A NEOCLASSICAL DILEMMA IN
SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS'S
REFLECTIONS ON ART

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I

Most commentators on Sir Joshua Reynolds's critical writings have grappled with the argumentative inconsistency of his *Discourses on Art*, which jars with his proclaimed intention 'to reduce the idea of beauty to general principles' and to comment 'on the Theory of Art'. The systemic instability of Reynolds's 'theory' was already noted by his early readers, even by those who did not share the hostility towards his philosophical and political premises which is inherent in Blake's infamous *ad hominem* attack. Ruskin, for instance, though he greatly admired Reynolds and his work, dismissed the *Discourses* as 'not well arranged, and not very recherché or original', and he suggested Fuseli instead as an authority, whom he considered to be 'worth a great deal more' and to provide—as opposed to Reynolds—a 'philosophy of the fine arts'. Twentieth-century critics became preoccupied with the problem of Reynolds's incoherency to the extent that the virtues of unity and systemic closure epitomized by Hegel's *Ästhetik* were elevated to touchstones for the canonization of art criticism. Ellis K. Waterhouse expressed this viewpoint when he declared that the *Discourses* would be greatly enjoyed for their eloquence, but would disappoint those who 'hope to discover a philosophical system from them'. The implication was that Reynolds was first and foremost a brilliant painter who also happened to reflect articulately upon theoretical issues, but who could not be regarded as a fully fledged philosopher of art.

As a result, there has been a tendency in Reynolds scholarship until quite recently to prove the importance of the *Discourses* for the shaping of eighteenth-

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1 Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1959; repr. 1975), pp. 53 and 175 (subsequent references to the *Discourses* refer to this edition and will be included parenthetically in the text).
century aesthetics by more or less toning down their incoherencies. Some critics argued that if one considers the varied circumstances of their presentation and publication, they do in fact reveal at least a set of key aesthetic issues which Reynolds treats consistently. Others maintained that while the Discourses lack unity, they are not defined by sharp breaks or paradoxes but by a steadily evolving argument (usually described in terms of a dialectic) which sets out from neoclassical premises to eventually usher in the 'dawn' of romanticism, opening the 'door', in Bate's words, 'to what is best and most desirable in the romantic theory of the imagination'.

The recent change in the critical climate has rendered suspect the unity of neoclassical aesthetics and has furthered a critical outlook which does not per se deem incoherency a disqualifying error for a philosopher of art. Thus Lawrence Lipking has described Reynolds's Discourses 'as the most remarkable of all his remarkable achievements' despite the contradictions, and has demonstrated that the preoccupation with unity embraced by traditional Reynolds scholarship works 'at the cost of sacrificing most of Reynolds' complications'.


Lawrence Lipking, The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1970), pp. 169, 185. Lipking shows that the incoherency of Reynolds's Discourses cannot fully be accounted for by the fact that they were delivered to student audiences of various levels of proficiency, and he demonstrates the dangers of positing dialectical development. His study remains one of the best-written and elucidating general introductions to the Discourses and their contexts. More recently, Reynolds's thought has been described as influenced by the proliferating discursive formations of his cultural situation. See John Barrell's exploration of Reynolds's sociopolitical situation in his The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1980); Richard Wendorf's discussion of Reynolds's paintings in relation to aristocratic ideology, The Painter in Society (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1996); Naomi Schor's examination of Reynolds's
argument, in what follows, will run along similar lines: I intend to refine (rather than to suppress) the incoherencies in Reynolds’s argumentation by focusing on a particular level of ambivalence which I see throughout his critical writings and which I take to stem from his difficulty in locating himself in a univocal position within the discursive formations related to the concepts of ‘Custom’ and of ‘General Nature’. I will therefore re-examine the ambivalences in Reynolds’s argumentation with regard to the eighteenth-century discourses of universality and contingency.

The period during which Reynolds delivered his Discourses (1769–1790) saw dramatic changes in various fields of eighteenth-century culture, and in particular a thoroughgoing transformation of epistemological and aesthetic concepts. Most critics appear to agree that these changes did not arise from a unified critical climate of neoclassicism through a sudden phase of contradiction (let alone a coherent romanticist revolt) to the telos of a turn-of-the-century resolution of antitheses. Wellek’s description of neoclassical thought as marked by gradual changes in emphasis during which ‘individual issues concealed in the current theory were brought out into the open [and] this or that position [was pushed] to its logical or illogical extreme’, astutely captures the disunity of the epoch, though Wellek does not sufficiently highlight the fact that even by the time Reynolds began his lectures, the loose conglomerate of contemporary critical standpoints had already become heterogeneous to the point of obvious contradiction, to the extent that the so-called neoclassical positions often differed from one another more than they diverged from later romanticist stances. While some of the opposing tendencies may have been resolved towards the close of the century, the conflict between ‘General Nature’ and ‘Custom’ was not. Instead, the effects of these diverging and fundamentally incommensurable discursive formations remained a constant force at work under the ambivalent surface of late-eighteenth-century positions.

The more dominant side of the coin was the tendency to think in terms of ‘Nature’ (with a capital N), which had not changed much since the criticism of Thomas Rymer, Dryden, or Pope. At the risk of simplification, it can be described as furthering non-relational, Cartesian views of history, universalist notions of

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Culture, and Neoplatonic concepts of the human mind. Within this epistemological framework, beauty and truth were seen as stable, subject-independent entities, mediated by neither historical nor cultural developments; their foundation was considered to be an invariable and single Nature—or its various signatures (of which the 1771 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* lists no less than eight), such as God, the universe, rationality, science, etc.

