

Clive Bell

Dr. Freud on Art (1925)*

Suppose an aesthete, armed with an hypothesis – he hypothesis, say, that Significant Form is the one thing common and peculiar to works of art – were to imagine that this hypothesis of his would explain every human activity: suppose, for instance, he were to tell you that what a poker-player really aims at is to hold a hand in which reds and blacks, court cards and plain, achieve a perfectly

harmonious and aesthetically satisfying rhythm, to which end he (the player) discards and draws; suppose he were to add that those persons who hopelessly lack aesthetic sensibility, who can never establish an aesthetically significant sequence, are the irremediably bad players: what would you think of him? Certainly, you would have to tell him that he was barking up the wrong tree; but whether

you would be justified in considering that this mania for forcing all nature to submit to a theory disabled his judgement on all questions is less clear. I beseech you to think twice or thrice before making up your mind; for on your decision depends the reputation of no less a person than Dr. Sigmund Freud.

Hark to him:

He (the artist) is one who is urged on by instinctive needs which are too clamorous; he longs to attain to honour, power, riches, fame, and the love of women; but he lacks the means of achieving these gratifications. So, like any other with an unsatisfied longing, he turns away from reality and transfers all his interest, and all his Libido too, on to the creation of his wishes: in the life of phantasy. . . He understands how to elaborate his day-dreams (*Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*).

The artist, in fact, is one who has set his heart on driving expensive women from expensive restaurants in expensive motorcars, on getting a title and becoming “a celebrity,” and generally living sumptuously. This, unluckily, he cannot afford to do. But he dreams; and he dreams so intensely that he can communicate his dreams to others, who share them, but cannot dream so vividly. For, in Dr. Freud’s words, “to those who are not artists the gratification that can be drawn from the springs of phantasy is very limited; their inexorable repressions prevent the enjoyment of all but the meagre day-dreams which can become conscious”. But through “the artist’s” “art” the public obtains, in the world of make-believe, satisfaction for its clamorous needs, and pays the artist so handsomely for the benefit that he soon obtains satisfaction for his in the world of reality. Art is, to stick to the Freudian jargon, “wish fulfilment”; the artist “realizes” his own dreams of being a great man and having a good time, and in so do-

ing gratifies a public which vaguely and feebly dreams the same dreams, but cannot dream them efficiently.

Now this, I dare say, is a pretty good account of what housemaids, and Dr. Freud presumably, take for art. Indeed the novelette is the perfect example of “wish fulfilment in the world of phantasy”. The housemaid dreams of becoming a great actress and being loved by a handsome earl; Dr. Freud dreams of having been born a handsome earl and loving a great actress. And for fifteen delirious minutes, while the story lasts, the dream comes true. But this has nothing to do with art. Any artist or any poker-player may, or may not, have a taste for expensive pleasures, but *qua* artist or poker-player he has other ends in view. The artist is not concerned with even the “sublimations” of his normal lusts, because he is concerned with a problem which is quite outside normal experience. His object is to create a form which shall match an aesthetic conception, not to create a form which shall satisfy Dr.

Freud’s unappeased longings. Neither Dr. Freud’s day-dreams of fame, women, and power, nor yet his own, are what the artist is striving to express; though they are what Dr. Freud and his like wish him to express. The artist’s problem is aesthetic; hence the endless quarrel about happy endings between a popular novelist who is ever so little an artist and his public. The public wants to have its wishes fulfilled; the artist wants to create a form which shall be aesthetically right. It is disagreeable for the young lady who has been dreaming of herself as Cordelia to be hanged in the last act. Shakespeare, however, was not considering the young lady’s dreams nor even his own of what would be a nice sort of world: he was concerned with an artistic problem. Of that problem Dr. Freud, unluckily, knows nothing. He knows nothing about art, or about the feelings of people who can appreciate art. There is no reason why he should know anything about either; only, being ignorant, he ought to have held his tongue.

Art has nothing to do with dreams. The artist is not one who dreams more vividly, but who is a good deal wider awake, than most people. His grand and absorbing problem is to create a form that shall match a conception, whatever that conception may be. He is a creator, not a dreamer. And we, who care for art, go to it, not for the fulfilment of our dreams of desirable life, but for something that life can never give – for that peculiar and quite disinterested state of mind which philosophers call aesthetic ecstasy. We ask the artist, not to make our dreams come true, but to give us a new thing, which comes out of his own experience.

