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Criticism Against Itself

Joshua Reynolds' "Discourses on Art" and Subjectivity

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Abstract: This reading of the Discourses, as a theory of criticism, argues that Reynolds resolves the problems of intersubjectivity by appealing to the visual artwork as an exemplary form of human knowledge. Reynolds grants a unique form of agency to the artwork, placing his theory in tension with theories of judgment that emphasize the artwork's status as the occasion for intersubjective exploration or judgment. While this is a subtle distinction it is an important one. The way in which Reynolds is able to contend with defining taste and genius in the context of instruction allows him to promote art as a unique source of knowledge for the spectator (critic and artist). He attempts to create a meaningful language for discussing the aesthetic experience by using criticism against itself -- to effectively subordinate the discursive account of the aesthetic experience to the formal account of the artwork.

Keywords: Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourses, subjectivity, theory of criticism, aesthetics, genius, imitation, style, technique, history of criticism, art, discursive knowledge

THIS READING OF the *Discourses On Art*, as a theory of criticism, argues that Reynolds resolves the problems of intersubjectivity by appealing to the visual artwork as an exemplary form of human knowledge. It is important to read Reynolds as granting a certain kind of agency to the artwork, placing his theory in tension with theories of judgment like Addison's or Kant's -- which emphasize the artwork's status as the occasion for intersubjective exploration or judgment. While this is a subtle distinction it is an important one. Reynolds attempts to create a meaningful language for discussing the aesthetic experience by using criticism against itself -- to effectively link and subordinate the discursive account of the aesthetic experience to the formal account of the artwork.

Blake famously ridiculed Reynolds' rather Augustan elevation of imitation to academic norm as,

Particularly interesting to Blockheads as it endeavors to prove that there is No such thing as inspiration and that any Man of a plain Understanding may by Thieving from Others become

a Mich. Angelo [sic]. (Blake, annotation to DiscourseIII, 296)¹

Blake's words on the historical significance of the *Discourses*, unfortunately for many students of criticism (outside of art history proper), are often the last ones. However, Reynolds' ambitions for *The Discourses* exceeded practical instruction and despite a derisive tone, William Hazlitt was not incorrect in characterizing the project as a "fine spun metaphysical theory, either not clearly understood, or not very correctly expressed" (Champion, Nov. 27, 1814).² The *Discourses* are as much a fulfillment of Reynolds' literary and philosophical ambitions as they are a set of instructions for aspiring painters.³ It is probable that Blake's evaluation, that seems at times to precede the *Discourses*, has helped to re-enforce a pejorative understanding of Reynolds as an unsophisticated "academic" painter and proponent of copying more than a legitimate theorist.⁴ Because the idea of learning via imitation is at once such a common part of academic practice and at the same time anathematic to the modern liberal conceptions of pro-

¹ This is the most often quoted phrase from William Blake's *Annotations to Reynolds Discourses*.

² William Hazlitt, "Introduction to an account of Sir Joshua's Discourses: I," *The Champion* Nov. 27, 1814. Rpt "William Hazlitt's Essays on Reynolds' Discourses." *Discourses on Art*. Ed. Robert Wark. NewHaven: Yale UP, 1997.

³ Hilles' book, *The Literary Career of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, remains useful for understanding Reynolds' intellectual context and ambitions as a man of letters. Hilles, Fredrick Whaley. *The Literary Career of Sir Joshua Reynolds*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1936.

⁴ For a brief discussion of the negative implications accumulated by this term in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries see Paul Barlow. "Fear and Loathing of the Academic." *Art and Academy in the Nineteenth Century*. Eds. Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Trodd. New Jersey: Rutgers UP 2000. See also, Thomas Hess, "Some Academic Questions" *The Academy* Ed Thomas Hess and John Ashbery. *Art News Annual XXXIII*. New York MacMillian 1967. Specific to Reynolds and the Royal Academy see Lamb, Walter Rangeley. *The Royal Academy: A Short History*. London, 1951. Hilles, *Literary Career*. See also John Russell, "Sir Joshua PRA," *The Academy*. Ed Thomas Hess and John Ashbery. *Art News Annual XXXIII*. New York MacMillian 1967, 39. For a comparison of Reynolds and Blake as theorists see Frederic Will, "Blake's Quarrel with Reynolds," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 15 No.3, (Mar., 1957) 340-394.



gress in the arts, it remains difficult to evaluate the precise impact of artists like Reynolds, who helped to create prototypes for the artist-as-intellectual, bridging the critical, commercial, and creative worlds. Reynolds' attempt to combine a critical language for defining the aesthetic experience of the artwork with the business of technical instruction is worth revisiting at a time when Reynolds himself is seeing something of a revival.⁵ As it represents only a small part of a larger study, this essay does not present an overall description of key concepts in *The Discourses*, rather it offers a limited analysis of how Reynolds uses the concepts of imagination, genius, imitation and style to produce an account of the artwork as an exemplary form of human knowledge.

