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# Sir Joshua Reynolds' 'Discourses': Anticipating a Movement beyond the 'Form' towards Ontology in Art

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## Abstract:

The paper tries to read the 'Discourses' or speeches addressed between 1769-1790 by Sir Joshua Reynolds to his students as the first President of Royal Academy of Arts, London, as a gradual movement of aesthetics from interminable formal/particular debates to theories of romantic emanation or still later, of a sense of ontological being, complete with historical awareness and temporal situation. Reynolds' statements require analysis not as mere pre-romantic ambiguities but definitive aesthetic reflections on ancient and contemporary art with an increasing cognizance of particularity as a tenet of modernity in art.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics, Ontology, Reynolds, Form, Particular, History Painting

One of the major concerns of 18th century Aesthetics was the fascination with the pure 'form' or the 'Ideal'. If, in accordance with the predominant train of western aesthetic thought since antiquity, all art was considered imitation, then the closest approximation to geometric abstracts could be met in the most simplistic of art: outlines of the form, free from added embellishments of color or texture, which tend to increase rather than decrease the removal of the art object from the Ideal. Sir Joshua Reynolds was known to have addressed to his students thus:

A firm and determined outline is one of the characteristics of the great style in painting; and, let me add, that he who possesses the knowledge of the exact form, that every part of Nature ought to have, will be fond of expressing that knowledge with correctness and precision in all his works. (Reynolds, 1<sup>st</sup> Speech)

Yet it has been observed that what imparts the best art objects their splendor is the precision and detailing with which the particulars of its model are represented in all life-likeness to the viewer. Clearly there is already an acquaintance with two definite aspects of imitation in visual or plastic arts: 1. imitation of the conceived abstract ideal or the 'form', like pure geometric concepts; and 2. imitation of a perceived object that is a single instance of perception only, such as an algebraic variable  $x$ . To return to the general trend that pervaded most aesthetic influences in the west, one must return to Socrates, in the *Theatetus* where he states that knowledge is true belief with an account (c. 369 B.C, p.201d-210a). The idea clearly invokes the twin tenets of rational thought or validity of argument on one hand, and the subjectivity of opinion on the other. The proportion of each element in this tricky phrase induced debates in the academia as to what exactly must constitute the admixture in what quantity. Ages later, the influence seems to have lost not much fervor as even Hegel, in his lectures on aesthetics recognizes artistic judgment broadly in terms of 1. Content and 2. Presentation. (Hegel, 1975) In other words, art-object must comprise of the ideal 'form' to be striven for and the particular instance to be simulate. The concern led up to the crucial question of artistic representation: What must the artist imitate or what would be the object of an artist's study?

The stock answer was of course, that the artist must imitate 'Nature'. But within it loomed inherent ambiguities that grew out of a tradition of skeptical doubt over perceptive capacities of Man; and a yearning for universal perfection attached to the special meaning of the word 'Nature'. It was a collective Ideal that was free from customary deficiencies and therefore impossible to be located in a single individual object or model.

Among numerous discourses on art at a time when aesthetics was for the first time being treated with concerns other than metaphysical, I would attempt to see *The Seven Discourses* of Sir Joshua Reynolds in the light of the much criticized ambiguities that seemingly fail to draw up a 'system' of aesthetic philosophy. In the critical climate of neoclassicism, many certainties were shaken, contrary to the simplistic association of the 18th century with methodology and encyclopedic classification. Aesthetic doubt is integral to it. How far is observed beauty true? At the same time, is not Truth devoid of 'form' if it is not absolutely beautiful? Initially, Reynolds' *'Discourses'* give expression to the greatest aversion of the neoclassical aesthete: the aversion to deformity or disfigurement. It is the artists' creed to rise above the deformities that are all made available to him for the real world, to extract the true 'form' to be imitated to perfection:

Thus it is from a reiterated experience, and a close comparison of the objects in Nature, that an artist becomes possessed of the idea of that central form... from which every deviation is deformity. But... I know...of one method of shortening the road...by a careful study of the works of the ancient sculptors; who, being indefatigable in the school of Nature, have left models of that perfect form behind them, which an artist would prefer as supremely beautiful... (Reynolds, 1<sup>st</sup> Speech)

