

# Reviews

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## The education of Roger Fry

by Andrew Brink

Frances Spalding. *Roger Fry: Art and Life*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980. Pp. xvi+304; 97 illustrations. US \$24.95. London: Elek, 1980. Pp. 256. £9.95.

FRANCES SPALDING'S *Roger Fry* is a critical biography for which everyone interested in Bloomsbury culture should be grateful. Based on extensive correspondences, it is the fullest account of his life we are likely to see. And yet Spalding's biography should be taken in conjunction with Virginia Woolf's remarkable *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940) which discloses the sympathy of friendship no subsequent biographer can hope to regain. Frances Spalding ventured where Virginia Woolf had triumphed for two reasons: much more of Fry's private life now can be told safely, and a thoroughgoing critical estimate of his art, criticism and scholarship is in order. Not that Woolf avoided the critical personal or evaluative issues; for instance, her passage on the madness which overtook Fry's wife, Helen, is crafted for truthfulness and delicacy, extraordinarily moving in view of Woolf's own fate, the fate which overtook Woolf despite the solicitude of her husband.

Roger Fry, it can only be said, did all that he could to help his wife; his patience and sympathy were indefatigable, his resourcefulness beyond belief. But her obsessions increased. And finally, when they came back to England in the spring the blow fell. Madness declared itself. "I was a fool to be happy yesterday", he wrote to R. C. Trevelyan.... (P. 103)

Spalding adds new information to this (that physiological causes were discovered at autopsy in 1937) but, despite skilful writing sometimes sounding like Woolf's own, she can't come close to the evocative power of these words. Similarly Woolf's brief remarks on Fry's achievement as painter and critic are as valuable now as the day they were written. Woolf knew that authentic art arises from "inner necessity" more than from

taking thought. She was first to suggest, but with due caution, that Fry had permitted intellect to starve off the vital unconscious forces on which every successful artist relies.

And did Roger Fry with his puritan upbringing and his Cambridge training repress [the unconscious] too severely? The psychologist may note that he had "given up day-dreaming when he was a boy of sixteen". Again, when he found that a mood of "egotistic exultation" forced itself upon him when he was listening to music, he gave up going to concerts. Perhaps the subconscious mind resented this incessant inspection and took its revenge. Or perhaps, as he claimed towards the end of his life, the art which is produced consciously and intellectually has its own quality, and it is a lasting one. (Pp. 119-20)

From Woolf's allusion to Freud's "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908) it is clear what a great artist commenting on a much lesser one was saying. What is left for Spalding except to work out the implications and to fill in the detail of Woolf's assessment? But that is a worthy enough aim, and we certainly learn much, not only of Fry and his circle, but of English culture in its turn-of-the-century uncertainty about how to accommodate to modernism.

Spalding is engaging because she clearly likes Fry and hopes to rehabilitate his sagging reputation. Both biographers show how winningly brilliant Fry was as a lecturer, writer and conversationalist—by his charisma and careful scholarship he virtually established art history as a discipline in England. He was a secular missionary bringing good news about aesthetic pleasures to be found in painting from the Renaissance to his own time; Fry was an effective public advocate, like Ruskin who had championed Turner's art, or the later Quaker-turned-surrealist, Roland Penrose, who championed Picasso's. He also carried forward with conviction William Morris's craft movement establishing the Omega Workshop in London which, up to the First World War, set about to revitalize English interior design as well as to be a mecca for the fine arts themselves. However, the new European aesthetic which came to prevail was not English but French. It is difficult to make Fry look anything but parochial, reacting to the excitements and discoveries of a culture not his own. This is a principal source of his uncertainty as painter and critic.

