

THE ANTHONY HECHT LECTURES IN THE HUMANITIES

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PANAESTHETICS

On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts

DANIEL ALBRIGHT

Yale

UNIVERSITY PRESS

*New Haven and London*

This book was first presented as the Anthony Hecht Lectures in the Humanities given by Daniel Albright at Bard College in 2012. The lectures have been revised for publication.

Published with assistance from the foundation established in memory of Philip Hamilton McMillan of the Class of 1894, Yale College.

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Set in Fournier type by IDS Infotech, Ltd. Printed in the United States of America.

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Albright, Daniel, 1945–

Panaesthetics : on the unity and diversity of the arts / Daniel Albright.—1st [edition].  
pages cm.—(The Anthony Hecht lectures in the humanities)

“This book was first presented as the Anthony Hecht Lectures in the Humanities given by Daniel Albright at Bard College in 2012. The lectures have been revised for publication.” Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-300-18662-8 (alk. paper) 1. Arts. I. Title. NX170.A45 2014  
700.1—dc23 2013034291

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48–1992 (Permanence of Paper).

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The Anthony Hecht Lectures in the Humanities, given biennially at Bard College, were established to honor the memory of this preeminent American poet by reflecting his lifelong interest in literature, music, the visual arts, and cultural history. Through his poems, scholarship, and teaching, Anthony Hecht has become recognized as one of the moral voices of his generation, and his works have had a profound effect on contemporary American poetry. The books in this series will keep alive the spirit of his work and life.

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*To Marta, in the hope that this book will have something of the  
loveliness of your name*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I WANT TO GIVE MY warmest thanks to Bard College, since this book grows out of the Anthony Hecht lectures I gave there in 2012;

and to Pamela Rosenberg and the American Academy in Berlin, where I resided in Fall 2012—the final part of this book was written as I watched the boats gliding out of the mists of the Wannsee like thoughts coming into being;

and to Harvard University, for supporting my research over the years and for providing me with a reliable source of income;

and to my research assistant, Benjamin Ory, and to Suzie Tibor, who helped me find illustrations, and to three people at Yale University Press, Jennifer Banks (whose confidence in this project has sustained me), Heather Gold, and Susan Laity, the most sensitive and esemplastically gifted manuscript editor I've ever known;

I was also fortunate that the superb polymath Simon Morrison read this book and thought along with some of the ideas in it;

and finally I thank my dear friend Marc Shell—he and I have been co-teaching a seminar on Comparative Arts for years, and this book grew out of that seminar. I learned from him much of what I know about *Zwischenkunst*—panaesthetics—

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PANAESTHETICS



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## INTRODUCTION

# *Mousike*

MUSIC. MUSIK. MUSIQUE. MUSICA. MÚSICA. МУЗЫКА.

These words mean the same thing, and pretty well cover Europe and the Western hemisphere. All are derived from μουσική, *mousike*—but this Greek word doesn't mean “music.” It is related to the word for Muse and means anything pertinent to the Muses; therefore it includes not only music but dance, mime, epic poetry, lyric poetry, history, comedy, tragedy, even astronomy. In Roman times the nine Muses were parceled out fairly neatly among these nine arts, one Muse to one art. But earlier, the boundaries of the areas overseen by each Muse were unclear and overlapping. Greek mythologizing tended to confuse and unify the arts: an artistic medium was not a distinct thing but a kind of proclivity within the general domain of Art.

On the other hand, the founding text of academic study of the interrelations among the arts is Aristotle's *Poetics*, a book with a strong appetite for division. Aristotle isolates six distinct aspects of dramatic art: plot (*mythos*), character (*ethe*), thought (*dianoia*), diction (*lexis*), spectacle (*opsis*), and music (*melos*). Far from blurring these categories, Aristotle ranks them in value, with plot as the most important, music much less so, and spectacle least of all. For Aristotle, it seems that

verbal art takes precedence over all others—and indeed the visual arts seem so ancillary in Greek culture that neither painting nor sculpture is dignified with a Muse of its own.

And yet the *Poetics* does not exalt the literary as much as it seems to. Nowadays we hear the word *plot* and may think of a verbal summary of a story; but for Aristotle the plot is as much a matter of bodies moving on a stage as a matter of words. In Greek thought, verbal art spills out of the purely textual in all directions: into mime, into chant, into elocution. The very word *poetics* refers to *making*, not to any specifically verbal craft: we might speak of the poetics of a sonnet, and we might speak of the poetics of a sofa.

The purpose of this book is to provide an introduction to the study of the comparative arts. And the proper place to begin is with the fundamental question of comparative arts: Are the arts one, or are they many? This question vexed the Greeks, and continues to vex us today.<sup>1</sup> Ringing affirmations that the arts are one are easy to find throughout history: as a summary of classical thought (written in the seventeenth century by Franciscus Junius) put it: “‘All arts,’ sayth *Tullie* [Cicero] ‘that doe belong to humanitie, have a common band, and are ally’d one to another, as by a kind of parentage.’ *Tertullian* speaketh to the same effect, when he sayth; ‘there is no Art, but shee is the mother of another Art, or at least of a nigh kindred.’” And innumerable writers cite Horace’s dictum *ut pictura poesis*: the poem should be like a picture. The Romantics were particularly attracted to the notion that there is a single Art that refracts itself into separate arts like light through a prism: “One man’s tongue is set free, and he becomes a poet; in another’s soul everything takes shape as colors and forms and he becomes a painter, the third involuntarily hears, as his soul’s mood varies, melodies sounding deep inside him, sometimes cheerful, sometimes serious or melancholy, and he becomes a musician; in short, one might say that it is the same creative power that, as through a prism, refracts in different ways” (Wilhelm von Schadow).<sup>2</sup>

This German painter and novelist, himself extremely versatile, resolutely states an intuition common throughout the centuries.

Strong assertions of the essential *disunity* of the arts are hard to find before early modern times. But the discipline of comparative arts arises from the work of just such a divider, Gotthold Lessing, who argued in *Laokoon* (1766) that the temporal arts, such as music and literature, had protocols wholly distinct from those of the spatial arts, such as sculpture and painting. He began by asking himself a question that the great art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann had asked before him: In the famous Roman statue (excavated in Michelangelo's time), why isn't Laocoön screaming? Laocoön and his children are being squeezed to death by an enormous snake; but Laocoön's mouth is a tight stoic line. Lessing argued that artworks in a sequential medium pertain to action and should be loud, vigorous, expressive, so it's appropriate that in the *Aeneid* Virgil depicts Laocoön as raising a horrible clamor to the stars; but artworks in a spatial medium pertain to stasis and should be decorous, calm, poised, so it's right that a statue should strive for balance and beauty even if it depicts a man dying horribly. A work of visual art is an immobile noun, or a collection of immobile nouns; a poem, a novel, a piece of music is all verb. In this way the arts diversify, even show a certain hostility to one another. Others who agreed with Lessing include Irving Babbitt, Clement Greenberg, Theodor Adorno, and the Victorian critic W. J. Courthope, who defined decadence in art as a quest for originality achieved when one of the arts borrows some principle from another. A famous example of a medial separatist is Marshall McLuhan, who thought that the medium was the message; for an extreme unifier, such as Wassily Kandinsky, the medium, far from being the message, is pretty much irrelevant to it.

My own view is that the arts themselves have no power to aggregate or to separate—they are neither one nor many but will gladly assume the poses of unity or diversity according to the desire of the

artist or the thinker. But the story of their comings together and splittings asunder is one of the great stories in the intellectual history of the West; and in this book I will tell it as best I can. I begin by looking at each artistic medium in isolation, always with reference to particular works, in order to see how artists' theories and practices reveal assumptions about the ultimate purpose of art. (I speak of artistic media in isolation, but this can never be strictly true since my only resource here is language: when I discourse on painting and music, I am already transforming them into writing. I can't really compare a painting and a symphony and a poem—I can only compare words-about-a-painting and words-about-a-symphony and words-about-a-poem.) Then we will look at the ways in which artistic media interact—sometimes cooperating genially, sometimes poaching on one another's territory, sometimes dissonating, clashing.

I open with four theses.

1. Anything is an artwork to the extent that it looks made. The Matterhorn is as much an artwork as the *Mona Lisa*, insofar as we understand it as something intended, an act of will. It may be the will of God; or, since we tend to ascribe a sort of impersonal will to irresistible forces, it may be the buckling of tectonic plates. I think that we are all animists to some degree, and when we perceive materializations of force (such as the rose that iron filings make around a magnet) or patterns generated by collisions of forces (the splat of a bug against a windshield, the whistling of wind, the impact crater of a meteorite), we feel the presence of an agent making a design—even the atheist who instantly dismisses the notion of a designer shivers faintly at the discredited teleology that seems to have brought the thing into being. As Friedrich Nietzsche says (repeatedly, in *The Birth of Tragedy*), the world justifies itself as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Meaning is not merely something that the spectator imports into an object, for meaning presupposes an intention to mean within the thing

itself: meaning is generated from the interaction of our minds with the intention that we imagine to have created the object we scrutinize. (By *meaning*, I mean a sense of the object's looming, its felt potential to become part of your mind's decor. Sometimes this impingement or import terminates in a message, paraphrasable in words, or in an emotion.) Any meaningful object given to the senses is an artwork, and meaning exists when we perceive or intuit or feign the constitutive processes that brought a thing into being, and therefore brought a thing into relation with us—for we meet the whole physical universe on the ground of our common origin, common originatedness. In Nabokov's *The Gift*, the hero thinks of revisiting the landscape of his childhood and rejoicing in the intimacy of the old landmarks because, as he says, "my eyes are, in the long run, made of the same stuff as the grayness, the clarity, the dampness of those sites."<sup>3</sup> Our eyes are made of the same water that rains on us, the same water in which we swim. And the artwork flows easily or effortfully through our brain's soft labyrinth because it and our brains are part of a single hydrodynamic.

We are also free, by a focal adjustment of the mind's eye, to abandon the quest for meaning in either the Matterhorn or the *Mona Lisa*. This abandonment is always an unmaking. The unmade thing then sinks flat and vain into wherever it happens to be located, outside the domain of relation, dead to us, though full of phlogiston, of potential meanings that wait to burn. By contrast, overmeaningful things tend to feel somewhat drained of possibility—this exhaustion explains why a postmodernist painter like Robert Rauschenberg would regard a print of Botticelli's *Venus* as a wildly neutral element in a collage.

2. An artwork is a voodoo doll. In old Hollywood movies, the sorcerers of the voodoo religion of Haiti are shown, falsely, as making dolls containing locks of hair or fingernail clippings from people whom they wish to torment: if the doll is stabbed with a pin, the person it is modeled on will feel a sharp pain. An artwork, any artwork, exercises

influence on our minds and our bodies, whether we wish it to or not. If we allow this to happen, or if the artwork seizes us against our will, we will be deeply intimate with it.

Aestheticians have long asked themselves, Is the purpose of art to express emotion? Is the purpose of art to offer chill examples of craft, objects without emotional content? Is the purpose of art to represent the world around us? Is the purpose of art to transcend representation, transcend earthly things entirely? These don't seem to be the right questions: art is intrinsically neither expressive nor inexpressive, representational nor nonrepresentational, though any of these may be part of the artist's intention. It would be better to describe an artwork as an icon of a sensorium, a sensibility—as a manifesting of a time-shape, a space-shape, that grows meaningful to me because the processes that brought it into being seem congruent with the processes that brought me into being. When I perceive an artwork, I know it and it knows me because it springs from a mind that is my congener. The material medium of the artwork (pigment, stone, sound, written word) becomes transformed (James Joyce would say transubstantiated) into something that feels human, yours, mine, ours, because anything arrayed by will is an image of the will that arrays it. Neurologists speak of the sensory homunculus, the little man or woman drawn by mapping the areas of the cerebral cortex responsible for interpreting sensation from various parts of our body: it has huge lips and hands, and spindly little legs and torso. There is also a motor homunculus, drawn by mapping the areas responsible for sending messages to the motor nerves. I mean to understand any artwork as an occult version of a sensory/motor homunculus, working our whole selves from deep within. In most cases the homunculus is incomplete: I may see in the artwork nothing of me but a fingernail clipping or a lock of hair, but that is enough: I am altered as I behold it; its shape becomes, experimentally, my shape. *You must change your life*, announces Apollo's archaic torso according to

Rainer Maria Rilke; but all artworks, if we open ourselves to them, compel intimate transformation.

There may be some specific feeling (jealousy, rage, yearning) that the artwork rouses in us by means of sympathetic magic; but more important, the artwork rouses a sense of outthrust or indraw, balance or vertigo, deep breath or gasp, clarity or darkening, sharpness or blunting—all those deep humannesses that lie beneath our ideas and our feelings. In this special sense, all art, even the most abstract, is representational, anthropomorphic, terraformed. D. H. Lawrence believed that dreams were images of the sleeping body's inner workings—if we dream of narrow passages, it is simply the artery's way of calling attention to itself.<sup>4</sup> An artwork is nothing but a reified dream, and it succeeds to the degree that it implicates the widest extent of our bodies and minds. It pricks, and I bleed.

3. Art is about art, and art history, and history. I might put this in Latin: *Ars est ostendere artem*. *Ars celare artem*—the art lies in the hiding of art—according to the old summarizing of a passage from Ovid; but even the best-concealed artifice is also a manifesting of artfulness. In every artistic medium, the artwork keeps reaching back to its coming-into-being, so that originary myth is always an overt or occult aspect. Therefore, insofar as every artwork gestures at the uninflected surface (the blank page, the blank canvas, the field of silence or background noise) on which it takes shape, literature and painting and music have something strongly in common: a positive sense of the absence that prevailed before its presence. Further, the artwork folds into itself not only its own origin but also the deep origin of the entire body of work in its medium, and the deeper origin of the world itself. There is no painting, however abstract or random, that does not gesture toward the Lascaux caves and toward the creation of the universe. In this sense every artwork is a divine comedy.

Similarly, every artwork presupposes its own destruction and the general disarticulation of the cosmos. In this sense it is tragic. The

pathos of the artwork arises from the fact that its beauty in the present moment is identical to the beauty of its passing away. William Butler Yeats describes a stone carved into the shape of a mountain climbed by Chinese scholars:

Every discolouration of the stone,  
 Every accidental crack or dent  
 Seems a water-course or an avalanche,  
 Or lofty slope where it still snows. ["Lapis Lazuli"]

Would the Aphrodite of Milos move us as much if she still had her arms? The sculptor's plastic force at once consents to and resists the entropy that will reduce the sculpture to something shapeless. The intensity of Michelangelo's *Rondanini Pietà*, as much raw rock as finished statue, comes from the way that it seems complicit in its own undoing since it was never done in the first place.

4. Art is both a language and a not-language. If we ask an artwork to have meaning, it will obey us by manifesting itself as speech or writing, throwing itself open so that we can gaze into every secret corner. This is what makes the discipline of Comparative Arts possible: since the meaning (insofar as it can be conveyed to others) of the artwork is always linguistic, every artwork can be located in the domain of language, where everything is relatable to everything else. But every artwork, even a poem, also exists in a different space, where it has no meaning—indeed, where the concept of meaning has no meaning. Insofar as it inhabits this space, this valley of unmaking, the artwork is ineffable but not extraordinary. So: every artistic medium is a language, but I can say this only because language understands everything as a language.<sup>5</sup>

I know that this aesthetic philosophy has its contrarian aspects. Hegel is extremely skillful at showing how the artist's idea adjusts itself

delicately, continually, to the physical medium in which it will be realized, but I require no idea preliminary to the object itself, only an intention to make that may have no precision whatever. The shape generated by the blind furious whittling of a stick is art; in fact the stick itself is art if we are sensitive to whatever process made it grow into its particular shape. Hegel, like most of the older philosophers, believed that only entities produced by human endeavor could be called art; and even more recent, open-hearted, open-arted philosophers balk at the notion that anything and everything might be understood as art. Arthur Danto is almost as latitudinarian as I am, since he is happy to allow Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol to call art certain mass-produced items bought in stores, but Danto still insists that “works of art constitute a restricted set of objects.” Or, as he puts it elsewhere, “*with qualification, anything goes.*”<sup>6</sup> Danto regards this *everything is permitted* attitude as the final chapter in the history of art. But there is a still later chapter, if even more than everything can be permitted—if we can remove the qualifications and restrictions he speaks of. One of Danto’s books is called *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, but I see no reason why the commonplace needs to be transfigured, though trans is a fine place for a figure to go. The aesthetic is simply a mode of all sensible reality, conceived under the rubric of the made. The world becomes friendlier when it is seen as art. In *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, Goethe says that art is art because it is not nature; I would say that nature is nature (in Spinoza’s sense of *natura naturans*, nature understood as a making-itself-come-into-being) because it is art.

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❧ *Part One* ❧

Individual Media

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *What Is Literature?*

IN MOLIÈRE'S *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, M. Jourdain is delighted to discover that he has been speaking prose all his life without even knowing it. Similarly, we might say that we have been writing literature all our lives: since *literature* just means *letters*, even a shopping list or a set of instructions for feeding the cat is in the largest sense literature. But we usually reserve the term for something more portentous or pretentious. The *Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses* are certainly literature; the novels of Norman Mailer are probably literature; Harlequin romances are possibly literature, at least according to advanced literary-critical thought; today's edition of the *New York Times* is marginally literature. The main criterion is, Will it continue to be read for a long time?

Textual longevity can arise from many sources, from urgency of content to rhetorical splendor. When Ezra Pound defined literature as news that stays news, he was creating a content-based definition: what Homer has to tell us about faithfulness, what Tolstoy has to tell us about adultery, what Goethe has to tell us about intellectual presumption, what the author of *Job* has to tell us about suffering are matters that will engage our attention for the foreseeable future.<sup>1</sup> The same is true about certain works of nonfiction, such as Adam Smith's and Karl

Marx's analyses of the ways society is shaped not for the convenience of human beings but for the convenience of money.

But importance is not a factor of insight-content alone. Sometimes even wearisome texts become literature by virtue of their influence on unwearisome texts: Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet* will always be an object of (limited) scrutiny, courtesy of William Shakespeare, who adapted Brooke's long, long poem into an excellent play. Brooke piggybacked himself into immortality.

Sometimes a text can ram itself into the cultural heritage, and therefore into the canon of the literary, by brute force. Such is the case with texts we are compelled to memorize, texts that may have no particular charm of insight or grace of expression:

I plédge allégiance  
 Tó the flág  
 Of the Unítéd Státes of América,  
 And tó the repúblic  
 For whích it stánds,  
 Óne nátion,  
 Únder Gód,  
 Índivísible  
 With líberty and jústice for áll.

But this is an interesting case: we promote this simple sentence (by the socialist Francis Bellamy, as amended by a pious Congress) into literature by the way we chant it, in two-beat lines, with the final passage of each main clause expanding into a three-beat line. It is a part of the secular liturgy of being an American, along with the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

We are now on the verge of another definition of literature: the sacred text. Sacredness isn't necessarily associated with verbal beauty, or

with helpful information, or with memorable utterance: as C. S. Lewis pointed out, the Gospels are written in businessman's Greek, far less inspired (aesthetically speaking) than the English version of King James's translators. Because the sacred is immune from critique, we sometimes leave it in a domain separate from the literary: if I hear about a college course called "The Bible as Literature," I assume that the instructor's motive is not to proselytize but to study narrative craft, structures of metaphor, affiliations with other texts written in the ancient Near East, and other scholarly matters. Indeed, cultures with a canonical sacred text may be somewhat inhibited from further literary production: if all I need to know in order to be righteous is found in the Talmud, or the Qur'an, why should I bother to write, or to read, anything else?

Insofar as Western literature begins with the Greeks, we may speculate that the absence of a sacred text was a sort of precondition to a certain kind of literary productivity. Homer's epics were the closest thing to sacred text that the Greeks had (at least according to Plato's *Ion*), but Socrates, according to Plato's *Republic* (book 10), considered Homer ignorant of statecraft and warfare, and so poor a poet that he could not figure out how to stay in character when devising the speech of an elderly priest; Aristotle, for all his admiration of Homer, had no trouble finding absurdities in the *Iliad*; and Xenophanes attacked Homer's theology. To some extent, the happy features of literature—insight, wit, grace, force—attempt to supply through aesthetics some illusion of the sacredness that few texts, or no text, can possess. In this sense literature is the domain of the pseudo-sacred, the provisionally sacred, the ironically sacred.

### *Literature That Changes You*

Literature, as opposed to Holy Writ, is less a warehouse of achieved cultural value than a machine for bringing cultural value into being.

Cultural values tend to be precarious: if I am a Roman, I might value stoic implacable constructiveness; if I am an American, I might value heroic assertions of personal liberty. But we are all of us lazy and shiftless, and need to be reminded continually of our cultural values if they are to have any force. In imperial Rome, Virgil's *Aeneid* served as a device to stamp out Romans of the proper mold:

Fair queen, you never can enough repeat  
 Your boundless favors, or I own my debt;  
 Nor can my mind forget Eliza's name,  
 While vital breath inspires this mortal frame.  
 This only let me speak in my defense:  
 I never hop'd a secret flight from hence,  
 Much less pretended to the lawful claim  
 Of sacred nuptials, or a husband's name.  
 For, if indulgent Heav'n would leave me free,  
 And not submit my life to fate's decree,  
 My choice would lead me to the Trojan shore,  
 Those relics to review, their dust adore,  
 And Priam's ruin'd palace to restore.  
 But now the Delphian oracle commands,  
 And fate invites me to the Latian lands.  
 That is the promis'd place to which I steer,  
 And all my vows are terminated there.

.....

Anchises' angry ghost in dreams appears,  
 Chides my delay, and fills my soul with fears. [4.483–507, trans.  
 John Dryden]

Pious Aeneas cannot rest in Carthaginian luxury with Queen Dido (here called Eliza); he cannot return to Troy to restore the shattered kingdom of his ancestors; the gods command him, his father's ghost

commands him to go to a new land, Italy, and ultimately to establish a new center of power, a second Troy: Rome. Not my will, but the will of fate—the will of the state; this is what it means to be Roman. The epic is a primary form of literature insofar as it is the clearest enunciation of cultural origin, cultural value.

But cultural solidarity can be achieved by many different sorts of literary methods. The epic proposes bald models of admirable behavior; the novel proposes a subtler sort of networking:

It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessities of life to her;—or I turn to that village wedding, kept between four brown walls, where an awkward bridegroom opens the dance with a high-shouldered, broad-faced bride, while elderly and middle-aged friends look on, with very irregular noses and lips and probably with quart-pots in their hands, but with an expression of unmistakable contentment and goodwill. “Foh!” says my idealistic friend, “what vulgar details! What good is there in taking all these pains to give an exact likeness of old women and clowns? What a low phase of life!—what clumsy, ugly people!”

But bless us, things may be lovable that are not altogether handsome, I hope? I am not at all sure that the majority of the human race have not been ugly, and even among those “lords of their kind,” the British, squat figures, ill-shapen nostrils, and dingy complexions are not startling exceptions. Yet there is a great deal of family love amongst us. . . . I have seen many an excellent matron, who could never in her best days have been handsome, and yet she had a packet of yellow love-letters in a private drawer, and sweet children showered kisses on her sallow cheeks. And I believe there have been plenty of young heroes, of middle stature and feeble beards, who have felt quite sure they could never love anything more insignificant than a Diana, and yet have found themselves in middle life happily settled with a wife who waddles. Yes! thank God; human feeling is like the mighty rivers that bless the earth: it does not wait for beauty—it flows with resistless force and brings beauty with it. [*Adam Bede* 2.17]

George Eliot—the pseudonym of Mary Anne Evans—writing in Queen Victoria’s England, renounces sibyls, warriors, and goddesses, the whole epic paraphernalia, in order to embrace the stout, the meager, the stumpy. It is not that she is taking the old woman at her spinning wheel as a hero finer than Aeneas; it is that she is taking *herself* as a hero finer than the Aeneas—herself as Maximum Sympathizer, in love with the whole human race in all its cherishable decrepitude, its bluster and stupor and occasional finesse. The protagonists of Eliot’s fiction learn how to extend their powers of tolerance and sympathy while refining the acuity of their judgment. In this way her novels became strong instruments of community and set a curriculum for future novelists to follow.

Even a novelist like Joseph Conrad—born in Poland, a professional sailor, a writer of adventure stories often set in exotic locales, in

every way the opposite of George Eliot and her hempen homespuns—speaks of the novelist’s mission in terms almost identical to Eliot’s. He says that the novelist speaks “to the subtle but invincible, conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn” (Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*). So Conrad’s novels, like Eliot’s, are devices for transforming obtuse folks into sensitive modern Europeans, full of the warm fellow-feeling that is one of the high virtues of the age.

Literature, then, is a tool for cultural assimilation: we read in order to learn what our tribe expects of us and to measure ourselves against its ideals—or to test its ideals against our inner light of proper conduct. Our system of desire is partly innate and partly something to be shaped by the cultural ambience: Bridget Jones’s diary, a Superman comic book, Ian Fleming’s *Goldfinger*, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* are at once the product of wishes and the mold through which our wishes take new forms. By means of reading, the boundaries of my field of desire expand in certain directions and shrink in others, whether it is to hanker after single-malt Scotch instead of Diet Dr. Pepper, or to envy the idiot’s modality of feeling over the Harvard student’s.

Literature is far more insidious than I can understand. If I read a text, I can try to remain detached, and I can to some degree succeed—I *must* succeed—but someone else’s sensibility, moral code, scheme for organizing reality has been grafted onto me. I am prey to phantom pains, phantom caresses from the undeveloped or absent limbs of my being. An amputee feels sensations from a leg once possessed but now missing; but the reader of a work of fiction feels ghost-touches on flesh never owned at all. In Plato’s *Symposium* (189c) Aristophanes says that we were once two-headed, four-armed, four-legged hermaphrodites,

but Zeus, fearing rivals, took a hair and cut us each in half, so that we run around helplessly trying to find our lost complement. Literature remedies this, gives us an illusion of access to the nervous system of the opposite-sexed creature once conjoined. But literature can do much more. Read enough, and you have a glimpse of the billion-membered creature that is the whole human race, a child in an African village, the last emperor of China, the first emperor of Rome—the stem-celled mind-tissue that can articulate itself into any human sentience. When we hand over governance of ourselves to Virginia Woolf or Fyodor Dostoyevsky we feel backward toward the origin of our own thought-patterns, our being’s melos, as we overlay the contour of our present sensibility upon that of Mrs. Ramsay or Prince Myshkin or the book’s narrator. This is what I mean when I say that the book is an icon of a sensorium—a sort of sensory homunculus that exerts cybernetic power over the reader’s mind.

I do not mean that reading can liberate me from the prison of self: I can’t transfigure myself into Abraham Lincoln or Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter or Madame Bovary (not that that notion of “becoming” a fictitious character has much meaning in any case, though I have read of a woman who hired surgeons to give her the physique of a Barbie doll). I mean that I experiment with the person who I would be if I thought the thoughts that Flaubert ascribes to his character or to himself. And I experiment with the flushes and darkenings of body that Flaubert and I co-imagine for Madame Bovary, a body influenced by many things, including lurid images from nineteenth-century paintings, postures that Flaubert devised for his *Hérodias*, and certain sensualities of mine that seemed plausibly female in nature. Ultimately, as a result of months and years of these experiments in alterity, I turn into someone else. The motto of every reader is Arthur Rimbaud’s *Je est un autre*: “I” is an other.

But as a member of a group (and I belong to many groups, including Americans, white males, professors at politically liberal universities,

scuba divers, atheists, and clumsy oafs), I use these fictitious alternate selves to explore both how to affiliate myself more deeply with my group and how to challenge that affiliation. Any sentence I read is a sentence I can imagine myself having invented, and so I become, for a moment at least, its author. I make myself by authorizing some sentences and refusing to authorize others; I don't know whether I'm more enriched by the body of what I submit to or the body of what I reject. Each is part of my general *machine à penser*. Those who read much tend to be amateurs of the human.

### *Literature That Affirms You*

I have so far been speaking of the transforming qualities of literature. But there is another aspect, equally important: we like to read books that make us content with what we have, with what we are. Transformative literature is often complacent on the level of culture, ambitious on the level of the individual; but there is also a literature that promotes local complacency as well.

My master had a journeyman named M. Verrat, whose house was in our vicinity; far from the house there was a garden in which very lovely asparagus grew. There came over M. Verrat, who didn't have much money, the desire to steal from his mother some fine early asparagus, and to sell it for some good meals. Since he didn't want to get caught, and since he wasn't very nimble, he picked me for this raid. After some preliminary coaxing, which won me over because I didn't see what he was getting at, he proposed this to me as if it were an idea that had just come to him. I argued strongly; he insisted. I have never been able to resist cajoling; I gave in. Every morning I went to gather the most lovely stalks; I took

them to Molard, where some good woman figured out that I was stealing them and told me so, so that she could get them at a better price. Greatly afraid, I took what she would give me; I bore it to M. Verrat. It was quickly transformed into a meal, a meal that I had provided, a meal that he shared with another friend; I was very content to have a few scraps—I didn't even touch their wine.

This little exercise went on for several days, and the idea still didn't come into my head that I could steal from the thief, and withhold from M. Verrat a percentage of the take. I performed my heist with the greatest scrupulousness; my only motive was to gain the favor of the man who made me do it. If I had been surprised in the act, however, how many beatings, how much invective, how much cruel treatment, I would have received, while the wretch, the man who made me lose my moral compass, would have been taken at his word, and I would have been punished twice as much for having dared to blame him, since he was a journeyman, and I was only an apprentice! You see how in every situation the guilty save themselves at the expense of the weak and innocent.

And so I learned that it wasn't as terrible to steal as I had thought; and from this knowledge I soon drew the lesson that if I burned to possess something, I should take it.<sup>2</sup>

If you're a bit hungry—not starving, but not well-fed, either—and you really like asparagus, and your neighbor has a lot more asparagus than she really needs, why you owe it to yourself to steal some asparagus. Your native scruples about theft may be hard to overcome, but sooner or later some wise older boy will come along and introduce you to the delights of taking things that aren't yours. I'm translating here a passage from the beginning of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, by some accounts the first modern autobiography; and it indeed

differs from most of its precursors in that the author is astonishingly tolerant of his own vices. He isn't urging you to steal; he isn't arguing that theft can be virtuous in some circumstances (as, for example, Victor Hugo might argue); he isn't even making a particular effort to get you to sympathize with his childhood predicament. But the mere act of verbalizing his acts tends to exonerate them: to represent something is to make it understandable, and to understand is to forgive. Most autobiographies are like that: a strange amalgam of self-accusation and self-defense in which the self-accusation *is* the self-defense, since if I indict my own behavior I am also congratulating myself for having attained the wisdom, the ethical enlightenment, to offer such a severe judgment.

The Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges wrote a story called "The Library of Babel" (1941), in which the universe is re-imagined as a honeycomb of hexagonal cells stretching endlessly in all directions, each crammed from floor to ceiling with books. The books are mostly nonsense—merely random combinations of the letters of the alphabet—but every so often the librarians find a string of intelligible words. Yet since every combination of the letters of the alphabet must appear in an infinite library, every truth and every lie is pronounced by some book, somewhere:

When it was announced that the Library comprised all books, the first feeling was extravagant joy. All men felt themselves the lords of a treasure intact and secret. There was no personal or global problem whose eloquent solution did not exist in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly, deceptively, took on the limitless dimensions of hope. During that time much was said about Vindications: books of apology and prophecy that once and for all vindicated the acts of every man in the universe and guarded stupendous arcana for his

future. Greed made thousands abandon the sweet hexagon of their birth and throw themselves up stairways, driven by the vain intent to find their Vindication. These wanderers fought in the narrow corridors, shouted dark curses, strangled one another in the divine stairways, hurled the misleading books down to the bottom of the tunnels, fell to their death when men of distant regions did the same to them. Others went mad. The Vindications exist (I have seen two that referred to persons of the future, persons perhaps not imaginary), but the treasure hunters did not remember that the possibility that a man would find his own, or some treacherous variation of his own, is calculated as zero.<sup>3</sup>

But in fact, in our world, as opposed to Babel, it is quite easy to find vindications of ourselves; our libraries can seem to contain nothing else. Whatever our sore point, our specialty, our triumph, our failing may be, other people have shared it and written about it. The lustful can read Casanova's memoirs, or Byron's *Don Juan*, or Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, or 2 Samuel in the Old Testament; those with a high I.Q. can read Goethe's *Faust*; the glutton can read the Falstaff scenes in *1 Henry IV*; the angrily slothful can read Beckett's *Malone Dies*. Sometimes at the end the sinner is snatched down to Hell, but it is usually a play-Hell where the little devils' pitchforks only add to the piquancy: for the most part the rehearsal of the sin re-creates its intrinsic joy, rids it of opprobrium. Whatever I am is right that I be. For every diet book, there is another book saying that it's a fine thing to be fat.

Whether a literary work transforms us or makes us complacent or seems to have no direct relevance to our state, it has a sensibility (or pseudo-sensibility) that co-evolves with the reader's own sensibility. Insofar as we perceive it as art, every text, even a hermetic poem by Mallarmé, is a *Bildungsroman*.

*The Literature of Origins*

We like literature not only because it recounts who we are, but also because it shows us how we got to be that way.

Mine eyes he clos'd, but op'n left the Cell  
Of Fancie my internal sight, by which  
Abstract as in a transe methought I saw,  
Though sleeping, where I lay, and saw the shape  
Still glorious before whom awake I stood;  
Who stooping op'nd my left side, and took  
From thence a Rib, with cordial spirits warme,  
And Life-blood streaming fresh; wide was the wound,  
But suddenly with flesh fill'd up & heal'd:  
The Rib he formd and fashond with his hands;  
Under his forming hands a Creature grew,  
Manlike, but different sex, so lovly faire,  
That what seemd fair in all the World, seemd now  
Mean, or in her summd up. [John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 8.460–73]

The boy enters the Oedipus phase; he begins to manipulate his penis and simultaneously has phantasies of carrying out some sort of activity with it in relation to his mother, till, owing to the combined threat of castration and the sight of the absence of a penis in females, he experiences the greatest trauma of his life. [Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*]<sup>4</sup>

Milton's account in *Paradise Lost* of the creation of the first woman and Freud's account of the first stirrings of sexuality in the boy are both stories about manipulation and a wound. Much, perhaps most of what we call literature consists of stories about origins—from the origin of the human race to the origin of Nicole Richie's bulimia; and many

origin stories share common features. The cosmos comes into being from an intolerable discord that needs to resolve itself into a universe, whether it is Empedocles' account of the strife among the elements or the physicist's account of the Big Bang; the city originates in the spilling of a brother's innocent blood, whether Abel's or Remus's (as W. H. Auden argues in "Memorial for the City").

How something comes into being is a matter of perpetual fascination. One day when I was in fourth grade, after we recited the pledge of allegiance, my teacher told us a story about how the leopard got its spots:

"Hi! Hi!" said the Ethiopian. ". . . You show up in this dark place like a bar of soap in a coal-scuttle."

"Ho! Ho!" said the Leopard. "Would it surprise you very much to know that you show up in this dark place like a mustard-plaster on a sack of coals?"

"Well, calling names won't catch dinner," said the Ethiopian. "The long and the little of it is that we don't match our backgrounds. I'm going to take Baviaan's [the baboon's] advice. He told me I ought to change: and as I've nothing to change except my skin I'm going to change that."

"What to?" said the Leopard, tremendously excited.

"To a nice working blackish-brownish colour, with a little purple in it, and touches of slaty-blue. It will be the very thing for hiding in hollows and behind trees."

So he changed his skin then and there, and the Leopard was more excited than ever: he had never seen a man change his skin before.

"But what about me?" he said, when the Ethiopian had worked his last little finger into his fine new black skin.

"You take Baviaan's advice too. He told you to go into spots." . . .

"What's the use of that?" said the Leopard.

“Think of Giraffe,” said the Ethiopian. “Or if you prefer stripes, think of Zebra. They find their spots and stripes give them per-feet satisfaction.”

“Umm,” said the Leopard. “I wouldn’t look like Zebra—not for ever so.”

“Well, make up your mind,” said the Ethiopian, “because I’d hate to go hunting without you, but I must if you insist on looking like a sunflower against a tarred fence.”

“I’ll take spots, then,” said the Leopard; “but don’t make ’em too vulgar-big. I wouldn’t look like Giraffe—not for ever so.”

“I’ll make ’em with the tips of my fingers,” said the Ethiopian. “There’s plenty of black left on my skin still. Stand over!”

Then the Ethiopian put his five fingers close together (there was plenty of black left on his new skin still) and pressed them all over the Leopard, and wherever the five fingers touched they left five little black marks, all close together. You can see them on any Leopard’s skin you like, Best Beloved. Sometimes the fingers slipped and the marks got a little blurred; but if you look closely at any Leopard now you will see that there are always five spots—off five black finger-tips.

“Now you are a beauty!” said the Ethiopian. “You can lie out on the bare ground and look like a heap of pebbles. You can lie out on the naked rocks and look like a piece of pudding-stone. You can lie out on a leafy branch and look like sunshine sifting through the leaves; and you can lie right across the centre of a path and look like nothing in particular. Think of that and purr!”

“But if I’m all this,” said the Leopard, “why didn’t you go spotty too?”

“Oh, plain black’s best,” said the Ethiopian. . . .

So they went away and lived happily ever afterwards, Best Beloved. That is all.

Oh, now and then you will hear grown-ups say, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the Leopard his spots?” I don’t think even grown-ups would keep on saying such a silly thing if the Leopard and the Ethiopian hadn’t done it once—do you? But they will never do it again, Best Beloved. They are quite contented as they are.<sup>5</sup>

This fable is one of Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories* (1902), and more self-consciously jocular illustrations of the complacent motto *Whatever is, is right* have rarely been found. Of course, the ticklish matter here isn’t the account of how the leopard got its spots but the account of how the Ethiopian got his black skin; I’m sure that it has been a great many years since teachers in the Chicago public school system read this story aloud, for reasons that you will understand without detailed explanation. (But I have chosen these examples from Milton, Freud, and Kipling because, though the texts all pertain to simplicity or innocence, they are far from innocent: these striking fictions of gender and race can be and have been used to inflict harm. Myths tend to have sharp edges.) In order to find a term of comparison to Kipling’s little tale, I consulted the Wikipedia article on human skin color:

Jablonski and Chaplin plotted the skin tone ( $W$ ) of indigenous peoples who have stayed in the same geographical area for the last 500 years versus the annual UV available for skin exposure (AUV) for over 200 indigenous persons and found that skin tone lightness  $W$  is related to the annual UV available for skin exposure AUV according to

$$W = 70 - \frac{AUV}{10}$$

(Jablonski and Chaplin (2000), p. 67, formula coefficients have been rounded to one-figure accuracy) where the skin tone lightness  $W$  is measured as the percentage of light reflected from the upper inner arm at which location on humans there should be minimal tanning of human skin due to personal exposure to the sun; a lighter skinned human would reflect more light and would have a higher  $W$  number.

Jablonski and Chaplin proposed an explanation for the observed variation of untanned human skin with annual UV exposure. By Jablonski and Chaplin's explanation, there are two competing forces affecting human skin tone:

1. the melanin that produces the darker tones of human skin serves as a light filter to protect against too much UV light getting under the human skin where too much UV causes sunburn and disrupts the synthesis of precursors necessary to make human DNA; versus
2. humans need at least a minimum threshold of UV light to get deep under human skin to produce vitamin D, which is essential for building and maintaining the bones of the human skeleton.

Jablonski and Chaplin note that when human indigenous peoples have migrated, they have carried with them a sufficient gene pool so that within a thousand years, the skin of their descendants living today has turned dark or turned light to adapt to fit the formula given above—with the notable exception of dark-skinned peoples moving north, such as to populate the seacoast of Greenland, to live where they have a year-round supply of food rich in vitamin D, such as fish, so that there was no necessity for their skin to lighten to let

enough UV under their skin to synthesize the vitamin D that humans need for healthy bones.

In considering the tone of human skin in the long span of human evolution, Jablonski and Chaplin note that there is no empirical evidence to suggest that the human ancestors six million years ago had a skin tone different from the skin tone of today's chimpanzees—namely light-skinned under black hair. But as humans evolved to lose their body hair a parallel evolution permitted human populations to turn their base skin tone dark or light over a period of less than a thousand years to adjust to the competing demands of 1) increasing eumelanin to protect from UV that was too intense and 2) reducing eumelanin so that enough UV would penetrate to synthesize enough vitamin D. By this explanation, in the time that humans lived only in Africa, humans had dark skin to the extent that they lived for extended periods of time where the sunlight is intense. As some humans migrated north, over time they developed light skin.

It is noteworthy that Kipling and the (anonymous) author of the Wikipedia entry agree on certain matters, such as the fact the light skin tones precede dark ones—though the Wikipedia author explains the darkening by appealing to evolutionary prevention of chromosomal damage and Kipling explains the darkening by means of the theory of camouflage. It is also interesting that the Wikipedia entry is in every way an ill-told tale: strenuously renouncing every grace of pacing and phrasing in favor of a bland awkward judiciousness (“there was no necessity”; “there is no empirical evidence to suggest”). In my college chemistry class, the lab assistant firmly instructed us to use the passive voice and avoid the pronoun *I* when writing lab reports; and science often frames its discourse in aggressively anti-literary form. Literature,

it seems, deals in myths and flagrantries, metaphors difficult to distinguish from lies; science pinpoints the genes that control color variation and quantifies the albedo of human skin with only a little bit of rounding-off. Virgil and Kipling alike find a Prime Originator, a single person who wills the new thing into being: the first Roman, the first black Ethiopian, the first spotted leopard; the scientist, on the other hand, speaks of random statistical variations, some of which prosper. This is not to say that a narrative constructed along Darwinian lines lacks a hero: the successful mutant is the hero of every Darwinian tale. The problem is that, if a Darwinian novel were to exist, it would have to place its hero in the context of thousands of perfectly predictable tales (the nonmutant phenotypes who led identical lives, reproduced, and died) and hundreds of narrative abortions (the unsuccessful mutant phenotypes who miscarried or died without reproducing) in order to frame the hero's faintly superior reproductive success.

It will be clear from Milton's Eve and Kipling's Ethiopian that literature is not expected to deal in biological truth in its origin stories. And yet I think that both literature and science are weakened by the attempt to enforce a firm separation. Why do the heavenly bodies move across the sky?

The Egyptian name for the dung-beetle was *hpr*, "rising from, come into being itself," close to the word *hpr*, with the meaning "to become, to change." The word *hpr* later became *hpri*, the divine name *Khepri*, given to the Creation god, who represented the young rising sun.

The name *Khepri* was often included as one of the five great names in the titulary of the king. *Khepri* was identified with the sacred beetle, *Kheper*, in life style and in being self-created. *Khepri* is often shown as a man with a beetle head or surmounted by a beetle or as a beetle. *Kheper*, the sacred beetle,

was believed [to be] the reincarnation of *Khepri*, the sun-god, being reborn each morning as the young sun, newly emerged out of the earth. *Khepri*, with the great sun-disk before him, would be energized in the other world each morning and roll the sun-disk onto the horizon at sunrise and across the sky, just as the beetle rolled its dung ball over the horizon on the earth and buried it in the sands. As the earthly symbol of an aspect of the great life-giving sun, *Kheper* was identified with spontaneous creation, regeneration, so closely associated with eternal existence. [Elaine Altman Evans, "The Sacred Scarab"]<sup>6</sup>

So, if we may, we suppose that the matter of which the visible world is composed was originally divided by God into particles which were approximately equal, and of a size which was moderate, or intermediate when compared with those which now make up the heavens and stars. We will also suppose that the total amount of motion they possessed was equal to that now found in the universe; and that their motions were of two kinds, each of equal force. First, they moved individually and separately about their own centers, so as to form a fluid body such as we take the heavens to be; and secondly, they moved in groups around certain other equidistant points corresponding to the present centres of the fixed stars, and also around other rather more numerous points equaling the number of the planets. . . so as to make up as many different vortices as there are now heavenly bodies in the universe. [René Descartes, "Principles of Philosophy"]<sup>7</sup>

For the Egyptians, the sun was pushed from east to west by the mother of all dung-beetles; for Descartes, the planets swirl around in mad eddies spinning in the ether soup (fig. 1). We appreciate that these explanations were once the best science available, but we laugh at the

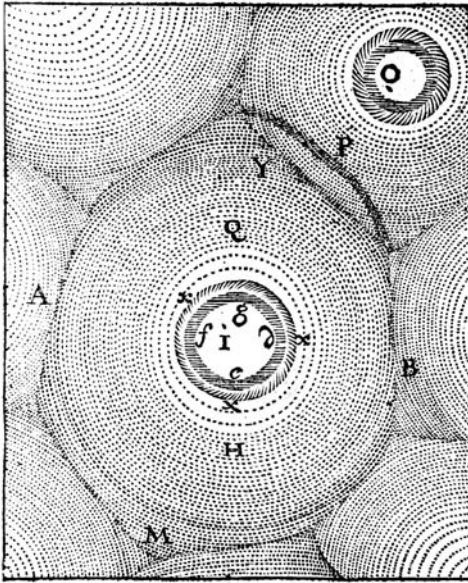


FIG. 1. René Descartes, *vortices*, from *Principia Philosophiae* (1644).  
Photo: Oxford Science Archive/HIP/Art Resource, NY.

naïveté of these attempts to analogize from the homely to the celestial.

As soon as a scientific theory is disproven it is immediately demoted to literature. But all science proceeds by means of explanatory metaphors—Einstein's intuition of space as a sagging mattress, sinking where stars and planets indent it, is no more and no less metaphorical than the whirlpool- and whirligig-ridden space of Descartes, full of little hard bits growing smaller as their edges erode. (And Descartes's description of the trials and errors of light as it passes through the vortices is not wholly different from the gravitational lenses of the relativistic universe.) We tend to lose consciousness of the metaphoricality as long as we think that the science is correct. But it would

be better if we could learn to think of scientific theory as a form of literature, even if it has the inconvenience of being true. A few of the world's great books were written by scientists and are no less compelling for being correct, or at least what was thought at the time of their writing correct; for example, the biologist Jacques Monod's *Chance and Necessity* (1971) is one of the most beautiful and moving texts ever written.

And yet, my old lab tutor had a point: truth is not a function of charm. If I'm hiring an engineer to build a bridge, I care more about the person's expertise in tensor calculus than about the suavity of her or his prose style. And insofar as literature is a search for origins, we are in danger of outgrowing literature entirely: our present intellectual climate is an Ice Age with respect to originary myth—nothing is more universally derided. Monod speaks of the comfort of mythology: how the divine hero and the inspired prophet provide a coherent account of the sacred traditions of a social group and an explanation of origin of the universe in which the human race has an important position in creation's scheme. Monod then turns to the austerities of science: the scientist doesn't relieve our anxiety but increases it by breaking the animist compact between nature and ourselves and leaving us shivering in a universe in which we mean nothing. Science devastates our illusions so thoroughly, Monod says, that none of would pursue it for a moment, were it not that it works so well.

A professor of symbology at Harvard might point out to the French Nobel Laureate that the scientist's proud objectivity itself has its miraculous origins—for example, in the thinking of Monod's hero Democritus—and therefore can be mocked just as easily as religion. In the same year that Monod published *Chance and Necessity*, Michel Foucault wrote an essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," which chided the scientific as well as the devout for their pretensions to truthfulness:

Why does Nietzsche challenge the pursuit of the origin . . . ? First, because it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, their purest possibilities, and their carefully protected identities; because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the external world of accident and succession. This search is directed to “that which was already there,” the image of a primordial truth fully adequate to its nature, and it necessitates the removal of every mask to ultimately disclose an original identity. However, if the genealogist refuses to extend his faith in metaphysics, if he listens to history, he finds that there is “something altogether different” behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms. Examining the history of reason, he learns that it was born in an altogether “reasonable” fashion—from chance; devotion to truth and the precision of scientific methods arose from the passion of scholars, their reciprocal hatred, their fanatical and unending discussions, and their spirit of competition—the personal conflicts that slowly forged the weapons of reason. . . .

History also teaches how to laugh at the solemnities of the origin. The lofty origin is no more than “a metaphysical extension which arises from the belief that things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth” [Nietzsche, *The Wanderer* §3]. We tend to think that this is the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning. The origin always precedes the Fall. It comes before the body, before the world and time; it is associated with the gods, and its story is always sung as a theogony. But historical beginnings are lowly: not in the sense of modest or discreet like the steps of a dove, but derisive and ironic, capable of

undoing every infatuation. “We wished to awaken the feeling of man’s sovereignty by showing his divine birth: this path is now forbidden, since a monkey stands at the entrance” [Nietzsche, *The Dawn of Day* §49].<sup>8</sup>

Myself, I wouldn’t be so hard on originary fables: let Virgil celebrate Aeneas, let Kipling put his hand on the leopard. If we accept that Nietzsche and Foucault are right in believing that the scientist and the prophet are alike fools of dogma; if we accept Jean-François Lyotard’s assertion that the characteristic stance of our age is incredulity toward metanarratives—that is, disbelief in stories that act as the ground for cultural values—if we accept that there is nothing more rickety and extravagant than a story about the origin of spider webs, or the hyacinth, or Rome, or the universe; then the self-conscious absurdity of originary fictions becomes a secret acknowledgment of the constructedness of all truth. The original sin: our need for lies about how things come into being, lies that freely confess their status as lies.

### *The Truest Poetry Is the Most Feigning*

The most liberating literature comes from the fiction section of the library—a Department of English is basically a Department of Lies. So are many other departments in the humanities, philosophy for example. Borges once wrote of a strange country where philosophy was considered a form of fantastic literature, but I suspect that most of us, especially philosophers, always considered it exactly that: we especially enjoy philosophy that challenges commonsense notions of reality—“Plato thought nature but a spume that plays / Upon a ghostly paradigm of things,” as Yeats put it. If literature has its tame and taming aspects, it also has its subversive aspects: to assert is also to call into question, and the more vigorous the assertion the more we

wonder why the author needs to defend it so strongly. So one movement in literature is to cultivate, transform, or affirm: to shape us as members of a tribe. But there is a countermovement, in which literature provokes us to reject everything it alleges, everything it esteems. In the domain of fiction we accept nothing at face value: a fiction is a thought-experiment, a playing with values in which we suspend belief and disbelief alike.