Diametrically opposed to the mainstream belief in ‘General Nature’ is a counter-current which made itself felt from the late seventeenth century and which fostered an interest in ‘Custom’, cultural variety, and individual experience. It prepared the ground for aesthetic and epistemological viewpoints which drew attention to the contingencies of human existence and considered cultural, historical, or mind-dependent factors to be constitutive in the acquisition of knowledge and the perception of beauty. The emergence of this tendency, to say the least, complicated art criticism, for it pitted relative against essential beauty in concepts of art which had previously rested on the safe ground of the absolute. It led to tensions between ‘General Nature’ and ‘Custom’, between non-relational and relational concepts of beauty and truth.8

The dilemma critics were facing now was that they had entered a slippery intermediate stage in which they could not, as it were, ‘unthink’ relationality and return to a straight mid-seventeenth-century universalism, but at the same time had not yet reached a position from which a thoroughly relational approach was thinkable. As a consequence of this interstitial position, they were engaged in a constant rearguard action against the relativist dynamics which the emergence of the tendency to think in terms of ‘Custom’ had set loose. In this respect, mid-eighteenth-century critics resembled Benjamin’s Angel of History: while the awakening historical sense pushed them towards a disquieting stage of indeterminate values, their gaze remained nostalgically fixed on a paradisiacal universal ground. Consequently, their critical enterprise tended to be driven by the effort to contain within the firm hold of ‘General Nature’ the relational element permeating their aesthetic and philosophical systems.

Reynolds’s aesthetics was characterized by the intensified clash of these two discursive tendencies, and, at various points in his argumentation, his rearguard action against relational thinking breaks down. There are no moncausal explanations for this characteristic aspect of Reynolds’s writings, yet at a certain

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level it is facilitated by the logic of his method: while Reynolds was extremely well-read in the philosophy and art criticism of his time, his attempt towards an overall synthesis seems rather half-hearted. He tends to formulate his aesthetics more as an artist than a philosopher, proceeding in an aphoristic, Montaignesque manner rather than in system-oriented moves, and consequently he neglects the self-reflexive monitoring of argumentative closure which is crucial to systemic coherency. It may be partly a result of this methodological blind spot that Reynolds is able to pursue—with notable insight and rigour—the most radical implications inherent in both the discourses of contingency and universality, all the way to their logical extremes. In the course of this process, Reynolds pushes the traditional neoclassical stances to their limits and to virtual incommensurability: he endeavours to combine a thorough Neoplatonism with radical empiricism, a universalist with a historicist view of art, and an aesthetics focused on objective beauty with notions of diversified observer response.

Reynolds's attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable must fail: he stretches his aesthetic 'system' beyond breaking point, and consequently his argument oscillates between the most radical applications of each tendency, counterpoising near-relativist statements with affirmations of a rock-bottom universalism. To be sure, to resolve this tension completely would presuppose a clear preference for one of the opposing discourses: it would mean either embarking on the road towards historicism (with Nietzsche as its relativist culmination), or retreating more fully into a complete repression of the historical sense (characteristic of, among others, Blake's romanticism). Reynolds, of course, could not make such a clear choice, since either way would have propelled him outside the perimeters of his age. Yet the interesting aspect of his aesthetics is that he travels both roads to a considerable extent and—by trying to coalesce incommensurable modes of thinking into systemic closure—holds up a magnifying glass to this particular

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9 Hilles has noted the impressiveness of Reynolds's library and the vast amount of philosophical sources with which he was acquainted (The Literary Career of Sir Joshua Reynolds [Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1936], ch. VII).

10 In this respect Reynolds differs from, for example, David Hume. Both Hume and Reynolds can be said to belong to the essay tradition dominant during the eighteenth century, but Hume is clearly more system-oriented. To be sure, he also grapples with the nature/custom conflict, as he has developed a theory of causation which takes the concept of 'Custom' far enough to destabilize the eighteenth-century discourse of 'General Nature'. Yet Hume remains constantly self-reflexive concerning the coherency of his system: in one of the most gloomy passages of his Treatise, he acknowledges the 'dangerous dilemma' towards which his theory drifts and discusses the disappointment 'when we learn that [causal connection] lies merely in ourselves [and] is acquire d by custom' (A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge [1888; repr., ed. P. H. Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1978], pp. 266-267). Because of his heightened systemic self-monitoring, Hume is more successful in his rearguard action against the discourse of 'Custom' than Reynolds and never seriously contradicts his firm belief in 'a general course of nature in human actions, as well as in the operations of the sun and the climate' (ibid., pp. 402-403).
problem of the eighteenth-century aesthetic debate and offers an enhanced image of the conflict between the universal and the contingent.