Fry came on the scene when late Victorian and Edwardian narrative and moralistic sentimentality still prevailed as in such painting as that of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema and George Frederic Watts. His own start as a portraitist was steady and purposeful, with some of his most successful work being portraits of G. Lowes Dickinson (1893) and Edward Carpenter (1894). But the literalness of portraiture did not satisfy him

and he yearned for fuller aesthetic revelation. As early as 1892 Fry had tried to assimilate French symbolist imagery into landscape, "The Estuary at Blythborough" being perhaps the first of his Post-Impressionist essays in the advancement of his own art and the reform of English taste. He was trying to paint *pictures* based on nature rather than represent, or even evoke, a particular scene. He had grasped from the French that the picture's authoritative "objecthood" is the desired result, but the lesson came hard to Fry not only because the English art public was philistine and uncomprehending. His own sensibility was unready to receive the information, it seems: the moralist and missionary could not allow the pure intellectual abandon of an artist who "thinks" in line, form and colour. Fry's obstacle was more than having to bring about the climate of taste in which to paint as he wanted to paint. As a propagandist and sponsor in London of new Continental trends he was brilliant, as we shall see. It was as an understander, in the deepest sense, of what was new in French painting that he fell down. There is something to the cliché that the English are much better at literary than visual art: where is the English painter to match Chaucer, Shakespeare or Milton? The imaginative painter William Blake was a poet first; the late Turner, master of expressive atmospheric turmoils, required draughts from the Europeans, Rembrandt and Watteau, to nourish his unusual English gift for visual thinking, while the English virtuoso of Romantic grandiosity John Martin was simply dismissed as "mad Martin". The memorable English painters who won solid reputations by keeping to the business of their own culture are, for instance, Hogarth the satirist, Stubbs the horse painter, and Constable the landscape artist. Arguably the greatest English portraits are by the seventeenth-century Dutchman Van Dyck rather than by the native-born Sir Joshua Reynolds in the next century. When the origins of an English *petit-maitre* such as Fry's contemporary Walter Sickert are looked into, it turns out that Sickert was more Bavarian than English. Is it any wonder that Fry was in difficulty?

When Roger Fry was in Paris in 1892 studying at the conservative Académie Julien, he hardly sensed impending changes in taste to be brought about mainly by the Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne. Not until 1906 did he recognize the revolutionary implications of Cézanne's ability to work strictly in a painter's language of line, form and colour, without striving for poetic associations that most artists still assumed the public wanted. Cézanne was finding in the structure of Mont Sainte Victoire much the same release into the pure logic of relations that Russell found in mathematics. Fry sensed the exhilaration of this release. By 1910, when Fry arranged the controversial Post-Impressionist exhibition at the Grafton Galleries in London, he was able

to see the course that modern European art in general was taking. Interestingly, Lady Ottoline Morrell backed this avant-garde attack on polite English academicism, for which the sponsors were branded anarchists and worse. Fry seems to have both desired and resisted the new aesthetic, or rather *mélange* of excitements, each with powerful aesthetic implications. By sponsoring experimentalism he endorsed a trend he was not himself capable of contributing to because of cultural insularity and temperament. Fry's landscape art is typically dreamy and nostalgic, full of melancholic sensibility best understood in terms of the "English malady", depression, rather than of the integrated mood of Cézanne which subordinates feeling to the realization of form in nature. Fry's mentors in nostalgia were the seventeenth-century French landscape painters Claude Lorrain and Nicholas Poussin, with one of his finest critical essays in *Vision and Design* being "Claude" (1907).

