Attribution and the Claim to Objectivity

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One of the first things that happened to me when I began working in a London national museum was that I got involved in a public dispute about the authenticity of some pictures. I was a junior Assistant Keeper in the Department of Paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and part of the job, when visitors brought paintings, drawings, watercolours or miniatures to the Museum, was to identify the objects. If possible, one would attribute the work to a particular artist, or to a school; more often, all one could do was give a date, and some indication of the sort of authorship – perhaps it would be a work by someone having lessons, or by an amateur, perhaps on tour in Europe, by a member of a local art society, or perhaps it would be a copy after something recognizable, or an imitation or a pastiche, sometimes even with a false signature. The task involved looking closely and analytically at the object, front and back, including any old mounting or framing material. Occasionally one would get out a selection of certainly authentic works for close comparison, or look up photographs either in the department records or in books.

In contrast to our colleagues in the department who gave opinions on prints – for they would consult the standard catalogues raisonnés of the artist concerned – we relied mainly on our internal visual memory and general knowledge of the conditions under which, for the last two or three hundred years, art had been produced. Mostly, people were satisfied. Those of us who were men had distinctly less trouble when we had to say that someone's David Cox was a forgery of c. 1905 than the women. Confronted with such bad news delivered by a young woman, some visitors would ask to speak to an older man. For all of us, giving opinions was very much easier at work than if we were taken by surprise at, say, a dinner party. This was not only for the obvious reason that one doesn't have books and photographs at dinner parties; it was because essentially what we were offering and deploying was the authority of the institution, not of ourselves. Obviously we had to embody that authority as far

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as possible, and not make too many judgements that other authorities would disagree with, or else we would imperil the authority of the institution both for ourselves and for the future. And in general, even without deep research and long trips to the library, it is possible to derive from the primary physical characteristics of a painting, together with any surviving evidence of provenance or exhibition history, most of what people want to know. That statement is what this paper is about.

One day in the early spring of 1975, I was summoned to the crowded opinions room and saw two young men in sharp suits with a large parcel. When their turn came they unpacked several framed watercolours and asked me if I could tell them what they were. After inspection, I said that it was difficult to comment on contemporary amateur work, that if they liked it, well and good, and they should have confidence in their own taste. One of the young men questioned me as to why I thought the images were recent, and I said that, although the drawings were on laid paper, their style was obviously dependent on that of Marc Chagall; I hazarded that they were by someone in the late 1960s, when Flower Power and Psychedelia briefly produced a revival of interest in Chagall of the 1940s. I said that such imagery did not exist in art or literature before the mid twentieth century. 'That's interesting' the young men said, 'because these drawings have been offered for sale to us as by a previously unknown female artist of the 1840s, a disciple of William Blake, who had managed, through mystical experiences similar to Blake's own, to anticipate the vision of the twentieth century.' The claim, they went on, was that the drawings were a major discovery, of importance to the whole history of art since the 1840s. A group of them had turned up in a street market and were now on sale in a London gallery. I said that if the objects were 'in process of trade', I was afraid I couldn't comment further, because it was against our rules. They 'thanked me and left' and I got on with the rest of the roomful of opinion seekers.

A couple of weeks later, I awoke one Sunday morning to hear myself being quoted on a radio programme called 'What the Papers Say'. There was evidently a row between *The Sunday People* and *The Observer*, and *The Observer* had just hit back.

What had happened was that reporters from *The Sunday People*, acting on a tip-off, had visited a gallery in the West End owned by a famous actor to investigate what thay had been told were some very dubious drawings. The exhibition had opened with fashionable éclat and everyone, except obviously me, had been there: a great art and show business affair, celebrating this major discovery. Among the guests had been the newly appointed Director of the V&A, and the exhibition had received an extremely favourable mention in *The Observer*. Maybe *The Sunday People* was interested in the story because of the show-business angle; maybe also because the owner of the gallery was still associated in the public mind with

a memorable scene in a film in which he had pulled the pink and yellow tights off two wonderful looking actresses. Anyway, *The Sunday People* had quoted me and my opposite number at the British Museum, as saying that the drawings were recent work. They had also cast doubt on the published information on the provenance of the drawings. They implicitly held *The Observer* up to ridicule and the owner of the gallery was naturally deeply embarrassed. Since I don't normally see *The Sunday People*, I had missed this article, as had everyone else I know at home and at work. But when *The Observer* hit back, everyone knew it.