Art and Imagination

Earlier in the eighteenth century another artist-intellectual, Joseph Addison, wrote one of the more succinct theories of the imagination. In *The Spectator* he described the "imagination" as serving a harmonizing purpose in relation to other faculties. As other theorists would, he granted "real" objects with affecting a primary pleasure and described the mental recollection of, or reflection on, such objects as a sort of secondary pleasure. This secondary "reflective" pleasure of the imagination is active when we are experiencing art. The aesthetic pleasure found in the experience of art augments our pleasure in nature. It also originates and facilitates a kind of pleasure in our own thinking and representational processes. For example, according to Addison our ability to compare the original and the imitation, to connect color with an idea, etc. offers us more pleasure than the initial sensory engagement with the art-object:

This secondary pleasure of the imagination proceeds from that Action of the Mind which compares the Ideas arising from the Original objects with the ideas we receive from the Statue, Picture, Description, or Sound that represents them For it is this that not only gives us a relish of Statuary, Painting and Description, but makes us delight in all the Actions of Arts and Mimickry [sic]. (*Spectator*, June 17, 1712)

As Kant and others will do later in the century, Addison emphasizes the experience in terms of discursive knowledge, generating a theory of aesthetic judgment where the "operation of the mind is attended to with so much pleasure" (ibid).⁶ This experience which takes place in the mind of the individual references the sensory and has some elements of primary pleasure (the feel of a book for example) but the secondary experience is fundamentally language bound as it serves a descriptive, reflective purpose. This is true for Addison even in the case of the visual arts:

Thus in painting it is pleasant to look on the Picture of any Face, where Resemblance is hit, but the pleasure encreases, if it be a Picture of a Face that is beautiful, and still greater if the Beauty be softened with an Air of Melancholly or Sorrow [sic]. (*Spectator*, June 30, 1712)

Similar to poetry, the *story* the picture tells is where the mind can compare "the Ideas that arise from words, with the Ideas that arise from the Objects themselves" (ibid). Imagination is not a form of knowledge, however, it is a necessary faculty for expanding knowledge and cultivating the ability to reflect upon and understand oneself rather than escaping into "vice." In many ways Addison is telling a familiar Christian and Enlightenment narrative about becoming civilized and self-sufficient rather than simply pursuing bodily, sensory pleasures. Artworks in particular provide Addison with a means of investigating the imagination and in many ways displaying his own imagination at work. As a foundational theorist we can see in Addison many recognizable elements from a variety of other aesthetic theories particularly those which look to the individual's consciousness as a location for a highly communicable experience of taste, one that can presume what Kant will call "universality."

Reynolds certainly was familiar with the aesthetic debate that preceded his first public forays into theory in the *Idler*.⁷ But it is an error to read *The Discourses* as a simple reflection or vulgar synthesis of the theories of Addison, Johnson, Shaftesbury, Burke, and others.⁸ Reynolds' idiosyncratic blend of aesthetic theory and philosophy of art engages with the defin-

⁵ Two recent biographies and a retrospective at the Tate have signaled renewed interest in Reynolds: Ian McIntyre, *Joshua Reynolds*. London: Allen Lane, 2003. Richard Wendorf, *Sir Joshua Reynolds the Painter in Society*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998

⁶ This seems close to Kant's "intellectual pleasure" where consciousness about the artifice of art causes us to reflect on and take pleasure in our own sensory-aesthetic experiences and facilitates new ways of knowing ourselves and our relation to the world according to what we can subsume under concepts. See Paul Guyer, "The Origins of Modern Aesthetics: 1711-35." *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics*. Oxford: 2004; also *Kant and the Claims of Taste*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1997.