II

Reynolds's paradoxical position astride two ways of worldmaking manifests itself in the manner he structures most of his key concepts. His concept of Nature, for instance, is a rather rickety construction based on the combination of a Neoplatonic epistemological framework with empiricist vectors.\[1\] It sets out from the Neoplatonic dualism of a tangible temporal and defective 'individual nature' (42) versus an ideal invariable and perfect 'general nature' (73). The primary task of the artist, accordingly, is to 'correct' (44) the imperfect surfaces of 'individual nature' towards 'the perfect state of nature, which the Artist calls the Ideal Beauty' (44–5). Reynolds's 'Ideal Beauty' or 'central form' (45) seems to be a subject-independent, timeless entity, and it seems to approximate the concept of the Platonic idea. Yet the road to attain perfection is out-and-out empiricist: the artist, Reynolds points out, must approach it inductively with an 'eye long used to the contemplation and comparison of' forms within individual nature (44). In a Neoplatonic manner of speaking, he must 'remove a veil, with which the fashion of times has thought proper to cover [the truth of things]' (49), but the customary veil can only be lifted by strictly empirical means: questioning the Neoplatonic myths of divine or introvertive inspiration, Reynolds insists that the essence of beauty is 'not to be sought in the heavens, but upon the earth' (44) and that '[t]he greatest natural genius cannot subsist on its own stock. . . . Nothing can come of nothing' (99). Genius, according to Reynolds, includes first and foremost an ability which has been the major preoccupation of the empirical sciences: the ability to observe.

Reynolds's concept of nature already shows the heightened tension between the 'General Nature' and 'Custom' paradigms. He confronts a Neoplatonist

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framework with the focus on the contingencies of human existence which the empiricist tradition conveys, and opens it to a mode of thinking influenced by Locke’s challenge of the universal. In other words, Reynolds combines his universalist stance with arguments which provide the basis for a potential nominalism, implying that our foundations for beauty and truth are perspectival constructions rather than Platonic entities with a reality of their own. The combination of Neoplatonism and empiricism, of course, does not as such lead to systemic instability. In Hutcheson’s Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue of 1725, for instance, the paradoxical positions of Shaftesbury and Locke are merged into a more or less stable system. Contrary to Reynolds, Hutcheson domesticates Locke’s relativist potential and thus succeeds in making it cohere with Shaftesbury’s Neoplatonic outlook. The difference is that Reynolds, as I will argue in more depth in the following, exposes his Neoplatonic framework to an empiricism the relativist dynamics of which are too fully realized to be smoothly integrated.

III

One major area of conflict between appeals to ‘General Nature’ and ‘Custom’ appears in the Discourses wherever Reynolds combines a traditional objectivist aesthetics with quite modern notions of observer response. On the one hand, Reynolds seems to concur with Burke’s belief that beauty is ‘some quality in bodies, acting mechanically upon the human mind’, a pre-interpretive entity within ‘General Nature’ which the artist seeks to parallel in a process of reproduction. Accordingly, Reynolds argues that the ‘value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it’ (57) and that it depends on the artwork’s interior structure, on ‘that union and harmony between all the component parts’ (85). That is to say, he seems to conceive of value as being intrinsic to the artefact, which renders the observer’s response as irrelevant to the beauty of a painting as the beholder’s gaze to the glamour of an oyster’s pearl. Whenever Reynolds conducts his argument from this viewpoint, his focus lies on the creative process, and he urges his students to concentrate on the intrinsic harmony of the artwork rather than the audience’s pleasure and thus to resist the temptation ‘of pleasing indiscriminately [a] mixed multitude of people’ (90). This

12 See Locke’s suggestion that such concepts as ‘general’ or ‘universal’ ‘are the Inventions and Creatures of the Understanding’, and his assertion that complex ideas—because they are projections rather than essential qualities—‘are often, in several Men, different’ (Locke’s emphasis; An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. Peter H. Nidditch [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], III, iii, pp. 11, 14).


Objective aesthetics also makes itself felt in Reynolds' visualization of art history as a quest in which artists present and past attempt at approximating the ideal. In the course of this teleological pageant, the excavation of intrinsic beauty is 'carried to perfection' from 'its infant state' (95) in a united effort, in which, Reynolds argues, '[o]ur predecessors have laboured for our advantage, we labour for our successors' (266).

While this line of argument remains a central aspect of Reynolds's aesthetics, it is subverted by a number of passages in the Discourses in which he focuses on the observer and defines the artwork in terms of its effect: from this point of view it is now 'the mental pleasure produced by [the artwork]' (57) which becomes the centre of attention: the aesthetic experience is constituted by the 'spectator' who 'feel[s] the result in his bosom' (59) of Michelangelo's or Homer's 'effect' (83).

The extent of Reynolds's acknowledgement of spectator response manifests itself in his revaluation of Gainsborough. Although he takes Gainsborough's method to violate most of the formal demands outlined in the Discourses, he cannot help being affected by his art. Thus he concedes that despite the 'chaos', the 'uncouth and shapeless appearance' ('defects', 'dead colour', 'odd scratches') in Gainsborough's paintings, he can 'hardly refuse acknowledging the full effect [s]' which ('by a kind of magick, at a certain distance' and with 'the imagination supp[ying] the rest') 'remind the spectator of the original' and induce Reynolds, despite himself, to recognize Gainsborough's genius (257ff.). This enactment of diversified observer response is substantiated by Reynolds's theoretical point that the viewer's active realization of the artwork is a central premise of the aesthetic experience:

Many . . . deviations from nature arise from the necessity which there is, . . . that the full effect may come home to the spectator. . . . The great end of all those arts is, to make an impression on the imagination and the feeling. . . . I think therefore the true test of all the arts, is not solely whether the production is a true copy of nature, but whether it answers the end of art, which is to produce a pleasing effect upon the mind. (239ff.)