Needless to say, their aesthetic is as different as can be from the expressive stridency of Fry's discoveries, for instance Matisse, Gauguin and Van Gogh. But Cézanne's art touched him essentially and, after the Post-Impressionist exhibition, its echoes pervade his work. Sensing Cézanne's impassioned impersonality gained in the purified objecthood of his pictures, Fry craved it for his own. By emulating Cézanne Fry probably hoped to bring about psychological "repair" of his melancholy, exacerbated by his wife's incurable mental illness and by the uncertain fortunes of his other love affairs. This hypothesis is not Spalding's, but it would be worth developing to explain the discrepancy between the aesthetic ideals to which Fry aspired and his actual performance, which never produced the pure painterly joy of which Cézanne, with all his temperamental quirks, was capable. Fry measured his work by the highest achievements of the age, but his painting never really assimilated the necessary aesthetic information to take it to Cézanne's level. When an exquisite small Cézanne still life of seven apples obtained by Maynard Keynes became nothing less than a worshipped Bloomsbury icon, Fry was confirmed in his belief, as Spalding quotes him, that "Art is a passion or it is nothing" (p. 220). As we have said, the passion for form and colour, the apples being a mere occasion for the event consisting of paint on canvas, is not an English passion. It descends from Chardin in eighteenth-century France and never crossed the channel. Fry was ready with an apt phrase, but Cézanne's unique blend of spatial logic with the magic of objecthood (the "thisness" of seven simple apples) seems to have escaped him. In translation something is always lost, and by concentrating too hard on this new visual language Fry lost the essence of what it was saying.

Fry was disadvantaged by being first trained as a scientist, which

training, having been at his father's insistence, caused him to rebel. As a child he had loved the colour and texture of plants in the enclosed garden at his family's house in Highgate Village, now a part of London. The resulting split between intellect and feeling, analysis and mystical intuition is a familiar one in English culture. It is found from Newton to Russell in mathematics and philosophy, and from John Donne to T. S. Eliot in poetry. Its main mode is isolation and denial of affect—encapsulating feeling so as to separate mere feeling from thought to which higher reality is imputed. Isolation and denial of affect are defences characteristic of those whose personality organization is obsessional, as is often the case with creative people. The highest creativity, however, embodies feeling in form, while lesser creativity isolates and denies feeling, driving it from the created configuration, whether painting, poem or other artistic form. (Creativity within the strict limits of mathematics and logic need not run the risk of excluding feeling.) Exclusion of feeling by artists, however, can be fatal to the power of imagination to originate its own verbal or visual language. Fry's art seldom connects the prose with the passion, leaving imagination constrained by too deliberate thought about the artistic problems to be solved. To be fair to him, he was well aware that he was not a great painter, only hoping occasionally to be a good one.

How skilfully does Spalding deal with the question of the reputation Fry deserves? There are hints through the biography that she wants to establish for Fry a reputation better than that which he earned. A balanced statement appears to be churlish: Fry was not a natural draughtsman but he could capture a telling and expressive likeness; he was not a poet in paint but he sometimes attained a winning nostalgia; he was not a gifted formalist but he at least grappled with Cézanne's discoveries and with those of the later French Cubists. Spalding wants better than this when she writes:

Inevitably his achievement as a painter is overshadowed by the great artists he wrote about and with whom his name is popularly associated. Yet [a] classical quality characterises his art, separates it from that of his contemporaries, and will ensure him a distinct position in the history of twentieth century British art. (P. 273)

This statement is based on an undeveloped assumption that Fry had fused the Classical landscape of Poussin with Cézanne's profound understanding of form. Alas, there isn't much to be said for such an assumption. The context for fairly judging Fry's art is better described as that of twentieth-century British art. But Spalding does not argue the case or

even discuss the chief contenders in terms of their overall achievement. Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell, Augustus John and Walter Sickert, for instance, invite useful comparisons. The remark about a "classical quality" in Fry's art is perhaps justifiable in a strictly descriptive sense, but it does little to assist in assessing the lasting worth of his art. It is more accurate to say that most of Fry's art is lost in a no-man's land between the aesthetic values he espoused as a spokesman for traditional European painting, including that of the Renaissance, and the new aesthetic of Post-Impressionism which he so energetically promoted. Fry will be remembered as the man who brought modernism to England long after his own art is seen to be mainly of historical interest. Ironically, Fry was the victim of the aesthetic revolution he did so much to produce.

