Introduction

In 1945, Kenneth Clark resigned his post as Director of the National Gallery, aged 42, bored of the infighting and committee meetings. He wanted to write. He had always regarded himself more of a writer than a professional administrator and he disliked having to deal with the details of administration, especially staff with whom he had quarrelled mortally. The whole of his upbringing, his education at Winchester, his time at Oxford in the early 1920s, his friendship with scholars like Maurice Bowra and John Sparrow, and, above all, his admiration for Bernard Berenson, with whom he worked closely on the revision of Berenson's *Drawings of the Florentine Painters* in the late 1920s, made him want to devote as much of his life as he could to writing about art, to creating a deeper understanding of its characteristics and, so far as he could whilst acknowledging his lack of a philosophical mind-set, to providing some insight into aesthetic experience — what he described in his Romanes Lecture in Oxford in May 1954 as 'moments of vision'.

His first book after the war, published in 1949 by John Murray, was on the subject of *Landscape into Art*. It derived from lectures he gave at Oxford as Slade Professor. He then published a beautiful, well judged and extremely succinct book on the life and art of Piero della Francesca, which was commissioned by Bela Horovitz at Phaidon Press. But all this time — according to Clark himself at least since 1940 — he was contemplating what he wanted to be a big book covering one of the great subjects of art throughout the centuries: that is, how artists through time had responded to, and depicted, the nude. In fact, it is at least possible that the idea first came to him when, aged seven, he gave a lecture to his grandmother about one of the pictures in a book, which she had given him, of paintings in the Louvre. He chose to talk about Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre*. She commented disapprovingly 'It's very nude'.

An invitation to give the A.W. Mellon lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in spring 1953 prompted him to put his ideas about the nude into shape and, unlike his Slade lectures, which he gave impromptu and then subsequently converted into text, he wrote the text of *The Nude* from the beginning as script, retreating to write it to Berenson's villa, I Tatti, in the hills outside Florence and to a small hotel in the sea-side town of Aldeburgh. By October 1952, he was able to supply a *resumé* of the theme of the book to the Bollingen Foundation, who were fund its American publication: 'Myron, Praxiteles, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Giorgione, Rubens, Ingres, Renoir spent their lives in giving a complete and expressive shape to the naked human body. Why has it held this supreme importance for them ? How does the nude differ from the unsatisfying object which all of us can see on a bathing beach and most of us can see in a mirror ?' But the subject of the lectures was not advertised in advance in case some congressman took offence at their theme.

It is interesting to consider where exactly Clark got the idea for writing about the subject of the nude, since he was not in any sense a classical scholar and it must have been obvious from the beginning that any serious treatment of the subject would require a study of its classical origins. One senses

throughout the text that he liked the opportunity to write over a broad canvas. He disliked what he always thought of as the pedantry of professional art historians and, being only half a professional art historian himself (he was trained before the establishment of the Courtauld Institute and long before art history was taught to undergraduates in British universities), he preferred to range over cultures, commenting freely on the experience of the greatest works of art and how artists had responded to the challenge of depicting human form.

There are three clues in the text as to the influences on his ideas. The first is a negative influence. It is important to remember that during the late 1920s, when Kenneth Clark organised the great exhibition of Italian Art at the Royal Academy, and the early 1930s when he became Director of the National Gallery, the key figure in writing and lecturing about art was Roger Fry. Clark became a friend of Fry, inviting him to lecture in Oxford when he was Keeper of Western Art at the Ashmolean, and he was to edit and write an introduction to Fry's *Last Lectures*, published in 1939. The essence of Roger Fry's ideas about art was to drain works of art of their content and to write about them only in terms of their form. But Clark never subscribed to this idea that one could segregate the experience of works of art from some understanding and appreciation of their subject matter. He thought it mattered that artists throughout history had painted, drawn, studied and idealised the human form and that much of the challenge of art — in many ways, the ultimate challenge — lies in the depiction of the body. As he writes in his autobiography *Another Part of the Wood*, he never really believed in the ideas of Roger Fry: 'Looking back, I wonder how much I was ever persuaded by the doctrine of "pure form". If I had been asked for an honest answer, I would have admitted that subject matter, with all its implications, was overwhelmingly important to me'. So, in some ways, *The Nude* can be read as a text against abstraction and in favour of depiction.