So far, Reynolds's position resonates with the general mid-eighteenth-century shift of critical interest to the reaction of the audience, which was induced by a disappointment with rule-based criticism and led to the psychological aesthetics Addison outlined in the Tatler. Yet at a certain level, Reynolds's preoccupation with the artwork's effect seems to be more radical in its contextualist implications

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15 See also Amal Asfour and Paul Williamson, 'Splendid Impositions: Gainsborough, Berkeley, Hume', Eighteenth-Century Studies, vol. 31, no. 4 (Summer 1998), pp. 412ff., who read Reynolds's re-evaluation of Gainsborough in terms of Berkeley's insistence that visual information needs to be interpreted from a perspectival point. This argument, I think, is in line with my own interpretation of the passage, and I agree with the authors' criticism of Barrell's suggestion that it demonstrates Reynolds's belief in uniformity of response (cf. Barrell, Political Theory of Painting, p. 120).
than the still, on the whole, tacit observer-response leanings of his contemporaries: Reynolds conceptualizes the aesthetic object as a function of the artwork and the viewer's subjective associations, and even of those associations which are entirely external to the artefact. Thus he holds the reason why antique ornaments are generally considered more beautiful than others to lie first and foremost in the fact that the observer associates with them the Greek and Roman 'fountains from whence have flowed all kinds of excellence' (138). He illustrates this phenomenon with an even more extreme example: 'very ordinary pictures acquired something of the air and effect of the works of Vandyck' simply because their painters used materials typical of Vandyck. As a result their pictures appeared 'at first sight to be better pictures than they really were; they appeared so, however, to those only who had the means of making this association; and when made, it was irresistible' (138–9). Crucially, when Reynolds stresses the fact that association depends on the observer's 'means', he challenges the belief in uniformity of response inherent in eighteenth-century psychological criticism, and describes the aesthetic object as a function of the observer's idiosyncratic horizon of expectations.

The idea that mediocre artworks can have a beautiful effect because of the associations they induce is not Reynolds's, of course, but goes back to Hutcheson's application of Locke's associationism. In his Inquiry, Hutcheson maintains that 'Associations of Ideas make Objects pleasant, and delightful, which are not naturally apt to give any such Pleasures.' The difference is, however, that for Hutcheson, the accidental connection of ideas was still prone to be 'foolish' and thus an embarrassment for art criticism. Hutcheson follows Locke's distinction between associations of ideas based on 'natural Correspondence' versus associations 'wholly owing to Chance or Custom', and he considers the latter to lead to questionable verdicts concerning the artwork's beauty. Hutcheson's repression of the discourse of 'Custom' is more thorough than Reynolds's, who takes arbitrary associations to be 'irresistible' (139) and holds that 'it is not in our power . . . to separate them [i.e. the artefacts from the external associations]' (138). Since aesthetic object and associative effects are inseparable, Reynolds regards the apperception of beauty which is based on association as a legitimate aesthetic experience:

But this association is nature . . . it is therefore not merely fantastical . . . though we are satisfied that neither nature nor reason are the foundation of those beauties which we imagine we see in that art . . . (139)

16 Hutcheson's emphasis; An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue, Collected Works, ed. Bernhard Fabian (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1990), p. 68.
17 Ibid., p. 67.
18 Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, II, xxxiii, p. 5.
In other words, one's perception of beauty is determined by the arbitrary mechanics of fashion, and there is nothing wrong with that: 'We are creatures of prejudice; we neither can nor ought to eradicate it' (140). With this move, Reynolds pushes to its logical extreme a line of associationist theory (followed by Hartley and Gay)19 which had tentatively begun to subvert Locke's hierarchy of natural and accidental connection of ideas. By levelling this hierarchy and departing from the idea of uniformity of response, Reynolds situates himself in a paradox he cannot solve: an aesthetic theory based on the universalist ideology of 'General Nature' moves onto marshy ground once it accepts the merely subjective into the realm of the truly aesthetic. Hutcheson's way out of the quandary is his suppression of subject-related associations, which Kant completes with his concept of the 'disinterested judgement'.20 Reynolds, on the contrary, tries to go both ways: his aesthetics rests on pillars of objective beauty, which in turn are erected on the yielding foundations of idiosyncratic patterns of observer response, subject to constant change and cultural renegotiation.

IV

While these contradictions are fundamental enough to cause Reynolds's aesthetics to drift apart, the main area of conflict between the concepts of 'General Nature' and 'Custom' lies at the root of his ambivalent treatment of historical or cultural difference. On the one hand, Reynolds follows a universalist concept of history in which variations in taste are considered to be approximations to or deviations from an ideal of perfection, a concept which Hume famously expressed in his Enquiry:

19 Note the similarities between Reynolds's argument and David Hartley's point that the effect of beauty is partly due to 'the strong associations with ... fashion', and that thus differences in perception of beauty are due to differences in context (Observation on Man, His Frame, His Duty and His Expectations [London, 1749], vol. I, p. 425), or to Joseph Priestley's assertion (drawn from Hartley) of the relativity of the sublime ('the ideas of great and little are confessedly relative ... Whenever any object ... becomes familiar to the mind ... the sublime vanishes') in his Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism (London, 1777), pp. 151–152. For a useful introduction to this tradition, see Martin Kallich, The Association of Ideas and Critical Theory in Eighteenth-Century England (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), p. 14.

