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ART IN MIND

At the very beginning of history we find the extraordinary monuments of Paleolithic art, a standing problem to all theories of human development, and a delicate test of their truth.

—R. G. COLLINGWOOD

LIVING IN THE ENTANGLEMENT

Collingwood wrote the words above almost a hundred years ago.¹ His challenge is clear. If we've been making art since the dawn of our history, then art is not the product of that history, but one of its conditions.

I try, in this book, to take this challenge seriously. Art may not come first. How could it? But it arrives at the start and there could be no beginning without it. Art is not an add-on, a mere cultural extra, but a basic and central part of what makes culture possible. "Art," as Collingwood also wrote, "is the primary and fundamental activity of the mind."² This is at once a statement about art and a statement about the mind: art is not a late addition to the human repertoire, and the work of art, its making and uses, belongs to our basic character as human beings.

You might think that the "primitive" mind finds its most natural expression in song and dance. But that's not really the

point. Not that we haven't been singing and dancing since our very beginnings. But art is much more than song and dance. Art, in its proper sense, is a kind of reflection and resistance. Art is irony. Art, for all its physicality and concern for material stuff, its ties to making, building, doing, as well as singing and dancing, is more like philosophy than it is like play; it is rigorous and demanding. Art aims at ecstasy and transformation. Art rocks our worlds.

Collingwood believed that history was central to the work of philosophy. I don't undertake historical research in this book. But there is a quasi-historical puzzle at its heart. We confront right off a striking puzzle about origins.

Consider: we find it natural to write our words down; we know how to do this. But how did we ever do this for the very first time? How did we even come up with the idea that speech, which is bodily, fluid, and tied to the breath and to social relationships, has the kind of articulateness and structure required so that it might be *writable*? The problem is this: to think of speech as possessing a kind of intrinsic articulation is already to think of it as made up of parts, combined and recombined; it is, that is, already to think of it as writable. So it would seem that the idea of language as writable had to preexist the invention of writing. Before there was writing, there was already, and from the beginning, the writerly attitude. (This is my topic in chapter 5.)

There is a similar quandary that arises when we turn to pictures (which I do in chapter 4). As Collingwood warns us not to forget, we have been making and studying pictures for not less than forty to fifty *thousand* years, that is, for as long as there is any reason to be confident that we—animals like us who inhabit the world and experience it as we do—have been around on this planet. But how did we learn to do this? How did we

come to acquire the capacity to contemplate the situation in which we find ourselves with the detachment needed to see it as if it were a mere scene or tableau that could be held still and written down, that is, *depicted*? We are no longer surprised by this capacity for detached viewing, for we live and have always lived with pictures. We know how to use them and how to think of the world as revealed in them, fixed by them, captured in them, even if only very few of us can make them very well. But this tendency to look at the world as if it were represented pictorially would be impossible, or rather, not even really intelligible, if not for the fact that the pictorial attitude in some sense precedes the invention of drawing and painting, if not for the prior availability of a picture understanding.

We confront this puzzle about origins even when we turn to areas of our life that seem, at first glance anyway, entirely unmediated by graphical technologies such as writing and drawing, or any other technology for that matter. Human beings have sex, after all. You might think that here, with sex itself, we reach a kind of natural bedrock. Sex has features, so we might think, that stem directly and immediately from the body. Marks of arousal such as blood flow, the secretion of fluids, the swelling of tissue, the very quality of orgasm itself, these seem to be fixed points biologically, the very same for people everywhere and at all times. Maybe so. But caution is due even here. The body is itself a carrier of style and meaning, and even our bodily experience is infiltrated by what you might call a self-conception. Insofar as sex is something that we do with another person, we do it only always under some self-conception of who we are and what we are doing with or in relation to the other. You can no more factor out the social and conception-bearing weight of human sexual engagement than you can factor it out of our linguistic lives. What would it be to be a talking person, a speaking

agent, a linguistic body, in the absence of one's participation in, and one's understanding of, the meaning of one's participation in linguistic encounters with another? As long as there have been human bodies, it seems, these bodies have been bearers of subjective and intersubjective significance—expressed in what we call style—that have no reflection in mere physiology. Even sex, then, is something that we enact or carry out as consumers of and participants in a larger culture of ideas and images. What could tempt us to think otherwise? (The body and style are the topic of chapters 7 and 8, respectively.)