I can't remember all the details, nor when, over several weeks, all the different statements were made. *The Observer* produced statements that the drawings had been found in an eighteenth century coffer in an old house in Surrey. They also quoted a paper conservator at the Courtauld Institute as saying that there were no anachronistic pigments and that since the drawings were on laid paper they must be old. They also quoted the Director of the V&A as being enthusiastic about the drawings.

In reply, *The Sunday People* demolished the new details of the provenance, quoting a denial by the recent owners of the house that there had been drawings or paintings anywhere in the house and that the coffer had been empty, and revealed other sceptical opinion in support of my position. The other side countered that the drawings had escaped the notice of the previous owners of the house because the coffer in question had had a false bottom. And so it went on.

I dreaded Sundays, but eventually the story lapsed and the drawings disappeared. No museums were buyers. It was a fairly typical art-world spat, the result, you might say, of the chronically loose and impressionistic evidential base of the way we write, or apply, the history of art. I have told it at some length because I think it shows some of the factors that act together to constitute day-to-day 'knowledge' in our field. I want to list those that I have so far distinguished, and then to spend rather longer exposing the historically specific nature of the position that I myself occupied in the dispute.

From what I stress is my point of view, I see the factors as:

(a) Firstly, *technical*, as in the question whether the drawings qualified as 'old', and therefore 'genuine', or 'recent' and therefore in this case 'fake'. But these words, which suggest that it might be possible to settle who was right in the controversy, cannot do so in any simple way. For instance, simply asking the question about age, and getting the answer that the paper is old, does not lead to the expected conclusion, for its being old is to my mind a reason for suspicion. Someone produced the drawings, I say, using old laid paper, which is not very easy to come by, and is anyway not very suitable for watercolour

painting. The visibility of the lines in laid paper (made by the lattice of wires in the traditional paper-maker's mould), and the fact that they show through the wash in a coloured drawing, was a reason for the adoption of wove paper (made with a fine woven screen developed by John Baskerville in the 1750s) for the large exhibition watercolours of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But the supposed watercolourist of the 1840s had many more papers to choose from and would have been much more likely to use one of the specially developed watercolourists' papers, such as 'Creswick', which were widely available and virtually standard for large wash drawings in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Amateurs particularly use these special papers, because correcting mistakes on them is so much easier. So the use of a laid paper seemed anomalous, and suggestive of an attempt to bamboozle the judgement of those of us who pay attention to such technical aspects of art. And similarly, the provision of an elaborate provenance, especially when it was exposed as dependent on coffers with false bottoms, suggested a deliberate attempt to deceive.

(b) *Money*: presumably, in the initial stages, the motive was profit.

(c) *Credulity*: although the gallery owner would legitimately have been making money out of the drawings, I doubt whether there was any attempt to deceive there. I suppose he was seduced by images which, though said to be nineteenth century, seemed wonderfully modern – and the more seductive to twentieth century eyes for that reason. The thought of an art historical coup would also be intoxicating.

(d) *Chic:* mounted, framed, catalogued and displayed in a chic gallery in a chic street, with the champagne flowing, with actors and actresses and other beautiful people present, the drawings would benefit from the dramatic impossibility of saying anything in front of them other than 'How marvellous, darling'.

(e) *Reputation:* perhaps influenced by this atmosphere, *The Observer* noticed the display favourably. Such an authoritative and *bien pensant* newspaper cannot be said to have made a naive mistake. When challenged, it had to defend its credibility – especially against *The Sunday People*.

(f) *Iconoclasm*: perhaps partly provoked by the West End ethos, *The Sunday People* set about an exposure, looking for facts – scientific and documentary, plus some opinions from those who had not so far been involved. The social dynamics of the confrontation were interesting. Very few people interested in art read *The Sunday People*, but most of them read *The Observer*. So most people interested in the subject got an extremely

one-sided impression of the case, and were anyway disinclined to believe that *The Sunday People* could, in this instance, be right and the good, responsible *Observer*, wrong. All my friends, and the colleagues at work, thought I had made an embarrassing mistake.