What Reynolds seems to suggest now, is an approximation of the form by extensive study of numerous particulars. The act of 'subsuming' was similar to the mathematical set in which the Ideal was the universal set imbibing subsets of particularities. Spinoza's concept of the '*sub specie aeternitatis*' became the indispensable expression to describe the primacy of the eternal form. There is, however, ample space for obvious shortcomings to this formulaic venture of perfecting art by leaping from particular to the ideal. Being well read in a vast canon of art history, possessing a natural love for reason and being of a very malleable disposition, Reynolds did not fail to see the inadequacy of the compromised resolution of the Ideal/particular debate. It was interesting that Reynolds did not seem to mind ambiguities, thus displaying mildly relational tendencies throughout the *'Discourses'* that puzzled critics way into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The present, or the immediately observable is the only available 'model' to 'spark the imagination of the viewer', whereas the greatness of the artist is in his ability to perceive the irrefutable 'form'. (Refer to Figure 1) I refer to the same text again,

I am very ready to allow that some circumstances of minuteness and particularity frequently tend to give an air of truth to a piece, and to interest the spectator in an extraordinary manner. Such circumstances, therefore, cannot wholly be rejected; but if there be anything in the art which requires peculiar nicety of discernment, it is the disposition of these minute circumstantial parts which, according to the judgment employed the choice, *become so useful to truth or so injurious to grandeur.* (Italics mine, Reynolds, 2<sup>nd</sup> Speech)

But again, how far did Reynolds' 'grand style' of painting come as an ideal compromise? What was 'useful to truth' was imitation of ascertained history, complete in its detailing of fact. But the problem was that the truth often imbibed anomalies within the framework of an otherwise conceived ideal form. Apparently, the *'Discourses'* tend to maintain a position of rejecting the 'school of superfluity' if ever they should come to challenge the higher principles of

art of the ancient masters like Raphael. But notably, he segregated the history painter from the painter of portraits. Being one of both, Reynolds' own expression of his notions on canvas must be taken into account, along with those as Reynolds as the President of Royal Academy. Moreover, it was one of his supreme innovations to take up history painting to a new flavor by impersonation of his sitters from the genteel classes to serve as models for heroism. While it was a common practice to use common models for mythical figures, the practice found sudden favor within the aristocratic society Reynolds was so popular in, which resulted in an uncomplimentary 'rococo' epithet used to casually dismiss much of his art in the later decades. Some of his assertions in the *'Discourses'*, likewise, do not seem hostile to 'portraiture' at all:

All... painters have, in general, the same right, in different degrees, to the name of a painter, which a satirist, an epigrammatist, a sonneteer, a writer of pastorals, or descriptive poetry, has to that of a poet. In the same rank, and, perhaps, of not so great merit, is the cold painter of portraits. But his correct and just imitation of his object has its merit. (Reynolds, 2<sup>nd</sup> Speech)

One may allude to certain excerpts from Sir Joshua Reynolds' recorded social life, studied in detail by Richard Wendorf. In discussing what he calls the portrait painter's 'art of pleasing', there is an implicit questionability of the attempt of portraying truth on the canvas. Wendorf questions, does the artwork then depict either the truth of the artist's intentions or the truth of the countenance of the sitter? Wendorf exemplifies Reynolds' acceptance of certain limits of his art in his comment, "(T)he habits of my profession un-luckily extend to the consideration of so much only of character as lies on the surface, as is expressed in the lineaments of the countenance..." (Wendorf, 1998, 24) It is notable, says Wendorf that Reynolds does not ignore that the portrait painter is bound to the surface and the moment only. Here, we may reflect, can this not be said of the history painter as well, the only difference being that the captured moment is a similar account of the surface but of the temporal past? Painting history can ascertain its truth only in so far as it is ascertained by language or textual documentation already. What then, would be the most interesting, valid and useful subject of art? Reynolds mentions:

With respect to the choice, no subject can be proper that is not generally interesting. It ought to be either some eminent instance of heroic action or heroic suffering. There must be something either in the action or in the object in which men are universally concerned, and which powerfully strikes upon the public sympathy. (Reynolds, 2<sup>nd</sup> Speech)

The great ideal of 'history painting' can be approached only by empirical means, by 'removing the veil', a process to be arduously strived for, not a moment of metaphysical revelation but an exercise of reason based on experience. Reynolds' inclinations towards the relative does not imply, as Blake felt, that the first half of his *'Discourses'* are altered drastically by the second, so much so that they seem to have been written by a different hand altogether (Malone, 1798). Rather Reynolds' historicism does not alter the universal primarily because to him, it is essentially a Nature of the universal to remain so while retaining infinite strands of multiplicity. I refer to Gunter Leypoldt's essay where he employs an idea of Locke's associationism, to describe how imitation of ancient ornaments in the tradition of Greeks bring up reflections of the entire stream of European culture that springs from the heritage, and relate to the present admiration of 'native' ornaments (Leypoldt, 1999, 331-349). Leypoldt goes on to explain how Reynolds' own queries about the incorporation of historicity in art led to Reynolds at his "most modern" (Leypoldt, 1999, 345). These mythical heroes of antiquity, gods and goddesses, even though distant from modern experience have become 'general' to artistic admiration by a combination of associating with historical experience and yearning for the glorious ideal. As Reynolds notes, this great ideal

