

# Reflections on Art, Culture and Universalism

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## Disclaimers

Generally, I do not write about aesthetics, the philosophy of art, the visual arts and music. Even literature for its own sake, as a creative act of human sensibility and imagination, rather than as an exemplar in or contributor to the history and dissemination of ideas I am not especially at home in. The reason is simple, if embarrassing. I have, as they say, no ear. In music and the visual arts especially, I lack not only knowledge but feeling and sensibility. I am and remain a man of words. I was trained—or that was the bit of my training that stuck—to see literature as making primarily intellectual contributions: developing a theme, exposing an illusion, providing the case studies on which a science, or at least an understanding, of human life and social tradition and interaction could be built. Literature was insight. ‘Too Much Feeling, Too Little Thought’ was the not inappropriate headline that a *Sydney Morning Herald* sub-editor gave to one of my early reviews. My more imaginative friends who think that literature rests not only on imagination but on imaging and imagining have continued to shake their heads sadly.

For me, Art is neither a mere imitation of reality nor necessarily a celebration of reality, neither an illusion nor a metaphysical homecoming to psychic or cosmic unity. Art is an *exploration* of reality, of human nature and its conflicts, capacities and potentialities, of character and feeling, of sights and sound and their interrelationship, of what is and what can or could be. To say this is not to flee from or to transcend realism or empiricism. The Fido-Fido model of meaning always was and remains a crude perversion of the way in which words, let alone phrases and sentences, convey meaning, information, draw our attention to the worlds within us and around us, enable us to learn what we did not know before. For things and events, like words, are infinitely complex. Their content, the true statements that may be made about them, are inexhaustible; the connections and distinctions of which they form parts are without end. Yet we can learn a language even if we can never completely exhaust its potentialities. We can say

in one word or one sentence more than one thing; characteristically, we express attitudes as well as and often at the same time as striving to present information with emotional neutrality. We enrich concepts, from Oedipus and Hamlet to 'businessmen' or Presbyterians, with a wealth of half-stated implications and allusions; we read past literature and listen to persisting language in the light of subsequent as well as previous exposition and commentary. We enrich meaning over space and over time, just as we can also impoverish it. Those who reject what I would call a realist or empiricist approach to art derive their plausibility, it seems to me, from crude, though at one time historically powerful, models of empiricism that saw it as involved in and aiming at the collection, classification, of brute facts, of atomistic simples, of unambiguous meanings and words. Yet what I love about words is their open-texturedness, their capacity to convey meaning on a scale and with a complexity and richness that go far beyond the Fido-Fido relationship. Words convey, evoke and create, not simple mental pictures, but whole webs of meaning, of interrelated occurrences and potentialities that make up and point to not the one universe, but an infinity of them. That is why language can be and is, as Giambattista Vico saw, a repository of culture—not a mere lexicographical tool. The development of language is the true glory and distinction of *homo sapiens* as both doer and thinker. It is the birth of criticism.

### Rejecting essentialism

The closing years of the twentieth century are a hell of a time to talk about art or, for that matter, about almost anything permanent and important that does not derive its rationale from the acquisition or saving of money. The comforting doctrine that words have an essential meaning, that people, institutions and works of art have an essential character and one overriding interest or function lies in tatters. There is one level at which the rejection of essentialism is perfectly sound. It has to be replaced by the recognition of pluralism—of competing values, interests, functions and of characteristics or trends pulling in different directions. Law does not do one thing; it does many things, often at the expense of each other. The same is true of art as a human activity and of a work of art as a specific whole. There is decorative art and religious art, the informative illustration and the propaganda poster, just as there are stirring military marches, music easy to listen to, triumphal fanfares. We may recognise that a particular work scores well in the special context and purpose for which it was created: it

lightens the heaviness of a room, it matches the curtains, it represents or suggests respectability and solidity. For art that has more than these limited functions or that welds them, fuses them into a wider ambition, my Sydney teacher and later colleague, John Passmore, has used the term 'serious art'.