These puzzles about origins remind us of Plato's Paradox of the *Meno*.³ To learn something new, you must recognize it when you have found it. But if you can do that, you must have known it already. Augustine posed a similar puzzle in *The Teacher*.⁴ It is not possible to teach, for students cannot learn something that does not already make sense to them. They are the arbiters of truth, not the teacher. Plato's solution, and Augustine's, is to suppose that the knowledge is already in place. The work of inquiry, or the work of the teacher, is to enable a kind of recollection, a process of making explicit what we already know implicitly.

My own solution is similar to theirs. We already need to view the world from the standpoint opened up by speech, by writing, by pictoriality, by sociality, in order for us to have any possibility of inventing or coming to possess these things. But this is true because, in a sense, we have always had them. We have always been all the things we are.

This is the force of Collingwood's challenge. But is this believable?

Perhaps it would be better to say that *the very fact* of the great monuments of Paleolithic art means that we have to go back *way* farther, tens of thousands of years farther back, to arrive at

anything that deserves to be called our true beginnings. Art, at least as I am thinking of it, cannot be something present at the dawn, for it is too sophisticated. Seeing, dancing, talking, making love, yes. But not art. And this conclusion, it would seem, is underwritten by the appreciation that while art must be the product of culture, these other activities—talking, perceiving, dancing, having sex—these are *natural*.

If you've been feeling vertigo, this won't help you regain your balance. You can't go far back enough. Humans are not machine-like, nor are we beasts. We don't just perform according to rules, nor do we rut; we *experience* our sexuality, and the latter can't be separated from other thoughts and attitudes and values and *self-understandings*. Likewise, we don't just grunt, we talk, and where there is talking, there is not only communication, but there is miscommunication, and there is, inevitably, talk about talking, and there is joking and ironic play. The point is that seeing, dancing, talking, and sex are not and have never been simple; they are sophisticated from the start. (Or to borrow a formulation common in some philosophical circles: they are *always already* sophisticated.) And this means that they participate in art, that they have always participated in art, and that it is through this participation that they become what they are.

At this point, the response might be to say that we need to press back *even farther* if we want to come face-to-face with the natural animals, the mere living bodies, that we really and most truly and most originally are. But this won't work either. We, that is, we psychologically modern *Homo sapiens*, are the ones who talk, and cook and dress; we use tools and make pictures. It is here, amid this repertoire of skillful, technological organization, that the human mind, our distinct manner of being alive in and to the world, shows up. Go back too far, in the hopes of explaining who or what we are, and we lose ourselves.

It is very tempting to think that we can sharply distinguish what we do at the first order, as it were by *nature*, or by habit, from the second-order ways that we think about and experience our own performance. To be *merely animal*, so the thought goes, is to operate effectively at the first level without any participation at the second. What it is to be an animal is thus understood as having a certain *lack* in comparison to a person. Concomitantly, the nature of a human being is thought to be that which it shares in common with “mere” animals. But for now, let us dwell on the discovery, which has been my leading idea: in human being, the two levels are entangled; there is no first order without the second, and the second loops down and affects the first. This doesn’t mean we need to give up the distinction. But it does mean that we have no hope of isolating our “true nature” in some core that we share with animals and that can be explained in biological terms alone. We are entangled, and we ourselves are products of this entanglement.

ART’S PRIMACY

I said above that we have always been all the things we are. But it would be more accurate to say that we are ourselves a happening, a becoming. Wherever we first show up, we show up not only as creatures of habit, but as creatures of habit whose very habits incorporate our own acts of resistance. This is entanglement. The things we know best, that make us what we are—our mental powers and personalities—are made up by art, or by art and philosophy. We ourselves, then, are the very stuff of art. We are living in the entanglement.

