso's disjoined and flattened guitars of 1915 or Matisse's wonderful curving art-paper collage, *The Fall of Icarus*, with which he acknowledged the chaos in France as World War Two ended.

Sometime in the 1970s, however, that fine American philosopher, New Yorker and art critic of the *Nation*, Arthur Danto, published in the late *Soho News* and at the invitation of the mighty Clement Greenberg, an influential essay entitled 'The End of Art'.² Danto took his cue from Hegel who had declared, early in the 19th century in his *Philosophy of the Fine Arts*, that art "is a form of life that has grown old", that art is only free "when it has established itself in a sphere it shares with religion and philosophy, becoming thereby one mode more and form through which ... the spiritual truths of widest range are brought home to consciousness". By this token, Hegel concluded, "Art is for us a thing of the past", "on the side of its highest possibilities, [art] has lost its genuine truth and life".

Admittedly Hegel was saying all this a century and a half or more before Danto mournfully repeats him, and as we have seen, no-one could suppose that the titanic battle of modernism was fought out anywhere but on the main stage of political history. Nonetheless Danto decides that inasmuch as the history of painting may be written as a narrative of increasing

¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Red and Black Books, 1971.

² Republished in Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

pictorial mastery from Masaccio to Monet, each great painter teaching new lessons about the faithful and recognisable rendering of the world-out-there, then after Fauvism burst so incomprehensibly on the scene in 1906, there was nowhere for art to go. History as progress was over, and could thereafter only be written as a series of discontinuities, each period shorter than the last. Danto writes:

Just think of the dazzling succession of art movements in our century: Fauvism, the Cubisms, Futurism, Vorticism, Synchronism, Abstractionism, Surrealism, Dada, Expressionism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop, Op, Minimalism, Post-Minimalism, Conceptualism, Photorealism, Abstract Realism, Neo-Expressionism – simply to list some of the more familiar ones. Fauvism lasted about two years, and there was a time when a whole period of art history seemed destined to endure about five months, or half a season. Creativity at that time seemed more to consist in making a period than in making a work. The imperatives of art were virtually historical imperatives – Make an art-historical period! – and success consisted in producing an accepted innovation. If you were successful, you had the monopoly on producing works no-one else could, since no-one else had made the period with which you and perhaps a few collaborators were from now on to be identified. With this went a certain financial security, inasmuch as museums, wedded to historical structure and the kind of completeness which went with having examples from each period, would want an example from you if you were a suitable period.³

Danto's brilliant little cameo of course catches precisely the wave-movement of capitalism itself, and history of a sort may surely be written as a narrative of successions, one damn thing after another, without destination or destiny. Danto anticipates, from within the limits of art-history, Francis Fukuyama's explosive little thesis on the end of Cold War, 'The End of History',⁴ where Fukuyama announces that teleological and political advance has dissolved into the quietism of billions of individual freedoms and, if the individual is lucky, fulfilments.

Deprived, in art history, of a narrative of progress, Danto also rejects the doctrines of expressivism which offered to replace progress. These taught that it was a mistake to study paintings for their march through time towards pictorial perfection. Rather, a painting was a record of the passions and truthful only to them.

³ Danto (1986) pp108-9.

⁴ *National Interest*, 15, summer 1989, later enlarged as a full-scale book, *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: 1993.

This was a refreshing shock. Pedagogically it had great staying-power. Feelings in any case had never had a satisfactory *theory* of them provided by philosophy. Descartes wrote his great essay, 'The Passions of the Soul' in 1649, and David Hume a century later put reason to the servitude of the passions in his 'Dissertation on the Passions', but philosophy pursued its way without recognising, first, the *historicality* of the formation of feelings, such that feelings in our present era, which has seen the triumph of the therapeutic, are differently comprised to the "civil affections" of which Hume wrote.⁵ And secondly, philosophy carried on as though cognition were always king, and disregarded the inseparability of thought and feeling.

Aesthetics after 1906 (the art-historical date provided by the first famous Fauve exhibition at the *Salon d'Automne*) didn't so much correct the omission as lean on Romanticism and declare the subject-matter of all painting to be the feelings. The trouble is then, as Danto says, that if it was supremely the achievement of modernism to hand over figurative and pictorial accuracy to photography and the cinema, to give up everything for expressivism, why was it so difficult to understand, and why was the theoretical exposition to which it gave rise so irregular, broken and discontinuous as to make its narrative history impossible to write? Danto ends by deciding that the story of art *is* indeed over, if that story is supposed to lead somewhere, to proceed in a line towards the philosophical goal of self-knowledge, or as Hegel would have put it, the realisation of the pure spirit *as itself*. Danto, with typical American cheeriness in the face of monstrosity, concludes that hereinafter painting will just variously be about itself, and 'go' nowhere. But he ends, "On the other hand, it has been an immense privilege to have lived in history".