It is remarkable how often we say yes when writers urge us to say no, and vice versa. This is especially common in utopian and dystopian fiction. If I describe my ideal city, the chances are excellent that you won't want to live there—maybe I wouldn't enjoy living there myself. Utopias tend to flatten variety: the progenitor of such fictions is Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), which anticipates Kant's categorical imperative in that every piece of behavior, every detail of human life is held to the following standard: it is virtuous only if it can be conceived as a universal moral law. Houses are good houses only if one is just like another; a dress is a good dress only if everybody wears it:

The houses be of fair and gorgeous building, and in the street side they stand joined together in a long row through the whole street without any partition or separation. The streets be twenty feet broad. On the back side of the houses through the whole length of the street, lie large gardens which be closed in round about with the back part of the streets. Every house hath two doors, one into the street, and a postern door on the back side into the garden. These doors be made with two leaves, never locked nor bolted, so easy to be opened, that they will follow the least drawing of a finger, and shut again by themselves. Every man that will, may go in, for there is nothing within the houses that is private, or any man's own. And every tenth year they change their houses by lot. . . .

For their garments, which throughout all the island be of one fashion (saving that there is a difference between the man's garment and the woman's, between the married and the unmarried) and this one continueth for evermore unchanged, seemly and comely to the eye, no let to the moving and wielding of the body, also fit both for winter and summer: as for these garments (I say) every family maketh their own.<sup>9</sup>

No one has secrets in Utopia, no one has guilty little habits or fetishes; Jeremy Bentham's scheme of a panoptical prison, where the inmates are at every moment exposed to the scrutiny of the guards, has nothing on Utopia, where everyone is guard and everyone is inmate. The houses aren't made of glass, but their doors swing open at the lightest touch, and your neighbor is not only going to know your affairs but is soon going to occupy your home.

The puritan character of Utopia expresses itself through extraordinarily harsh rules concerning sexual behavior. The Utopians assume that sex is so intensely pleasurable that if premarital relations were permitted no one would bother to get married, to the detriment of a well-regulated state:

If either the man or the woman be proved to have bodily offended before their marriage with another, he or she whether it be is sharply punished. And both the offenders be forbidden ever after in all their life to marry. . . . That offence is so sharply punished, because they perceive, that unless they be diligently kept from the liberty of this vice, few will join together in the love of marriage, wherein all the life must be led with one, and also all the griefs and displeasures that come therewith must patiently be taken and borne. Furthermore in choosing wives and husbands they observe earnestly and straitly a custom,

which seemed to us very fond and foolish. For a sad and an honest matron showeth the woman, be she maid or widow, naked to the wooer. And likewise a sage and discreet man exhibiteth the wooer naked to the woman. At this custom we laughed and disallowed it as foolish. But they on the other part do greatly wonder at the folly of all other nations, which in buying a colt, whereas a little money is in hazard, be so chary and circumspect, that though he be almost all bare, yet they will not buy him, unless the saddle and all the harness be taken off, lest under those coverings be hid some gall or sore.

Marriage is essentially grim, a long grief to be endured with patience; but at least you get to see the horse before agreeing to own it, or to be owned by it. The striptease sounds ironical or grotesque until we realize that *exposure* is the key to Utopian society as More devises it; not only do you have no right to privacy, but you also have a duty to publish your whole being. In Utopia interchangeable residents bear identical yokes and labor to pull the state toward—what? Being Utopia, it is itself a goal, and therefore can have no purpose except perhaps to display its perfection as a model for inferior states.

No one, then, actually wants to live in More's Utopia—or Plato's Republic, a place devoid of all poetry and all music except martial airs, a gymnasium where cutouts of human beings are snipped into shape through remorseless exercise. On the other hand, when I read such books as Dante's *Inferno* or George Orwell's *1984* (1949), books that describe places designed to repel, I sometimes say to myself, It doesn't seem as bad as all that. I might not like to be a damned soul enduring Dante's torments, but to be a minor devil might be exhilarating—I could ride breathlessly on Geryon's back and swoop over scenes contrived to delight through a symmetry of pain. And even the damned souls dwell in a state of unusual intensity of being. As for Orwell,

the city of *1984* offers personal safety, a strong sense of community, striking rituals for integrating private desires into the general will, interesting and rewarding work, and inexpensive gin. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in 1936 that “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function,” and by this definition the slogans of *1984* make geniuses of those who believe them:

War is Peace.

Freedom is Slavery.

Ignorance is Strength.

Perhaps the attempt to limit the number of words in the residents’ vocabulary is ungood, but a strange elasticity of mind is a precondition of life.

The book’s hero, Winston Smith, works for the Ministry of Truth, an agency that revises all records of the past—photographs, documents—in order to make the past conform with the vision of the past expedient to the present political moment. I first read the novel in high school, and I remember the elation that came over me at the thought of the past as an infinitely revisable text—as if all unpleasantnesses could be edited into nonexistence. In George Bernard Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1901), a panicking eunuch rushes in to tell Caesar that the great library of Alexandria is on fire—“What is burning there is the memory of mankind”; Caesar coolly replies, “A shameful memory. Let it burn.” But Orwell found a solution better than burning: to regard all writing as an indeterminate shimmer of faint letters scarcely visible against the whiteness, letter-rêves, letter-revenants, continually unforming and reforming—writing that imitates the real operation of human memory, vague and vagrant, with all harsh edges filed away by rationalization, blurred by confabulation.

We enjoy living in the world that Orwell anticipated with fear. I am writing this on a computer, and until it leaves my hard drive I could make the whole discussion of Orwell vanish into the cyber-ether as if it had never been and replace it with words that contradict everything I've just said. And even after it leaves my hard drive, I could go back into my correspondence file and unwrite a letter that I never should have sent, replacing it with a less awkward and abrupt, more graceful counterpart; I could even reshape the answer I received, in a way that less appalls my vanity—mitigate an epithet, add a concessive clause. *You turd!* can effortlessly become *my word!* in *My Life: The Revised Standard Edition*. History today is written not only by the victors but also by the vanquished, and even by the illiterate. But this is a better representation of history than what Orwell wanted: a set of bound immutable folios of the *London Times*, painstakingly corrected by a scrupulous editor. I can understand truth more easily as a collection of liquid documents rippling and wrinkling on the surface of time.

Winston toils at the Ministry of Truth; his illicit girlfriend Julia, on the other hand, works in the Fiction Department. Near the beginning of their relationship he notices that her arm is in a sling: "Probably she had crushed her hand while swinging round one of the big kaleidoscopes on which the plots of novels were 'roughed in.' It was a common accident in the Fiction Department" (part 2, chapter 1).<sup>10</sup> This is a smiling homage to the passage in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1727) describing the machine in the Academy of Lagado, a device for cranking out books by the random generation of words:

He then led me to the Frame. . . . It was Twenty Foot square, placed in the Middle of the Room. The Superficies was composed of several Bits of Wood, about the Bigness of a Dye, but some larger than others. They were all linked together by slender Wires. These Bits of Wood were covered

on every Square with Papers pasted on them; and on these Papers were written all the Words of their Language in their several Moods, Tenses, and Declensions, but without any Order. [part 3, chapter 5]<sup>11</sup>

The limit of the unfixing of literature is the Library of Babel, generating by random procedures: the casting of dice, the turning of a kaleidoscope, or the typing of an infinite number of monkeys. The notion of a fixed canon of immortal masterpieces is gratifying; but there is also an obscure sort of delight in the notion of savoring sheer textual accident, or of dismissing texts entirely.

The purpose of literature is partly to make a permanent record of things that need recording; partly to help efface memory, even of things that should be remembered. There is a marvelous moment in the *Aeneid*: In Hell, the Cumaean Sibyl has provided Aeneas with a golden branch that enables him to descend into the underworld, where he meets his father, Anchises, by the shores of Lethe. Anchises shows Aeneas a haze of souls, those who will be reborn as Aeneas's children and grandchildren and remote descendants:

“The souls that throng the flood  
Are those to whom, by fate, are other bodies ow’d:  
In Lethe’s lake they long oblivion taste,  
Of future life secure, forgetful of the past.  
Long has my soul desir’d this time and place,  
To set before your sight your glorious race,  
That this presaging joy may fire your mind  
To seek the shores by destiny design’d.”

.....  
“Survey,” pursued the sire, “this airy throng,  
As, offer’d to thy view, they pass along.

These are th' Italian names, which fate will join  
With ours, and graff upon the Trojan line.  
Observe the youth who first appears in sight,  
And holds the nearest station to the light,  
Already seems to snuff the vital air,  
And leans just forward, on a shining spear:  
Silvius is he, thy last-begotten race,  
But first in order sent, to fill thy place." [6.966–1034,  
trans. Dryden]

The lineage eventually stretches as far as Virgil's own imperial Rome. But this thousand-year-long line of heroes comes into being only through massive erasures of fate's hard drive; in Hell, remembering and forgetting are in a state of perfect equipoise. I take this as a parable of the operation of literature itself: we forget to remember, we remember to forget.

According to William Butler Yeats's book of occult philosophy, *A Vision* (1925), the souls of the dead have to purify themselves of their past life by undergoing the *Dreaming Back*: "The *Spirit* is compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it; there can be nothing new, but the old events stand forth in a light that is dim or bright according to the intensity of the passion that accompanied them. They occur in the order of their intensity or luminosity, the more intense first, and the painful are commonly the more intense, and repeat themselves again and again."<sup>12</sup> The aim is exhaustion of self: after enough repetition, the intensity diminishes to zero, leading to oblivion and rebirth. Yeats's work often describes dead souls caught in the *Dreaming Back*: in his play *Purgatory* (1938) the Old Man—patricide, soon to be filicide—stares at a gap in a wall and sees the ghosts of his parents reenacting their wedding night: his drunken father climbs into bed with his lustful mother, although the Old Man screams that she shouldn't let him touch her. But he can't

prevent the sexual act that begot him: he can only watch in horror as it repeats itself. All tragedy is reenactment of some primal scene, some knot of passion that must be retied and untied over and over. But after we have read or watched *King Lear* or *Oedipus Rex* fifty times, the rhythms are so familiar that the denouement loses some of its earlier luster; if the hair bristles a bit, it no longer stands straight up. Familiarity has its gifts: the abyss is a little less frightening after we come to know it well, from Sophocles' plays, or from sitting at the edge of a bed in a hospital room full of spiffy gadgets. And yet this regression to the mean is a cause for regret, too. The unforgettable will also be forgotten.

Writers write in order to preserve experience, but also in order to dismiss it. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) was, by common consent, an amazingly acute and vivid resurrection of her parents, Sir Leslie Stephen and Julia Duckworth Stephen—his rationalism, his candor, his obtuseness, his stretch of mind; her compassion, her myopia, her inaccessibility. But Woolf evidently wrote the book not as an aide-mémoire, but as an aide-oubli:

Until I was in the forties . . . the presence of my mother obsessed me. I could hear her voice, see her, imagine what she would do or say as I went about my day's doings. She was one of the invisible presences who after all play so important a part in every life. . . .

Then one day walking round Tavistock Square I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, *To the Lighthouse*, in a great, apparently involuntary, rush. One thing burst into another. . . . I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her.

I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply

felt emotion. And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest. But what is the meaning of “explained” it?<sup>13</sup>

The verb *explain* basically means *flatten*, and all the literary business of explaining and defending and accusing and vindicating is, from one point of view, an act of smoothing everything that juts out until there’s only an uninflected surface, about which nothing can be said. Why does anyone write down anything?—in order not to have keep its details in mind at all times: to have an external storage device, that is, a book. We erect our libraries not far from dull Lethe’s wharf.

## CHAPTER TWO

# ❧ *What Is Painting?* ❧

I BEGIN WITH two definitions of painting:

The Art of Painting, is the Art of Representing any Object by Lines drawn upon a flat Superficies, which Lines are afterwards covered with Colours, and those Colours applied with a certain just distribution of Lights and Shades, with a regard to the Rules of Symetry and Perspective; the whole producing a Likeness or true Idæa of the Subject intended. [William Aglionby, *Painting in Three Dialogues*, 1685]<sup>1</sup>

We should remember that a picture—before being a war horse, a nude woman, a telling some other story—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours arranged in a particular pattern [*une surface plane recouverte de couleurs en un certain ordre assemblées*]. . . . Let us go to the Museum. . . . If it is possible, through an effort of the will, to see “nature” in these pictures, it is equally possible not to. [Maurice Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionalisme,” 1890]<sup>2</sup>

We note that, in the two centuries between these definitions, painting has evolved by subtraction of rule: in the seventeenth century, a painter has a lot of factors to take into consideration in the performance of his or her art; in the nineteenth century, there seems to be much less that has to be thought about. But in its way freedom is as stern a taskmaster as the laws of representational truth, symmetry, and perspective. Aglionby and Denis agree on one thing, flatness, but everything else is turned around. For one, the natural object is both the origin and the goal; for the other, any resemblance between the painting and a natural object is a more or less happy accident—*essentially* the painting is arranged pigment. For Aglionby, first there is line, then color; for Denis, color is so important that line is scarcely worth mentioning—and Denis's contemporary Paul Gauguin states explicitly:

In the academies . . . colour is nothing but an accessory. "Sir, you must draw properly before painting"—this said in a professional manner; the great stupidities are always said that way.

Do you put on your shoes like your gloves? Can you really make me believe that drawing does not derive from colour and vice versa?<sup>3</sup>

Gauguin also insists on painting from memory so the actual appearance of things will not distract the painter from the painting. For the seventeenth century, painting seems to be a set of procedures for tasteful imitation; for the nineteenth, it seems to be a self-enclosed aesthetic act, unrelated to the world's outsides. Nothing, we might think, could reconcile these divergent definitions. But in fact the older painters were less stolid, less thing-ridden, than Aglionby might have us believe; and the newer painters were more concerned with meaning beneath the pictorial surface than Denis suggests. The goal of painting is not

representation, nor is it the patterning of planes with color, though both these modalities are important. The goal of painting is to say something—at least from the point of view of language, which is always a saying-something—and in this chapter we will consider painting as a form of speech.

### *The Speech of Space*

When we think of the breakthroughs of Renaissance art, we may think of the various toys that helped artists conceive Euclidian space, such as the camera obscura, described here by Leonardo da Vinci: “An experiment, showing how objects transmit their images or pictures, intersecting within the eye in the crystalline humour, is seen when by some small round hole penetrate the images of illuminated objects into a very dark chamber. Then, receive these images on a white paper placed within this dark room and rather near to the hole and you will see all the objects on the paper in their proper forms and colours, but much smaller; and they will be upsidedown by reason of that very intersection.”<sup>4</sup> Soon it was noted (by della Porta, for example) that if you could not draw, you could still make a very creditable picture by tracing the outline of such an image. This and similar devices, often provided with lenses, have attracted the attention of artists ever since: Sir Joshua Reynolds owned a portable camera obscura that could fold up to resemble a book. And the contemporary painter David Hockney, himself a great lover of optical gizmos, believes that Holbein, Ingres, and many other painters used little helpers of this sort.

Another method for helping painters master the science of perspective was to paint on glass or on a mirror. Or you could study the chief effect of perspective—the toeing-in of parallel lines—by using actual strings pulled taut between your eye and the object you were painting (fig. 2). To draw a lute, you would restring it to play music for

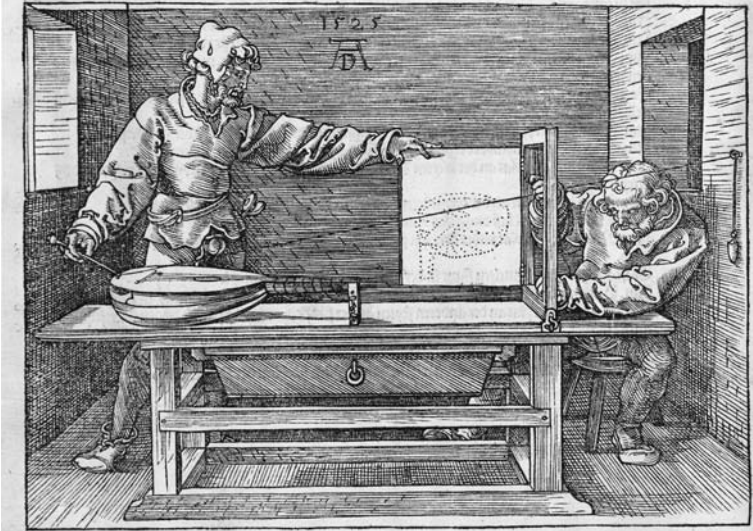


FIG. 2. *Albrecht Dürer, Unterweysung der Messung mit Zirckel und Richtscheit (1525).*

the eye—the strings are the physical embodiments of rays of light. It seems that by means of glass and string we can aspire to reproduce the visual with fidelity.

And yet all this concern with perspective is more unnatural, even seditious to nature, than it first appears. Perspective is less concerned with objects than with space—it lavishes its resources on relations, not on things. In some Renaissance paintings, the thing represented seems arbitrary, chosen mostly for its usefulness for describing flamboyance of space. The magnificent building in the center rear of Perugino's *Christ Giving Peter the Keys to Heaven and Hell* (fig. 3) is supposed to be the Temple of Solomon, but it is conceived according to the model of the baptisteries of Renaissance Italy; on either side are Roman triumphal arches, out of place in Christ's Jerusalem. In fact there aren't any



FIG. 3. *Perugino*, *Christ Giving Peter the Keys to Heaven and Hell* (1482).

habitable buildings visible at all, only buildings symbolic of power and glory. There is far too much empty space—it's clear that Perugino was little concerned with representing a city, and greatly concerned with playing with the newly discovered science of perspective—your eyes skid dizzily toward the vanishing point on the horizon, right behind the door of the temple. The pavement seems preternaturally smooth, flat, and open: in fact, some of the figures in the middle right seem to be doing something like ice-skating. Most cities in Renaissance art bear some resemblance to the city of heaven, a theatrical artifice.

The representation of physical objects has always been a matter of the greatest interest to painters, but it has rarely been understood as the central purpose of painting. Painters in the West have often considered the invisible more worthy of representation than the visible. Rousseau, in his essay on the origin of language, posits that a language of gesture precedes a language of speech. But the trouble with gesture is that you



FIG. 4. *Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, Allegory of the Planets and the Continents (1752).*

can't point at something that isn't there. It's easy to indicate a chicken when it's scratching in your front yard, but to indicate an absent chicken you need some other strategy, a word that means *chicken*; indeed most language acts are concerned with invisible things. Painting, then, is a language insofar as it points to invisibilities, surrounds us with invisibilities. A certain fringe of vertigo, like a halo instinct through the entire picture, attends the Christ of Perugino, and later painters promoted

giddiness almost to the exclusion of every other sensation. In Tiepolo's *Allegory* (fig. 4), the figures seem to exist in order to trace a funnel of sky.

It may seem strange to think of painting as an art devoted to wind, space, and hovering sanctities; but in many ways the painters themselves understood their art as a limning of things they couldn't see. By the twentieth century, artists were speaking explicitly of their art as a dialectic between the visible and the invisible. Here is an excerpt from an interview with Richard Tuttle:

I was doing white paper octagonals on a wall at a museum in Dallas. And the critic came along and made mock introductions, "Oh, this is Richard Tuttle. He's interested in impermanence in the arts." And she said that to Betty Parsons, and Betty just immediately snapped back, "What's more permanent than the invisible?" It fits in with the whole line that in any art form there has to be an accounting of its opposite condition. If you're going to be a visual artist, then there has to be something in the work that accounts for the possibility of the invisible, the opposite of the visual experience. That's why it's not like a table or a car or something.<sup>5</sup>

Behind every display of the visible, behind pigment and stone, there lies something invisible, teasing, permanent, in some sense indestructible even though the work itself is always destructible: never quite *there* in the artwork, never quite not there.

The prestige of the invisible has a history extending well before the age of modernism. In 1649 there was published, posthumously, a treatise called *Arte de la pintura*, by Francisco Pacheco, painter, poet, art censor for the Inquisition, and father-in-law of Velázquez; he considered at some length the question of how to represent angels—not as women, he insisted (to endow them with breasts would be "quite

unworthy of their perfection”), but as male youths between the age of ten and twenty or as children, even “new-born babes . . . flying in a decent and responsible manner . . . naked [or] dressed in tunics of silk or variously colored cotton.” Pacheco thought it best to “depict garments and devices in strict accordance to the historical story”; so the archangel Michael struggling against the devil should be “girt with weapons and Roman armour,” not the armor of our own times. (He does not seem to have questioned whether classical Roman armor was appropriate for a being that had existed since the beginning of the world.) More interesting than his stress on historical verisimilitude is Pacheco’s sense that angels should be painted with wings whether God created them that way or not: “Ordinarily one should paint angels with magnificent wings, diversely coloured in imitation of nature . . . not so much because God has created them thus but rather to convey their essentially ethereal character, the agility and speed with which they are endowed, the manner in which they may swoop down from the heavens quite unburdened with corporeal weight . . . moving amongst the clouds because the heavens are indeed their proper abode and from whence they may gently communicate to us that inaccessible light [*luz inaccesible*] in which they rejoice.”<sup>6</sup> What counts is not what an angel really is—Pacheco is far from sure that the angels have iridescent wings—but what can allude to superhuman speed, insubstantiality, nimbleness. It is as if an angel should be shown as human figure so thinned with turpentine that it is little more than a glide of ether—a vestige of inaccessible light. But in a sense, all light is inaccessible to a painter since a painting can only reflect, not shine—in the language of the Renaissance, it may possess splendor, but never radiance. Somewhere above or before or behind the painting is the light it cannot emit.

Far from considering themselves bound to the heavy truth of physical appearance, the older painters were fascinated by the airy, the motile, the evanescent. Pacheco, in his instructions on how to paint the

Immaculate Conception, noted that “although [the moon] is a solid planet, I myself render it light and translucent.” For the spiritually inclined artist, all that is solid melts into air. There is a much-quoted dictum of Michelangelo’s, reported by Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo in *Trattato dell’arte di pittura, scultura, ed architettura* (1584); I give it here as appears in a treatise by William Hogarth, on whom Michelangelo’s idea made a lasting impression:

Lomazzo who wrote about the painting at that time [the Renaissance] hath this remarkable passage: “. . . It is reported then that *Michael Angelo* upon a time gave this observation to the Painter *Marcus de Scienna* his scholler; that he should alwaies make a figure *Pyramidall, Serpentlike, and multiplied by one two and three*. In which precept (in mine opinion) the whole mysterie of the arte consisteth. For the greatest grace and life that a picture can have, is, that it expresse *Motion*: which the Painters call the *spirite [furia]* of a picture: Nowe there is no forme so fitte to expresse this *motion*, as that of the flame of fire, which according to *Aristotle* and the other Philosophers, is an elemente most active of all others: because the forme of the flame thereof is most apt for motion: for it hath a Conus or sharpe pointe wherewith it seemeth to divide the aire, that so it may ascende to his proper sphere. So that a picture having this forme will bee most beautiful.”<sup>7</sup>

Painting seems in many ways an earthbound sort of art, a smearing on a wall of various kinds of mud; but for Michelangelo (via Lomazzo), the only thing worth painting is fire: even a collection of human bodies, such as the Holy Family, is nothing but a modality of flame. The very word *pyramid* has sometimes been thought to be related to the Greek word *pyr*, “fire,” on the theory that a pyramid looks like a stone model of rays of light emanating from the sun. It is as if a painting

were always trying to supersede its own materiality, even its own visibility—trying to “ascende to his proper sphere” in a divine realm of formal essences. By means of painting, the crystalline shells at the limit of Ptolemy’s universe are made to speak.

Nothing could be farther from Aglionby’s definition. Painting is not the art of static representation of physical objects, but the art of the arrow shot straight up, beyond the pull of the earth. The whole passage from Lomazzo anticipates Wassily Kandinsky’s 1911 defense of a purely abstract art: “The life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost. . . . The whole triangle is moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards. Where the apex was today the second segment is tomorrow.”<sup>8</sup> The heavy world of matter graduates continuously upward, into the nonmaterial, the nonrepresentational. Kandinsky thought that Paul Cézanne was fond of triangular composition for mystical reasons, since Cézanne was working toward sheer abstraction; he reproduced Cézanne’s *Large Bathers* as an example (fig. 5). Not only are the tree trunks and branches and the women’s bodies inclining toward some point of convergence above the frame of the painting, but the women are striding forward or hunching themselves into intricately subdivided triangles; the squatter on the far left has so abandoned herself to triangularity that her face has degenerated into a smear. They yearn for the geometrical.

Kandinsky contrasts Cézanne’s triangular composition with a Holy Family by Raphael, heavy and academic (he says), lifeless. Raphael-bashing was common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries among those of advanced taste. The poet Ezra Pound once laughed at Raphael for the ponderousness of his figures: he sardonically quoted a German scholar’s comment that through Raphael the Madonna ideal has become flesh, and added, “The metamorphosis into carnal tissue becomes frequent and general somewhere about 1527.



FIG. 5. *Paul Cézanne, Large Bathers (1899–1906).*

The people are corpus, corpuscular, but not in the strict sense ‘animate,’ it is no longer the body of air clothed in the body of fire; it no longer radiates, light no longer moves from the eye, there is a great deal of meat, shock absorbing, perhaps.”<sup>9</sup> But I’m not sure that he’s right about that. Pound was influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of the Victorian age, a group of painters who blamed Raphael for much that had gone wrong with art. But I think that Raphael, like Michelangelo, cared more for the *fury* of a painting than for its exactness of representation. Some of Raphael’s figures lack all heaviness, seem pregnant with upward motion, as in *The Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple* (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. *Raphael, The Expulsion of Heliodorus from the Temple (1511–14).*

According to the Apocrypha (2 Maccabees 3), the king of Syria ordered Heliodorus to seize treasure from the Temple of Jerusalem; but God sent a gold-bridled horse to trample him and two youths to flog him. In Raphael's painting, the two youths are wingless angels: their feet don't touch the ground. But the force of gravity seems weak everywhere: the half-rearing horse seems slow in its topple, caught, like the cloaks of his rider and the first youth, in some great updraft; the oddly twisted woman in the center left seems to be rising from a kneel by uncorkscrewing herself; one man has even levitated onto a column base. In this mural and others in the *Stanze di Raffaello* in the Vatican, Raphael was fond of triangular compositions with crowds of figures on the right and left, with not much happening in the center: the picture

seems to want to move inward and upward, in the manner of the closing of an inverted fan or book.

In the *Odyssey*, Penelope weaves a tapestry by day and unweaves it at night to delay the moment of reckoning when she must choose a new husband, and in the Renaissance there was a certain acknowledgment that painting and unpainting were intimately related. Andrea Mantegna painted three pictures of Saint Sebastian: one of them is now in Vienna (fig. 7). In the right corner there is an extinguished candle with a little ribbon wrapped around the base; on that banderol is a message: *Nihil nisi divinum stabile est. Coetera fumus* (Nothing but the divine is stable; the rest is smoke). The martyr Sebastian is carnally vivid—you're keenly aware of the pain the arrows must cause. On the other hand (as in many paintings on this theme), the blood is mysteriously withheld: he bleeds a bit, decorously, but so little that he might be threaded in a labyrinth of light. Mantegna seems to be demonstrating that Sebastian has attained such a state of spiritual elevation that his body has a spectral penetrability: perhaps your hand would slide through him as easily as the arrows do.

In an earlier painting of Sebastian, in Venice, Mantegna provides the *fumus*, the smoke, in visible form (fig. 8). If you look carefully at the upper left corner, you see that one of the clouds is a horseman. This cloud-rider has excited much speculation—I see him as something like the traveler of the gravestone inscription *Abi viator* (“Horseman, pass by!” as Yeats puts it). The cloud-rider, and Sebastian, and the whole visible world are all smoke—hazily lazily forming and deforming and reforming as a camel or a whale or Hamlet. Paint is a runny glue in which colored dust is suspended: and stained liquid is a fine medium for presenting a liquid world. Painting is about the modalities of nonexistence of the images on the canvases, and of the physical universe itself. This is not a pipe, this is not a world, but the stuff that dreams are made on.



FIG. 7. *Andrea Mantegna, Saint Sebastian (c. 1490).*



FIG. 8. *Andrea Mantegna, Saint Sebastian (c. 1470).*

*Speaking of Vanity*

Northern Europe treated the *cetera fumus* theme in a more direct manner. The paintings of the Flemish and Dutch baroque, with their lavish flowers, lustrous helmets, and luscious translucencies of fruit, can appear as the apotheosis of capitalism—as if they were extremely expensive advertisements crying out, Eat me! Buy me! But often the paintings are trying to dismiss the very objects they make so attractive: if they provoke envy, it is only to declare that envy is a sin. The basic form of the still life—*nature morte*, as it’s called in French—is the *vanitas*, a genre that proclaims the emptiness of all things. Edwaert Collier’s *Vanitas with a Globe, Musical Scores, and Instruments* (1692), for example, shows (as in the Mantegna painting) an extinguished candle, signaling the transience of all human light; in front of the candle we see the worthless treasures on which we set so much store. Collier included in his painting the motto *Life is short, art is long*, but this may be ironical, since nothing is briefer than the sound produced by the violin or the recorder, conspicuously displayed. Near the globe an English-language book is opened to a page that reads, “Description of the WORLD,” but the globe is hollow—literally and figuratively hollow.

In Goethe’s *Faust* (1808), Mephistopheles takes Faust to a witch’s kitchen, where he sees monkeys playing with a great globe; a he-monkey explains:

This is the world:  
It rises and falls,  
Constantly rolls;  
It clinks like glass—  
And then it cracks!  
It’s hollow inside.  
It shines just now,



FIG. 9. *David Bailly, Vanitas Still Life with Portrait (c 1650). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Louis V. Keeler, Class of 1911, by exchange. Photography courtesy of the Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University.*

And now all's dull.

.....

You'll have to die!

It's all made of clay,

These are the shards.<sup>10</sup>

The vanitas paintings are full of hollow things—not only globes but lutes and skulls as well, as in David Bailly's *Vanitas Still Life with Portrait* (fig. 9). At about the same time that Bailly painted this vanitas, in which the skull seems like a larger bubble in the rising spew of soap bubbles, Richard Crashaw, a Catholic Englishman living in Rome, wrote a Latin poem called *Bulla*, in which a talking bubble describes its little life: "I am the genius of the gust / and the sure flower of air." As Goethe would put it at the end of *Faust*, everything transitory is but a simile.



Pietro Testa was writing a treatise in which he ridiculed the lower class of painters, those who are “the dirty and ridiculous apes of nature”;<sup>11</sup> and in a preparatory study to his etching *The Triumph of Painting*, Testa drew an ape painting at an easel. The ape struggles to make images that ape the visible world, but for Testa painting must have a higher purpose than mere verisimilitude: it must have a moral mission, it must carry us to Parnassus (the theme of this series of etchings), or to heaven. Far more important to draw a right angel than a right bird.

### *Painted Origins*

Like literature, painting is often concerned with origins: the creation of the sun and moon; the creation of Adam; the origin of the Christian faith (the nativity of Christ, the crucifixion, the resurrection).

Often the study of originary images is serious; on occasion it is frivolous, as in Tintoretto’s *Origin of the Milky Way* (fig. 11). *Galaxy* comes from the Greek word for *milk*, and in Tintoretto’s painting the stars of the Milky Way shoot from Juno’s breast like sparks from a Fourth of July sparkler. The no-man’s-land between the uncreated and the created, the there and the non-there—what Wallace Stevens calls form gulping after formlessness—is a prime subject of Western art. A painting is a conjuring of form from a blank surface; and subjects that pertain to shapechanging, the coming into being of shapes, are especially pleasing to painters.

One of the most forward-looking passages in the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci is this:

I cannot refrain from mentioning among these precepts a new device for study which, although it may seem but trivial and almost ludicrous, is nevertheless very useful in arousing the mind to various inventions. And this is, when you look at a



FIG. 11. *Jacopo Tintoretto*, *The Origin of the Milky Way* (c. 1575).

wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture of different kinds of stones, if you have to invent some scene, you may discover a similarity with different kinds of landscapes, embellished with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and hills in varied arrangement; or, again, you may see battles and figures in action or strange faces and costumes, and an endless variety of objects which you could reduce to complete and well-drawn forms. It happens with this confused appearance of walls as it does with the sound of bells in whose jangle you may find any name or word you can imagine.<sup>12</sup>

In 1933 André Breton quoted this paragraph and recommended its strategy as good advice for the apprentice surrealist: chaos seethes with unbegotten, uncomprehended forms. The quick of visual imagination lies here, in the construing of pregnant nothings; as Coleridge says, the highest operation of imagination is a hovering between images, not a settling onto a single image. The American composer John Cage, who thought that blind chance was the best of all musicians, used Leonardo's method for writing music: "When I said recently in Darmstadt that one could write music by observing the imperfections in the paper upon which one was writing, a student who did not understand because he was full of musical ideas asked, "Would one piece of paper be better than another: one for instance that had more imperfections?"<sup>13</sup> You can write notes on the faint marks generated by the faults in the papermaking process, and soon you will have composed some music. For Cage, acquiescence to the random was a way of saying yes to the universe as it is.

Leonardo, of course, did not go as far as Cage, as we see in a passage in his *Treatise on Painting*:

By throwing a sponge impregnated with various colours against a wall, it leaves some spots upon it, which may appear like a landscape. . . . A variety of compositions may be seen in such spots, according to the disposition of mind with which they are considered. . . . It may be compared to the sound of bells, which may seem to say whatever we choose to imagine. In the same manner also, these spots may furnish hints for compositions, though they do not tell us how to finish any particular part; and the imitators of them are but sorry landscape-painters.<sup>14</sup>

For a Renaissance painter, chance proposes, man disposes. But museums are full of old paintings that seem to allude to some state

prior to composition, some unrealizedness, some intra-ocular tease. If a painting is puzzling enough, we label it *Allegory* and hang it in a back room, in the hope that someone, sometime, can wrestle its constellations into coherence; for the interpreter of a painting is also, in a sense, staring at marks on a wall and trying to spiff them into meaning. But interpretation, like the rest of human life, is vanity. Even the most heavily overt allegory, or the plainest narrative, can sustain itself for only a little while before it sinks back into unmeaning.

A painting pulls its images or patterns or textures out of the invisible, and then lets go, allows them to recede into the invisibility that they never entirely left in the first place. This is one way in which a painting co-evolves with its spectator: human knowledge proceeds out of ignorance, and to ignorance it will return.

### *The Speech of Physical Objects*

During the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, a number of painters rethought their whole art, challenged all the old assumptions. To some extent they were as radical as they thought they were; but in other ways they obeyed the old canons under the aspect of changing definitions of the primary terms. It is no use to follow the rules for Euclidean space if we begin to understand space in non-Euclidean ways. And if the great origins are understood materialistically, not religiously, the painter will conceive the highest themes of visual art in a strikingly differently manner. Consider the origin of the heavenly bodies as conceived by Michelangelo and compare it to the origin of the world as conceived by Gustave Courbet (figs. 12, 13): instead of a magnificent old man, circumscribing sun and moon into being with his finger-compass, we have an anonymous vulva on a tousled sheet. The title of Courbet's painting seems huge and pompous, but it is not altogether ironic.



FIG. 12. *Michelangelo*, *The Creation of the Sun and Moon*, *Sistine Chapel* (1508–12).



FIG. 13. *Gustave Courbet*, *The Origin of the World* (1866).

Courbet and like-minded painters became known as realists. *Realism* is an old word in philosophy: it refers to the belief that abstractions or universals have an existence independent of the physical world. (The opposite view is called *nominalism*, the belief that abstractions or

universals are mere names.) But we rarely use *realism* in that sense; instead we use it to mean an art that claims to derive value from its close approximation to what we can see, hear, touch, smell, taste. To understand why this sort of art would attract Courbet, we can point to the rise of positivist and empiricist philosophy (giving more prestige to inductions from the senses than to deductions from transcendental forms); and to the peculiar economics of art in nineteenth-century France.

The mood of Italian painters circa 1500 was one of extraordinary excitement over new discoveries concerning the representation of space. The mood of (some) French painters circa 1850 was a chafing against regimented education (consisting largely of copying certifiable masterpieces) and a regimented market, in which acceptance by the governmental Salon meant everything. Imagine an America in which the National Endowment for the Humanities, under the control of the vice president's wife, Lynne Cheney (I'm going back some years), had sole responsibility for determining your success or failure as a painter: if your painting was considered obedient to the rules of art and furthered the ethical goals of the Republican Party, your work would be exhibited and in all probability sold at a high price; if you were rejected, you could stand on a street corner holding your picture and hope that it would catch the fancy of a passerby.

Now the situation in France wasn't quite as bad as this: for one thing, the aesthetic taste of the government was not monolithic—Courbet once found himself in the odd position of having sold a painting to the French government that was later rejected for exhibition at the Salon; and during Édouard Manet's time, in the 1860s, Napoleon III himself sponsored a Salon des Refusés, a state-mandated exception to the state's authority. But the situation was exasperating to painters with an ounce of originality. If the French government had deliberately set out to foster revolution, it couldn't have done a better job—its heavy hand bred a race of radical objectors.

If you were a painter eager for success in postrevolutionary France, how would you go about conforming to the canon of accepted taste? You would try your hand at large-scale historical paintings on grand themes—the rape of the Sabine women, the oath of the Horatii, the death of Sardanapalus—such were the themes of the most admired paintings of the age. Sometimes these paintings obliquely flattered France as the present seat of the republican, or at least anti-tyrannical, values of early Rome.

But if you were a rebel by temperament, how could you defend yourself? First, you would point out that the curriculum for training artists was essentially sterile: in the academy you learned about art from copying other works of art, not from studying nature. Objections to this secondhand method, in which you ate stuff that had already been eaten, were common in the thinking of Courbet, Manet, and many others. Second, you would point out that historical set pieces were necessarily fantastic and thin since no one knew what the scenes actually looked like: in order to give a rich sense of actuality, a painter should paint his or her own time and own place. In your search for old masters sympathetic to this artistic goal, you would look not to Raphael or to Poussin but to painters with little desire to idealize or extenuate—painters who showed indifferently the beautiful and the ugly, who did not flinch from the warts and scars of things. Such painters might include Rembrandt and Brueghel—and in fact the term *realism* in its modern sense was coined in the nineteenth century to describe Dutch genre painting.

In 1861 Gustave Courbet wrote one of the strongest statements of revolutionary realism:

No era or time can be reproduced but by its own artists, by the artists living at that particular time. The artists of any given century are thus totally incapable of reproducing people or

things from a past or future century . . . all history painting must, in its essence, be contemporary. . . . I also hold that painting is a quite concrete art, and can consist of nothing but the representation of real, tangible things. It is a physical language, whose words are visible objects. No abstract, invisible, intangible object can ever be material for a painting.<sup>15</sup>

A work of art speaks because the things it depicts are themselves words. The academic position is just the opposite: a work of art speaks because it depicts a noble or morally charged or generically impressive event, such as the assassination of Julius Caesar; the meaning lies not in the furniture but in the ethical narrative of which the painting is a snapshot. But Courbet thought that the physical world itself had meaning, and to show it accurately was enough to make significant art.

And yet Courbet is not saying that the representation of physical objects is an end in itself. The goal of a word is what it says, and if physical objects constitute a language, then that language must be saying something beyond the objects in themselves. Courbet specifically excludes invisible objects from the domain of paintings; yet his paintings are full of invisible objects lurking behind the sharply focused, almost palpable visibilities. If objects speak, they pertain to something missing from the visual field.

What are the objects saying? In the previous chapter, we saw George Eliot's manifesto of realism in the novel: the purpose of writing fiction is to bind us in sympathetic comity—we are connected to one another because we are connected to the thing we all share, the physical world. The message of Courbet's realism may be similar. In his paintings, objects often shout in loud voices. His *Stone-breakers* (fig. 14), for example, scandalized the Salon of 1850—it seemed so low, so cloddish, so unworthy—and yet Courbet was trying to argue that this prosaic and commonplace action was to be celebrated. For Courbet, heavy manual



FIG. 14. *Gustave Courbet, The Stone-breakers (1849).*

labor was especially attractive in that it showed the most intimate possible relation between humans and the visible and tangible world—the men are faceless, nameless, stony as the stone they break. Indeed the men seem to be attacking the rock in the way Courbet attacks the rockiness of things: trying to penetrate it, trying to see what lies beneath it. Pigment itself is often made of crushed mineral; Courbet's brush has, in the light of this painting, a certain hammerlike aspect. The long-handled hammers allude to the highfalutin' implements of history painting, such as the superb asterisk of swords in Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii* (fig. 15). But in Courbet's painting the stone-breakers aren't posturers swearing all for one and one for all, pledging to fulfill a heroic destiny: indeed the stone-breakers seem to have no particular regard for one another. Still, the camaraderie of labor is implicit. In a strange way the stale virtues of the academy are revalidated by Courbet's way of playing with them. In art, undercutting, challenging, ironizing only tend to confirm the importance of the thing undercut, challenged, ironized.



FIG. 15. *Jacques-Louis David, The Oath of the Horatii (1784).*

Courbet's contemporaries saw a strong political aspect to Courbet's art. One of Courbet's close friends was the social reformer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, whose famous motto *Property is theft* became the rallying cry of the anarchist movement. Proudhon thought that Courbet was trying to reform society by means of his language of the visible—as Proudhon wrote,

It is against this degrading theory of art for art's sake that Courbet, and with him, the whole of the school currently termed realist, ardently and energetically protest. "No," he says—I voice Courbet's thoughts as they appear in his works rather than in his writings—"No, it is not true that the sole end of art is pleasure, for pleasure is not an end. . . . The goal

of art is to lead us to a better knowledge of ourselves, by the revelation of all our thoughts, even the most secret. . . . It is not in our power to be nourished by chimeras, to intoxicate ourselves with illusion . . . but to deliver ourselves from pernicious illusions by denouncing them.”<sup>16</sup>

Courbet, by displaying the truth about hard work, was creating a sort of painted manifesto of economics—Proudhon tried to put into words that language of physical objects that the painting itself speaks. Proudhon considered Courbet the first painter to behave as a “fair-ground strongman,” striking blows against his irresponsible colleagues who ignored present conditions in order to paint fantastical scenes of no consequence to anyone.

So the objects in Courbet’s paintings, though commonplace, are emblems, in the way that the dove or the lily or Saint Catherine’s wheel or the moon under Mary’s feet was an emblem in the Renaissance. Courbet uses different words, and is trying to utter different truths; but the grammar is roughly the same. Courbet’s stones aren’t as transparent as some of the angels and moons in Renaissance art, but if you look hard you can see right through them, into a doctrine about how to lead a meaningful life.

### *The Speech of Light*

Painters have always been in thrall to the philosophy of light; and as notions about light changed, so the look of paintings changed. In old times light and matter were inextricable—in fact, it seemed probable that matter was a sort of coagulated or secondhand form of light. As a Suffolk bishop put it in the early thirteenth century: “The first corporeal form which some call corporeity is in my opinion light. For light of its very nature diffuses itself in every direction in such a way that a

point of light will produce instantaneously a sphere of light of any size whatsoever, unless some opaque object stands in the way. Now the extension of matter in three dimensions is a necessary concomitant of corporeity, and this despite the fact that both corporeity and matter are in themselves simple substances lacking all dimension. . . . Light is not a form subsequent to corporeity, but it is corporeity itself.”<sup>17</sup> Physicists now speak of the decoupling of light from matter, which took place some three hundred thousand years after the Big Bang—and the aboriginal union of photons and the particles that now constitute atoms is not far from Bishop Grosseteste’s notion that anything that possesses dimension is derived from the primal predimensional entity, pure light. Long before Grosseteste, the ninth-century Irish philosopher Scotus Erigena had put it more simply: *omnia quia sunt, sunt lumina*—all things that are, are light. Michelangelo’s sense that painting ought to aspire to the condition of flame, Pacheco’s search for the occult light, the inaccessible light in which the angels rejoice, are related to this phototheology.

But by the nineteenth century, light had become somewhat more prosaic, and in the work of the impressionists we see secular light, light understood less as an emanation of God than as a wave of energy. Indeed, the intellectual world was starting to lose interest in the Newtonian universe—a collection of solid objects in empty space, all trying to fall into one another—in favor of the universe as envisaged by Michael Faraday, Hans Christian Ørsted, and James Clerk Maxwell, a buzzing field of interacting forces. The nineteenth century had a materialistic character, as Courbet understood, but also a dematerializing aspect, as Courbet did not understand.

To understand how a realism of important objects differs from a realism of light, it is useful to compare Courbet’s painting of the cliffs at Étretat, Normandy, with Claude Monet’s (figs. 16, 17). Courbet’s cliff has, in places, a sharp outline; but in fact nature has no

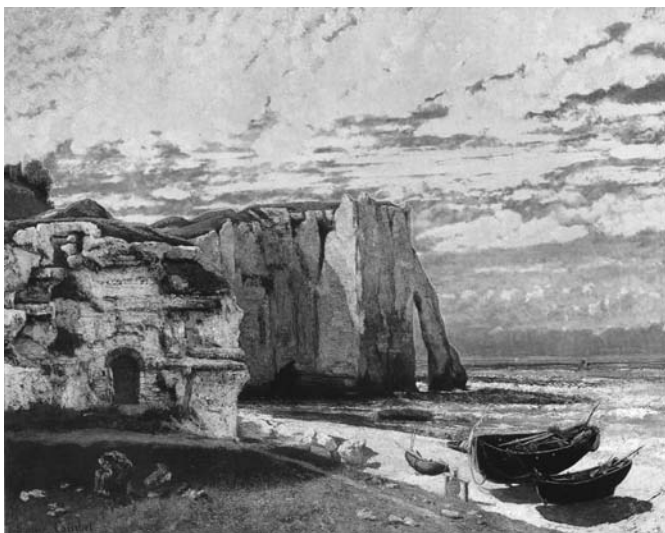


FIG. 16. *Gustave Courbet, The Cliffs at Étretat After the Storm (1869).*

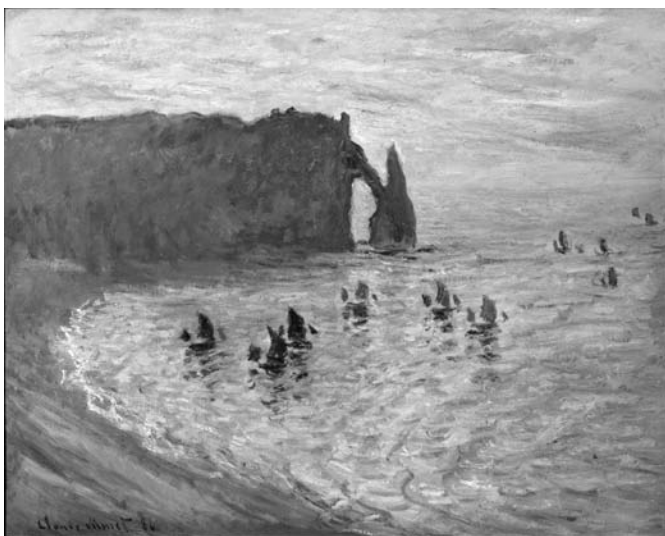


FIG. 17. *Claude Monet, The Cliffs at Étretat (1886).* Photo: *Scala/Art Resource, NY.*

outlines—nature never begins with a drawing and then colors it in. If I look at my arm, I see that it is not surrounded by a thin black line; my arm is there and then it leaves off. Monet's cliff is less a finite sharp shape than a vague looming—the sunlight is so intense that the cliff fails, turns filmy, almost translucent. Courbet's painting is about bulk, heft, solidity; Monet's is about air and light—about the ways in which solid objects deliquesce into sense data. In Courbet there is a language of physical objects; in Monet there is a language of light impinging on retinal nerves. The process of decomposition has perhaps a verbal equivalent in Walt Whitman's "There Was a Child Went Forth" (1855):

The family usages, the language, the company, the furniture,  
the yearning and swelling heart,  
Affection that will not be gainsay'd, the sense of what is real,  
the thought if after all it should prove unreal,  
The doubts of day-time and the doubts of night-time, the  
curious whether and how,  
Whether that which appears so is so, or is it all flashes and  
specks?  
Men and women crowding fast in the streets, if they are not  
flashes and specks what are they?  
The streets themselves and the facades of houses, and goods  
in the windows,  
Vehicles, teams, the heavy-plank'd wharves, the huge crossing  
at the ferries,  
The village on the highland seen from afar at sunset, the river  
between,  
Shadows, aureola and mist, the light falling on roofs and  
gables of white or brown two miles off,  
The schooner near by sleepily dropping down the tide, the  
little boat slack-tow'd astern,

The hurrying tumbling waves, quick-broken crests, slapping,  
 The strata of color'd clouds, the long bar of maroon-tint  
     away solitary by itself, the spread of purity it lies motion-  
     less in,  
 The horizon's edge, the flying sea-crow, the fragrance of salt  
     marsh and shore mud,  
 These became part of that child who went forth every day,  
     and who now goes, and will always go forth every  
     day.<sup>18</sup>

The more closely you look at the solid world, the less solid it becomes—  
 it comes to us in the form of raw sense-data, flashes and specks. It is this  
 faithfulness to the perceptual process that makes impressionist painting  
 a sort of literal realism of the eye.

