
"Significant Form" in the Aesthetics of Clive Bell

FRANK J. HOFFMAN

Clive Bell wrote the Preface to the first edition of *Art* in 1913, and in this book devised a theory through which theoretical lens post-Impression could be appreciated. In the Preface to the 1948 edition of *Art* Bell stated that when he wrote the book the "battle of post-Impressionism" had just begun :¹

The best that even Sickert would say for Cezanne, in 1911, was that he was "un grande rate, "while Sargent called him a "botcher", and the director of the Tate Gallery refused to hang his pictures. Van Gogh was denounced every day almost as an incompetent and vulgar madman; M. Jacques-Emile Blanche informed us that, when cleaning his palette, he often produced something better than a Gauguin; and when Roger Fry showed a Matisse to the Art-Workers Guild the cry went up "drink or drugs?"...Hark to Sickert : "Matisse has all the worst art-school tricks"...Picasso, like all Whistler's followers, has annexed Whistler's empty background without annexing the one quality by which Whistler made his empty background interesting.

With Bell, photographic exactitude of representation is not the desideratum of painting. By focusing on "significant form" in the work of artists such as those mentioned above, art-work may be evaluated without naturalistic representation as a criterion. Particular examples of Primitive and Oriental art may thus turn out to be valuable in their presentation of "significant form." (But as Bell himself later realized, in this period of reaction he tended to underrate Renaissance, 18th and 19th century arts.²) As John Hospers observes, however, Bell's main point is not to champion abstract art to the exclusion of naturalist art, but to exclude life values and to establish form as a necessary condition for artistic appreciation and achievement.³

The Bloomsbury Group, consisting of Bell and his friends, was in some ways influenced by G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*⁴. For example, following Moore he took "good" to mean an indefinable, non-natural property, and states : "Creating works of art is as direct a means to good as a human being can practice."⁵ Good art would not, then, be art with a certain natural property or set of properties (such as roundness or smoothness) but art with "significant form". With respect to visual art, Bell developed the idea of significant form as "relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms."⁶

As in Moore's conception of intuitive apprehension of "good" such relations and combinations are either intuitively perceived in the inspection of an art-work or not. In any case, according to Bell, reasons are not applicable to the determination of whether an object has significant form. As William G. Bywater observes for Bell : "The critic does not render judgments on the basis of norms and reasons, rather he turns his attention to the audience, guiding and animating it. His language is designed to bring about an experience of significant form; to bring about aesthetic experience."⁷

In Art Bell offered both an aesthetic and a metaphysical hypothesis. The former is the hypothesis that "the essential quality in a work of art is significant form."⁸ The concept of significant form was articulated by Bell in order to solve what he took to be the central problem of aesthetics viz., providing a quality which is common and peculiar to all works of art. Thus, Bell emerged as an "essentialist" rather than a "family resemblance" theorist with respect to the concept of art.⁹ On the essentialist view there must be something common to all and only what is called "art" in order for that word to have any meaning. And since Bell held that the essence of art does not consist in a property or properties, he found it in the relations of "significant form".

As against those who would urge a search for the artist's intention by whatever means (e.g., exploring biographical accounts) as relevant to the understanding, interpretation, and/or evaluation of an art-work, Bell argued that in aesthetic appreciation "we need bring with us nothing from life."¹⁰ In doing so he attempted to safeguard the autonomy of art. On this view, "aesthetic isolationism," the work of art can and should stand on its own, and the aesthetic experience has nothing to do with cognitive considerations provided by extraneous material. This isolationist position is at odds with contextualism, the thesis that a work of art can only be appreciated by considering it in its social, historical, and cultural context.

Bell also put forth a metaphysical hypothesis stating : "significant form is the expression of a peculiar emotion felt for reality."¹¹ He suggested that art may be a manifestation of "man's sense of ultimate reality," thereby envisioning a link between art and religion.¹² Thus Bell predicted that, on the one hand, when significant form is rarely to be found in a period, religion, too, will be at low ebb and culture degenerate. On the other hand, when the sense of reality mentioned in the metaphysical hypothesis is achieved, people tend to value spiritual rather than materialistic concerns according to Bell. Thus, the spiritual and the aesthetic function in unison here. One might compare Bell with Tolstoy on this point. As a consequence of the close kinship between art and religion

envisioned, art-works are taken to be immediate means to good : art could not be immoral but must be moral or above morality on Bell's reasoning.¹³

Bywater argued in favour of what he calls the "fruitless search" arguments of Kennick and Weitz.¹⁴ While Kennick and Weitz emphasized the open-textured character of the ordinary concept of art, Bell is seen as recommending a revisionary concept. Specifically, Bywater argued against the "warehouse argument" of Kennick. Briefly, the warehouse argument asserts that, one instructed to remove all (and only) objects of art from a warehouse containing all sorts of things would have an easy task compared to one instructed to remove all (and only) objects of significant form from the warehouse. In defense of Bell, Bywater argued that it does not address the issue, since "no one needs to suppose that the average person will be able, without training and guidance to understand Bell's theory or to recognize something with significant form,"¹⁵ Although Bywater was correct to point out that Kennick's argument needs to take this point into account, it is fair for Kennick to have raised the question of whether Bell's notion of "significant form" is sufficiently clear that even a trained observer would know what to look for in the hypothetical warehouse. Perhaps Bywater has missed Kennick's point, for the whole thrust of Kennick's point is not that the average person would not be able to pick out objects of significant form from the warehouse, but that even a trained observer could not do so.

Yet Bywater formulated an important criticism of Bell in pointing out that Bell runs the risk of diluting his formalism by removing our attention from the works of art themselves to the creative process of the artist in order to delineate a distinction between art and nature.¹⁶ Bell held that a copy cannot be as moving as an original, since there is something in the mind of the artist which the copyist did not possess.

