

### Richard Wollheim, 1923–2003

**R**ichard Wollheim taught philosophy at University College London from 1949 to his retirement as Grote Professor of Mind and Logic in 1982. During 1982–85 he was Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University and then at the University of California at Berkeley from 1985 to 2003. As well as philosophical works and essays, he wrote one novel, *A Family Romance* (1969), and a reflective memoir, *Fifty Years*, about his experience of World War II. It is in this essay that we perhaps get some idea of what he meant in asserting in *Painting as an Art* that the two deepest commitments of his life were ‘the love of painting and devotion to the cause of Socialism’. Can he have been suggesting that painting enables us to make something good or fine with our unreflective or primitive tendencies and that we can come to socialism by a similarly psychological route?

Wollheim produced two major philosophical works that are concerned with art. *Art and Its Objects* (1968) and *Painting as an Art* (1987). The first of these was in many ways in the analytical tradition, connected particularly to the later writing of Wittgenstein. His underlying argument is that in order to have any clarity in aesthetics, we will have to do some work on the ontology of art. It was precisely at this time – with the nervous breakdown of modernism – that art’s ontology was undergoing what looked like a paradigm shift. Wollheim could not quite bring himself to relinquish the precept that art is something that requires material embodiment. His view was that in so far as there is an internal connection between a medium and its artistic or aesthetic effects, then the argument that there is a general and non-circular distinction between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic properties of art must be false.

This is where the idea of ‘seeing-in’ became relevant for Wollheim. He argued that seeing the marks with which a surface is configured and seeing an object represented by those marks are aspects of one and the same perceptual experience. The difficulty this entrains is that in seeing the painting blots as depicting my Granny, I may very well be wrong, or at least be recovering something culturally, historically or even technically irrelevant; my primitive ability to do this may have led me to the mistaken belief that any feature of an activity is aesthetically, or more basically perhaps, descriptively relevant.

#### Recoverable intentions

The theoretical *résumé* of *Painting as an Art* departs from premisses which are superficially similar to the ideas sketched by Donald Davidson in ‘What Metaphors Mean’. Davidson’s text is an article. It is short, terse and conversational. Wollheim’s is a book and is arguably his major work. For Wollheim paintings do not mean in the way that words do. Davidson’s article left open a link between what might be called the verbal and the non-verbal arts. It still leaves work to do. Wollheim performed a closure which severed the link. Davidson divided the odd sheep from the odd goat. Wollheim circumscribed painting as an art: Art. Davidson denied or did not attempt to produce an exhaustive picture of the interior life of the dawning of an aspect. Wollheim essayed a psychological account. But this account was not delivered with any discursive self-scepticism; rather it was an act, a performance which made space for a kind of *being*: the love of great art plus philosophy sensitively pursued.

A more empirical observation is that *Painting as an Art* is an art bosses' book, a theoretical Bible for the School of London, with all its attendant professors, heads of department and other varieties of academician. It is all universal-human-nature socialism attached to a grotesquely effortless sense of social hierarchy. But it is also uncanny – a massively informative and vivid allegory. Wollheim produced readings: illuminating accounts of his thoughts and imaginings in front of a range of paintings, each, on his own account, not so much studied as looked at at length, each original dwelt on as the object of a sustained face-to-face encounter.

The theoretical argument on which *Painting as an Art* is built is roughly as follows: painting, if it is practised as an art, is intentional under certain descriptions, and it is not an art if it is intentional under certain other descriptions (e.g. if someone did it 'for the money'). 'Intention' is qualified and ramified in various ways. Finally it more or less explodes: 'Intention must be understood so as to include thoughts, beliefs, memories, and, in particular, emotions and feelings, that the artist had and that, specifically, caused him to paint as he did.' Anyway, the path which intention takes is traced via thematization. The meaning of (presumably 'artistic') painting is not like linguistic meaning: it is not recovered through (or by appeal to) systems of rules, grammars, and so on, but in a systematic psychological attempt to read back to (or to retrodict) the *intentions* of the artist. It is these recovered or recoverable intentions which establish the correctness or incorrectness and the relevance or irrelevance of an attempted account of a painting's meaning. Not just anyone can hope to make the attempt successfully, though. The meaning (the artist's intentions) will be recovered by (since presumably they are addressed to) 'an adequately sensitive, adequately informed, spectator'.