(g) *Authority*: both sides attempted to enlist the authority of institutions and great names in support of their position. The watercolour experts at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum were ranged against the paper conservation laboratory at the Courtauld Institute and the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

(h) *Institutional pressure*: I was aware of institutional pressure, as my head of department enquired delicately whether I was sure of my ground (he was an *Observer* reader). My Director was quoted to me as having said testily that he was the only person who could speak for the V&A, not some junior whippersnapper upstairs.

(i) *Appeasement and selective quotation*: I remember saying to *The Observer*, which quoted me, that I was perfectly ready to change my opinion if the facts warranted, and if it could be explained to me how images from Chagall could be produced by someone else ninety years before they were invented. In print, the defiant irony of that was lost and made to look like wavering – 'V&A expert ready to change his mind'.

(j) *Obstinacy and arrogance*: But clearly by this time I was also locked into a position, partly determined by my own character and convictions, partly by a sense of solidarity with my colleague at the British Museum. As you can probably tell from the way I tell the story, I thought virtually everyone else was either venal or silly, and a lot of natural arrogance was thus mixed in with a sense of being unjustly treated.

(k) *Objectivity, history and science*: Since I had absolutely no financial or other reason to say anything in the matter except what I thought, I was able to adopt the posture of the objective expert – and of course, as any P.R. consultant would have told me, I should have refused any further comment after the story had broken. I was secure in the myths of incorruptible disinterested scholarship, and of positive knowledge derived from empirically verifiable observations.

That these are myths, or rather that, like myths, they are historically contingent and dependent for their persuasive force on human, institutional and political factors, is the theme of the rest of this paper. In that spirit, I should start by saying a little more both about the history of the art historical discipline and about the sort of work which I normally do within it.

Very briefly, the importance attached to the authorship of pictures in our culture is generally held to be a function of the respect for individualism in the Renaissance, and in particular of Giorgio Vasari's account of the increasing perfection of the art of pictorial representation resulting from the excellencies of a succession of great painters. However, the question of personal authorship was not of exclusive importance for the owners of pictures during the next two hundred years or so. Ownership of a particular image was often more important than ownership of an authentic or original work from a particular artist's hand. Copies, and the art of accurate copying, were certainly not despised, even by great connoisseurs like Charles I of Britain. Seventeenth and eighteenth century art historians, such as Karel van Mander[1] and George Vertue (his notebooks compiled in the early years of the eighteenth century provided the material for Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting in England*, 1765–71) continued to collect information about contemporary or recent artists of their national schools, and to record the location of pictures, describing them according to their subjects or traditional identifications. We may see this as part of the encyclopaedic mentality, analogous as a study of man-made artefacts to seventeenth and eighteenth century studies of natural history and topography. By the nineteenth century, the taxonomic habit of mind had itself produced a sense of the importance of classifying pictures according to school and artist, and there was an increasingly strong sense that Hippolyte Taine's determinants ('race, milieu and moment') were the definitive conditions within which artists worked. From a different philosophical direction, Romantic attitudes to human individuality and to art as the expression of that individuality, hugely increased the importance of artist's biographies and of the precise order in which pictures were painted. Written records were searched so that the character of each artist could be understood, and so that pictures could be recognised by reference to that unique character. In the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, new private collections of pictures were founded, and also the earliest of the great national art museums. The requirements of these institutions, their enlargement by acquisitions and the problem of their rational arrangement by artist and national school, increasingly concentrated the attention of art historians on questions of taxonomy and authorship. Thus art museums, being themselves products of the Enlightenment and of Romanticism, ensure the survival into the twentieth and twenty-first century of the value systems and practices they incorporate. And museum curators remain primarily responsible both academically and publicly for maintaining an up-to-date nomenclature of the pictures they look after.