Fry's thought about art is another matter. His very inconsistencies are interesting. At its highest he thought of art as secular religious revelation to replace the Quakerism of his childhood. He remarked on the danger of separating art from religion and both from life, but separate them he did with results often not satisfactory to himself. Roger Fry's most important theoretical contribution is to the aesthetics of form. While not resolving the form-content dichotomy (who can in just those terms?), he animated its discussion, despite the inevitable reductionism to which emphasis on form led. Was this because as a divided personality he was seeking shelter in a realm of impersonal pure form? Fry certainly insisted on the autonomy of formal as opposed to representative content in painting. Taking his cue from Bernard Berenson, as Spalding says, Fry developed the theory of "significant form". The relationship with Berenson soon broke down since Berenson was extremely touchy about any views on Renaissance art which were not his own; inevitably Fry transgressed. Fry therefore independently developed a doctrine of form as the most aesthetically pure element in art, opening a battle with himself, and with the art public, which gives the biographer her most interesting topic. As might be expected of a Quaker, Fry was a moralist, humanitarian and a believer in immediate and continuing revelation. On the other hand, the repressed and fearful part of Fry (to make a psychological assumption) favoured privacy, intellectual precision and formal exactitude—within the controlled precinct of artistic form. Fry was pulled between humane responses to content and the logic of form: between "the pathos and adoration expressed in [Giovanni] Bellini's early work" (c. 1460) and the passionate but severely logical structure of the frescos of Piero della Francesca.

This isolation led Fry to mute feelings and to paint "ideas", a necessary reaction against Victorian sentimentality. It permitted movement toward the tougher intellectuality of Cézanne, but there were difficulties. Writ-

ing to the object of his passion Vanessa Bell, about painting her portrait, Fry talks about the "miracle of rhythm" in all she does, calling it "delightful reasonableness and after all beauty is a kind of reasonableness you know" (p. 172). To speak thus of reasonableness in art is an evasion of feeling, a curiously "English" way of dealing with the disruptive infatuation with Vanessa Bell. Yet applied to a Post-Impressionist picture the comment makes some sense because, if an artist cannot *construct* his material so as to give it readable order, there is little hope for the appeal of his product. In Fry's art passion is typically overcontrolled by reason (isolation of affect), explaining the deference to French prototypes and the uneven results of an artist who never quite trusted, or even clearly identified, his own gifts. Deference to pure form in art sometimes also landed his criticism in absurdity, as when he claimed that to understand one of Paul Gauguin's exotic masterpieces, laden with poetic content, nothing more than formal analysis was required. As Fry wrote, "Nor do I imagine that one's pleasure in the picture would anyway be heightened by an elucidation of the symbolism." The form-content dichotomy plagues Fry's most important theoretical work in *Vision and Design* (1920, 1923); but like most gifted critics his intuitive insights could outrun his stated principles, as in the wonderful essay on the seventeenth-century landscape painter, Claude Lorraine. As he writes, Claude's "world is not to be lived in, only to be looked at in a mood of pleasing melancholy or suave reverie" (*Vision and Design*, p. 231). This was Fry's real temperamental starting-point, but the excitements of modernism overrode it, leaving his art tentative and without the centre of conviction from which it might grow.

What will those who value the work of Bertrand Russell gain from Spalding's biography? For somebody Russell calls a friend from his earliest Cambridge days, Fry suffers neglect in the *Autobiography*. Spalding does not remedy the defect, except for informing us that Fry designed the Russells' bookplate, and we are left guessing about a number of things. In truth there were tensions between them with Russell's judgment falling heavily on Fry, for instance after the tragedy of Theodore Llewelyn Davies' death when he found Fry "too soft for the tragedies of passionate people" (letter to Ottoline Morrell, 1 April 1911). When Fry was established as an art critic, there was little common ground with Russell who, as far back as 1903, had portrayed himself in a letter to Bernard Berenson as being an ordinary English Philistine. This of course changed after 1911 and the love affair with Lady Ottoline Morrell, but Russell was never very secure in his appreciation of art. Roger Fry's falling out with Lady Ottoline in May 1911, as would be supposed, involved Russell. As she reports in her *Memoirs* (I: 213), she

