

Art and its objects



1

'What is art?' 'Art is the sum or totality of works of art.' 'What is a work of art?' 'A work of art is a poem, a painting, a piece of music, a sculpture, a novel. ...' 'What is a poem? a painting? a piece of music? a sculpture? a novel? ...' 'A poem is ..., a painting is ..., a piece of music is ...' a sculpture is ...' a novel is ...'

It would be natural to assume that, if only we could fill in the gaps in the last line of this dialogue, we should have an answer to one of the most elusive of the traditional problems of human culture: the nature of art. The assumption here is, of course, that the dialogue, as we have it above, is consequential. This is something that, for the present, I shall continue to assume.

2

It might, however, be objected that, even if we could succeed in filling in the gaps on which this dialogue ends, we should still not have an answer to the traditional question, at any rate as this has been traditionally intended. For that question has always been a demand for a unitary answer, an answer of the form 'Art is ...'; whereas the best we could now hope for is a plurality of answers, as many indeed as the arts or media that we initially distinguish. And if it is now countered that we could always get a unitary answer out of what we would then have, by putting together all the particular answers into one big disjunction, this misses the point. For the traditional demand was certainly, if not always explicitly, intended to exclude anything by way of an answer that had this degree of complexity: precisely the use of the word 'unitary' is to show that what is not wanted is anything of the form 'Art is (whatever a poem is), or (whatever a painting is), or ...'

But why should it be assumed, as it now appears to be, that, if we think of Art as being essentially explicable in terms of different kinds of work of

art or different arts, we must abandon hope of anything except a highly complex conception of Art? For are we not overlooking the possibility that the various particular answers, answers to the questions What is a poem?, a painting?, etc., may, when they come, turn out to have something or even a great deal in common, in that the things they define or describe (i.e. works of art in their kinds) have many shared properties? For if this were so, then we would not have to resort to, at any rate we would not be confined to, mere disjunction. In what would be the area of overlap, we would have a base for a traditional type of answer: even if it later emerged that we could not move forward from this base, in that beyond a certain point the different arts remained intractably particular. For what this would show is that the traditional demand could not be satisfied in its totality, not that it was wrong ever to make it.

3

A procedure now suggests itself: and that is that what we should do is to try and first set out the various particular definitions or descriptions – what a poem is, what a painting is, etc. – and then, with them before us, see whether they have anything in common and, if they have, what it is. But though this procedure might have much to recommend it on grounds of thoroughness (later we may have to question this), it is barely practical. For it is unlikely that we could ever complete the initial or preparatory part of the task.

I shall, therefore, concede this much at least, procedurally, that is, to the objections of the traditionalist: that I shall start with what I have called the overlap. Instead of waiting for the particular answers and then seeing what they have in common, I shall try to anticipate them and project the area over which they are likely to coincide. And if this is now objected to on grounds that it reverses the proper order of inquiry, in that we shall be invited to consider and pronounce upon hypotheses before examining the evidence upon which they are supposedly based, my argument would be that we all do have in effect, already inside us, the requisite evidence. Requisite, that is, for the purpose, for the comparatively limited purpose, to hand: we all do have such experience of poetry, painting, music, etc. that, if we cannot (as I am sure we cannot) say on the basis of it what these things are, we can at least recognize when we are being told that they are something which in point of fact they are not. The claim has been made that human experience is adequate for the falsification, but never for the confirmation, of a hypothesis. Without committing myself either way

on this as a general philosophical thesis, I think that it is true enough in this area, and it is upon the asymmetry that it asserts that the procedure I propose to follow is based.

This procedure will bring us into contact at many points with certain traditional theories of art. But it is worth reiterating that it is no part of my present intention either to produce such a theory myself or to consider existing theories as such. There is an important difference between asking what Art is, and asking what (if anything) is common to the different kinds of work of art or different arts: even if the second question (my question) is asked primarily as a prelude to, or as prefatory of, the first.