The rhetoric of impressionism is closely related to that of the  
 advanced philosophy and science of its day. Here is Auguste Renoir in  
 1885, proposing a Society of Irregularists, devoted to the thesis that  
 “nature abhors regularity”:

Observers have noted in fact that, despite the apparent laws  
 which preside over their formation, the works of nature from  
 the most important to the most insignificant are infinitely  
 varied, no matter what type or species they belong to. The two  
 eyes of even the most beautiful face are never exactly alike; no  
 nose is ever situated immediately above the middle of the  
 mouth; the segments of an orange, the leaves of a tree, the  
 petals of a flower, are never exactly identical. It would seem  
 that every type of beauty derives its charm from its diversity.<sup>19</sup>

And here is Nietzsche from twelve years earlier, in his then-unpublished  
 essay on truth and falsehood in the extramoral sense:

Every concept originates through equating the unequal. Certainly one leaf is never exactly like another, and so the concept “leaf” is formed through an arbitrary abandonment of these individual differences, through forgetting the disparities, and it awakens the idea—as if there existed in nature, in addition to leaves, the “leaf,” a sort of primal form [*Urform*] after which all leaves were woven, marked, precisely measured, colored, curled, painted, but by unskilled hands, so that no exemplar turned out correctly and reliably as a faithful image of the primal form.<sup>20</sup>

Not *the* willow, a cue to think pensive thoughts, but *this* willow, painted not because it signals a mood but because nature stuck it here, right where I’m painting; not the general but the particular; not Plato’s transcendental forms but local percepts; not *quidditas*, “whatness,” but *haecceitas*, “thisness,” to use the scholastic terms that the Victorian poet Gerard Manley Hopkins borrowed from Duns Scotus. Traditional painting had addressed itself to the mind, had done everything it could to facilitate the sense of recognition—this boy has a slingshot, so he must be David. But impressionist painting addressed itself to the eye, and did everything it could to facilitate the sense of shock prior to recognition: Monet told an American painter that he tried “to see the world as a pattern of nameless colour patches—as it might [look] to a man born blind who has suddenly regained his sight.”<sup>21</sup>

Most of the impressionists knew something about recent scientific discourse on light. Camille Pissarro closely studied the contemporary physics of Hermann Helmholtz and James Clerk Maxwell (who taught that electromagnetic lines of force could be understood through analogy with the motion of liquids, and who created the color photograph by understanding that the eye has three kinds of color receptors); but

the great scientific hero of the impressionists was Eugène Chevreul, a chemist who worked for the Gobelin tapestry factory by investigating the optics of dye-stuffs. He discovered that nearby colors influenced one another—this had been known since Leonardo’s time, but Chevreul gave precision to this idea by publishing a color wheel that showed each color 180 degrees from its opposite. A spot of any pigment swims in a little halo of its own complementary color—a drop of red discolors the surrounding field with blue-green. As Pissarro wrote, the task of the painter was “to seek a modern synthesis of methods based on science, that is, based on M. Chevreul’s theory of colour and on the experiments of Maxwell. . . . To substitute optical mixture [juxtaposed dabs of unmixed colors] for mixture of pigments.”<sup>22</sup> A fine example can be found in Pissarro’s *Haymakers Resting* (1891), where the sky-blue of the haymaker’s dress seeps into the peach flesh of her arm and neck, and vice versa: it is a strategy for intensifying the sheen, the vibrancy of color.

Pissarro was himself born poor, and had leftist sympathies for the working class. But his *Haymakers*, unlike Courbet’s *Stone-breakers*, could never be seen as propaganda for socialism: we see a calm chatty break from the not-too-strenuous heaping of something pleasant to rest against. The subject matter of impressionist painting is rarely the main point. Partly this is for a technical reason: if you want to devise a new representational method, you don’t paint bizarre, unrecognizable things but the most familiar stuff you can find. The weather in impressionist paintings is usually not too violent; the scenery, with the exception of Étretat, not too dramatic; the narrative content low; the activities mildly festive (horse racing, roller-skating, boating); the emotional content somewhat restrained—scenes of wild weeping or laughter are rare, and bemusement and idle strolling common.

But in addition to this technical reason, there is another reason: the physical object has little symbolic or emotional import when too

particularized or too disintegrated; light is everything, waves and waves of light, shaded, stained, trembling, or simply white. The highest compliment ever given to an impressionist painter was Paul Cézanne's remark about Monet, "Monet is only an eye, but my God what an eye!"<sup>23</sup> The impressionist painter aspires to be a holy fool, incapable of conceptualizing *leaf* from nature's endless array of individual leaves. It is often said, and to some extent correctly, that impressionism arose as a revolt against photography, an affirmation of an optical truth beyond what a machine could show. But the impressionist painters—the blind suddenly given sight, the nothing-but-an-eye—seem to have aspired to the camera's sublime brainlessness.

The poet Stéphane Mallarmé felt that the blank page had a certain prestige that was compromised by writing letters on it, and interest in the all-white canvas was present even in the days of the impressionists: in 1882 Alphonse Allais (a member of a group of pranksters called Les Incohérents) exhibited just such a picture, titled *Anemic Girls Have Their First Communion As It Snows* (in a later chapter I shall look more closely at blankness as an aesthetic ideal).<sup>24</sup> This was a joke, but there are some serious paintings that come close to this ideal, such as Berthe Morisot's *Lady at Her Toilette* (fig. 18). In Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" (1832) the heroine famishes from unreality: she sits in a tower weaving a tapestry, unable to look at the outside world except by means of a mirror trained on a window:

But in her web she still delights  
 To weave the mirror's magic sights,  
 For often thro' the silent nights  
 A funeral, with plumes and lights  
     And music, went to Camelot:  
 Or when the moon was overhead,  
 Came two young lovers lately wed;



FIG. 18. *Berthe Morisot, Lady at Her Toilette (1875)*.

“I am half sick of shadows,” said  
The Lady of Shalott. [ll. 64–72]

Morisot’s lady is herself almost a prisoner of her mirror, since the whole room, including her glass vase and her wallpaper, is made of vitreous bluish-white. But unlike Tennyson’s lady, she doesn’t seem “half sick of shadows”: she looks content to be so poorly discriminated from her background, herself a standing wave in a room of water. The painting is a study of flow-patterns, foe-patterns, of the color white: helical white means a dress, ramifying white means a rear wall, a white smudge means a flower. Morisot (the sister-in-law of Manet) used some of the highest keys of any of the painters in the impressionist movement—a soprano of paint.

If impressionist painting is a kind of speech, what are its words? Clearly the represented objects are not words for two reasons: first, because the objects are often poorly constituted: nameless color patches that the until-recently-blind person cannot yet map onto the field of the real; second, because, if we can manage to discern physical objects with any confidence, there seems to be little or no way to gather them into the domain of the thinkable—if, as Renoir says, one leaf is utterly unlike any other leaf, then the concept *leaf* and therefore the word *leaf* vanish, blow away in the wind. And yet there are few impressionist paintings for which you could not hazard a title if none were supplied. The dabs or blotches of pigment are like words in difficult poetry (I think of Mallarmé's *Autre éventail*), so stunningly miscontextualized that they call attention to their individual sensuous properties while nevertheless allowing themselves to be partly subsumed as elements in a representation. But neither painting nor music constitutes itself as a language (that is, as a system for erecting a virtual world, a sort of phantom anthill inside of which human beings can interact) by means of words; in the following sections we'll continue to look at various pseudo-words, such as the symbol, that have attained a certain prestige because artists and spectators tend to feel most at home in languages made up of words.

### *The Speech of Touch*

The pure wild eye of the impressionists was not quite so pure or wild as their rhetoric suggests. There is something cerebral and tricky about the whole school: the painting becomes a kind of tease, in which the spectator has to work to figure out how the dabs and dapples constitute a visual field. If you stand at the wrong distance from the painting, you won't be able to read it; the painting specifies a point of view as surely as Renaissance perspective does. The painting is a recipe for concocting

an image in your mind: it compels you to attend by introducing friction into the perceptual act. In this sense impressionism is exactly like cubism, despite the fact that cubism seems to be its opposite, in that cubism is uninterested in optical verities—no impressionist would ever say what Picasso said: “I paint objects as I think them, not as I see them.” Indeed, when cubism first appeared, it struck many as the antidote to impressionism, or the hangover after impressionist intoxication: at the Salon d’Automne of 1910, Roger Allard noted (of Albert Gleizes), “I had the very definite impression of a sobering up after an Impressionist debauch.”<sup>25</sup>

Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso developed cubism together in the years after 1907; Picasso used to address Braque as “mon cher Wilbure”—Wilbur to his Orville Wright, the first painters who had learned how to fly.<sup>26</sup> Braque understood himself as a sort of researcher into the feel of space: “There is in nature a tactile space, I might almost say a manual space. . . . This is the kind of space that fascinated me so much, because that is what early Cubist painting was, a research into space.”<sup>27</sup> Instead of optical verities, cubism tended to concern itself with tactile verities: in Braque’s *Little Harbor in Normandy* (fig. 19), the sky is divided into checks exactly like the rocks on the bottom—indeed one rock on the right is colored the same blue as the sky. The whole painting crinkles and bulges, as if the canvas had been crumpled and then smoothed out but still retained folds that stick out a bit, folds that your hand could feel if you rubbed the surface. Cubism is, so to speak, painting for the blind, painting in braille; it appeals to the mind’s finger to generate its sense of depth. Indeed, Picasso hoped that spectators would feel able “to cut up” the canvas and put it back together again “according to the color indications” and find themselves “confronted with a sculpture.”<sup>28</sup> The painting has half-disintegrated into small facets, with implicit instructions on how to fold them into a hollow three-dimensional object—origami for the eye.



FIG. 19. *Georges Braque, Little Harbor in Normandy (1909)*. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

These facets may be conceived as the words of a new language of painting.

Picasso and Braque used this language to speak the physical world and the world of ideas, both at the same time, remarkably enough; I think that the power of Cubism lies partly in this integration of the ideal and the real.

First, the ideal. Those who first felt the shock of cubist art considered it an overwhelmingly mathematical method: André Salmon gazed at *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (fig. 20) and saw not ghastly images of naked women but mathematical formulas expounded by a professor: “These are stark problems, white equations on a black-board. This is the first appearance of painting as algebra.”<sup>29</sup> Juan Gris made an intent study of Henri Poincaré and Albert Einstein; and an amateur mathematician named Maurice Princet, who was friendly with the cubists, once posed a question to Picasso and Braque: “You represent by means of a



FIG. 20. *Pablo Picasso, Les demoiselles d'Avignon (1907). © 2013 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

trapezoid a table, just as you see it, distorted by perspective, but what would happen if you decided to express the universal table [*la table type*]? You would have to straighten it up onto the picture plane, and from the trapezoid return to a true rectangle. If that table is covered with objects equally distorted by perspective, the same straightening up process would have to take place with each of them. Thus the oval of a glass would become a perfect circle.”<sup>30</sup> A cubist painting, of a certain sort, looks like a reduction of a Platonic form to an equation of lines. The painters themselves pondered their art in exactly this way. Braque remarked in 1908, concerning a drawing of three nude women (fig. 21), “It was necessary to draw three figures to portray every physical aspect



FIG. 21. *Georges Braque, Three Nudes (1907)*. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

of a woman, just as a house must be drawn in plan, elevation, and section. . . . I want to expose the Absolute, and not merely the factitious woman.”<sup>31</sup>

This then is the *femme type* in three different extensions, and the problem of early cubism was to find a way of integrating this house plan of a woman into a volumetric whole *without* recourse to perspective—that is, without making the table into a trapezoid. In *Large Nude* (1908), Braque contrived to combine the three figures into a single figure: the woman’s head is taken from a frontal view, while her body is

taken from a sideways or rear view. The leftmost of the three earlier nudes contributes the general pose, but the painted nude's left leg seems to extend a gesture that the rightmost figure in the drawing began, while the painted nude's breast is crooked in her armpit in a manner similar to the center figure of the drawing—the big nude is a conflation of all three naked women. Behind her there is a blanket or something, and this surround is one of Braque's greatest feats of imagining. The shading suggests that it is a stiff husk or cocoon that cradles or envelops the woman: the top segments seem generated by the flexes of her arms, and the right middle segment repeats the curve of her buttocks, making her appear to be caught in an environment that is leggy, buttocky, and breasty in the same way she is. How can you represent a cube, if you don't use slanty perspective lines running off a square?—Well, you can draw six squares in the form of a cross and supply directions for cutting and folding them into a cube (this is, I think, what Princet was getting at by insisting on a purely rectangular table). Braque has a similar recipe for the Absolute Woman: supply a painting that looks like a set of instructions for rolling and pinching the canvas into the set of crimped cylinders that constitute a woman. The space around the woman, so feminized in Braque's construction, helps the eye imagine just how to perform this trick.

*Les demoiselles d'Avignon* is algebraic for a similar reason: the fourth woman, the squatting one, is obviously seen from the rear, yet her face is frontal, as if she'd mastered Linda Blair's neck trick in the film *The Exorcist*; furthermore, she crooks her right arm—though it's hard to be positive it's her right arm and not her left—which makes her seem to be facing front. Behind the third figure Picasso chops up pieces of sky—I think you can even see a fragment of sun—in forms that rhyme with the figure's elbow joint, nose, and breast cone: again, the air behind the figures repeats the instructions for cutting out and folding the paper dolls, though Picasso's figures are flatter, less

volumetrically intense, than Braque's. Picasso evidently thought of titling the painting *Le bordel philosophique*, and there is a strong sense that this is Plato's bordello, not *a* brothel but *the* brothel, the brothel translated into some sort of perfect arithmetic of sex.

Second, the real. No one looks at *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* and thinks chaste Platonic thoughts: there is something clawing about the picture, something of stark terror; as Francis Frascina has noted, the faces of the women can be compared not only to African or Iberian masks but to photographs of faces eaten away by syphilis. For a basically cerebral sort of paint play, cubism was saturated in magic from the beginning: Picasso called *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* an "exorcism picture," explaining, "For me the masks were not simply sculptures, they were magical objects. . . . They were weapons—to keep people from being ruled by spirits, to help free themselves."<sup>32</sup> Perhaps my reference to Linda Blair wasn't so farfetched: if this is indeed the first cubist painting, the movement begins with demonic possession. The painting is an immanence of fetishes—objects so overcharged, so real, that they make the rest of the physical world grow faint by contrast.

The cubists were to develop many ways of increasing the ontological intensity of painting, of hauling a painted image from a mere semblance to something equal in dignity with a physical object. Picasso was the first cubist to glue an actual object onto the canvas, in *Still Life with Chair-Caning* (1912). The object is a bit of cloth printed to simulate chair caning—in other words a real object that fakes another real object, introduced onto a canvas in such a way that it's hard to tell whether it is real or itself a painted fake, leading to a sort of delirium that abolishes the distinction between artificial and real, genuine and hoax. But it was Braque who did the most with introducing a sort of materialism into cubist painting. Sometimes he mixed sand or sawdust or some other substance into his pigments, giving the painting's texture something of the physical world's grit. (Braque was the son of a

housepainter and knew many tricks, such as raking a painted surface with a comb, common in the domain of the useful arts but little known in the world of the fine arts.) The idea that painting could improve its status from imitation to a kind of dignity of being-in-its-own-right was strong in Braque: as Braque's first important critic, Waldemar Georges, put it, "Anxious almost to excess to render not the ephemeral effect produced by colour, but its very essence, Braque introduced into his paintings extrapictorial substances. He thus produces ingenious compositions, in which the parts . . . don't represent reality but embody it and become confounded with it."<sup>33</sup>

So—the piece of printed cloth becomes a word meaning itself-outside-the-context-of-the-painting, and, in a larger field of signification, the very realness of reality. The real texture of the weave and the fake texture of the caning and the real texture of the canvas behind the cloth all point toward a version of the world of experience in which the real and the artificial are equal and inextricable. Cubist paintings are often confusing, confusing to the fingertips as well as the eye: we are sometimes in the position of the blind men in the story who grope at various body parts of an elephant, and feel a rope, a pillar, a fan, a tree branch.

This hope of finding a more haptically intense modality of art was not confined to cubism. In 1896 the art critic Bernard Berenson advocated what he called the "tactile values" of painting: in addition to retinal sensations, he found in paintings that he liked "actual bodily sensations as of good or bad air, heat or cold, nervous visceral and muscular comfort or discomfort."<sup>34</sup> Berenson was describing the voodoo-doll aspect of art, its way of abrading our skin or disturbing our inner ear or making us shiver.

Poets too sought to create tactile values. In the heyday of cubism, Ezra Pound wrote that poetry concerned objects—what John Locke called the primary qualities of objects (density, hardness, weight), as

opposed to such secondary qualities as color. In this letter Pound pondered the impressionist prose of Ford Madox Ford: “[Ford’s] flaw is the flaw of impressionism, impressionism, that is, carried out of its due medium. Impressionism belongs in paint, it is of the eye. The cinematograph records, for instance, the ‘impression’ of any given action or place, far more exactly than the finest writing, it transmits the impression to its ‘audience’ with less work on their part. A ball of gold and a gilded ball give the same ‘impression’ to the painter. Poetry is in some odd way concerned with the specific gravity of things, with their nature.”<sup>35</sup> The images in a poem are, then, heft-words, denoting mass and volume, not appearance. And a cubist’s cubes are volume-words, little chunks of universe out of which bigger chunks of universe can be assembled, polytroped.

### *The Speech of Symbols*

In painting, physical objects can speak, as in Courbet; light can speak, as in Monet; touch can speak, as in Braque. But the oldest painting-speak lies in the domain of the symbolic. Like impressionism, symbolism represents a loss of prestige in the physical object, which had to thin into transparency so that it could become a strangely shaped window into some meaning greater than itself. Yeats thought hard about the relation between well-known symbols and more recondite ones:

William Blake has written, “Vision or imagination”—meaning symbolism by these words—“is a representation of what actually exists, really or unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is formed by the daughters of Memory.” The German [painter who painted Yeats’s portrait] insisted with many determined gestures, that Symbolism said things which could not be said

so perfectly in any other way, and needed but a right instinct for its understanding; while Allegory said things which could be said as well, or better, in another way, and needed a right knowledge for its understanding. The one gave dumb things voices, and bodiless things bodies; while the other read a meaning—which had never lacked its voice or its body—into something heard or seen, and loved less for the meaning than for its own sake. The only symbols he cared for were the shapes and motions of the body; ears hidden by the hair, to make one think of a mind busy with inner voices; and a head so bent that back and neck made the one curve, as in Blake's *Vision of Blood-thirstiness*, to call up an emotion of bodily strength; and he would not put even a lily, or a rose, or a poppy into a picture to express purity, or love, or sleep, because he thought such emblems were allegorical, and had their meaning by a traditional and not by a natural right. I said that the rose, and the lily, and the poppy were so married, by their colour and their odour, and their use, to love and purity and sleep, or to other symbols of love and purity and sleep, and had been so long a part of the imagination of the world, that a symbolist might use them to help out his meaning without becoming an allegorist. I think I quoted the lily in the hand of the angel in Rossetti's *Annunciation*, and the lily in the jar in his *Childhood of Mary Virgin*, and thought they made the more important symbols, the women's bodies, and the angels' bodies, and the clear morning light, take that place, in the great procession of Christian symbols, where they can alone have all their meaning and all their beauty.<sup>36</sup>

Yeats, then, could look at a painting and see every detail, not just the obvious symbols, as symbolic. (Yeats also could look at his own poetry and see nothing but symbols, as he said in "Upon a Dying Lady": "I

have no speech but symbol, the pagan speech I made / Amid the dreams of youth.”) The symbolic, then, is a mode of looking that the spectator can apply to any painting. But some paintings can invite such a gaze by special procedures, such as (1) flatness (you can reduce the image to an outline of itself, to be filled in with such meanings as the spectator can import); (2) archaism (you can paint a symbol by cribbing your design from the obviously symbolic images of the Middle Ages or by using medieval stylistic devices associated with old symbols); (3) tenuity (you can make an image that is so faintly constituted it is hardly there at all); and (4) absence (if you paint in a nonrepresentational fashion, you can untether meaning: the discrete areas of the painting are no longer tethered to the physical world, no longer constricted in range of meaning).

As an example of the first two methods, we may turn to Dante Gabriel Rossetti; as examples of the second two, to Wassily Kandinsky.

Rossetti was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group that tried to revive the old medieval dictionary of emblems. In *Dantis Amor* (fig. 22), Rossetti tried to be even more medieval than the medievals themselves, by eliminating all that is not super-significant: on one half of the depthless field we see banners of sunlight flapping, and on the other half the stars throng in such profusion that little of night’s darkness remains. King Sun and Queen Moon calmly regard each other, while winged Love holds gigantic icons of Male and Female—arrow and cup. Rossetti arrays these pictographs according to a visual syntax: man and woman are strict opposites, one at the upper left, the other at the lower right, with the whole heavens in between, and yet by the power of the paraclete Love, the arrow can touch the cup. The static tableau can be read as a parable about love’s gravity: love (as Dante put it) moves the sun and other stars. Rossetti meant the images to iconicize, verbalize themselves, grow legible, even as they



FIG. 22. *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Dantis Amor (1860).*

lose shading, lose depth, lose all superfluity, and become cards in a divine tarot pack useful for prophecy.

Rossetti tried to spiritualize his paintings by reducing the field of representation to the symbolic; Kandinsky tried to spiritualize his paintings by attenuating or annihilating the field of representation. In his 1911 treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky argued that a nonrepresentational style was an advance in the art of painting in that it liberated art from its dependence on the coarse and corrupt external world and sensitized its medium to spiritual vibrations in the ether:

“The more abstract the form, the more clear and direct is its appeal. In any composition the material side may be more or less omitted in proportion as the forms used are more or less material, and for them substituted pure abstractions, or largely dematerialized objects. The more an artist uses these abstracted forms, the deeper and more confidently will he advance into the kingdom of the abstract.”<sup>37</sup> *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* is a brief both for an antirepresentational mode of painting, and for erasing the boundaries that separate the various media. Behind both arguments there is a certain gnostic sense that the material world is fallen, evil: the world apparent to our senses is a botched world created by an ignorant demiurge, and only by attuning ourselves to transcendental vibrations can we hope to attain salvation; as Kandinsky’s friend the composer Arnold Schoenberg (also attracted to this sort of mysticism) wrote in his *Kol Nidre*, “Myriads of sparks are hidden in the world, but not all of us behold them.” To obey the rule of representation is to compromise oneself with corruption. On the other hand, not every sort of abstraction is good, either: Kandinsky had a certain mild contempt for the sort of designs suitable for “neckties or carpets”—the merely decorative. What he wanted was an abstraction that had a certain creative power, a living abstraction.

One way—not the only way—that an abstraction could show its essential strength was to hover on the brink of representation, as if it were a depiction of the force that brought a physical form into being instead of the physical form itself. In *Improvisation “Klamm”* (fig. 23), you can make out two human beings, perhaps in Bavarian costume, and a boat landing, and a waterfall, but they’re almost lost in the swirl of colors—Kandinsky seems to be painting the geological energy that tore apart the ravine. In other paintings the force seems as much destructive as creative, as if the material world were simply falling asunder. In Kandinsky’s *Sketch for Deluge I* (fig. 24), you can see (possibly) a horseman blowing a horn in the far left center, perhaps



FIG. 23. *Wassily Kandinsky, Improvisation "Klamm" (1914). akg-images, © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.*

announcing the end of the world, as the mountains themselves seem to be swept away in the deluge—a bit of prow in the far right center may indicate Noah's Ark. As Kandinsky wrote: "Technically, every work of art comes into being in the same way as the cosmos—by means of catastrophes, which ultimately create out of the cacophony of the various instruments that symphony we call the music of the spheres. The creation of the work of art is the creation of the world."<sup>38</sup> Every act of destruction in the physical world seems to be an act of creation in the spiritual world. I believe that all paintings, in a sense, gesture toward their own origin and toward the origin of the universe; but in Kandinsky's work, at the beginning of his maturity, the feeling is particularly strong, the feeling of the undone that precedes, and follows, the done.



FIG. 24. *Wassily Kandinsky, Sketch for Deluge I (1912). © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.*

Kandinsky referred to another painting on the deluge theme as “a living paean of praise, the hymn of that new creation that follows upon the destruction of the world”: a painting is both music and language pursued by other means.<sup>39</sup>

In Kandinsky’s first full abstraction—by some accounts the first abstract painting in Western art, though there are other candidates—a certain creative strength is felt (fig. 25). Like all Kandinsky’s early abstractions this is a watercolor, and in the water paramercia and amoebas and diatoms seem to swim—not the primitive organisms of the physical world but the ones of the spirit. The blob, like the primal syllable *DA* that the thunder says in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, becomes a proto-linguistic element of a speech tongued with fire.

As Kandinsky moved farther into the kingdom of the abstract, he started to perceive vitality not in the biomorphs of the first abstract watercolor but in the intrinsic motility of paint itself. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* he draws a diagram in which the color blue is schematized as a circle with curvy arrows inside, as if it were spinning, receding into the picture plane, whereas the color yellow is schematized as a circle



FIG. 25. *Wassily Kandinsky, First Abstract Watercolor (1910)*. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY.

with curvy arrows outside, whirling out toward the spectator's eye. Pigment doesn't lie flat on the canvas; it burrows in, bulges out—it even tends to determine form: “Keen colours are well suited by sharp forms (*e.g.*, a yellow triangle), and soft, deep colours by round forms (*e.g.*, a blue circle).” Furthermore, Kandinsky insists on the three-dimensionality of the picture plane: “The thinness or thickness of a line, the placing of the form on the surface, the overlaying of one form on another may be quoted as examples of artistic means that may be employed [to make a three-dimensional effect].”<sup>40</sup> Every Kandinsky abstraction is a virtual equivalent of an animated cartoon, in which lines swerve, swoop, tangle themselves ecstatically—a painting is a kind of aerial ballet of geometry. This is how to paint energy instead of representational forms. Cubist painters sometimes tried to enhance the realness of the image by a sort of implied origami; Kandinsky tries to enhance the realness of his nonimages by liberating them from the flat canvas.

As to the second large point of Kandinsky's brief, the melting-away of the boundaries that separate one artistic medium from another, this too is the result of an anti-materialist perspective. If matter means nothing, then it makes no difference whether you're a painter or a composer or a poet—what counts is the artistic impulse behind the medium, not the material medium itself. An *Ab* and the color green and the word *love* are all just vibrations: vibrations in air, vibrations in ether. This is one reason for Kandinsky's fondness for Schoenberg: Kandinsky thought that Schoenberg's abandonment of tonality was not simply an analogy for his own abandonment of representation but rather the same thing—one expressed in music, the other in painting. And just as Schoenberg was not simply a musician, but a painter himself, and Kandinsky was also a playwright, the artist is not bounded by the medium of his first mastery. Kandinsky's play *The Yellow Sound* (1912) is a painting transmuted into a theatrical piece: it is a play almost without dialogue, consisting of stage directions:

The music is shrill and tempestuous, with oft-repeated *a* and *b* and *b* and *a-flat* . . . the brilliant white light becomes progressively grayer. On the left side of the hill a big yellow flower suddenly becomes visible. It bears a distant resemblance to a large, bent cucumber, and its color becomes more and more intense. . . . Later, in *complete silence*, the flower begins to sway very slowly from right to left.<sup>41</sup>

This is about as abstract as stage action can be, a vague flower-cucumber that suddenly appears and starts, for no reason, to move. In the introduction to the play, Kandinsky states his theory of the equivalence of the artistic media as clearly as possible:

The means belonging to the different arts are externally quite different. Sound, color, words!

*In the last essentials*, these means are wholly alike: the final goal extinguishes the external dissimilarities and reveals the inner identity.

This *final goal* (knowledge) is attained by the human soul through finer vibrations of the same. These finer vibrations, however, which are identical in their final goal, have in themselves different inner motions and are thereby distinguished from one another. . . .

A certain complex of vibrations—the goal of a work of art.<sup>42</sup>

To the general question Are the arts one or many? Kandinsky has a clear answer: One. The painting-word, the poem-word, the music-word are all parts of speech in a single language.

### *The Quanta of Painting*

The search for the right language—words of color, words of light—led painters to science and mathematics as well as to the old book of symbols. One eighteenth-century painter who tried to find the elementary unit of his art, a sort of root word, was William Hogarth. I quoted earlier Hogarth's approval of the Renaissance notion that a painting should be as motile as fire—a pyramid or a cone. Hogarth contemplated with great care the body of received wisdom concerning visual grace: not just Michelangelo and Lomazzo but Charles-Alphonse Du Fresnoy, who declared that a "fine figure and its parts ought always to have a serpent-like and flaming form." Hogarth, like Du Fresnoy, was attracted to "large flowing, gliding outlines which are in waves," but he considered that it was not enough merely to state that painted lines

must be lambent or undulant, since “*winding lines are as often the cause of deformity as of grace.*”<sup>43</sup> He noted that the human body contains no perfectly straight lines, so straightness must be incompatible with beauty; the supreme grace must therefore lie in some sort of curved line. Eventually he decided that a line that traces the contour of a wire wrapped around a cone was the master key to composition—“the precise serpentine line, or *line of grace*,” as he called it. *Serpentine* was a vogue word in Hogarth’s time: the great landscape architect Lancelot “Capability” Brown favored serpentine walks on gently undulating land near serpentine lakes.

But Hogarth argued, in effect, that there was one and only one right snake, the one that coiled around the cone, a line that by hinting at a spiral has an irresistible charm, impetus. The line of grace appears in both the right and the left drawings of figure 26 as number 4: by contrast, numbers 1, 2, and 3 (he says) are timid, weak, and numbers 5, 6, and 7 are contorted and gross. Hogarth finds the line of grace not only in correctly proportioned furniture but also in the thigh bone and pelvis of the human skeleton—in every overt or occult way our bodies seem to be trying to conform to this ideal of force and grace. As a specialist in scenes of moral corruption, Hogarth often had recourse to lines of plod, but even in his satirical works the line of grace occasionally appears in the back of a man’s coat, or in the legs and torso of a slouching idler.

In this way, through the varying tensility of curves, Hogarth found a language that could say much about ugliness and beauty—a language that could accuse or applaud by purely visual means. But other painters and theorists sought a more extensive and varied system of picture-words, and a better explanation of why these signs possessed meaning. Humbert de Superville, in his remarkable *Essay on Absolute Signs in Art* (1827–32), taught that images have power because they pertain to biological imperatives—there is an innate grammar of images, just as,

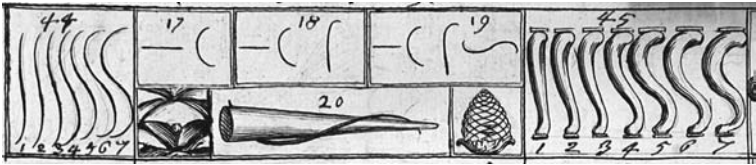


FIG. 26. *William Hogarth, Analysis of Beauty (1753), pl. 1 (detail). Private Collection/The Bridgeman Art Library.*

much later, Noam Chomsky hypothesized an innate grammar of spoken language. White, said Superville, is an innocent peaceful color, calming us in the way that pure snow or moonlight calms. Black implies “silence and solitude, sadness, death, and oblivion”; red is “the hieroglyph of life and movement . . . the excess of luminous rays, just as the colour black is its absorption and annihilation.”<sup>44</sup> But this correlation of color with emotional state is less original than Superville’s belief that color and line are “the identical signs of one invariable language, and the associations of the one automatically imply the associations of the other”—every color corresponds to a linear pattern, every linear pattern presupposes a certain color. Superville provides a diagram to prove his point: red throws its arms into the air; black is stooped, submissive; “white, an invariable, pure sign, like the horizontal line, occupies the middle place between two extremes” (fig. 27). Even such abstract figures as these are fraught with meaning, since we read not just with our eyes but with our whole bodies—we transpose ourselves kinesthetically into complex landscapes and simple scrawls alike. As the poet-painter William Blake put it, we become what we behold.

In the 1860s Charles Blanc tried to codify Supervillean theory into a more complete grammar of the pictorial. In his *Grammar of the Arts of Drawing*, Blanc elaborates Superville’s little chevroned crosses into faces: the red cross turns into a smiling face, sanguine, that is, bloody,

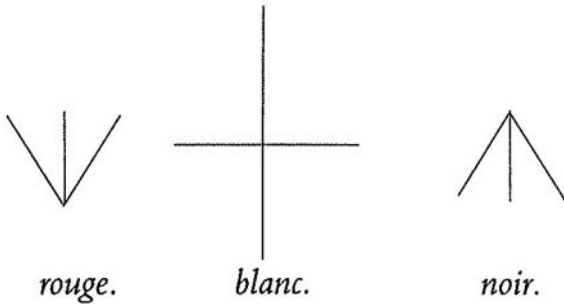


FIG. 27. *Humbert de Superville, Linear equivalents to colors, from Essai sur les signes inconditionnels dans l'art (Leiden: C. van der Hoek, 1827).*

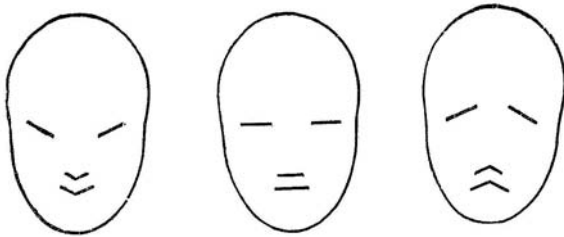


FIG. 28. *Charles Blanc, Faces à la Superville, from Grammaire des arts du dessin (Paris: Librairie-Editeur, 1867).*

according to the old theory of the four humors of the body; the black cross turns into a sad face, atrabilious, full of black bile (fig. 28).<sup>45</sup> A drawing, then, is a voodoo doll—a means for subliminal control of our bodies, our faces, our moods, even if it doesn't depict faces or bodies. Line and color suffice for speech.

To find a grammar for painting, you usually look either to physiognomy or to Euclid—to the body or to the elementary forms of cognition itself. Near the end of his life, in 1904, Paul Cézanne wrote a letter in which he delivered a famous command to painters: “Treat

nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything brought into proper perspective so that each side of an object or a plane is directed towards a central point.” The art historian Theodore Reff once said that he was disappointed with this dictum because it seemed to be a backsliding into traditional Renaissance one-point perspective instead of an affirmation of the new kinds of volumetric wizardry that Cézanne was helping to bring into being.<sup>46</sup> But I think that Cézanne was right (for his purposes) to insist that the Euclidean solids—the simplicities from which every complex form can be built up—should be shaded according to normal academic procedures.

Without perspective, a sphere is a circle and a cone is a triangle. There is nothing wrong with constructing a painting out of circles and triangles, but Cézanne had a special fascination with depth, as he often said; and for giving an impression of depth spheres and cones are more useful than their flat derivatives. In some of his paintings Cézanne looked not to the cylinder, the sphere, or the cone, but to the cube. In his *Mountains in Provence* (fig. 29), there is a continuum between the tilted cubes in the foreground and the tilted squares in the distance, that is, the fields on the side of the slope: it’s a semi-digitized picture—we almost feel that, if we look too closely at the long curve of the road or the long curve of the hill, we might see that the smooth lines are roughened by tiny pixels.

Just after Cézanne’s death, the cubists hammered down Cézanne’s great blocks of rock and roof and wall into smaller and smaller cubes—volumetric elementals, units of universe. They still used the traditional devices of shading and perspective in order to make sure that the individual facets in the painting were seen as cubes and not flat rhomboids. But they didn’t feel the need to fit these facets into a uniform spatial scheme; they left the picture gaping, wrenched open, disarticulated into scores of competing mini-spaces. The painting is sinewless, undone, prevented from collapse only by a sort of intellectual tension. As



FIG. 29. Paul Cézanne, *Mountains in Provence* (1886–90). © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY.

Robert Delaunay exclaimed after seeing a cubist exhibition, “They paint with cobwebs, these fellows!”<sup>47</sup> In *The Aficionado* (fig. 30), what kind of language is Picasso speaking? Since every diagonal is potentially the edge of a paper fold sticking out at the spectator, there is a single word uttered almost everywhere, *cube*; then there are little piecemeal pictographs that identify the aficionado as a dashing fellow, a sportsman, a southerner, a lover of bullfights: the mustache, the guitar, and (a little below the canvas’s center) the picador’s dart; finally there are actual words, appropriated from written language, such as *Nîmes* and *LE TORERO*. Picture-language is encroaching onto another language’s territory, actual French—this is a phenomenon that occurs

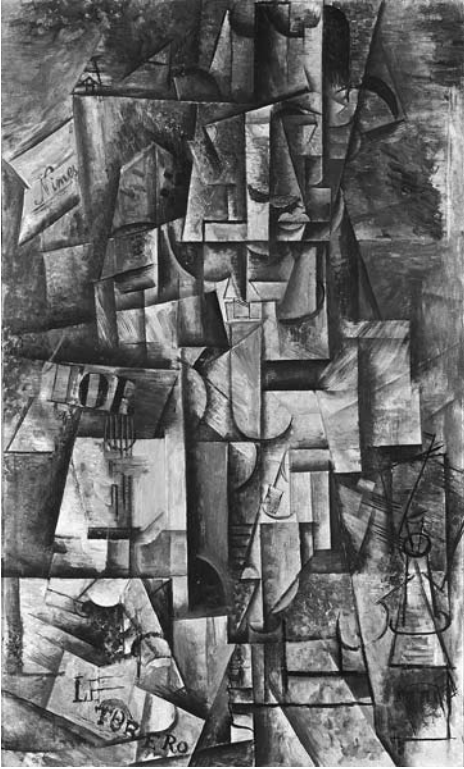


FIG. 30. *Pablo Picasso, The Aficionado (1912).*  
© 2013 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.  
Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

often, the refusal of an artistic medium to keep its speech confined to the words that properly belong to it.

In 1923 the American writer Gertrude Stein wrote a pen-portrait of her friend Picasso called “If I Told Him”—here is a sample: “Would he like it would Napoleon would Napoleon would would he like it. . . . Shutters shut and open so do queens. Shutters shut and shutters and so shutters shut and shutters and so and so shutters and so and so shutters shut.”<sup>48</sup> Proudhon tried to imagine what Courbet’s paintings would say if they spoke French; if a Picasso painting could speak English it might

say something along the lines of “If I Told Him.” The shutters shutting and opening seem to represent the constant background and foreground noise of the cube-facets; and Napoleon and queens and the other words seem to represent those token signs interspersed among the cubes, such as *mustache* and *dart*. Stein keeps stuttering on the words *would* and *shut* just as Picasso keeps obsessively piling up his cubes, neutral and trivial as individual elements, rhythmically tense in the aggregate.

### *Painting as Mathematics*

We have now studied picture-languages based on physical objects (Courbet), based on emblems of invisible things (Pacheco and his angels, Rossetti and his angelic Amor), based on hieroglyphs of emotion (Hogarth, Superville), and based on units of volume (Cézanne, Picasso). But there is another picture-language I want to bring to your attention: one based not on physical solids or geometrical solids or symbolic semi-solids but on figments of relation, often relation in the absence of objects to be related.

In 1912 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the “caffeine of Europe,” published his *Technical Manifesto of Futurism*, commanding the world to stop using commas and periods in favor of “mathematical signs (+ – × : =) to indicate movement and direction.” The great futurist also had certain pictorial strategies for liberating language from the tyranny of linear print, as in a typographical drawing of 1914, in which the letters of the phrase *TURKISH CAPTIVE BALLOON* are arranged in a circle, tied to earth by means of a vertical string of letters; but for the art of painting what mattered was the new prestige of mathematical signs.

Plus signs, minus signs, times signs are simple operators: they tell you what to do—how to transform two things into a third thing. The simplicity of the procedure is reflected in the simplicity of the sign: all five of Marinetti’s examples consist entirely of points and straight lines.

When Superville drew crosses to show the basic elements of drawing and painting, he appealed to psychophysiology: the spirits are lifted by images of uplift. But when the painters of the early twentieth century drew crosses, they were appealing (at times) to a dynamic of impersonal cognition, of inhuman physical force.

The great master of the plus sign was, of course, Piet Mondrian, whose mature paintings usually consist only of vertical and horizontal lines. Mondrian thought that he had attained, or nearly attained, the ultimate goal of art, as he explains to the educable philistine called "A." in his "Dialogue on the New Plastic" (1919):

*A.* Art will be much impoverished if the natural is eliminated.

*B.* How can its expression be impoverished if it conveys more clearly what is important and essential to the work of art?

*A.* But the *straight* line can say so little.

*B.* The straight line tells the truth. . . . I see reality as a *unity*; what is manifested in all its appearances is *one and the same*: the *immutable*. We try to express this plastically as purely as possible.

*A.* It seems reasonable to take the immutable as the basis: the *changeable* provides nothing solid. But what do you call *immutable*?

*B.* *The plastic expression of immutable relationship: the relationship of two straight lines perpendicular to each other. . . .*

*A.* So the New Plastic is the end of painting?

*B.* Insofar as there can be no purer plastic expression of equilibrated relationships.<sup>49</sup>

The pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides held that reality was a changeless sphere, and that all change—growth, decay, the whirling of the planets—was illusory, the result of a defect in our sensory

apparatus. Mondrian might be called a neo-Parmenidean. In his 1914 *Pier and Ocean* he stares out at the water and contemplates a sea of plus signs—the image looks something like the designs on some manhole covers, little crosshatches everywhere covering the whole surface. And Mondrian’s pictures of trees from this period look rather similar, though they retain a few of the diagonals that he would soon find weak and hateful. As Mondrian grew older he experimented with still more extreme reduction, until there wasn’t much left except the Big Plus—as in his 1930 *Composition with Yellow Patch*, which consists almost entirely of two bold black lines, one horizontal and one vertical, intersecting in the middle of the white canvas, with a small yellow patch discreetly manifest in the lower right quadrant.

For Mondrian, such paintings showed the inner truth of nature—nature as it would look purged of all contingency, stripped to the absolute. It is at once a schematic diagram of reality as God sees it—all universal and no universe—and a statement of how things might be related, positioned with respect to one another, if a thing or two ever happened to appear in one of the white fields. It’s a Cartesian grid, an  $x$ -axis and a  $y$ -axis erected in a world of ratios without visible numbers.

It seems that Kandinsky had no great love for Mondrian, for he thought that the “exclusive penchant for the horizontal-vertical” arose out of the “dead end” of modern life—we are so racked by preoccupation with external things that we seek to plunge ourselves into the “inner silence” of simple things: black and white and horizontal and vertical.<sup>50</sup> And yet Kandinsky too sought to strip painting down to its barest elements, and found himself at times not too far from the position of Mondrian. In his book *Point and Line to Plane* (1926), Kandinsky tried to derive all art—not just painting, but all art—from the point and its various forms of mobilization. In writing, the point is a full stop:

Today I am going to the cinema.  
 Today I am going. To the cinema.  
 Today I. Am going to the cinema.

The goal of the sentence changes with the punctuation: where the period is, there is the stress, the main event. In music, the point is the note—Kandinsky even rewrites the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony as a bold graphic of sets of three small points followed by one big point.<sup>51</sup> In dance, the point is the pointe, the tip of the dancer’s foot, and the tips of the dancer’s spread fingers as well. In architecture, the point is the limit of taper at the ends of (for example) the corners of pagoda roofs. Roof and leg and symphonic development swell outward from the point.

A straight line, then, is a point pushed steadily in one direction; a zigzag line is a point pushed by two forces that “operate in sequence”; a curve is a point pushed by two forces that “operate together” at the same time. A plane, of course, is a pushed line. In the course of building up art from its rudiments, Kandinsky asks himself if there is a *primal picture*, a first image of pictorial expression: yes, he says, it is a point at the center of a square—a perfect unison of point and plane. Similarly, Kandinsky finds that “*the archetypal image of linear expression or linear construction*” is a square crosshatched with a single horizontal and a single vertical line—“a square divided into four squares, producing the most primitive form of division of a diagrammatic surface.”<sup>52</sup> This is the form of maximum poise, maximum repose, balancing the cold horizontal with the warm vertical. And so we are back to the large plus sign, now conceived not as Mondrian conceives it, as the end of painting, but as the origin of painting. It wasn’t enough for paintings to gesture at their coming-into-being, as many of Kandinsky’s explicitly do; a theory of painting, starting from the origin, from first elements, had to be created as well.

At about the same time that Kandinsky was working on *Point and Line to Plane*, Paul Klee, at the Bauhaus, was engaged in a startlingly similar project, published in 1925 as *Pedagogical Sketchbook*. Klee was struck by the dynamic aspects of lines, how they walk around and ricochet off points and swivel and twist around. (Oddly enough, the first illustration in the book, depicting a walking line, shows a curved figure much like Hogarth's line of grace.) But Klee's axiomatics of painting differs from Kandinsky's in one important way: Klee is a biometrician, like Superville and Blanc, and tries to understand the elements of painting in terms of the human body. On one page he draws an oblique angle and an acute angle, and outfits both figures with muscles and ligaments in order to illustrate the implied tension of the acute and relaxation of the oblique. And when he analyzes the simple cross—the plus sign—he finds a meaning different from that of Mondrian or Kandinsky precisely because he reads it corporeally, as if someone were standing on the crossbar: “The tightrope-walker is emphatically concerned about his balance. He calculates the gravity on both ends. He is the scale.” Far from being a diagram of repose, the cross is in danger of tipping one way or another, unless it is somehow shored up. In all his designs, Klee considers the role of gravity: an arch is the path of a “bullet, fired at a steep angle”; a rising sequence of short horizontals and verticals is a staircase.<sup>53</sup> You read a painting according to the muscular strain of inhabiting it. It is the voodoo doll once again: you see something, and your body tenses in response to the painting's internal stresses. You look with your muscles.

Another form of upthrust resistant to gravity is the arrow, and Klee liked arrows. To Lomazzo and Kandinsky, a triangle moving upward represented the gradual ascent into a world of pure spirit; to Klee, it is a schematic of a penis, as his painting *Eros* suggests (fig. 31).

Klee inherited this concern with arrows from the futurists. The arrow, like the plus sign, denotes a relation: it means *implies* in

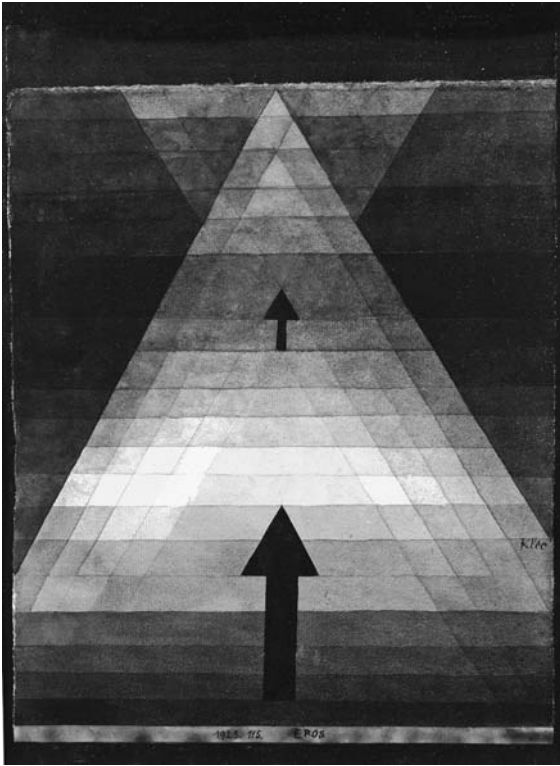


FIG. 31. *Paul Klee, Eros (1923), akg-images.*

mathematics and symbolic logic. Indeed the arrow is a far more significant entity in futurist painting than the signs that Marinetti recommended as replacements for punctuation. In Luigi Russolo's painting of an automobile (fig. 32), scarcely any vestige of the automobile is left: it has vanished into its own dynamism. The atmosphere seems to consist of a series of vertical planes, each of which buckles, collapses into an arrow form as the automobile passes through it. The car's



FIG. 32. *Luigi Russolo, Dynamism of an Automobile (1912–13).*  
*Photo: Jean-Claude Planchet, CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais/  
Art Resource, NY.*

sharpness promotes a general acuity of space itself. Here Kandinsky's spiritual triangle, or Michelangelo's spiritual pyramid, is turned 90 degrees: the arrow does not lift us out of the physical world; it represents a transference of force within the physical world. But it is the force that counts, not the object that imparted it or the object to which it was imparted.

In a sense all Western painting is concerned with ways of understanding marks on a surface as expressions of force—since force is invisible, this is another of the invisibilities that preoccupy painters: the semantic force of symbols and emblems, the manual force of the hand that pushes the brush or (in Jackson Pollock's case) flings the paint,

even the force of decay on the crumbling surface of Leonardo's *Last Supper*. The futurists only made such force a more explicit subject. There is something at once sophisticated and primitive about the arrow paintings of Klee, Russolo, and others: the arrow resembles less a finite word than a preverbal utterance, a breath, a whistling of air.

### *The Speech of Cinema*

Paintings may imply force and motion, but when the futurists were painting, they were competing with pictures that actually moved. The cinema also has its languages, to some extent determined by a single variable: the length of the take. A film shot with long takes, such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), edited to seem like one continuous take, or Alexander Sokurov's preposterously virtuosic *Russian Ark* (2002), which evidently *is* one continuous take, gives a strong impression of imitating the field of vision of a single human eyeball. The movie develops meaning through our surrender (or failure to surrender) to the camera's chasing after or retreating from the objects of its curiosity: its boldness or timorousness defines a subject-position, even when we know nothing about the camera's "character" other than its way of moving through its environment. The first-person shooter of video games permits the player to take charge of the long take (demands it, in fact): that the shooter can sometimes see his or her own arm holding the pistol intensifies the kinesthetic identification of player and avatar. But even in the cinema, the long take always creates an avatar that we play with and that plays with us. Most contemporary directors seem to dislike long takes except under unusual circumstances, and they regularly chop up static scenes, not with any particular intent of montage, but simply to deny the camera its own point of view, its own personality.