20 Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), pp. 45ff. For Reynolds and the problem of aesthetic disinterestedness, see Elizabeth A. Bohls, 'Disinterestedness and Denial of the Particular: Locke, Adam Smith, and the Subject of Aesthetics', in Paul Mattick, Jr (ed.), Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics and the Reconstruction of Art (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1993), pp. 16–51. Bohls traces the tradition of the disinterested observer from Shaftesbury to Kant, and she sees Reynolds's contribution to it in his denial of the particular. I find her interpretation plausible, though I would also agree with Leo Damrosch's point that Reynolds's treatment of the particular and the general is highly contradictory ('Generality and Particularity', in H.-B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (eds), The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Eighteenth Century [Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1998], p. 387). At any rate, Reynolds's defence of arbitrary observer association undermines the concept of disinterestedness despite his denial of the particular, which only highlights the extent to which he is caught between opposing views of worldmaking.
... you cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the [Greeks and Romans] most of the observations which you have made with regard to the [French and English]. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature [and] the regular springs of human action and behaviour.21

The idea that history does not alter the universality of human nature forms a principal theme within Reynolds's Discourses and is at its most outspoken in his paraphrasing of Imlac's speech (published a few years previously in Johnson's Rasselas):

When the Artist has ... reduced the variety of nature to the abstract idea; his next task will be to become acquainted with the general habits of nature, as distinguished from those of fashion ... he must divest himself of all prejudices in favour of his age or country; he must disregard all local and temporary ornaments, and look only on those general habits which are everywhere and always the same. (47ff.)

On the other hand, however, Reynolds is heavily influenced by the late-seventeenth-century awakening of the historical sense; which begins to permeate English and Scottish aesthetics, yet was anticipated by some of the conclusions of the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes initiated by Perrault in 1687.22 Perrault introduced the distinction between essential and relative beauty ('Des beautés universelles & absolues' or 'essentielles' as against '[des beautes] particulieres & relatives'),23 conceptualizing the artwork as a hybrid of both natural (invariable) and cultural or historical (variable) parameters. Thus the Querelle prepared the ground for the notion that the works of the ancients and the moderns cannot be measured according to an absolute and single concept of beauty, but must be considered as historically different artworks,24 and it thus opened art criticism to


22 The emergence of the modern historical sense has been located at various points between Renaissance humanism and Bolingbroke's Letters on the Study and Use of History (1752). While there is, of course, no clear 'origin', one could do worse, I think, than arguing that at least within the field of aesthetics the Querelle is one of its earliest and most influential manifestations. For an introduction to the debate on the 'origin' of protohistoricism, see G. H. Nadel, 'Philosophy of History before Historicism', History and Theory, vol. 3 (1964), pp. 291-315.


the discourse of ‘Custom’. By the time Reynolds wrote his Discourses, it was almost impossible to ignore the concept of the historicity of beauty altogether, though it was firmly contained within an anti-historicist framework. Accordingly, Hume’s concession that questions of taste hinge on ‘customs’ and lack a ‘standard, by which they can be decided’ is immediately qualified when he refers to ‘eternal blemishes’ of taste which even ‘the prejudices . . . of the age’ cannot justify.

Johnson, similarly, grants that beauty is ‘relative and comparative’, but he limits relationality to ‘the nameless and inexplicable elegancies which appeal wholly to the fancy’ (as opposed to ‘those means of pleasing which depend upon known causes’ and can therefore be put ‘under the dominion of science’). Because of this reduction of the relational element of beauty to the negligible (considered to be external to the essence of the art object), Hume and Johnson show a mere tentative nodding towards an historicist aesthetics. While Reynolds is often associated with this tradition, it seems to me that his position is fundamentally different, for he repeatedly leads his argumentation to a point where the framework of ‘General Nature’ as an ordering force breaks down.

Similarly to Archibald Alison’s opposition of natural and ‘Accidental Beauty . . . peculiar to the individual’, Reynolds distinguishes between primary and secondary beauty or truth, the former based on ‘immutable laws of nature’, the latter on ‘fashions’ (141). Yet while Alison’s opposition is decidedly hierarchical—the artist, he argues, must ‘disengage his mind from the accidental’—Reynolds destabilizes the hierarchy when he points out that secondary truths are not insignificant surface phenomena inconsequential to rigorous criticism (as his mentor Johnson argues) but, on the contrary, play a central role in the perception of the artwork by the viewer:

However, whilst these opinions and prejudices, on which [apparent truth] is founded, continue, they operate as truth; and the art, whose office it is to please the


mind, as well as to instruct it, must direct itself according to opinion, or it will not attain its end. (122)

By elevating secondary truth or beauty to an integral part of the artwork, Reynolds implies that the fact that some beliefs or some concepts of beauty are cultural rather than natural does not make them less compelling or less significant for the value of the artefact. Reynolds's argument that beliefs based on 'Custom' may 'operate as truth' (122) anticipates the modern idea that truth is a discursive effect, a function, as it were, of variable viewpoints, rather than an entity prior to discourse. This does not, of course, make Reynolds an anti-foundationalist in the postmodern sense. Rather, by conceptualizing contingent parameters as 'operating as truth', Reynolds gives historicist figures of thought more room than would Hume, Johnson, or Alison and thus destabilizes the traditionally universalist framework of his aesthetics.