perfection and beauty are not to be sought in the heavens, but upon the earth, by expertise of the artist in recognizing and distinguishing between the deformed individual and the perfect form, by altering the historical 'relative' by pure artistic judgment. Reynolds further clarifies that beliefs 'based on opinion' may masquerade as truth which brings a modern perspective into the framework. He emphasizes that the mind must direct itself according to 'opinion' as they 'operate' the path to the end, that is, to Truth. These ideas tend to subvert much of the orthodoxy ascribed to neoclassical concern with the form by imparting a historical and cultural value to it. Form does not remain independent of Time, but carries numerous histories in it. Thus pulled out of the simplistic tradition of relating imitation to emulating 'beauty' while rejecting 'deformity' to construct a philosophical perfection, Reynolds' art becomes an imprint of historicism with an immanent possibility of form-ation. Thus he speaks in relating the genius of the sublime artist with day-to-day practical reason or common sense: "It is necessary that at some time or other we should see things as they really are, and not impose on ourselves by that false magnitude with which objects appear when viewed indistinctly as through a mist." (Reynolds, 5<sup>th</sup> Speech)

The universalism of 'form' lies in its difference from passing sensation as passing sensation involves an immediate experience of time. Here Reynolds addresses a new question: Can the form undergo repeated metamorphosis over events in history as well as representations in transmission of history (both being functions of time), and therefore tends to become an 'ideal-liable-to-contingency'?

This would mean art objects, in imitating certain peak points of history lose their adherence to the ground model of preconceived form. When Reynolds talks of the difference in the dressing style of Cherokee Indians, he is at his most appreciative of contingency and multiplicity in art. His views are somewhat similar to Winckelmann here, when he associates differences in taste of garment and ornament to local 'Natures', but he differs in that he does not consider any single Nature superior or inferior. Such terms are not only to be seen from a racial perspective but from aesthetic considerations of beauty. Evidently Reynolds provided in his *Discourses* an extremely flexible conception of the art object. The ultimate judgment was reserved for the discernment of the true master of high art or the genius:

Raffaelle had more taste and fancy, Michael Angelo more genius and imagination... Raffaelle's materials are generally borrowed, though the noble structure is his own... Nobody excelled him in that judgment, with which he united to his own observations on Nature the energy of Michael Angelo, and the beauty and simplicity of the antique. To the question, therefore, which ought to hold the first rank, Raffaelle or Michael Angelo, it must be answered...there is no doubt but Raffaelle is the first. But if, according to Longinus, 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. (Reynolds, 3<sup>rd</sup> Speech)

This vague ascription to an artistic genius, however, did not resolve our question as to what, other than the form and the particular, must an artist look for to build in his best works. So far his arguments about certain terms dominating the neoclassical academic circles has been discussed such as 'form', 'particular' and 'history' and 'Ideal', but Reynolds' perspective seems to turn and broaden out immensely in scope when he imparts a Kantian disinterested-ness to art-objects. Unlike Kant in some respects, Reynolds is careful not to attach pure imagination with genius, as the Romantic imagination is a complete detachment with either the higher form or the empirical particular or both. The Nature of good art is elemental and essential, a feature of itself and in itself, that is, to use a rather unbecomingly modern term, the 'being' of the art-object. In

talking of this 'harmony' that livens the art-object and promotes itself to a greater purpose than the concept form of the artist or the perceived particular of worldly models, Reynolds hints at an intrinsic being of art which will be further analyzed in due course. The art object, in comprising history and culture immanent in it, does not exist merely *now*, but had been being on its own accord. The 'Nature' ascribed to the ancient masterpieces of art cease being mere ideals but merge with popular culture to perform a historical function in shaping the present actuality of art. According to Reynolds, it is vain for painters to try to invent without prior materials. Nothing, he remarks, can come of nothing. (Reynolds, 1<sup>st</sup> Speech)