Cinema, of course, was originally silent, and had to create its languages through pictorial means, sometimes with a little help from an accompanying pianist. And in a sense the ideal protagonist of a silent movie is mute or nearly mute—someone whose expressive power lies in gestural intensity, such as Quasimodo as played by Lon Chaney in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923) or the somnambulist killer Cesare in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). After sound did come to movies, in 1927, nonspeaking characters were often still prominent, as if a certain sense persisted that cinema was, at the center of its being, silent: the monster played by Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein* (1931), for example, or the ape in *King Kong* (1933) or Harpo in any of the Marx Brothers films. Most of these characters are figures of horror, as if the cinematic sublime, its core astonishment, arises from the refusal of the pure image to make articulate sound: the language of cinema seems most fluently spoken by pictures, only pictures. One of the first important movies, the Lumière brothers' *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (1896), caused panic in the audience according to a reporter for *Der Spiegel*, for the train seemed about to run from the screen into the theater: an overwhelm by purely visual means.

Maybe the director most sensitive to difference of cinema-dialect between silent and talking movies was Charlie Chaplin. His *Modern Times* (1936) has a soundtrack, with the usual quantity of background music. But the role of speech is odd: the factory boss can bark orders through a kind of loudspeaker; a gramophone can utter a sales pitch; but neither Chaplin himself nor the female lead, the gamine played by Paulette Goddard, ever says a word—Chaplin does sing a song, but the lyrics are gibberish. The dialogue between the lovers is handled by the old silent-movie device of intertitles, although often it's easy to read their lips: cinematic intimacy, it appears, requires silence, and speech is a kind of harsh technological intrusion. In the film's most famous scene Chaplin is sucked into the gears of a huge machine, and only his

slithery grace prevents him from being ground into hamburger. To Chaplin, speech in movies feels invasive, abrasive, a threat to the dance of light and shadow.

If sound is alien to the classical language of cinema, what is its proper vocabulary? For Sergei Eisenstein, it is montage—a collage in time, instead of space. Eisenstein was impressed by a famous experiment in reaction shots: the director Lev Kuleshov prepared a series of montages based on archival footage of a close-up of the expressionless face of the actor Ivan Mozhukhin: first Mozhukhin’s face was followed by a bowl of soup on a table; then by an old woman’s corpse in a coffin; then by a child playing with a teddy bear. The audience, it is said, was impressed by Mozhukhin’s skill as an actor: how hungrily he stared at the soup, how mournfully he regarded the corpse, how delicately he smiled at the girl. Nonreactivity, then, is retrospectively interpreted as reaction. Kuleshov was trying to make a point about emotional leakage from one element of a montage into another: a montage makes an aesthetic whole that is not entirely predicable from its parts in isolation. If a snippet of film is considered a word in the cinema-language of the short take, then it has little meaning in itself: exactly as in spoken language, a cinema-word acquires meaning from the context in which it appears. One of Eisenstein’s most telling examples of what he called “intellectual montage” occurs in his first full-length movie, *Strike* (1925): an attack on striking workers and the slaughter of a bull are spliced together.

But in no visual medium is there an exact equivalent to a spoken word, and Eisenstein himself (in his 1929 essay “Beyond the Shot”) intelligently compared the two elements of a simple montage to lexemes, not words: he noted that the pairing of one film bit with a contrasting bit is like the pairing of two primitive “hieroglyphs” that might combine to make a Chinese ideogram—a word in a language of visual design but pronounceable in spoken language. Eisenstein’s way

of signifying by sinicizing recalls the speculations of Ernest Fenollosa, whose *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1918, edited by Ezra Pound) describes, for example, how the Chinese character *míng* (shine or bright) is made up of two radicals representing the sun and the moon. Out of two juxtaposed symbols, each derived from a pictogram, a meaning emerges. Eisenstein learned to speak a sort of cinematic neo-Chinese made up not of pictograms but of fluent images of the world around us.

Before the era of digitalization, movies were filmed, and projected, by winding a filmstrip from one reel onto another; so to think filmically was always to think in terms of spinning circles. Some of the earliest movies were simple loops of action, just like the old optical toys such as the zoetrope, which gave the spectator the visual impression of (say) a horse endlessly jumping over a fence. Some silent movies found ways of embodying the rotary motion of the medium into the film's theme: for example, *Ballet mécanique* (1923–24), by the painter Fernand Léger and the cameraman Dudley Murphy, is a plotless exercise in motion repetition, both human and mechanical. The film discovers (or imposes) such uniform rhythms in the world of machines and the world of human beings that it tends to flatten any distinction between them. Attractive women and piston engines appear to be two species of the same genus—or, as the futurist Marinetti put it, the heat of iron is just as interesting as the laughter or tears of a woman. Both machines and persons seem equally urbane, compelling, witty. The film's first episode shows a happy young woman on a swing; later episodes show various clock pendula and swinging balls and an older woman climbing up the same few stone steps over and over and locomotive-like pistons and other sorts of back and forth and in and out. The young woman on the swing is perhaps the key episode, in that it contains both a human being and a (very simple) machine, cohabiting amiably. In cinema-language, it's easy to say the same thing over and over again.

*Painted Anthropology*

Throughout this chapter we have been studying painting and other visual arts in terms of what the artwork is saying. This approach works well when there is a named artist whose intention is known or may be adequately guessed, and when we know the cultural context in which an artwork is found useless or useful, incomprehensible or possible to interpret. It is idle to ask what a painting says if the painting is on the wall of a cave in southern France, long predating the historical record. But if we look at the art of painting from an anthropological perspective instead of a semantic perspective, it is possible to entertain some thoughts about a cave dweller's purpose in drawing fleet figures of wild animals.

The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss considered that every painting, every sculpture aspired to the condition of the miniature. In *The Savage Mind* (1962) he argues that even the *Last Judgment* fresco in the Sistine Chapel, even an over-life-size equestrian statue, is a miniature because it represents a reduction of attribute: the figures in the painting lack volume, the horse in the statue lacks color and smell and the feel of pelt, and both are paralyzed in time, reduced to a single instant. Lévi-Strauss speculates that we make miniatures to gain power, or the illusion of power, over their models: even the act of stopping them in time and stripping them of some of their qualities is a kind of assertion of mastery, and because miniatures are handmade, they represent an experiment in grasping in your fingers certain animate beings that are not easy to grasp in real life.

In the eighteenth century, the orator and aesthetician Edmund Burke devised a sort of realpolitik of art: the sublime (storm, tiger, the infinite sea) is what has power over you; the beautiful (flower, scrimshaw, glass animal) is what you have power over. But for Lévi-Strauss, all visual representation is an attempt to master the world by cutting it

down to size: whether I draw a boar or a mastodon or a stalk of wheat or a fertile woman, I'm committing an act of voodoo, trying to seize control by means of an image. In some sense, seizing control is the default language of all representation since all representation is an attempt to gain power over, or at least not to be the slave of, the thing represented. This is true of spoken language as well as painting: if I personify the weather as, say, Thor or Zeus, I may still be a victim of floods and droughts, but I have created a locus of propitiation that I can try to influence.

But the magic of visual representation has grown weaker over the centuries: not only has the woolly rhinoceros died out, but also the hope of being able to capture the animal by capturing its image. Art has had to look to increasingly impalpable things in its search for a domain in which it retains wisdom and power: angels, the theory of optics, electrodynamics. Postmodernism in art is simply an acknowledgment of magiclessness: an art at once lax and sensationalistic. To compare a cave painting of an ox with Damien Hirst's *Mother and Child Divided* (1993) may show what I mean: Hirst provided a cow and a calf, each cut in two down the backbone and arranged so that the spectator could walk between the two half-cows and half-calves. The ancient ox image is, plausibly, a thing of force and wonder; Hirst's cow is not only domesticated but immeasurably brought low. Inside the aurochs there might be something like the energy that D. H. Lawrence once saw in a horse: "Large, large seemed the bluish, incandescent flash of the hoof-iron, large as a halo of lightning round the knotted darkness of the flanks. Like circles of lightning came the flash of hoofs from out of the powerful flanks."<sup>54</sup> Inside Hirst's cow we find nothing marvelous, nothing at all, just whatever is inside a cow. In the end some contemporary artists try to evade both Aglionby's and Denis's definitions of art by making something that is neither a representation nor a colored plane.

*Ekphrasis*

Of all problems in the field of comparative arts, ekphrasis, a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art, may be the most thoroughly studied; but I think that there is more to be said. Since every ekphrasis is also an intermedial translation—a pseudomorphosis—it might be thought better to postpone this discussion until we turn to pseudomorphoses in the second part of this book. But since almost every attempt to come to terms with a painting involves translating that painting into language, it seems appropriate to deal with ekphrasis in trying to answer the question What is painting? One painting can be a critique of or commentary on another painting, as in Francis Bacon's mid-twentieth-century series of screaming popes based on Velázquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1650), in which Bacon amplifies the canniness, the suspiciousness, the inquisitorial menace at which Velázquez hints into bald loud terror. But usually we use words when trying to describe a particular painting, or painting in general.

One form of such words is the ekphrastic poem. What does a poet do in trying to translate an image into language? (I mean a real painting or sculpture, not a fictitious one such as Achilles' shield or Keats's Grecian urn.) There are many factors that the poet must consider, but the chief is subject position: where does the poet stand in relation to the image? A catalogue of stances might range from objective to subjective.

1. Most objective is *the poet as transcriber*: The poet names some of the items represented in the image, often with descriptors of color, shape, and aspect. Since most paintings contain far more items than it would be useful to name, the selection is itself a reshaping of the painting's field of value into the new field of value of the poem. An example can be found in W. H. Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" (1938), in



FIG. 33. *Pieter Bruegel the Elder (or copyist), Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (c. 1560s).*

which the poet, pondering Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (fig. 33), makes much of the seemingly irrelevant details that occupy most of the picture plane in order to moralize Bruegel as an artist preoccupied with confining sacred or numinous matters to a narrow space in human life:

In Breughel's *Icarus*, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.<sup>55</sup>



FIG. 34. *Fra Filippo Lippi*, *The Coronation of the Virgin* (1441–47).

2. The poet may also be a *participant*, in any of several modes.

a. The poet may *identify with one of the visible characters*. A spectacular example of this can be found in Robert Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi” (1855), in which the poet, speaking in the persona of the fifteenth-century painter, notes that he himself is one of the painted figures in the charged heaven depicted in *The Coronation of the Virgin* (fig. 34).

Mazed, motionless and moonstruck—I’m the man!  
 Back I shrink—what is this I see and hear?  
 I, caught up with my monk’s-things by mistake,  
 My old serge gown and rope that goes all round,  
 I, in this presence, this pure company!  
 Where’s a hole, where’s a corner for escape?  
 Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing  
 Forward, puts out a soft palm—“Not so fast!”  
 —Addresses the celestial presence, “nay—

He made you and devised you, after all,  
Though he's none of you! Could Saint John there draw—  
His camel-hair make up a painting-brush?  
We come to brother Lippo for all that,  
*Iste perfecit opus.*" So, all smile—  
I shuffle sideways with my blushing face  
Under the cover of a hundred wings  
Thrown like a spread of kirtles when you're gay  
And play hot cockles, all the doors being shut,  
Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops  
The hothead husband! [ll. 364–83]

Browning thought that Lippi was the gray-headed kneeler in profile at the lower right of the painting, though some posit that this was the donor, not the painter. Browning/Lippi imagines that behind the calm surfaces of the artwork, there is an invisible meta-painting in which angels' wings become a huge skirt under which he diddles his adulterous lover—sexual vivacity is the occult theme of every one of Lippi's images, even the most pious. Elsewhere, Browning hinted that hidden threads of erotic love were woven into much of his poetry.

b. Conversely, *the poet's sensibility might be transformed as the image effects a kind of seizure*. In the previous example the poet stepped into the painting; here the painting assaults and partly conquers the poet. *Du musst dein Leben ändern*, the archaic torso tells Rainier Maria Rilke—You must change your life, you must make your life other. And often in ekphrastic poems the image seems to take control of the poet's processes of thinking and feeling. In Percy Bysshe Shelley's unfinished "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" (1819)—Leonardo did not in fact paint the anonymous picture (fig. 35) in the Uffizi—Shelley petrifies as he contemplates the hideous face, and his spirit, now made of stone, is gashed into a Gorgon's shape:



FIG. 35. *Anonymous (Flemish), Medusa (c. 1600).*

Yet it is less the horror than the grace  
     Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone;  
 Whereon the lineaments of that dead face  
     Are graven, till the characters be grown  
 Into itself, and thought no more can trace;  
     'Tis the melodious hue of beauty thrown  
 Athwart the darkness and the glare of pain,  
 Which humanize and harmonize the strain.  
 And from its head as from one body grow,  
     As [ ] grass out of a watery rock,  
 Hairs which are vipers, and they curl and flow  
     And their long tangles in each other lock,  
 And with unending involutions shew  
     Their mailed radiance, as it were to mock  
 The torture and the death within, and saw  
 The solid air with many a ragged jaw. [ll. 9–24]<sup>56</sup>

Even the “solid air” seems a form of stone—nothing is immune to the transformative force of Medusa. The mind-meld between the painted image and the poet is so complete that the poet seems unable to extricate himself from the weave of snakes—though maybe he lends a

bit of his own humanity, melody, and grace to the Shelley-Gorgon complex, at once softening the horror and intensifying it.

Another, quite different, example of ekphrasis-as-seizure can be found in William Carlos Williams's "The Dance" (1944):

In Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess,  
the dancers go round, they go round and  
around, the squeal and the blare and the  
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles  
tipping their bellies (round as the thick-  
sided glasses whose wash they impound)  
their hips and their bellies off balance  
to turn them. Kicking and rolling  
about the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those  
shanks must be sound to bear up under such  
rollicking measures, prance as they dance  
in Brueghel's great picture, The Kermess.<sup>57</sup>

This is a poem about turning: the dancers turn in the little space in front of the musicians, and the painting itself seems to swivel on a central vertical axis, since the foreground figures on the right are disproportionately large, and the foreground figures on the left disproportionately small, as if the right side of the canvas were closer to our eye (fig. 36). And this is a poem about contagion: the dancers strut and twirl to the implied music of the bagpipes, the bugle, the fiddles (some of these instruments Williams has seen fit to add to Brueghel's little band); the bellies catch the shape of the glass vessels, even catch the layer of color applied over the glass (the "wash"—though technically this term refers only to watercolors). But the central contagion is from the Brueghel's pictorial rhythm to the poet's body: he sees the painting kinesthetically, and the feet of the dancers are transposed into the



FIG. 36. *Pieter Brueghel the Elder, The Kermess (1568). Photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.*

metrical feet of the poem, off-kilter amphibrachs and dactyls and other triplets, for Williams seems to hear the implied music as eccentric waltzes. The rhymes come at the wrong places in these heavily enjambed lines—a pattern of stumble is everywhere built into the poem. Just as in “Danse Russe” (c. 1917), Williams leaves his sleeping family to “dance naked, grotesquely / before my mirror,” the “happy genius” of his household, so he here seems captured by the surge and thrust and spin of the fairground dancers, though his own dancing is immanent only in the rhythm of the words.

c. In the most subjective form of ekphrasis, *the image itself speaks*. The limit of fusion between contemplator and contemplated image occurs when the image is promoted into a subject in its own right,



FIG. 37. *Michelangelo, Night (1526–31)*. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY.

before which, or whom, the poet is effaced. An example is a poem that Michelangelo wrote to be inscribed on his statue *La notte* (Night), in the tomb of Lorenzo de' Medici in the church of San Lorenzo in Florence (fig. 37):

Grato m'è il sonno, e più l'esser di sasso.  
Mentre che il danno e la vergogna dura,  
Non veder, non sentir m'è gran ventura  
Però non mi destar, deh'—parla basso!

[Glad to sleep, gladder to be of stone.  
While the hurt lingers, and the shame as well,  
Good luck is not to see and not to feel.  
Oh do not wake me yet—speak low!]

There are many other interpretive axes in ekphrasis beyond subject position, such as *content versus form*: Is the poet trying to convey what the form represents or the form itself? (In other words, am I going to talk about the biblical account of the Last Supper or about an elongated trapezoid?); and *artwork versus artist*: Is the poet trying to convey what is objectively visible in the painting or the presumed state of mind and intention of the painter? (Am I going to talk about what I see when I look at the *Last Supper* or about the complex of private moods and cultural/theological ideas that led Leonardo to paint what he painted?). But much of the delight in criticizing ekphrastic poems lies in figuring out the poet's subject position, from cool poise to radical self-surrender.

One of the most remarkable cases of ekphrasis in English poetry can be found in Denise Riley's "Lure 1963," based on a painting, *Lure*, by Gillian Ayres (fig. 38):

Navy near-black cut in with lemon, fruity bright lime green.  
 I roam around around around around acidic yellows, globe  
 oranges burning, slashed cream, huge scarlet flowing  
 anemones, barbaric pink singing, radiant weeping When  
 will I be loved? Flood, drag to papery long brushes  
 of deep violet, that's where it is, indigo, oh no, it's in  
 his kiss. Lime brilliance. Obsessive song. Ink tongues.  
 Black cascades trail and spatter darkly orange pools  
 toward washed lakes, whose welling rose and milkberibboned  
 pillars melt and sag, I'm just a crimson  
 kid that you won't date. Pear glow boys. Clean red.  
 Fluent grey green, pine, broad stinging blue rough  
 strips to make this floating space a burning place of  
 whitest shores, a wave out on the ocean could never  
 move that way, flower, swell, don't ever make her blue.  
 Oh yes I'm the great pretender. Red lays a stripe of darkest



FIG. 38. *Gillian Ayres, Lure (1963)*. © Gillian Ayres. Courtesy Alan Cristea Gallery. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

green on dark. My need is such I pretend too much, I'm  
wearing. And you're not listening to a word I say.<sup>58</sup>

The poet's subject position is extraordinarily complicated: sometimes she seems to be describing the painting; sometimes she seems to be circumambulating or penetrating the color lozenges, as if the painting were a map of islands, "pools," and "lakes," and she were an ant making its way across the implied topography; sometimes the painting itself seems to address the reader directly, in the manner of Keats's Grecian urn:

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—  
And you’re not listening to a word I say.”

And yet none of these subject positions turns out to be quite tenable. For one thing (as Thomas Butler has shown), the *I*-statements are quotations from the lyrics of pop songs: “The entrance of this first-person subject in the second line is caught up in the catchy refrain of Dion’s ‘The Wanderer’ (1962): ‘I roam around around around around.’ The end of that sentence contorts into the ‘barbaric pink’ singing and weeping ‘When will I be loved?’ which is the title of the Everly Brothers’ 1960 hit song. Through the poem, lines of Betty Everett, The Platters, and Bobby Vee all join in the movement of the colors.”<sup>59</sup> The jellybeany color scheme of Ayres’s painting conjures up proto-bubblegum words and tunes—the lyric *I* seems not to be Riley’s own but that of some vast cultural blob, the whole AM radio spectrum circa 1963 personified, suitable for Ayres’s wavering, sluggishly motile, garish-pastel translucencies.

I read the poem first, and when I saw the painting I was considerably surprised—so much so that I came to feel that Riley was deliberately making a semi-false ekphrasis (“I’m the great pretender . . . I pretend too much”) by describing a half-invented painting that bore some similarity to Ayres’s *Lure*. Such words as *acidic*, *slashed*, *radiant*, *stinging*, *burning* made me expect color riots beyond anything Ayres tries to do. Ayres’s colors are striking, protuberant, but not highly saturated; allusions to innocuous pop music seem more appropriate than the scarred-cornea adjectives cited above (though I’m far from sure that Riley would agree with my characterization of the Everly Brothers, the Platters, and the others as innocuous). Furthermore, Riley’s descriptors sometimes seem wrong: the black-blue areas in Ayres’s painting do not appear to be true indigo, and Riley seems to discover shapes (such as “milkberibboned pillars”) that aren’t

in the painting—as if the landscape, with its floods and washes and pools and lakes, needed to be decorated with a few fantastic bits of architecture.

On the other hand, Riley does not precisely allege that there's a field of indigo somewhere in the painting: she writes, "that's where it is, indigo, oh no, it's in his kiss," as if she were debating whether to withdraw the indigo from the painting and plant it into the kiss instead. There are a remarkable number of negatives in the poem:

oh *no*, it's in his kiss  
I'm just a crimson kid that you *won't* date  
a wave out on the ocean could *never* move that way  
*don't* ever make her blue  
And you're *not* listening to a word I say

Maybe this poem is less an ekphrasis than a refusal of ekphrasis: the painting, writhing in its impermeable pictorial space, keeps saying no, no, no as it eludes the poet's every attempt to haul it into discursive space—the colors keep pasting themselves onto creatures outside the canvas ("a crimson kid"; "don't ever make her blue"). Butler quotes a 1995 interview in which Romana Huk asked Riley about her work's relation to paintings by Ian McKeever and Gillian Ayres:

Well, these are all painters of large, energetic, unbounded, differently vigorous abstract work, which relies heavily on brilliance of or density of colour, or the floating quality of colour, as well as a roughness or visibility of brushwork. So that you get a feeling of speed and heaviness and immediacy just by being in the same room as those paintings. And is it

possible to do it with poetry? My attempts are always going to end in tears; black and white typography on the page is so remorsefully different.<sup>60</sup>

The poet's heavy, even desperate impasto self-consciously fails to give the quality of the thinly vivid paint on the canvas; the poet's floatings-off into music quotations do a better job, I think, of giving a sense of the buoyancy of the picture. *Lure* suggests seduction, and the poet, like Odysseus, keeps her ears open to whatever siren songs the painting may happen to sing. But Riley's most effective ekphrasis may come from kinesthesia: just as Williams finds clear verbal equivalents for Brueghel's drunken whirl, so Riley, roaming around around around around, traces a sort of bodily elation of movement through prismatic spaces. Dante conceived of the moon and the planets as frictionless blobs of light, and Riley, for all her skitteriness of verbal texture, her weeping over the monochrome aspect of print, seems to find her own Paradiso.

### *Narrating a Picture*

How many dimensions does a painting have? I don't know, but I know that the answer is not two. Even in the spatial sense, an oil painting has three dimensions: for even a painting with imperceptible brushstrokes has faint undulations in its surface, regions of thicker and thinner pigment. To generate an image on any physical surface requires either adding matter or scraping it away, though the matter may be impalpable dust, like the stuff in toner cartridges.

According to string theory, the physical universe has ten or eleven spatial dimensions, although the dimensions beyond the normal three seem uncommodious, lacking much scope for play. Paintings, however, have dimensions that are cheerfully unconstricted, open for experiment. In order to study these dimensions, we narrate paintings: in the

translation from the pictorial to the verbal, a painting's field of specifications, its set of orthogonals, becomes lucid and pertinent. It may even be true that the act of narrating a painting *creates* its extraspatial dimensions: if the Forbidden Experiment were performed, and a group of children were raised without hearing language, would they be unusually reliant on pictures, or unusually indifferent to them?

Every axis of interpretation can be conceived of as a dimension: a painting may arouse emotions or quiet them; it may constitute itself as a representation of the outer world or it may decline to do so; it may invite worship of the supernatural, or it may present itself as a material object in a desecrated universe. But extra dimensions come into play even in very simple descriptions, descriptions that seem prior to any interpretive maneuver. Kandinsky, for example, argued that blue areas seem to recede into the canvas, whereas yellow areas seem to bulge out; if he's right, then the simple comment "This part is blue" identifies an inward-burrowing movement in the painting, a virtual hole, a depression in the canvas that your finger could feel. To say *anything* about a painting is to build around it a multi-dimensional grid.

One can describe a painting according to strictly objective criteria: in some sense a JPEG file is a narration of a painting in a language of zeros and ones that allows the image's full reconstruction, slightly roughened by the coarseness of the pixel and the absence of infinite gradients of color. It is also possible to use English to reconstruct a painting, though English is such a poor medium for this kind of description that no one would think of trying to write a long letter to, say, Lucian Freud, instructing him how to make an exact copy of a painting that the artist himself had never seen. (When Lessing insisted that the arts of space, such as painting, and the arts of time, such as writing, were mutually exclusive, he relied on arguments along similar lines.)

And yet the notion of asking an artist to draw or paint the presumed original image from a description of the image lends itself to

experiment. An example: I might ask the artist to make an image of a running woman, with her right femur perpendicular to her torso, and her right lower leg perpendicular to her femur, while her left femur extends straight from her torso; I might add that her arms are arranged so that her arms and legs together form a sort of swastika—and her head is shown full-face with teeth bared and her wide tongue sticking out. This is reasonably specific and objective, but I've already introduced a number of cultural dimensions that will cue the artist to think not of drawing something suitable for advertising Nike sneakers but of making an icon of terror: the expression on her face suggests ferocity and impudence; the posture is effortful, grotesque; the word *swastika*, even when used strictly as a shape-descriptor for the positioning of limbs, has its own strong connotations. What began as an attempt to map an image in words, in order to allow its re-creation as a picture, has turned into a map of an affect—fear—of which the image is the proximate cause. The picture has become a means toward an end, rather than an end in itself; and the description is less a description of the picture per se than of the intention (or presumed intention) of the original artist. If the other artist—the one trying to replicate the image on the basis of the description—were to decorate the running woman with a bonnet of snakes, it would be correct even though the verbal description made no mention of such things, and not only because the old familiar image of Medusa lies behind this whole example. It is hard (and probably useless) to purge affective dimensions from descriptions of images: even an innocent description (say, a term such as “crimped oval” to describe the face of a woman painted by Modigliani) is full of odd kinesthetic sensations—in this case responses to the edginess of Modigliani's volupté.

Of course the more usual case is to proceed not from the description to the image but vice versa. The image-maker seems somewhat helpless, at the mercy of critics; but in fact he or she has means to push the discourse of critics in congenial directions. The simplest one is the

title. To assign a title is to assert power; even to refuse to assign a title is to assert power. Such refusal springs (usually) from one of two cases: either the image-maker belongs to such a settled community of image describers that a title is superfluous (as in the case of a medieval European artist who shows a dove with a halo); or the image-maker belongs to such an unsettled community of image describers that a title would violate the transcendental autonomy of the artwork. In the first case the artist asserts, “You know what this means without my telling you—I have the power to make what you can recognize.” In the second case the artist asserts, “I have titled my work ‘Untitled’ in order to sever any connection to the world of conventional discourse concerning images—describe it at your peril.” But I think that every artist wants people to talk about his or her work—the untitling ploy exists only to provide a certain stress of enigma.

Assigning a title is only the beginning of the artist’s control over future description. To show how this works, I’ll attempt an analogy with music. There are many musical compositions that begin in a state of disguise: the key of the piece is troubled or falsified until some maneuver finally establishes it. A famous example is Mozart’s so-called *Dissonance* Quartet in C major, K. 465 (1785), whose first movement begins with an adagio in which ghostly chords slide through various unstable configurations until the genial allegro takes up a clear C major. In the domain of visual representation, every image—even the most tranquil, poised, and static—creates an instability, an imbalance, a need to fall into the intelligible. Sometimes this happens almost instantaneously, just as many musical compositions manifest their key boldly, without preliminary fuss. But this fall into recognition does not exist in the image itself. Mozart’s *Dissonance* Quartet contains (seems to contain) its resolution within the music; but in the realm of painting and sculpture, the resolution exists in the discourse that talks about it. (Even the quartet, as a whole artwork, is not resolved until it is talked

about—the satisfaction of the cadence exists only by grace of a long-standing cultural agreement, mediated by discourse.) Criticism is necessary to all art, but the need is especially acute in the visual arts, where an image is not even an image until someone construes it. The picture demands a description in words, a response: as we have seen, the technical term for a description of a picture is *ekphrasis*, and I'm arguing here the ekphrasis is part of the necessary rhythm of making images.

Representation is itself a generative instability. If I see a fusiform white blob with bent triangles sticking out of the sides, it teeters in the mind's space for a fraction of a second until it comes to rest, and I say, dove! The easier the recognition, the simpler and more direct the cadence. But just as much of the art of tonal music is a matter of cleverly delaying the cadence, so much of the art of traditional painting is making recognition problematic:

- by enveloping objects in shadow or cloud, so that it's hard to discern what's there;
- by including distortion devices, such as convex mirrors, in the visual field;
- by putting recognizable objects in a context where they don't fit;
- by painting purely imaginary objects assembled out of bits and pieces of familiar objects—bellows-boys tootling away on the flutes of their own noses, and so forth.

Some painters, such as Canaletto, have little interest in these obfuscating devices, but many painters like to complicate recognition. Every difficulty imposed on recognition increases the tension level of the critical response to the painting; if enough conventional meaning is subtracted, a lot of unconventional meaning will have to be added. At a certain point, the critic will be driven to allegory; beyond that, the critic will have to call the painting an allegory of allegory, or something

so completely resistant to interpretation that the criticism must billow out on fancy's wings. Of course, any painter who ventures into the land of polysemy will find that this strategy does not guarantee success: univocal Canaletto is a far greater artist than any number of puzzle painters whose work adorns the back galleries of minor museums. But whatever Canaletto's excellence, it is the Hieronymus Bosch and Jackson Pollocks who rouse critics to fill the art history shelves of the library.

A representation that uses either perspectivist or cubist devices creates an illusion of a third dimension: we learn when very young the trick of perceiving a real diagonal as a virtual orthogonal jutting out into an imaginary altitude. Certain painters and critics disparage these tricks: Clement Greenberg, for one, advocated a purist modality of the visual arts, utterly without illusion—painting should be a thrusting forth of pigment and sculpture an extacy of metal or stone. But to look at a sculpture and see a simple rock is also to become implicated with the illusory, since it is not a simple rock—it's a sculpture. The multidimensional aspect of the artwork cannot easily be wished away.

Beyond representation in itself, images contain other moments of instability. As soon as a pigmenting or an inflecting has stooped to representation, a host of other things are hoisted up and (in one manner or another) need to fall. Representations lack repose. A death mask or a life-size sculpture of a corpse reclining on a sepulcher is a fairly stressless image, but even this is a provisional volume awaiting further collapse: as the corpse itself will turn into dust, so the recumbent sculpture is quietly looking forward to its own disintegration, a final cadence.

Most images, far from being static, are in a fury of movement. In classical Greek sculpture, the simple contrapposto—the twisting of the shoulders out of the plane of the hips in a kind of arrogant ease—suggests the overwhelming fidgetiness of the human body, its constant

shifting of weight, its need to sit, to walk, to yawn, to get the hell out of here. Myron's sculpture of the Discobolus shows a man as a vast sling, stretched as far back as it will go, on the point of snap. Even non-representational artifacts have their peculiar dynamisms: a clay pot, for example, is an icon of the rotary, a study in the thumb's friction—as T. S. Eliot put it in “Burnt Norton”:

Only by the form, the pattern,  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.  
Not the stillness of the violin, while the note lasts,  
Not that only, but the co-existence,  
Or say that the end precedes the beginning.<sup>61</sup>

Eliot is the anti-Lessing: far from separating the arts of space from the arts of time, Eliot suggests that the jar on the table is delirious with its own spinning, while the Beethoven quartet never got past its first note. Even buildings rarely give a sense of heavy sullen squat: they are so penetrated by doors and windows that the restlessness of the outer world keeps them in a state of motion. And even from a fixed point of view, the space enclosed by a building keeps wildly swelling and contracting: a notable example is the fifth-century mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, which can feel small and claustrophobic at one moment, while at the next instant the low dim vault can vanish, and you are outside, standing on a strange planet looking up at huge mosaic stars so profuse and complicated that there seem to be more stars than sky.

Some paintings are so committed to unstable forms or situations that they are, in effect, compressed-file cinema. J. M. W. Turner's *Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons* shows a great boulder a quarter-second



FIG. 39. *J. M. W. Turner, The Fall of an Avalanche in the Grisons (1810).*

away from crushing the Swiss hut (fig. 39). When Turner exhibited his paintings, he often attached to them a few verses of his own:

The downward sun a parting sadness gleams,  
Portentous lurid thro' the gathering storm;  
Thick drifting snow on snow,  
Till the vast weight bursts thro' the rocky barrier;  
Down at once, its pine clad forests,  
And towering glaciers fall, the work of ages  
Crashing through all! Extinction follows,  
And the toil, the hope of man—o'erwhelms.

These lines rewind the film, panning first to the sun before the storm, then to the gradual accumulation of snow, then to the collapse of the high rock. Turner experiments with inverted syntax, beginning the third clause with “Down at once”—the great adverb provides the impetus that pushes the sentence, just as the rock pushes its way down the mountain. After he arrives at his freeze-frame—the painting itself, with the rocks suspended in midair—Turner lets time roll on a moment longer, then the boulder squashes the hut. The postponing of the crush verb *o'erwhelms* until the end heightens the sense that the critical event is in a postponed state—in some sense the image on the canvas takes place during the em-dash between *man* and *o'erwhelms*.

The poem, then, makes actual two dimensions that are only virtual in the painting itself: the temporal dimension and the moral intent—an intent that lies behind much of Turner's work. (Starting in 1812 Turner appended to many of his paintings lines from a long, unfinished, unpublished poem called “The Fallacy of Hope”—a theme given remarkably explicit shape in his avalanche painting of 1810.) Of course, Turner's lines about the avalanche add little to the experience of the painting: we could figure out for ourselves most of what it mentions, except perhaps for the luridness of the prestorm sunlight and the flattening of the forest. Still, it testifies to the strong urge to complete the experience of a painting by putting it into words.

A poet more gifted than Turner, a low threshold to cross, also tried his hand at landscapes related to this theme. In an 1807 revision of the Simplon Pass episode of *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth inserted lines about

Huge fragments of primaeval mountain spread  
 In powerless ruin, blocks as huge aloft  
 Impending, nor permitted yet to fall.

Wordsworth is describing a rockfall that hasn't happened *yet*—and in a strange way Turner too refuses to permit his huge block to fall, since it is forever pasted a few feet above the Swiss hut. These verses suggest that potential energy is every bit as awe-making as kinetic energy—even a quiet landscape is a locus of terror. The mountain, long ago shattered into a ruin, vividly displays the energy that destroyed it. Similarly, the deepest theme of Turner's painting seems to be not the vanity of human wishes, not the flimsiness of wood, but force—gravity.

### *Counterpoint in Painting*

The temporal dimension of a painting is sometimes simple, sometimes complex. To continue the musical analogy, I might say that a painting can exhibit either monophony or polyphony. Turner's avalanche painting, for example, is monophonic, in that it presents a single line of movement, straight down: nothing resists the pull. But other paintings contain several reference frames, with different vectors, different accelerations. These paintings might be called contrapuntal.

Counterpoint in painting can arise in several ways. An image can grow contrapuntal through polystylism: Saul Steinberg called the drawing in figure 40 *Techniques at a Party*, a title that might be understood as meaning either the strategies of greeting, meeting, and conversing that we all use at get-togethers or personifications of technical artistic devices whooping it up at a shindig. Or maybe these two things are one thing, and Steinberg is playing a game in which different strategies of human interaction are imaged as different drawing styles. Some of us present sharp outlines of ourselves (“Hello! I’m an aerospace engineer from Utah!”); some of us present only oblique shadings (“I’m nobody in particular—or—am I?”); some of us behave like clowns with red-rubber-ball noses (“I went to the University of



FIG. 40. *Saul Steinberg, Techniques at a Party, 1953. Ink, colored pencil, and watercolor, 14½ × 23 in. The Saul Steinberg Foundation, New York. © The Saul Steinberg Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.*

Antarctica, where I majored in ice cream”); some of us are so recessive in personality that scarcely a smudge or a faint broken outline can be discerned; and one of us, probably the hostess, overwhelms the whole gathering, with the tiara and great florid blowsy face of the Queen of Hearts. There is also a man with a basketball head wearing red-and-blue 3D glasses, but I can scarcely guess what his conversational gambit might be (“If you punch me hard I spring right back up”?)—he seems to have crashed the party from some realm of abstract art.

But the most normal form of visual counterpoint is not polystylism, but polytemporality—different time schemes superimposed. The simplest way to achieve this is by juxtaposing several panels, as in a stained-glass window showing different episodes from the life of Jesus or a Batman comic book. But sometimes we find that a single panel depicts the same person at two or more stages of a single narrative. This is a more intimate form of fugue: there is a temporal overlay of a single theme upon itself, a staggering. Simone Martini’s early Trecento painting attests to the appetite in the commune of Siena for a lovable, down-to-earth local holy man along the lines of Francis of Assisi: the

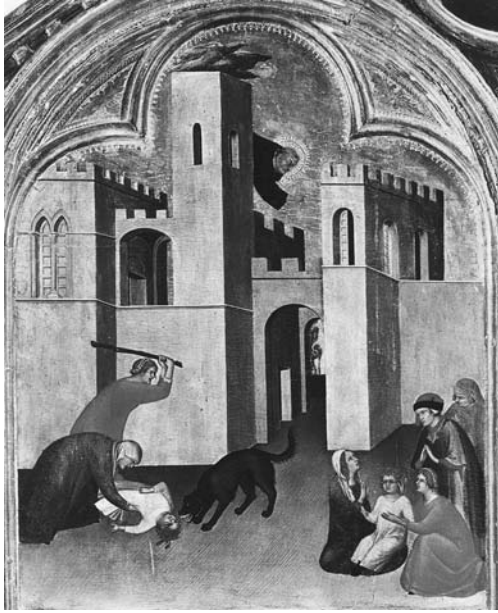


FIG. 41. *Simone Martini*, *The Blessed Agostino Novello Heals a Child Mauled by a Dog* (c. 1328).

painter was enlisted to help spread the cult of Agostino Novello (d. 1309), a popular politician, later an Augustinian monk—part of a (failed) campaign to promote Agostino Novello as the patron saint of Siena (fig. 41). On the left side, all is vehemence and horror: the dog snaps at the child’s eye, the woman beats the dog with a stick; on top, the blessed Augustine swoops down to rescue, his habit turning into a comet-tail emerging from a cloud; on the right, all is peaceful prayer, as the family gives thanks for the child’s miraculous healing. The painting juxtaposes not only earlier and later parts of the same tale but also different kinds of motion: whirl and stasis. The style is homogenous throughout the painting—the violently agitated figures are as carefully



FIG. 42. *Simone Martini*, *The Blessed Agostino Novello Resurrects a Fallen Child* (c. 1328).

outlined as the quiet ones—but the image sets up areas ruled by clocks moving at different speeds, like a musical composition in which different meters are coordinated. In fact, I might call this a painted version of a two-part canon in augmentation: the theme is the same in both halves of the painting, but the note-values of the second entry are longer.

The figures on the right huddle together, pay so little attention to the figures on the left—their prior selves—that they seem to have fully dismissed the wretched event. But in a companion work (fig. 42), Simone Martini creates a more complicated intermesh of the two time schemes: here Agostino brings back to life a child killed after falling from a balcony. The revived child, however, instead of turning his back on the calamity, studies it with care: this is a painting about memory, about trying to process one visual field from the vantage point of another. The hideous fall is scrutinized from several points of view: that of the saved child, a little farther back in space and a little farther

ahead in time than the child who falls; that of Agostino, so sympathetic that he falls with the child and so thrifty that he even rescues the plank of wood from the collapsing balcony; and of course that of the spectator, who can study the whole complex process of fall and rebound. (Sometimes, we learn from Christian iconography, hope is no fallacy, and avalanches can roll back up.) You not only interpret, you interpret various interpretations included within the picture frame. The right side of the painting is a sort of visual ekphrasis of the left side: the child (puzzled? fearful? at a loss?) is a commentary on his own plunge, his own salvation. In perspectival space, the saved child should be smaller than the falling child since he's several feet farther back; but scientific perspective did not exist in 1328, so Martini uses the medieval convention of making the more important element larger. The painting is at once (to use Lessing's terms for distinguishing the arts of time, such as poetry and music, from the arts of space, such as painting) a *nacheinander* and a *nebeneinander*: sequential, in that a chronology can easily be teased out of the figural repetitions; and juxtapositive, in that the totality of the panel represents the operation of God's mind, in which all time coexists at once, and every figure in every state, from origin to passing away, is instantly available to the divine random-access memory.

A painting can also be contrapuntal, polychronic, without specific narrative intent. A mosaic procession of saints and martyrs might imply a single overarching forward movement, that of the procession—though the only place where saints and martyrs can process is heaven, and it is not clear where they might be headed, except perhaps for a better glimpse of God. But in the midst of this central rhythmic push we might see suggestions of other time frames: if a woman with a wheel appears, she must be Saint Catherine of Alexandria, who was tied to a spiked wheel for professing her Christian faith in the days of the Roman emperor Maxentius (the torture device broke

when she touched it, and the executioner had to resort to beheading). If a man appears holding a grill, it is Saint Lawrence, who was roasted for his religious conviction. These emblematic figures set off little whirligigs of time within the mosaic: the icon that identifies the martyr also serves to remind the spectator of the whole story of the martyr's resolution, imaginatively enriched with pain. There is a kind of spinning firework called a Catherine wheel, and the religious image of the wheel also acts as a firework, burrowing deep into the pictorial surface, incising terse narratives about the incision of flesh. The cross itself operates in exactly this way: it is an icon of torture on which the four gospels are invisibly inscribed—a static image with a huge kinetic portent.

Images of heaven are almost always richly contrapuntal, since earthly life exists there only in the form of video files waiting to be unspooled. Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* places two martyrs directly below Christ: Saint Lawrence, who cannot let go of his grill without losing his identity, and Saint Bartholomew, flayed alive while spreading Christianity in Armenia (fig. 43). These saints seem especially intimate to the craft of the visual arts, since Lawrence's grill looks a bit like the scaffolds and ladders over which Michelangelo clambered for years while painting the Sistine Chapel; and Bartholomew's detached skin has flattened into two dimensions, a painted image with no canvas to which it can attach itself. The face on the skin of grief is thought to be that of Michelangelo himself: the great image-maker translated into a peculiarly empty image, as if pronouncing on the vanity of art. Of the many time-schemes present in *The Last Judgment*, some of the most prominent concern Michelangelo's long, long labor in the chapel, his enslavement to the craft of painting. Indeed *The Last Judgment* is as biographically charged, as full of grim in-jokes, as Dante's *Divine Comedy*; the story of the painter's life is a necessary moment in its ekphrasis.

Catherine's wheel and Lawrence's grill are symbols; and symbolism in painting is the art of digging visual tunnels through which



FIG. 43. *Michelangelo*, *The Last Judgment* (1537–41).

stories emerge. All symbolism depends to some degree on incongruity, not-belonging: women do not usually carry wheels around, particularly large spiked ones, nor do men lug about frameworks of metal. Once you know the hagiography, the story itself is simple, though the ingenuity of the torture, the dissonance between the saint's calm heavenly face and the implied pain, still imparts a certain fringe of the eerie. But there is a kind of visual symbolism that teases by opening up story-clouds, vague heuristics—narratives that the spectators have to make up for themselves. The image on the back of the dollar bill, a pyramid

surmounted by an eye, suggests that the value of money springs from an incomprehensible locus of antique power. I was a slave toiling in the desert, hauling huge blocks of rock up wooden ramps by means of ropes, and the pharaoh's overseer pointed to the blinding sun over the unfinished mountain of stone, and he said, That is Amon-Ra, the god of gods, whose smile makes the land to bear wheat; here, take this papyrus on which His image is drawn, and it will entitle the bearer to rations of bread and beer at a local restaurant, on demand. This is perhaps not quite the story that the excellent Freemasons who designed the dollar bill meant me to think, but it seems as good as any.

Symbolic art may hint at specific stories, but as the bandwidth of the symbol's radiance increases, the narrative grows more vague, until all precision is lost in the excessive brilliance of the symbol. It is like trying to read an inscription cut into a stone in the desert, in which the individual glyphs are lost in the sheer dazzle of the sun. Indeed, this movement from meaning to too great meaning to unmeaning is found in every painting, whether expressly symbolic or not: ekphrasis is always a provisional exercise and quickly reaches its limit. Every good painting that offers itself up to the ekphrastic imagination must, at some point in the interpretive process, refuse further ekphrasis. Ekphrasis and indescribability are both necessary moments, necessary points of view. The problem with unappealing narrative paintings isn't the narrative but the absence of anything but narrative. We want our paintings first to speak, then to shut up. Symbolist paintings differ from other narrative paintings only in that the superseding of narrative is more obviously built into the painting itself. There are counterpoints in painting between the visible and the invisible, the descriptive and the indescribable, the narrative and the inenarrable.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *What Is Music?*

THERE ARE MANY theories about the modus and goal of music that stress music's essentially expressive character. And there are others that stress its essentially inexpressive character—the two most famous are Eduard Hanslick's formalist definition of music as motion-form perceptible through the ear (*tönend bewegte Form*) and Stravinsky's cool statement that "music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to *express* anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc."<sup>1</sup> But just as painting is neither essentially representational nor essentially nonrepresentational, so music is neither expressive nor nonexpressive. Expressiveness and inexpressiveness are two standard moments in music's development; neither is an essential property, but it is usually convenient, when interpreting a particular piece of music, to discuss the rhythm of expression—how it flaunts itself, then recedes or vanishes.

We can locate expression in any of music's elements: melody, rhythm, harmony, timbre. But it is not always clear that the expression naturally lurks there—maybe the composer has planted it in one of these places artificially, by means of written directions to the

performer: *appassionato*, *dolente*, *morendo*, *spianato*, *con dolcezza*, *con fuoco*, and all those other Italian terms that figure in the published scores. There is scarcely any sequence of notes that cannot be made to assume the guise of rage or sorrow or joy by means of the performer's art. And yet the possibility of *natural* expression in music cannot be strictly discounted—and I think it would be useful to review the ways through which music attains expression before we try to descend to some deeper level of what music is, some level beneath expression itself.

1. *Codes*. A composer who wishes to manipulate you—to make you feel something that you're probably not feeling at the present instant—will first of all have recourse to codes. Music has always tried to compile dictionaries of itself, codebooks of emotional content. Since the days of Plato, particular keys were associated with particular moods: in fact, Plato's treatise on the ideal republic forbids musicians from playing music in the Lydian mode (not to be confused with the Lydian mode of medieval music) on the grounds that its soft lax harmonies would render the populace effeminate. Later, eighteenth-century music theorists compiled tables of the meanings of particular keys (for example, B minor was associated with the bizarre, the mad, and even the demonic). These tables of meaning codes were the subject of some dispute: different theorists heard different emotions in the same key. But it was agreed early on that the chromatic scale, which consists of all the notes of the black keys of the piano as well as the white keys, was encoded as appropriate for dark moods, for extreme torsion of soul—for wit's end. Even in the Middle Ages there was an Easter celebration (*Diastematica*, from a thirteenth-century English songbook) in which the text commands, *absit chromatica*, Let chromaticism be absent (during this time of harmonious rejoicing). Later, William Byrd wrote a madrigal on the chroma-code:

Come, woeful Orpheus, with thy charming lyre,  
And tune my voice unto thy skillful wire;  
Some strange chromatic notes do you devise,  
That best with mournful accents sympathize:  
Of sourest sharps and uncouth flats make choice,  
And I'll thereto compassionate my voice. [Byrd, "Come woeful  
Orpheus," 1611]

Here the text and the music alike speak of chromatic misery.

One of the most influential and in some ways ambitious attempts to codify the feeling content of music was Claudio Monteverdi's preface to his Eighth Book of Madrigals (1638), which divided music into three styles: the *stile molle* (soft style) and the *stile temperato* (calm style) were the standard means of madrigal composers; but Monteverdi claimed to have invented the third style, the *stile concitato* (excited style), suitable for the rhetoric of war. This third style, a stutter of sixteenth notes, was based on the pyrrhic foot (short-short) of classical prosody:

I have reflected that the principal passions or affections of our mind are three, namely, anger, moderation, and humility or supplication; so the best philosophers declare. . . . The art of music also points clearly to these three in its terms "agitated," "soft," and "moderate" [*concitato*, *molle*, and *temperato*]. In all the works of former composers I have indeed found examples of the "soft" and the "moderate," but never of the "agitated," a genus nevertheless described by Plato in the third book of his *Rhetoric* [399a] in these words: "Take that harmony that would fittingly imitate the utterances and the accents of a brave man who is engaged in warfare." And since I was aware that it is contraries which greatly move our mind, and that this

is the purpose which all good music should have . . . I have applied myself with no small diligence and toil to rediscover this genus.

After reflecting that in the pyrrhic measure the tempo is fast, and, according to all the best philosophers, used warlike, agitated leaps, and in the spondaic, the tempo slow and the opposite, I began, therefore, to consider the semibreve which . . . should correspond to one stroke of a spondaic measure; when this was divided into sixteen *semicrome* [sixteenth notes] and restruck one after the other and combined with words expressing anger and disdain, I recognized in this brief sample a resemblance to the affect I sought.<sup>2</sup>

It is not quite clear what Monteverdi meant by *stile molle* except that it seems to be the opposite of *stile concitato* and has something to do with humility and supplication. It is possible that he meant simply something like *relaxed*; but the argument makes more sense if we assume it has to do with states of abjection and misery, the subject of the great lamentations, often chromatic and contorted, that were a specialty of Monteverdi and his contemporaries. If so, Monteverdi's codebook is based on a simple tripartite scheme of the soul:

<i>High</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>Low</i>
mania	reflective sobriety	depression
elation	neutrality	abjection
inflicting pain	calm	suffering pain

He considered, quite justly, that he had written music that spanned the whole gamut of feeling, from the heights to the depths. The notions of high and low vary considerably from century to century: for Plato in the *Phaedrus*, high means upward to the divine, and low downward to

the clambering world of the senses; for Freud, high means obedient to the internalized father who demands virtuous behavior (the superego), and low obedient to the foul unspeakable desires of the unconscious (the id); but across the span of Western culture a tripartite model of the psyche—high, middle, low—has often held sway.

The preface to the Eighth Book goes on to say that the *stile concitato*, the angry style, was first created for *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* (1624), a staged setting of some stanzas from Torquato Tasso—a curious sort of narrated opera in which most of the singing is done by a tenor *testo* (the text personified), with a few interjections in direct dialogue by the warrior protagonists. The narrator describes the clashing of swords, the quick ring of mighty blows, in an ecstatic vocal drumming of sixteenth-note figures. Monteverdi may have thought that he had created the musical equivalent of *virtus*, maleness: a species of heroic manly rhetoric opposed to the endless series of pitiful women—Ariadne, Olympia, Mary, Queen of Scots—found in the madrigals of d’India, Bertali, and many others, including Monteverdi himself, who started the vogue in 1608 with his “Lamento d’Arianna.” This last piece was the climactic aria from an otherwise lost opera; in his Sixth Book of Madrigals (1614) Monteverdi published it in the form of a five-voice madrigal. Madrigal and early opera bleed into each other in odd ways, and the codes of affect seem completely interchangeable between the two genres.