It is to my purpose that the best art historian of the present day (now Gombrich has died), T J Clark, so far supports this argument that he spends a little time mocking the idea that, in the case of Jackson Pollock, the spectator could read in his drip and thrown pictures such expressive themes as "sustained paroxysms of passion", "ravaging aggressive virility", and that Pollock could "paint ecstasy as it could not be written".⁶ The logical next step in art history, with expressivism in general and Pollock in particular, is no doubt to hitch a lift from Freud, and (for all his Freudian sympathies) Clark makes fun of this school of *savants* as

⁵ I take this point from Alasdair MacIntyre, especially in his essay 'Practical Rationalities as Social Structures' in *The MacIntyre Reader*. K Knight (ed). Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

⁶ T J Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: episodes from a history of modernism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, p308.

well, as having so often led "to amateur theatricals, portentous, overstuffed and overwrought".⁷

Clark is sufficiently of Danto's mind to agree that something has indeed ended. Modernism is the form of life which is over, where modernism means the passion to pull everything down, to declare history herself as finished, and the brave, new and good society as beginning here right now. Clark ends his wonderful elegy with lines from Pier Panto Pasolini's poems:

Ma io, con il cuore cosciente
Di chi sottano nella storia ha vita,
potro ma piu con pura passione operare,
se so che in nostra storia e finita?

(But I, with the heart and mind of someone who can only live in history, shall I ever be able to act again with a pure passion when I know that our history is finished?)

Pasolini's lament is for the end of socialism. Pollock's paintings are certainly the end of something even though it is hard to say what. For Pollock made it impossible to do the same thing again, though plenty of painters made a living pretending they could.

Clark and Danto (and Clement Greenberg also) agree at least that art and history have parted company. The ardent utopianism and the visionary extremism of the first Cubists was joined in a common endeavour to make painting foretell the future with the great American paintings of the Cold War: by Pollock, and Clyfford Still, Hans Hofmann and Willem de Kooning. These amazing painters pulled paint and people together; their drunken abandonment to colour, size, sheer lavishness of form has its corollary in the terrific consumer all-overishness of the United States. It is as though, like D H Lawrence in his great essays on classic American literature,⁸ they not only saw their country as the incarnate future, but saw it also as one vast, terrifying and teeming geography of politics, city, prairie, and the endless roads, obliterating the past and hauling everybody after it into the vulgar paradise of consumerism.

It can be no surprise that such a vision of politics stopped painting in its tracks.

⁷ Clark (1999) p344.

⁸ D H Lawrence *Studies in Classic American Literature, Complete Works*, vol XIV. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

II The Missing Painter

There are two striking short novels by Englishmen, John Berger's *A Painter of our Time* and John Fowles's *The Ebony Tower*,⁹ which set their faces against the apocalyptic darkneses and sudden explosions of dazzling light that are the American vision of the Cold War epoch. (The clinching image of that epoch is Francis Ford Coppola's incendiary raid in the rightly titled *Apocalypse Now*.) Berger and Fowles alike imagine a fictional painter who would tie old politics to new art, who would stretch reconciling hands out to the giant discoveries of Picasso and Braque and draw them equally forward to an age which without failing to see the hideousness of twentieth century politics, would soften its terrible outlines and find a way of recovering not visions of utopia but rather, a more equable settlement, a politics of home.

Fowles's novel is set in 1974 when his painter, Henry Breasley, is 78, graduate of the Slade College of Art in its greatest days, pacifist who joined the International Brigade in Spain at 40, younger rival and familiar of Picasso and Braque in Paris from 1920 onwards, only at the end of his life coming to be seen as the supreme English modernist, upper-class upbringing and lifelong exile notwithstanding. His visitor in the novel is a young English painter-critic, David Williams, come to interview Breasley and write the introductory essay for the full *catalogue raisonné* treatment at Breasley's beautiful reclusive farmhouse deep in the Breton forest.

The momentous clash between the two of them, the easy-going, eclectic, abstract painter versus the fiercely figurative old master, ends in a draw. In the implicit contest between their two views of *life*, the old man wins hands down: passionate vitality defeats tasteful, tolerant niceness. The paintings are the achievement they are because the power of the art matches and transmits the vitality and the ardour of the man.