4

Let us begin with the hypothesis that works of art are physical objects. I shall call this for the sake of brevity the 'physical-object hypothesis'. Such a hypothesis is a natural starting point: if only for the reason that it is plausible to assume that things are physical objects unless they obviously aren't. Certain things very obviously aren't physical objects. Now though it may not be obvious that works of art are physical objects, they don't seem to belong among these other things. They don't, that is, immediately group themselves along with thoughts, or periods of history, or numbers, or mirages. Furthermore, and more substantively, this hypothesis accords with many traditional conceptions of Art and its objects and what they are.

5

Nevertheless the hypothesis that all works of art are physical objects can be challenged. For our purposes it will be useful, and instructive, to divide this challenge into two parts: the division conveniently corresponding to a division within the arts themselves. For in the case of certain arts the argument is that there is no physical object that can with any plausibility be identified as the work of art: there is no object existing in space and time (as physical objects must) that can be picked out and thought of as a piece of music or a novel. In the case of other arts – most notably painting and sculpture – the argument is that, though there are physical objects of a standard and acceptable kind that could be, indeed generally are, identified as works of art, such identifications are wrong.

The first part of this challenge is, as we shall see, by far the harder to meet. However it is, fortunately, not it, but the second part of the challenge, that potentially raises such difficulties for aesthetics.

6

That there is a physical object that can be identified as *Ulysses* or *Der Rosenkavalier* is not a view that can long survive the demand that we should pick out or point to that object. There is, of course, the copy of *Ulysses* that is on my table before me now, there is the performance of *Der Rosenkavalier* that I will go to tonight, and both these two things may (with some latitude, it is true, in the case of the performance) be regarded as physical objects. Furthermore, a common way of referring to these objects is by saying things like ‘*Ulysses* is on my table’, ‘I shall see *Rosenkavalier* tonight’: from which it would be tempting (but erroneous) to conclude that *Ulysses* just is my copy of it, *Rosenkavalier* just is tonight’s performance.

Tempting, but erroneous; and there are a number of very succinct ways of bringing out the error involved. For instance, it would follow that if I lost my copy of *Ulysses*, *Ulysses* would become a lost work. Again, it would follow that if the critics disliked tonight’s performance of *Rosenkavalier*, then they dislike *Rosenkavalier*. Clearly neither of these inferences is acceptable.

We have here two locutions or ways of describing the facts: one in terms of works of art, the other in terms of copies, performances, etc. of works of art. Just because there are contexts in which these two locutions are interchangeable, this does not mean that there are no contexts, moreover no contexts of a substantive kind, in which they are not interchangeable. There very evidently are such contexts, and the physical-object hypothesis would seem to overlook them to its utter detriment.

7

But, it might now be maintained, of course it is absurd to identify *Ulysses* with my copy of it or *Der Rosenkavalier* with tonight’s performance, but nothing follows from this of a general character about the wrongness of identifying works of art with physical objects. For what was wrong in these two cases was the actual physical object that was picked out and with which the identification was then made. The validity of the physical-object hypothesis, like that of any other hypothesis, is quite unaffected by the consequences of misapplying it.

For instance, it is obviously wrong to say that *Ulysses* is my copy of it. Nevertheless, there is a physical object, of precisely the same order of being as my copy, though significantly not called a ‘copy’, with which such an identification would be quite correct. This object is the author’s manuscript: that, in other words, which Joyce wrote when he wrote *Ulysses*.

On the intimate connexion, which undoubtedly does exist, between a novel or a poem on the one hand and the author's manuscript on the other, I shall have something to add later. But the connexion does not justify us in asserting that one just is the other. Indeed, to do so seems open to objections not all that dissimilar from those we have just been considering. The critic, for instance, who admires *Ulysses* does not necessarily admire the manuscript. Nor is the critic who has seen or handled the manuscript in a privileged position as such when it comes to judgement on the novel. And – here we have come to an objection directly parallel to that which seemed fatal to identifying *Ulysses* with my copy of it – it would be possible for the manuscript to be lost and *Ulysses* to survive. None of this can be admitted by the person who thinks that *Ulysses* and the manuscript are one and the same thing.