It is important to realise, however, that at no time in the history of the history of art, has the pre-occupation with attribution been exclusive. For instance, in the second quarter of the nineteenth

century, the need to understand those aspects of Christian iconography which were no longer part of the traditional faith in Protestant countries (if anywhere), led to the publication of important handbooks by Lord Lindsay and Mrs Jameson.[2] Academic foundations such as the Warburg Institute exist to promote such iconographical studies of the Art, in the broadest sense, of the Classical Tradition. Particularly since the 1930s, there has been a strong academic tradition of Marxist art history, concerned primarily with the social determinants and functioning of art, and only marginally interested in questions of authorship. And since the 1960s, post-structuralist critiques of 'intentionality' and the ways in which meanings are generated by texts, including visual texts, have placed greater emphasis on the audiences of art than on its producers.

Personally, I have worked mostly on the key role of aesthetic theory in the formation of imagery in the years around 1800. I have also worked on portrait images in the seventeenth century which, I would claim, were important in maintaining and transmitting cultural values associated with the Tudor Anglican Settlement into the post-Restoration years. But that work grew out of a task to which I was assigned when I joined the Victoria and Albert Museum, and which was very much part of the central taxonomic role of the Museum, rather than of my own instinctive preferences. The task was to become an expert on portrait miniatures and their authorship, and to catalogue the collection.

It is through that task that I was, as it happens, enabled to understand some of the historical contingencies of the claim to scientific objectivity that is implicit in our public role as curators.

I have described myself in 1974 as Assistant Keeper in the Department of Paintings. I was appointed to that office the year before by the then Director of the V&A John Pope-Hennessey and by the Keeper of the department Graham Reynolds. Apart from immediate tasks, such as the Byron exhibition, I was to take over from Graham his special fields of the watercolours, the miniatures (especially the early ones) and Constable. While I was doing Byron, John Pope-Hennessey left and was succeeded by Roy Strong, whose work on Tudor portraiture I knew and greatly admired. Reynolds and Strong had, in the past, clashed about the attribution of a possible Holbein miniature, and in the event, Graham brought forward his planned retirement by a year. In his last months as Keeper he instituted for me a twice weekly private session, two hours long, in which he systematically took me through the collection of miniatures, of which I had no previous experience. For each artist there was something distinctive, the shape of the ear, perhaps, or more often something more minute, such as the way in which the shadow under the eye was drawn, or the outlining of the nose, or the shading of the background. He used a hand-held lens and knew exactly what he was looking for in each object. If an object had been attributed to, say, Andrew Plimer, and the shape of the nose or the hatching

of the background were not right, then, even if the miniature purported to be signed or otherwise documented, one was to doubt the signature rather than the evidence of the nose or hatching strokes. It was only years later that I realised what Graham was doing, that I was being inducted into a specific tradition of connoisseurship, and that there was, within it, an apostolic succession at the V&A.

Graham had himself joined the department in 1938 as the equivalent of an Assistant Keeper. Interestingly, his degree was in mathematics. One of his duties was to learn the specially difficult and arcane field of miniatures, which is studied only at the V&A, and he was inducted into it by Carl Winter (1906–1966), during the period when Winter was beginning to try to distinguish the hands of Nicholas Hilliard and Isaac Oliver, the two great Elizabethan miniaturists, whose oeuvres had become totally confused in the welter of traditional and speculative attributions since the seventeenth century. The work was characterised by minutely sensitive analysis of the actual marks made on the vellum by the artists, and for the first time, proper allowance was made for condition – not so much in describing the extent of restorers' interpolations, but by looking for and using stylistic markers that, in most cases, were little affected by restoration or fading. For the first time there would be a rational and principled distinction between the artists. Winter, however, was one of those connoisseurs who published little and so it fell to Reynolds, when Winter left to become Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in 1946, to continue the work and bring it to fruition. This he did in the brilliant Hilliard-Oliver exhibition held at the V&A in 1947. In the catalogue he pays generous tribute to Winter's 'basic work on this fundamental task.'