Let me try to make this clearer.

I begin with the fact that human life is structured by organized activity. Organized activity is the domain of habit; it is typically

skillful, and expressive of intelligence, as well as a range of other sophisticated cognitive powers such as attention. But it is also basic, in the sense of being both spontaneous and also foundational in relation to other activities and goals. Breast feeding, talking, and walking are examples of basic and foundational activities, in this sense. They are, also, typically, goal directed.⁵

Technology plays a special role in connection with organized activities. For tools and technologies themselves depend on being securely integrated into patterns of organized activity. To every tool or technology there correspond suites of organized activity, and organized activities are frequently clustered around tool-using and tool-making activities. Driving and writing are good examples.

Dancing, in the sense in which we dance at parties and weddings, is an organized activity—it is spontaneous and “natural,” but expressive of intelligence and sensitivity; it is typically social and serves all manner of communal functions (celebration, courting, etc.); dancing entrains what we do and how we move with characteristic and recognizable temporal and spatial dynamics.

The existence of tools, technologies, and organized activities is art’s precondition, rather as straight talk is the precondition of irony. Art does not aim at more tools, more technology, better organization. Instead, art *works with* these constitutive habitual dispositions; artists make art out of them. So, to return to dancing—which forms the topic of chapter 3—dance artists don’t merely dance the way the rest of us do at weddings and parties; rather, they take the very fact of dancing and make art out of it. Instead of showcasing it, merely showing it off, they are more likely to disrupt it or interrupt it and in so doing expose it for what it is, an organized activity. In this way they reveal us to ourselves.

Or to use a different example: pictoriality—both the making and using of pictures (in whatever medium, e.g., photography, drawing, painting, digital media, etc.)—is a culturally embedded and settled communicative activity, and has been so, as we have already acknowledged, for millennia. We are fluent with pictures in personal as well as commercial transactions. Think of the pictures of cars advertised by the dealership, or of chickens and broccoli sent out by the supermarket in the weekly circular, or of the photos of grandma on the mantel shelf, or of the selfies we take together at the ball game, not to mention the superabundance of pictures streaming in social media. These pictures carry explicit or implicit captions, and their meaning and content, what they *show*, is secured, usually, by these captions. We seldom need to think twice—there is almost never anything to think twice about—when it comes to seeing what these pictures show. But pictorial *art* is a different thing altogether. The artist isn't participating in the economy of picture-making, but is reflecting on it, or exposing it, putting *it* on display. (Note, this may not be *all* that the pictorial artist is doing, just as choreographers are interested in a great deal more than dancing. For example, artists of all stripes, choreographers and painters in particular, are participants in an art culture; art targets other art, almost always.)

Art practices, then, are tied to *making* activities, to human doing and tool use, for these latter are its preconditions and form the ground from which different art forms or media arise and on which they do their work. Choreographers make art out of dancing, and pictorial artists make art out of picture-using activities. Literary writers, for their part, make art out of the raw materials given by the basic fact that human beings organize themselves, or find themselves organized, by speech, telling, and writing. But art is not itself merely a making activity. Artists

make things not in order to surpass mere technology or manufacture, not because they can do it better or in a more “aesthetically pleasing” way. They make things, finally, because we are makers; that is, we are beings whose lives are given shape by the things we make and by the ways we find ourselves organized in good measure by things we have done or made. By making, and by exposing what our making takes for granted, art puts *us* on display. And it does so in ways that change us and, finally, liberate us from the bonds of habit and character.

How so? Here is where what I am calling entanglement comes more fully into play.

