THE ART OF CLIVE BELL’S \textit{Art}

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I

As an art critic Clive Bell has always suffered in comparison with Roger Fry. He was not a painter and claimed not to analyse pictures so much as to appreciate them. Fry’s greater originality is evidenced in the ideas that Bell begged, borrowed, and sometimes (to Fry’s irritation) stole from him. Bell may, indeed, be the least liked member of Bloomsbury. His friends and relatives acknowledged his generosity, charm, and vitality; he was second to none in Bloomsbury in his capacity for admiration and enjoyment, and Desmond MacCarthy thought it «impossible to overestimate the part played by him in the creation of Bloomsbury\textsuperscript{1}». But Bell has been found wanting by biographers and critics of the Group – as a husband, a father, and especially a brother-in-law. It is undeniable that he was a wealthy snob, hedonist, and womaniser, a racist and an anti-Semite (but not a homophobe), who changed from a liberal socialist and pacifist into a reactionary appeaser. Bell’s reputation has led to his being underestimated in the history of Bloomsbury; there is no collected edition of his works or his lively correspondence. Yet despite Fry’s greater achievements as a critic, nothing he wrote has had as wide an influence as Bell’s book on art.

Clive Bell’s \textit{Art} is the first of Bloomsbury’s manifestos. It ranks with Lytton Strachey’s \textit{Eminent Victorians} and John Maynard Keynes’ \textit{The Economic Consequences of the Peace} as a Bloomsbury polemic. \textit{Art} and \textit{Eminent Victorians}, published four years apart, changed the interpretation of visual art and the writing of biography in English. And as amusing, effective critiques of nineteenth century English culture, both have been attacked in their turn. Some of the denunciations of \textit{Eminent Victorians} realise that irony and exaggeration were part of its disputatious form, but the critiques of \textit{Art} do not often recognise that it

too is a polemic. Despite Ruskin, Whistler, Pater, and Wilde, English art criticism is still not much thought of in literary terms. Art is making a series of arguments, to be sure, and these must be evaluated, but to appreciate the significance of Bell’s book, more than its reasoning must be examined. The importance of Art cannot be dismissed merely with assertions that its concept of significant form is tautological, its art history simplistic, or its aesthetic emotion a phantom feeling.

In addition to the literary relevance of its form as a piece of writing for Bloomsbury’s literary history, the content, as it were, of Bell’s Art has influenced the theory of literature. Contrary to Fry, Bell maintained that the arts were not unified. « The “Difference” of Literature », as he titled one of his essays, meant that his aesthetic hypothesis of significant form did not apply to words. Yet the ideas of significant form and especially aesthetic emotion in Art have appealed to literary critics, and throughout his own writings, Bell relied on analogies between visual and verbal art. And Bell himself later expanded his definition of significant form to include literature, as well as retracting his contentious history of art. But he never gave up his reliance on aesthetic emotion. These developments have been little noticed. Art has been « a book more quoted than read », Bell’s son has observed2. The purpose of this essay, then, is to offer a reading of Art that describes its form, arguments, qualifications, and something of its influence.

II

In 1905 Lytton Strachey wrote Leonard Woolf in Ceylon that Clive Bell, back from his year in Paris, had reported there was no adequate book on aesthetics, not even Longinus’s3. Kant, Hegel, Tolstoy, Santayana, Croce were all, it seems, unsatisfactory, untranslated, or unknown. (Fry’s edition of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s discourses had not yet appeared.) Bell picks up the theme in the first sentence of the first chapter of Art – a sentence that sets the book’s tone: « It is improbable that more nonsense has been written about aesthetics than about anything else: the literature of the subject is not large enough for that4 » (p. 3). In his introduction, however, Bell acknowledges that Fry’s « An Essay in Aesthetics » has been the most helpful contribution since Kant (p. xi); then he takes as the title for the first chapter of his book Tolstoy’s What Is Art?, the expressive theory of which was so useful

2 Quentin Bell, Elders and Betters (London: John Murray) p. 30.
3 Letter, 20 June 1905, Leonard Woolf papers, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.
4 References to Art are to J. B. Bullen’s edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).