Winter was a great connoisseur. He had joined the department also as an Assistant Keeper, in 1931, when the towering personality was Basil Long (1881–1937). Long had been in the department since 1906 and had a string of major catalogues to his credit. A brilliant linguist who had been at the University of Heidelburg, he ranged across the whole field of European old master painting, including British art, but his special field was the miniature. In the departmental files one comes across notes written by him when he was a staff officer on the Western Front during the war, giving his assistant Stokes back in South Kensington amazingly detailed instructions on the day-to-day care of the collection. Among his art-historical papers I found a list of miniaturists and alongside each name was some characteristic trait: long straight noses, a small white high-light in each eye, matt grey backgrounds, a black line under the eye-lid. I presume it was work in progress, available as such to his colleagues, but not yet ready for publication. Of the work that he did complete, the most important was the monumental *British Miniaturists* of 1929, which is still standard. In effect, it established the field, rescuing it from the enthusiasm of amateurs,

dealers and collectors, who both before and after Long, have poured forth garbled monographs and general histories. *British Miniaturists* is a comprehensive study of every artist then known, covering the documentary records and current locations of all important works, together with a characterisation of each artist's style: for example, on Samuel Cooper:

> 'A typical portion of the faces for comparison is the method of drawing the eyelids. ... The shading of his faces is usually brown ... he laid in a ground of opaque white on the parchment before painting a miniature ...'.

Winter revered Long, and Long trained Winter. But in 1936, Long suddenly began suffering from headaches and he died from a brain tumour on 5 January 1937 . Winter busied himself with organizing a memorial for him, and collected enough money to purchase from the Buccleuch Collection a brilliant, troubling self portrait by the poet, barrister, Fellow of the Royal Society and miniaturist, Thomas Flatman (1635–88). Acquired in 1937, it was one of the first objects catalogued by the young Graham Reynolds as he joined the department.

One day in the mid 1980s I came across, folded in a book in the departmental library, a newspaper obituary of Long with all references and dates unfortunately cut off. In one sentence it told that, just after graduating in the late 1890s, Long had taken himself off to Milan, where he had studied the methods of the great Giovanni Morelli.

Now, Morelli (1816–1891) is an interesting man. Among the inventors of art history he has been somewhat obscured by the fame of Burckhardt, Waagen, Crowe and Cavalcaselle, Bode, Berenson, Warburg et al. Yet Morelli was the brightest star of all, at least in a literary sense, between the publication of his first essay in 1874 and his death in 1891. Writing under the pseudonym Ivan Lermolieff, an anagram of his name with a Russian ending, he presented himself as a sort of Ariel, a deliberately insubstantial figure of the imagination, but dedicated to the reform of the deep intellectual and institutional structure of art history. Feigning a Socratic naïveté, he adopted the form of the dialogue, and his irony is both delicious and devastating. We shall return to his role as Ariel in due course.

In relation to the brief history of art history which I have sketched above, Morelli enters the story in the mid-nineteenth century when attribution was well-established as the central, institutional preoccupation. The practice of attribution through the recognition of the essential spirit (the Hegelian *geist*) of the painting was still standard, though it was to be supported by archival research and the study of drawings.

Morelli, by descent a Swiss Protestant educated in Germany, was by conviction a protagonist of the Italian Risorgimento and member

of the Italian popular assembly. Already a connoisseur and activist in matters of art, he was appointed in April 1861 as a commissioner for the Italian government to tour Umbria and the Marches, to list and report on the paintings in churches, monasteries, and private collections. The secretary of the commission was Giovanni Cavalcaselle, who thus laid the foundations for his collaboration with Joseph Arthur Crowe on the *New History of Painting in Italy* (1864) and many subsequent works. Morelli was appalled at the physical state of the paintings, and at the ignorance of those in charge of them. He spent the next ten or twelve years pressing for the reform of the Italian museums and galleries, especially seeking the appointment of directors competent in the history of art, and in securing the passage of the first of the Italian state laws regulating the sale and export of works of art in public institutions. During these years he travelled widely in Europe, studying collections in Germany, France and England, confirming his general impression of widespread incompetence in the identification of pictures and acquiring a sharp sense of the self-serving arrogance of gallery directors and university professors. Ultimately, having become a member of the Italian senate, at the age of nearly sixty he ventured into print with a series of essays in Carl von Lutzow's periodical *Zeitschrift für Bildende Kunst* (Leipzig 1874–6), which caused a sensation in the European art world. He offered a detailed critique and exposé of what he claimed to be wrong attributions in the most famous galleries of Italy, pouring scorn on not only the traditional attributions but on the recent judgements of the most powerful German scholars. Following the succès de scandale of this first series, he followed it in 1880 with a critical review of the pictures in the galleries at Dresden, Munich and Berlin.