To this last objection someone might retort that there are cases (e.g., *Love's Labour Won*, Kleist's *Robert Guiscard*) where the manuscript is lost and the work is lost, and moreover the work is lost because the manuscript is lost. Of course there is no real argument here, since nothing more is claimed than that there are *some* cases like this. Nevertheless the retort is worth pursuing, for the significance of such cases is precisely the opposite of that intended. Instead of reinforcing, they actually diminish the status of the manuscript. For if we now ask, When is the work lost when the manuscript is lost?, the answer is, When and only when the manuscript is unique: but then this would be true for any copy of the work were it unique.

Moreover, it is significant that in the case of *Rosenkavalier* it is not even possible to construct an argument corresponding to the one about *Ulysses*. To identify an opera or any other piece of music with the composer's holograph, which looks the corresponding thing to do, is implausible because (for instance), whereas an opera can be heard, a holograph cannot be. In consequence it is common at this stage of the argument, when music is considered, to introduce a new notion, that of the ideal performance, and then to identify the piece of music with this. There are many difficulties here: in the present context it is enough to point out that this step could not conceivably satisfy the purpose for which it was intended; that is, that of saving the physical-object hypothesis. For an ideal performance cannot be, even in the attenuated sense in which we have extended the term to ordinary performances, a physical object.

8

A final and desperate expedient to save the physical-object hypothesis is to suggest that all those works of art which cannot plausibly be identified

with physical objects are identical with classes of such objects. A novel, of which there are copies, is not my or your copy but is the class of all its copies. An opera, of which there are performances, is not tonight's or last night's performance, nor even the ideal performance, but is the class of all its performances. (Of course, strictly speaking, this suggestion doesn't save the hypothesis at all: since a class of physical objects isn't necessarily, indeed is most unlikely to be, a physical object itself. But it saves something like the spirit of the hypothesis.)

However, it is not difficult to think of objections to this suggestion. Ordinarily we conceive of a novelist as writing a novel, or a composer as finishing an opera. But both these ideas imply some moment in time at which the work is complete. Now suppose (which is not unlikely) that the copies of a novel or the performances of an opera go on being produced for an indefinite period: then, on the present suggestion, there is no such moment, let alone one in their creator's lifetime. So we cannot say that *Ulysses* was written by Joyce, or that Strauss composed *Der Rosenkavalier*. Or, again, there is the problem of the unperformed symphony, or the poem of which there is not even a manuscript: in what sense can we now say that these things even *exist*?

But perhaps a more serious, certainly a more interesting, objection is that in this suggestion what is totally unexplained is why the various copies of *Ulysses* are all said to be copies of *Ulysses* and nothing else, why all the performances of *Der Rosenkavalier* are reckoned performances of that one opera. For the ordinary explanation of how we come to group copies or performances as being of this book or of that opera is by reference to something else, something other than themselves, to which they stand in some special relation. (Exactly what this other thing is, or what is the special relation in which they stand to it is, of course, something we are as yet totally unable to say.) But the effect, indeed precisely the point, of the present suggestion is to eliminate the possibility of any such reference: if a novel or opera just is its copies or its performances, then we cannot, for purposes of identification, refer from the latter to the former.

The possibility that remains is that the various particular objects, the copies or performances, are grouped as they are, not by reference to some other thing to which they are related, but in virtue of some relation that holds between them: more specifically, in virtue of resemblance.