Art loops down and changes the life of which it is the artistic representation.⁶ Take the case of choreography. How people dance today at weddings and clubs is shaped by images of dancing provided by choreography. Our dancing, mine and yours, *incorporates* art dancing, however indirectly.⁷ Over time, across generations, the entanglement of dancing and the art of dancing is effected. The entanglement is not so great as to make it the case that the line between the dance art, or choreography, and what we are doing at weddings is effaced entirely. But now the line becomes itself a problem, a source of questioning and puzzlement. As an example from painting’s recent history, consider the fertile exchange, at art schools, and in the art world, between fine art and commercial art in the mid-twentieth century (e.g., the Bauhaus, Warhol).⁸

What I am arguing, and what I hope to substantiate in the following chapters on dance and dancing, pictures and seeing, writing and speech, and also the body, is that technology is a modality of organization; it is a ground of habit. Technology is culture. But *art*, as I am thinking of it here, is not *more technology*; it is not *more culture*. Art refuses culture, by disrupting its habitual operations. In this sense it emancipates us from

culture. It does this by simultaneously unveiling us to ourselves—putting the ways in which we are organized by technologies and habits of making on display—and by doing so in ways that supply resources to carry on differently. Art shines forth and loops down and disorganizes and thus, finally, enables the reorganization of the life of which it is the representation and against which it is a reaction. This entanglement of life with nonlife, technology and the reflective, disruptive work of art, becomes essential to life itself, or at least to our distinctively human form of life.⁹

The thing that we need to appreciate, and that we somehow often fail to do, is that talking and seeing are problems for us, for they are organized activities that govern, as it were, without the consent of the governed. It is this fact that explains the *felt need* for visual art, linguistic art, and also philosophy. We are creatures of habit, but we are never only that. We are creatures of habit who, as I have remarked above, always actively resist or at least question our own habits. We are not controlled by rules, determining how we talk, or how we experience the visual world, or our own bodies. But there are rules, and we are troubled by them.

Irony, it turns out, is no less a precondition of straight talk than the latter is of the former. That is, there could be no straightforward and direct use of language for any purpose at all if there were not also the possibility of taking up a playful, or a subversive, or a questioning attitude to language. The point here is not causal but conceptual. A form of linguistic life that left no space for linguistic play would be radically unlike our human lives with language. The availability of irony is, for us, then, a condition of the very possibility of the things we do with words. Irony, we might then say, is, as some philosophers might put it, a transcendental precondition of our lives together.

Compare my claim here to philosopher Donald Davidson's proposition that to have beliefs, an animal must have the concept of belief, and that for an animal to have that concept, it must possess a full-blown conception of truth and falsehood; for a belief is not merely a *record* of how things are, as it were, but a *response* and a *taking* that always, of their nature, raises the question whether things are the way they are taken to be.¹⁰ Davidson thought that you would need to have a language to have the resources for framing this kind of rich conception of belief, and so he thought that nonlinguistic animals do not have beliefs. This is a provocative and maybe overly strong way to make a more innocuous point: there is nothing in the life of a nonlinguistic animal that suggests that it worries about whether its beliefs are true.¹¹ Its existence is not troubled in that way.

Now I will try to show that to be a language user is to be sensitive to a whole host of demands—so-called normative demands pertaining not just to the question of how we speak, but to that of how we ought to speak—that require of us that we have access to something to which we do in fact have access, namely, writing as a canonical system for representing what we are doing when we are talking.¹² Similarly, pictoriality, as we will consider in chapter 4, is a way of working with and thinking about *what we see* in a way that is sensitive to how fragile and problematic our seeing is. And so in these and other ways we come to appreciate that just as truth presupposes irony, so life presupposes, or is at least preconditioned by, the possibility of art. We make art out of life, yes, but, as we now understand, we make life out of art. Art is one of life's preconditions. Art does not come *first*, not in any temporal sense. But art is not a late-comer either. There is no technology of pictures, or application of writing to linguistic communication, *without art*. To borrow a way of speaking due to art historian Whitney Davis, we ourselves only rise to *visuality*,

to linguisticity, to thought, when we also rise to painting, poetry, and philosophy.¹³ Art is a condition of the possibility of our lives as we know them.