The 1880s were a decade of gradual, perhaps irresistible success as, despite the anger of the Berlin establishment, galleries all over Europe fell into line with the maestro's judgements. By 1890, when his last book came out, recapitulating some of his earliest material on the Borghese and Doria-Pamfili galleries in Rome, his triumph was largely complete. It is time to look at his work and the nature of his impact on the practice of art history in greater detail.

For Morelli, the most important piece of evidence in relation to authorship was the painting itself. Although archival research might produce evidence of a commission, or of payments to a named artist, the definitive evidence had to be the formal properties, or 'phraseology', of the painting. His alter ego, an aged Italian connoisseur, who is encountered descending the steps of the Pitti one evening, makes the point:

> 'Let me give an ... instance of the very problematic value of a document in the hands of a man who does not understand the phraseology of art. [A]... distinguished archivist ... who has

> rendered good service in his particular branch of research, had the misfortune to discover a document some years ago in our city archives, which records that Fra Diamante, an inferior painter of the middle of the fifteenth century, the pupil and assistant of Fra Filippo Lippi, was commissioned to paint a fresco in the Vatican, of "Christ delivering the keys to St. Peter." Jubilant at his great discovery, he gave vent to his mingled excitement and scorn in the following terms: "How little you art-critics know of your business! From Vasari downwards you have all ascribed the large fresco in the Sistine chapel representing "St. Peter receiving the keys" to Perugino, and you profess to see his manner in it. But let me tell you that you are quite on the wrong tack; for it is not the work of an Umbrian at all, but of our Florentine, Fra Diamante ... Here it is in black and white in my document, as clear as noonday, and before such evidence criticism and strife must cease"'.[3]

Commonsense alone, we might suppose, should have prevented such a foolishly premature announcement by the archivist. The old man's companion replies:

> '"As I have not been in Rome I cannot say anything about this fresco", said I. "Do you consider it to be the work of Perugino?" "His best work", replied the Italian emphatically, with an air of complete conviction.
>
> "I must confess", I observed, "that you have persuaded me of this much, that the work of art itself is, after all, the only trustworthy evidence for purposes of identification"'.

The *only* evidence that counts ultimately is therefore the evidence contained in the actual picture surface, that which bears marks made both deliberately and instinctually by the person in whom one is interested. The elderly Italian speaks again:

> '"Only by gaining a thorough knowledge of the characteristics of each painter – of his forms and of his colouring – shall we ever succeed in distinguishing the genuine works of the great masters from those of their pupils and imitators, or even from copies; and though this method may not always lead to absolute conviction, it, at least, brings us to the threshold."
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> "That may be", said I, "but you must recollect that every human eye sees form differently."
>
> "Exactly so", said the Italian, "and, for this very reason, every great artist sees and represents those forms in his own distinctive manner; hence, for him they become characteristic. For they are by no means the result of accident or caprice, but of internal conditions."'[4]

The next day the pair meet in the Uffizi and apply the previous day's lesson to two works attributed by the gallery director to Fra Filippo Lippi:

> '"Look at this painting carefully", he said, as he placed me before it in the best light. "Among Sandro Botticelli's characteristic forms I will mention the hand, with bony fingers – not beautiful, but always full of life; the nails, which, as you perceive in the thumb here, are square with black outlines, and the short nose with dilated nostrils, which you see exemplified in Botticelli's celebrated and undisputed work hanging close by – *The Calumny of Apelles*. Note, too, the peculiar lengthened folds of the drapery, and the transparent golden red colour in both pictures. If you like, you may also compare the nimbus round the head of St Augustine, with the glories of other saints in *authentic* works of the same period by the master, and you will, I think be found to acknowledge that the painter of the *Calumny* and of the large *Tondo* in the next room, must also have been the author of this St Augustine."
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> This matter-of-fact way of identifying works of art by the help of such external signs savoured more of an anatomist, I thought, than of a student of art, and was moreover entirely opposed to the usually accepted method. Nevertheless I answered: "You seem to be right in your conjectures; but how is it that the picture came to be ascribed to Fra Filippo and not to Botticelli?"
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> "Because those who named the pictures in this gallery were only guided by the general impression, and were not in the habit of comparing the works by different masters of the same school; the principal reason, however, was that Vasari, in his life of Fra Filippo, records that the Frate painted a *St Augustine in his Study* for Bernardo Vecchietti."'[5]