⁷ "Critique of False Criticism." *Idler No. 76*. September 29, 1759. "Grand Style of Painting." *Idler No. 79*. October 20, 1759. "True Idea of Beauty." *Idler No. 82*. November 10, 1759.

⁸ Reynolds' theories obviously were influenced by and share many commonalities with these writers. See, Goldstein, "Ut Poesis Pictura: Reynolds on Imitation and Imagination." *Eighteenth Century Studies* Vol.1 No.3 (Spring 1968) 213-235. See also, Hilles, cited above. Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757, 1759) provides a convenient and effective link between Addison's conceptualization of imagination and Reynolds'.

ing problems of aesthetic pleasure and taste in order to resolve them through exemplary models -- of artworks, practices and techniques. In doing so he makes significant claims for the artwork as more than the occasion for the production of knowledge. For Reynolds, we learn about art *from artworks*, not from the ideas we form about works while looking at them (VI, 301-305, 102). At first this seems simply like Addison's notion of primary pleasure (unmediated vision and sympathetic reaction). However, what Reynolds is describing is a kind of experience which, though augmented by descriptive theoretical language, sits in fundamental tension with that language. Knowledge arrived at through language (even in the *Discourses*) has to contend with a form of knowledge which is outside of its grasp -- even as Reynolds supplies more and more vocabulary for describing it. The purpose of theory is not to turn artworks into a scrutable reference book of techniques.

Rather, The great end of art is to strike the imagination. The Painter is therefore to make no ostentation of the means by which this is done; the spectator is only to feel the result in his bosom In works of the lower kind, every thing appears studied, and encumbered; it is all boastful art, and open affectation. The ignorant often part from such pictures with wonder in their mouths, and indifference in their hearts.(IV, 81-91,59)

The very immediacy of the visual experience, its connection to pleasure and our experience of nature puts the analyzing critic or student at a disadvantage. This is because the art which is most describable in terms of technique is, by definition, not the best art. Here, the task of aesthetic engagement necessarily shifts away from communicating experiences or judgment and towards understanding the artwork itself as an object; an object which *should* inevitably effect us in a profound immediate, and pleasing way. The artwork is both a material object (known by empirical observation and subject to discursive knowledge) and an expression of some sort of general truth (accessed intuitively through the exercise of taste).

Similar to Addison, Reynolds evokes imagination in a productive relationship with understanding. However, unlike Addison, Reynolds deploys such a division as merely a provisional discursive account of the artwork, insofar as it is an account of broadly comprehensible *rules*. Because the great-artwork affects imagination directly (by approximating the ideal) rather than merely stimulating understanding (demonstrating rules) the artwork itself has to be "able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind" (III, 105, 44). Expressions of ideal form still correspond to available natural forms. Hence, the artwork's ability to generalize offers a kind of reconciliation between empirical knowledge and abstract concepts.⁹ The contemplation of superior works of art certainly improves one's taste and inspires one's admiration for beauty and goodness -- away from simple bodily pleasures, as Addison argues. However, Reynolds always seeks to elevate the status of painting and goes beyond Addison. The following passage from the fourteenth discourse is one of Reynolds' more unrestrained endorsements of artwork as a source of knowledge:

By continual contemplation of such works, sense of the higher excellencies of art will by degrees dawn on the imagination; at every review that sense will become more and more assured, until we come to enjoy a sober certainty of the real existence (if I may so express myself) of those almost ideal beauties; and the artist will then find no difficulty in fixing in his mind the principles by which the impression is produced; which he will feel, and practice, though they are perhaps too delicate and refined, and too particular to the imitative art to be conveyed by any other means. (XIV, 341-349, 257)

Reynolds argues that only art brings us full circle (note his use of imitative art -- singular). In the form of an ambitious dialectic, the passage above attempts to explain how the experience of great art will actually transform one's "sober" understanding of the existence of general truths. In other words, it verifies their existence by describing how the natural and ideal can be brought together in works like *Salvator*

⁹ Reynolds assumes a certain natural cohesion between technical/formal elements and conceptual-philosophical elements. "The natural appetite or taste of the human mind is for Truth: whether that truth results from real agreement or equality of original ideas among themselves; from the agreement of the representation of any object with the thing represented; or from the correspondence of the several parts of any arrangement with each other [sic]" (VII, 160-165, 122). This certainly is consistent with Reynolds' neoclassicism and affection for proportion, derived from the period's preoccupation with Greek and Roman artworks, empirical observation, and pure mathematical language.