It goes without saying that Reynolds, too, engages in the eighteenth-century rearguard action against the disquieting implications of customary beauty, and inclines towards relating the truth value of discursive effects to their proximity to 'General Nature', on whose 'very slender foundation', he argues, secondary truths and beauties must rest (136). Yet Reynolds's appeal to a natural foundation is subverted by his conclusion that 'General Nature' cannot serve as a ground if the secondary truths or beauties to be compared are equally distanced from it:

But we have still more slender means of determining, to which of the different customs of different ages or countries we ought to give the preference, since they seem to be all equally removed from nature. (137)

The implication is, of course, that some objects and practices are exclusively cultural: if two artefacts are equally distant from their ground (or telos)—that is, the ideal of perfection as it lies within 'General Nature'—the telos will cease to function as a yardstick and become insignificant in questions of beauty or truth. Reynolds illustrates this point by contrasting the clothing fashions of Europeans and Cherokee Indians, concluding that they cannot be compared in evaluative terms. Both concepts of beauty are valuable in their own right; and if they change and evolve, they will still, 'in all probability, be equally removed from nature' (137).

Indeed, whenever Reynolds deals with the problem of cultural difference, he tends to push the relational thinking, to which the awakening of the historical sense has led him, to its most extreme conclusion. By the 1750s it was widely acknowledged that differences between peoples and nations were not merely due to deviations from a single Nature, but that they resulted from the concurrent existence of several fundamentally different (lower case) natures (an idea which developed from the climate theory introduced to English aesthetics by Sir William Temple). In Addison's words, 'different nations have different tastes'
because different climatic influences alter the sense organs and ‘caus[e] an alteration in the animal spirits’.29 Yet the affirmation of difference by the climate theorists is contained by the conviction that the different natures are not ‘equally removed from Nature’ but, on the contrary, must be measured against an ideal, which only thrives within a temperate climate. Thus Winckelmann, quite typically for that early stage of art history, conceives of cultural difference in terms of a centre–periphery opposition, arguing that African concepts of beauty (along with African physiognomy) are inferior to those in Europe and Greece: ‘The closer nature approaches its centre’, he claims, ‘the more evenly it creates’, and he concludes that ‘ours and the Greeks’ concepts of beauty . . . are more true than those that can be made by peoples . . . that deviate from the image of their creator’.30 This grounding of the ideal in the Greek and European culture also forms the base of Hume’s essay ‘Of National Characters’: although he takes a stance against orthodox versions of the climate theory, he affirms most of its racial stereotypes (e.g. that ‘the negroes [are] naturally inferior to the whites’) and asserts that ‘the people, in very temperate climates, are the most likely to attain all sorts of improvement’.31

When Reynolds examines the taste and physiognomy of various nations, however, he clearly moves beyond the climatological approach and embraces a notion of cultural difference entirely devoid of hierarchies:

The black and white nations must, in respect of beauty, be considered as of different kinds, at least a different species of the same kind; from one of which to the other . . . no inference can be drawn.32

Accordingly, the concepts of beauty within black and white cultures do not rest on a common natural foundation but are based on fundamentally different premises which evade comparison in terms of their distance from Nature. Differences in the perception of beauty are thus not a result of deformed tastes, but due to difference in 'Custom':

... custom makes, in a certain sense, white black, and black white; it is custom alone determines our preference of the colour of the Europeans to the Ethiopians, and they, for the same reason, prefer their own colour to ours. I suppose no body will doubt, if one of their Painters were to paint the Goddess of Beauty, but that he would represent her black, with thick lips, flat nose, and woolly hair; and, it seems to me, he would act very unnaturally if he did not: for by what criterion will any one dispute the propriety of his idea? We indeed say, that the form and colour of the European is preferable to that of the Ethiopian; but I know of no other reason we have for it, but that we are more accustomed to it.  

Reynolds's insistence that 'custom alone determines our preference' is a leap forward beyond the limits of climatological thinking; his emphatic denial, moreover, of pertinent criteria for one or the other cultural preference challenges the ground for any hierarchizations of diverse customs and manners along the lines of a superiority of European (Shaftesbury) or natural man (Rousseau). Reynolds's conviction that various cultures are 'equally removed from nature' anticipates the nineteenth-century historicist catchphrase that all cultural expressions are 'equally close to God', that is, equally valuable in their own right, and only to be judged on the basis of their own particular logic. Reynolds's elevation of 'Custom' to a central principle implies that concepts of beauty are merely cultural entities which lack determinate natures and which are only their histories. In more modern terms, it amounts to saying that there is nothing beyond 'Custom'. This idea cannot but explode the universalist framework which is so typical for Reynolds's age, but which is also central to significant parts of his own aesthetics. It goes without saying that his insistence on the exclusively customary base of differences in taste between Ethiopians and Europeans is hopelessly at odds with his more conservative definition of taste as the 'substance ... fixed and established in the nature of things' (134). Reynolds's treatment of cultural difference, therefore, is marked by the most extreme tension between his conceptual contradictions, a tension that stretches his aesthetic 'system' beyond breaking point.