One of Breasley's famous paintings, the huge *Moon Hunt*, hangs above his fireplace. Uccello's famed predecessor is somewhere evident in it, but it is a dark, sombre, ambiguous almost-masterpiece, no hounds or horses or prey, just nocturnal figures among trees. In the painting on which he is working in the novel, Breasley has begun from dim childhood memories of a heavy thunderstorm at a funfair. Gradually, as he works at and over the

⁹ Berger, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965; Fowles, London: Jonathan Cape, 1974.

image, the fair theme becomes overlaid (perhaps in something like the process one can see in Braque's late sequence, *Birds*) as if Breasley must gradually squeeze out the literal event which then only survives in "the strange inwardness, the lit oblivion of the central scene of the painting".¹⁰ This new painting is presaged by an earlier one in his Breton retreat, Coëtminais, in which the presence of Pisanello as well as early memory of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* brood over another dark wood in which the parallel tree trunks are echoed by hanged corpses and irregularly punctuated by living figures who "seemed as if they wished they too were among the dead".

Breasley teaches Williams by example to see "the banality, the jargon, the pretence of authority" in his own essay on the Master:

Perhaps abstraction, the very word, gave the game away. You did not want how you lived to be reflected in your painting; or because it was so compromised, so settled-for-the-safe, you could only try to camouflage its hollow reality under craftsmanship and good taste. Geometry. Safety hid nothingness.

What the old man still had was an umbilical cord to the past; a step back, he stood by Pisanello's side. In spirit, anyway. While David was encapsulated in book-knowledge, art as social institution, science, subject-matter for grants and committee discussion. That was the real kernel of his wildness. David and his generation, and all those to come, could only look back, through bars, like caged animals, born in captivity, at the old green freedom. That described exactly the experience of those last two days: the laboratory monkey allowed a glimpse of his lost true self. One was misled by the excess in vogue, the officially blessed indiscipline, the surface liberties of contemporary art; which all sprang from a profound frustration, a buried but not yet quite extinguished awareness of non-freedom. It ran through the whole recent history of art education in Britain. That notorious diploma show where the Fine Arts students had shown nothing but blank canvases – what truer comment on the stale hypocrisy of the teaching and the helpless bankruptcy of the taught? One could not live by one's art, therefore one taught a travesty of its basic principles; pretending that genius making it, is arrived at by overnight experiment, histrionics, instead of endless years of solitary obstinacy.¹¹

Breasley, the first missing painter in British art, fictionally fills the actual gap between Henry Moore's monumental sculptures and the exquisite good manners and lovely colour sense of John Piper. Moore is unmistakably an artist in history, but off the main lines of the British

¹⁰ John Fowles, *The Ebony Tower*. St Albans: Panther Books edition, 1975, p31.

¹¹ Fowles (1975) pp110-11.

tradition. Piper, splendid painter as he is, as all his contemporaries were – Bawden, Ravilious, Nicholson, Clough, the Nash brothers – takes modernism and *tames* it by nonchalance. He transposes the revolutionary music of Europe into seaside serenade, and he simply ignores the thrilling destructiveness of the last Americans. In my final section of the paper I shall nonetheless suggest the timeliness of such a treaty and its usefulness in the moment of postmodernism.

The force of any such conclusion is underlined by the life of our second fictional painter, John Berger's Janos Lavin. Lavin is a Hungarian émigré painter, a passionate dissenting socialist, working in London. In a very telling speech Berger gives to a detestably knowing gallery-owner, the speaker, who is looking at Lavin's portfolio with a view to perhaps exhibiting him in the West End, says:

What I feel, you see, is that somebody like your friend belongs to a generation – how old is he, by the way? – the generation of what I call Desperate Optimism... It's the same with Léger and Corb and Mondriaan. All of them tried to fight Chaos with Order. And you just can't do it. The reality of our time is chaotic whether we like it or not. And anything that rejects that reality becomes mechanical. Look at Klee. He was a man who accepted this chaotic, irrational reality, and the result was he produced poetry. Take Picasso. He's the one man of his generation who's still contemporary. Why? Because fundamentally he's destructive. But the Desperate Optimists, as I call them – they're sentimentalists at heart. They idealize the machine and what's called The People. But, believe me, people just aren't like that. No-one wants to live in a Corbusier. And why should they? Take the films and the weeklies – that's where you'll find the clue to the popular imagination – and it's not so far from Dostoyevsky and Kafka as you might suppose. But people like your friend here, with his calm sterilized Hope and Beauty – they're as out of touch as the Pre-Raphaelites really. Of course it's talented work – very. But in the end it's boring.¹²

Berger's artist paints or etches pictures entitled *The Bicyclist*, *The Welder*, *The Swimmers*, *The Ladder* (with a workman on it), *The Waves*. The definite article indicates their monumental status; they are public emblems of honest work by free men. All the while Lavin is working, we learn his thoughts from his diary as shown to us, with a commentary of his own, by the narrator (a figure very like Berger himself). His artistic and intellectual preoccupation is to put his art at the service of a fulfilling free because socialist state and society. There is in this ambition no taint of the deathly doctrine of Socialist Realism. His

¹² Berger (1965) p112.

oldest friend, who is a practising politician in the Socialist Republic of Hungary at this time (it is 1956, a pregnant date), is indicted for treason in one of Soviet socialism's fixed trials. He is shot. Berger, himself at that date a committed Marxist, looks straightly enough at the monstrousness of official state socialism, and keeps up his hopes.