The distinction between the decorative and the 'serious', the work of art and the piece of propaganda that is effective—consider only Mayakovsky and Brecht—is not always easy. Neither is it always easy to distinguish the novel and therefore striking—consider Futurist art—from the innovative and important. But in recognising multiplicity of intentions, of functions, of strivings and values between would-be artists and within works of art, we are not proclaiming relativism, we are proclaiming pluralism. We retain, as I believe we must, a commitment to objectivity in perception, in valuation, in understanding, even if we can never escape dispute in these matters. We can recognise and reject one of our leading modern tendencies—the quest for immediate fame and recognition through shocking, outraging, striking, making quick and easy impact. Dali, it must be said, was better than that; many of those exhibited today are not.

Today, many have gone far beyond this to the proclamation of extremes of cultural, moral and social relativism, to the insistence that 'authenticity', doing your own thing, is the only stable value and that the character of art, of literature, is not to be found in any given work or text but only through reading, deconstructing or leaving it behind to give it meaning in terms of something outside it: our own subjectivity or the conscious and unconscious furtherance of ideology, including words and images, in attempted domination, in the struggle for power. With that I am not at home, even though it correctly introduces complexity into any understanding of a text or work and can bring out the social context of a work of art. For behind the elevation of subjectivity, of relativism, I find always the elevation of alleged and mostly untrue assertions that claim objectivity for themselves.

### The concept of the artistic

Passmore's article 'The Dreariness of Aesthetics'<sup>1</sup> came as a shock to many, both in his suggestion that aesthetics may not be as 'scientific' as it would like to be and in his recognition that different art forms may invite different criteria of excellence or 'beauty'. That is not my problem. My problem, rather, is that aesthetics vacillates between two poles. At one end it is a form of abstraction that carries with it none of

the specificity and excitement, complexity, of life and being, of objects and spaces, of sound and silence. That we find only in what I will call the real world which includes the world created by artists. (There has, of course, been interesting progress and exploration under the rubric of the cognitive sciences seeking regularities or irregularities in visual perceptions, auditory perceptions and taste, both among individuals and among cultures. It is perhaps more interesting for its own sake than for its contribution to the philosophy of art, though it heightens our appreciation of its structures.) At the other end, aesthetics can be a form of parasitism, presenting us with inept and less interesting versions of what the artist himself or herself has already said more directly, more subtly, with more interest. Textbooks of aesthetics, in short, are dreary precisely because they are not art. When they are illuminating, they are like Wittgenstein's ladder, ready to be kicked away. For the valuable function of art criticism is not to judge works of art but to make us see things that are in those works, actually or potentially, that we might have missed and to point out what is not there. That is not a philosophic enterprise. In that sense, the criticism of music, architecture, of sculpture and of painting, and for that matter, of embroidery, dress design, of wrought-iron work, may have common ground and function.

Making a correct statement, telling the truth, getting it right, may be commendable activities and artists may indulge in them as much as anyone else active in the life of the mind. But getting it right is not sufficient to make art serious or commendable as art, though getting it wrong (if we pay careful attention to what 'it' means here) may be sufficient to disqualify a work of art as serious art or, for that matter, good art. What else is needed, then? Good art has to be interesting and not only at first impact. Personally, I believe it has to make us see, not cry or pant or relax. Passmore has maintained, I think rightly, that good serious art is always imaginative, whereas bad serious art is usually banal or gimmicky or exhibits some other non-imaginative characteristics. It spouts propaganda, it moralises, it pigeon-holes, it stereotypes. To a greater extent than artists would like to confess, they seek impact and reputation in the way dress designers do, by creating new fashions or latching on to emerging ones. Fashion which is nothing but servility to the immediate present is an enemy of art. Passmore, emphasising all this, nevertheless finds himself unable to argue that Beauty is Truth and Truth Beauty. For only in the case of some serious representational art can Passmore find a sense in which serious art makes us aware of truths, just as in some limited cases art