Rosa's *Jacob's Dream* and Sebastien Bourdon's *The Return of the Arc*.¹⁰ By granting painting the metaphorical capacities of poetry – to link the natural and the heroic or mythical -- he grants it the knowledge producing agency of language. Reynolds even goes so far as to call this skill poetic (ibid 323-324). However, he also alludes to the inability of discursive (non-poetic) language to reproduce such composite “delicate and refined” visual/spatial impressions.

The scholarly contemplation of great works of art, or masterworks, is fundamentally an approximation of the knowledge-producing endeavor of creating. The work itself possesses the new knowledge, that excites our imagination. We describe this knowledge as technique. However, unlike mediocre and even adequate art the masterwork does not reveal its techniques easily; they are hidden in the experience of pleasure occasioned by the engagement of the spectator's imagination. Understanding and uncovering these rules then becomes the exemplary critical activity.

By virtue of their own mystery masterworks stand in for and explore the serious problems of self-consciousness, interaction, and man's need to find an adequate representation of himself in his own world. Criticism, as a form of pedagogy is the occasion for achieving a provisional (that is to say discursive) comprehension of genius and style (VI, 280-285, 101). For Reynolds subsuming technical and formal language into an account of style is the most effective means available to us of reconciling the discursive world and the visual one. It is also he suggests, terribly inadequate.

Genius

All students of art aspire to be thought a man of genius. Discourse XI, 2, 191.

Theories of taste need theories of genius. Describing genius through the language of technique, then ultimately softening it with a broad conception of style is Reynolds' compromise between all things ineffable and the practical demands of art-education

in an institutional context. The contemporary understanding of “genius” as referencing innate and extraordinary intellectual capacities or creative abilities is very much a product of the eighteenth century -- although its origins can be traced back to the Platonic conception of creativity as possession rather than art.¹¹ Addison defined genius in opposition to imitation but also left room for one to acquire genius as well as be born with it (*Spectator* 160, September 3, 1711). The possibility of learning what one was not necessarily born with certainly underscores Reynolds' academic approach and he sought a term that could account for a repeatable but esoteric process. A process he will describe as the “genius of mechanical performance.”

For Reynolds the genius of mechanical performance is comprehensible through technical elements of form, color, drawing, subject, etc.. There is a desire for rational science which Reynolds is not willing to relinquish but he qualifies it with the caveat that the actual genius in the manipulation of these elements is necessarily an effect which cannot be broken down into composite parts (XI, 20-30, 191).¹² What this genius of mechanical performance ultimately amounts to, according to Reynolds, is an expression of *the whole* that allows (or compels) the viewer to suspend consideration or criticism of subordinate or particular beauties or defects (ibid.). Our inability to produce this whole if we are artists, or recognize this whole if we are spectators, is the product of false expectation of what one “ought to see” in a painting, based on bad education or lack of industriousness – including the misapplication of proper education. In this way Reynolds, like Addison, appeals to the aesthetic experience as a union of intellect and sensibility, with the former having a potentially disciplining or distorting effect on the latter.

While genius necessarily involves something unique, it is not capricious. Reynolds argues, paradoxically, genius is best understood in terms of imitation and tradition more than novelty or innovation.¹³ Reynolds uses the term to re-enforce his model of

¹⁰ These are in fact the works Reynolds is referring to in Discourse XIV lines 341-349 (cited in this article). According to Reynolds, “A ladder against the sky has no very promising appearance of possessing a capacity to excite any heroick[sic] ideas; and the Arc, in the hands of a second-rate master, would have little more effect than a common wagon on the highway; yet those subjects are so poetically treated throughout, the parts have such a correspondence with each other, and the whole and every part of the scene is so visionary, that it is impossible to look at them, without feeling, in some measure, the enthusiasm which seems to have inspired the painters” (XIV, 333-340, 257). For Reynolds these works are evidence of how lesser artforms like landscape are elevated to or combined with heroic (historical/mythical) subjects successfully. According to Wark, Reynolds was actually in possession of the Bourdon painting (*Discourses*, 256n). Such references would certainly allow Reynolds to present himself as a kind of role model for the academic tradition: simultaneously an artist, connoisseur, and theorist.