I once heard Mr. Roger Fry trying to explain this to a roomful of psychoanalysts; and, following in his footsteps, I have attempted the same task myself. I have begged them – the psychologists – to believe that the emotion provoked in me by St Paul's Cathedral has nothing to do with my notion of having a good time. I have said that it

was comparable rather with the emotion provoked in a mathematician by the perfect and perfectly economical solution of a problem, than with that provoked in me by the prospect of going to Monte Carlo in particularly favourable circumstances. But they knew all about St Paul's Cathedral and all about quadratic equations and all about me apparently. So I told them that if Cézanne was for ever painting apples, that had nothing to do with an insatiable appetite for those handsome, but to me unpalatable, fruit. At the word "apples", however, my psychologists broke into titters. Apparently, they knew all about apples, too. And they knew that Cézanne painted them for precisely the same reason that poker-players desire to be dealt a pair of aces.

As a matter of fact, Cézanne would very likely have preferred flowers, the forms and colours of which are said by many to be even more inspiring than those of fruit; only flowers fade, and Cézanne was extraordinarily slow. It

was not till late in life he discovered that artificial flowers would serve his purpose just as well as real ones. Apples are comparatively durable; and apples can be depended upon to behave themselves. It was the steadiness as much as the comparative immarcescibility of apples which endeared them to Cézanne – a secret which once, by accident, he betrayed. He was painting a portrait of M. Ambroise Vollard, for which I have heard he demanded not less than fifty sittings. Now, in the warm Provençal afternoons, M. Vollard used to grow sleepy, and used sometimes to doze. But when the model dozes inevitably the pose changes. To counteract this danger Cézanne so arranged the chair on the model's throne that the slightest movement on the sitter's part would bring him crashing to the ground. M. Vollard's spirit was all right, but the flesh was weak; lunch was over, the afternoon warm, off nodded the sitter, and down came the chair. Slightly stunned – the throne was a high one – M. Vollard was

picking himself up when he saw and heard the artist advancing furiously upon him: *“Tu ne peux pas te tenir tranqui, donc? Pourquoi bouges-tu? Les pommes ne bougent pas”*. Unhappily, as the only language known to English psychologists is German, my story, like its subject, fell miserably flat.

Dr. Sigmund Freud has made himself slightly ridiculous by talking about things of which, he knows nothing, by imagining that the books and pictures he likes are works of art, and that the people who react to works of art feel what he feels for the books and pictures he likes. Are we, on this account, to conclude that Dr. Freud is not to be trusted on any subject? “Yes”, says Dr. Johnson.

A physician being mentioned who had lost his practice, because his whimsically changing his religion had made people distrustful of him, I maintained that this was unreasonable, as religion is unconnected with medical skill.

Johnson – Sir, it is not unreasonable; for when people see a man absurd in what they understand, they may conclude the same of him in what they do not understand.

But I doubt the great doctor was a little hasty and, like Dr. Freud himself, something given to generalizing on insufficient data. To me it seems that Dr. Freud may be an excellent psychoanalyst; but I am sure he had better leave art alone.

* *Dr. Freud on Art*, "The Dial", 78.4, April 1925, pp. 280-284.

[This original version of the text is published without any introduction. If you are interested, see the "Nota introduttiva" in the Italian version. *Ed.*]

Clive Bell (1881-1963), art critic and philosopher of art, is one of the most important proponents of formalism in aesthetics. He was associated with the Bloomsbury Group, along with Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, Roger Fry and many others. Among his publications are *Art*, Frederick A. Stokes, New York 1913; *Since Cézanne*, Chatto and Windus London 1922; *Landmarks in Nineteenth-century Painting*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1927; *Enjoying Pictures: Meditations in the National Gallery and Elsewhere*, Harcourt Brace, New York 1934; *Old Friends: Personal Recollections*. Harcourt Brace, New York 1956. See also D. Laing, *Clive Bell: An Annotated Bibliography of the Published Writings*, Garland, New York 1983.