makes us aware of the values of moral education. Here, I would argue, he is wrong: too ready to treat the moral and the aesthetic as distinct and self-contained 'truths' (as an older generation would have said) different from empirical truths. There is a line, an artistically important line, between imagination, which always involves insight, and fantasy, which need not. If there are links between Beauty, Truth and Goodness, then the principal home of Truth and Goodness, Passmore argues, is outside the arts, while the principal home of Beauty is often claimed to be inside serious art and to constitute its defining characteristic. (Of course, it might be better to abandon the concepts of Beauty, Truth and Goodness as substantives and to speak of things as beautiful, true or good.) Any admirer of great nineteenth-century Russian literature would find Passmore's a most puzzling statement indeed. Truth in art and morals, even in *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*—His Truth is marching on—is not a mere cover for sanctimoniousness. Nor is it in Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. There are modern critics who prefer, as Passmore stresses, some phrases like formal values to Beauty. But the problem goes deeper than that. Is it at all natural in the case of much serious art that one is ready to admit as being such, to speak of it as beautiful? The powerful vitality, says Passmore, of Michelangelo's *Captives* and Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* does not immediately invite us to speak of these works as beautiful; neither is T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* precisely a beautiful poem. Nor is Iago a beautiful person. Is the depiction of Iago, however, beautiful in precisely the sense in which we speak of artistic work as beautiful, powerful, compelling, vital, truthful and convincing? There are, on the other hand, beautiful landscapes, beautiful faces, beautiful configurations and the paintings of these are all too often strikingly banal and uninteresting. All that this proves is that beautiful, too, is a complex word and concept, with its banal usages and its subtle ones. The central and defining characteristic of Art, Passmore concludes, is neither Truth nor Beauty, but Imagination, though one might well respond that imagination is itself the discovery of new truths that are not merely uncontrolled, subjective fantasies.

Imagination is not fantasy. Writing science fiction is not itself a sufficient guarantee that one will create great literature. Painting flowers that do not exist is not a recipe for exciting pictorial art; Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* is—for reasons extraneous to the work itself—an intriguing, problematic poem, but not a great one. It is clever, clever with words, clever in construction, but it needs J. L. Lowes's *The Road to Xanadu* to become really interesting. The late Isaac

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Asimov has often been regarded as the doyen of science fiction writing, creating a whole language and set of parameters within which it moves, making the future to many people seem interesting and credible. Yet the most striking thing about his Foundation trilogy is its banality: the banality of its philosophy of history, of its distinction between the natural and the social sciences, of its attempt to give an account of the varieties of human motivation and human character. Even its mutant, the Mule, may throw Seldon's Plan out of joint, but neither the Mule nor Asimov would throw any working mind out of gear with an unsuspected novelty or a real leap of imagination. George Orwell's *1984*, on the other hand, does capture our imagination and bears witness to Orwell's by not portraying a brave new world or by leaping into the wholly other. Its strength on the contrary, like the more subtle but much lower appeal of *Dr Who* in the earlier episodes, lies in its national and temporal specificity. Horror can be British and in one sense very banal, it can reek of perfectly familiar wartime drabness, bureaucracy and cabbage, while transcending them in ruthlessness.

I have stressed in the foregoing pluralism as opposed to relativism and I shall leave it to others to consider the other side of the coin: the clarity, integrity and harmony that many classical critics, from Aquinas to James Joyce (or Stephen Dedalus), require of the work of art. The concepts are difficult, yet not just mistaken or inappropriate. Let me here rather mention one other point suggested to me—no doubt much more subtly—by the late Sam Goldberg. A great work of art—a play of Shakespeare's, for instance—may derive much of its impact from a variety of features: poetic feeling, richness and creativity in language, subtlety in the perception of character, strength in the development of plot, political and not only psychological insight, dramatic feel. These could be treated as signs of a first-class writer or mind but do not readily lend themselves to the scientific model of the exploration of a theme.

### Beauty, truth and art

Is there a sense in which one can use the word beautiful, not just to mean one likes it, not on a mere whim, but deeply and profoundly, being content *to be judged as a person* by one's liking?

There used to be a great philosophical discussion regarding the commensurability or incommensurability of beautifuls. Of course, I could laugh with the best of them at Harold Stewart's telling analysis

in ARNA of Neville Cardus' penchant for talking about music in terms of cricket and cricket in terms of music: Stravinsky's last run to the wicket; Bradman's coda. But why is it that the best pieces of musical criticism are not simply played on the piano, except as entertainment, as was done by Bracket and Hinge? Art histories and even art criticism that deal with painting may be illustrated, but they are not painted, even though there is music and there are pictures that do make telling points about other music and other pictures, most frequently by way of parody but not exclusively so. Personally, I believe that more could be done along these lines, perhaps more as a sally than as a sustained work. I wish we had more such sallies.