¹¹ Plato, *Ion*. For a brief survey of the history of the word in English see *The Dictionary of the History of Ideas* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*. See also, *Genius: The History of an Idea*. Ed. Penelope Murray. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989. Also, Rensselaer Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting*. New York: Norton 1967.

¹² For Reynolds the genius of mechanical performance must be distinguished from a general state of genius related to ideas and taste which can be communicated by any artform or science (XI, 30-30, 191).

¹³ Reynolds notes that though Michelangelo was “capricious in his inventions,” these caprices are not the source of his genius, they are rather, a by-product of genius. In the context of the general superiority of Michelangelo's work, such inventions are simply evidence of his inability to be bound by convention, categorically (XV, 369-382, 276).

pedagogy wherein the artist learns through emulation. By dismissing the notion that genius is “out of reach of the rules of art” and instead binding it to history and describable technique, Reynolds can claim that genius is simply a set of rules beyond the grasp of *our current vocabulary* but not ultimately unknowable (VI, 105-165, 96 -97). There can be no accident to the achievements of Michelangelo and Reynolds goes so far as to argue that the rules of genius are adhered to by artists *as rules* (ibid.). The ineffable elements of genius are *only ineffable* to the non-genius. These elements must continually defy linguistic capacities -- because of their visual and transformative nature -- but they are not entirely beyond at least intuitive understanding or appreciation through study.

Reynolds’ understanding of genius produces a non-discursive basis for aesthetic experience of the great artwork. There is a bit of metaphysical momentum in such a theory: Because the rules of genius do not lend themselves to language, any precise understanding of them is deferred. However, unlike the wholly inscrutable or divine genius Romanticism will merge with the avant-garde and resolve into artistic temperament, the careful humble study of past works of genius necessarily leads to an understanding of the related elements of genius possible for contemporary artworks (VI, 270-305, 101-102). This, in turn, leads to an intuitive sort of understanding of how it is that “ideas” cannot account for the precise makeup of the aesthetic experience of the artwork. One can learn to practice the technique that produces the effect of genius without ever really being able to precisely describe the proportions of light to dark, line to shadow (etc.) that generate a satisfactory aesthetic response. Artists therefore, unlike non-artists, can bypass the discursive rules and adhere to the mental and physical habits of which the rules are mere descriptions – transforming themselves into geniuses. Hence Reynolds tells his students to *study* technique not just memorize it:

It is not by laying up in the memory the particular details of any of the great works of art, that any man becomes a great artist. . . . If he even hopes to rival those whom he admires, he must consider their works as the means of teaching him the true art of seeing nature. (XI, 415-418, 204)

Again, genius is not capricious. Measurement via discursive analysis (criticism) exists as a kind of key to unlocking the mysteries of art, just as natural science is a means of unlocking the mysteries of nature. Reynolds claims that the artwork’s defining moments of genius are based on invariable standards, derived from the classical models. In doing so he explicitly challenges the assertion that taste is a matter of

private experience not to be disputed (from Gerard) describing such a claim as owing

its influence and its general reception to the same error which leads us to imagine this faculty [taste] of too high an original to submit to the authority of an earthly tribunal. It likewise corresponds with the notions of those who consider it as a mere phantom of the imagination, so devoid of substance as to elude all criticism. (VII, 141-143, 121)

Reynolds uses the notion of canon to challenge the overly psychological and the overly spiritual account of beauty, asserting that because beauty in the artwork is produced by man it is essentially of this world and our knowledge of it must be as systematic as any other form of knowledge. Art facilitates discourse because it has a describable substance. Additionally, there is something at the core of the artwork that corresponds to a verifiable truth. For Reynolds’ purposes, it does not matter whether one is talking about geometric proofs, musical harmony, systems of logic, or the play of light and shadow:

All of these things have unalterable and fixed foundations in nature, and are therefore equally investigated by reason, and known by study; some with more, some with less clearness, but all exactly in the same way. (VII, 170-174, 122)

The lack of clarity that underscores our attempts to describe method or technique in relation to aesthetic impact drives the critical endeavor. Reynolds rejects the notion that great art is in anyway arbitrary or accidental, hence pleasure in art is not arbitrary or accidental. Here, Reynolds holds a one-to-one correspondence between the word and the object in front of the student like a prize for careful attention.