But today most of the codes that cue us to feel come from quotation, either direct quotation of musical phrases or indirect quotation of certain gestures we have learned to associate with certain emotions. And we learn our codes not from madrigals or operas but from movies. Indeed some of the most ambitious codebooks come from the domain of silent films: for example, in 1924 Ernő Rapée published *Motion Picture Moods for Pianists and Organists*, which classifies a large number of pieces under fifty-two headings, such as **Aëroplane** (Mendelssohn’s

*Rondo capriccioso*), **Battle** (the third movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*), **Horror** (the bride's abduction from Grieg's *Peer Gynt*), **Railroad** (the Spinning Song from Wagner's *Flying Dutchman*), **Sadness** (the first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*)—and, “for use in situations . . . where *there is neither action, nor atmosphere, nor the elements of human temperament,*” **Neutral** (Schubert's *Moment Musical*, op. 94, no. 3). Rapée was imagining direct quotations, but recent film composers tend to adapt gestures from preexisting film music (especially that of Prokofiev), itself dependent on codes derived from opera—to watch a movie is to enter a world where uneasiness is disrupted rhythm, love is legato strings, and so forth. If you watch television shows with the captions turned on, you notice that they sometimes supply the intended mood of the music, even adding little rave reviews at times: “♪ unbearably suspenseful music ♪,” for example. If you didn't know what unbearably suspenseful music sounded like before, you certainly do after reading the caption. Musical cues tend to work insofar as they observe a code—they tell you that hidden danger is lurking, that something silly is about to happen, and so forth. If movie music is generally forgettable, it is because in most cases it is supposed to be ignored: viewers are supposed to hear not the music but the code.

2. *Kinesthesia*. But when I say that you have to *learn* a music code, I'm on treacherous ground. Am I really sure that there are no *natural* codes, codes that you don't have to learn because they are hard-wired into the human nervous system? By insisting that music codes are nothing more than convention, arbitrary labels of *love* or *rage* pasted onto neutral acoustic material, I'm using modernist linguistics along the lines of the semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure, who taught that “the arbitrary nature of the sign . . . dominates the whole of linguistic analysis.”<sup>3</sup> In the realm of spoken language, the arbitrariness of the sign (except perhaps in the case of such onomatopoeic signs as the word

*cuckoo*) is perfectly arguable. And it is possible to devise a system according to which music generates powerful meanings strictly out of arbitrary signs. But fair-mindedness requires us to inspect this principle closely: is music a system of purely arbitrary and conventional gestures, as Stravinsky (and many others) believed (or pretended to believe)?

Not entirely. Let us begin with a look at a language of physical gesture, such as American Sign Language: what are the meanings possible to the gesture of *raised fist, trembling rapidly within a narrow compass, with elbow crooked and biceps contracted*? Surely many meanings are possible, ranging from *I want to kill you* to *Look how strong I am* to *Let us unite against the tyrant*. However, some meanings are not reasonable, unless the sign system is constructed in an extremely willful manner. This gesture would not mean *Be kind to kittens*—except perhaps in the sense of *Be kind to kittens, or else*. This restriction of the arbitrariness of the sign is not hard to understand: the gesture requires such great muscular tension, and is so often accompanied by the emotion of anger and the act of smiting, that it has a “natural” range of meanings not easily trespassed. It is hard to imagine a human culture, or even a baboon culture, in which some sort of fury or self-insistence would not be intended.

The same is true of certain musical gestures. The mere physiological tension involved in making very loud and rapid strokes with a bow or in hitting a very high note with a trumpet entails a certain urgency, and will tend to specify a certain range of meanings—arousal, agitation, assertion, and so forth. The opposite meanings tend to cluster around gestures produced with little effort. To this extent, we read the meaning of the music from the imputed physical exertion of the musician.

To study music is to study the whole body. Music is not only a sign system of gesture; it is a simulacrum of the body on which gesture is

inscribed. In some distant sense, musical compositions can present maps of the human nervous system. But a map is not a landscape, and an analogy is not an identity. The hope of direct physiological manipulation through music—Orpheus’s gift for making trees lift their roots from the ground and dance—can never be realized, no matter how keen the intelligence of the composer or how large the composer’s claims. When Monteverdi claims to have discovered the exact musical equivalent for anger, in his stutter of sixteenth notes; when Alexander Goehr and Theodor Adorno claim that Schoenberg discovered the exact musical electroencephalogram for emotion, we should be skeptical. As painters and sculptors have always understood, human beings are extremely susceptible to images of their bodies—every such image is a potential voodoo doll, subject to manipulations by sympathetic magic. Similarly, the images of the human nervous system presented in musical compositions can provoke an assortment of shivers, fevers, tremors in the listener; but that response is based on sophisticated analogies, corporeal interpretations, not the direct effect of a stimulus on the body. If I hear a musical depiction of a frozen landscape, such as Vivaldi’s, in the Winter concerto from *The Four Seasons* (1725), I do not step into a refrigerator; instead I perform, with my whole body, a sequence of tremblings and chatterings, a lucid imagination of ice.

Still, the voodoo power of musical images of the body must not be underestimated. If you listen to the prelude to Verdi’s *Rigoletto* (1851), you understand that it’s about suspense and terror. Why? Partly because of a learned response: the music is in the minor mode, full of diminished sevenths, and a thousand pieces of music have taught us to shudder when we hear such chords. But partly we understand because of a code that no one had to teach us because it’s built into our bodies: sharp iambic rhythms are heartbeats, and to hear them is to hear sudden contractions of our own heart: lubDUB. To hear a beating heart is to attend to something biological, independent of culture—though the

interpretive strategies through which we understand an iambic drum-beat as a heartbeat are mediated by culture.

The great composers of dance music, such as Jean-Philippe Rameau and Sergei Prokofiev, are extremely canny about creating precise images of leg movements in music: hops, skips, jumps, glides, twirls—you hear the music and your body understands how it's supposed to move. A good example can be found in the fat stepsister's dance in Prokofiev's ballet *Cinderella* (1944): The music suggests a dainty but uncertain movement—there's a built-in stumble. If you hear this and think of an elephant in a tutu trying to dance gracefully on tippytoes, you're hearing what the composer intended. But whenever you hear music of any kind, whether intended for dancing or not, try to listen to your body: sometimes the rhythms of your feet, your heartbeat, even your breathing, will tell you what the music means. Implied kinesthesia is everywhere in music.

3. *Binary Thought*. So I think it's good to give Mother Nature her due as an explicator of music. Nevertheless, most of the things we consider natural in music aren't natural at all. A good deal of musical response is purely intellectual and discursive, and has to be realized through mental effort, not kinesthetic intuition. Music is a kind of thinking, and it operates according to procedures similar to other kinds of thinking. The biologist Lewis Thomas once suggested that Bach's *Art of the Fugue* (1750) was *about* thinking, a kind of model of how thinking works; it is easy to understand what he means but hard to describe exactly how Bach's manipulations of his fugal theme resemble the problem-solving processes of the brain. One species of musical thinking relies on the principles of binary thought.

Much music can be analyzed profitably according to the intellectual model proposed by French structuralism. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (1964), pondered mythological narratives

gathered from many remote places, such as the rainforests of Brazil; after breaking these narratives down to their basic elements, Lévi-Strauss proposed that the mythopoeia and thought processes of primitive cultures were embodied in a complex network of simple binary divisions, including human/animal, man/woman, mortal/immortal, rock/flesh, water/fire, boiled/roasted, wholesome/rotten, raw/cooked—all the binaries through which a hunter-gatherer makes sense of the world and of human presence in the world and of the origins of the things that constitute the world. Lévi-Strauss was careful not to say that the thinking of “sophisticated” cultures was also governed by binary divisions, but the possibility remains open. Might the analyst not discover that any great intellectual feat—the philosophy of Plato, for instance—can be reduced to a huge grid of polar oppositions: form/copy, reason/appetite, and so on? Some cognitive scientists speak of the brain as a kind of binary computer, in which decision making is predicated on an infinitely intricate web of absurdly elementary events: a neuron either fires across a synapse or it does not fire, it in effect holds up a sign saying yes or no. The brain is not quite like a computer—the threshold for a neuron’s firing is chemically variable, whereas each element of a machine is fixed, inexorably indicating on or off, one or zero—but the analogy is striking.

We see, then, that one can make a respectable argument that human thought is essentially binary in character. Now as it happens, Western music is extremely rich in binary possibilities. Music is soft or loud, pitched or unpitched, high-pitched or low-pitched, legato or emphatically rhythmic, minor or major, chromatic or diatonic, aleatory or systematic, in duple or triple meter. Out of these and many other polarities the composer can construct a system of *significant* divisions, such as female/male, chaos/order, dark/light, misery/joy, tyrant/victim. Once an antithesis is established, the composer may alternate, combine, vary, expand on, digress from, supersede, or otherwise compare,

contrast, and entwine the two antithetical elements; in this manner the composer prosecutes an argument, *thinks* in music.

In establishing these antitheses, we are once again largely in the realm of the arbitrary. The historical assignation of meaning to certain antitheses is often strong:

<i>Major</i>	<i>Minor</i>
happy	sad
direct	oblique
day	night
stern	yielding
male	female

(Not only was the minor mode considered feminine in character, but in the eighteenth century it was even personified as a woman.)<sup>4</sup> Tables such as this may look impressive, but their semantic fixity is illusory. Indeed, we might wonder how many of these meanings are consequences not of the actual *sound* of the major or minor mode but of the terms *major* and *minor* (as they are called in English, French, and Italian; in German and Russian they are called *hard* and *soft*). The terms themselves impose such striking semantic obligations on the modes that they can scarcely have been ignored by composers.

And yet it is easy to find conspicuous exceptions. It has often been noted that the aria that became the very type of pathetic lamentation, C. W. Gluck's "Che farò senza Euridice" (from *Orfeo ed Euridice*, 1762), is in fact written in a clear C major; even in the eighteenth century this mode choice caused such consternation that Gluck (or Gluck's librettist Calzabigi, writing under Gluck's name) felt compelled to defend the aria (in the preface to *Paride ed Elena*, 1770) against the charge that it was too cheerful. But Gluck, in the act of reforming opera from the dying conventions of the previous generation, was

quite right to challenge the semantic convention of the major mode itself—that too was an important operatic reform. One axiom of musical semantics is that as semantic conventions grow rigid they become, paradoxically, *less* meaningful: when music grows too easy to interpret, the ear hears the interpretation and not the music. This phenomenon explains why much contemporary film music has (often intentionally) almost no acoustic presence at all; if music is to be heard, it must at least partly reinvent the system through which it is understood. The audacity of Gluck's choice of C major tended to restore the freshness, the keenness of Orpheus's grief at the loss of his wife.

Gluck's aria is the canonical demonstration of semantic displacement of the major mode. There is not, to my knowledge, an equally famous instance of reversal of expected meaning in the minor mode; but I have a candidate to propose. In Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischütz* (1821), the hero is in desperate danger of damnation, for he has entered a compact with the powers of darkness in return for magic bullets that strike whatever they are aimed at; yet at the end, when all seems lost, a prayerful hermit-ex-machina comes onstage to impose a happy ending. At the climax of the Hermit's song-speech, he sings a melody decorated with a celestial flute accompaniment, "Doch sonst stets rein und bieder war." But although this flute tune is little more than a B minor scale, it is sometimes hard even for trained music students (as I have discovered by experiment) to recognize it as minor: all the semantic cues of orchestration and dramatic function point to *major*.

The semantic power of the opposition between major and minor does not reside in the table of commonplace associations listed above; instead, the commonplace associations (and many others) are generated by the musical power of the opposition between major and minor. In other words: first sound, then meaning. Our brains are constructed so as to regard every combination of sounds as, in potential, a language;

when we listen, we seek to construe. One of the issues that preoccupies linguists is the fact that human beings have so many languages, so diverse in character. But the very fact of diversity proves our avidity for language: in any stream of sound, our ear seeks *Gestalten*, patterns of recurrence and differentiation, from which a vocabulary may be drawn. Music's wealth of binary oppositions provides the ear with large words, sound-gestures, which come to function as elements of formal propositions, no less potent for their lack of referential content. Music teases the linguistic areas of the brain without terminating in language: it turns out that we derive as much pleasure from alinguistic patterns as from linguistic ones.

A useful example of binary thinking can be found by comparing the beginning of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* overture (1845), marked *Andante maestoso*, with a passage some four minutes into the piece, marked *Allegro*. Both are in E major, so there's no contrast of key, and yet they obviously have different meanings. What does the first section mean?—the rhythm is slow and steady; the kinesthetic value is pretty clear—it's a procession; you could get your diploma to such music with perfect propriety. Furthermore, you might note, especially if you've ever spent much time at Protestant church services of the sober-sided sort, that the music is somewhat like a Lutheran chorale—rhythmically staid, if not dull, but with a good deal of harmonic movement within somewhat narrow bounds. So if kinesthesia makes you think of a procession, experience might make you think of a religious procession. As for the second theme, what you chiefly notice is that whatever it is, it's the opposite of the first theme: giddy, flighty, erratic, full of odd spurts and jerks, perhaps indicating some sort of feverish and hectic dance. So in trying to think through this overture in terms of structuralist binaries, you have a lot of material to work with. You might conceive of a dismal beach versus dolphins playing in the waves; you might think of a funeral on one hand, and Sylvester chasing Tweety Bird on the other

(these are actual examples that my students have proposed to me); you might even come upon something very like what the composer intended—for the opening music represents a procession of pious pilgrims repenting their sins, and the second music an orgy of nymphs and satyrs presided over by the goddess Venus. So the theme of Wagner's music-thinking here is quite simple: it's a dialectic of Chastity versus Sex. Most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century overtures are written in sonata form—that is, they *argue* the relation of two separate musical areas, distinguished by theme or by key or (typically) by both, at last (after tense dissection) reconciling them. Most overtures prosecute their argument as abstract rhetorical structure, without recourse to a finite debate; but some dramatic overtures, as in the case of *Tannhäuser*, have a strange sort of forensic acuity.

Each of these three modes of semantic generation works for painting as well as music—maybe this schema has some use for generating narratives in many different artistic media. (1) Instead of codes of affect, painting has codes of symbols, often religious symbols in older painting. (2) Instead of the kinesthetics of motion, painting has (to take the simplest example) images of the human body in various contortions, from German crucifixes that are all writhe and broken tendons to Degas ballerinas forced into painfully unstable postures—these images produce shadows of contraction in our muscles; a more complicated example can be found in Klee's notion that we can't look at a horizontal line without imagining a tightrope walker's careful self-balancing. (3) Instead of binary thinking thought out over time, painting has its own dialectics, sometimes formal, such as the diagonal division of a rectangular canvas (often with distinctions of hue or saturation or image density between the two sides), sometimes thematic, such as, in Giotto's *La lamentazione*, the division between the paralyzed human beings in the lower half of the picture standing over the body of Christ and the angels in the upper half, crazily twisting in an ecstasy of grief.

*Music's Tongue*

*Music is speechlike. . . . But music is not speech. Its speechlikeness points the way into the interior, but also into the vague.*

—Theodor Adorno, “Fragment on Language,” 1963

Earlier we saw that painting was not an art of representation or an art of abstraction but an art of speech. Similarly I hope to show that music is not an art of expression or an art of formal delight but an art of speech—though, as with all speech, there is a shadow region of speechlessness on all sides of it.

We often think of music as a translation of emotional states: you know that a violin playing droopy phrases means you're supposed to weep; you know that Sousa marches mean you're supposed to feel exhilarated. But these conventional mood settings seem pretty vague; can music aspire to more precise kinds of translation? Can sentences, stories, dramas be translated into music? If so, does the resulting music have any of the properties of spoken or written language? Music—instrumental music—has a linguistic character, as if it translated texts (real or imaginary) into wordless sound; yet at the same time it resists any linguistic character, even proposes itself as an anti-language incapable of translating anything. Just as ekphrasis in painting typically terminates in storylessness, so the linguistic character of music must, at some point or other, *leave off*.

*Music as a language.* According to this model, music is the one universal language, a sort of pentecostal tongue of fire, in that it behaves as a language not learned systematically but understood intuitively by everyone. This model is in some ways obviously untenable: how could one say “The persimmons are mottled but unripe” without recourse to spoken words? But it provides a powerful dream for activating certain

potentialities of musical expression, even though it is most pervasive as a trope of comedy, as (for example) when Harpo Marx (in *Duck Soup*) carries on one end of a telephone conversation strictly by means of a bicycle horn. Still, there is a case to be made for the thesis that music can operate in its way as a complete language, since every formal property of speech—formal in the sense of nondenotative—can, I believe, be understood as a formal property of music. Insofar as music *is* a language, it is scarcely even a pseudomorphosis to find the right words to describe (narrate, dramatize) a purely instrumental phenomenon; and yet it is good to be clear that all verbalizing of music is speculative and idiosyncratic, though as we shall see there are some possibilities for objectivity.

Among the schemes for classifying the formal properties of speech are those based on small units, such as inflection and phoneme construction; those based on middle-sized units, such as syntax; and those based on large units, such as the structures of rational persuasion that we call rhetoric, or the structures of seduction that we call narrative and drama. It is hard to exaggerate how profoundly we understand music as a language. Or, to put it better, how profoundly language understands music as a language, since language tends to understand everything as a language.

The vocabulary of music analysis is amazingly dependent on terms from linguistics, as the words *phrase* and *theme* quickly show; and I suspect that the history of music has been strongly shaped by the conscious or subconscious tendency of composers to literalize the vocabulary of music analysis. Consider the term *subject*: the instant I denote the main melodic entity in a composition as a subject, I have thereby promoted that thing into a little person, or at least into a crucial matter with as yet unexplained properties, and I compel a tacit grammatical search for a way of explaining the rest of the composition as a predicate to that subject. The rest of the composition becomes a way of

learning about the subject, of teasing out its attributes, of defining its contours, its submissions to new harmonic contexts, its recalcitrances against ill treatment. The term *subject* imparts a prestige, a centrality, that the sequence of notes might not otherwise possess. Indeed, the term *subject* has an implicit push toward narrative in that the vicissitudes of the subject during the course of the composition start to become heard as adventures. This process is sometimes explicit, as in Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* (1888), in which the composer used the same theme to represent (in the opening bars) the Sultan listening to his new wife's stories, and Sindbad navigating his boat through sea-sickening orchestral swell. A nice psychological touch: the Sultan imagines himself as the hero of his wife's story, like a boy reading a Superman comic book and imagining that Superman has his own face.

Large musical structures can recall other sorts of large speech structures. The opening of the slow movement of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto (1807), in which the piano and the orchestra don't speak at the same time but are confined to separate acoustic and emotional domains, impresses most listeners as a drama—not a narrative, not a piece of rhetoric, but a drama. What is the story here? I once heard a radio broadcast in which the pianist Krystian Zimerman was reported as saying that the movement represented Christ before Pontius Pilate. In 1859, A. B. Marx, in his biography of Beethoven, sketched out an Orpheus scenario for the concerto. The novelist E. M. Forster also heard Orpheus:

This famous little movement consists of a dialogue between orchestra and piano, the orchestra rough, the piano plaintive, the orchestra gradually calmer. It is very easy music; it strikes or strokes immediately, and elderly gentlemen before myself have called it "Beauty and the Beast." What about Orpheus

and the Furies, though? That is the idea that has slipped into my mind to the detriment of the actual musical sounds, and when the movement begins I always repair to the entrance of Hell and descend under the guidance of Gluck [in the second act of *Orfeo ed Euridice*] through diminishing opposition to the Elysian Fields. There has been no word-making, to be sure, but there has been a big operatic import. . . . The piano turns into Orpheus and *via* him into Miss Marie Brema, whom I best remember in that rôle, and the strings and wind, waving less and less their snaky locks, sink at last into acquiescence with true love. Then the third movement starts. The parallel breaks, and I am back in a world which seems four-square and self-contained, the world of the opening.<sup>5</sup>

Forster felt sad when the concerto lost its linguistic character and disenchanting itself back into “mere” music—as if Beethoven’s imagination had failed him at the instant the music failed to approximate some sort of speech-act. It is slightly disquieting, perhaps contrary to experience, to think that music is less potent, in a sense less music, if it fails to support clear story outlines.

Sometimes music addresses itself not to the imagination but to the discerning intellect and attempts to ape the language of oratory. In his 1739 treatise *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, Johann Mattheson understands the art of musical composition as classical rhetoric transposed into a language of tones, cleanly organized into *inventio*, *dispositio* (articulation of the invented idea into parts), *decoratio*, and *pronuntiatio* (delivery)—Mattheson even plays with forensic models of musical rhetoric, in which a composition is divided into *exordium*, *narratio* (statement of facts), *divisio* (forecast of main points in the speaker’s favor), *confirmatio*, *confutatio* (rebuttal), and *peroratio*. Mattheson and other musical rhetoricians also provided tables of figures of speech

complete with examples, so the reader could ponder the musical equivalent of (say) exclamation, ellipsis, and pleonasm. Many of the tropes in the tables pertain to insistence, and it is clear that music is quite handy at repeating, ornamenting, developing, augmenting, or otherwise waxing large upon an idea—in that sense music is much like spoken oratory.

Let us look at an example of an easy translation of a figure of speech from the domain of language to that of music. If you begin every sentence with the same few words, you're using the trope called anaphora: "We shall fight in France, we shall fight in the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, . . . we shall fight on the beaches," in Churchill's splendid anaphora from 1940. The old musical theorists discovered anaphora in musical compositions; one, Athanasius Kircher, defined it as a repetition of the same theme on different notes in different parts. Kircher's example of anaphora is taken from a motet by Heinrich Schütz, "Freut euch des Herren," from *Symphoniae Sacrae*, op. 10 (1647), in which the words "Singet dem" keep staggering from one voice to another. It is the rhetoric of "We shall fight . . . we shall fight" translated into music. If the singers were replaced by violins, it would still be anaphora, utterly without a text.<sup>6</sup>

You will note that many of the tropes mentioned by the old musicologists (anaphora, pleonasm, and so forth) are somewhat exotic: literary rhetoric emphasizes a set of tropes different from that of musical rhetoric. In speech and writing, most tropes pertain not to insistence but to transposition: here the basic figures are metaphor and simile, which alas seem not to exist in the world of music, or to exist only tangentially: how can one sequence of notes take the place of, or allude to, or hover alongside of, an absent sequence of notes? Furthermore, a central oratorical device is contradiction: not only am I right, but you are wrong. But music, while it may have many parts of speech, seems

to lack a privative, an intelligible *not*: a musical event can't easily be annulled, or vitiated, or dismissed, by another musical event. To some extent a strong contrast or a bar or two of silence may act as a negation, but the listener may regard the subsequent material as a supplement to the previous material instead of a denial of it. There are a few effective acts of musical negation: the opening of the fourth movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (1824), whose huge discord proceeds to annihilate the themes of the preceding movements one by one; the great shriek in the adagio of Mahler's Tenth; a number of moments in Alfred Schnittke's work. But these can be seen as special stunts, and their methods would be hard to promote into a general model of contradiction via music.

So to evaluate music as a reasonable discourse becomes a frustrating matter: a musical composition may have many discursive aspects, may even, like Charles Ives's Second Quartet (1907–13), represent a bunch of men screaming at each other about the American Civil War, but it finally seems able to go only so far in mapping itself according to oratorical form. In the second movement, the second violinist, whom Ives called a "Rollo"—that is, a sissy—tries to calm the argument in a passage that Ives marked *Andante emasculata*. This is perhaps the only piece of homophobic chamber music in the whole repertoire. But Ives's jokes are often more easily understood by study of the score than by listening to a performance, and the only way that the auditor can catch the Civil War references is by recognizing the quoted tunes associated with the Yanks and the Rebs.

Perhaps the most successful of all strategies for discursifying music lies on the level of inflection. Here we have not only such stunts as Harpo's bicycle horn but also the hero's wife in Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* (1899) who "speaks" so intelligibly through a violin that it tempts the listener to imagine actual verbal dialogue, wheedling, cajoling, pouting, vituperating, or, as Strauss indicates in one particularly

challenging instruction to the violinist, *heuchlerisch schmachtend*—hypocritically languishing.

Another example is “Bacchus at whose orgies is heard the noise of gaggling women’s tattling tongues and shouting out of boys,” the fourth of Benjamin Britten’s *Six Metamorphoses After Ovid* (1951), in which a solo oboe rattles and shouts a language that the listener has never been taught and yet understands quite clearly. By choosing Bacchus as the god of speech-music, Britten stresses the Dionysiac character of this art: music seems to be nothing more than speech grown so excited that only the excitement is intelligible, not the words. Britten seems to appeal to old fantasies of an all-compulsive archaic language of sound-gestures: Rousseau, for example, imagined that a modern European, only faintly acquainted with Arabic, would prostrate himself, abandon his Christian beliefs, and march in the armies of Islam if he had heard Muhammad preach, burning with the enthusiasm of his prophecy.<sup>7</sup>

And yet even in these examples, where music seems ready to assert itself as a language, as a modality of word-inflection in the absence of the word, there are certain counterpressures that threaten to destroy its linguistic character. The first of Britten’s *Six Metamorphoses After Ovid* is “Pan who played upon the reed pipe which was Syrinx, his beloved.” This nobly poised cantilena makes the Bacchus movement seem by contrast almost submusical, a kind of woodwind gargling. To introduce musical speechifying into a composition usually means that the composer thereby specifies other areas of a composition with higher melodic contour and clearer harmonic articulation—in short, more like music because less like speech. An old but effective example of this tendency can be found in Marc-Antoine Charpentier’s miniature opera *Les plaisirs de Versailles* (early 1680s), in which La Musique and La Conversation debate whether Louis XIV would be more delighted to hear music or to engage in a lively chat: La Conversation argues in

favor of talk by singing her lines in a *langue frétillante* (frisky), a garrulous gabble above a hectoring bass viol; whereas La Musique preens herself in *accords charmants*, a long slow ravishing legato. Though Charpentier characterizes La Conversation by musical means, music itself seems the exact opposite of talkiness.

Furthermore, there is a notable lack of coordination among the various linguistic models possible to music. Britten's Bacchus movement is extremely talkative on the level of inflection, but not talkative at all on the level of rhetoric or narrative: there is scarcely even the ghost of a story or an argument, just a series of speech-gestures. Similarly, the examples of rhetoric that Mattheson cites don't tend to have any inflectional force behind them. In Strauss's tone poems one can find several examples of inflectional imitation, but it's often oddly detached from the story, indeed slowing down the momentum of the story: Strauss's hero's wife is, from the point of view of the narrative, a tedious digression, inhibiting the hero from getting on with his business. Strauss's chatterboxes, such as the monks in *Don Quixote* (1898), provide comic relief—discursivity as a sort of local color or amusement pasted onto the music, instead of the crucial matter of music. Even the narrative aspect of the tone poem can seem dangerously extrinsic, which is why composers have often been so uneasy about publishing them. Strauss is famous for narrative specificity, but the program of *Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche* (Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks—or Lusty Strokes, 1895) remained unpublished: it is known only through a table of twenty-three motives that exists in the manuscript score and through some help he gave to Wilhelm Mauke when Mauke was writing a guide to the work. The tone poem begins with a “once upon a time” gesture, and soon we hear the “subject”—Till himself—in a theme that poises for a moment on a minor third before completing itself on the major third (the solo horn rises from G# to A, in the key of F). At the end of the horn theme we hear a bit of the endless

sequence of orchestral titters, giggles, and razzes that Strauss has at his command. At last, after many rascally tricks, Till is caught and hanged, yet even on the gallows, as figures on the clarinet and other solo instruments suggest above the drum roll, Till keeps joking. You hear that drop of a major seventh—*der Tod*—just as Till falls and breaks his neck. But let me return to an earlier episode, where Strauss offers some extraordinarily precise notations of complicated events. At one point Till disguises himself: as Strauss said, “Dressed as a priest he oozes unction and morality.” At the end of this passage a clarinet plays a figure glossed by Strauss as follows: “But the rogue’s big toe protrudes beneath the cassock” (in the published score this moment is marked *schelmisch*, “roguelike”). Strauss felt that he had reached such a pitch of mastery of representation that the sudden emerging of a toe could be depicted by purely orchestral means; whether it’s Till’s big right toe or his big left toe, Strauss doesn’t say. On the other hand, there are also episodes of utter vagueness (“On to new pranks”). Every tone poem I know has episodes where a program is not only superfluous but impossible to construct: Strauss in particular always inserts blurs, patches of inenarrable confusion, like the gray blob that disturbs the center of Manet’s painting *Music in the Tuileries Garden* (1862).

The more closely we examine the hypothesis that music is a language, whether in theory or in practice, the less tenable it appears. After exhaustive study of Mattheson’s tables of tropes and of many other old treatises, the musicologist George J. Buelow—to whom I’m much indebted—concludes, “Many of the musical figures . . . originated in attempts to explain or justify irregular, if not incorrect, contrapuntal writing.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, the rhetorical aspects of music seem to be concentrated in various areas of deviance from accepted musical practice; so we are left with the uncomfortable dilemma that music is a kind of rhetoric, even while music is more rhetorical when it breaks down than when it obeys the rules. I believe that similar paradoxes

result from any attempt to impose a linguistic character on music. Perhaps the finest of all recent students of musical narrative, Carolyn Abbate, has announced, in effect, that the more she studies musical narrative, the less she finds: “In my own interpretations . . . I will interpret music as *narrating* only rarely. It is not narrative, but it possesses moments of narration, moments that can be identified by their bizarre and disruptive effect.”<sup>9</sup>

Jean-Jacques Nattiez offered a still bleaker view, seeming to deny even those rare moments of narration that Abbate found: “‘Music has no past tense,’ as Carolyn Abbate rightly observes. It can evoke the past by means of citations or stylistic borrowings, but it cannot narrate, cannot speak what *took place* in time past. . . . Literary narrative is an invention, a lie. Music cannot lie. The responsibility for joining character-phantoms with action-shadows lies with me, the listener, since it does not lie within *music’s* capacities to join subject and predicate.”<sup>10</sup> A musical narrative, then, is a confabulation of the listener or of the composer, who is evidently merely another listener with no special interpretive credentials. It seems that music behaves linguistically only in a spasmodic, haphazard, and irregular manner. The search for music’s tongue seems to render music mute.

Furthermore, from the beginning of theoretical discourse about music, there are strong hints that there is something desperately wrong with the attempt to understand music as a language. There exists a curious manual of advice for writing a bad opera, *Il teatro alla moda* (c. 1720), in which Benedetto Marcello informs the apprentice hack how to organize his arias:

Let [the composer] see to it that the arias, to the very end of the opera, are alternatively a lively one and a pathetic one, without regard to the words, the modes, or the proprieties of the scene. If substantive nouns, e.g., *padre*, *impero* [empire]

*amore, arena, beltà* [beauty], *lena* [vigor], *core* [heart], etc. . . . should occur in the arias, the modern composer should base upon them a long passage; e.g., *pa . . . impeeee . . . amoooo . . . areeee . . . reeee . . . beltàaaaa . . . lenaaaaa . . .* The object is to get away from the ancient style, which did not use passages on substantive nouns or on adverbs, but only on words signifying some passion or movement; e.g., *tormento, affanno* [breathlessness], *canto, volar* [to fly], *cader* [to fall], etc.<sup>11</sup>

Marcello is profoundly suspicious of static nouns: he would like to banish solid objects from serious attention by musicians. This makes sense, in that the denotative functions of language have always seemed the least likely to translate into music. On the other hand, what hope is there for creating a language without nouns? Jorge Luis Borges once imagined a language consisting entirely of impersonal verbs:

For them the world is not a concurrence of objects in space; it is a series of independent and incommensurable acts. It is successive and temporal, not spatial. There are no nouns in Tlön's conjectural *Ursprache*, from which the "present" languages and dialects proceed: there are impersonal verbs qualified by monosyllabic suffixes (or prefixes) with an adverbial value. For example: there is no word that corresponds to the word *moon*, but there is a verb that would be in Spanish *lunecer* or *lunar* ["to moonrise," "to moon"]. They would say *The moon rose over the river* as *Hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö . . .* Xul Solar translated it succinctly: . . . *Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned*. ["Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," 1947; ellipsis in the original]<sup>12</sup>

(The last phrase is in English in the original.) To understand the behavior of the ocean in Debussy's *La mer* (1905) in similar terms has

a certain attraction—onward beneath the up-diamonding it surged, one might say of certain passages. And yet to accept music as a defective language is merely to call increasing attention to its defectiveness, rather than its power.

*Music as a nonlanguage.* If music slips through our grasp if we try to understand it as a language, the next step is to try to put together a nonlinguistic theory of music. On this side of the divide there are distinguished historical precedents: Pythagoras, who heard music as a sort of celestial arithmetic, a sound-map of the starry sky; and Eduard Hanslick, the Viennese music critic and champion of Brahms, who defined music as *tönend bewegte Form*—a term that might be translated literally as “soundingly moved form,” or less literally as “dynamic sound-form” or “form set into motion through sound” or (perhaps best) “motion-form perceptible through the ear.” It is no wonder that Hanslick and Wagner detested each other—Wagner even toyed with the idea of using the name Hanslick for the ignorant carping critic in *Die Meistersinger*—for Hanslick’s asemantic theory of music is exactly opposed to Wagner’s semantically overcharged notions of music. For Hanslick, music is to the ear what Alexander Calder’s mobiles, in the next century, would be to the eye: a shifting series of acoustic cross sections. To listen to a musical composition is not to hear a displacement of speech but to attend to shapes opening through modulatory space and then closing up at cadences.

In the twentieth century, such nonlinguistic models would continue to attract certain composers. Erik Satie wrote a piece of *musique d’ameublement*—furniture music—which he titled *Wallpaper in Forged Iron*; George Antheil considered his works to be paintings on a time-canvas; and Stravinsky audibly pieced together such works as *Renard* by the method of collage, pasting short snippets into repetitive chains—the scissors and the gluepot have replaced the rhetoric book as a means of organization. Stravinsky’s distaste for expression—“I consider that

music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to *express* anything at all”—has of course strong anti-linguistic tendencies. What Pythagoras, Hanslick, Satie, Antheil, and Stravinsky have in common is this: by refusing the idea that music is a language, they embrace the idea that music is a species of visual art realized in sound. When discourse seems to evaporate, pictures fly in to occupy the empty space—for theory, like nature, abhors a vacuum.

And yet it's not clear that the opposition between discourse and the visual arts can be sustained. From Apelles to Jackson Pollock and beyond, pictures have seemed pregnant with stories, and have been understood through rhetorical models. It is possible that music's attempt to flee from language through reliance on pictorial methods will only lead back to language by means of an oblique route—we are all so thickly imprisoned in verbal constructions of reality that every escape tunnel we dig will lead us back to the same jail.

Of course, there are some composers whose methods seem to exclude any possibility of contamination by language: John Cage, for example, whose post-1951 reliance on various sorts of aleatory construction and indeterminate performance vitiates any standard notion of the semantic, or the rhetorical, or the grammatical, or the speech-inflective. If Cage's compositions are music, then music would seem to be not only nonlinguistic but the antidote to language. But it is just here, where music and speech seem to diverge utterly, that they start to swerve together: for Cage treats speech simply as a form of nonsung mouth music, by constructing discourse according to the same aleatory procedures that he used to govern his music. In one well-known example, he wrote out a series of random statements and then, during the question-and-answer session following a lecture, read the statements one after another, without regard to the actual questions. A more thorough deconstruction can be found in *Solo for Voice 2* (1960), in which Cage instructs the performer to write vowels and consonants on a

transparent sheet and then, through certain manipulations of this sheet over a piece of paper inscribed with lines, to devise an array of phonemes that will be the text to be performed.

This sort of anti-language can be dismissed as a special stunt with no relevance to speech as we usually speak it. But the tendency of linguistics from Saussure to Jacques Derrida has been to remove physical objects from the domain of language, to understand language as chains of endlessly deferred signifiers, never terminating in any actual thing. Every attempt to dereferentialize language tends to turn what the TV meteorologist says into an occult version of *Solo for Voice 2*, in which the phonic aspects grow increasingly opaque, increasingly an occasion for aesthetic delight in their heard immediacy. Wittgenstein's later philosophy repeatedly stresses the musical aspects of normal speech; as he says in *Philosophical Investigations* (sect. 527), "Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a sentence lies nearer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme."<sup>13</sup> It fascinates me that these two sentences are, in effect, musical variations of the same sentence: Wittgenstein is proving his point in the act of making it. For Wittgenstein, music is not like speech; instead, speech is a special case of music. Some of the things you say to me I understand in the way I understand Mozart; some of the things in the way I understand Cage; some of the things in the way I understand Britney Spears. But in all cases, speech is a game with sounds, just as music is a game with sounds—neither strictly possesses meaning or conviction, but meaning and conviction may glide around either.

Recent rhetoricians, such as Andrzej Warminski and Paul de Man, also describe a rhetoric that looks musical rather than discursive. According to de Man, "Every text generates a referent that subverts the grammatical principles to which it owed its constitution. . . . [There is]

a fundamental incompatibility between grammar and referential meaning.”<sup>14</sup> But if the language is beset by the same problems of jarring and incommensurable, un-unifiable models that beset music, then music and language are in exactly the same uncomfortable situation. Yes, Strauss’s *Till Eulenspiegel* lurches wildly from narrative to speech-inflection to exasperating tangles of unconstruables; but a written chronicle of Till’s adventures would do the same. So we are left in paradox: the more we try to understand music as language, the more strongly it resists that understanding; and the more we try to understand music as the opposite of language, the more sweetly, strongly, plainly it speaks to the ear. We understand the siren’s song only at the moment when we stop trying to understand it.

### *Music’s Mythology: Origins and Endings*

The artwork contains within itself the history of its medium. I shall show how this works in music, but it might be plainer if I began with a discussion of a painting—or, more exactly, a discussion of a discussion of a painting.

Maybe the single most beautiful essay on aesthetics in the whole history of philosophy is Martin Heidegger’s work on the origin of the work of art—*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks* (1935–36). Heidegger argues that there are two modalities of being, which he calls world and earth. Earth is the closed, undisclosable universe of physical objects, stubbornly resisting every human attempt to confront or understand or come to terms with it—you can shatter a stone, but each fragment remains just as obdurate, as grimly unforthcoming as the original. World, on the other hand, is never objective: it is the universe brought into the domain of the human, configured by human decision, instinct with human presence, not something alien but the shelter in which we all huddle.



FIG. 44. *Vincent van Gogh, A Pair of Shoes (1886).*

Heidegger meditates at length on a painting of Vincent van Gogh's, *A Pair of Shoes* (fig. 44):

Out of the dark opening of the blown-out insides of the battered shoe there gazes the toil of the worker's footsteps. In the earthy-massive heaviness of the battered shoe there is stored up the doggedness of the slow going through the long-drawn-out and always-the-same furrows of the field, over which a raw wind blows. On the leather there lie the damp and fullness of the ground. Under the sole there shifts the loneliness of the field paths through the falling evening. In the

battered shoe there pulses the hidden call of the earth, the earth's silent abounding of ripening grain and the earth's lightless self-denial in the fallow waste of the winter field. Through this beaten stuff there is drawn the uncomplaining fear about the uncertainty of bread, the wordless joy at once again surviving hardship, the quaking at the onset of birth and the trembling at the threat of death.<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere in this essay Heidegger notes that the world worlds—*die Welt weltet*—and it seems that the world over-fragrant with humanness starts whirling, worlding itself, out of these splayed spavined shoes. Human presence in the universe transubstantiates right here.

Out of the dark opening of Heidegger's stunning paragraph there has gaped a good deal of later philosophy, including a riff by Fredric Jameson. But I want to play a slightly different shell game with this shoe, by taking it not as a talisman or thumb drive into which the felt reality of farm life has been uploaded, but as a talisman into which an artistic medium has been compressed: the whole history of painting lurks there. Under the sole there is stuck the mud with which the cave dweller made the first intended mark on the wall; in the lacings and unlacings there are all the disciplines and relinquishments of craft; within the soft broken flapping tongue there is all the speech of painting ready to be heard. Furthermore, I believe that the same can be said of any painting: the beginning, the middle, and the end of art history are all co-present, waiting. In the greatest paintings we often feel this immanence with unusual clarity. Heidegger was wrong in thinking that van Gogh was painting a stray farmer's shoes: van Gogh was painting his own—they are a painter's shoes, and van Gogh had trudged a long way in them, over thousands or millions of years, from East Africa to the caves of Lascaux to Provence.

In H. G. Wells's *Time Machine* (1895) the hero leaves off at the end of time, at the margin of an ocean made of dead seas, a post-human, almost post-animate earth lit by a huge cold red sun:

Then like a red-hot bow in the sky appeared the edge of the sun. . . . As I stood sick and confused I saw again the moving thing upon the shoal—there was no mistake now that it was a moving thing—against the red water of the sea. It was a round thing, the size of a football perhaps, or, it may be, bigger, and tentacles trailed down from it; it seemed black against the weltering blood-red water, and it was hopping fitfully about.

If this Portuguese-man-of-war-like thing is the endpoint of our evolution, the mark that its tentacle leaves on the sand, if made with the intent to leave a mark, is latent in van Gogh's painting of his shoe. You can even see the tentacular waverings in the lower right-hand corner.

But first mythologies of origin, then mythologies of the end.

One of the most striking characteristics of music as a language is its predilection for originary myth—but the languages of music, painting, and literature each deal with originary myth in a slightly different fashion. We have seen that much literature explicitly pertains to stories about origin, and painting pertains to them as well, implicitly. Literature and painting differ, however, in that there is an important subset of literary creation tales that concern the creation of language itself; whereas there are few paintings in which the creation of the world is imagined as a picture about the creation of paint. Michelangelo's fresco of God creating the sun and the moon shows the sun as a compass-ruled disk marked with yellow pigment applied as if combed in a circle across the wet plaster, but you don't see this and think to yourself, God

creating the art of fresco. Some of Kandinsky's catastrophe paintings, such as *The Flood*, go farther toward embodying a rhythm of destruction and creation in terms of forms receding into and emerging from a chaos of paint; but even so, they aren't exactly meta-paintings, except in the sense (nontrivial, I think) that every painting is also a meta-painting.

In literature, however, stories about ultimate origins tend to default into stories about the origin of speech:

<sup>17</sup>But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die. <sup>18</sup>And the LORD God said, *It is* not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. <sup>19</sup>And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought *them* unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that *was* the name thereof. <sup>20</sup>And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. <sup>21</sup>And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; <sup>22</sup>And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. <sup>23</sup>And Adam said, *This is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. [Gen. 2, KJV]

The naming of things occurs at an odd point in the creation story. First comes a divine prohibition concerning a special tree—clearly God created language along with Adam, because Adam could not have known what God was prohibiting if the word *tree* didn't already exist;

on the other hand, God is happy to let Adam assist in filling out the fauna chapters of the dictionary—his invention of their common nouns confirms his dominion over them. God seems to create syntax and basic Hebrew; Adam makes up the language of animate creation. Language is a co-creation of man and God, and God (as the King James translators have it) seems to allow Adam to correct or supplement God's own vocabulary: God calls Adam's as-yet-uncreated companion *help meet for him*, whereas Adam grandly announces that she shall be called *Woman*. (Adam will not name her Eve until after the Fall.) So Adamic language comes into being between a divine prohibition and a sort of scission that created a sexual partner for Adam—that is, between a taboo and a seduction. And formations of taboo and formations of seduction are still today the primary speech-acts: speech charges entities in the world around us with both kinds of erotic power.

Like the author of Genesis, Socrates also asked himself how words came into being but offered a far more prosaic account. His argument is found in Plato's *Cratylus*, where Hermogenes claims that the relation between word and thing is conventional and arbitrary, while Cratylus disagrees, arguing that things may be rightly or wrongly named. Socrates, meanwhile, listens to a summary of their debate, taking no firm position; he seems first to be on Cratylus's side, then ambiguously on Hermogenes'. Socrates argues that if a thing is to be rightly named, there needs to be a fundamental resemblance between the name and what it refers to, and he wonders whether a perfect correspondence might be possible: "I should say . . . that the image, if expressing in every point the entire reality, would no longer be an image" (432b, trans. Benjamin Jowett). Socrates finally scoffs at the notion that a word can be equivalent to an object: "But then how ridiculous would be the effect of names on things, if they were exactly the same with them! For they would be doubles of them, and no one would be able to

determine which were the names and which were the realities” (432d). Any real name, Socrates suggests, is a more or less faulty representation of its correspondent thing. He asks himself whether the original “legislator”—the fellow who invented names and attached them to things—was extraordinarily wise or knowledgeable; no, Socrates decides, the legislator was more ignorant than we are today, so there is no special prestige to be discovered in the origins of Greek or of any other language. (Socrates’ cold eye toward origins foreshadows a similar attitude in Nietzsche and Michel Foucault.)

By involving the creation of language with the creation of the universe, the author of Genesis shows himself or herself to be a poet; by carefully separating the creation of language from any sort of supernatural potency, Socrates shows himself to be a philosopher. Cratylus himself keeps trying to introduce poetry into the dialogue: “I believe, Socrates, the true account of the matter to be, that a power more than human gave things their first names, and that the names which are thus given are necessarily their true names” (438c). But Socrates keeps challenging such lines of speculation, keeps reducing words to defective human inventions. What Cratylus would charge with glamour (itself a word etymologically related to *grammar*), Socrates would leave commonplace, stumpy. To write literature it helps to believe that the phonic element of language contains some dim vestige of the huge voice of God the Father, and that etymological relations among words are traces of some primal unity of human speech, language ante-Babel. In that sense every poet is Judeo-Christian—or Cratylian.

Music about music’s origin also falls into two categories: Judeo-Christian and Greek. Composers following the Judeo-Christian tradition rarely pay much attention to the brief biblical mention of the first musician (“And his brother’s name was Jubal: he was the father of all such as handle the harp and organ,” Genesis 4:21); instead they seek

ways of embodying in wordless sound the dark words with which the Bible begins:

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. <sup>2</sup>And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. <sup>3</sup>And God said, Let there be light: and there was light.

This passage conceives creation as a theme appropriately grasped by the eye. It is as if the eye exists even before the universe exists. The ear also exists in that there seems to be someone to hear the words as well as to see the images—unless God is simply talking to himself as he utters the great command for light. But composers still face the task of translating from the eye to the ear in order to produce creation music based on the beginning of Genesis.

The *void* of Genesis 1:2 might suggest silence, but a musical composition that opens with silence is unlikely to be dramatic in the proper way, so it is easier to interpret *void* as a something like a vague roaring, a tohu-bohu in which all sounds are mixed together before being carefully separated into finite notes. The universe, before it comes into being, is pure depth: it is God's task to create the shallows, to invent surfaces and inflections, desinences. The dark waters seem to be a thick slosh, all the elements co-present, commingled, waiting for God to qualify them.

In Western music the most famous account is Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* (1798), which opens with a flagrantly literal version of chaos. Haydn was a Moses by temperament, a lawgiver who legislated (not single-handedly, not out of nothing) the sonata form of the symphony, in ways that would stand for two hundred years or so. But he was also Mosaic in that he was determined both to give laws and to

break them. Sometimes I wonder whether his greatest delight might have been the *plaisir de rompre*; and there is perhaps no passage in his entire huge body of work that displays more of his singular energy than the opening of *The Creation*. The notion of embodying originary chaos in art is, as we shall see, far more attractive to composers than to poets (and this is a principal way in which music about origins differs from literature about origins): poets, philosophers, and scripture writers *discuss* chaos but don't typically begin with a disordered agrammatical string of words.

For the formalist Haydn, there was no greater challenge, no greater incentive, than the instruction "without form, and void"—*wüst und leer*, "waste and empty," as Luther's Bible has it. Haydn conceived transcendental waste as punctuationlessness, as he noted to his friend Fredrik Samuel Silverstolpe: "You have certainly noticed how I avoided the resolutions that you would most readily expect. The reason is, that there is no form in anything yet."<sup>16</sup> The prelude, marked "Representation of Chaos," opens as a somewhat undifferentiated loudness—not quite an arrhythmia, not quite an anharmonia (God's first creative act is a thick C minor chord), but with tendencies in these directions. It is a stately tumbling of various figures—dominant arpeggios, chromatic surges—we hear a slow seething of the deep, a stirring of a kraken, a blank aimless tumult, inexpressive, panexpressive. Everything is happening and nothing is happening: Carl Friedrich Zelter, Goethe's music adviser, caught this quality well: "One is astonished at the multitude of small, playful figures that swarm round huge dark masses, like clouds of insects against the great horizon."<sup>17</sup> But as Haydn said, the chief effect arises from the absence of cadence; the ear loses its bearings in an ungoverned harmonic space, until God creates light in a great tingly blare of C major. Out of the undistinguished there comes distinction. Ultimately, Haydn's orchestra will make more and more precise semantic divisions: Adam is a character in the oratorio,



Of jarring atoms lay,  
And could not heave her head,  
The tuneful voice was heard from high:  
    "Arise, ye more than dead."  
Then cold, and hot, and moist, and dry,  
    In order to their stations leap,  
    And Music's pow'r obey.  
From harmony, from heav'nly harmony  
    This universal frame began:  
    From harmony to harmony  
Thro' all the compass of the notes it ran,  
    The diapason closing full in Man.

This cosmogony seems derived from Greek sources, particularly the atomic theory of Democritus and the natural philosophy of Empedocles. In his poem *On Nature* (mid-fifth-century B.C.E.) Empedocles wrote of four elements: earth, air, water, and fire; according to Aristotle, Empedocles was the first to distinguish these elements clearly. The elements are governed by two conflicting forces, Love and Strife: Love unites them, Strife makes them fly asunder; neither can finally conquer the other, so the universe exists in a state of continual slow oscillation between chaos and cosmos.