Of course, Dali and Picasso, modernism and post-modernism, produced artistically and intellectually self-conscious paintings, that involved more than mere reactions against schools, that incorporated comments. How far can such comment be structured, worked out, to make connected points in the manner we are accustomed to with words? Have artists done this more than I know? Or would they be able to do it if they tried harder? Much of the history of their discipline, if I may call it that, was devoted to pictorial representation—a form of creative endeavour not to be sneezed at any more than we have any business sneezing at narrative history. Narratives do not write themselves. Neither do portraits paint themselves. Much recent endeavour in the Arts, indeed, going back to James Joyce and Marcel Proust, involves a particular form of discovery and illumination which we have come to call a paradigm shift. It is not the imposition of new subjectivities on old realities, it is the discovery of new aspects of the material analogous to the Impressionist discovery or at least conscious bringing to the foreground of light.

Human beings in Joyce and Proust and their attitudes and recollections turn out to be far more complex, far less unitary and convention-bound than we had thought. They operate at many levels; they remember and misremember. But let us also say that there is no great discovery that cannot be trivialised, that cannot become the stuff of popular fiction, advertising copy and decorative art. The futurists may have been fated to that end. Archipenko, Modigliani and Braque were greater than that. So was Paul Klee who has nevertheless inspired a whole style of merely clever cartoons. Do we have in the non-verbal arts that fascinating phenomenon that we get in literature—that additional content of interpretation and theory that can be poured into the actual work and its character in the way that we have poured them into *Oedipus Rex*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*? Plays that cannot only be

translated into another culture, as Kurosawa had done with *King Lear*, but that consistently attract great but varied interpretations, reinterpretations, and inspire further plays that are not simply banal copies like the plaster casts of Michelangelo's *David*.

### On art as contemplation

Aquinas and the young Stephen Dedalus saw the superiority of the artistic sensibility over other human drives and desires in the fact that it was satisfied with contemplation: it did not of itself involve the desire to have. Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Idea* developed and thus discredited this view. Will was particular, divisive, characterised by narrowness of vision, egoism, competition rather than emulation. Art, above all music for Schopenhauer, because of its very non-verbalisation, was universal. It surmounted the particular human being and his or her particularity: it offered, strove toward and achieved universality.

Before we dismiss this as typically Continental metaphysics, let us remember that David Hume had some intimation of the extent to which ethics and culture involve the capacity to universalise, limited as it is. Naturally, by virtue of our constitution, he believed, we are capable of seeing others as ourselves once more, of wincing when they are struck, of weeping when they cry, for no other reason but empathy. Passmore has emphasised that serious art involves above all imagination and he remains sceptical of its role in what is often called moral education—though much of his own writing on what culture means to him suggests the opposite. At least a central and important part of the imagination for which we value art lies precisely, it seems to me, in its capacity to heighten our perceptiveness, to broaden our response, to make us see more people as ourselves once more or to recognise evil for what it is: dangerous, destructive and ineradicable. Good art makes us see more deeply and in that it has normally in its written form and in the outstanding portrait, great superiority over the television documentary, the film and the photography, no matter how well done. Anglo-Saxon moral theory has long focused on action and consequences, on an Aristotelian conception of goods. The Platonic traditions of the Eastern Orthodox Church have concentrated much more on Beauty and Ugliness of character, on the extent to which actions arise out of or produce a moral state in the person. Yuri Zhivago and those he loved would have been dead if it were not for the unprincipled practicality of Komarovski. But for Zhivago and Pasternak



and for many Russians, Komarovski has an essence: it is that of being a scoundrel and everything he does and all those who associated with him are tainted by it. It is a different conception of the moral life, more frequently found in serious literature than in serious modern philosophy.

### The war for art

The war for art—on behalf of artistic seriousness, artistic integrity, artistic achievement—has been fought and has to be fought on constantly shifting fronts. Not only the locale of the battle but the character of the enemy, the incursions that have to be repelled, the assumptions that have to be rejected, keep changing. Since definition is a matter of distinction, our conception of art and of the artist's task keep changing. There is no high road to art signposted all the way; there is no utopia where art flourishes and takes possession of all human souls. If it did, it would become non-art: dreary, unproblematic, uninteresting. That is why would-be utopias—both in literature and in life—have put artists and everyone else in uniform, have relied on uniformity instead of variety, harmony in place of pluralism.