The second influence, also not acknowledged, but implicit in the way that Clark studied his subject, was the influence of the writings of Aby Warburg. In his autobiography he described the tremendous impact of a lecture given by Aby Warburg, as if directly to Clark himself, who was sitting in the front row at the Biblioteca Hertziana in Rome on 19 January 1929 (although in his autobiography he gets the year wrong): 'Instead of thinking of works of art as life-enhancing representations he thought of them as symbols, and he believed that the art historian should concern himself with the origin, meaning and transmission of symbolic images'. Clark was himself instrumental in enabling the move of Warburg's great library and accompanying institute from Hamburg to London in 1933. Although Clark was not in any sense a Warburgian scholar (he is remembered at the Warburg Institute for the occasion when he drove up in a chauffeur-driven limousine and was turned away on the grounds that he did not have any scholarly identification), his study of *The Nude* is infused with the belief that there is a pictorial language which has been transferred and re-interpreted from antiquity to the Renaissance. As Gertrud Bing, the then Director of the Warburg Institute, wrote in acknowledging the gift of the book in January 1957: 'I must tell you how 'Warburgian' your method seems to me — infinitely more so than much that now sails under Warburg's flag. The main thing about Warburg, I think, is that he saw like you images as the

embodiment of impulses, coined in the workshop of classical antiquity and capable of being discovered in such apparently divergent products as the Nereids and Michelangelo's Risen Christ'.

The third, very obvious influence is the writings of Ruskin and, as Bing also recognised, Walter Pater. Clark was taught to draw at Winchester by the son of Alexander Macdonald, who had been the first master of the Ruskin School in Oxford, and he immersed himself in the writings of Ruskin in the school library. When he was at Oxford, he gave a paper (hard to imagine) to his college literary society on the subject of Ruskin's socialism. And his first book on the *Gothic Revival* contains a chapter on Ruskin. Clark saw himself very much as writing in the tradition of English art criticism, which, from Hazlitt onwards, has always had a strong element of *belle lettres* and it is evident throughout *The Nude* that he took the utmost pleasure in the task of literary composition, in the rhetoric of his description of works of art and the balance and poise of his sentences. This is perhaps one of the reasons why art historians remain suspicious of Clark, as if he put slightly too much effort into his style, and not quite enough into his substance. But it remains one of the reasons why *The Nude* is a pleasure to read, always lucid and written in the best, if occasionally slightly mandarin, English.

Clark begins his book with a well-known and well-judged description of the difference between the naked and the nude, and includes a sentence which provides more than ample justification for the writing of the book: 'In our own century, when we have shaken off one by one those inheritances of Greece which were revived at the Renaissance, discarded the antique armour, forgotten the subjects of mythology and disputed the doctrine of imitation, the nude alone has survived'. He also includes one of the only references to the issue of the erotic: in other words, to what extent did artists of the past expect the spectator to respond to works of art erotically ? He does so by reference to a comment of E.P. Alexander when he writes that 'If the nude is so treated that it raises in the spectator ideas or desires appropriate to the material subject, it is false art, and bad morals'. Clark declares the opposite: 'This high-minded theory is contrary to experience. In the mixture of memories and sensations aroused by the nudes of Rubens and Renoir are many which are 'appropriate to the material subject'. Clark was well known to be an admirer of women. But this is nearly the only reference to this aspect of the nude and to the fact that, for example, it has become increasingly obvious in recent scholarship that the appeal of Titian's paintings to his patrons was precisely that he provided images which glorified and idealised the lure of the erotic.

Clark opens his historical analysis with changing approaches to the male body, beginning with archaic Greek statuary and describing the work of Polycletus with intelligent lyricism. He had the confidence to describe the different periods of classical sculpture without being too academic about them and, indeed, one of the pleasures of his book is that it integrates an understanding and appreciation of classical art with the Renaissance. Medieval depictions of the nude are dismissed fairly summarily: 'nude figures are occasionally to be found, but they are echoes or meaningless doxologies, repeated on account of some magic which has long since evaporated from them'. He then describes the rediscovery of the antique in the work of Donatello and, most of all, in the work of Michelangelo, whose drawings he had

been encouraged to study by Charles Bell, his predecessor as Keeper of Western Art at the Ashmolean. He ends his chapter on Apollo with a very brief description of neo-classicism, a period of art for which he had no appreciation and a rather beautiful description of what happened to Apollo in the twentieth century: 'Myths do not die suddenly. They pass through a long period of respectable retirement, decorating the background of the imagination, until some new hot-gospeller decides that their destruction is necessary to his salvation'. This passage encapsulates Clark's approach to his subject and is why he was such a brilliant broadcaster: he is never afraid of provocative over-simplification.

Clark then devotes two chapters to the female nude under the title 'Venus'. This is the heart of his project, to describe how the Greeks produced an ideal of feminine beauty in sculptures which were rediscovered and displayed in the Renaissance and helped to inspire some of the greatest works of art in Florence, Venice and, later, in northern Europe. Clark provides a more convincing description of the work of Botticelli than the learned exegesis of its neo-Platonic origins in the work of Warburgian scholars, including Erwin Panofsky and Ernst Gombrich, because he had a sympathetic view of the quality and character of Botticelli's poetic imagination. He describes with effective and poetic use of language the difference between Giorgione's Dresden Venus and Titian's Venus of Urbino. And he writes with authority and admiration about Rubens's depiction of the nude, disparaging the tendency for the English to dismiss his him as 'a painter of fat naked women'.