He pins those hopes on painting. Lavin, with barely enough to eat, his upper-class English wife helping out with a pitiful wage from the local library, living in classic studio poverty, buys on credit a vast canvas. Inspired by his experience as a spectator at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, he will paint a mural-sized picture called *The Games*. The 1948 Games happily combined (I remember them plainly; I was 11) the exhilarating relief of its having been peacetime for only three years with the Games themselves, a lovely not really affordable holiday in the midst of continuing shortage and austerity. They also combined this common happiness with a complete absence of money values, of the poisonous histrionics and the derogation of the best sporting values which have so disfigured Olympic Games since, let us say, politics burst in so murderously in Munich in 1972.

Lavin writes in his diary, "The athlete is one of the few individuals under capitalism who demonstrates purely and hopefully the process of civilisation"; he goes on:

In pure athletics it is the individual's intuition that is liberated. In sport the liberation is collective. I have seen games of football in which I have glimpsed all I believe the productive relations among men might be.¹³

Such glimpsed hopefulness is now pretty well extinguished as capital pours itself into all sport as part of its new, colossal colonisation of every aspect of private or civic life. But Lavin's ambition, at a historical moment at which there was still a direct connection between exceptional but still amateur athletes and an international people flushed by a just victory in war and the imminence, as they believed, of a full democracy in peace.

So Lavin notes in his diary that his figures must be lifesize and therefore adequate to a collective legend. He goes back to learn from Poussin,

Where Poussin hangs a garland I shall paint the athlete's number – solid black numerals on white ... where Poussin uses the bough of a tree, I shall use

¹³ Berger (1965) pp121-2.

hurdles ... The faces must be open like vases. This was Michelangelo's secret as much as it is Léger's. It is the energy of their bodies fills their faces with meaning.¹⁴

Then, "The athletes are not acrobats. It is news not entertainment that they bring". Finally,

The painting looks much larger again – like a flag unfurled indoors. It has its idiosyncracies, which I regret. But I can do nothing about them. They are locked now, like everything else in it, in a chain of cause and effect. On the whole it is a strong chain: a good painting. I am happy.¹⁵

After years of neglect, Lavin's luck turns, but in a direction which thwarts all his ambitions for an art of the people. *The Games* is bought by a famous and wealthy collector to hang in his enormous private gallery at his home. Lavin's exhibition sells out. Telling nobody, he set off to Budapest to join in the 1956 insurrection against Stalinist oppression, to do what he can to retrieve the dream of socialism with a human face. He is never heard of again.

The two missing painters compress the end of modernism into their non-existent masterpieces. The émigré Englishman in France has brought off paintings which combine the mysterious English romanticism of Samuel Palmer with the European and nightmare hauntedness of Marc Chagall, in order to commemorate the hideous tragedy of twentieth century politics. The émigré Hungarian in London, painting directly in the tradition of Florentine frescoes and David's great historical genre works, has invented an image with which to capture the noblest hopes of free, equal and productive peoples, united by the promise of happiness held out in sport.

III Painting and the Moral Point of Teaching Art

Breasley's imaginary vision is a tragic one, Janos Lavin's is that of the 'desperate optimist'. Both are narrators of a history which has broken off. Every society, and the great world itself, needs a believable story with which to join past to future by way of the present. Such a story must needs fill in the value-realms which constitute life in each society – give some meaning and content to love of those closest to you, to responsibility for those who are not, bless the work one does and the rewards it brings with some sense of purpose and point,

¹⁴ Berger (1965) pp124-5.

¹⁵ Berger (1965) p141.

sanction one's very death as not instantly forgotten but one's name as living usefully on, situate life and lives in some less acquisitive, more benignant relation to the great globe itself, so that human greed does not consume and destroy nature and therefore life.

We look to our culture to tell us such stories. We look to art to tell us the truth. Just now, the stories we have are failing us. They fail to link together our hungry generations. Hence the murderous strife between capitalism and Islam, even between America and Europe as pictures of the future, and hence also the monstrous breakdown of mutual reciprocity between rich and poor in almost any country in the world, certainly in mine and yours.