If art is connected, as I believe it is, with freedom and universality then freedom requires plurality of attitudes, desires, institutions and traditions that cannot be brought to a common market, that cannot be expressed in a common currency. That is why money as a universal denominator is a fundamental enemy to art, and why utilitarians are forced, reluctantly—wriggling all the way, as it were—to say that push-pin is as good as poetry, especially if the people like it.

Poetry, Matthew Arnold tells us, is a criticism of life. Percy Bysshe Shelley, a less cautious and more muddled thinker, insists that poetry is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge. It is that which comprehends all science and that to which all science must be referred. It is, at the same time, the root and blossom of all other systems of thought. It is that from which all springs and which adorns all. But what, as Passmore has complained, are we to make of the comment by Frank Kermode, an able, serious and intelligent critic, when he refers to Yeats' *Byzantium*: 'To speak humanly of becoming and knowing is the task of pure being'? As Passmore puts it, here even the reader inoculated by much study of bad philosophy calls a halt. Yet Matthew Arnold is saying something important about poetry and more generally art. It is an exploration and a criticism of life.

## Art and pluralism

Pluralism complicates any attempted definition, evocation or description of what constitutes art, not only by emphasising the variety of traditions, beliefs and desires that different persons and societies have, and that colour, not just their conception of art, but the point and interest of creativity and imagination. Any serious study of ethics, of what is involved in both decent conduct and the moral life, requires a recognition of value pluralism, not just moral conflict between people and moralities, but conflict between the values espoused in one morality and the need to find a necessarily unstable balance between such values or, at least, to take each of them into account. The one institution, the one tradition, the one person, cannot take its departure from a *summum bonum*, or a single defining criterion of good. It would be forced into a recognition that it values different and competing character traits, strivings, satisfactions and social desires. Law must have certainty and flexibility; the universal rules and adaptations to the particular case; objective standards and the recognition of social and subjective contexts that can make these standards seem not wholly apposite. Morality is in this respect like law. So is the appraisal of human life that may be involved in literary endeavour. A traditional novel is an experiment, exploring the ramifications of conflict and balances in human life. The concrete recognition of these complexities in the moral life is the distinction between a Dostoevsky and a Chernachevsky, between the earlier Tolstoy and the later Tolstoy, between Jane Austen and Ilya Erenburg. Just as we cannot satisfy all desires at once, so we cannot escape the conflict between virtues and their capacity for becoming vices when pushed beyond certain points. This recognition was the strength of the old moral psychology, much of it based in religion. Just as there is no handbook for applying moral truths and precepts, so there is no handbook for creating Art.

## Art and 'multiculturalism'

In recent years, there has been much stress on cultural and historical associations—on ethnicities (like those of the Welsh and the Burgundians), on tribal groups, their cults and mysteries, and on respect for the secrets contained in their art. There has been similar stress on multiculturalism, on the right of groups in a nation-state to maintain the languages and cultures with which they came to that state. Not only do they have such right but they enrich the society and

the state in which they exercise it. They give us the opportunity to extend and broaden our understanding of humanity and our sympathy for all that is human. But what we demand of ourselves we should also demand of them, at least as they become settled and not overwhelmed by the fear of prejudice and the insecurity of migration or an earlier despised status. We do not universalise the contribution made by Homer and Confucius or even by the Greek people and the Chinese people by learning to eat badly made spanakopita with tomato ketchup, to like honeyed prawns or disastrously crude springrolls. Care is one of the contributions that both civilisations have made and we would do well to absorb that with their food, or the Spanish sense of dignity with their music.

Multiculturalism to be serious involves the recognition that different cultural traditions highlight and examine with more knowledge and sensitivity particular aspects of human capacity and human experience. They broaden our knowledge, our sensitivity, our imagination. They help to make us better people. They do not do so if they simply substitute one chauvinism for another. The ideal we work toward is that of making all human beings multicultural, of having them appreciate and respect for its virtues more than one nation, one language, history and tradition—more than one 'culture'. This assumes that behind the 'cultures' of the anthropologist, there lies a universal culture. Let me, in conclusion, say something about that.