In accordance with Heidegger's belief that the 'increasing rootedness of the world in anthropology, which has set in since the end of the eighteenth century',

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34 See the historicist Leopold von Ranke's dictum (1888) that all epochs are 'unmittelbar zu Gott' and therefore of equal value (Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte, ed. Horst Michael [Wien, 1928], pp. 133-134).
furthers the realization that the subject is separated from the objective state of things by historically variable world views. Reynolds is at his most modern when he reflects on problems of cultural difference. Yet the force of the relational concepts he develops in the process permeates, to various extents, his more general reflections on beauty. Thus he considers preferences in ‘fashions of dress’ to result from ‘no other reason than that we are used to them’, and insists that there is no ‘general criterion of beauty’ or ground for deciding ‘why one species is more beautiful than another’ other than ‘Custom’. Similarly, Reynolds develops a relational concept of genius, ‘the degree of excellence’ of which ‘is different, in different times and different places’ (96).

Whenever Reynolds deals directly with painting, his emphasis on the contingency of beauty becomes less outspoken. Yet the relational stances of his cultural comparisons seem to ramify into his evaluative practice and to re-emerge as an intuitive suspicion of natural criteria for the aesthetic. It is quite conspicuous, for instance, that his application of superlatives is haphazard and covers such a wide range of fundamentally dissimilar artists that it becomes meaningless. Thus the epithet ‘Father of Modern Art’ is attributed to Masaccio (218), Michelangelo (272), as well as the more abstract ‘genius which hovers over’ the works of the ancients (106). More importantly, Reynolds praises a variety of painters who resist reduction to a single evaluative system, and he tries to differentiate his all-encompassing praise by hierarchizing the specific fields in which he takes each painter to excel. Yet his favourable evaluation of Gainsborough in the fifteenth discourse demonstrates how easily he tends to subvert his own categorical hierarchies.

The most striking example, finally, of Reynolds’s reluctance to believe in natural sets of criteria for beauty is his conspicuous dithering and ambivalence regarding his preference for either Raphael or Michelangelo. Although his discussion of the two painters may harbour the hope that they can be hierarchized according to an ideal of perfection, Reynolds’s evaluation comes to a halt with the conclusion that the works of Raphael and Michelangelo are no more than essentially different manifestations of excellence:

Raffaelle had more Taste and Fancy, Michael Angelo more Genius and Imagination. The one excelled in beauty, the other in energy. Michael Angelo has more of the Poetical Inspiration: his ideas are vast and sublime; his people are a superior order of beings; ... Raffaelle’s imagination is not so elevated; his figures are not so much disjoined from our own diminutive race of beings, though his ideas are chaste, noble and of great conformity to their subjects. Michael Angelo’s works have a strong, peculiar, and marked character. ... The excellency of [Raffaelle] lay in the propriety, beauty, and majesty of his characters, the judicious contrivance of his Composition.

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his correctness of Drawing, purity of Taste, and skilful accommodation of other men’s conceptions to his own purpose. (83–84)

The confusion of incommensurable criteria which Reynolds posits is irreducible to a totalizing evaluation, and predilection for one or the other artist seems to depend on the premises one defines:

To the question therefore, which ought to hold the first rank, Raffaelle or Michael Angelo, it must be answered, that if it is to be given to him who possessed a greater combination of the higher qualities of the art than any other man, there is no doubt but Raffaelle is the first. But if, as Longinus thinks, the sublime, being the highest excellence that human composition can attain to, abundantly compensates the absence of every other beauty, and atones for all other deficiencies, then Michael Angelo demands the preference. (84)

Reynolds posits the criteria which are to be decisive for evaluation in the form of a question, yet instead of offering an answer, he contents himself with acknowledging the fundamental difference of the two painters.37 Reynolds’s procedure, therefore, reveals a suspicion that the criteria of excellence within painting may be precisely as customary as those underlying the preference for a white or black goddess of beauty. At the same time his universalist influences prevent him from asserting an openly relational theory of painting, unthinkable within the epistemological and aesthetic outlook of his age. His evaluative practice, nevertheless, speaks for itself: as Lipking observes, while Reynolds struggles to decide who is to be seen as the greater artist, his objects seem to ‘fluctuate like one of those optical illusions in which interlocked geometrical figures, as one stares at them, alternately emerge from and retreat into the background’.38 It is with this fluctuation rather than with an outspoken embrace of relationality that Reynolds subverts his evaluative hierarchies and demonstrates the customary base of evaluation itself.

V

Considering the extent of Reynolds’s ambivalence, it is hardly surprising that his writings still invite totalizing interpretations. While some critics follow Ruskin, who takes Reynolds to argue ‘that beauty was merely a result of custom’, Levine ascribes to him a ‘timeless generalizing perspective that is the very reverse of historicism’.39 Both readings, of course, miss the extent to which Reynolds is...

37 I do not agree with Monk (Sublime, p. 187) that the fact that Reynolds ends his final lecture with an appeal to Michelangelo indicates a clear way out of his evaluative quandary which took place eighteen years previously. In his final discourse Reynolds refers neither to his previous indecision, nor to Raphael.