This not only rejects Romantic imagination as the third prerequisite of art, but introduces a very modern ontological concern to it. According to Martha Woodmansee, Aesthetic autonomy emerged in 18<sup>th</sup> century Germany from the ideas of Karl Philipp Moritz who questioned the concerns of Meldenssohn among others of his time who felt the immense power of art-objects lay in their metaphysical intension to *move* us. To Moritz, she says, the purpose of imitation has been replaced by the purpose of pleasure so that it is only the artist who is bound by the limits of the ideal of form, whereas the art object, once viewed, springs out of the confines of artistic conception and moves beyond it into endless possibilities of visual and tactile pleasure. (Woodmansee, 2003) Also, similar idea was emphasized by Kant in *The Critique of Judgment* where he explicitly dismisses teleology from aesthetic judgment. Whereas 'interest' or intension had been ascribed to the order of the particular, Kant rejected teleological direction of art in favor of pure and intrinsically immanent beauty. This intrinsic Nature of a good art-object is clearly not the hitherto known Platonic form. Kant emphasizes universality but the universal does not remain a metaphysical ideal that the art-object exists to imitate. It becomes more and more apparent that an undefinable possibility is being ascribed to potentially stirring art, or art that '*moves*' the viewer in ways never conceived by the artist. This 'possibility' might be the quality of the art object that it takes up in its process of its being. Reynolds' views on the subject suggest a similar innate being of art independent of metaphysical purpose. The artist's task is limited to 'unveiling' of already existing nature of art-object that imbibes history in its essential existence.

Associative ideas of history are not separable from the aesthetic object. Hence perception of beauty, in spite of being relational, is authentic as aesthetic experience of the viewer. As viewers, we tend to find pleasure in this very aesthetic experience, "though we are satisfied that neither Nature nor reason are the foundation of those beauties which we imagine we see in that art..." (Reynolds, Seventh Speech)

Clearly, the aesthetic experience derived from the object of art owes itself to more than either perceptible individual properties or abstract reason. The term 'foundation' put forward the existence of art as an independent being. Reynolds is clear in his agreement to the fact that "we are creatures of prejudice" (Reynolds, Seventh speech) and does not find anything disagreeable in it. Art is subject to mechanisms of fashion which are arbitrary and undeniable in its ascription to unfolding of events in history. Facts may be disfigurement of the greater Truth but they modify and shape art of the present none the less. Therefore, while he does rest grandeur of art to objective form, response to art is subject to fluctuations and changes. This is nothing but the nature of art, its tendency to spark opinions, its innate possibility that has grown out of its immanent multiplicity of cultures and histories.

An interesting instance of Reynolds' undogmatic stance is his reaction to Benjamin West's historical painting of *The Death of General Wolfe* (Refer to Figure 3) in which the painter depicted the modern hero of the American war in contemporary soldiers' garb which did not ascribe to conventions of history painting in the 'grand style' that was in fashion in academic and cultural

circles. Initially, in 1770, Reynolds as the President of the Royal Academy objected to the introduction of contemporary costumes into a story edifying heroism because, for him, painting's greatest strength was its ability to tell morally encouraging stories without the limitations of facts coerced by language. He argued that the classic costume of antiquity was much more becoming to his subject than the modern garb of war. The contemporary meant specific and local, ideas that did not regard the 'form' that was ideally represented in nudity and sublime classical décor. Reynolds was, however, influenced favorably by West's argument in response to this criticism. Charles Mitchell notes, West had argued:

...(T)he event intended to be commemorated took place...on the 13th of September, 1758 in a region of the world unknown to the Greeks and Romans, and at a period of time when no such nations, nor heroes in their costume, any longer existed....It is a topic which will proudly record, the same truth that guides the pen of the historian should guide the pencil of the artist...if... instead of the facts of transaction, I represent classical fiction... how shall I be understood by posterity! (Mitchell, 1944)

To this, Reynolds had replied that he indeed had been mistaken and that not only would the painting be one of the most popular history pieces but also occasion a revolution in art (Mitchell, 1944) This new dimension to history painting was indeed revolutionary as it brought forth aspects of visual arts hitherto unaddressed. History in image would henceforth be realized within the verifiable authenticity of linguistic or 'factual' history. History of the red-jacket uniforms would be as aesthetic as history of toga wearers. All discourses would flourish in simultaneity in a universal archeology. Yet history painting was not merely an assortment of facts but deeply immersed in a sense of nostalgia for localized culture that emerges, for instance, in the works of Gauguin later. What had happened was that the demands of the universal 'form' were increasingly pitted against the demands of narrative, movement of action or flux of history. The universal could no longer be static. As explained earlier, Reynolds' approbation of expression of racio-cultural and historical differences such as those between the European and the Ethiopian, do not allow one to dogmatize the universalism which was so typical to the age. The art object is enmeshed in multiplicity and dynamism. This is in keeping with Reynolds' so called ambiguous' or 'relativist' shifting-ideal or shifting-Nature. He remarks:

But...when we criticize Rembrandt and other Dutch painters, who introduced into their historical pictures exact representations of individual objects with all their imperfections, we say, though it is not in a good taste, *yet it is Nature*. (Italics mine, Reynolds, 5<sup>th</sup> Speech)

This distinctly modern element in Reynolds' aesthetic 'system' seems to have been widely misinterpreted by perceiving it as a weakness of his philosophy. At the same time, why was it that modernity became increasingly concerned with its own intrinsic value as aesthetic objects more than anything else? Did this imply that art was gradually losing eternal meaning or that it would be confined to transience and relativism? To these questions, one could certainly say that art in the modern sense has become increasingly concerned with its historical as well as philosophical 'about-ness', to use a term described by Arthur C. Danto<sup>1</sup> in context of evaluation (and necessity?) of art, 'after the end of history', that is, post Hegel. The doubt about modern art, whether if all a 'relativist' art is of any use to the world any more arises because of the already mentioned subservience of history-in-image to history-in-words. In the face of history written down explicitly as anthropology, and the absence of mythical glorification, where does art stand, if not,

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<sup>1</sup> Danto used the term in 1998 to suggest the embodiment of meaning in art seen interpretively. For further reading, see References.

mysteriously, for its own sake? 'About-ness', the 'embodiment' of meaning in art-object is what makes essentialism possible within a context of historicism. However, I must add, perhaps capriciously, that 'about-ness' is not, at least conceptually a sudden development as there may be found ample traces of the emergence of the ontological importance of the art object in an academia preoccupied with anthropology by this time.

Martin Heidegger's dominance over modern ontology had surprisingly little influence over aesthetic studies as such, primarily because he did not address too many issues related to the fine arts except for a few observations in his essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (first published in 1950), which will be analyzed in the final section of this paper. From the two objects of art, the pair of peasant shoes painted by Van Gogh and the Greek temple ruins, which he uses among his examples, two aspects of the Nature of art-objects emerge (Refer to Figures 4 and 5): firstly, that the being of art-objects involve things setting themselves to 'work'; and secondly, being of art objects involve things placing themselves in 'earth'. While the former springs forth in its active life, the latter fights for concealment. Both these innate qualities that reside in art-objects clearly reveal their 'nature'. This is in spite of the fact that Heidegger's entire philosophy was pivoted on the forgotten historicity of civilization which is ironically internal to the vision of 'future' of mankind, that is, of metaphysics itself. In *Being and Time* he says that the occupation of philosophy is to locate one's own historical situation. Further he goes on to describe every aspect of philosophy as an attempt to understand one's own time as a function of past, as a coherent response free from discord of disjointed-ness in time. Simplistically put, future (philosophy) imbibes present (culture) imbibes past (history). (Is this not very reminiscent of Reynolds' ideas of depiction of, say, Tragedy through an actress in the garb of the muse?) Further, Heidegger presents an importance of historical being of man, not as a mere recipient of religious or mythological impressions but as an active participant in what he calls the 'world-picture', as 'Wesen' or something that 'holds sway' in its ongoing presence. (Heidegger, 1977, 3-35) He emphasizes that it is an essential phenomenon of the modern period that art "moves into the purview of aesthetics" and is "consequently considered an expression of human life." Clearly, this element becomes a third feature of art objects. The most interesting term that I feel might anticipate Danto's 'about-ness' is Heidegger's 'subiectum' in the aforementioned essay, which he defines as that aspect of being which makes him gather the surrounding events as 'ground' while carrying forward the same in time in its subjectivity. Of course, Heidegger used it to define the being of Man, whereas Danto stepped further to impart this centrality to art as being and subject. The significance of art, says Danto, is 'mined' from history. The narrative of art culminates into an exposition of an internal drive of art, which means that there is no more a single narrative that creates art that can be described in terms of a sound philosophical 'theory'. There is immanent knowledge in arts *about* arts that have been before. The antithetical relation between Nature and history, or 'form' and particular, therefore, shatters in the presence of such an ontological possibility of art. Perhaps it is this mysterious third end of good art that Reynolds could perceive but not fully frame. Nevertheless, the dismissal of Reynolds' *Discourses* as confused and unsystematic owing to his pre-timed assertions in a transitional age, is rather inadequate and naïve.

**Figures:**



**Figure 1: Pietro Antonio Novelli, *Attitudes of Lady Hamilton*, 1791  
As an example of a 'model' substituting for divine subjects.**



**Figure 2: Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1771**



Figure 3: Vincent Van Gogh, *Shoes*, 1887



Figure 5: The Temple of Aphaia in Aegina, c.500 BCE.

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