Culture, as I have written elsewhere, is not, as it is often taken to be, a random, accidental collection of arts and accomplishments. It is not—despite much opinion to the contrary—the expression of a wholly distinct national genius, though different nations may cultivate different talents. Culture above all is not bounded by race and place, incommunicable to those who do not share your experience. The same is true of Art. It is not a principle of division, but a basis for communication, responsiveness, cross-cultural admiration and emulation. It requires, let it be said frankly, intelligence and education rather than self-aggrandizement and a demotic egalitarianism. It may be culturally enriching; it is not politically serviceable in a society reluctant to draw distinctions.

Some of you will remember James McAuley's 'Jindyworo-baksheesh':

By the waters of Babylon  
I heard a Public Works official say:  
'A culture that is truly Babylonian  
Has been ordered for delivery today'.

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By the waters of Babylon  
A quiet noise of subsidies in motion.  
'To a bald or mangy surface we apply  
Our sovereign art-provoking lotion'.

By the waters of Babylon I heard  
That art was for the people; but they meant  
That art should sweeten to the people's mouth  
The droppings from the perch of government.

Another fine poet, the American Archibald MacLeish, in his 'Invocation to the Social Muse', uttered a parallel warning: Poets are whores, Fräulein. They sleep with stragglers from both camps and are forbidden by the rules to mix in the manoeuvres of either. It is not fashionable these days, nor was it fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s, to decry literature that was *engagé*. Yet serious literature, even if it tries to be *engagé*, somehow fails precisely in its political message. Are Brecht's plays and some of his poems serious literature? I should think not. Culture, in short, is the ability to transcend one's situation, one's place and time, one's language and traditions. It is no accident that so many of the greatest makers and shapers of the cultures on which nations pride themselves were marginal men or women, of mixed race or nationalities, of recent immigrant background, or of socially ambiguous position. Being on the margins can be soul-destroying, but it can also sharpen perception, increase ambition, widen imagination. The artist is *déclassé*. There are exceptions, some very distinguished exceptions indeed, but they do not constitute a movement or a trend.

Culture rests on the motto that nothing human is alien to me; it thrives on admiration for, and emulation of, the most penetrating and sensitive that has been thought and said, felt and done, anywhere. It finds that in Europe *and* in Asia, in Israel *and* in Babylon. Culture promotes intellectual development and moral understanding, it enriches lives and minds, through knowledge, criticism, imagination and sensibility. It judges with compassion but also with precision. It recognises complexity without losing a sense of order and direction; it grasps the reality, the power and intensity, of evil and irrationality without helplessly surrendering before them, or denying that they are properly called evil or irrational. It has room for both Ariel and Caliban, and knows that human beings are both and neither. Culture thrives not on the joyful, but passive, surrender to nature, or the 'people' or the sense of nationhood, but on asphalt and overcrowding, on creative tensions between suffering and hope, pride and despair,

anxiety and ambition, nationalism and internationalism; it rests, like revolution, on reality-centred but unsatisfied longings, on a delicate balance between denial and affirmation, criticism of, and respect for, the traditions and society in which the cultured person lives. Is it perverse to say the same of art? The contexts and conditions of culture and of art are neither easily characterised nor capable, by themselves, of guaranteeing or even producing culture and Art themselves. It appears in the most surprising and unexpected times and places and we see the conditions that helped to produce it, for the most part, only with hindsight. For culture and Art are not only firmly international in their nature and effects, they make people and peoples 'transcend' themselves and their seemingly narrow, time- and space-bound, capacities. Culture and Art draw them, or are constituted by their being drawn, into a continuing world-wide Republic of Art and Letters, knowledge and imagination; this gives them a universal, both cosmic and human, dimension that transcends, without denying, both their historical period and their geographical location.

Art, in short, is not to be set over and against culture—what is now called high culture—it is part of it.

#### Note

- 1 J. A. Passmore, 'The Dreariness of Aesthetics', *Aesthetics and Language*, ed. William Elton, Oxford, 1954, pp.36-55.