But, in the first place, all copies of *Ulysses*, and certainly all performances of *Der Rosenkavalier*, are not perfect matches. And if it is now said that the differences do not matter, either because the various copies or performances resemble each other in all relevant respects, or because they

resemble each other more than they resemble the copies or performances of any other novel or opera, neither answer is adequate. The first answer begs the issue, in that to talk of relevant respects presupposes that we know how, say, copies of *Ulysses* are grouped together: the second answer evades the issue, in that though it may tell us why we do not, say, reckon any of the performances of *Der Rosenkavalier* as performances of *Arabella*, it gives us no indication why we do not set some of them up separately, as performances of some third opera.

Secondly, it seems strange to refer to the resemblance between the copies of *Ulysses* or the performances of *Rosenkavalier* as though this were a brute fact: a fact, moreover, which could be used to explain why they were copies or performances of what they are. It would be more natural to think of this so-called 'fact' as something that itself stood in need of explanation: and, moreover, as finding its explanation in just that which it is here invoked to explain. In other words, to say that certain copies or performances are of *Ulysses* or *Rosenkavalier* because they resemble one another seems precisely to reverse the natural order of thought: the resemblance, we would think, follows from, or is to be understood in terms of, the fact that they are of the same novel or opera.

9

However, those who are ready to concede that some kinds of work of art are not physical objects will yet insist that others are. *Ulysses* and *Der Rosenkavalier* may not be physical objects, but the *Donna Velata* and Donatello's *St George* most certainly are.

I have already suggested (section 5) that the challenge to the physical-object hypothesis can be divided into two parts. It will be clear that I am now about to embark on the second part of the challenge: namely, that which allows that there are (some) physical objects that could conceivably be identified as works of art, but insists that it would be quite erroneous to make the identification.

(To some, such a course of action may seem superfluous. For enough has been said to disprove the physical-object hypothesis. That is true; but the argument that is to come has its intrinsic interest, and for that reason is worth developing. Those for whom the interest of all philosophical argument is essentially polemical, and who have been convinced by the preceding argument, may choose to think of that which is to follow as bearing upon a revised or weakened version of the physical-object hypothesis: namely, that some works of art are physical objects.)

10

In the Pitti there is a canvas (No. 245) 85 cm × 64 cm: in the Museo Nazionale, Florence, there is a piece of marble 209 cm high. It is with these physical objects that those who claim that the *Donna Velata* and the *St George* are physical objects would naturally identify them.

This identification can be disputed in (roughly) one or other of two ways. It can be argued that the work of art has properties which are incompatible with certain properties that the physical object has; alternatively it can be argued that the work of art has properties which no physical object could have: in neither case could the work of art be the physical object.

An argument of the first kind would run: We say of the *St George* that it moves with life (Vasari). Yet the block of marble is inanimate. Therefore the *St George* cannot be that block of marble. An argument of the second kind would run: We say of the *Donna Velata* that it is exalted and dignified (Wölfflin). Yet a piece of canvas in the Pitti cannot conceivably have these qualities. Therefore the *Donna Velata* cannot be that piece of canvas.

These two arguments, I suggest, are not merely instances of these two ways of arguing, they are characteristic instances. For the argument that there is an incompatibility of property between works of art and physical objects characteristically concentrates on the representational properties of works of art. The argument that works of art have properties that physical objects could not have characteristically concentrates on the expressive properties of works of art. The terms 'representational' and 'expressive' are used here in a very wide fashion, which, it is hoped, will become clear as the discussion proceeds.

11

Let us begin with the argument about representational properties. An initial difficulty here is to see exactly how the argument is supposed to fit on to the facts. For, as we have seen from the *St George* example, its tactic is to take some representational property that we ascribe to a work of art and then point out that there is some property that the relevant physical object possesses and that is incompatible with it, e.g. 'being instinct with life' and 'being inanimate'. But if we consider how, in point of fact, we do talk or think of works of representational art, we see that by and large what we ascribe representational properties to are elements or bits of the picture: it is only peripherally that we make such an attribution to the work itself, to the work, that is, as a whole.