A twofold tale I shall tell: at one time it grew to be one alone out of many, at another again it grew apart to be many out of one. Double is the birth of mortal things and double their failing; for one is brought to birth and destroyed by the coming together of all things, the other is nurtured and flies apart as they grow apart again. And these things never cease their continual exchange, now through Love all coming together into one, now again each carried apart by the hatred



rhythms, as Music works her magic; eventually the notes run merrily through the compass of a fine Mixolydian scale, and the diapason closing full on man closes full on a deep, rich D-major chord, as if humankind were both the ultimate bass and the highest achievement of creation.

Handel was not the first composer to experiment with an Empedoclean version of a creation story. Two years earlier, in his ballet *Les éléments* (1737), Jean-Féry Rebel had explicitly attempted to portray chaos as a heavy commingled condition: the elements slowly disentangle themselves from a sort of musical mud, like the quicksandy chaos through which Satan struggles in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), "With head, hands, wings, or feet pursues his way, / And swims or sinks, or wades, or creeps, or flies" (2.947–48). Rebel explicitly noted that he "dared to undertake to link the idea of the confusion of the elements with that of confusion of harmony."<sup>19</sup> This opening symphony, *Le chaos*, presents thick clots of unstructured laborious sound that the violins and flutes try to smooth into scales; seven times the chaos music returns, with diminishing vehemence, as the rule of Love supersedes the old anarchy. Each element has its own dance: dainty flute chirps for air, for fire brisk rushes of violins within a stately chaconne, and so forth; but we already heard these flutes and violins prominently in the chaos music, as if the later dances were promotions out of the previous mess.

Empedocles is not the only Greek source for musical creation mythology: Pythagoras, the semi-real sixth-century B.C.E. philosopher, has also provided a good deal of inspiration. Playing on his monochord (a one-stringed instrument) he noted that the octave was generated by halving the length of the string, given a constant tension; and that the other basic concords (the fifth, the fourth) were simple 3:2 or 4:3 ratios; furthermore he described occult correlations between this phonic arithmetic with the movement of the planets—the "music of the spheres" that, according to Iamblichus, Pythagoras alone of all men could hear:

World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras  
 Fingering upon a fiddle-stick or strings

What a star sang and careless Muses heard. [W. B. Yeats, "Among  
 School Children"]

There is no particular creation story associated with Pythagoras, but the notion of chaos as some themeless musical pudding that resolves itself first into pure consonant intervals and then into intelligible scales has a strong Pythagorean aspect. Such a movement can be heard in the previous musical chaoses we've studied; but there are several other works in which Pythagoras is, in effect, the secret hero of the piece. The twentieth century is particularly rich in Pythagorean music, probably because the fundamentals of music were then being scrutinized with such agony, such delight. Pythagoras smiles in certain compositions by Harry Partch and La Monte Young written in just intonation, exact numerical pitch ratios, instead of the usual well-tempered system, with its cunning compromises that permit (say)  $D\flat$  and  $C\sharp$  to be taken as the same note—they are (mathematically speaking) not identical, but need to be treated as identical to make most keyboard instruments possible. But in any dramatic composition in which the Greek lyre is the central stage prop, it is likely that Pythagoras invisibly presides.

Arthur Honegger's ballet-melodrama *Amphion* (1929) is a case in point. Paul Valéry's elegant text concerns not the creation of the world but the creation of music and the creation of architecture: Amphion was the son of Jupiter who built the city of Thebes by means of music—the stones shaped themselves into buildings purely through the lyre's motive force. (As early as 1904 Valéry had tried to persuade Debussy to collaborate on a version of the Orpheus legend, evidently making some use of an 1891 essay on architecture.)<sup>20</sup> Honegger's piece opens with a soft sustained chord made out of a pile of fourths; the cellos start to chitter out the same fourths as a rising melody; then the

xylophone dares to experiment with another interval, a fifth. On one hand we're dwelling in Pythagoras's dreamworld of perfect consonances; on the other nothing seems yet to make sense. A tower of fourths is an impressive construct, but hard for the ear to grasp. The music illustrates Valéry's stage direction, "The Harmony of the spheres reigns, in monotone." It is a sort of not-yet-music.

Amphion is lulled by a chorus of dreams, but the Muses come and scatter them—"The silence is made of Muses." The music grows more and more ravishing, as if the Muses were the sirens of Odysseus, or those other sirens that Plato placed on each of the crystalline spheres on which the heavens rotate, sirens whose singing makes up the sphere-clang. They invoke Apollo; Apollo tells Amphion, "I place in you the origin of order," and grants him the gift of the lyre—"On its tense strings you will seek and you will find the roads that the gods follow." But when Amphion grasps the lyre and tries to play it, the first sound that emerges is one of terror and astonishment—Honegger illustrates this with a loud bitonal chord, superimposing G minor and A minor. Amphion, however, is a quick learner, and the second sound he makes is a delicate, nonaggressive version of the same bitonal chord, around which a flute plays a simple melody and a harp plays figures constructed mostly out of thirds and sixths—"All nature is under a spell." Both in the discord and in the concord there is a certain sense that Amphion has discovered that talisman of talismans, the third. Now Honegger's music has, to this point, availed itself of every resource of modern harmony—we have heard a good deal of tonal music in thirds. But this is the first moment in which the third has enjoyed special privilege, had itself called attention to: the initial music of the spheres, and the great, much-repeated vocatives ("Apollon!" "Amphion!") have been based on fourths or fifths. To build the city of Thebes, Amphion will need resources of violence and subtlety, not just the monotonously perfect intervals that move the monotonously perfect heavens.

Before long Amphion is prelude skillfully on his lyre, riffing on his root noise, the G minor/A minor bitonal chord. Together they sound most of the notes of the Mixolydian scale (the scale of the dominant in tonal harmony, a major scale with a flatted seventh). And according to the stage direction Amphion is indeed in the act of creating the scales—the labor preparatory to building the city. But Honegger never allows Amphion the satisfaction of playing a simple pure scale. The music for scale invention is boisterous, complicated, a mixture of many different scales, including quite odd ones, such as the whole-tone. Amphion exults in chromaticism, dissonance, exotic timbres—his wild imagination refuses to obey any normal scalar pattern, as he thrusts out his tone ladders in every direction. The gods themselves seem a bit too tame for such bizarreries—it takes a mortal, Amphion, to sin so madly, to erect such labyrinths and towers of sound. And in a great fugue the stones lift themselves out of their sleep and become a city—“What frightening life invades all nature!” The head of the fugue tune is a simple octave drop, but as it grows excited it misshapes itself into other intervals—the octave *clonk* may suffice for the foundation stones, but the triglyphs and metopes and the temple’s other ornaments will require more delicate work. Pythagoras himself knew hammers as well as strings: there is an old story that he listened to blacksmiths, and noted that two hammers, one twice as heavy as the other, would sound an octave apart. This is a doubtful tale—for one thing, hammers struck against anvils don’t vary their pitch in proportion to the weight of the hammer—but it is oddly congruent with Honegger’s lusty octaves for the building fugue.

The end of the work is sad. Having built the city, Amphion finds that his usefulness is over—the Muses seek some other man to inspire, and a “veiled woman, image of Love or Death” leads Amphion away. The man has so identified himself with his frozen music, his melted architecture, that he has become a superfluous thing, and must vanish.

Honegger leads us directly to Stravinsky, another mythologist of music's coming-into-being. There are passages in Honegger's *Amphion* that have a strong savor of Stravinsky's *Apollon musagète* of the previous year—a ballet about prosody, a ballet that attains its apotheosis in the form of an iambic foot, suggesting that Apollo was born specifically to give a fundamental rhythm to music and poetry: “The real subject of *Apollo* . . . is versification, which implies something arbitrary and artificial to most people, though to me art is arbitrary and must be artificial. The basic rhythmic patterns are iambic.”<sup>21</sup> Stravinsky was obsessed with writing music about the origin of music. This is true at all phases in his career—even *The Rite of Spring* (1913) can be construed in this fashion, since the high bassoon solo at the work's beginning is in some sense the work of a Russian Pan, cutting the first reed and making the first music. The ballet *Orpheus* (1948) begins with descending Phrygian scales, as if Orpheus were inventing the mode before our ears—the most perfectly Pythagorean beginning imaginable. (I have a recording by the Atrium Musicae de Madrid of the first Pythian Ode, as presumably played and sung in ancient Greece; it is uncannily like the opening of Stravinsky's *Orpheus*, but the reconstruction of archaic music is so speculative that it's possible that Stravinsky's *Orpheus* influenced the producers of this recording.) *Orpheus* continues with a number of allusions to Pythagorean rudiments: during the Dance of the Angel of Death, a trumpet plays some open intervals in a manner that Stravinsky himself compared to the bugle call “taps.” The trajectory of the whole ballet is similar to that of *The Rite of Spring*: music's basic elements are first presented in a more or less simple way, then develop into savage complexity, breathless heaves, lurches, paroxysms—the earlier ballet terminates in the sacrifice of a virgin to the god of spring, the later in the dismemberment of Orpheus by the Maenads.

Stravinsky's most ambitious attempt to mythologize origins occurred in his television mystery play *The Flood* (1962). I wonder

whether Stravinsky knew Honegger's *Amphion*, because there are a number of points of similarity between the two works, even though one is based on an urbane post-symbolist poem recounting a Greek myth, and the other on a medieval Christian play text (also, in its way, highly sophisticated). Each moves from chaos toward architecture: Honegger's chaos begins with an elementary stack of fourths, Stravinsky's (more excitingly) with a chord containing all twelve notes of the chromatic scale, spread out over the whole span of the orchestra. Amphion constructs the city of Thebes; Noah constructs the Ark—Stravinsky imagined “builders (dancers) who carry invisible boards and beams and who hammer non-existent nails”—but the hammering, though intended to be invisible on television, is perfectly audible in the orchestra.<sup>22</sup> Stravinsky conceived the builders as robots: “The dancers' movements must be as mechanical as a watch, and the builders' arms should work like semaphores”—that is, as pure incarnations of music, puppets who respond to the orchestra's inexorable declarations of rhythm.<sup>23</sup> As in *Orpheus*, Stravinsky is deriving action from musical fundamentals. The base elements of music haunted him through the whole compositional process: he even thought of supplementing Noah's line “The earth is overflowed with flood” with “a pure noise, like a sinus tone.”<sup>24</sup> A sine-wave generator, if brought into the sound world of *The Flood*, would have been something like the wordless ultimate voice of God, something beyond the pair of bass singers who represent God elsewhere in the play.

Stravinsky was bemused by the task of representing chaos: “My ‘Representation of Chaos’ is not so different from Haydn's. . . . My ‘material of Chaos’ is limited, however, and I couldn't make my Chaos last very long.”<sup>25</sup> And indeed, after the sounding of the twelve-note chord and a few thick spasms, the chaos music tapers out into Jacob's Ladder, a cleanly stitched tracery of high woodwind notes;<sup>26</sup> then we hear a *Te Deum*, as God asserts his presence, unchaoses the universe.

The important musical events come with astonishing speed in these opening bars. In the chaos music (as in Haydn's) there is little feeling for rhythm; the *Te Deum*, by contrast, is highly active rhythmically: God creates by imposing rhythmic shape on the void, the formlessness. Stravinsky noted that he associated the Jacob's Ladder effect with Chaos at the play's beginning, and with Sin at the play's end. The Ladder—even eighth notes in a  $\frac{12}{4}$  bar, giving the impression of a meterless recitative—terminates with a piccolo monotonously alternating between a high C and a very high  $D\flat$ , a minor ninth above. Then comes the *Te Deum*—Stravinsky said it was “not Gregorian but Igorian chant”—which begins with a tune that simply alternates, with much metrical inflection, between  $C\sharp$  and  $D\sharp$ . There is a certain subliminal sense here that a minor second is bad, and a major second is good.

This impression becomes sharper later, when the Serpent comes to tempt Eve. Stravinsky described his music as follows: “The Tarnhelm music for two muted horns is likely to be my first and last attempt to compose a belly dance.”<sup>27</sup> It is the merest sketch of a belly dance, a dance for the skeleton of a belly dancer. Once again it is all but rhythmless: one horn simply alternates between B and C, while the other plays various desultory notes, beginning with  $G\sharp$ . In Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, the Tarnhelm motive—the motive of the shape-shifting helmet—appears initially as a  $G\sharp$  minor chord that transforms itself into an E minor chord, and then a B chord. It is a harmonic riddle that poses the question, How many triads contain the note B?—B is the one stable element as the motive creeps up and contracts and creeps up again a little farther. (Similarly, Alberich is always Alberich, whether in the form of dragon or toad—he is going nowhere, just as the motive is going nowhere.) Stravinsky has oversimplified the Tarnhelm into the emptiest possible oscillation of two notes separated by a minor second. Chaos or Sin is little more than a vain mindless transit across a minor

ninth—that is, a minor second at an octave’s remove; Satan is the same thing.

In music drama it is usual for the Devil to get the best music; Stravinsky is extraordinary in making Chaos and Satan bores—loud bores, or insinuating bores—shapelessnesses—whereas God’s shaping force is portrayed with the utmost musical vigor. In the twelfth century the German abbess Hildegard von Bingen wrote a music drama called *Ordo virtutum* in which the Devil is a speaking role: only the theologically pure possess the gift of song. Stravinsky called the Satan of *The Flood* a “high, slightly pederastic tenor”—though it’s not a speaking role, he cajoles or yelps in weak talky melodies.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps Hildegard and Stravinsky are among the most Christian of all composers: God is the only musical presence worth attending to.

It may be that in the future, if the hold of both Genesis and Empedocles on the artistic imagination starts to weaken, composers will experiment with more scientific accounts of creation. The Big Bang would be difficult to conceive in musical terms, though Iannis Xenakis’s experiment (in *Pithoprakta*, 1956) with writing music based on representations of the distribution of gas molecules in an enclosed space (pizzicati and glissandi figure prominently) might suggest how a cosmological music might come into being. Haydn himself may have attended to scientists as well as preachers: he was astonished when he looked through William Herschel’s telescope, and Donald Tovey has suggested that the representation of Chaos in *The Creation* was inspired by the nebular hypothesis of eighteenth-century astronomy.

Until fairly recent times, composers have tended to assume that listeners have weak ears: that we need regular patient reminders of the tonic note and the normal shape of the scale or mode. (Every so often I become exasperated when composers seem to treat me like a child, and I feel grateful to Johannes Ockeghem and Bach and Anton Webern for

being grown-ups writing for grown-ups.) This is why so much music seems to be about its own coming-into-being, about the creation of a universe of musical discourse: the particular piece of music seems never to stray from its rudiments. It is as if the earth and its gravitational field have to be re-created with each composition, and Pythagoras hauled down from Elysium to affirm the right ratios of the basic intervals.

But maybe music really is a precarious art and needs constant fingering of its origins in order to prosper. And any work of art has to re-trace the whole history of its medium in order to take a strong position in the chronicle of the world's imagination.

The solidest work of art is in the end a flimsy thing, retaining a foothold on existence by grace of a community of interpreters. And works of art find ways of reminding us that all art is vain, all art not only begins in chaos but ends in the void. Even apocalyptic compositions, such as Olivier Messiaen's *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (1941), with its world-rending *Danse de la fureur*, or Georg Philipp Telemann's *Der Tag des Gerichts* (1762), in which a singer describes graphically how the harmony of the spheres becomes sheer noise, and the earth groans, and the moon whirls out of its orbit (*Das sind sie, der Verwüstung Zeichen*), tend to move toward some transcendental calm—the universe dissolves and leaves not a wrack behind.

In music there is the difference between cadence and cadenza. The rules of tonality require that a piece, or an important section of a piece, end with a cadence, an unequivocal return to the tonic note. This can be understood in many ways, but sometimes has the feeling of a jack-in-the-box recoiling, latching his own lid, leaving you to wonder whether anything happened at all. A cadenza has a more specialized sense: it is usually a bit of vocal or instrumental virtuosity that delays the actual cadence. In a concerto it is often left for the soloist to improvise; marked in the score by a fermata, the cadenza seems outside the

time scheme of the rest of the composition, a bubble in the text. Often the cadenza has an unmetred feel, as if time had stopped and music were expatiating on itself, free from the normal shackles of propriety, even of meaning. Cadenzas tend toward rapture, fever, madness, as in the great cadenza for flute and soprano in Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), composed in 1888 by Mathilde Marchesi for Nellie Melba. The music raves and then collapses, and this can be taken as a sign that all music is a raving and a collapse. A cadenza is music's vanitas.

Sometimes a composer contrives to make you feel that the music leaves off in a vacuum. A genial example is the thinning out of the orchestral mass at the end of Haydn's *Farewell* Symphony (1772): during the finale, the musicians leave one by one, each snuffing out his candle, until there are only two muted violins playing. This was intended as a friendly hint to Haydn's employer that the musicians would like to return home to their wives after a long summer in Eszterháza, but it is possible to use Haydn's technique to more somber ends: in the final scene of Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* (1957), the nuns go to the guillotine one by one, singing a "Salve regina" that becomes sparser and sparser.

Something of this shiver, this sense that the music is marching toward its own nonexistence, can be achieved in purely instrumental music. During the last minutes of Jean Sibelius's Fourth Symphony (1911), a chorale-like theme, originally devised for an (abandoned) orchestral setting of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven,"<sup>29</sup> experiments with various constructions of itself, some highly chromatic, before it simplifies, becoming increasingly stark and rigid, until finally it is no theme at all, just the notes of an A minor chord repeated almost rhythmlessly. The music has turned into catatonia.

Elsewhere in the twentieth-century repertory we find symphonies that end as if the music machine were breaking down, leaving only

jammed gears and a strip of broken metal flapping back and forth—Arthur Honegger’s Fifth Symphony (1950) is an example. And it is possible to write music that erases itself, or simply gives itself over to the empty space on which it is figured. Georg Friedrich Haas’s *Torso* (1999–2000) is an orchestral realization of an unfinished C major piano sonata by Schubert, D. 840 (1825). Schubert simply failed to complete the music, but Haas’s *Torso* is as much about unfinishedness as it is about Schubert. Toward the end of the last movement, Haas underlays a Schubertian theme with a rapid ticking—then the theme ends, but the ticking continues, a metronome furious that it has nothing left to measure; a sort of audible graph paper. Then the ticking stops. First music ends, then time ends.

Composers in earlier centuries also made music that undoes itself. In an oratorio written around 1650, *Vanitas vanitatum II*, attributed to Giacomo Carissimi, pompous music depicting the pomp of royal life suddenly collapses at the mention of the word *vanity*, like a balloon pricked with a needle:

Scepters, crowns, purple pomp,  
triumphs, laurels, honors, decorations,  
glories, even games, and delights,  
and feasts, and riches, all  
is vanity and a shadow.

The simplest meaning of the word *vanity* is “emptiness.” This oratorio is exactly equivalent to those seventeenth-century still lifes in which a skull and a housefly were somber signs of the transience of all things mortal; Carissimi even builds long rests into the music, leaving the listener to contemplate the fact that, of the things that pass away, nothing passes away so quickly as music, which makes its little noise and then is as if it never was. The French term for “still life” is *nature*

*morte*, and the ticking in Haas's *Torso* reappears, with much greater orchestral variety, in his *Natures mortes* (2003), in which, according to the composer's own description, "In the middle section, the orchestra pulses evenly in sixteenth notes, and the musical action dissolves into points on a grid."<sup>30</sup> In many compositions by Haas and his contemporaries (Helmut Lachenmann, for example), the music overtly unmusics itself; but I think that the music of every age constitutes itself through the tension between sound's self-insistence and sound's self-extinction.

You can hear in a musical composition both the origin of music and music's vanishing. In 1907 Mahler told Sibelius that a symphony must be like the world and embrace everything; but every musical composition, every artwork, embraces all time and all space:

If all things be in all,  
As I thinke, since all, which were, are, and shall  
Bee, be made of the same elements:  
Each thing, each thing implies or represents. [John Donne, *Satyre*  
5, c. 1599]

Nothing needs to be connected to anything else since they are not  
separated irrevocably to begin with. [John Cage]<sup>31</sup>

### *Narrating a Piece of Music*

Each of the arts contains its own narratology. Literature is good at telling stories, and also good at explaining how it manages to tell stories. Music is also good at telling stories, not only in tone poems but also in movements constructed as a theme and variations. In Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, the hero's music teacher Kretschmar plays the variations movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata op. 111 and narrates its story as he goes along:

The arietta theme, created for adventures and odd destinies, though born so innocent and idyllic, appears at once and pronounces itself in sixteen measures, a melody that can be reduced to a short, soulful cry that steps forth at the end of the first half: only three notes, an eighth, a sixteenth, and a dotted quarter, which can only be scanned as something like: “heav-en’sblue” or “Sad-inlove” or “Go-withgrace” or “one-fineday” or “mea-dowland”—and that is all. Now what happens to this gentle statement, this thing made so quiet and melancholy, as it undergoes rhythmic-harmonic-contrapuntal transformation, all those consequences with which the master blesses it or damns it—into what nights and what overglare, crystalline spheres, where cold and heat, rest and ecstasy are one and the same, he hurls it and lifts it up, you might call it wide-ranging, wondrous, strange, all too magnificent, without giving it a name, because it is precisely nameless.<sup>32</sup>

The plot of a whole Faust novel, in fact the plot of the very Faust novel we’re reading, lies hidden in Beethoven’s sonata. Unprogrammatic music, like this Beethoven composition, deals in various namelessnesses, and yet half-namable apparitions keep eerily coming into being. Just as a dactylic musical figure might tentatively take verbal shape as “heav-en’sblue” or “sad-inlove,” so the progress of a single musical theme, as it is deconstructed into a mere trill, or reconstructed by the addition of a fourth note in the middle of the first three, might tentatively take on the form of a particular narrative.

Any assignment of a particular narrative to a piece of music is adventitious, indeed open to ridicule. Yet a refusal to allow music its narrative moment is also, I believe, a mistake. Let me try to explain a way out of this unpleasant situation.

The most acute narratologists of music are often the most skeptical of music's possibilities of narrating. I might cite Jean-Jacques Nattiez:

Linguistic syntax, as we know, is grounded principally in a subject and a predicate, and the predicate tells us what has been stated concerning the former. There is a logical connection between the two.

In music, however, connections are situated within the sonorous discourse, not on the level of a story that this discourse is said to narrate. When I hear a march in Mahler's second symphony, I imagine that it's got something to do with a band of people, but I don't know *which* people. The march may come closer, or fade into the distance . . . but I don't know where they are coming from, or where they are going. Hearing *Till Eulenspiegel*, I can (aided by the title) recognize that it deals with the life and death of an individual. I can hear how he runs, jumps . . . but what, exactly, is he doing? . . . Literary narrative is an invention, a lie. Music cannot lie. The responsibility for joining character-phantoms with action-shadows lies with me, the listener, since it does not lie within *music's* semiological capacities to join subject and predicate. . . . Music, to cite Adorno's paradoxical comment on Mahler, is "a narrative that narrates nothing." . . .

Music is not a narrative, but an incitement to make a narrative, to comment, to analyze. We could never overemphasize the difference between music, and music as the object of metalanguages to which it gives rise. Only thus can we start to outline its symbolic functioning.<sup>33</sup>

This lucid, beautifully written statement deserves much praise. And yet I believe that Nattiez has exaggerated the difference between music and

narrative. Music is, despite Adorno, a narrative that does narrate something; and what it narrates, despite Nattiez, is not strictly a whim of the listener's but something built into the music itself.

Let me slightly alter Nattiez's example, from a march (which march?) in Mahler's Second Symphony (1895) to the cortège in the third movement of Mahler's First (1889). This movement, marked *Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen* (solemn and measured, without dragging) is also, audibly, a procession—and whence it comes and whither it goes, we know not. But would it be a better narrative, a more telling narrative, a more *narrative* narrative if we somehow knew its origin and its destination? If we had two German place names, or (in the manner of old-fashioned novels) two letters of the alphabet (A Procession from B—— to H——), would the implied story be much altered? Modern narratology has given the most intense scrutiny to the chronological structure of written narrative, to the distinction between singular and habitual action, to the language that specifies time and place (*then, here, now, usually*); but perhaps what we need first is a clear notion of what constitutes an *event*. One possible definition for an event is a consequential impinging upon a subject's body—a blow of the fist, a long-awaited kiss, a swallowing of poison, a rape—or a displacement of an impinging, such as a curse, a love letter, or the shocking news of someone's death.

I propose that the *event*, the kernel of the narrative, can in some cases be specified as exactly by music as by words. The jumping in Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel*, the *salto mortale* in Stravinsky's *Renard* have more kinesthetic immediacy than a verbal description of those leaps could provide; and insofar as a narrative is a temporal coordination of physical impingings—kicks, hops, caresses—music has tremendous narrative power. The third movement of Mahler's First Symphony begins as slow, minor-key version of the folk tune "Bruder Martin" (also called "Frère Jacques"); its middle section expatiates on the tune

that accompanies the words “Auf der Straße steht ein Lindenbaum / da hab’ ich zum ersten Mal im Schlaf geruht!” (By the road stands a lime tree; there for the first time I rested in sleep) from the fourth song (“Die zwei blauen Augen”) from Mahler’s song cycle *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (1883–85; 1896)—a song of difficult consolation after the extremes of loneliness and abandonment. But the somber “Bruder Martin” procession returns. It is not hard to reconstruct a number of precise narratives that fit this emotional trajectory:

A child has died, and this death is imaged as a nightmare dead march based on the child’s favorite song—but the nightmare briefly yields to a deeper, more restful sleep.

A child mourns the loss of someone or something he loves—though he is so young that his mourning is only a kind of trial sketch of what grief is to an adult, and the composer is aware of all that the child is ignorant of.

A grown man is mourning the death of his innocence, the passing away of the child in him, but comes to a kind of acceptance of maturity—indeed, he pre-dismisses his own sentimentality by his self-conscious distortion of the nursery tune.

Now it may be difficult to choose among these various narrative scenarios (the first of which is obviously indebted to Mahler’s 1905 *Kindertotenlieder*), but that difficulty of choice does not mean that the music is vague: it only means that a verbal storyteller has to choose among several equivalent plotlines in trying to achieve the desired narrative effect, while the composer can operate at the narrative core of things. As it happens, we know, more or less, what story Mahler had in mind, since the original subtitle of the movement, “Funeral March in



FIG. 45. *Moritz von Schwind*, *How the Beats Buried the Hunter* (1850).

the Manner of Callot,” specifies a certain well-known illustration (though in fact by Moritz von Schwind, not Jacques Callot)—as Mahler himself noted: “The composer received the immediate inspiration for this piece from a pictorial parody well known to all children in South Germany, *Des Jägers Leichenbegängnis* (The Hunter’s Funeral Procession).” So the “solution” to the quest for narrative is:

Weasels and foxes bawling into their handkerchiefs, rabbits and badgers lighting the way with torches, deer carrying the coffin, a duck contorting itself in midair like one of Giotto’s grief-stricken angels, cat musicians chanting the dirge in front, all pretending to mourn the death of the hunter (fig. 45).

But any narrative in which Experience dresses itself in the distorted garments of Innocence would be equally satisfactory. To be sure, there are other strategies that the storyteller might use: either by emphasizing different parts of Mahler’s movement (such as the klezmer-style, Jewish-sounding music that precedes the quotation from *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen*) or by citing Mahler’s rejected program from Jean Paul’s *Titan* (1800–1803). This novel provides a number of

possibilities for narratives, all of which are somewhat contrived. I will mention three. (1) The hero, Albano, at one point attends a prince's funeral and hears muffled drums reverberating as if through catacombs—this can be linked to certain musical effects at the movement's beginning. (2) Jean Paul considered titling the novel *Anti-Titan*, and a certain convergence of opposites can be heard in Mahler's music: turning the cheerful "Bruder Martin" round into a dirge is one of many. (3) Bruno Walter thought that Mahler intended the funeral march on the "Bruder Martin" theme to "bury" Roquairol, the scoffer—the spirit of self-mockery, the internal critic that prevented a gifted man from attaining mastery of his art.<sup>34</sup>

But I believe that there are elements that *every* plausible narrative of Mahler's movement would have in common: perhaps the pain that arises out of the inevitable conflict of sacred and profane perspectives; irony's choking on itself. When Nattiez writes that "music is not a narrative, but an incitement to make a narrative," he is in a sense right; but it could also be said that a written narrative is nothing but an incitement to make a narrative, since written stories (as Wolfgang Iser and others have shown) become significant to us only insofar as we fill in their blanks, as we remap them onto private grids of thought and feeling. Music and word narrative are equally true and equally fictitious: we give music too much credit (or not enough) if we say that music cannot lie. Indeed the funeral march in Mahler's First Symphony pronounces itself a kind of lie, insofar as it constructs itself out of melodic material chosen precisely because it is unsatisfactory for a funeral march. Musical discourse is just as fallen, impure, thickly human, as written discourse. Our music is no better or worse than we are.

 *Part Two* 

Art Rampant

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### 🌿 *Nine Definitions* 🌿

1. *Multimedial* A multimedial artwork comprises elements of two or more media. An opera is strongly multimedial since it comprises music, text, and decor, and often dance as well; a painting in which a few stray musical notes are depicted is weakly multimedial.

2. *Intermedial* An intermedial artwork is the imaginary artwork generated by the spectator through the interplay of two or more media—the transient, complex thing that is assembled in each spectator’s mind through attention to the elements in different media. An opera is intermedial because it is conceived not solely as its music or its text or its decor, but rather as some virtual entity brought into being by the superposition of these three components. The creator, or creators, of the artwork may use various procedures to guide the spectator toward a desired synthesis, but these procedures are heuristic and often ineffective.

In some sense every visitor to the Louvre sees the same *Mona Lisa*, even though every interpretation and judgment and point of view and seizure of detail can and will differ. A painting can be fully quantified according to size, pigment substance, gradation of saturation and hue,

direction and pressure of brushstroke, and so forth. But each member of the audience at a performance of *Tosca* experiences a different opera because the opera exists only as an airy shimmer generated from components each one of which bulges and recedes in a space uniquely defined by, and for, a particular spectator. Each component is quantifiable, but the interaction of the various components is chaotic because governed by innumerable variables, including shifts and losses of attention, adjustments of focus, and sudden reprioritizations of the components. A work in a single medium may have a limited there-ness, but it is still much more *there* than any intermedial work can hope to be.

3. *Figures of Consonance and Dissonance* Intermedial figments in which the spectator feels that the components of a multimedial artwork glide together in a mutually reinforcing way, thereby creating a single potent effect, are known as figures of consonance. These are opposed to *figures of dissonance*, intermedial figments in which the spectator feels that the component artworks fail to fuse, remain in a state of discord.

Richard Wagner's music dramas offer spectacular examples in which the music, the text, and the stage action all come together to produce an oceanic experience, as at the end of *Götterdämmerung* (1876), where Brünnhilde rides into her funeral pyre and the Rhine overflows its banks to delirious music that modulates like swelling waves and flickers like flames. Bertolt Brecht noted that he and Kurt Weill wrote music dramas specifically intended to produce in the audience a critical, canny, anti-Wagnerian, anti-narcotic response—as in *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), where Mack the Knife and Jenny reminiscence about their bygone days as pimp and whore to a swoony romantic tune. Here the music and the text undercut one another.

4. *Concinnity* What I call concinnity is the limit-point of consonance in figures of consonance, in which the spectator feels that the

component artworks are perfectly congruent to one another. I intend this word as a pun on the word *consign*, but with a meaning different from its usual one: as a co-sign, a signing-together, the state in which the signifiers of the component artworks all point to an identical signified. (If I were Derrida I would speak of *consignity*.)

Concinnity is always somewhat illusory because no sign in one medium can mean exactly the same thing when translated into a different medium. The image of a woman with many babies clinging to her body is a Renaissance icon of charity, and an engraving of such a woman captioned *Charity* is a simple and strong figure of consonance. The correlation between the engraving and the one-word text may possess great conventional force, but the word *charity* is not the same thing as an image of a woman with many babies, which may be simply a photograph of a new mother of sextuplets who has been given a year's supply of diapers as a publicity stunt by the Pampers company.

5. *Abrasion* As concinnity is the limit-point of figures of consonance, abrasion is the limit-point of figures of dissonance, in which the component artworks seem to clash incoherently, attack, erode, and possibly destroy one another's effects. Lacking any sense that the component artworks add up to a satisfactory whole, the spectator may be disappointed, teased, or exhilarated.

When Francis Ford Coppola used Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to accompany helicopters strafing a Vietnamese village, that was a plausible concinnity—possibly a more impressive intermedial consonance than Wagner himself achieved; when Federico Fellini used the same music in *8½* (1963) to accompany feeble old folks stumbling around a spa, that was a plausible abrasion.

6. *Counterpoint* In certain figures of dissonance the component artworks seem to form interesting patterns from their friction against

one another, without agreeing on a single effect, making what is known as counterpoint. An example can be found in the aria “Le calme rentre dans mon coeur,” from Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779), where Orestes sings that he has at last become calm again, while nervous figures in the orchestra tell us that he’s deceiving himself.

7. *Pseudomorphic* Pseudomorphosis occurs when, in a work in a single artistic medium, the medium is asked to ape, or do the work of, some alien medium. This typically involves a certain wrenching or scraping against the grain of the original medium. This word was introduced into musicology by Theodor Adorno to describe the way Stravinsky’s music is constructed according to collage principles stolen from visual art, and therefore, at bottom, remains static just as a painting is static.

I don’t like this word, because the prefix *pseudo-* expresses Adorno’s contempt for the whole notion of pseudomorphosis. But I will use it, because the word exists and means what I want it to mean, even though I have no prejudice against pseudomorphic art. I might also note that Adorno took the word from Oswald Spengler, who used it in *The Decline of the West* to describe certain structural elements retained from an older culture, elements that had lost any relevance or meaning in the new culture: decadence reified. (Spengler, in turn, borrowed the term from geology, where it refers to a crystal structure in one mineral that is more characteristic of some other mineral, a sort of mineral disguise.)

8. *Pseudomorph* A spectator confronted with a pseudomorphic work of art may construct a pseudomorph: an image of what the pseudomorphic artwork would be if it were actually in the medium that it seems to aspire to be in. In 1902, Gustav Klimt painted a frieze in which he tried to imagine Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in visual terms. When you

enter the exhibition space, you do not actually hear Beethoven's Ninth, but you do conjure up auditory images of the symphony as you study the frieze. This pseudomorph-symphony does not play consecutively in your head from the first bar to the last; instead your mind summons up passages that seem relevant to the Klimt image. All spectators who know Beethoven will listen to an inner Ninth Symphony as they view Klimt's frieze, but none will create the same pseudomorph, because there is no determinate correspondence between a passage of the frieze and a passage of the symphony, though there are places where the image gestures toward a specific event in the symphony.

In another example, we have Stravinsky's *Circus Polka* (1942). Any listener who knows that the subtitle is "For a Young Elephant" will visualize a pseudomorph of an elephant moving to polka rhythm, probably with its forelegs in the air. But the dance will never be the same for two auditors (except, perhaps, those who have seen photographs of the fifty elephants in the Ringling Brothers circus who danced to it in George Balanchine's choreography of the polka—and for those listeners, *Circus Polka* is not pseudomorphic but multimedial).

Listeners who have no knowledge of the subtitle or compositional history of the polka might have no visual impression beyond a general sense of a picture of galumph. Stravinsky may have loved circuses, but Adorno did not: he accused Stravinsky of debasing the art of music by making his compositions into picture circuses: "The trick that defines all of Stravinsky's organizings of form: to let time stand in, as in a circus tableau, and to present time complexes as if spatial—this trick wears off. It loses its power over the consciousness of duration."<sup>1</sup>

9. *Eidolon* A more general term for the phantoms generated by the transposition of a work in one artistic medium into an alien one is *eidolon*. A pseudomorph exists where there is some specific cue on how

to perform the transposition (such as calling a work *Beethoven-Frieze*). An eidolon may be a more vagrant phenomenon, generated by (idle or intent) speculation about what an artwork in one medium might look like if translated to another. Synesthetes often find this easy, but anyone can play.

I was once standing in the Musée de l'Orangerie, half-drowning in the depths beneath Monet's water lilies, when my companion asked me what sort of music would be the right accompaniment to this experience. I thought for a moment and said Brahms's Intermezzo, op. 118, no. 6—the subdued elation, the dark haunt, seemed right for Monet. But Monet's water lilies are in no obvious way pseudomorphic, so there is no particular reason, besides contiguity of title or theme (I might have thought of Saint-Saëns's *Aquarium* or Rachmaninov's *Lilies*) or similarity of mood, to choose one musical analogue rather than another.

A final note: *pseudomorphosis* is a word I will often use to refer to an invention by an artist, *eidolon* to a fancy of a spectator; but an artist (while attempting to translate an existing work in medium A into a new work in medium B) will have to have recourse to eidola in all circumstances where the original work in medium A has no specific cues on how such a translation should be performed.

These definitions should prove useful. There is, however, a false assumption built into this whole parsing-out of the field of the comparative arts: that there is such a thing as an artwork that exists in one medium and one medium alone. There are those who insist that every artwork is, or should be, confined to the medium in which it was created—that an artwork that tries to wriggle free from the enclosure of its subsistence is inherently flawed, incapacitated. G. E. Lessing, Theodor Adorno, and Irving Babbitt make this argument, but its strongest statement comes from the art historian Clement Greenberg:

Shelley . . . exalted poetry above the other arts because its medium came closest . . . to being no medium at all. In practice this aesthetic encouraged that particular widespread form of artistic dishonesty which consists in the attempt to escape from the problems of the medium of one art by taking refuge in the effects of another. Painting is the most susceptible to evasions of this sort . . .

Painting and sculpture in the hands of the lesser talents . . . become nothing more than ghosts and “stooges” of literature.

To restore the identity of an art the opacity of its medium must be emphasized.

The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane’s denial of efforts to “hole through” it for realistic perspectival space.<sup>2</sup>

But I believe that Greenberg’s argument is untenable.

An artwork has little power of resistance to description or interpretation. A flat picture plane is in a poor position to deny anything whatsoever, including efforts to hole through it. If I ask a sculpture to be a ghost or stooge of literature, it has no choice but to comply. I will go farther and propose that an artwork is an artwork precisely because it is especially susceptible to translation into an alien medium, and because those translations have a certain captivating aspect. If Greenberg had been correct, he would have had to abandon his career as a sculpture critic and become a specialist in metallurgy. Every act of art criticism is a hauling of the criticized thing into the field of the verbal, where, according to Greenberg, it has no home.

A urinal (to take a famous example) is not normally considered an artwork, an adventure in ceramic. If someone asks me to describe or

interpret a urinal, not that this request comes up every day, I can speak of its half-cylindrical aspect, its glazed white surface, the fragrant hockey puck often thrown into it, its happy usefulness at catching and disposing of urine. I have taken a material object and made a parallel to it in another medium, language. I could even make a narrative: I could speak of what little I know of the history of the urinal, from the vespasienne to the present; I could speak of memorable urinals I've used, from Tibet to Peru to New York. These are brief and boring stories. But if I think of a urinal promoted into an art object, as in Duchamp's bold ploy in New York in 1917, suddenly I can say a great deal more, indeed I can gabble about it for hours. Insofar as I see it as art, a urinal becomes a figure of power. It compels me to think and speak.

By decontextualizing it from the single context it once occupied, a lavatory, Duchamp liberated the urinal to be recontextualized in a thousand different contexts. It is now sculpture: and precisely because it is sculpture it becomes the ghost or stooge of literature. Its title *Fountain* permits, even demands, comparison with the fountain of Arethusa or other classical fountains; the fact that a urinal is a kind of upside-down fountain, spraying into the earth, makes for speculation on the ways art is a reversal of nature, a mirror image in which everything is backward. The signature on the sculpture, "R. Mutt," opens up vistas: not only the urinal's status as a mutt, a mongrel of high art and humble call of nature, but also the German word *Armut*, "poverty," and, still further, the comic strip *Mutt and Jeff*, begun in 1907 and first titled *A. Mutt*—Mutt was a gambler on horse races and Jeff a former inmate of an insane asylum. These are only some of the more obvious stories that can be scooped out of the urinal: stories concerning destitution, insanity, games of chance, ironic cooptation, suddenly spurt out—just as, in Heidegger's essay on the origin of the work of art, a whole world emerges from the splayed-open boots in van Gogh's painting.

One defining characteristic of the artwork is this ease of intermedial manipulation. (This is, of course, the exact opposite of Greenberg's definition.) This transit can go in any direction: music can open itself to visual expression, as in Klimt's *Beethoven-Frieze*, and a sculpture can open itself to musical expression, as in Liszt's *Il penseroso*, and and and. Creative work manifests its creativeness by inspiring creativity in others. An artwork from which no story or other homologue/analogue/metologue could be educed would not be an artwork, indeed would have only the feeblest hold on existence.

By far the most common destination of intermedial thrust is language. We are used to mapping artworks of every medium onto language—indeed a sensuous object is an aesthetic object to the degree that it demands to be interpreted, that is, talked about. A newly made thing is only potentially an artwork; it realizes itself as art, not in the act of its being painted or being composed, but in the act of submitting itself as a subject for discursing. It needs to find word-threads that tie it to other works in its genre, to its possible use (even if its use consists only of display in some appropriate venue), to the culture-scape of the objects the artist intends to represent (if it is representational in character)—these threads reach to the most distant and tenuous regions of the universe of discourse. The best art often has the most intricate network of such strands; one might fear that a superlative artwork might become buried under its own quotedness, but that seems not to happen, even to Shakespeare. In *The Painted Word*, Tom Wolfe mocks the mid-twentieth-century New York art scene as a set of meek and tasteful illustrations to mightily self-important art-historical texts written by Hilton Kramer, Clement Greenberg, and others; but painting and interpretation are in fact so deeply intertwined that a robust criticism is a blessing to art.

Duchamp and Cage were right: every thing is art; every sound is music. Even natural phenomena, such as shells or ravines, are aesthetic

objects to the degree that they invite a play of contexts. The Grand Canyon is aesthetic to me because the muscles around the small of my back grow tense as I imagine falling into it; the banks of the Mississippi are aesthetic to me because they hold the memory of Huck Finn drifting at night. A conch shell is aesthetic to me in part because I can imagine the brilliant blare that a conch shell trumpet would make. A cowrie shell is aesthetic too, but in a different way, because I remember that cowries were once used as money; and I remember that cowrie shells are smooth because the mantle, the shell-making organ, is outside the shell instead of inside, so that a cowrie is a sort of everted gastropod; and I remember Yeats's idea that God toils more in making a little shell than in making a thunderclap; and I toy with the notion that shells might be readable because certain designs look like letters in some unknown alphabet.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Wonder and the Sublime*

ANYTHING CAN BE lifted (lowered?) into the domain of art simply by the effort of imagination—we live in a world where every object compels imagining and reimagining, because nothing exists entirely where it happens to be. Much of this wonder is preverbal; but wonder is a little scary, and we need to relieve ourselves of wonder by verbalizing it, whether in formal criticism or in subvocal comings to term.

Still, those who try to eliminate stories and other forms of intermedial translation from the universe of discourse have a point. The effort of New Criticism to eliminate biography, parallel texts, and everything else not contained in the poem itself could not go far, but it was an homage to something real and important about poetry. In the original artwork (any artwork, not just a poem) a residue of the untranslatable is left behind after every act of translation. The translation is a falsification—but a falsification without which art could not exist. By *residue* I mean the  $x$  that critics and intermedial artists keep trying to elucidate, to bring into the field of the comprehended, but that will always remain untouched, or touched only glancingly, obliquely. We can think of the history of the criticism of an artwork as a sort of dialectics that reduces this residue to the least possible size; but the residue

will always loom large because criticism is and ought to be interminable. This residue is where Greenberg is right: here the original medium is everything; here the signifiers in the artwork point to signifieds that can exist only in the original medium, indeed only in the original artwork, triumphant in its autotelic solitude. The deepest art in the artwork lies in this volute—in this closed whorl of signifier and signified that cannot be pried apart, cannot be loosened for public inspection.

But any finite work of art also contains signs that are nothing like this—signs that can be carried across, with more or less precision, into other artistic media, including critical discourse. It is in the region of such playful, extraverted, easy, and accommodating signs that the possibility for a discipline of comparative arts exists. I may marvel at how richly an artwork compels a whole environment to take shape around it, as iron filings take shape around a magnet. But there is something else beneath this richness. In an artwork there is matter like dark matter in the galaxies, unavailable to scrutiny because impossible to articulate or paraphrase or in any way transpose, in the strictest sense ineffable. So we can interpret a poem, but we can never crack its shell, extract the poemness hidden in the words, let out the massed dark. The name we give to this left-behind is wonder, and through wonder we know it is there. I remember listening to my mother reading “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” aloud to me before I even knew how to read, and I remember that I felt the miracle inside it, and I know that no account or interpretation, however subtle or penetrating or beautifully written, has touched that first shiver.

This wonder, this convulsive beauty (as the surrealists called it), has tempted artists to find out whether an artwork could aspire to be all wonder, all residuum. In every age artists have attempted to purge art of the prosaic or mundane—everything that was not miracle. The usual term for such art is *sublime*. In 1757, Edmund Burke defined the effect of the sublime as astonishment:

The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it. Hence arises the great power of the sublime, that, far from being produced by them, it anticipates our reasonings, and hurries us on by an irresistible force. Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree; the inferior effects are admiration, reverence, and respect.<sup>1</sup>

A dentist's drill touching a raw nerve is sublime: it so fills your mind that there's no space left to contemplate your overdue credit-card payment, or yesterday's poor haircut, or Fermat's last theorem.

The sublime abolishes the normal categories of experience: time and space grow disoriented, confused; and even the sense of self vanishes. A sublime experience is without subject or object: you don't know where you stop and the rest of the universe begins. This eerie sort of overwhelm is caused, Burke says, by sensory overload: the eye is overstrained by the infinite expanse of the ocean, or a Gothic colonnade receding into the distance, or the starry sky; the ear is overstrained by huge sounds; perhaps even the tongue can be overstrained by the far too bitter. In this reeling of the senses, the mind loses its purchase, grows delirious. In the nice phrase of Immanuel Kant, who studied Burke closely before writing his *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, the sublime manages "to contravene the ends of our power of judgment . . . and to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination."<sup>2</sup> Lacking any faculty of judgment, lost in imagelessness, we are no longer ourselves—we tend to dissipate into the experience that drowns us.

The imagination is most easily outraged by images that stubbornly remain vague, incoherent, indistinct. Such images can be presented in poetry in several ways—one useful strategy is self-contradiction, an outrage to reason as well as imagination. Burke cites as an example Milton’s description of God, “*Dark with excessive light thy skirts appear*” (*Paradise Lost* 3.380, slightly misquoted: Milton has *bright*, not *light*). Opposites meet and become interchangeable—a fine example of the abolishing of nominal categories. But the finest outrage on the imagination that Burke knows is Milton’s description of Death. Before quoting Milton, Burke talks about heathen idols:

Almost all the heathen temples were dark. Even in the barbarous temples of the Americans at this day, they keep their idol in a dark part of the hut, which is consecrated to his worship. For this purpose too the Druids performed all their ceremonies in the bosom of the darkest woods, and in the shade of the oldest and most spreading oaks. No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light, by the force of a judicious obscurity, than Milton. His description of Death in the second book [of *Paradise Lost*] is admirably studied; it is astonishing with what a gloomy pomp, with what a significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring, he has finished the portrait of the king of terrors:

The other shape,  
 If shape it might be call’d that shape had none  
 Distinguishable in member, joint, or limb,  
 Or substance might be call’d that shadow seem’d,  
 For each seemed either; black it stood as Night,  
 Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as Hell,  
 And shook a dreadful Dart; what seem’d his head  
 The likeness of a Kingly Crown had on. [2.666–73]

In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree.<sup>3</sup>

What does Death look like? A shapeless shape, an insubstantial substance; hovering between contraries, it is a sort of blob outfitted with dart and crown. All is oxymoron and paradox. Milton gives us a vertigo, not an image.

Sublime painting—that is, painting meant to astonish—may be dark, uncertain, confused, and terrible, as in Henry Fuseli's *Night-hag Visiting the Lapland Witches* (fig. 46), based a passage in *Paradise Lost* in which the hellhounds incorporated into Sin's body are compared to those that



FIG. 46. Henry Fuseli, *The Night-hag Visiting the Lapland Witches* (1796).

Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: *Art Resource, NY*.

follow the night-hag, when, called  
 In secret, riding through the air she comes,  
 Lured with the smell of infant blood, to dance  
 With Lapland witches, while the labouring moon  
 Eclipses at their charms. [2.622–26]

But this isn't a pure delirium of wonder. It is full of contexts, full of things to think about: not only its source in Milton, but other stories of child-murderesses, such as Medea, and other stories of witches, such as *Macbeth* (another favorite theme of Fuseli's).

I find more wonder in paintings that are evocative without being narrative. When I look at Albert Pinkham Ryder's *Sailing by Moonlight* and J. M. W. Turner's *Moses Writing the Book of Genesis* (figs. 47, 48),



FIG. 47. *Albert Pinkham Ryder (formerly attrib.), Sailing by Moonlight (n.d.)*.



FIG. 48. *J. M. W. Turner, Moses Writing the Book of Genesis (1843).*

especially if I can keep their titles out of consideration, I find a pure immanence of wonder: no terror, no loneliness, no joy in the usual sense of the word, no finite emotion at all, but a sense of some inarticulate stirring, some *rapt*, that might terminate in any emotion, all emotion. I confront the work as if it had neither content nor context; I lose culture, become horizonless.

How far is it possible to go in divesting the artwork of discursive elements? Especially in recent times there have been attempts to

enhance the prestige and self-sufficiency of the artwork by ridding it of all culturally vivid, user-friendly signs, the little army of industrious workers that pull the artwork into the domain of the speakable. If this could be accomplished, the artwork would be pure residue, beyond the reach of translation, beyond culture altogether. The easiest procedure for such designification is to empty the artwork of all content, on the theory that where there is nothing there cannot be any signs. But that is impossible: no artwork can be residue and nothing but residue.