Following the chapter on the male nude, and two on the female, there follow three thematic chapters, one on the subject of Energy, which discusses how artists depicted the idea of movement in the naked body, another on Pathos, and a third on the subject of Ecstasy. In the chapters on both Energy and Pathos, Michelangelo is again the dominant figure, taking on from the work of the Pollajuolos the challenge of how to depict a battle of naked warriors, which Michelangelo first explored in his *Battle of the Centaurs* in the Casa Buonarotti, developed in his astonishing *virtuoso* drawings for the Battle of Cascina, and demonstrated to exaggerated effect in some of the figures in the Sistine Chapel. In the chapter on Pathos, there is a long disquisition on the evolution of Michelangelo's work from the early *Pietà* in St. Peter's in Rome, through the two Captives in the Louvre, to his late drawings of the Crucifixion. It is Michelangelo, more than any artist, who moves Clark to his best writing.

In every chapter he skates lightly over the eighteenth century: 'In 18th-century painting, with its diminished force and seriousness, the embodiment of energy almost disappears'; 'In the 18th century this sense of tragic humanity was driven underground (where it was visited by Gluck's Orpheus and Mozart's Don Giovanni)'. But he acknowledges the power of some nineteenth-century artists in depicting the nude, including Delacroix, Géricault, Degas and Rodin. And, like so many of his generation, including some of the younger artists whose work he collected, he greatly admired the work of Blake. He ends his chapter on Ecstasy with a comment which belongs to the cold war, where he describes Matisse's great painting *The Dance*, which had belonged to Sergei Shchukin (no Christian name is given) and which Clark describes as 'still, I suppose, hanging in Moscow', as if it was too difficult to verify.

Clark's last two chapters pick up the threads of what has been missing from the pre-eminently classical and essentially Italian account of the depiction of the nude. In his chapter called 'The Alternative Tradition' he describes the gothic depiction of the body. It is generally regarded as the least satisfactory chapter of the book since he cannot disguise his essentially somewhat disparaging view of the gothic: that it is not idealised; that it is rather gauche; that even an artist as great as Durer is only really worthy of consideration in so far as he is influenced by classicism. However, even this chapter is redeemed by the fact that, when he comes to write about Rembrandt, Clark cannot disguise his deep love for the work itself – indeed, precisely for those aspects of Rembrandt's art which show his deep and compassionate humanity: 'To Rembrandt, the supreme interpreter of biblical Christianity, ugliness, poverty and other misfortunes of our physical life were not absurd, but inevitable, perhaps he might have said 'natural', and capable of receiving some radiance of the spirit because emptied of all pride'.

Clark's final chapter is on the nude in the twentieth century, or at least a partial reference to how it has been treated in the work of Picasso, Matisse and Henry Moore. He writes about the work of Picasso with a surprising degree of empathy, given that he was not generally sympathetic to twentieth-century art. And he had admired the work of Henry Moore ever since he had bought two works from his first exhibition at the Warren Galleries in 1928 because he could feel within it strong echoes of the art of the past. He ends with two works by Moore, which, as Clark describes it, 'develop two basic ideas of the nude which was first embodied in the Dionysus and the Ilissus of the Parthenon, the stone figure with bent knee rising from the earth like a hill, the wooden figure with averted thorax and open legs, struggling out of the earth like a tree, not without a powerful suggestion of sexual readiness'. Clark could not really imagine, or respond to, art which did not contain within it some element of response to the human form and some reference, however subliminal, to the vocabulary of classicism.

Throughout *The Nude*, one is very conscious of travelling in the company of someone of remarkably wide and humane learning, but always lightly worn. He is able to make easy comparisons between Cranach and Hindu sculpture. He is familiar with the representation of Eve in the tympanum of Autun, as he is with what Maillol would have thought of archaic Greek sculpture. It is this sense of deep and essentially European culture which led to these lectures being so well received in Washington, as when, later in his life, he burst into tears at the warmth of the reception to a screening of *Civilisation*. For Americans and for the audience of his television programmes, Clark was the quintessence of the *cicerone*, showing a slide and able to discourse with intelligent insight into the significance of both the form and the meaning of a work of art, encouraging the viewer to look a bit more carefully, to think about the significance of what was on the screen, and to understand better what it is that makes a work of art. Although professional art historians have sometimes not valued this quality of independent-minded critical exegesis, it retains its validity and readability in the twenty-first century.

Clark himself thought *The Nude* was the best of his books. When he came to write his second volume of autobiography, called *The Other Half* (less satisfactory than the first only because it is simply a

record of his many public accomplishments), he describes *The Nude* with an entirely justified sense of pride:

> It is without question my best book, full of ideas and information, simplifying its complex subject without deformation, and in places eloquent. Much of it was written in Aldeburgh, which ever since my childhood has had the effect of sharpening my mind; and once or twice an idea or phrase came to me which surprised me. Where had it come from ? I remember that after writing the passage on Rubens I began to tremble, and had to leave my hotel bedroom and walk along the sea front. I make no claim to be an inspired writer but I know what inspiration feels like, which makes it easier for me, as a critic, to recognise it in others.

The Nude by Kenneth Clark
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