Let us take, for instance, the justly famous descriptions given by Wölfflin of Raphael's Stanze in *Classic Art*: in particular, that of the *Expulsion of Heliodorus*. Wölfflin is generally thought of as a formalist critic. But if he is, it is in a very restricted sense: since, even when he is most assiduous in using the vocabulary of geometry to describe compositional devices, it is significant how he identifies the shapes or forms whose arrangements he analyses. He does so invariably by reference back to the characters or happenings that they depict. When, as in the Raphael descriptions, his aim is to bring out the dramatic content of a painting, he keeps extremely close to its representational aspect. What in such circumstances do we find him mentioning? The movement of the youths: the fallen Heliodorus, with vengeance breaking over him: the women and the children huddled together: the clambering pair of boys on the left who balance the prostrate Heliodorus on the right, and who lead the eyes backward to the centre where the High Priest is praying. Now all these particular elements, which seem the natural items of discourse in the description of a representational painting – or better, perhaps, of a painting in its representational function – provide no obvious point of application for the argument under consideration. For there would have to be, corresponding to each of these elements, a physical object such that we could then ask of it whether it possessed some property that is incompatible with the representational property we have ascribed to the element.

But, it will be objected, I have not given the situation in full. For even in the description of the *Expulsion of Heliodorus*, there are nonparticular or over-all representational attributions. Wölfflin, for instance, speaks of 'a great void' in the middle of the composition.

This is true. But it looks as though the argument requires more than this. It requires not just that there should exist such attributions but that they should be central to the notion of representation: that, for instance, it should be through them that we learn what it is for something to be a representation of something else. I want to argue that, on the contrary, they are peripheral. First, in a weaker sense, in that they have no priority over the more particular or specific attributions. The very general attributions come out of a very large range of attributions, and it certainly does not look as though we could understand them without understanding the other judgements in the range. It is hard to see, for instance, how a man could 'read' the void in the middle of Raphael's fresco if he was not at the same time able to make out the spatial relations that hold between Heliodorus and the youths who advance to scourge him, or between the

Pope and the scene that he surveys in calm detachment. Secondly, a stronger argument could be mounted – though it would be too elaborate to do so here – to show that the representational attribution that we make in respect of the picture as a whole is dependent upon, or can be analysed in terms of, the specific attributions. The clearest way of exhibiting this would be to take simpler over-all attributions than Wölfflin's: for instance, that a picture has depth, or that it has great movement, or that it has a diagonal recession: and then show how these can be fully elucidated by reference to the spatial relations that hold between e.g. a tree in the foreground and the horizon, or the body of the saint and the crowd of angels through whom he ascends to heaven. A more dramatic way of exhibiting this would be to point out that we could not produce a sheet of blank paper and say that it was a representation of Empty Space. Though, of course, what we could do is to produce such a sheet and entitle it 'Empty Space', and there could be a point to this title.

12

Reference was made in the last section to the wide range of representational attributions that we make, and it is important to appreciate quite how wide it is. It certainly extends well beyond the domain of purely figurative art, and takes in such things as geometrical drawings or certain forms of architectural ornament. And I now suggest that if we look at the opposite end of this range to that occupied by, e.g. Raphael's Stanze, we may see our present problem in a fresh light.

It is said that Hans Hofmann, the doyen of New York painting, used to ask his pupils, on joining his studio, to put a black mark on a white canvas, and then observe how the black was on the white. It is clear that what Hofmann's pupils were asked to observe was not the fact that some black paint was physically on a white canvas. So I shall change the example somewhat to bring this out better, and assume that the young painters were asked to put a blue mark on a white canvas and then observe how the blue was behind (as it was) the white. The sense in which 'on' was used in the original example and 'behind' in the revised example give us in an elementary form the notion of what it is to see something as a representation, or for something to have representational properties. Accordingly, if we are going to accept the argument that works of art cannot be physical objects because they have representational properties, it looks as though we are committed to regarding the invitation to see the blue behind the white as something in the nature of an incitement to deny