Morelli called what the old man was looking for the *Grundform*, or typical form, by which each artist indicates a part of the anatomy, or part of a landscape background. Because, as he says, 'most painters ... put all the strength of their art into the delineation of the features [of the head] ... and pupils, for this part of the work, often appropriate ideas from their masters', one has to look for the *Grundform* in the hands and ears, the less regarded parts of the body, over which the painter's brush passes instinctively, creating forms that come from his own unalloyed vision – 'For every important painter has, so to speak, a type of hand and ear peculiar to himself.'[6]

Lest this should seem simplistic, Morelli sees numerous other instinctually 'typical' markers of the painter's hand. In discussing an artist called Bacchiacca he lists a number of them:

'1) In the foreground of his landscapes he nearly always introduces a wedge-shaped rock of a light colour, over-grown with trees and bushes ...
2) His hands have long bony fingers
3) ... he shows a predilection for blue.
4) He first laid in the hair in brown, and added the details with glazes of a yellowish colour ...
5) [the ear] is sometimes rounder, sometimes longer in form ...
6) The close-fitting sleeves which he gives to his female figures show a number of stiff cross-folds ... a peculiarity ... due to his study of Lucas van Leyden's engravings ...
7) In the draperies we often find a fold in the shape of a V...'.[7]

It is difficult for us now to understand how revolutionary – the word is actually used by the narrator in Morelli's dialogue – this seemed in the late nineteenth century. Although he pays lip-service to the German idealist tradition, to the idea that all appearances are merely local incarnations of the *geist*, there is no doubt that he felt the starting point should be those adventitious, mundane, instinctual little marks on the canvas. His contribution to the history of art is in that sense 'scientific', for it is based on the classic inductive process, of close observation and measurement, followed by hypothetical generalisation, which was, from the 'scientific' revolution of the seventeenth century, held to provide the most plausible road to certain knowledge. It is interesting that Morelli was actually trained as a physician – he was thus professionally as well as intellectually of the empirical tradition, and he claims it specifically as his own in the Introduction to his essay on the Munich Gallery:

> 'Yet even the most highly gifted and accomplished connoisseur will never attain to certainty of judgement without a definite system of study, and this, I believe, must be that so-called "experimental method" which, from the time of Leonardo da Vinci, of Galileo, and of Bacon, to that of Volta and Darwin, has led to the most splendid discoveries. In the history of Art it can, of course, only be regarded as a means to assist in identifying the author of a picture.'[8]

In fact, of course, Morelli was not a white-coated scientist disinterestedly seeking after truth. We may here remember that he was an Italian patriot, hyper-conscious of the growing power of Germany under Bismarck, and it is difficult to read even his coolest descriptive prose without being aware that coolness and the claim to objectivity are part of his weaponry. Thus disguised, he was in fact an amazingly persistent and biting controversialist, pursuing controversy with an open animus that eventually embarrassed even his greatest admirers and disciples. His principal opponent was Wilhelm Bode (1845–1929), the famous and infinitely formidable director of the

great gallery at Berlin which bears his name. Institutionally, and by common consent as to his merit as a scholar, Bode was the leader of the German school of art history, which had, certainly since the 1820s, dominated the entire European scene by its professionalised scholarship and by its own separate claims to 'scientific' authority.

Fundamentally, the argument is over the ownership of 'science':

> 'Some of the most persistent among my numerous opponents at Berlin condemned my interpretation of the history of Italian art as unscientific. They more especially disparaged the experimental method which I recommended. None of them, however, were able to show that my opinions were unsound, nor were they capable of proving, by arguments to the contrary, that the conclusions to which my researches had led me were erroneous.'[9]

He rejects contemptuously the German claim to scientific rigour:

> 'At Berlin, the "centre of the scientific study of art" the critics have found it desirable to form an alliance, offensive and defensive [to prevent the publication of dissenting views in the normal periodicals]. Like the Triple Alliance, which was formed in that city for the preservation of the peace of the universe, this league was to ensure to its members a peaceful and unmolested existence and to uphold its own prestige in matters of art.'[10]