The tragic vision of the 20th century framed the gigantic clash of Fascism, Socialism and liberal democracy. It is over. The noble vision of general emancipation and progress has stalled. What is needed now is more like what the American critic Kenneth Burke compressed as "the comic vision", which he defined variously as seeing human misery and cruelty not as tragic but as the consequence either of stupidity or shameless cheating or other forms of error. Comedy itself he defined in a rather quirky way as "the maximum of forensic complexity", by which I take it he meant as much complication of commonplace detail as possible, as much labouring at the ordinariness and weirdness of humankind as one can stand, and in art itself as much working and reworking of the means of expression to hand as it takes squarely to match actuality to desire in the name of truthfulness.

For my purposes today the means of expression are paints, and my immediate preoccupation to reaffirm the *practice* of paint as in itself constituting a long tradition, embodied by its own standards of distinction, by the obedience it enjoins to its own rules, by the achievement it recognises of the goods the practice enshrines. These goods are not matters of opinion nor spaces for the free play of subjectivity. The trouble with the concept of a tradition is that it has been monopolised by the political right; it is however indispensable to any collective effort both to sustain a social narrative dramatising a picture of the common good, and to pursue an art capable of rejecting kitsch and propaganda, and preferring competence in its crafts as well as the beauty of truthfulness as its end.

This is the moral point of teaching art and it is all the sharper at a time when painting is in competition with so very many means of reproduction, from photography via film and digital television to moving holography and computer image generation. In this company it is

damnably hard for painting to keep up. It is so slow, such hard work so pitiless with incompetence, so demanding of attention, stamina, the sensitivities of touch as much if not more than purity of vision; "blood, imagination, intellect, all running together" as the poet W B Yeats, son and brother of fine painters, put it.

At the end of 1996, Bridget Riley, an unmistakably great painter of our time, gave the William Townsend memorial lecture at the Slade School of Art.¹⁶ With her habitual sternness in such matters, she declined to distribute copies of her lecture to those who requested them, saying that the words belonged strictly to the occasion and would travel badly.

The attitude sorts well with the argument. Bridget Riley swept to fame in the 1960s, at a moment when art had been taken up by fashion and a new style – Pop art – had hit the galleries hard with its unexpected ease, clarity and directness. There was no mistaking the ostensible subject of Lichtenstein's paintings. Everybody knew those images – the unreally perfect girls with perfectly formed tears on the sweet curve of their cheeks – and the pleasures of instant recognition were keen after the brutal, slobbering kind of mystery purveyed by a painter like de Kooning.

Fashion in art is not a trivial thing. It represents an effort to catch ephemerality on the wing and find its meaning. It is a tribute paid to innovation. Of course it is liable to snobbery and pretentiousness, to the insincerity of chic and the fraudulence of those for whom anything which presages possibility may be turned into a commodity and sold for cash. But the force of fashion is that it recognises the irresistible power of spontaneity and, looking always for its beauty, is often foolish or wilful. Fashion speaks to desire: the desire that the world be different and actuality be defeated.

Bridget Riley was new all right, and the term coined for her kind of painting – Op art – was instantly right. The Pop artists caught up the imagery of comic books and television and by hugely enlarging it said something, not much, not difficult, but worth saying, about a quite new world of seeing-and-imagining created by the omnipresence of the commercial media. In such a world, the serene depth and glowing jewellery of colour learned from the masters of

¹⁶ Bridget Riley, 'Painting Now', William Townsend memorial lecture, Slade School of Art, 1996, as reported by Michael Bracewell, *Guardian Weekend*, 15 March 1997.

the Renaissance and the Romantic yesterday are replaced by the surface line and reproductive colour dots of Lichtenstein's so-easy-to-read fighter aircraft and lovelorn beauties.

Bridget Riley would have none of it then and none of it now. Op (short for optical) art was well named. She summoned painters back to the vocation succinctly characterised by a no less great contemporary of hers, Patrick Heron, who said, "I have always claimed that it is the prime function of painting to dictate to us what the world looks like".¹⁷

Bridget Riley is, at first glance, as easy to read as the funsters of Pop art. Her pictures are, as they say, so visual: huge canvases of parallel, sinuous lines of colour, uncoiling and undulating down the picture; small, slender, elongated rectangles of other colours trembling in a still tension with one another. The longer one looks, the less certain becomes one's vision. Optical confidence blurs, wavers and is renewed. Colour and form speak certainly of uncertainty, each category changing place with the other. Not that the moral of Bridget Riley's paintings is to teach us of the world's undependable surfaces. She is a moralist but not a moraliser, and her paintings show, rather than teach, truths about the wonder of colour and paint; the loveliness of line; the necessity of order and how hard it is to discover; the science and discipline of seeing; the capacity of a beautiful vision to clear one's gaze and feelings.