This prize however, is pulled away at the last minute. Our ability to systematically compare shadow in Rembrandt and Michelangelo demonstrates our affinity for the aesthetic experience (expressed through discourse) and our *potential access* to the language of genius. Students and connoisseurs need language to account for the experience of the visual artwork but (unlike poetry) the experience itself exists *outside* of the narrative structures of language. This seems to affect an awkward marriage between the earthly and the divine: systematic technical language (methodical analysis and comparison of forms, expression, line, and style) becomes a way to communicate *about* the ineffable (genius) – which is different than precisely comprehending it. Without explicitly critical language, without theory and methodological exposition, we are at a loss to understand the aesthetic experience of the artwork as something that represents the ideal (divine) in our

less than ideal selves. What is important here, in terms of Reynolds' contribution to aesthetics, is that this approximation of the ideal is affected when there is a *man-made object of taste* that exceeds the language of form and technique, which we are nonetheless compelled to evaluate through that language.

Reynolds understands that he cannot completely systematize genius without giving up the promise of sensibility and sympathy that sets freethinking and civilized men apart from others. What he tries to do is caution his students against overestimating novelty by casting the concept of genius in a reassuringly cumulative model of knowledge (IX, 115-125). New rules, arrived at through the innovations of genius, may have a yet-to-be articulated quality – but this is not to be confused with a purely superlunary quality. Hence, aesthetic feelings akin to the divine are not *literally divine*, as Blake would have it. They are rather, ways of seeing, habits and practices that the reasonable mind, cultivated by the proper sentiments can appropriate if not actually articulate. There is still an appeal to the unconscious mind or spirit of the artist as a sort of translator of the aesthetic experience of the natural world but there is also a means of verifying the difference between the genius and the would-be genius. Reynolds saw such a critical approach as genuine progress in the arts; allowing academics to discern between real advances in art and mere novelty produced by the whims of the artist, patron, or emerging market of exhibition goers.¹⁴ Hence, in the Royal Academic vision of art the desire for knowledge, pleasure and even for immortality, take shape next to practical methodology:

These Arts, in their highest province, are not addressed to the gross senses, but to the desires of the mind, to that spark of divinity which we have within, impatient of being circumscribed and pent up by the world which is about us. (XIII, 486-490, 244)

Reynolds takes the imaginative element of the artwork, or at least the non-literal element, and connects it with something metaphysical in order to grant it authority. In this theory, great works of art present creative nonlinguistic rules (genius) exemplified. These rules can be provisionally apprehended and put into contact with existing ones through critical discourse and from this emerges the evaluation or *judgment* which gives voice to the aesthetic experience. Reynolds seems to fulfill Addison's claim for imagination (discussed earlier) while simultaneously subordinating the very kind of discursive knowledge that makes such a claim possible.

Imitation and Style

In pursuing this great Art, it must be acknowledged that we labour under greater difficulties than those who were born in the age of its discovery, and whose minds from their infancy were habituated to this style; who learnt it as language, as their mother tongue. They had no mean taste to unlearn; they needed no persuasive discourse to allure them to a favourable reception of it, no abstruse investigation of its principles to convince them of the great and latent truths on which it is founded. We are constrained, in these later days to have recourse to a sort of Grammar and Dictionary, as the only means of recovering a dead language. It was by them learned by rote, and perhaps better learned that way than by precept. (Discourse XV 420-430)

For Reynolds, there are always two basic forms of imitation at stake: the imitation of nature, and the imitation of artworks. With regards to the first category, Reynolds makes the familiar qualification that technical proficiency and accurate rendering of nature are not in and of themselves expressions of superior artworks. The exacting imitation of nature, a scene, or a person -- what Reynolds describes as "servile imitation" -- is the opposite of what art requires (XIII, 220). The imitation of nature must always be subordinated to the ultimate goal of art which is its "pleasing effect" (XIII 380).

If we suppose a view of nature represented with all of the truth of a camera obscura, and the same scene represented by a great artist, how little and mean will the one appear in comparison of the other, where no superiority is supposed from the choice of subject. (XII, 261-262, 237)

What true art (the art of genius) offers is not a document of life or mere particulars but the elevation of the subject through improved style. In this "general effect," so important to Reynolds, the artist renders a person, or scene in a somewhat idealized or "general" fashion (ibid.). Painting serves an essentially philosophic purpose here, though it is not philosophical in method: Imitation of nature is motivated by a need for a self-knowledge, world-knowledge and a deep regard for the ultimate unreachable ideal of beauty. The very academic combination of art history and art criticism reveals a description of the painterly process as a unique form of representation by which

¹⁴ See Holger Hoock, *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture 1760-1840*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. Relevant to this essay chapters 1-5 and chapter 8.

man defines and conceives of both his-self and his relation to others in a larger natural or divine context.