*Intentional* in a Wollheimian way is what painting *must* be (under certain descriptions) in order for it to be art. It is as if *artists'* intentions mirrored a kind of *super*-rationalist in which the wishing world is allowed to be or to become the intending one. Wollheim was too disciplined a thinker to subscribe to the view of the artist as shaman, but by recourse to Freudian theory and Freudian case history he came up with something not wholly unrelated. Though 'we do not find in great artists great disorders of the mind ... what we sometimes find is the way back from such disorders'. Elsewhere it is made clear just how remarkable a projection into his medium the artist must have achieved in order to embody the meaning which Wollheim uncovered.

Theories which tended to make art a contingent and socially produced category were rejected out of hand. Wollheim held up 'the institutional theory of art' as an example of wrong thinking. This theory, roughly exemplified for him in George Dickie and Arthur Danto, was travestied in a wilful and unironical literalness.



Does the art world really nominate representatives? If it does, where, and how, do these nominations take place? Do the representatives, if they exist, pass in review all candidates for the status of art, and do they then, while conferring this status on some, deny it to others? What record is kept of these conferrals, and is the status itself subject to revision?

The funny thing is that this travesty pointed to a contradiction in Wollheim's own position. 'Such socially identified persons seem to have no contribution to make to the account of art, they belong only to the presentation of the account: rather as though an account of disease were to try to characterize disease in terms of what doctors do and say about it.' Wollheim's Popperian allegiances are revealed: first, in his insistence on looking for 'persons' – social atoms; and second, in the production of a spurious

anti-Kuhnian analogy. Were we to replace ‘disease’ with ‘medicine’ in the last sentence quoted, the analogy would be both more apt and very much less damaging to the institutional theory.

Interestingly, the disdain accorded by Wollheim to Clement Greenberg was not extended to Michael Fried, his one-time disciple, who got pats on the back – or on the head. In fact Wollheim’s notion of ‘the spectator in the picture’ (the title of the third chapter of *Painting as an Art*) was clearly indebted to Fried’s work. He argued, however, that Fried had failed to make an adequate distinction between the internal and



the external spectator. Indeed he was charged with conflating them. Though Fried may not have discussed the matter with the same philosophical skill and refinement as Wollheim, it is hard to see how his ‘Art and Objecthood’ (*Artforum*, Summer 1967) could have been written without some such distinction being applied. In that essay Fried suggested that the (apparent) abandonment of the virtual (and what was called ‘relational’) space of painting by Minimalist object-makers had brought the latter’s work to the condition of theatre. For Fried, the effect of theatricalization was to restrict the spectator to a single possibility, that of ‘external spectator’. This entailed the loss, for him, of just that kind of imaginative scope with which Wollheim’s ‘internal spectator’ was dubbed.

Wollheim distinguished the ‘internal spectator’ from the ‘external spectator’, regarding the former as the latter’s imaginary protagonist or stalking horse (or cat’s paw?) in the matter of the recovery of intention. The two are functionally connected. It is the ‘adequately sensitive and informed [external] spectator’ who remained Wollheim’s real foundation, however. This construct

formed a motif which could not be called into question. The theoretical principles to which psychology and causality go turned out simply to be those which regulated the narrative of the agency of Wollheim’s gentleman spectator. Though he was the authority for the presence of meaning, his own presence was neither discussed nor defended. The adequately sensitive and informed spectator was, in fact, Wollheim’s representative. What *he* recovered determined the status of painting as an art. This (gentleman) was the artist’s ideal friend and confidante, and since artists are also, importantly, spectators of their own work, he was sometimes indistinguishable from the artist. Artist and spectator were rendered with undeclared circularity in Wollheim’s image to haunt the text as unchallengeable conventions. The ghost of an honourable and gracious (gentlemanly) age, his spectator was no more ontologically secure than those ‘representatives of the art world’ whom the author conjured and then ridiculed in his account of the institutional theory of art. He was the token of the author’s own cultural relativity, a cultural relativity which he disowned.