### *White Canvases and Silent Music*

The history of the blank will show what I mean. A blank ought to be signless, meaningless—or so much-meaning that it is equivalent to unmeaning. And yet a blank surface, as soon as its blankness becomes an object of scrutiny, tends to provoke a lot of speculative discourse. An early example is the Bellman's map of the ocean, at the beginning of Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark* (1876), an empty page: this is a spoof of the concept of a map and therefore asks to be compared to other maps we have seen, especially those maps in which the ignorant cartographer leaves open space. Here be dragons; there be a snark. At about the same time (1883), Alphonse Allais exhibited at the Galerie Vivienne a blank sheet of paper titled *Anemic Girls Have Their First Communion As It Snows* (Première communion de jeunes filles chlorotiques par un temps de neige). (Allais also composed in 1897 what may be the first silent musical composition, *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man*, consisting of nine blank bars.) Allais was making a joke, though it's not easy to see whether the joke has a particular object; he was probably not calling into question the whole art of painting. Neither Carroll nor Allais particularly intended either absence or overfullness of meaning: each blank is carefully set into a context of signs,

in which the blank itself signifies something in a teasing yet quite ordinary way.

But elsewhere in late-nineteenth-century France blankness was evolving toward a different set of meanings. In 1892 Mallarmé wrote: “The poem’s intellectual armature hides and retains its hold—takes place—in the space in which the stanzas are set like islands, and in the midst of the paper’s white: significative silence that is just as beautiful to compose as the verses themselves.”<sup>4</sup> The structure of a poem, the very integrity of a poem, lies not in the words but in the void around the words. For a symbolist like Mallarmé, a state of absence is transcendental and pure, and the marks of the pen are wisps designed to call attention to the whiteness of the surrounding sheet of paper. Pushed a little farther, Mallarmé’s logic leads to the conclusion that the poem lies in the white space, not in the words. Floating, dissolving on the paper they disfigure, the words efface and discredit themselves. In this way the empty page starts to signify a nothing that distends with meaning, a divine nihil.

The all-white nonimage, then, can be frivolous or it can be an object of awe. But cultural shifts provide different tenors. In 1918, near the zenith of high modernism, the suprematist Kazimir Malevich painted his *White on White*—not quite a white canvas, since a large tilted rectangle of darker white is imposed on a lighter white background. Malevich believed that he had achieved something like the entelechy of the whole art of painting, with *White on White* a kind of rocket ship that had escaped earth’s gravitational field:

Our century is a huge boulder aimed with all its weight into space. From this follows the collapse of all the foundations in Art, as our consciousness is transferred onto completely different ground. The field of color must be annihilated, that is, it must transform itself into white . . . the development of

white . . . points to my transformation in time. My imagining of color stops being colorful, it merges into one color—white.<sup>5</sup>

Conquered by the suprematist system, the sky's blue has been holed through and has penetrated into white—veritable representation of the infinite . . . Comrade aviators, sail after me into the abyss.<sup>6</sup>

Like Kandinsky, Malevich felt that abstract art was a form of spiritual transcendence: “Geometrical forms constitute a portal to the perfectly objectless, which no longer has any point of reference to external reality.”<sup>7</sup> So an all-white painting means an *absence of representation*, an adventure in dematerialized gnostic. But when Robert Rauschenberg, at the beginning of his career as a postmodernist, painted a series of white canvases in 1951, the war against representation was yesterday's news; now an all-white canvas was exciting because it meant an *absence of signs*. For Malevich, his experiments in white were explicitly adventures in creating a new semiotics of color: “Suprematism, semaphore of color, is found in its infinite abyss. . . . I have erected the semaphores of suprematism.”<sup>8</sup> I doubt that Rauschenberg regarded his all-white canvases as a waving of flags to deliver a message. A canvas painted white differs from a blank sheet of paper (Allais exhibited a piece of paper, and Mallarmé was also pondering the whiteness of paper): to paint a canvas white is to make a more active, aggressive emptiness than the emptiness created by merely not doing anything. Rauschenberg did what he could to eliminate the presence of the artist as well as the presence of the artwork: he painted with a roller, so that no trace of brushstroke would give clues about the process of production.

Though Rauschenberg was not constructing a system of signs, there is every reason to believe that he was, here and elsewhere,

pondering the semiotics of art, the borders between sign and signlessness. When he presented his famous *Rebus* (fig. 49), a drippy smeary “combine” onto which he stuck photos of runners, a print of Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus*, an election poster, a comic strip, and other cultural bric-a-brac, he seemed to be demoting all visual signs to the same level of significance. Maybe Rauschenberg was flattening signs into nonentity, devaluing them to zero; but I’d prefer to phrase it another way: that he was flattening signs into a state of exactly equivalent value. Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* and the comic strip are equally precious, equally easy to toss into the garbage; you can adore them, you can dispose of them, Rauschenberg doesn’t care. There is a subtle gradation between high art and low, and between images with detail and high finish, and images that are hasty bare outlines (such as the faint drawing, in the lower right, of Goldilocks and the three bears, perhaps taken from a children’s coloring book, but turned upside-down). The latter are enclosed in careless rectangles, suggesting that neither the selected image nor the act of framing it is worthy of particular fuss. The whole painting, though the canvas is an exact rectangle, is similarly a void framing a busier void. With its pattern of rectangles within a rectangle it’s a comic strip itself, entropy’s splat. Or you can read the painting the other way, as an ascent from undone images to magnificently done images. But even so, a certain undoneness clings to everything, even, or especially, to the Botticelli.

I think of *Rebus* as a culmination of Rauschenberg’s investigation of the nonimage. In 1953, in *Erased de Kooning*, he took a drawing by de Kooning and undrew it, leaving faint vestiges of the *there* there to remind the spectator of the expanses of the *not-there*. *Rebus* contains obvious images, but by making no comment on their consequentiality or inconsequentiality Rauschenberg removes the sting or fever that most images have, since most images goad us into thinking of the things they represent, and of the huge contexts of those things. The

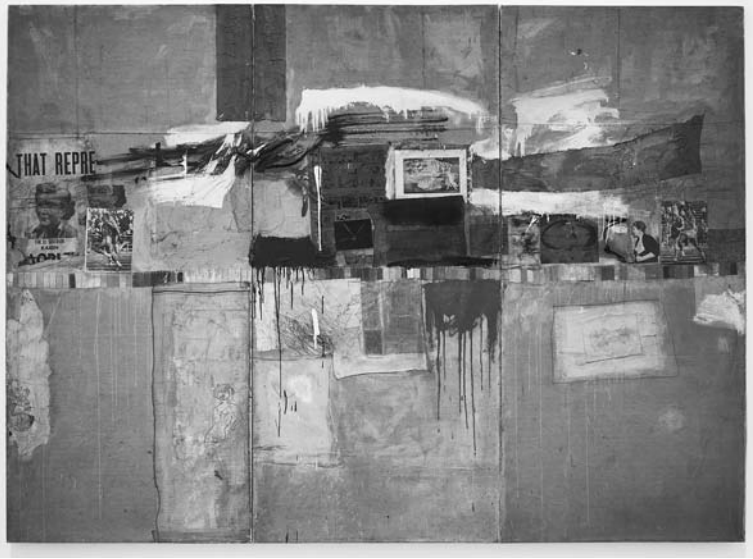


FIG. 49. Robert Rauschenberg, *Rebus* (1955). Oil, synthetic polymer paint, pencil, crayon, pastel, cut-and-pasted printed and painted papers, and fabric on canvas mounted and stapled to fabric, three panels, 8 ft. × 10 ft. 11/8 in. (243.8 × 333.1 cm). Partial and promised gift of Jo Carole and Ronald S. Lauder and purchase. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, USA. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Art © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

images in *Rebus* don't ask questions; in fact the point of *Rebus* may be that it isn't a rebus. The images in the painting are the burnt-up remnants of extinguished images, images that have lost their purchase in the realm of the imaginary. Shorn, dumb, stunned, vulnerable, they lie before us with no power to resist or redirect our gaze. But still, if we stare at *The Birth of Venus* print, it can disengage itself from the slop

around it, kindle once again. The image as image, and the image as nonimage, are here held in a tense equipoise.

The all-white paintings of 1951 are simpler attempts to thrust an absence of images at the public. But here there seems to be no overt playfulness, no games with semiosis. Still, to represent a surface on which a sign might appear if it happened to exist is not necessarily an asemiotic act. The painting may contain no signs, but *is* a sign, a sign meaning signlessness. But the previous sentence is wrong, too: the all-white painting *does* contain signs, but vagrant signs generated by shadows and the altering albedo—from glare to dullness—as you see it from different angles. John Cage was sensitive to this property: “I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing in these paintings that could not be changed, that they can be seen in any light and are not destroyed by the action of shadows. Hallelujah! the blind can see again; the water’s fine.”<sup>9</sup> The all-white painting may aspire, seriously or impudently, to a state of sublime referencelessness.

But just as every artwork has aspects that are esoteric, unspeakable—what I have been calling residue—so every artwork flaunts public signs, generous signs that open themselves to us. The all-white paintings of 1951 turn out to have some degree of narrative content. Even in a more or less effaced or erased or unbegun artwork, its very state of unbeing has a certain power to thrust into other media. You can invent stories about the shadows that drift across its surface; stories about how in its sacral purity it has the Christlike gift to heal the blind; stories about how you dive into it as you dive into water. And it proved to be simple to make pseudomorphs of these all-white canvases: it is speculated, persuasively to my mind, that Cage’s silent piece *4’33”* (1952) came into being partly as a response to Rauschenberg—a pseudomorph from painting to music, just as Cage, in his newspaper comment about Rauschenberg, gestured at possible pseudomorphs between painting and literature.

When you try to omit contextualizable elements from an artwork, suddenly small, humble aspects of the artwork loom large, grow inflamed with discursive possibility. The way that a painting is fastened to a wall is not generally a matter that merits or receives much attention, but in the world of all-white paintings it undergoes considerable scrutiny: Robert Ryman designed for such works as *Tract* (1982) and *Journal* (1988) special metal brackets to hold his paintings to the wall. Ryman explicitly noted that he chose to use white pigment precisely for the sake of making conspicuous the aspects of the art of painting easiest to ignore: “The white is just a means of emphasising other elements of the painting: the surface, texture, edges, colour, the absorption and reflection of light, and even the medium onto which the paint is applied.”<sup>10</sup> If you try to make your canvas mute, then its raveled edges, its inner weave, your own shadow from the gallery’s fluorescent light, will start to raise a clamor. Similarly, Cage’s *4’33”* performed by an oboist differs strongly from *4’33”* performed by a pianist: the look of an oboist holding his instrument in his lap, relaxed yet secure, is not the look of a pianist hunched before her instrument, refusing to play.

We are left then with a paradox: art is not art unless capable of being transposed; but the transposition is never comprehensive or even correct, except with respect to a few contrived congruences. In the 1960s literary critics spoke much about the heresy of paraphrase; but even an artwork that seems to eliminate all paraphrasable matter, such as an all-white painting, can be paraphrased, as Cage showed both in his newspaper comments and in *4’33”*. I think that the notion of the heresy of paraphrase has it exactly backward: a poem is not a poem *unless* it can be paraphrased—even nonsense is usually not irreducible, as Humpty Dumpty showed when he gave a prose version of the first stanza of “Jabberwocky.” (Asemantic texts, collocations of phonemes, are indeed not paraphrasable, but seem to me artistic in some dimension other than the poetic.) Meaning itself does not exist except insofar

as the meaningful thing can be somehow restated. So we are left with another version of the same paradox: nothing is meaningful unless it can be paraphrased; but the paraphrase will always mean something different from the paraphrased thing.

Art always exasperates. If I try to understand an artwork as a hard, closed, self-contained thing in which the aesthetic experience lies only in the interrelations among its parts, it will dissipate under my gaze, deconstruct into a cloud of endless cultural self-interrogations. If I try to understand an artwork as a point of intersection of lines of force within the culture in which it was produced, in which unconscious dialectics of dominance and subjection can be brought to light by close analysis, it will recede before my eyes, clench itself into a tight closed object. If I want the artwork to be absolute, a text severed from all context, it diffuses into a swarm of mosquitoes; if I want the artwork to be a specimen and manifestation of its surrounding culture, it becomes an armadillo curling itself into a scaly ball.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Pseudomorphoses*

THE COMMONEST pseudomorphic translations are from literature to picture (as in the case of book illustration, ranging from heroic paintings of biblical or Homeric themes to Gustave Doré's illustrations of Dante to the drawings published with Dickens novels) and from picture to literature (as in the case of ekphrasis). Here I will treat four of the less common cross-medial thrusts among three important media: from poetry to music; from music to poetry; from painting to music, and from music to painting.

#### *Pseudomorphoses from Poetry to Music*

A song, when completed, is multimedial, since it comprises both words and music. But the task of the composer is pseudomorphic, since he or she has to find music for words that already exist. (I will not discuss the rare cases in which a composer writes music for not-yet-written words, to be filled in later by a poet.)

A composer writing a song may, of course, force onto the words a tune that does not fit the poem's meter or concord in any way with the poem's themes, thereby creating an effect of perfect abrasion.



of stanza in which Time might be discussed. A little later Shelley came up with another version of this stanza:

Na na, na na ná na  
 Nă nă na na na—nă nă  
                   Nă nă nă nă nă nă  
 Na na nă nă nă ã na

The theme has vanished entirely, and Shelley is doodling with patterns of beats. In its final form the stanza reads as follows:

                  O world! O life! O time!  
 On whose last steps I climb,  
                   Trembling at that where I had stood before;  
 When will return the glory of your prime?  
                   No more—Oh, never more!<sup>1</sup>

This is a vague stanza—the denotation of the words does not seem to matter much. The first line could be “O world! O life! O time!”; or it could be (with some adjustments to the rhyme scheme) “O fate! O death! O night!”; or it could be “O woe! O me! O my!”; or simply “O O! O O! O O!” What counts here is a mood of exclamatory misery: a mood, and a rhythm. In the middle three lines Shelley ventures into syntax, but at the end he returns to pure rhythmic ejaculation: “No more—Oh, never more!” The scansion itself seems to possess meaning, rather than the words of the poem.

In some sense Shelley is less a poet than a composer who uses words instead of notes. I mention this poem because it’s easy to imagine a composer using this same process backward: starting with the finished poem and groping toward some pure prosodic isolate on which a tune could be constructed. Shelley, groping toward the final text, was

not simply marking the meter and the stanza form: he was thinking about the flow of the words toward a particularly strong stress, and maybe also indicating the length of time a certain syllable should be pronounced as well as the pattern of stress emphasis. The diacritical marks could even be interpreted as faint but real melodic cues. The poem withholds nothing; its intimate inside lies open, exposed to the composer's gaze. Finding a pseudomorph is almost too easy.

Languages like English and German tend to invite musical settings in which the tonic accent occupies a privileged position, even the dominating position, in the song. Every (good) poem written in meter has a design of hesitations and accelerations, half-emphases, over-emphases, extraneous syllables, puzzling absences—all those deviations that give life to rhythm. Every (good) composer attends to these filigrees, these gashes in time.

There are a number of English-language songs that are little more than a steady jumping back and forth between two notes, imitating the steady alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in iambic verse. Two examples from popular music are Louis Jordan's "School Days" (1950) and Bob Dylan's "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" (1964), both of which prefigure the extreme narrowing of melodic amplitude in rap music. Music composed by poets may tend in this direction: before Kurt Weill composed the "Alabama-Song" for the *Mahogonny-Songspiel* (1927), the poet, Bertolt Brecht, wrote his own melody, full of these two-note oscillations. In these examples the length of the note is not of first importance—what counts is the stress on the note.

But it is also possible to let duration determine the importance of a syllable. In Greek and Latin poetry, meter was determined by quantity: a long syllable took twice as long to pronounce as a short syllable; tonic accent had no metrical value. Music, of course, can specify both quantity and accent, so an iambic rhythm can be marked by either or both

means. So a composer may write prosodically intense songs by placing a quantitative grid (such as, say, a dotted quarter note for stressed syllables and an eighth note for unstressed ones) on top of an elementary chunk of melody, such as a scale or an arpeggio: a sophisticated example is Benjamin Britten's 1937 *Nocturne*: at the climax of the song, in which the dreamer rejects dreams of tractor, bull, or succubus, the vocal line becomes a chill strict monotone, inexorably rhythmic, while the piano supplies the nightmare described in Auden's text.

The accompaniment to these songs in which the poem's meter is brought to the foreground tends to take one of two forms: either obedient or disobedient. In one of the coincidences of music history, Franz Schubert wrote his song "Der Erlkönig" (1815), his opus 1, shortly before Carl Loewe wrote *his* setting of "Der Erlkönig" (1817–18), also opus 1 (number 3). (There is also a magnificent torso of a setting by Beethoven, difficult to date.) It is hard to know which is more stunning, the Schubert or the Loewe; either will set a whirligig going in my head that lasts for hours; but when I recite the poem to myself, the inner music I hear is usually Loewe's. Except for the trills and flutters that may represent the rustling of leaves in the wind, all is relentless iambs in Loewe's piano accompaniment, whipping the song forward. Schubert, by contrast, begins his setting with a repeated figure in the piano, an urgent uprush of a minor-key scale followed by three sharply accented notes. The rhythm is not iambic; and this potent figure keeps pushing against the iambs of the rest of the song. It is drama achieved by rhythmic disparity: part of the song follows Goethe's text, part resists it. This prosodic theater became a common feature of Schubert's creative personality: in his late Heine setting *Die Stadt* (1828) the salient feature of the piano part is a shivery rhythmless frill (an arpeggiated diminished chord), which seems to try to pull the iambic vocal lines into a sort of blurry nonentity.

To a rhythmically sensitive composer, German and English differ in certain important ways. English has a great many short words, and

monosyllables are liberating because they can often be placed in either a stressed or an unstressed position:

Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks

In this pentameter line of Auden's, the word *plain* first occupies an unstressed position, then a stressed position, then an unstressed position. But when read aloud (at least as I read it aloud), each *plain* has roughly equal emphasis, so that both the first foot and the last hover in some ambiguous prosodic space between an iamb and a spondee. Monosyllables don't bear strong markers of accent—their neuter aspect, their plasticity imparts, in skilled hands, grace to a line of verse. In ages with strict poetic rules, such as the early eighteenth century, the indeterminacy of monosyllables made them suspect, as we see in Pope's verse:

And ten low Words oft creep in one dull Line

The joke is that Pope censures monosyllables by writing a strictly monosyllabic line. But I think that most subsequent poets have enjoyed the free spaces that monosyllables open.

If monosyllables provide English poets with play room, German's wealth of unstressed syllables offers something similar. The inflectional terminations of German make it harder to write in strict iambs: a word with two syllables will often pick up a third as it moves through its declension or conjunction. The supernumerary syllables are sometimes so weak and so subject to elision that they vanish or nearly vanish, thus becoming prosodic ghosts. But they can also make themselves felt in striking ways:

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?  
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;

Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,  
 Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

[Through night and the wind who rides so wild?  
 It is a father, and with his child;  
 He holds the child secure in his arm,  
 His grasp is strong and he keeps him warm.]

This is the first stanza of “Der Erlkönig.” The meter is iambic tetrameter, but in each line one foot is an anapest, not an iamb; and Goethe keeps varying the anapest’s position—the second foot in the first line, the third foot in the second, the fourth foot in the third, the third foot in the fourth. The effect is a slightly staggered gallop. When the Erlking tempts the sick little boy with dreams of cloudy delight, the anapestic effect grows stronger:

Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Reihn  
 Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein.

[And my daughters lead you to revels and dance,  
 And whirl you and carol and coax and caress.]

Six of the eight feet in this couplet are anapests. A sort of waltz is welling up in the text, and composers hear it—Loewe’s setting grows particularly fevered and frenetic at this point.

So when a composer concentrates on a poem, or daydreams about it, a pseudomorph comes into being, a tentative pattern of durations and emphases, a phantom of rhythm. The poem arrays itself with scansion marks; and those acutenesses and gravities and circumflects and inflects start to shape themselves into streaks of tunes. At the same time the poem’s themes, the tendrils of feeling that grow out of the words,

rouse memories of tunes and harmonies and structural patterns from earlier works, memories that imagination may find useful in refining and specifying the pseudomorph, as it arrests its vagrancies, starts to assume a determinate form.

Of course I'm speaking of figures of consonance—the common situation in which the composer is working toward a state of concinnity between words and music. But composers have also been fascinated by the edgy dynamism that can be created through intermedial dissonance. In *Dido and Aeneas* (1680s), Purcell set Nahum Tate's lines "Fear no danger to ensue, / The Hero loves as well as you" to a melody with strange rhythmic displacements: the unstressed "o" of the word *Hero*, and the second *as*, bear much of the weight of the musical line—exactly the syllables one would consider among the least important of the second line. Now, the Hero (Aeneas), as it turns out, does *not* love as well as Queen Dido loves, and it seems possible that the distorted rhythm is a clue that this is a false prophecy.

The greatest master of prosodic dissonance was Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky was eerily sensitive to verse movement: some of his finest works are experiments in prosody, from the *Three Japanese Songs* (1913) on—indeed, he considered the true subject of his ballet *Apollon musagète* to be the iambic foot, even though the ballet contains no singing whatsoever. Nevertheless, Stravinsky never hesitated to write music that obviously contradicts every metrical element of the text he set. I feel that the most ravishing tune he ever wrote was his setting of W. H. Auden's lullaby "Gently, little boat," in *The Rake's Progress* (1951), in which the main beat keeps falling on words like *the*. I don't think that the music is in any way ironic or parodic or aporetic; Stravinsky does not resist the tender text but intensifies the eerie beauty of the situation—a lullaby sung in a madhouse to a dying lunatic.

When we turn to Italian—to how composers develop a pseudomorph from an Italian text—we find ourselves in a domain governed

by entirely different laws of prosody. Italian meters are usually classified by syllable count, but in a slightly tricky way: you count the number of syllables from the beginning of the line to the last accented syllable, then add one. So (to use as examples two meters common in opera libretti), a *quinario* has its last stress on the fourth syllable; an *ottonario* on the seventh syllable; and so on. This system reflects the fact that the commonest landing point for an Italian phrase is the penult. But an Italian phrase can also place the final stress on the ultima, in which case a *quinario* has only four syllables—this is called *verso tronco*, “truncated verse”; or the final stress might go on the antepenult, in which case a *quinario* has six syllables—this is called *verso sdrucchiolo*, “sliding verse.” So there are three types of *quinari* (note that when you count the syllables, a vowel at the end of one word can elide into the vowel at the beginning of the next word; and note that the acute accents here are not part of Italian orthography but stress indicators that I’ve added to the text):

Di quella pira [normal, from Verdi’s *Il trovatore*, libretto by  
Salvatore Cammarano]

Chi mai dell’Érebo  
fra le calígini,  
sull’orme d’Ércole  
e di Pirítoo

conduce il piè? [four versi sdrucchioli, then one verso tronco,  
from Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), libretto by Ranieri de’  
Calzabigi]

[Who through the depths of hell,  
through all the darknesses,  
retracing Hercules’

path, and Pirithous',  
dares to set foot?]

Italian prosody is plastic, and the secondary stresses in a line of poetry will often fall into something that feels like a German or English stress pattern—iambic, trochaic, anapestic, or dactylic. The six-syllable *quinari* from the *Orfeo ed Euridice* chorus can be scanned—pseudo-scanned—as iambic trimeter or as dactylic dimeter: by setting the words to a tune in three-quarter time, Gluck imparted a certain dactylic lilt.

Sometimes a musical setting of Italian will heighten this stress pattern in remarkable ways: for example, Leporello's opening aria in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787, libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte) begins

Nótte e giòrno fáticár

[Working, working, night and day]

A truncated *ottonario*: Mozart set it with very heavy beats on the four stressed syllables, producing an almost parodically trochaic effect—you can hear the hammer pounding the overworked servant into the ground. Mozart, of course, was (like Gluck) not a native speaker, and sometimes thought Germanically when setting Italian.

Giuseppe Verdi conceived Italian differently: he was less interested in secondary accents than in the way the whole line steadily mounts toward the final stressed syllable—the syllable that is key to the whole scansion. Consider the Duke's famous canzone in *Rigoletto* (1851, libretto by Francesco Piave):

La donna è móbile  
qual piuma al vénto,

muta d'accénto  
e di pensió.

[Woman is changeable,  
a wind-blown feather,  
her mind has weather  
forever changing.]

The first three syllables are set to a single nonchalant note; with the fourth syllable (“mo-”), the melody grows insistent, pungent. The first line of the song is a textbook example of *quinario sdrucchiolo*, in which the last stressed syllable, the antepenult, bears all the prosodic weight. Even in his most lyrical mode, Verdi shifts the center of gravity to the end of the poetic line, the most prosodically intense area. To my mind, the most haunting aria Verdi ever wrote comes from the second act of *Un ballo in maschera* (1859, libretto by Antonio Somma), when Amelia visits the site of a gallows to pluck a magic herb:

Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa  
Come avrò di mia mano quell'erba

[Horrid places, a dry stalk uprooted,  
for this herb is right here for my grasping]

These decasyllabic lines place a strong stress on the ninth syllable and a secondary stress on the third and sixth syllables, and around these points Verdi's melody turns. There is little movement until the sixth syllable, where there is a sudden quickening; and on the ninth syllable the melody clinches, tightens into place. It is a tune that, despite its poise, charges to the end of the line, like “La donna è mobile”—indeed, the two tunes have certain points of resemblance, though one is

plaintive and the other heady with joy: each begins with repeated notes, filling up prosodically weak space; each ends with an emphatic downward three-note phrase, throwing into the highest relief the line's crucial syllable. In most of Verdi's arias, the precompositional materials—the pseudomorphs of the libretto's meter—make themselves heard in the finished piece: you feel the deep prosodic shapes below.

Poems in German, English, and Italian all provide some skeleton useful to a composer seeking musical flesh. But French verse is far more reticent: it offers few clues about proper melodic form. A line of French poetry is classified simply according to syllabic count; it is possible to speak of stresses in French verse, but rarely does a stress pattern have a particular prosodic value. There are, however, subtle techniques for lengthening a diphthong into two beats and for squashing two vowels into one—*diérèse* and *synérèse*, respectively—thereby implying retardations and quickenings in the line. Also, the dip in vocal energy that occurs when an unaccented “e” is pronounced creates certain difficult to quantify patterns. And the caesura is unusually important in French: the basic meter of French drama, the twelve-syllable line called an alexandrine, should have a distinct break after the sixth syllable.

This lack of stress has sometimes left some poets and musicians wishing for more rigorous metrical principles. In the 1560s, the gifted poets of the Pléiade (Jean-Antoine de Baïf, Pierre de Ronsard, and others) sought to revive the quantitative meters of Greek and Latin poetry: a line of French verse was to be understood as a set of long syllables and short ones, and the long syllables should take twice as much time to pronounce as the short ones. This development of *vers mesuré* encouraged composers, particularly Claude Lejeune, to experiment with *musique mesurée*, a text-setting procedure in which the time values of the notes exactly matched the duration of the syllables.

But *musique mesurée* in the strict sense didn't catch on—though, in an odd sequel to the movement, Camille Saint-Saëns wrote *Chant saphique* (1892) for cello and piano in which the durational pattern of the melody matches the Greek scansion of the Sapphic ode. So, for the most part, French composers of songs learned to live with near anarchy—learned to provide texts with music that traced subtle phrase contours in the absence of a prosodic scheme that could account for the relationship of one syllable to another. In German, English, and Italian poetry, pseudomorphs in music often come without too much trouble—show me a poem written in a traditional meter, and I will sing it to some feeble tune. In French poetry, however, pseudomorphs often have to be teased or winkled out. But sometimes, through anaphora or repetition or some similar device, a text would become so structurally determinate that pseudomorphs easily presented themselves to a composer. An example is Claude Debussy's *Chevaux de bois* (1888), to a poem by Paul Verlaine:

Tournez, tournez, bon chevaux de bois,  
 Tournez cent tours, tounez mille tours.  
 Tournez souvent et tournez toujours,  
 Tournez, tournez au son des hautbois.

[Turn and turn, wooden horses, turn,  
 Turn a hundred times, a thousand, turn,  
 Turn and keep turning, forever turn,  
 Turn, turn to the oboes' turning sound.]

The “Tournez, tournez” phrase rises a fourth, then falls a fourth, a recurrent little loop amid the general whirl of the merry-go-round: Verlaine wrote the poem in unusual nine-syllable lines, an eccentric meter, as if to suggest that the carrousel has a slight wobble; and

Debussy's eccentric chromaticism in the second and third lines of this stanza suggests a certain exhilaration or breathlessness. Here is a music pattern generated almost irresistibly from a word pattern.

Phonemic repetition can sometimes perform a similar service. In Jean-Philippe Rameau's opera *Platée* (1745, libretto by Le Valois d'Orville), a hideous froglike nymph is the victim of a cruel prank: she is made to think she's the beautiful bride of Jupiter. Toward the end, La Folie leads a (fake) wedding dance: "Chantez Platée, égayez-vous" (Oh praise Platée, grow gay, all you). This can easily be read as a four-beat line, with the accents of the first three beats falling on a single sound, "é," though the sound is represented by different spellings ("-tez," "-tée," "-gay-"): the line scans as iambic tetrameter, even in a language like French, where the concept of iamb isn't strong. And Rameau obligingly provides a spiky iambic pulse in his music.

But in many cases the rhythms of French poems are hard to construe, providing an obligingly neutral phonic surface that could be figured with any rhythm the composer desired. Sometimes a vocal line floats serenely over an intricate piano accompaniment, an accompaniment more melodically intense than the vocal line itself. Gabriel Fauré's *Clair de lune* (1887) sets a delicate Verlaine poem in which characters from the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the stock zanies of the old pop theater of Europe, dance a bergamask and sing and flirt and play the lute, a little sadly because they don't quite believe in their own happiness. The poem posits a dance, but it doesn't try to fit itself to any particular dance rhythm; so Fauré provides a fragile dance-lilt in the piano, insistent until it starts to blur out toward the end of the song. The vocal line sometimes conforms to the shape of the melody in the piano, sometimes goes its own unobtrusive path. In the absence of the piano, the vocal line wouldn't mean much; but the piano part could make an effective piece in the absence of the vocal line. In German and English, the marked rhythm of the poem often leads to a marked

rhythm in the song; but French, incapable of offering much resistance, allows the composer to superimpose many sorts of simple or complicated rhythms onto the text.

In French songs of the sort I'm describing here, it is hard to speak (in terms of form) of figures of consonance or dissonance because the form of the poem cannot specify much about the form of the music. Intermedial consonance or dissonance requires a certain robustness in both of the component media; and here the poetry can do little to withstand the music imposed upon it. So intermedial consonance or dissonance becomes a property of thematic, or half-thematic, half-formal concerns. For example: the long-breathed, subtly inflected dance tune in Fauré's *Clair de lune* is not, as far as I can hear, the dance that Verlaine specifies in his text, a bergamask; it doesn't have the right clownish, clunking I-IV-V-I harmony. On the other hand it does sound appropriate to the special bergamaskers in Verlaine's poem, who are not lumpy clowns but comedians of ether, capering in some soulscape not quite of this earth. It would be possible to devise a musical setting far more dissonant with the text than Fauré's, by providing, say, a rumba in the accompaniment: but the dissonance would lie more in the content than in the form.

### *Pseudomorphoses from Music to Poetry*

Many poems praise music and try to ape its powers of dejecting or exalting the soul, such as Cecilian odes written by (among other poets) John Dryden:

Now strike the golden lyre again;  
 A louder yet, and yet a louder strain.  
 Break his bands of sleep asunder,  
 And rouse him, like a rattling peal of thunder  
           Hark, hark! the horrid sound

Has raised up his head;  
As awaked from the dead,  
And amazed, he stares around.  
Revenge, revenge! Timotheus cries,  
See the furies arise;  
See the snakes, that they rear,  
How they hiss in their hair,  
And the sparkles that flash from their eyes! ["Alexander's  
Feast," 1697]

And a few poems try to imitate certain formal properties of music, such as Richard Steele's "Lyric for Italian Music" (1720):

I.  
So notwithstanding heretofore  
Strait forward by and by  
Now everlastingly therefore  
Too low and eke too high.

II.  
Then for almost and also why  
Not thus when less so near  
Oh! For hereafter quite so nigh  
But greatly ever here.

This is a poem without nouns, in honor, or dishonor, of music's inability to denote anything concrete: it satirizes the emptiness of Italian opera by creating a text of approximations ("almost," "near," "nigh") that never hit the thing being approached. The poem keeps gliding up and down like the voice of a singer who goes flat or sharp without ever finding the proper note.

But neither of these poems is a pseudomorphosis because there is no particular musical composition to which either refers. True pseudomorphoses from music to poetry are rare. The example that I'll discuss here is a poem by Amy Lowell, "Stravinsky's Three Pieces 'Grotesques,' for String Quartet" (1916), based on Stravinsky's *Three Pieces for String Quartet* (1914)—Stravinsky originally called them "Grotesques." The second movement, titled "Excentrique" when Stravinsky orchestrated these pieces in 1928, is of particular interest, because Stravinsky said that he was inspired by a British music-hall comedian named Little Tich:

I had been fascinated by the movements of Little Tich whom I had seen in London in 1914, and the jerky, spastic movement, the ups and downs, the rhythm—even the mood or joke of the music—which I later called *Eccentric*, was suggested by the art of this great clown (and suggested seemed to me the right word, for it does not try to *approfondir* the relationship, whatever it is).<sup>2</sup>

So the movement has an extramusical artistic origin (a clown show) and an extramusical artistic terminus (Lowell's poem):

#### Second Movement

Pale violin music whiffs across the moon,  
 A pale smoke of violin music blows over the moon,  
 Cherry petals fall and flutter,  
 And the white Pierrot,  
 Wreathed in the smoke of the violins,  
 Splashed with cherry petals falling, falling,  
 Claws a grave for himself in the fresh earth  
 With his finger-nails.<sup>3</sup>

Lowell caught the clown in the music, though Pierrot is the sad clown of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, the clown that never gets the girl, while the routines of Little Tich (Harry Relph) seem to have been more silly than sad—drag spoofs of famous dancers such as Loie Fuller, for example. His most famous number was called the Big Boot dance, in which he wore twenty-eight-inch-long wooden shoes, which were half as long as he was tall (4'6")—in Monty Python's *Ministry of Silly Walks* skit, Michael Palin dresses in obvious imitation of the 1900 film in which Little Tich leans far forward on his huge shoes and then springs back up.

The opening figure in Stravinsky's music, a repeated overstressed iamb that sounds like a cog with missing teeth trying to turn a gear, is Stravinsky's kinesthetic equivalent to Little Tich's jerks and spasms; but between the clown's clonic turns we hear poised and dainty rhythmically even figures, as if Little Tich were interrupting his goofing to do something delicate, even exquisite. I take it that Lowell heard these latter figures as the pale smoke of violin music blowing across the moon; as for the flutter of cherry petals—maybe Stravinsky's pizzicato effects sounded fluttery to her. The macabre image of Pierrot clawing a grave with his fingernails sounds right out of Albert Giraud's collection of poems *Pierrot Lunaire* (1884), in which Pierrot does many ugly things, including eating his own heart in a mock eucharist. (Giraud's poems are familiar now from Schoenberg's 1912 cabaret settings, which, oddly enough, were the only material by Schoenberg that Stravinsky knew before writing *Three Pieces for String Quartet*.) It is clear that Lowell heard far more desperation in Stravinsky's music than Stravinsky intended to put there, but urgency can easily be heard as desperate, and Stravinsky's music, with its continual lurches of rhythm, can easily be understood as urgent.

*Pseudomorphoses from Painting to Music*

One of the topics of warm aesthetic debate in the Renaissance was the *paragone*, or comparison: which is the queen of the arts? This is a tricky question for many reasons, one of which is that the framing of the question will tend to push the answer in a certain path. If I ask, Which art most strongly moves the soul?, then a response concerning an art of motion, such as music, might come more easily than one involving an art of stasis, such as sculpture. If I ask, Which art provides the most complete picture of nature?, the question itself contains the word *picture*, and so the art of painting wins the laurel.

Leonardo da Vinci pondered the *paragone* question with particular intensity:

Painting represents its essence to you in one moment through the power of sight by the same means as the receptor of impressions receives natural forms, at the same time compounding the proportional harmony of the parts of which the whole is composed, and delighting the senses. Poetry transmits the same thing but by a less noble means than the eye, carrying it more confusedly to the receptor of impressions and describing its configurations more slowly than is done by the eye. The eye is the true medium between the object and the receptor, which immediately transmits with highest fidelity the true surfaces and the shapes of whatever is presented outside.<sup>4</sup>

What the difference is between painting and poetry.

Painting is mute Poetry, and Poetry is blind Painting, and both aim at imitating nature as closely as their power permits. . . . But since Painting serves the eye—the noblest sense and nobler than the ear to which Poetry is addressed—there arises from it [from Painting] harmony of proportions,

just as many different voices [tones of different pitch] joined together in the same instant [simultaneously] create a harmony of proportions which gives so much pleasure to the sense of hearing that the listeners remain struck with admiration. . . . But if Poetry would attempt a representation of perfect beauty by representing separately all particular parts [features] that in Painting are joined together by the harmony described above, the same graceful impact would result as . . . if [in Painting] a face would be shown bit by bit, always covering up the parts shown before, so that forgetfulness would prevent us from composing [building up] any harmony of proportions because the eye with its range of vision could not take them in all together in the same instant—the same happens with the beautiful features of any thing invented by the Poet because they are all disclosed separately at separate [successive] times [instants] so that memory does not receive from them any harmony.

. . . The sense of hearing . . . again is less noble than the eye, because there [in the sense of hearing] as soon as it is born, it dies, and dies as fast as it was born. This cannot happen with the sense of sight; for if you [as a painter] represent to the eye a human beauty composed by the proportions of its beautiful limbs, all this beauty is not as mortal and swiftly destructible as music . . . it enralls you and is the reason that all the senses, together with the eye, want to possess it, so that it seems as if they wanted to compete with the eye. [In fact] it seems as if the mouth wants to swallow it bodily, as if the ear took pleasure to hear about its attractions [the beauties of it], as if the sense of touch wanted to penetrate it through all its pores, and as if even the nose wanted to inhale the air exhaled continually by it [by beauty]. . . . The same instant within which the comprehension of something beautiful rendered in Painting is confined

cannot offer [give] something beautiful rendered by [verbal] description, and he who wants to consign to the ear what belongs to the eye, commits a sin against nature.<sup>5</sup>

How painting surpasses all human works by reason of the subtle possibilities which it contains:

. . . Although the poet has as wide a choice of subjects as the painter, his creations fail to afford as much satisfaction to mankind as do paintings, for while poetry attempts to represent forms, actions and scenes with words, the painter employs the exact images of these forms in order to reproduce them. Consider, then, which is more fundamental to man, the name of man or his image? The name changes with change of country; the form is unchanged except by death.

. . . We may just speak of it [painting] as the grandchild of nature and as related to God himself.<sup>6</sup>

Leonardo bases his argument on speed and completeness of apprehension: you take in a picture all at once and exult in your mastery. Language and music enter your mind laboriously, in dribbles, and it's hard to seize the whole; a picture, on the other hand, gives itself as a form of intuition, not as a form of discourse. In this sense we know a picture exactly as we know the real world. Language is a construct, a human work—words are unstable, varying from one language to another; but pictures are accurate reflections of the work of God. Speech, it seems, is little more than an ugly convenience for sharing data—for forcing information (ocular in nature, since the most reliable information comes from the eye) through an inferior orifice, the ear canal. All science is in some sense painting: it is the eye that thinks. In fact, the eye does not only the work of thinking but the work of feeling: a painted image is a pan-sensual facsimile of nature delivered

to the whole sensorium—it is addressed first to the eye, but is then savored by the mind’s tongue, the mind’s nose.

The word *idea* is derived from a Greek verb meaning “to see,” and Leonardo seemed to imagine the mind as an art studio stocked with concept-pictures: thinking itself is pursued by means of visual play. In some of his most triumphant passages, Leonardo imagines the painter’s mind growing bright with a new universe, a nature recombinant:

A painter ought to study universal Nature, and reason much within himself on all he sees, making use of the most excellent parts that compose the species of every object before him. His mind will by this method be like a mirror, reflecting truly every object placed before it, and become, as it were, a second Nature.<sup>7</sup>

You know that you cannot make any animal without it having its limbs such that each bears some resemblance to that of some one of the other animals. If therefore you wish to make one of your imaginary animals appear natural—let us suppose it to be a dragon—take for its head that of a mastiff or setter, for its eyes those of a cat, for its ears those of a porcupine, for its nose that of a greyhound, with the eyebrows of a lion, the temples of an old cock and the neck of a water-tortoise.<sup>8</sup>

I think that Leonardo may have dreamed of a complete visual rhetoric, a speech of the eye, in which the whole work of language, from invention to persuasion to dialectic to symbolic logic, was accomplished strictly through images. In picture-language, every new idea is a chimera, a recombination of the scattered limbs (manes, snouts, cocks’ combs) of old ideas—just as (many) Chinese ideograms recombine radicals from other characters.

Leonardo insists that a painted image is better than a musical composition because it persists unchanged in time. This looks like a valuing of the static over the dynamic. But that isn't quite true: Leonardo's paintings, even the calm ones, disquiet us because they are tracings of whirlwinds. Not much is solidly *there*. His portraits tend to show half-shut eyes and half-smiles and inarticulate fingers half self-caressing, or articulate fingers arrayed into a pinwheel and describing a spin. Much swaying cartilage, little fixed bone; a knowingness in the absence of a known. The marshes or fluent rocks in the background are signs that the faces and bodies in the foreground are themselves eddies, standing waves, studies in inconclusive sentience.

Though Leonardo thought literature and music lesser arts, he had some skill at both. His improvisations on the *lira da braccia* were praised, and he was a superb writer—his descriptions of imaginary paintings contain some extraordinarily cunning passages. His meditation on battle painting would give a narratologist much to ponder:

#### The Way to Represent a Battle

Show first the smoke of the artillery mingled in the air with the dust stirred up by the movement of the horses and of the combatants. This process you should express as follows: the dust, since it is made up of earth and has weight, although by reason of its fineness it may easily rise and mingle with the air, will nevertheless readily fall down again, and the greatest height will be attained by such part of it as is the finest, and this will in consequence be the least visible and will seem almost the colour of the air itself.

The smoke which is mingled with the dust-laden air will as it rises to a certain height have more and more the appearance of a dark cloud, at the summit of which the smoke will be more distinctly visible than the dust. The smoke will assume a

bluish tinge, and the dust will keep its natural colour. From the side whence the light comes this mixture of air and smoke and dust will seem far brighter than on the opposite side.

As for the combatants the more they are in the midst of this turmoil the less they will be visible, and the less will be the contrast between their lights and shadows.

You should give a ruddy glow to the faces and the figures and the air around them, and to the gunners and those near to them, and this glow should grow fainter as it is farther away from its cause. The figures which are between you and the light, if far away, will appear dark against a light background, and the nearer their limbs are to the ground the less will they be visible, for there the dust is greater and thicker. And if you make horses galloping away from the throng, make little clouds of dust as far distant one from another as is the space between the strides made by the horse, and that cloud which is farthest away from the horse should be the least visible, for it should be high and spread out and thin, while that which is nearest should be most conspicuous and smallest and most compact.

Let the air be full of arrows going in various directions, some mounting upwards, others falling, others flying horizontally; and let the balls shot from the guns have a train of smoke following their course. Show the figures in the foreground covered with dust on their hair and eyebrows and such other level parts as afford the dust a space to lodge.

Make the conquerors running, with their hair and other light things streaming in the wind, and with brows bent down; and they should be thrusting forward opposite limbs, that is, if a man advances the right foot, the left arm should also come forward. If you represent anyone fallen you should show the mark where he has been dragged through the dust which has

become changed to blood-stained mire, and round about in the half-liquid earth you should show the marks of the trampling of men and horses who have passed over it.

Make a horse dragging the dead body of his master, and leaving behind him in the dust and mud the track of where the body was dragged along.

Make the beaten and conquered pallid, with brows raised and knit together, and let the skin above the brows be all full of lines of pain; at the sides of the nose show the furrows going in an arch from the nostrils and ending where the eye begins, and show the dilatation of the nostrils which is the cause of these lines; and let the lips be arched displaying the upper row of teeth, and let the teeth be parted after the manner of such as cry in lamentation. Show someone using his hand as a shield for his terrified eyes, turning the palm of it towards the enemy, and having the other resting on the ground to support the weight of his body; let others be crying out with their mouths wide open, and fleeing away. Put all sorts of armour lying between the feet of the combatants, such as broken shields, lances, swords, and other things like these. Make the dead, some half-buried in dust, others with the dust all mingled with the oozing blood and changing into crimson mud; and let the line of the blood be discerned by its colour, flowing in a sinuous stream from the corpse to the dust. Show others in the death agony grinding their teeth and rolling their eyes, with clenched fists grinding against their bodies and with legs distorted. Then you might show one, disarmed and struck down by the enemy, turning on him with teeth and nails to take fierce and inhuman vengeance, and let a riderless horse be seen galloping with mane streaming in the wind, charging among the enemy and doing them great mischief with his hoofs.

You may see there one of the combatants, maimed and fallen on the ground, protecting himself with his shield, and the enemy bending down over him and striving to give him the fatal stroke; there might also be seen many men fallen in a heap on top of a dead horse; and you should show some of the victors leaving the combat and retiring apart from the crowd, and with both hands wiping away from eyes and cheeks the thick layer of mud caused by the smarting of their eyes from the dust.

And the squadrons of the reserves should be seen standing full of hope but cautious, with eyebrows raised, and shading their eyes with their hands, peering into the thick, heavy mist in readiness for the commands of their captain; and so too the captain with his staff raised, hurrying to the reserves and pointing out to them the quarter of the field where they are needed; and you should show a river, within which the horses are galloping, stirring the water all around with a heaving mass of waves and foam and broken water, leaping high into the air and over the legs and bodies of the horses; but see that you make no level spot of ground that is not trampled over with blood.<sup>9</sup>

The prose is detailed and intent, and a novelist could quarry from it a moving chapter in a book something like *The Red Badge of Courage*—Stephen Crane, like Leonardo, is acutely sensitive to atmospherics. But Leonardo's battle scene is something you are invited to co-create, not to participate in: with the imperative verbs the passage feels like a set of instructions from a master god to his subordinate demiurges. Among the warriors there is suffering, and there is elation, but they exist only as hypothetical emotions to generate a particular writhe of neck or twist of cheek. But what is particularly strange is that it is not one battle

but all battles, with a sky filled at once with a whoosh of arrows, and with cannon smoke, and little puffs from the muskets—all the motives of all battle paintings are co-present, with concomitant inspissations and rarefactions and anfractuosités and big boistures and little slithers. Leonardo gives us a description not of a single painting but of the universe of possible battle paintings—this is maybe as close as the Renaissance comes to the sort of ekphrasis that Homer gives us in the description of Achilles' shield, a film spool on which all time is wound and bound. You can push the image backward by attending to the tracks of the fallen warriors pulled along the ground by their horses; you can push the image forward by following the direction of the shaded gaze of the cheerful horsemen in the reserve squadrons. The image is complete, in time as well as space: not a spot is left untrampled over with blood. We know the battle in the way that God knows a battle, conscious of creation's inner craft.

If a composer were to try to turn a battle painting into a musical composition, he or she would probably begin by creating a verbal or subverbal account of the painting, in terms similar to Leonardo's advice given above. It is difficult or impossible, I think, to perform any experiment in intermedial translation without recourse to words: the composer has to try to understand the painting as a language, a set of binary oppositions graduated between their extremes (triumphant victors versus desolate or raving losers, with the cautiously sanguine reserve squadrons in the middle; clear air versus heavy smoke, with thin dust in the middle). It may be possible to accomplish this re-mapping directly from pigment to music, but that would seem a miracle of intuition. A mediating eidolon in words is useful in stabilizing the relation between the real painting and the music that is about to come into being.

As it happens, Leonardo died just when a vogue for musical representations of battles was beginning. Clément Janequin, thirty years

younger than Leonardo, popularized the genre with a polyphonic chanson “La bataille (Escoutez tous gentilz),” usually thought to be a celebration of the French victory over the Swiss Confederates at the Battle of Marignano in 1515. The voices imitate cannons and staccato musket fire, the shouts of triumph, the legato groans of the wounded: the texture thins and thickens, exactly like the gradations of smoke and dust and sky in Leonardo’s description of the (*the*) battle painting. And of course the temporal aspect of the chanson, a weakness, to Leonardo’s way of thinking, of the whole art of music, makes the piece all the more representationally accurate, since battles take place in time—though Janequin foreshortens several hours into six minutes.

“La bataille” is representational but not ekphrastic, since there is no reason to think that a painting figured anywhere in Janequin’s thinking. But there are battle pieces that are musical meditations on particular battle paintings: for example, Liszt’s eleventh Symphonic Poem, *Hunnenschlacht* (Battle of the Huns, 1857). This is an ekphrasis of a painting by Wilhelm von Kaulbach of the famous battle in 451 when the Roman general Flavius Aëtius led a coalition against the forces of Attila: Kaulbach’s painting follows a legend that the spirits of the dead warriors kept fighting in the sky, in the tremendous struggle between civilization and barbarism, the sacred and the profane (fig. 50).