The second category of imitation refers to imitation of the masterwork (touched on earlier in regards to genius). Reynolds uses the tradition of copying as another kind of technical language and as a way to evaluate the success and failure of an artwork in relation to the ongoing history of art. Keeping in mind the importance of the idea of the sister arts in the eighteenth century we are better off reading Reynolds through Johnson's theory of copying and translation than Blake's theory of invention. Just as the poet hones his skills with repetitions of odes the painter mimics the style of the great artist in order to find his own. Johnson's indictment of metaphysical poetry in *The Lives of the Poets* reflects a deferential, scholarly attitude toward the classical past. Johnson finds genius through careful assimilation more than radical departure.¹⁵ This attitude undoubtedly influenced Reynolds' advice with respect to choosing what exactly is worth imitating:

I could wish that you would take the world's opinion rather than your own. In other words I would have you choose those of established reputation rather than follow your own fancy. If you should not admire them at first, you will, by endeavouring to imitate them, find that the world has not been mistaken. (II, 230-235, 32)

Imitation, not servile copying, ultimately leads to a richer artwork – one that is describable and contains the potential for true innovation or genius. Like a parent cautioning his rebellious offspring Reynolds admonishes any pretensions to prodigal originality:

A student unacquainted with the attempts of former adventurers, is always apt to over-rate his own abilities; to mistake the most trifling excursions for discoveries of moment, and every coast new to him, for a new found country. If by chance he passes beyond his usual limits, he congratulates his own arrival at those regions which they who have steered a better course have long left behind them. . . . The productions of such minds are seldom distinguished by an air of originality: They are anticipated in their happiest efforts; and if they are found to differ in any thing from their predecessors, it is only in irregular sallies and trifling conceits. (II, 88-97, 27-28)

Reynolds describes a modern genius who distinguishes himself by bridging the classical past and the liberal present. True imitation serves the same

purpose in the visual arts as it does the literary ones. Like Johnson's discussions of Homer and Virgil, Reynolds uses Raphael and Michelangelo as the models of a broadly conceived bridge to the classical aesthetic, which the academy itself was designed to emulate and bring to the nation as a whole.¹⁶ What J.C.D. Clark observes of Johnson and poetry is equally true of Reynolds and painting: "It was English poetry's links with Greece and Rome which affirmed its commitment to themes of general application to the human condition, to the noble and to the sublime. It was in these terms that Johnson praised the ancients" (24 -25). The ability of art to say something serious about the human condition rests in its ability to say something general and universal about that condition, *not* something locally relevant or precise. Thus, for Reynolds great artworks can become the exemplary expression of general truths.

The unification of the sensible, feeling subject and the rational, pure, thinking subject seem tantalizingly close to reconciliation in a model of the artwork as truth-teller. Paintings themselves (as long as they are works of genius) can contain the "general" language of humanity that is re-describable through the modern critical languages of form, technique, and style. Reynolds attempts to show how the secular languages of technique and form are the best discursive means to accessing the knowledge contained in both ancient and modern artwork (modern meaning the Italian Renaissance). Political and social insight (including moral insight) resides not, as we tend to think, in the political or even allegorical details (though these are not unimportant). However, comprehension of such details, in light of technical choices and stylistic challenges, enables students to build intuitively on what has come before. In such a context critical language is only a discussion about knowledge – it is not knowledge in and of itself.

Reynolds ultimately set his sights on a lofty notion of style as "a power over materials by which conceptions or sentiments are conveyed" (II, 240-245, 32). Style subsumes the techniques of coloring, light and shadow, subject, outline, etc., but like the term genius is not simply the composite effect of those elements. One must take into account the way in which the artist offers a unique expression of style. Hence a critical account of style is never a literal account of *the whole* that art possesses (ibid, 245-248, 32). Rather, style is a limited discursive account of that whole. This subsequently forces us back to the unique, canonical, exemplary object.

