Arthur Danto at Columbia and in New York

Arthur Danto has just died.

In two places where Arthur worked for many decades -- Columbia’s Philosophy Department and the Journal of Philosophy-- there had always been a general feeling among us that much as he loved and laboured here, he found us too confining. This was a source of pride rather than hurt. It is an apt measure of the limits of the academy that we should take pride in the fact that every now and then we had among us someone whose talents and intellectual appetites far surpass the nourishment that a mere department or journal or even a professionalized discipline such as Philosophy, can offer.

The larger space, which Arthur occupied with such relish is, of course, the city of New of York. In fact his whole style was so supremely metropolitan that one gets no sense at all of where he was born and bred. One might easily have concluded, looking at the style of the man, and of his speech and writing, that everything
about his life has been striking, even his birth which was on New Years day of 1924 --yet we mustn’t forget that it was, after all, in Ann Arbor, Michigan that he was born and in Detroit where he was bred. But like all good New Yorkers and good Columbia men and women, Arthur gave the impression, however wrong, that he really only began to flourish after he came to New York and to Columbia.

Early flourishing took the form of successive books in analytic philosophy, which contained original and substantial ideas on the nature of history and human action, ideas which have been widely discussed and assimilated into the tradition of thought on these subjects. Then there were books with invaluably clear and novel interpretations of the thought of philosophers outside of the mainstream of analytic philosophy, Nietzsche and Sartre in particular, which brought him wider fame and, as he liked to say, a summer home in the Hamptons. But it was not until he began a study of the nature of artworks and artworlds that he poised himself for a major defection, or ‘transfiguration’, to use a word that he had
almost made his own.

Premonitions of that defection were there for us to see for some years before, when in his editorial judgements at the Journal of Philosophy and in his stray remarks he would betray a mild weariness with the way Philosophy had gone: the tedium of some of its professional protocols, the barbarous idiom of some of its writing, the lack of chivalry in some of its argumentative combat, and the routines of its reinvention of familiar and tired ideas. It was not that he was nostalgic for some earlier way of doing it, and it’s not that he failed to recognize that there were pockets of creative and exciting work, it’s more, I believe, that he was just yearning for himself, some more human and gallant creed. So the defection finally came when that great old fox and facilitator, Ben Sonnenberg of the old *Grand Street*, urged various commissions of essays on art upon him, to which he responded with the passion of long simmering intellectual tendencies being released; and then it was Sonnenberg again who persuaded *The Nation* and Arthur to come together in what has been an extraordinary
career of art criticism, though 'career' seems wholly the wrong word for what the Nation makes possible for its writers as well as for the attractive life Arthur has led in the last decades of his life. These writings have been collected in several volumes over the years.

I say this was a defection, but I should by no means give the impression that it was something complete or dramatic, away from Philosophy. All the great modern writers on art have a complexion. Clement Greenberg’s zeal for the modern had a distinct New York accent, Harold Rosenberg’s shrewd insights had the cultivated chattiness of the New Yorker (when the New Yorker was cultivated) and even Meyer Schapiro’s vast learning had many hints of his great progressive politics and humanity -- and the special quality of Arthur’s reviews in the Nation is that they are unmistakably the writings of a philosopher, revealing often how a line or image or stone was the stimulus or the station of some idea, even sometimes of an argument. The Nation has, as a result of his essays, managed to become something of a philosophical magazine, and that is no bad thing.
And conversely, in philosophy, what he managed to assert in public ways in these last thirty years was a personality that made him quite unusual, if not almost unique, among analytic philosophers -- a genuinely cultured man. Not just someone grabbing every week the offerings of a prodigious metropole, but someone whose ideas and perceptions are tuned by a daily awareness of how the city and its arts have come to be what they are, and how it stands among the productions of other cities in America and the world. Culture, in Arthur’s philosophical thinking was perhaps more important than anything else, and this emerged in ways that were sometimes amusing -- and appalling. I remember once how Isaac Levi and I were struck dumb when we asked him, after his visit to Calcutta, how he had managed to cope with the awful condition of its suffering, and he replied in a trice: “Oh that was nothing, you see poverty is part of the culture of Calcutta.”

Before the mutual embrace with the city’s arts, he led the department of Philosophy at Columbia
with a quality from which I and others, alas, learnt little --and that is his gift, not so much of what is called in that charmless phrase ‘consensus-building’, which no department with character will attain, but rather in the face of a lack of consensus, of nevertheless avoiding all conflict with a sort of genial deflection. Indeed as his earlier appalling remark I just cited suggests, he would have managed to deflect all conflict were he even the Mayor of Calcutta! Adversity never seemed to toughen him, it merely brought out his likeable humours. I don’t know where Arthur learnt these arts, which seem to come so naturally to him. I only know that I want to go to school there.

I have used words like ‘geniality’ and ‘deflection’ but they seem to only skim what I think goes very much deeper ---down to depths of a touching kindness of temperament, which made him a most appealing colleague, and it is no doubt part of his appeal as a critic. I can’t put it better than he himself did in a short essay that I recently read: “There is a lot I like and a lot I don’t like, but these preferences do not give me reason either to defend or attack. I must some
time discover why art criticism and criticism generally is so savagely aggressive against its target, almost—as Chekhov once wrote—as if the writer or artist had committed some crime. When I first began to write, there was a certain amount of negativity in my pieces, but I increasingly believe that that is a form of cruelty, and that cruelty is never permissible.”

Notice that even the condemnation of the cruel here is gentle and incomplete, for as he says only (and I specially like this): “I must some time discover” why we are like that…. That is Arthur Danto all over. Is it a wonder that people, even cruel people, love him --here, and in the artworld, and everywhere else that he is known.

To no one, not even to those whom he knew well, nor even I am sure to his wonderful wife and companion Barbara, did he ever give the impression that he quite believed in the remarkableness of his achievements. It’s not as if he thought it all a dream. He was just having too much fun to stop and take it in.
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