This is a puzzling idea coming from someone like Bell who is a non-Idealistic theoretician championing "significant form" rather than the intentions in the mind of an artistic genius. Presumably this "something in the mind" is not what Idealist aestheticians (such as Croce or Collingwood) might suppose. Not to put too fine a point on it, it appears that Bell is simply inconsistent here. His formalism cannot stand on its own if he must appeal to "something in the mind" to distinguish a copy from an original.

There are various difficulties with Bell's view. If one says that something is significant, it is appropriate to ask "Significant of what ?" But in the case of Bell's usage of "significant form," such a question cannot be answered. Thus it seems that, as Langer has noted, this is indeed a poor word choice.¹⁷

Beardsley, for one, has pointed out that there is a circularity in Bell's argument.¹⁸ While aesthetic emotion was defined by Bell as that which is

produced by significant form, significant form was defined as that which produces aesthetic emotion.

Bell's treatment of intention also deserves critical comment. He drives a wedge between the artist's intention to promote aesthetic emotion (the emotive) and intention to convey information (the cognitive) in his rejection of Italian Futurism.¹⁹ By this move he unwittingly rejected much of traditional art, since often if not always traditional art has an informative even pedagogical function (e.g., pertaining to religious belief).

It might also be asked whether Bell believed that the intention to evoke aesthetic emotion underlies all works that he perceives as having significant form? If so, then how could it be consistent for Bell both to believe this and positively evaluate Primitive Art as such, in view of the possibility that the art of Primitives (deeply appreciated by Bell) be just as it is even if there never were anything so rarified as intentions to evoke aesthetic emotion underlying the production of Primitive Art?

When purely formal considerations are inadequate to show that a work of art is valuable, Bell slid toward expressionism (e.g., when Cezanne's working out his salvation is taken into consideration²⁰). And the various references to expressing significant form leave the impression that "form" is being substituted for "idea" in a revision of expression theory.

For the canonical or 19th century expression theory, a work of art is the direct expression of the artists' feelings or emotions, and at least only indirectly of influences on the artist from his society, including ideas forming a part of its climate of opinion.

From Wittgensteinian quarters a fundamental methodological critique is possible. Whereas Bell assumed an essentialist stance with respect to defining "art" by seeking a property common to all and only what is called "art" which on his analysis turns out to be the relational property of significant form--it might be objected that the concept of art is an "open-textured" concept and therefore Bell's approach is fundamentally mistaken.²¹

Another possible criticism of Bell's position is to point to a problem in isolationist stance in regard to aesthetic appreciation. Since Bell held that nothing from life is relevant here, he may be charged with divorcing art from life and catering to those who know, and perhaps care to know, only what is directly given in sensation. There is, too, the concomitant danger of aesthetic cultism, which emphasizes some forms as "significant" on unclear grounds while ignoring and perhaps destroying others.

The relationship between Bell's aesthetic hypothesis and his metaphysical hypothesis is in need of clarification as well. Bell made a strong commitment

to the former and a weak commitment to the latter, wishing to keep them separate. But it is not clear that he can get away with giving such a weak commitment to the metaphysical hypothesis. For as soon as Bell was pressed to elucidate the notion of significant form (a notion which is far from clear in the chapter on the aesthetic hypothesis in Bell's work, *Art*), the only feature of his overall theory which allowed him to do so is the expressionistic slant of the metaphysical hypothesis. Significant form was then characterized as "the expression of a peculiar emotion felt for reality" as noted earlier. Thus the aesthetic hypothesis turns out to be parasitical upon the metaphysical hypothesis, with its unanalyzed notion of "reality" and implicit appeal to religious sentiment.

While Bell's theory does indeed have the difficulties mentioned above, it has been historically important in justifying post- Impressionism. Clive Bell attempted to provide a clear account of aesthetic experience by sorting out emotions of a personal sort, reveries, and desires separately from aesthetic experience of art.²²

Notes and References

1. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York :Capricorn Books, 1958) ninth impression, p.11. Quoted in William G. Bywater, *Clive Bell's Eye* (Detroit : Wayne State University Press, 1975), p.22.
2. Bywater, *ibid.*, p. 116
3. John Hospers, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1946), pp.98-102.
4. G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (New York and Cambridge, England : Cambridge University Press, 1993). Revised edition with preface to the second edition and references to other papers.
5. Clive Bell, *Art* (New York: Frederic Stokes Co., no copyright date given), pp.110 and 115.
6. Frank A. Tillman and Steven M. Cahn, *Philosophy of Art and Aesthetics from Plato to Wittgenstein* (New York : Harper and Row, 1969), p. 417.
7. Bywater, *op.cit.*, p. 33
8. Bell, *op.cit.*, p. 100
9. Ludwig Wittgenstein has called attention to problems in essentialist ways of thinking, inter alia in *Philosophical Investigations* (New York : Macmillan, 1953). Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe.
10. Tillman and Cahn, *op.cit.*, p. 424.
11. Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 102. But he is also criticized for this in John Hospers, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1946), pp. 213-238.
13. Tillman and Cahn, *op.cit.*, p. 421.
14. Bywater, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-31.
15. Bywater, *op.cit.*, p. 29.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 93
17. Susane K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York : Scribner's 1953), p. 15.
18. Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics : Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York : Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), p. 298
19. Tillman and Cahn, *op. cit.*, p. 422.
20. Bywater, *op. cit.*, p. 93.
21. Morris Weitz, *Problems in Aesthetics* (New York : Macmillan, 1959), pp. 149-152.

22 Tillman and Cahn, *op.cit.*, pp 420 and 426.

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Department of Philosophy,
West Chester University
West Chester,
Pennsylvania, U.S.A.