From the standpoint of the entanglement, living in the entanglement—our speech, our vision, our dancing, our bodies, sex show up for us already permeated by and inflected with art. We cannot factor the art and philosophy out of our basic experience. You'd have to go back to an imaginary prehistory to get at experience that was not in these ways entangled and re-entangled with art and philosophy.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Just a brief further word on this, our imaginary prehistory.

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.”¹⁴ This Biblical phrase captures our insight. With the word, everything is given. For a word presupposes the whole shebang, that is, all the words, and all the worries about what the words mean, and all the pleas and excuses, but also the relationships and stories of life and death. This New Testament idea seems well anticipated in the details of Genesis. Adam is made in relationship with God, and then there is Eve, and the serpent, and the other animals so that he might not be “alone.” The natural condition is one of sociality even if it is also, before the great act of disobedience, a state of childlike naïveté. But with that one bite of the apple, innocence is lost and the more arduous, more adult, life of trial and tribulation begins, as it is known to all of us. It is the act of disobedience that brings Adam and Eve into conflict with God, who speaks to them and gives them orders, as a parent, that is to say, as a person would; and it is this act of disobedience that first gives them their “self-conception.” Once they have disobeyed God, they hide from

Him, they seek to escape criticism, and they blame each other and the serpent; now they know both shame and its correlate, lust, and also the imminence of death.

We can see that Adam and Eve emerge from Eden as fully formed, self-aware, motivated persons. Nothing essential is lacking for there to be what we might call society or civilization; theirs just happens to be a society of two. All that's missing is more babies. And of course with more babies comes the first murder of Abel by Cain. But while a novel occurrence, the first murder, its shape and possibility, was present proleptically in the moral and emotional landscape that is already in place at the moment of expulsion.

Now one might object to this Biblical story precisely on the grounds that it falsifies what is surely the accomplishment of natural evolution over deep time and cultural evolution across many tens of thousands of years. But this story—Adam and Eve's story—seems to capture, as no evolutionary account is able to, the fact that the human being is not an organic system that *later* acquires consciousness, but is, if you like, a singular exemplification of consciousness, with all its facets—social, linguistic, moral psychological—from the outset. (“A dynamic singularity,” to use Hurley's phrase.¹⁵)

It is not much of a stretch, I think, to notice that art is everywhere in Genesis. God is the maker, the artist, and we are His handiwork. And Genesis is the telling of our story, in the terms *we* understand, that is, it is *our* story, as told not by God, but by us. So we come to understand ourselves according to a story of our own devising in which our own origins are made up.

And remarkably, this simple fable, just a few short paragraphs long, prefigures certain aspects of what will come to be known later, in philosophy, as the mind/body problem. Some early Christian thinkers argued that carnal desire is a consequence of

the Fall, but since nothing that happens is not good, since everything that happens is *from God*, carnal desire must be good. It is good and natural precisely, or just because, it is something that we must resist and deny. This kind of Christian thinker occupies a position that is the ancestor of a materialist naturalism. The sex drive is innate and we have to deal with it. But other thinkers, somewhat later, foremost among them Augustine, have a picture according to which there is no straightforward reading off of our needs, pleasures, or drives from, as it were, our *natural* condition. According to Augustine, love and marriage were already there for us in Eden.¹⁶ The Fall stems from disobedience, and our punishment, as Augustine sees it, is a twisting and distorting of the will with the consequence that sex, love, and marriage are no longer our unproblematic birthright but something difficult that we need to work on and try to achieve. For Augustine, the conflict is *psychological*, not physical, and it is irreducible to our physical condition. Our wills are deformed and we are now at odds with our own bodies. Impotence, on the one hand, and “nocturnal emissions,” on the other, are evidence that we have no control over what we do, no harmony with ourselves. This is our lot and our punishment. Mind and body have lost the integration they knew in Eden.

What is important for our purposes is that we would need to go back to our first days in the Garden to find ourselves, as we were, before the entanglement has given us the resources to become what we are—fully, recognizably human. Which is just another way of saying that there was no human being before the entanglement.

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