The "great style" is most venerated in Reynolds' theory of art and can subsume the lesser style of ornamentation (V, 246-365, 84). However, it is "char-

¹⁵ Johnson, *Lives*: "Those writers who lay on the watch for novelty could have little hope of greatness; for greatness cannot have escaped former observation" (Vol.1).

¹⁶ Again See Hoock cited above.

acteristic style” that brings the politics of subjectivity into play most effectively. For the purposes of this essay an analysis of the great style will be postponed in favor of exploration of Reynolds’ notion of characteristic style. Characteristic style (unlike great or ornamental style) is unique to a particular artist. Like other forms of style it is understood through the study of art history. Being able to recognize characteristic style as a unique record of human consciousness is necessary for the critic as well as the painter. The study of this kind of style merges the erudition process of the professional and the connoisseur into something that should look quite familiar: an academic with a broad historical narrative who can identify the unique form of world-knowledge present in a body of works. By providing a list of examples from across the classic, modern, and contemporary canons Reynolds demonstrates how to pull coherent rules from comparative sources without sacrificing the notion of individuality. He also produces an institutionally validated discursive account of the aesthetic experience via empirically verifiable, man-made objects of study.

By using style to position the artist and critic on either side of the artwork (temporally), Reynolds reinforces the notion that the artwork is an expression of something unique involving the subjective human experience but giving rise to objective standards for future judgment. Because the artwork already presents an internal reconciliation of subject and object, it addresses the problem of the viewer’s appropriate aesthetic response. Taste cannot only be exercised (in contemplation or enjoyment of the artwork) but can potentially be instructed by its own object of study. Rather than simply being the occasion for aesthetic dispute, the artwork becomes a model of aesthetic reconciliation – where the spectator’s sensory experience (translated into considerations of form, proportion, light, and color) is brought into concert with the broad intellectual concern for something which contains truth beyond our “gross physical selves” that reason alone cannot access. Hence, artworks do not simply speak about *or to* our subjectivity; they provide *authoritative models of subjectivity* – demonstrable connections between the empirical and the ideal. The ideal, that necessarily

eludes language, is accessed through the great visual artwork. By contending with “mechanical” issues of practice as well the discursive philosophic problem of “knowing” the world, it becomes easier to elevate the social status of the artwork and use it as an instructive model of consciousness, individual and national.¹⁷ Reynolds posits the artwork as the bridge between the ideal and the practical, and even the ethical and moral. Art is no longer where we work out our own aesthetic criteria or reflective judgment; it is where we authenticate such criteria. By approaching art as a science, Reynolds ultimately defines the artwork as a pathway through the laws of reason and the natural, physical world (the particular) to those of the metaphysical one (the general, the ideal). Hence Reynolds can assert, without fear of contradicting himself, that “Reason, without a doubt, must ultimately determine everything; at this minute it is required to inform us when that very reason is to give way to feeling” (XIII, 88-90, 231).

There is much more to be said about the significance of broad philosophic concerns to *The Discourses on Art* and in particular Reynolds’ engagement with problems of consciousness and subjectivity. This paper merely introduces a few of these concerns. In the *Discourses* the artwork itself becomes an exemplary reconciliation of problems of human consciousness and is transformed into a knowledge possessing object of a knowledge seeking critical discourse. The appeal to genius, imitation and style are intertwined with the promotion of the study of art as a legitimate critical-academic undertaking. Considering that modern criticism emerges out of conserving academic traditions as much as avant-garde intellectual traditions, it is perhaps not surprising that contemporary critics find themselves arguing, like Reynolds, that art itself holds the key understanding the aesthetic experience of art. Similarly, in the attempt to advocate for the always-maligned artwork (particularly historical, marginalized, and non-canonical works) criticism continually finds itself granting those artworks a conspicuous sort of knowledge producing agency – one which ultimately defeats the very discursive undertakings they purportedly occasion.

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¹⁷ Due to length constraints I have eliminated the discussion of the relationship between Reynolds’ model of subjectivity and nationalism which is essential to any substantial study of Reynolds’ engagement with public discourse. See *The Ideology of Reynolds’ Discourses on Art*, cited above. See also, Alison Conway, “Private Interests: The Portrait and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England.” *Eighteenth Century Life* 21.3 (1997) 1-15. John Barrell *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: The Body of the Public*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. More recently, Holger Hoock, cited above.

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