In the lecture, entitled 'Painting Now', she said:

If a would-be artist has no form of exercising, no means of practising, no way of acquiring a language with which to make a translation of the text [to be deciphered] then, aside from the tragic and shameful implications of such a situation, this person inevitably starts to look around for some indication of what they should be doing as an artist. And it is at this point that a fundamental confusion arises. What should come from within, now comes from outside. The would-be artist goes searching for Art instead of learning how to be a translator. Expressive forms and methods that once served a specific purpose are treated as a sort of camouflage to hide a fundamental inadequacy. As Stravinsky said in lectures on the Poetics of Music, which he gave at Harvard in the winter of 1939-1940: 'That which is without tradition is plagiarism'. A variant of this problem – with unfortunately a very large following – is a special sort of conformism. But while the previous attitude is rooted in ignorance and innocence, the second is street-wise. It depends on what has already been accepted as 'Art' and is therefore immediately identifiable as 'Art'. Essentially parasitical, it cares little or nothing for the

¹⁷ Patrick Heron, Solid space in Cézanne. *Modern Painters*, vol 9, no 1, 1996.

health of Art and will not invest any effort or take any risks in preserving its traditions. It is a mark of this sort of conformism that it sports a few touches of past radicalism. However, its main objective is deathly. It is to be acceptable, to pass muster, to find a niche, a position in the scene. Radicalism itself is transformed into a fashionable mode of conformism.¹⁸

Fashion is much taken in by plagiarism. Since fashion in our time comes along so very expensively provided for and *everybody* could do with a bit of money, it seems likely that in order to paint and work as Bridget Riley wants good painters to paint and work, such painters will have to refuse fashion according to the customs of their country. They will have to make art into *work*, and work into art, and live accordingly. They will have to have a sharp, even a magpie's eye for the glint of treasure in other painters who will be a help to them, and keep themselves blind to the distractions of those millions of strange shadows flickering on the screens and windows of the world. They will have to deny a lot in order to affirm anything. They will need a tradition to work from, because, as Bridget Riley says, without a tradition to guide you in moments of danger – rather like a rope stretched along a path beside a steep cliff which you may touch from time to time for reassurance – without that you are just a plagiarist. But that same tradition is not the heavy-sounding brigade of the classical canon, come to put down bright youngsters; it is a small octet of ghosts, mostly inaudible, sitting about the corners of the studio just out of vision, ready to give a hand when you're stuck.

Bridget Riley is heir to the modernist tradition; her subject is *seeing*, but seeing, as you might say, without vision. She matches the facts of perception to the universal desire for beautiful colours, and she does so by hand, not by means of reproductive technology. The body's grasp of the brush and touching of the lines of paint is intrinsic to the making of the visible picture.¹⁹

It was R G Collingwood, philosopher and painter, who first brought home to aesthetics the centrality of physical touch to painting and, as he says, it was Cézanne who discovered it first. Until the end of the 19th century everyone had supposed that painting was a visual art.

Then came Cézanne, and began to paint like a blind man. His still-life studies, which enshrine the essence of his genius, are like groups of things that have been groped over with the hands; he uses colour not to reproduce what he

¹⁸ Bridget Riley, 'Painting now' as cited.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Nick Jones for this insight, in his unpublished paper, 'How paintings work' (2006).

sees in looking at them but to express almost in a kind of algebraic notation what in this groping he has felt ... It is the same when Cézanne takes us into the open air. His landscapes have lost almost every trace of visibility. Trees never looked like that; that is how they feel to a man who encounters them with his eyes shut, blundering against them blindly.²⁰

To paint like this returns the painter to his or her earliest experience, and requires that the act of painting gradually reconstitutes and rediscovers the world, slowly feeling its forms until the painting has remade it from the beginning. This is how Braque painted his birds, how Matisse rediscovered the vivid textile patterns he found in Bohain in French Flanders in the 1870s.²¹ It must even be true of so apparently visual a kind of painting as Bridget Riley's. She says herself that, copying a small painting by Seurat, she understood how he "masses colours on his canvas ... gathering them into larger forms, dispensing them ... and this moulding, moving about, shaping ... through these tiny, tiny dots gave me a way which completely broke the hardness of the line".²²

The lesson of that, as it says in *Alice in Wonderland*, is to emphasise that touch is primary, that finding your touch is a whole self-education, and that the hard, loving labour of painting which so absorbs the painter right into itself, is its own infallible inoculation against what Collingwood elsewhere calls "the corruption of consciousness".

Consciousness, Collingwood writes, is thought in its absolutely fundamental and original shape. True consciousness is a clear perception of our feelings; false consciousness is disowning them. We take fright at the idea to which the impression in our consciousness gives rise. We cannot accommodate it or bring it under our cognitive and emotional control. We give up, turn away, or transform it magically into something easier.