### Imaginary character

But Wollheim was more persuasive when his readings were corrective than when they were inventive. In rescuing Poussin from the accusation of frigidity he did a good job against weak opposition – or perhaps it is fairer to say that in demolishing the set-up opposition he demonstrated just how primitive art historians’ normal methods are for deducing the psychology of style. By a kind of contrast with Poussin, Ingres was seen as psychologically, though not morally (like Delacroix), flawed. One sensed the author hovering about his work, reluctant to be caught too close to it. Wollheim held up against painting a (culturally produced) image of the Whole Man. He then constructed

whatever fitted the profile in such a way as to get himself reflected as the Whole Man's ideal boon companion.

Wollheim's project, which was – dropping a few things here, gaining some there – the massively elaborate psychologizing of 'significant form', reached its most discursive, and in some ways its most compellingly plausible, moment in Lecture VI of *Painting as an Art*, 'Painting, Metaphor and the Body'. In comparison with Wollheim's various summings up, the tops and tails of other lectures, the text is fugitive and allusive. However, it makes a definite start. 'Metaphorical meaning is a case of primary meaning; that is to say, it accrues to a painting through the making of it, but not through what the making of it means to the artist.' ('Secondary meaning' is not so much intentional as involuntary; it is the kind of meaning Wollheim found typically in Ingres; the kind of which only the psychoanalyst or the psychoanalytically competent philosopher has an overview.) In earlier lectures Wollheim trod the familiar road first laid out by I.A. Richards, and by dint of considerable psychological ingenuity produced a theory of expressing *and* representing, and he illuminated a lot of very fine art along the way. Psychologically ingenious or no, this brought him to a morally barbarous (manipulative) and normative dead end: not a difference and contrast, not the problem of keeping something at the centre of the pile of causal and significant junk, not conversation. Metaphor was the way out (or back).

Wollheim's theory of metaphor is, as he put it, a theory of double improvisation: 'It is an improvisation upon what is already improvisatory.' What paintings do, as representations, is produce certain seeings-in (by spectators of the right sort), the index of the correctness of which is the fulfilled intention of the artist. And analogously for expression: what is produced is a certain (kind of) experience in (the right kind of) people. The metaphorical 'meaning' is rather like the expressive one, but no appeal is made to the artist's intention as an index of correctness. Wollheim's analysis of linguistic metaphor was broadly post-Max Black, who hung on to the idea of 'special kinds of metaphorical meaning'. Wollheim preferred to say that metaphor is revelatory, that no facts or propositions are conveyed.

To stand back from the text is not to deprive it of virtue. Indeed, *Painting as an Art* would lose nothing, might even gain, from our standing back, in the sense that one stands back from – does not take literally or confuse with the world – a work of fiction. It is as such an already-demystified text that *Painting as an Art* deserves its place as a likely stimulant to the non-trivial conversation of the studio. Wollheim himself is perhaps best read as a kind of character, as the spectator in the picture of a picture – as one empowered with the three perceptual capacities he himself prescribed: 'seeing-in', 'expressive perception' (the ability to see a painting as expressing some mental or psychological phenomena) and 'a capacity to experience visual delight'. This imaginary character we may, if we choose, identify as our protagonist. Through his being we may then invoke and simulate a certain decidedly masterly repertoire of feelings, insights and manners. The motive for doing so would be to consider how and in what modes of feedback to experience the world – what forms of confirmation of his mastery – might, for a certain sort of spectator at least, be availed by the paintings we put him notionally in front of. The purpose would be to learn better just how his competences are to be marginalized or frustrated in practice.

Unlike many who have written with apparent authority and concentration about painting, Wollheim was unpedantically powerful in argument. He has left us with difficulties and work to do. The question of internality is of continuing relevance as the tatty crows of dematerialization come home to roost in the triumph of distribution and curatorship. Indeed, two hours of place and time in front of a work possessed of internal complexity is clearly some kind of resistance to the myths of institutional democracy.