38 Lipking, Ordering of the Arts, p. 198.

39 Levine, Humanism and History, p. 208; Ruskin, Modern Painters, vol. V, p. 46. Reynolds’s aesthetics,
caught between the diverging viewpoints. John Barrell’s recent and very enlightening discussion of Reynolds’s location in the nature–custom opposition at least recognizes the variety of his standpoints, but follows the critical tradition which tends to level them into a coherent development (if non-dialectical). According to Barrell, the discursive forces of the late-eighteenth-century affirmation of customary law push Reynolds towards a ‘customary aesthetics’, which dawns upon him in the Idler papers (1759), then declines by discourse three (1770), rises again by discourse seven (1776), reasserts itself as a general principle in discourses eight and thirteen (1778/1786), and eventually remains crucial until Reynolds’s final unpublished papers.40 However, Barrell’s detection of decided and all-embracing turns in Reynolds’s general epistemological and aesthetic outlook neglects the extent to which universalist and relational concepts proliferate simultaneously throughout Reynolds’s writings. Thus discourse three (whose appeal to ‘General Nature’ [48–49] Barrell considers to be central evidence for Reynolds’s belief in ‘universal principles’) is also concerned with the existence of ‘different ideas of beauty’ (47); already the fourth discourse is marked by extensive reader response leanings (57, 59); the relational evaluation of Michelangelo and Raphael I have described above appears in the fifth discourse (83); Reynolds’s relative concept of genius is developed as early as discourse six (96). On the other hand, Reynolds’s Idler papers offer enough references to ‘Nature’ to satisfy anyone trying to claim Reynolds for universalism. Discourse seven (which offers the revaluation of secondary truths that Barrell takes to be central to the customary aesthetics) also posits ‘a general uniformity and agreement in the minds of men’ (131) and a definition of taste as a natural substance (134). Discourses eight and thirteen (which, according to Barrell, see the completion of Reynolds’s turn towards ‘Custom’) are also strong on the idea that art transports the mind ‘beyond the ignorant present, to ages past’ (162, Reynolds’s emphasis) and, more importantly,


develop a theory of imagination which appeals to the world of essence and timeless unity operating below the empirical world of ‘individual nature’ and ‘Custom’.

The sheer abundance of Reynolds’s argumentative turns renders the image of a process of development dubious. Rather, Reynolds is a critical chameleon, whose conceptual balance fluctuates in a non-teleological and erratic way, and whose argumentation is marked by oscillation or double gesture.41 Accordingly, the genuinely neoclassical Reynolds (with his whole-hearted appeals to an eternal ‘central form’) slips intermittently into his more modern critical persona (voicing confident proclamations of de gustibus non est disputandum). At one point, Reynolds is all art instructor and monitor of taste, who condemns cultural mannerism and grounds his pedagogical enterprise in universal values; at the next turn of the argument, he metamorphoses into a philanthropist who argues that beauty is based on ‘Custom’, and that ‘Custom’ itself is irreducible to nature. His critical selves shift back and forth between Reynolds the universalist and Reynolds the historicist, as if he were to enact the ‘divided self’ he thematizes in some of his paintings,42 and to become the living proof of his observation that man is ‘an inconsistent being’ who tends to engage in the ‘double operation’ of appealing to ‘two objects at a time’.43

At the root of Reynolds’s oscillation may be something like a process of negation (in the Freudian sense): the more radically the historicist Reynolds exposes the contingencies of the human condition, the more vehemently his neoclassical alter ego denounces them, as if the sheer volume of his appeals to ‘General Nature’ was meant to silence the disquieting murmurs which arise from the customary aesthetics.

One result of Reynolds’s shifting of critical personalities, to be sure, is the overall incoherency of his aesthetics, wherefore, at a certain level, Blake was not altogether wrong in supposing that either Reynolds ‘[m]ust be full of Contradictions’ or the Discourses ‘the Work of Several Hands’.44 What Blake did not honour, however, is the innovative effect of Reynolds’s systemic blindspot: whenever Reynolds assumes his historicist persona, he seems to take full in the face the radical implications inherent in the discourse of ‘Custom’ and to push them to an extreme which is unthinkable within a consistently neoclassical framework. He thus posits the fundamental equality of cultural expressions

41 Lipking has observed (in a slightly different context) that Reynolds’s critical enterprise ‘lives in the tension, not the resting place between extremes’, and has compared it quite suitably to the movement of a pendulum (Ordering of the Arts, p. 185).
42 See Wendorf’s discussion of Reynolds’s ‘fascination with the divided self’ in Painter in Society, pp. 147ff.
44 Blake, Annotations, p. 288.
almost twenty years before Herder redresses the conceptual balance in favour of historicism.\textsuperscript{45} Blake, on the other hand, tried to solve the nature–culture conflict by simply repressing the historical sense altogether. From his romanticist outlook, he could not have seen that it is precisely Reynolds’s systemic incoherencies which reveal him to be one of the most intriguing aestheticians of the late eighteenth century.

\textsuperscript{45} See notably Herder’s criticism (1774) of Winckelmann, Hume, Robertson, and Voltaire for their eurocentrism and ahistorical method (\textit{Sämtliche Werke}, ed. Bernhard Suphan [Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1877–1913], vol. V, p. 308), which is generally regarded as the beginning of the tradition culminating in post-Hegelian historicism. I am not aware, however, of evidence for Herder’s knowledge of Reynolds’s \textit{Idler} papers, and the German translations of the \textit{Discourses} appeared after Herder formulated his theory.