This is the corruption of consciousness.²³ It takes place when a painter, estimating a correspondence between the colours and forms of the world and the expressive colours and forms of his or her palette and passions, deliberately suppresses the true correspondence in favour of a false one. It may be prettier, in the cause of sentimentality; it may be uglier, in order to shock or otherwise titillate a smart audience. Either way, it is kitsch or amusement

²⁰ R G Collingwood, *The Principles of Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938, p144.

²¹ As we learn from Hilary Spurling's incomparable biography, vol 1, *The Unknown Matisse*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998.

²² Bridget Riley, *Dialogues on Art*. London: Zwemmer, 1995, p65.

²³ Summarised from R G Collingwood (1938) pp216-7.

art, detached from history and bodily experience like the shining etherealisation of young women's bodies in girlie magazines.

The ultimate cruelty of kitsch is that it sweetens and makes soporific the connection between our moral sympathies and the facts.

IV Coming Home to Painting

The wonderfully eloquent, loweringly dark critic of modernism, Theodor Adorno, concluded while in exile from Vienna on Morningside Heights that art can only fend off the horrors of Fascist, Stalinist or American-Consumerist totalitarianism by transforming romanticism into the aesthetic of asceticism. Such an art refuses access and embodies enigma. Its truths cannot console. It keeps alive the artist's vision only in negation; that is, by darkening its revelation to the point of invisibility. In a grim time, it sheds no light on a better future, and turns away from any sociable accommodation offered to it.

Adorno's makes an exiguous treaty, the more so at a time when it seems so plain that something is going so badly wrong with America. The dominant public narratives – from Hollywood, on American television, in the horrible chat shows, in the masquerade of political assurance stage-managed in Washington – no longer serve. Present is ruptured from past, cannot join itself except by means of consoling mendacities to a believable future. Mostly, my people and yours close their ears to the public narratives, and do the best they can with domestic ones. Who is the artist that he or she can offer no solace in this extremity?

There is no shortage of artistic traitors. As far as the protean powers of a headlong capitalism are concerned, intent upon shaping *all* painting into swiftly disposable commodities, the competitive avant-gardism of modern art lends itself precisely, as I noted, to the rhythms of product innovation and obsolescence, of advertisement and fashion launches, which are at the heart of niche marketing and status competition. Yet painting is of its nature, as I have also suggested, too searching, solitary and painstaking a business to fit easily into these processes. To join its tradition, to learn its patient, deliberate practice is, if you have the gifts, to realise the dream of Ruskin and William Morris, in which the human necessity of hard work is transfigured into fulfilment. When this happens, the painter-worker arrives at Matisse's

wonderful epiphany and is, in Matisse's words, "unable to distinguish between the feeling I have for life and my way of expressing it".²⁴

I am searching for a way of opposing both the treatment of painting as just another commodity and Adorno's view that the only way to avoid this fate is for all arts to be made as difficult as possible. One answer is to be found, I believe, in that noble tradition of American philosophic transcendentalism initiated by Emerson and presently sustained by Stanley Cavell. Its painterly embodiments in the USA are mostly pre-modern – Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer for example – but its contemporaneity is obvious on any Main Street.

Cavell is intent upon discovering in the best of Americanness an affirmation of culture and art which is at once perfectionist and democratic. He quotes from John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, the greatest work of political philosophy in the American canon, where Rawls speaks of Emersonian perfectionism as "directing society to arrange institutions and to define the duties and obligations of individuals so as to maximise the achievements of human excellence, in art, in science, in culture".²⁵ Cavell notes that what writers in this tradition seek to do is "to secularise religious responsibility",²⁶ and quite right too, as well as to accomplish, in his key phrase, "the domestication of culture". He joins hands with the Scottish-American philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, in imagining the good life of the individual as only realisable in our collective effort to make the good society. The good life of both is then the striving to make of art, life, and politics a sufficient work of art, unified by the virtues of which each individual character is capable. Agreeing with Emerson, Cavell names as the triple ingredients of democratic life as it may be brought to the level of artistic achievement: education, character and friendship.

These three social practices, institutions in every culture, are given their particular timbre and chords in the democratic tradition inaugurated by Britain and North America. Its two founding ideas are the two familiar precepts: do to others as you would have others do to you; and, in order to be happy, become the best person you have it in you to become.²⁷

²⁴ Quoted from *Artists on Art*, R Goldwater and M Treves eds. New York: Pantheon Books, 1945, p410.

²⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971, section 50.

²⁶ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: the constitution of Emersonian perfectionism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990, chapter 1, 'Aversive thinking'.