protested when Fry had wrongly accused her of spreading abroad that he was in love with her. Thus an important alliance turned to bitterness, which Spalding thinks was due to Fry's unreasonableness in a time of stress. She does not trace the more probable cause as being Fry's and Vanessa Bell's gossip—furthered by Virginia Woolf—about Russell's affair with Lady Ottoline. Sandra Darroch, Lady Ottoline's biographer, thinks that Roger Fry as a Quaker took Alys Pearsall Smith's side as the wronged party in the breakdown of Russell's marriage. It was one of those inwrought Bloomsbury complications that only the most careful biographical reconstruction can make clear. Spalding's biography does not investigate such seemingly secondary issues, but it gives the Russell scholar a sympathetic portrait of a key Bloomsbury intellectual who mingled more in Russell's life than either was prepared to admit. It would have been fascinating to have had her comments on the respects in which Fry and Russell were alike—both mystically inclined rationalists, the one seeking solace in the forms of art, the other in the logic of number. Each sought replacement for lost belief in Christian religion; each hoped that new revelation could be derived from the cultural materials handed down to them in art and mathematics. There were remarkable feats of intellect and sensibility yet the split-off intellectual quests of these two thinkers imposed serious limitations which it is time to begin considering.

And Fry himself—how deeply is he portrayed? Spalding's biography is neither an admiring extravaganza such as Michael Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey* nor a psychobiography fitting the facts to a theory of personality development. Undoubtedly Fry's life would fit the New York psychoanalyst Matthew Besdine's theory of the "Jocasta-mothered" creative genius, a theory in which the affect-starved possessive mother imperils her son's emotional and sexual autonomy which leads him to make guilty amends through creative work.<sup>1</sup> Spalding clearly establishes that Fry's mother was the dominant parent and that, following the death of a brother six years older, Roger, as the only boy, "felt menaced by an excess of sisters" (p. 12). One of the sisters had also died and, with Roger the only remaining boy, excessive hopes were pinned on him by his father to succeed in science. Judging from his schoolboy correspondence, Spalding calls him "pathetically attached to his mother" and "under considerable emotional and moral pressure due to her influence". Continuing on this line she hazards the interpretation: "His close attachment to his mother partly explains why in Lady Fry's august footsteps there

was to follow a colourful, chaotic line of ladies, all of whom, to a varying extent, were to perform a supportive, semi-maternal role" (p. 13). These unstable relationships, with for instance Nina Hamnett, whose difficult temperament led to alcoholism and tragic death, are well documented in this biography in a way Virginia Woolf was unable to do. Fry's intimate friendship at Cambridge with Charles Ashbee acquires a homosexual suggestion, since Ashbee sought Edward Carpenter's sanction for "Friendship" when Carpenter visited Cambridge in 1886 (p. 23). But this theme is not developed as perhaps it might have been. Nor does Spalding explain why Fry should have married Helen Coombe in whose personality there were already signs of the mental illness which so tragically incapacitated her for life. No theory is offered to comprehend parental and family influences, a possible homosexual inclination, and Fry's complicated and mainly unsatisfying relationships with women. Spalding only toys with Freud's Oedipal theory when she says that Fry's close attachment to his mother "partly" accounts for his ambivalence toward women; she isn't willing to let this line of thinking upset her book. The biography is informative and unfailingly agreeable, though it lacks any colour illustrations by which to judge that aspect of his art. (I have a small signed watercolour by Fry which isn't encouraging on this point.) If there are the beginnings of a different book on the "real Roger Fry", it is not a book that Bloomsbury admirers seem to want at the moment.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Besdine, "The Jocasta Complex, Mothering and Genius", Parts I and II, *Psychoanalytic Review*, 55 (1968): 259-77 and 574-600.