The light-footed irony of this passage, which is characteristic of all Morelli's writing, not just the overtly controversial parts, begins to show why I have referred to him as Ariel, the sprite in *The Tempest*. Morelli loathed the professionalisation of art and mocked its pomposities mercilessly:

> 'I must confess that nothing appears to me more ludicrous than that self-complacent assurance and pretentious gravity which, according to Socrates, moved even the gods to laughter. ... If it be true ... that I have had the good fortune to correct several glaring misstatements in the history of Italian art, it is entirely owing to the fact that I hold no official position. ... A director of a gallery or a professor is apt to think it due to his high office that he should lay down the law to others, and to feel himself debarred from admitting that he has anything more to learn ...'.[11]

But apart from mockery, Ariel also has a function in the play, which is to torment the King of Naples and the usurping Duke of Milan so much that they repent of their ways and are reconciled to Prospero, the true Duke, who is thus restored to his dukedom. I do

not know whether Morelli really fought to win, or whether he fought for the mere pleasure of scoring off heavier-footed opponents. It is not even completely clear that art and attributions are the real subject of his animus, or whether he is at some metaphorical level conducting an unwinnable guerilla campaign against German hegemony in Europe, and against the manifold imperialisms of the dominant German culture. Whatever the truth of that, he was, as I have indicated already, the winner in the 1870s and 1880s on the issue of attribution science.

And within months of writing the last passage quoted above, he definitively departed from the play by dying (28 February 1891), and Bode was left fulminating against his memory in the pages of *The Fortnightly Review*.

> 'You have hardly heard in England of Herr Lermolieff, in spite of the claims which are put forward even there on his behalf. This Swiss physician [Bode had trained as a lawyer!], who was educated in Germany and of late took his seat in the Senate at Rome, has strung into a theory his experiences as an old and lucky hand at collecting, and this theory is to make every believer in it infallible in recognizing an Old Master. As a surgeon he had his attention directed to the form of the human body, and especially of its extremities, and when thus engaged he thought he discovered that every great artist, even in painting portraits, made use of his own extremities as models for the subject in hand. ... The success of this quack doctor was all the more complete, in that he extolled his method with an air of infallibility, and held up all previous authorities ... to the contempt of his credulous following. Now, although this Romanised Swiss promulgates his theories on Italian art in the crudest manner, and makes fun of Germans on nearly every page of his books, he has formed a sect of German and half-German believers who endeavour to propagate his teaching by embittering the lives of us, directors of picture-galleries, with the usual amenity of sectarians.'[12]

The thought of Bode, like Caliban, alone again on the enchanted Museuminsel in Berlin, should remind us of the impossibility of any resolution in such a conflict; should remind us that, even if young English or American art historians took up and practised the Morellian method, there was no consensus, no universal recognition that truth and justice had prevailed. The whole episode consisted of a contest between different rhetorical strategies, representing interests which, if they were not merely personal, were to an uncertain extent political and nationalistic. That is the tradition of objective art historical scholarship to which I was inducted in my turn in 1974. I realise, as I write the date, that 1974 was a hundred years after Morelli had published his first essay.

Notes

1 *Het Schilder-Boeck...*, [1603]-04.
2 Alexander Lindsay, Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, *Sketches of the History of Christian Art*, 1847; Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, 1848–1852.
3 Giovanni Morelli, *Italian Painters, Critical Studies of their Works*, ed. C.J.Ffoulkes with an Introduction by A.H.Layard, 1892, I, p. 31.
4 *Ibid.*, I, p. 23.
5 *Ibid.*, I, pp. 35–6.
6 *Ibid.*, I, pp. 76–7, illus, pp. 77, 78.
7 *Ibid.*, p. 104.
8 *Ibid.*, II, p. 2.
9 *Ibid.*, II, pp. viii–ix.
10 *Ibid.*, II, p. viii.
11 *Ibid.*, II, pp. vi–vii.
12 W. Bode, 'The Berlin Renaissance Museum', *The Fortnightly Review*, Vol. LVI, 1 October 1891, pp. 506–15; the quotation is on p. 509.

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