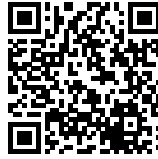




SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS: SOME THOUGHTS

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Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses on Art* is continually informed by mimesis. The importance of mimesis for Reynolds lies in the fact that it produces perfection – a key motive in any production of art, for Reynolds.

Therefore, Reynolds' discourse is grounded in the concept that art imitates nature, where the endeavor is to realistically portray life and reproduce natural objects and actions.

The justification of this grounding is provided for Reynolds by the old masters whom he admires for their success, and advocates that artists must follow in their footsteps in order to achieve and produce perfection. As well, there is the concern that without classical models artistic vices will proliferate and artistic virtue will not be attained.

There are several varieties of imitation: painting in the spirit of the old masters and using their general principles; borrowing from the old masters with the necessity of accommodating the material to the artists own age; and the collection and use of special "beauties" in technique and expression from the works of the best painters.

Let us look at mimesis a little more closely. The recurring theme in the production of discourse in the eighteenth-century is the desire to arrive at a definition of taste and good sense, thereby to place men and women into the eternal scheme of things.

As such, we confront a continuous tension between opposing forces, binaries of sorts: the classic with the Romantic, the rational with the sentimental, the town with the country, art with nature, religion with irreligion, to mention but a few. Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses on Art* participate in this agonistic method by positing a discourse that is firmly grounded in classical esthetics, where the old masters are to be emulated as paradigms of perfection.

Thus, Reynolds is continually valorizing one mode of discourse over another: "I would chiefly recommend that an implicit obedience to the rules of art, as established by the great masters, should be exacted from the young students.

That those models, which have passed through the approbation of ages, should be considered by them as perfect and infallible guides as subjects for their imitation, not their criticism."

But let us briefly turn aside and flesh out the key characteristics that constitute the paradigm of the old masters. The *modus operandi* for this esthetic is the classical period, or the ideals, and idealized versions, of Greece and Rome. Thus, Reynolds emphasizes taste, polish, common sense, and reason over emotion and imagination.

Therefore, upon the Renaissance idea of the limitless potentiality of human beings Reynolds imposes a view of human being as limited, dualistic, imperfect. For Reynolds, the intensity of human responses is checked by a reverence for order and a delight in reason and rules.

Imagination is tempered by a distrust of innovation and invention. Individualism comes to be defined only in terms of the human potential within a group and generic quality. The tension that results because of these polarities lead Reynolds to an esthetic that stresses order, logic, restrained emotion, accuracy, "correctness," "good taste," and decorum.

Consequently, Reynolds defines art by a sense of symmetry, a delight in design, and by the centrality of the human subject, which in turn lead to the categories of proportion, unity, harmony and grace.

Thus, for Reynolds, the aim of art is to delight, instruct and correct human beings (in that primarily human beings are social animals): "Every opportunity, therefore, should be taken to discountenance that false and vulgar opinion that rules are the fetters of genius. They are fetters only to men of no genius."

Highlighted in the discourse of emphasizing the old masters is the moral discourse of imitation, or mimesis. The concept of art as imitation has its origin with the classical critics. Aristotle says at the very beginning of his Poetics that all art is a mode of imitation; and by extension, art is an imitation of nature. Consequently, in ancient Rome and Greece the imitation of models (created by past masters) was an accepted form of composition.

Therefore, for Reynolds, imitation is the key instructive tool. Imitation of nature, for him, becomes a realistic portrayal of life, and a reproduction of natural objects and actions.

As well, there is a marked admiration of the success of the greater classical artists, who had closely followed nature, and were therefore worthy of being imitated.

The moral aspect of this notion is fully visible when we consider that genius for Reynolds is not an inborn ability, but an acquired attitude: "Let us not destroy the scaffold until we have raised the building."

In fact, an adherence to models created by past masters inculcates a method for Reynolds that successfully avoids artistic shortcomings and ensures the attainment of literary virtues.

Imitation is further defined by Reynolds. It is the borrowing from the ancients with the necessity of accommodating the material of the artist's own age. It is the collection and use of special "beauties" in form and expression from the works of past masters. And it is the exercise of paraphrase and translation of the devices used by the past masters.

Consequently, for Reynolds, creativity can only be housed in mimetic expression, that is, in models created and perfected by past masters: "The pictures, thus wrought with such pain, now appear like the effect of enchantment, and as if some mighty genius had struck them off at a blow."

The force that governs the mimetic concerns of Reynolds is, of course, nature. Contained within nature is the implicit workings of a universal esthetic whose validity leads the human subject to a reverence for rules and such reverence is then taken as an evidence of the basis of these rules in what is universal in human nature. The rules, for Reynolds, are grounded in models proven by the old master.

Therefore, it is necessary to include with nature the human capacity for reason – since both are grounded in the idea of "order" – nature is order in external existence, and reason is order in the internal existence of the human subject: "He who endeavours to copy nicely the figure before him not only acquires a habit of exactness and precision, but is continually advancing in his knowledge of the human figure; and though he seems to superficial observers to make a slower progress, he will be found at last capable of adding (without running into capricious wildness) that grace and beauty which is necessary to be given to his more finished works, and which cannot be got by the moderns, as it was not acquired by the ancients, but by an attentive and well-compared study of the human form."

Thus, we see that Reynolds discourse in his Discourses on Art is continually informed and determined by mimesis, which advocates imitation of the old masters in whose works perfection is housed, and which students are to imitate in order to garner and benefit from the genius housed in artistic works of the past: "He who endeavours to copy nicely the figure before him not only acquires a habit of exactness and precision, but is continually advancing in his knowledge of the human figure; and though he seems to superficial observers to make a slower progress, he will be found at last capable of adding (without running into capricious wildness) that grace and beauty which is necessary to be given to his more finished works, and which cannot be got by the moderns, as it was not acquired by the ancients, but by an attentive and well-compared study of the human form."

The photo shows a self portrait by Joshua Reynolds, painted, ca. 1780.