²⁷ I take this way of putting it from V S Naipaul in his boldly titled 'Our universal civilisation', collected in his *The Writer and the World*. New York: Alfred Knopf, 2002, p517.

I need a hero-painter with which to conclude and to demonstrate what it might be like to make such an art in paint, one which will answer, in its peculiar, messy, tactile and practical way of working, to all this highmindedness.

The painter I have in mind is an Englishman and a friend. This partisanship is important, for it is more than time we shook off the exalted detachment of the Kantians and their requirement that the sublime and beautiful be as impersonal as possible. Great art commands us, for sure, but its works become our familiars and, if we are loving and persistent, our friends. I am overwhelmed by the majestic and shocking authority of Turner's mighty painting of 1840, *Slavers throwing overboard the dead and dying* in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Ruskin was given it by his father in 1844, thought it Turner's most immortal work, "based on the purest truth and wrought out of the concentrated knowledge of a life", but found it "too painful to live with" and after 25 years sold it at Christie's. Frightful and beautiful as it is, whenever I see it I greet it as a friend, but at the same time deferentially, awestruck, as one might have greeted Turner himself.

My hero-painter must be sketched in words in order to show what painting still does for us, and must continue to do if the historical narrative of culture is to be repaired. You will find your own examples and, it may be, paint the pictures which provide them.

Len Tabner paints sea- and landscapes. He paints them in water-colour on extremely heavy, thick, porous white paper, specially commissioned in massive one-tonne bolts. He handles the paint like oil (like Turner) in thick blobs of almost-impasto, sometimes strengthened with acrylic and works almost always outdoors, preferably as close to wet undergrowth or waves as he can get. He allows the moisture to soak deep into the paper, diffuse the paint, and permeate all lines, limits and distinctions so that the light of the sky and the reflections on the water become indistinguishably sumptuous and bare, at once austere like the sea – "the unplumb'd, salt estranging sea" – and richly tumultuous like the sea.

He paints on, around and in the estuary of the river Tees in north-east England (where I too was brought up), where his father worked the riverside in his coble – a stout little fishing boat – as dredger, fisherman, river maintenance man, sea coal gatherer.

The Tees was until recently a clamorous shipbuilding river; it was the centre of north-east iron and steel-making; as these industries declined, it was headquarters to two huge chemical and artificial textile plants belonging to ICI. Tabner chronicled the last works of the shipbuilders (those towering hulls, the sparkling welders, the dazzling lights caught in the river), but quite without "desperate optimism". He simply bore his witness to an ending.

To do so his way – and this is my point about postmodernist painting – is not to walk consciously with history. But it is to find in the complex endings-and-beginnings of industrial life what may be made of its shapes and colours so that the painting becomes inhabitable. "Friendship, character, education," says Cavell. The right kind of painting makes of these a little place to live.

It does so out of the least propitious-seeming possibilities. When the Royal Navy found that in Tabner they had a new genius of their business element, they hired him to paint pictures of Trident nuclear submarines, and he did so, not in protest, not in endorsement, but as commemorating the work of man, as celebrating these giant, beautiful black monsters propped in dry dock, the work of men like himself, knowledgeable, local, glad of a job, proud of their skills, self-reliant, free.

Tabner is rooted in that blurred, dramatic, difficult country, where the muddy estuary runs with no distinction into the level sands of little seaside resorts, built for the working classes of six generations, still going on as they always did. Yet he went to sea with the Navy to paint its old struggle with the waters, went to Alaska to paint, without any political emphasis, the necessary oil rigs in temperatures of 60° below, the water freezing the instant it hit the paper so he dashed it on with body colour leaving it later to thaw and soak in the porous textures, making a curiously mottled and thickened effect happily matched to the tundra. In the islands of South Georgia, in Ireland herself, in Japan, in Norway, he painted in the imagery of his homeland, an English Northeasterner, living in a remote old house on a cliff edge of the same red and friable stone on the north-western edge of Europe.

I do not doubt Len Tabner's greatness as a painter. But to you, who do not know and cannot easily see the paintings, I commend him as a living, active embodiment (he is only in his early fifties) of a figure essential to the life of your culture and mine. He is a radical conservationist, holding on to certain values (because he can't help it, these are his deepest

allegiances) which he has wrung out of his history and that of his people, and transmuted into the principles of the art which is his work. The works themselves, of the nature of their arduous composition and of the nature of their achievement enshrine and embody the continuity of a culture. Quite without world-historical pretensions, they rejoin past to present. Unmistakably modern, they offer themselves for our common recognition as pictures of home. In the dreadful din of popular culture and commercial image-vending, the quiet enterprise of home-making remains the source of our best hopes, and its paintings are essential ingredients of the good society.

FRED INGLIS