Would Liszt’s composition have been the slightest bit different if he had simply meditated directly on the legend, in the absence of the finite painting? Is its status as ekphrasis at all significant? It is an open question. A notation in the score says, concerning the opening of the music, “Conductors: the entire colour should be kept very dark, and all instruments must sound like ghosts.”<sup>10</sup> It is possible that the colors of the spirits in the painting encouraged something of the muted, faintly eerie textures of the music—but Kaulbach’s ghosts aren’t at all dark, and in any case there is little in color or shape to distinguish them from the corporeal presences on the ground. But in determining other



Fig. 50. *Wilhelm von Kaulbach, Battle of the Huns (1857).*

aspects of Liszt's musical thinking, Kaulbach may have been of distinct help. The theme of the Christian warriors is the plainchant *Crux fidelis*: the trombones cut through the battle music with this solemn motive, a sound equivalent to the glowing cross held by the billowy wafted figure on the upper left corner of the painting. The musical contrast is strong, between simple serene Christian confidence and the blasts and bloats of pagan fury. Liszt described this section of his music as "two opposing streams of light in which the Huns and the Cross are moving," and Kaulbach's painting is exactly that—the sky is filled with two great diagonals of moving bodies, flowing upward, in the reverse gravity of the kingdom of the spirit.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, any composer of a piece depicting a particular battle would think dialectically—as Beethoven does in *Wellington's Victory* (1813), in which the British forces are

represented by “God Save the King; and “Rule Britannia,” and the French by “Marlbrough s’en va-t-en guerre.”

So I would say that, while Kaulbach’s painting may have inspired *Hunnenschlacht*, the painting per se was, so to speak, only mildly indispensable. The more interesting cases of this sort of musical ekphrasis are the less representational ones. A musical representation of an image of a battle is not likely to differ much from a musical representation of a battle—unless the composer can take account of the aspects of the painting that are specific to the art of painting, the varnish, the canvas texture, the width of the brush, the use of turpentine. It is fascinating to watch intermedial artists when they try to find equivalents for some purely technical matter.

When Gloria Coates decided to write a symphonic piece based on van Gogh’s *Still Life with Quinces* (fig. 51)—the piece is called *The Quinces Quandary* (1993–94)—she faced a difficult problem in ekphrasis: as Coates remarked of her music, “[*Still Life with Quinces* is] not really a still life inasmuch as all the objects were in motion. Van Gogh painted it during the last year of his life. . . . I felt something of his own fears and disappointments . . . and the quinces were beginning to move, one was already falling. . . . The form which I selected corresponded to the movement of my eye across the canvas from the upper left to the lower right with the falling fruit. The brushstrokes were like my own glissandi . . . but in another medium, creating musical forms similar to those on the canvas.”<sup>12</sup> The content resists any ordinary strategy for representational musicalizing: even Richard Strauss might have had trouble writing a quince-flavored, as opposed to an apple- or peach-flavored symphonic movement. And the content resists any ordinary strategy for musicalizing not only on the level of content but on the level of form: Erik Satie wrote a set of pieces called *Trois morceaux en forme de poire* (1903), but it is not easy to know what musical form would actually correspond to that of a pear, or a quince.



FIG. 51. *Vincent van Gogh, Still Life with Quinces (1888).*

But in any case Coates seems less interested in the falling thing than in the act of falling: for her the painting depicts a suspended tumbling, and in her music we hear a sort of implacable lethargy of drop. But there is something else as well. What Coates chose to imitate was not the notion of quince but the notion of impasto: the thick smear of pigment is imaged by overlapping glissandi and unstable rumblings in the bass. The music seems at once heavy and glaring, just as van Gogh's painting is heavy and glaring. The subject matter has little importance; the form (if by form you mean the bulgy roundness of the quinces and the design that the little heap makes against the cloth) has little importance; the important thing is the handling of the pigment—the way it abrades the eye. Coates seems attentive to the implied kinesthetics of the painting, the extreme gravitational field around the fruit, warping the air.

In the twentieth century, composers worked to see how far they could go in converting into music an image—not what an image represents, not some aspect of an image, but the entirety of an image. One composer, Iannis Xenakis, devised a machine to help him achieve this dream of intermedial perfection: the machine was called UPIC (Unité Polyagogique Informatique du CEMAMu—the last term is another acronym, standing for Centre d'Études de Mathématique et Automatique Musicales). It is a tablet on which the composer draws lines with an electromagnetic pen, thereby making a picture that the machine interprets as a sound-graph in which the  $x$ -axis is time and the  $y$ -axis is pitch. (Ronald Squibb has written a fascinating explanation of the inner workings of UPIC.)<sup>13</sup> The machine interprets a steady horizontal line as a steady note (high if located near the top of the picture, low if located near the bottom—though because the lines are hand-drawn, there is a slight vagrancy of pitch); a curved line as an irregular glissando. Since each arc on the tablet represents a different line of sound, it is easy to create extremely complex polyphony simply by drawing lots of lines.

Xenakis called the first UPIC-generated composition *Mycenae-Alpha* (1978). Mycenae is the site of powerfully archaic Greek ruins, and possibly Xenakis assigned this name because he felt himself a kind of archaeologist of music, excavating from pictorial space a primal acoustic architecture, even a lost civilization of sound, just as Heinrich Schliemann excavated from Mycenae the great golden mask known as the Mask of Agamemnon. Because there are passages of silence, or of pedal points that register visually only as a thick line at the bottom of the graph, the sounding parts of the score are separated into separate visual units: stalagmites made up of piles of short horizontal lines, stacks of little clouds, a large central blob in which many glissandi sprout and jag and ramify from a single pitch and then contract again.



FIG. 52. Iannis Xenakis, *Mycenaes-Alpha* (1978), detail. Copyright © 1978 Éditions Salabert—Paris. All rights reserved. Reproduced by kind permission of MGB Hal Leonard s.r.l.

When Xenakis drew the score onto UPIC, he was presumably thinking less about visual aesthetics than about the sounds that the image would yield; but the score is arresting to the eye, as a section may show (fig. 52). The two most salient phrase-icons remind me strongly of mature surrealism, especially Max Ernst, in, for example, *The Angel of the Hearth*; or, *The Triumph of Surrealism* (fig. 53), and something of the gustiness, the stomp, the articulation of a hand with way too many fingers can be heard in Xenakis's music. Ernst's painting has an explicitly political theme: "*The [Angel of the Hearth]* is a picture I painted



FIG. 53. *Max Ernst, The Angel of the Hearth; or, The Triumph of Surrealism (1937)*. © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo: Art Resource, NY.

after the defeat of the Republicans in Spain. . . . This is, of course, an ironical title for a kind of clumsy oaf which destroys everything that gets in the way. That was my impression in those days of the things that might happen in the world. And I was right.”<sup>14</sup>

Xenakis considered the procedures that govern his musical compositions to be similar to those that govern natural processes, such as the patter of raindrops or the chirping of cicadas, and also similar to those that govern political catastrophe:

Everyone has observed the sonic phenomena of a political crowd of dozens or hundreds of thousands of people. The human river shouts a slogan in a uniform rhythm. Then another slogan springs from the head of the demonstration; it spreads toward the tail, replacing the first. A wave of transition thus passes from the head to the tail. The clamor fills the

city, and the inhibiting force of voice and rhythm reaches a climax. It is an event of great power and beauty in its ferocity. Then the impact between the demonstrators and the enemy occurs. The perfect rhythm of the last slogan breaks up in a huge cluster of chaotic shouts, which also spreads to the tail. Imagine, in addition, the reports of dozens of machine guns and the whistle of bullets adding their punctuations to this total disorder. The crowd is then rapidly dispersed, and after sonic and visual hell follows a detonating calm, full of despair, dust, and death. The statistical laws of these events, separated from their political or moral context, are the same as those of the cicadas or the rain. They are the laws of the passage from complete order to total disorder in a continuous or explosive manner. They are stochastic laws.<sup>15</sup>

I don't know whether *Mycenae-Alpha* was intended to have a political subtext, but Xenakis was a passionately political man—he lost an eye in the struggle against monarchy in Greece in 1944. And I want to take *Mycenae-Alpha* as a kind of battle piece in which the whoomps and whistles and detonations and calms are generated from something like a battle picture by Ernst, a visual surreality translated into a musical one. It is possible to hear the battle as a sophisticated update of Janequin's "La bataille"; or it is possible to hear it as a sound-picture of the endless combat between order and disorder, figure and blur, being and nonbeing.

### *Pseudomorphoses Between Music and Painting*

Representational painting is always concerned with the not-there-ness of the represented object, and a painting that represents music necessarily deals with a particularly un-present entity. But if sound can't be

painted, it can be framed by all sorts of paramusical things pertinent to its origin or circumstances of performance: the face of a composer, the face of a musician, the face of a listener, the decor of an opera or ballet, the beautiful shapes of musical instruments—any and all of these things can suggest music in general or (to some degree) in particular; even musical notation can have a certain crabbed visual charm. Painters can manipulate the visual field to impart some specificity to the suggestion of music. In *The Orchestra of the Opera* (fig. 54), Edgar Degas has rearranged the orchestral layout to make the figure of his friend, Désiré Dihau, prominent in a way that a bassoonist would never be in a French orchestra pit. The effect is like that of a camera panning in on the soloist in a concert: the bassoon, the flute, and the neck of the double bass (perpendicular to bassoon and flute) form a striking shape, a tilted rectangular, the visual equivalent of the leading-lines in a passage from the ballet music. I don't hear a specific tune in my head when I study this painting, but something of the melos of woodwind-intensive passages in Delibes or Adolphe Adam comes through. The absent music looms in the strong wood of the instruments, in the rapt routine of the players' faces.

Music appears most forcefully in painting as a locus of attention, a pricking-up of the ears. Earlier in this book I argued that painting tends to be a language for pondering invisibilities, and the audible is an especially impressive and significant form of the invisible. In medieval and Renaissance pictures, angels are sometimes like wreaths or banners wrapped around or streaming from the harps and flutes and trumpets they carry, as if angels existed mostly as a half-visualized form of music. Even in more earthbound depictions of music, the sounds of the instruments make themselves visible in the sheer intentness of the listener's or the player's gaze. Walter Pater, an art critic who could hear with his eye, wrote in 1873 of Titian's *Concert* (fig. 55) and related concert paintings by Giorgione or Titian: "In sketch or finished picture, in various



FIG. 54. *Edgar Degas, The Orchestra of the Opera (c. 1870).*

collections, we may follow it through many intricate variations—men fainting at music; music at the pool-side while people fish, or mingled with the sound of the pitcher in the well, or heard across running water, or among the flocks; the tuning of instruments; people with intent faces, as if listening . . . to detect the small interval of musical sound, the smallest undulation in the air, or feeling for music in thought on a stringless instrument.” The effort to hear what cannot be heard can be a metaphor for the effort to see what cannot be seen. Pater went so far as to assert that all painting is music carried on by other means: “*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music.*”<sup>16</sup> You don’t need any

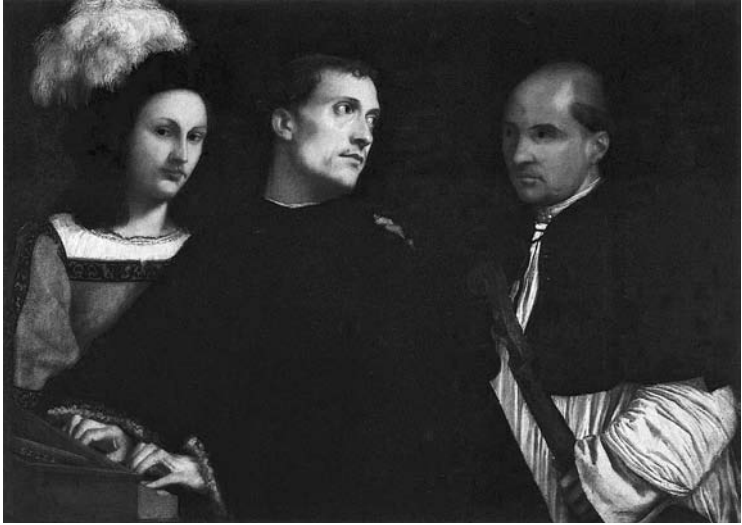


FIG. 55. *Titian, Concert (c. 1510).*

special faculty of synesthesia to hear painting: a good painting is already constructed in ocular timbres, ocular harmonies. We don't usually have to strain to see an object a few feet from our face: but, according to Pater, Giorgione teaches us to scan a painting for the unheard melodies of pictorial craft, the subtleties that need to be teased out patiently from the general mass of sensation. You should look at a painting in exactly the way that the harpsichordist in the *Concert* stares with his ear at his instrument.

The old masters themselves understood their art as music. Nicolas Poussin was perhaps the most explicit on this theme:

Those fine old Greeks, who invented everything that is beautiful, found several Modes by means of which they produced marvelous effects. This word Mode means, properly, the *ratio*

or the measure and the form that we employ to do anything. . . . As the Modes of the ancients were composed of several things put together, the variety produced certain differences of Mode whereby one could understand that each of them retained in itself a subtle distinction, particularly when all the things that pertained to the composition were put together in proportions that had the power to arouse the soul of the spectator to diverse emotions.<sup>17</sup>

Poussin conceived, or came to interpret, his martial scenes as music in the Phrygian mode, stern and serious; and some of his pastoral scenes, such as *Dance to the Music of Time* (fig. 56), in the Ionian mode, cheerful, bacchanalian. The baby on the right, with the hourglass, suggests that the dance might end in an hour; the baby on the left, blowing bubbles, suggests that the dance might end in a second. In a great many of Poussin's paintings, even much less overtly musical ones than this, a dance seems to be on the verge of breaking out, as if the human figures were just about to catch the subliminal tune that guided the hand of their painter.

But some artists have attempted to represent music not on the level of visual phenomena that cause music (harps), not on the level of visual phenomena inspired by music (dancing), but on a deeper level. Gustav Klimt's monumental frieze based on Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is a long, somewhat scroll-like mural that, as it unspools, you read over time just as you hear music over time: there are figures that represent (among other things) the sorrow of weak humanity, the hostile forces arrayed against us, the yearning for happiness (with a knight in golden armor who has the face of Gustav Mahler), the arts, the angels of paradise, the great kiss. All of this is closely, intensely related to our experience in hearing the Ninth Symphony, though Klimt's imagination, and our imaginations, are considerably aided by the fact



FIG. 56. *Nicolas Poussin, Dance to the Music of Time (1640).*

that Beethoven's fourth movement is a setting of a poem by Friedrich Schiller, the Ode to Joy (1785), a vision of the universal brotherhood of man. Klimt, then, has not made a pure eidolon of a musical composition, but one mediated by the much easier process of making an eidolon of a poem.

Still, as we study the painting to seek some pseudomorph specific to a passage in the symphony, we can sometimes find that Klimt is responding directly to Beethoven, not to Schiller. In the Hostile Forces section are arrayed the forces that oppose Joy: on the right, Unchastity, Voluptuousness, Immoderation, on the left the Gorgons, all in the bosom of the great gorilla-like monster Typhon (fig. 57). Schiller understands that Joy is not yet absolute, but in its supernal elation the poem sweeps away all unjoyous things, as time presses forward urgently to a world beyond sorrow, beyond anger, beyond monarchs, beyond



FIG. 57. *Gustav Klimt, Beethoven-Frieze (1902), detail: The Hostile Forces.*

war. Beethoven, on the other hand, begins the fourth movement with a huge dissonance, a fanfare of terror, and then reviews the symphony's earlier themes—it is as if some mighty hand were crossing out the first three movements one by one. We hear the first stirrings of the familiar and agreeable Ode to Joy theme, but, as if angered again, the *Schreckensfanfare* shouts it down; finally a bass cries out, “O friends, not these sounds”—and soon the movement settles into the great choral setting of the Ode to Joy. When Klimt devotes a good deal of space to the hostile forces, he is attending to terrors and twistednesses that exist far more strongly in the music than in the poem.

The most remarkable effort I know to paint music-as-music, rather than a particular composition or a particular response to music, came from the Italian futurist Luigi Russolo, whose automobile we studied in an earlier chapter. Russolo was a composer and music theoretician as well as a painter—he devised a set of noisemakers (gurgler, hissers,

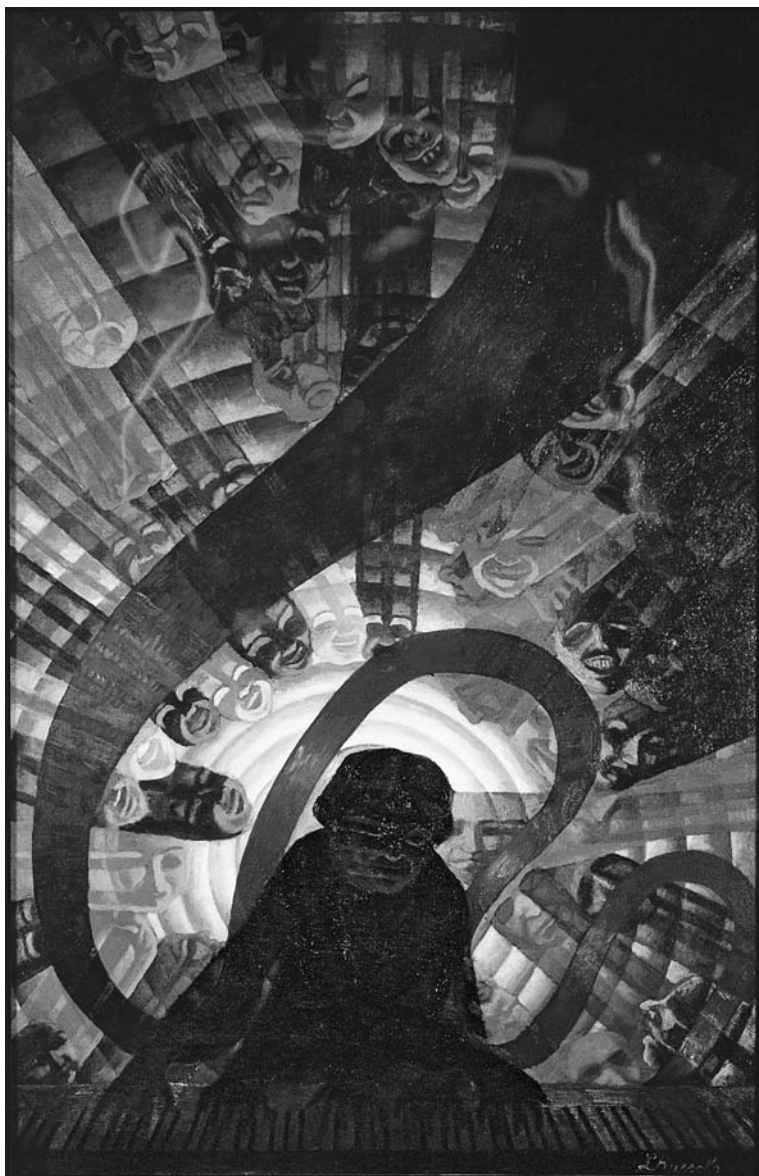


FIG. 58. *Luigi Russolo, Music (1911)*. © DeA Picture Library/Art Resource, NY.

rumbler, and so forth) and wrote music for them. In one of his best-known paintings, *Music* (fig. 58), he sets himself the task of painting sound waves. Here the comet masks—grinning, or pensive, or astonished, or resigned, or goofy, or quietly amused—give some account of music’s expressive potentialities; but what chiefly interests Russolo is the shape of energy. As it happens, waves come in two basic types: transverse (in which the displacement of the medium is perpendicular to the direction of propagation, as in the sine waves made by a shaken string) and longitudinal (in which the displacement of the medium is the same as the direction of propagation, as in a sound wave). A note struck on a piano makes the air bulge and recede, in an out-pulsing of concentric shells. This is exactly what Russolo depicts here; but through the shells of the longitudinal wave Russolo has threaded a transverse wave, a blue snake. The two sets of waves, along with the facial vectors pointing inward at the pianist’s head, constitute a remarkably effective image of directed energies.

A still further stage in the visualization of music might be a fanciful realizing of the tracing of an oscilloscope. Something like this occurs in the intermission of Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* (1940), where the affable bore Deems Taylor talks with a cartoon representation of the optical soundtrack affixed to the filmstrip in a nonsilent movie. Taylor was himself a composer, and it is amusing to see a composer talking nonchalantly with a visual image of Music herself.

❧ *Comparative Arts* ❧

Two Conclusions

*1. Every Artistic Medium Is the Wrong Medium*

THERE IS A DANGER that intermedial exercises will expose the vanity or uselessness of art. I believe that every attempt to interpret, to find meaning, pushes the artwork into some medium other than the one in which it states itself: a poem becomes known through the pictures and the music it rouses in the critic's imagination, a painting through the words that attempt to describe it, to locate the sources of its power, and so forth. Indeed, the aesthetic phenomenon is most strongly felt when art is liberated from itself, a condition that can happen only through the act of forcing it, more or less against its will, into an alien medium.

Kant describes the condition of art as purposiveness in the absence of a purpose, but I'm not sure that an artwork can even possess purposiveness. An interpretation can be considered as a construction of a tentative entelechy, but the infinite multiplication of interpretations tends to erode any viable sense of an objective telos. Furthermore, whatever integrity or consonance or radiance an artwork

may possess in its home medium tends to vanish with the rough intermedial handling that the artwork must undergo in the process of interpretation.

The clearest demonstration I know is Luciano Berio's account of the composition of his *Ekphrasis*:

Ekphrasis [Continuo II] is a reserved and reflective commentary on an adagio which I wrote in 1990. It is a commentary on a continuous and ever changing soundscape formed from a lace of repeating patterns.

I had no intention of composing a musical metaphor for architecture while I was working on Continuo. Nor did I want to write a musical homage to the famous architects from Chicago, such as Sullivan, Wright or Mies van der Rohe. Neither did I want to engineer any direct reference to the amusing yet reasonable constructions by Renzo Piano whose work I greatly admire. During the course of composition, however, I realised that this was exactly what had happened.

The music processes within the fabric of Continuo do indeed have similarities to architectural principles, in abstract form if not in static shape. The musical patterns result in a completely impractical building with no door and pathways. Its expressive attraction, nonetheless, lies in the contradiction of being thus uninhabitable yet open at any one time for alternative extensions by added new wings, rooms and windows.<sup>1</sup>

Berio describes the architectural pseudomorph that his music erects in his mind. *Ekphrasis* is in every way a remarkable composition, a piece full of tense, bright calm—myself I hear in it liquid scrawls in the

fashion of Cy Twombly, music trying to construct graphemes to reach out to some unknowable picture that was beyond its power to grasp. But when Berio tries to imagine the building that his music would be if it were a building, he finds only something without doors or corridors, completely uninhabitable, beyond or beneath any human purpose. Perhaps every artwork is like that: we imagine that it is full of friendly doors through which we gain intimate access, but in fact we are shut out. The artwork, like the monad, has no windows. And if we do somehow manage to get inside an artwork, it may look like this:

*This palace is a fabrication of the gods*, I thought at first. I explored the uninhabited enclosures and corrected the thought: *The gods that built it have died*. I noted its peculiarities and said, *The gods that built it were mad*. . . . I had crossed a labyrinth, but the shining City of the Immortals terrified and disgusted me. A labyrinth is a house elaborated for the sake of confusing those within it; its architecture, extravagant in symmetries, is subordinated to that end. In the palace that I imperfectly explored, the architecture lacked any end at all. The place abounded in atrocity: the exitless corridor, the window too high to reach, the ostentatious door that gave on a cell or an empty shaft, incredible inverted stairways, with steps and balustrades pointing down. Other stairways, attached airily to the side of a monumental wall, died leading nowhere, petering out after two or three turnings, in the highest darkness of the cupolas. [Jorge Luis Borges, "El Inmortal" (1947)]<sup>2</sup>

No artwork has a habitable form. I cannot even live in my own house unless I concentrate on the ways in which it fails to be an artwork.

2. *Every Artistic Medium Is the Right Medium*

The phenomenon of synesthesia suggests that the choice of medium does not particularly matter: every medium is intimate with every other because the senses themselves are only weakly segregated. It is improper to speak of rough handling in the translation of an artwork to an alien medium because there are no alien media: each artwork is already present in the mind as a painting, a poem, a piece of music, no matter what the medium of its original presentation. All art is inscribed on the brain, and what lights up the visual areas will also light up the faculties of hearing and touching. Indeed, there is something peculiarly seductive, warmly human, in the sidestep across media boundaries:

Rafael made a century of sonnets,  
 Made and wrote them in a certain volume  
 Dinted with the silver-pointed pencil  
 Else he only us'd to draw Madonnas:  
 These, the world might view—but One, the volume.  
 Who that one, you ask? Your heart instructs you.  
 Did she live and love it all her lifetime?  
 .....

Dante once prepar'd to paint an angel:  
 Whom to please? You whisper "Beatrice."  
 While he mus'd and traced it and retraced it,  
 (Peradventure with a pen corroded  
 Still by drops of that hot ink he dipp'd for,  
 When, his left-hand i' the hair o' the wicked,  
 Back he held the brow and prick'd its stigma,  
 Bit into the live man's flesh for parchment,  
 Loos'd him, laugh'd to see the writing rankle,

Let the wretch go festering thro' Florence). [Robert Browning,  
"One Word More," 1855]

Dante's painting, Raphael's sonnets—these were special acts of love, not public performances. And when we, as critics, tease out the paintings latent in the *Commedia* or the poem latent in *La fornarina*, we are engaged in something like an act of love, because we usually bother to interpret only the things we love.

All art is inscribed on the body. The corporeality of art may not always be easy to see, but it is always there. It is easy to mock the critic who notes, for example, that the composer Edvard Grieg may have shied away from grandiose works in favor of musical miniatures (sometimes concerning trolls) because he was five feet one inch tall. I would mock him myself. On the other hand, would we still laugh at a critic who connected the short-breathed melodies common in Grieg's work with the fact that Grieg had only one lung? Maybe, maybe not—but I am certain that something of Grieg's experience with his own body does inhere in his work.

The arts are easy to join because they were never strongly separated in the first place. It isn't always easy to describe the insights gained from a corporealist view of the arts, but it's easy to feel the body beneath every aesthetic phenomenon: in dance the body's motion-incises in air, in painting the way the arms and fingers make choreographs of their fine motor skills on a canvas stage, in architecture the body's soaring stamina, in music the body's way of understanding its emphases as forms of sound, in poetry the body's attempt to articulate its breathing presence in the world. I have had little to say about dance in this book, partly because this project could not hope to comprehend the whole range of the arts, but mostly because I understand each art individually as a dance, and all the arts together as the aggregate dance of the body of the whole human race. As Richard Wagner put it,

Of all the arts, the art of dance is the most real. The material of its art is the actual bodily human being, and not just a part, but the whole, from the foot sole to the top of the head, as presented to the eye. Therefore the dance includes in itself the conditions for the manifestation of all other arts. [*The Artwork of the Future*, 1849]<sup>3</sup>

Wagner's early days in Paris partly ruined for him the formal art of ballet, but the one sustained dance project of his maturity, the Venusberg scene added to *Tannhäuser* in 1861, suggests something of the possibilities of carnality in dance. For Wagner, dance is one of the arts, but it is also all the arts: elsewhere in this same essay he speaks of the intimate minuet that Dance, Music, and Poetry perform together, breast to breast and leg to leg.

In the course of this book, we have looked at a number of creation myths in literature, painting, and music. But to my mind the most compelling account of the origin of the human race is found in an 1801 ballet, Beethoven's *Creatures of Prometheus*. According to Beethoven, dance precedes speech, precedes thinking, precedes feeling itself:

The two [statues] move slowly across the stage from the background.—P[rometheus] . . . is pleased when he sees that his plan is such a success; he is inexpressibly delighted, stands up and beckons to the children to stop—They turn slowly towards him in an expressionless manner . . . he explains to them that they are his work, that they belong to him, that they must be thankful to him, kisses and caresses them.—However, still in an emotionless manner, they sometimes merely shake their heads, are completely indifferent, and stand there, groping in all directions.<sup>4</sup>

Prometheus has shaped clay into a man and a woman, and animated them with the fire that he stole from heaven; but he is disappointed that they are just zombies, brainless creatures capable only of blank uncertain movement. The music that Beethoven wrote to accompany their coming-to-life is startling: first we hear a vague rhythmless prelude, then Prometheus's temporary pleasure in his new creation. How are these half-baked gingerbread figures to be turned into a man and a woman capable of reason and affection? Prometheus ponders the problem, and decides to take them to Parnassus, where Apollo and the Muses will instruct them in how to be human by means of music and dance—as the scenario puts it,

Euterpe, assisted by Amphion, starts to play music, and at the sound of their harmonies the two young people start to show signs of understanding, of the power of reflection, of an appreciation of the beauties of nature and of human feeling.<sup>5</sup>

(The intelligent and moving scenario was devised by the great choreographer Salvatore Viganò, who commissioned the music from Beethoven and danced the role of the male Urmensch.) By means of various dances from Terpsichore, the Graces, and Bacchus, the new man and woman learn the arts of pleasure and the arts of war.

So far the ballet seems to have little drama, little conflict; but Beethoven and Viganò have a surprise. Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy, takes a dagger and mimes the act of dying; overcome by her own art, she denounces Prometheus for having created a new race born but to die—and she kills Prometheus. But the ballet will end happily: Pan and his fauns perform a grotesque dance that brings the dead Titan back to life. At the beginning Prometheus gives life to the human race; at the end the life-giver is himself in need of resurrection. Beethoven

described that resurrection with a theme that came to obsess him: the theme we know from the finale of the Third Symphony, the *Eroica* (composed in 1804, three years after *The Creatures of Prometheus*). Beethoven also used this theme for a contradanse and in a set of piano variations from 1802: the piano piece begins with its naked bass line, then slowly outfits it first with its true melody, and then with counter-melodies: the drama is like that of a statue that gradually comes to life, as if the variations were a miniature version of the ballet. In the Third Symphony, the theme appears after a funeral march, another suggestion of resurrection—the simple melody seems to represent for Beethoven some cosmic vivacity, some primal dance that catches up trees and rocks and humans in its irresistible toils of grace. The theme begins delicately, but soon moves toward three heavy clumps—in the *Eroica* finale these clonks undergo a remarkable development that could be called the apotheosis of the stomp.

So a dance can embrace everything governed by the Muses, all mousike; and death; and resurrection. A dance is a response to music, and a making of its own music—figuratively, or even literally, as in the case of tap dancing, or in the case of a dancer I once saw who strapped transducers to her own joints, so that every swivel of hip or flexion of wrist created a specific sound generated by a computer program. A dance is also a set of moving statues, moving pictures; and dancers often shape their bodies into architectural forms, such as a gated gazebo in Filippo Taglioni's 1832 *La sylphide* or a merry-go-round in Balanchine's 1929 *The Prodigal Son*. To some extent the aesthetic phenomenon is a mode of understanding how the human body winds and unwinds, sleeks itself, through the artwork. The artwork's surface is always, in a sense, skin.

The human race and its art are always co-evolving. Maybe art is helping us sprout new sense organs, as some artists have thought. Here is Ezra Pound in 1921:

Let us suppose man capable of exteriorizing a new organ, horn, halo, Eye of Horus. Given a brain of this power, comes the question, what organ, and to what purpose?

Turning to folk-lore, we have Frazer on horned gods, we have Egyptian statues. . . . Now in a primitive community, a man, a volontaire, might risk it. He might want prestige, authority, want them enough to grow horns and claim a divine heritage, or to grow a cat head . . . he would have been deified, or crucified, or possibly both. Today he would be caught for a circus. . . .

But man goes on making new faculties. . . . You have every exploited "hyper-æsthesia," i.e., every new form of genius, from the faculty of hearing four parts in a fugue perfectly, to the ear for money.<sup>6</sup>

Pound's ultimate hope for the *Cantos* might have been to hasten the evolution of a new human race, as horns, whiskers, antennae poke out of us, sensitive to divine tremblings in the ether.

And here is Marinetti. In a 1924 piece called "Tactilism," Marinetti imagined an art for the skin to complement and perhaps replace the arts of the eye and ear (painting, sculpture, music, literature): the artist would make poems for the fingertips, by juxtaposing (say) sponges, sandpaper, wool, pig's bristle, and wire bristle:

TOWARD THE DISCOVERY OF NEW SENSES

Imagine the Sun leaving its orbit and forgetting the Earth! Darkness. Men stumbling around. Terror. Then the birth of a vague sense of security and adjustment. . . .

A visual sense is born in the fingertips.

X-ray vision develops, and some people can already see inside their bodies. Others dimly explore the insight of their neighbors' bodies . . . the epigastrium sees. The knees see.

The elbows see. . . . Perhaps there is more thought in the fingertips and the iron than in the brain that prides itself on observing the phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

It seems that the artwork appeals not only to all the senses we already have, but to senses as yet undiscovered. To learn to see with the epigastrium and to hear with the elbows is part of the mission of the artwork: to read with the skin and all that is beneath the skin.

## NOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

### *Introduction*

1. Are the arts one or many is a principal question that the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy asks in *Les muses* (2001).

2. “Dem Einen ist die Zunge gelöst, und er wird Dichter, in eines Andern Seele gestaltet sich Alles zu Farben und Formen und er wird ein bildender Künstler, der Dritte hört unwillkürlich, gemäß der Verschiedenheit seiner Seelenstimmung, bald heitre, bald ernst oder melancholische Melodien in seinem Innern erklingen, und er wird Musiker; kurz, es ist dieselbe schöpferische Kraft, welche gleichsam, wie durch ein Prisma, sich verschiedenartig bricht.” Wilhelm von Schadow, *Der moderne Vasari: Erinnerungen aus dem Künstlerleben. Eine Novelle* (Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1854), p. 94.

3. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Capricorn, 1970), p. 37.

4. D. H. Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious and Fantasia of the Unconscious* (New York: Viking, 1960), p. 195.

5. In formulating these theses I am deeply indebted to Martin Heidegger’s great essay on the origin of the artwork, *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes* (1935–36).

6. Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), p. 18; Danto, *After the End of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 47 (emphasis mine).

### *1. What Is Literature?*

1. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 2010), p. 29.

2. “Il y avait chez mon maître un compagnon appelé M. Verrat, dont la maison, dans le voisinage, avait un jardin assez éloigné qui produisait de très belles

asperges. Il prit envie à M. Verrat, qui n'avait pas beaucoup d'argent, de voler à sa mère des asperges dans leur primeur, et de les vendre pour faire quelques bons déjeuners. Comme il ne voulait pas s'exposer lui-même, et qu'il n'était pas fort ingambe, il me choisit pour cette expédition. Après quelques cajoleries préliminaires, qui me gagnèrent d'autant mieux que je n'en voyais pas le but, il me la proposa comme une idée qui lui venait sur-le-champ. Je disputai beaucoup; il insista. Je n'ai jamais pu résister aux caresses; je me rendis. J'allais tous les matins moissonner les plus belles asperges: je les portais au Molard, où quelque bonne femme, qui voyait que je venais de les voler, me le disait pour les avoir à meilleur compte. Dans ma frayeur, je prenais ce qu'elle voulait me donner; je le portais à M. Verrat. Cela se changeait promptement en un déjeuner dont j'étais le pourvoyeur, et qu'il partageait avec un autre camarade; car pour moi, très content d'en avoir quelques bribes, je ne touchais pas même à leur vin.

“Ce petit manège dura plusieurs jours sans qu'il me vînt même à l'esprit de voler le voleur, et de dîmer sur M. Verrat le produit de ses asperges. J'exécutais ma friponnerie avec la plus grande fidélité; mon seul motif était de complaire à celui qui me la faisait faire. Cependant si j'eusse été surpris, que de coups, que d'injures, quels traitements cruels n'eussé-je point essuyés, tandis que le misérable, en me démentant, eut été cru sur sa parole, et moi doublement puni pour avoir osé le charger, attendu qu'il était compagnon, et que je n'étais qu'apprenti! Voilà comment en tout état le fort coupable se sauve aux dépens du faible innocent.

“J'appris ainsi qu'il n'était pas si terrible de voler que je l'avais cru; et je tirai bientôt si bon parti de ma science, que rien de ce que je convoitais n'était à ma portée en sûreté.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les confessions* (Paris: Launette, 1889), vol. 1, available at [http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Les\\_Confessions\\_%28Rousseau%29/Livre\\_I?match=en](http://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Les_Confessions_%28Rousseau%29/Livre_I?match=en).

3. “Cuando se proclamó que la Biblioteca abarcaba todos los libros, la primera impresión fue de extravagante felicidad. Todos los hombres se sintieron señores de un tesoro intacto y secreto. No había problema personal o mundial cuya elocuente solución no existiera: en algún hexágono. El universo estaba justificado, el universo bruscamente usurpó las dimensiones ilimitadas de la esperanza. En aquel tiempo se habló mucho de las Vindicaciones: libros de apología y de profecía, que para siempre vindicaban los actos de cada hombre del universo y guardaban

arcanos prodigiosos para su porvenir. Miles de codiciosos abandonaron el dulce hexágono natal y se lanzaron escaleras arriba, urgidos por el vano propósito de encontrar su Vindicación. Esos peregrinos disputaban en los corredores estrechos, proferían oscuras maldiciones, se estrangulaban en las escaleras divinas, arrojaban los libros engañosos al fondo de los túneles, morían despeñados por los hombres de regiones remotas. Otros se enloquecieron . . . Las Vindicaciones existen (yo he visto dos que se refieren a personas del porvenir, a personas acaso no imaginarias) pero los buscadores no recordaban que la posibilidad de que un hombre encuentre la suya, o alguna pérvida variación de la suya, es computable en cero.” Jorge Luis Borges, “La biblioteca de Babel,” available at <http://www.literaberinto.com/vueltamundo/bibliotecaborges.htm>.

4. Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (Radford, Va.: Wilder, 2010), pp. 25–26.

5. Rudyard Kipling, “How the Leopard Got His Spots,” *Just So Stories*, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2781/2781-h/2781-h.htm>.

6. Elaine Altman Evans, “The Sacred Scarab,” McClung Museum Occasional Papers (posted January 1, 1998), at <http://mclungmuseum.utk.edu/sacred-scarab/>.

7. René Descartes, “Principles of Philosophy,” part 3, sect. 46, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1:257.

8. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 142–43.

9. Thomas More, *Utopia*, Harvard Classics, vol. 36, part 3 (New York: Collier, 1909–14), book 2, available at <http://www.bartleby.com/36/3/3.html>. All subsequent references to *Utopia* are from this source.

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12. W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 226.

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2. *What Is Painting?*

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2. Maurice Denis, “Définition du Néo-traditionalisme” (1890), trans. Peter Collier, *ibid.*, p. 863.
3. Paul Gauguin, “Notes on Painting” (c. 1889–90), trans. John Rewald, *ibid.*, p. 1024.
4. *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, trans. Jean Paul Richter (Seattle: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2010), p. 14.
5. Richard Tuttle, interview, *Art21*, PBS, available at <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/tuttle/clip2.html>.
6. Francisco Pacheco, *Arte de la pintura* (1649), in *Art in Theory*, p. 35.
7. William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753), *ibid.*, p. 493.
8. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977), p. 6.
9. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 153.
10. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust. Der Tragödie erster Teil*:

Das ist die Welt:  
Sie steigt und fällt  
Und rollt beständig;  
Sie klingt wie Glas—  
Wie bald bricht das!  
Ist hohl inwendig.  
Hier glänzt sie sehr,  
Und hier noch mehr.  
.....  
Du musst sterben!  
Sie ist von Ton,  
Es gibt Scherben.

Available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2229/pg2229.html>.

11. Quoted in Ann Sutherland Harris and Carla Lord, “Pietro Testa and Parnassus,” *Burlington Magazine* 803, vol. 112, no. 16 (January 1970).

12. Quoted in Emanuel Winternitz, *Leonardo da Vinci as a Musician* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 134.

13. John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 70.

14. Leonardo da Vinci, *Treatise on Painting*, trans. John Francis Rigaud (New York: Dover, 2005), sect. 349, pp. 149–50.

15. Gustave Courbet, “Letter to Young Artists” (1861), trans. Jonathan Murphy, in *Art in Theory*, pp. 403–4.

16. Pierre Proudhon, *Du principe de l’art et sa destination sociale* (1865), trans. Christopher Miller, *ibid.*, p. 407.

17. Robert Grosseteste, *On Light (De luce)*, trans. Clare C. Riedl (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942), available at [http://www.lumen.nu/rekvelld/wp/?page\\_id=175](http://www.lumen.nu/rekvelld/wp/?page_id=175).

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19. Quoted in Bernard Denvir, *The Impressionists at First Hand* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), pp. 146–47.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinne” (On Truth and Falsehood in the Extramoral Sense), *Werke in Drei Bänden* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1966), 3:313.

21. Quoted in Phoebe Poole, *Impressionism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 224.

22. Lionel Abel, *Camille Pissarro: Letters to His Son Lucien* (New York: Pantheon), p. 64.

23. Quoted in Poole, *Impressionism*, p. 61.

24. Denvir, *Impressionists at First Hand*, p. 136.

25. Both quoted in John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis, 1907–1914* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1988), pp. 51, 5.

26. Douglas Cooper, *The Cubist Epoch* (London: Phaidon, 1970), p. 59.

27. Quoted in John Golding, *Braque: The Late Works* (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 1997), p. 4.

28. Quoted in Cooper, *Cubist Epoch*, p. 33.

29. Quoted in Golding, *Cubism*, p. 34.

30. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 106.

31. Quoted in Cooper, *Cubist Epoch*, pp. 27–28.

32. Francis Francina, “Realism and Ideology: An Introduction to Semiotics and Cubism,” in Charles Harrison, Francis Francina, and Gill Perry, *Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 128; quoted in Golding, *Cubism*, p. 49.

33. Quoted in Golding, *Cubism*, p. 116.

34. Bernard Berenson, “Aesthetic and History: Tactile Values” (1896), available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/39437229/Berenson-B-Aesthetic-and-History-Tactile-Values>.

35. *Pound / Ford: The Story of a Literary Friendship*, ed. Brita Lindberg-Seysted (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 10.

36. W. B. Yeats, “Symbolism in Painting” (1898), from Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Collier, 1968), p. 147.

37. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 32.

38. Wassily Kandinsky, *Reminiscences* (1913), quoted in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. and trans. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston: Da Capo, 1994), p. 373.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 388.

40. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, p. 44.

41. Kandinsky, *The Yellow Sound* (1912), in *Complete Writings*, pp. 275–76.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

43. Hogarth, *Analysis of Beauty*, pp. 493–94.

44. Humbert de Superville, *Essai sur les signes inconditionnels dans l’art* (Essay on Absolute Signs in Art) (1827–32), trans. Jonathan Murphy, in *Art in Theory*, p. 227.

45. Charles Blanc, *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, 2nd ed. (1870), in Martin Kemp, *The Science of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 257.

46. *Cézanne: The Late Work*, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1977), pp. 46, 202.

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50. *Punkt und Linie zur Fläche* (Point and Line to Plane) (1926), in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings*, p. 579.

51. *Ibid.*, pp. 540, 560.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 583, 551–52, 581–82.

53. Paul Klee, *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, trans. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 28, 42, 48.

54. D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow* (New York: Viking, 1969), p. 487.

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56. “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery,” in *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Mary W. Shelley (London: John and Henry L. Hunt, 1854), 139–40, edited for online version by Melissa J. Sites and Neil Fraistat and available at <http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/shelley/medusa/mforum.html>. Brackets signify gaps in the lines of this unfinished poem.

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59. Thomas Butler, “Writing at the Edge of the Person: Lyric Subjectivity in Cambridge Poetry, 1966–1993” (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 2005), p. 210.

60. Quoted in Butler, “Writing at the Edge of the Person,” p. 202.

61. T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” (1935), from *Four Quartets*, in Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909–62* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1991), p. 180.

### 3. *What Is Music?*

1. Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 53.

2. Claudio Monteverdi, Preface to *Madrigali guerrieri, ed amorosi* (1638),

trans. Oliver Strunk, in *Source Readings in Music History*, ed. Oliver Strunk, rev. Leo Treitler (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 665–66.

3. Quoted in Jonathan D. Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 29.

4. Gretchen Wheelock, “Schwarze Gretel and the Engendered Minor Mode in Mozart’s Operas,” in *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 201–21.

5. E. M. Forster, “Word-Making and Sound-Taking,” in Foster, *Abinger Harvest* (Boston: Mariner, 1950), p. 105.

6. George J. Buelow, “Rhetoric and Music,” in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Grove’s Dictionaries of Music, 1980), vol. 15.

7. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Origin of Language*, trans. John Moran (New York: Ungar, 1966), p. 49.

8. Buelow, “Rhetoric and Music,” p. 800.

9. Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 29.

10. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 128.

11. Benedetto Marcello, *Il teatro alla moda* (c. 1720), trans. R. G. Pauly, in *Source Readings in Music History*, ed. Oliver Strunk (New York: Norton, 1950), pp. 526–27.

12. “El mundo para ellos no es un concurso de objetos en el espacio; es una serie heterogénea de actos independientes. Es sucesivo, temporal, no espacial. No hay sustantivos en la conjetural *Ursprache* de Tlön, de la que proceden los idiomas ‘actuales’ y los dialectos: hay verbos impersonales, calificados por sufijos (o prefijos) monosilábicos de valor adverbial. Por ejemplo: no hay palabra que corresponda a la palabra *luna*, pero hay un verbo que sería en español *lunecer* o *lunar*. *Surgió la luna sobre el río* se dice *hlör u fang axaxaxas mlö . . .* Xul Solar traduce con brevedad: . . . *Upward, behind the onstreaming it mooned.*” Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1947), available at *Ciudad Seva*, <http://www.ciudadseva.com/textos/cuentos/esp/borges/tlon.htm>.

13. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), p. 151.

14. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 269–70.

15. “Aus der dunklen Öffnung des ausgetretenen Inwendigen des Schuhzeuges starrt die Mühsal der Arbeitsschritte. In der derbgediegenen Schwere des Schuhzeuges ist aufgestaut die Zähigkeit des langsamen Ganges durch die weithin gestreckten und immer gleichen Furchen des Ackers, über dem ein rauher Wind steht. Auf dem Leder liegt das Feuchte und Satte des Bodens. Unter den Sohlen schiebt sich hin die Einsamkeit des Feldweges durch den sinkenden Abend. In dem Schuhzeug schwingt der verschwiegene Zuruf der Erde, ihr stilles Verschenken des reifenden Kornes und ihr unerklärtes Sichversagen in der öden Brache des winterlichen Feldes. Durch dieses Zeug zieht das klaglose Bangen um die Sicherheit des Brotes, die wortlose Freude des Wiederüberstehens der Not, das Beben in der Ankunft der Geburt und das Zittern in der Umdrohung des Todes.” Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950), p. 19.

16. Quoted in Nicholas Temperley, *Haydn: The Creation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 32.

17. Quoted *ibid.*, p. 90.

18. Empedocles, *On Nature* B, Fragment 17, ll. 1–13, trans. G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, in *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), revised by the editors of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

19. Quoted in Nicholas McGegan and Simon Shaw, booklet accompanying Handel, *Ode for St. Cecilia's Day*, L'Oiseau-Lyre CD 421 6562–2 (1989), p. 3.

20. Maureen A. Carr, *Multiple Masks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 5.

21. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 33.

22. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 125.

23. Stravinsky and Craft, *Dialogues*, p. 76.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

25. Stravinsky and Craft, *Expositions and Developments*, p. 124.

26. Stravinsky and Craft, *Dialogues*, p. 72.

27. Ibid., p. 75.

28. Stravinsky and Craft, *Expositions and Developments*, p. 124.

29. Erik Tawaststjerna, *Sibelius*, vol. 2: 1904–1914, trans. Robert Layton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 196.

30. Georg Friedrich Haas, “*Natures mortes*, for Large Orchestra, Work Introduction, *Universal Edition*, [http://www.universaledition.com/Georg-Friedrich-Haas/composers-and-works/composer/278/work/11014/work\\_introduction](http://www.universaledition.com/Georg-Friedrich-Haas/composers-and-works/composer/278/work/11014/work_introduction).

31. John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), p. 229.

32. “Das Arietta-Thema, zu Abenteuern und Schicksalen bestimmt, für die es in seiner idyllischen Unschuld keineswegs geboren scheint, is ja sogleich auf dem Plan und spricht sich in sechzehn Takten aus, auf ein Motiv reduzierbar, das am Schluß seiner ersten Hälfte, einem kurzen, seelenvollen Rufe gleich, hervortritt,— drei Töne nur, eine Achtel-, eine Sechzehntel- und eine punktierte Viertelnote, nicht anders skandiert als etwa: ‘Himmelsblau’ oder: ‘Lie-besleid’ oder: ‘Leb’-mir wohl’ oder: ‘Der-maleinst’ oder: ‘Wie-sengrund,’—und das ist alles. Was sich mit dieser sanften Aussage, dieser schwermütig stillen Formung nun in der Folge rhythmisch-harmonisch-kontrapunktisch begibt, womit ihr Meister sie segnet and wozu er sie verdammt, in welche Nächte und Überhelligkeit, Kristallsphären, worin Kälte und Hitze, Ruhe und Ekstase ein und dasselbe sind, er sie stürzt und erhebt, das mag man wohl weitläufig, wohl wundersam, fremd und exzessiv großartig nennen, ohne es doch damit namhaft zu machen, weil es recht eigentlich namenlos ist.” Thomas Mann, *Doktor Faustus* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1973), pp. 56–57. Mann here makes a joke by working the name of his musical mentor Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno into the prosodic cues.

33. Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, pp. 127–28.

34. Donald Mitchell, *Gustav Mahler, The Wunderhorn Years: Chronicles and Commentaries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 302.

#### 4. *Nine Definitions*

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9. John Cage, statement printed in Emily Genauer’s column in the *New York Herald Tribune*, December 27, 1953, sect. 4, p. 6.

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3. “Stravinsky’s Three Pieces ‘Grotesques,’ for String Quartet” (1916), in *Selected Poems of Amy Lowell*, ed. Melissa Bradshaw and Adrienne Munich (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 61.

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 312.

12. Gloria Coates, cited by Detlef Gojowy in booklet accompanying cpo cd 999 590–2, pp. 9–10.

13. Ronald Squibb, “Images of Sound in Xenakis’s Mycenae-Alpha,” available at [www.krablabab.nl/docs/articlesquibbs.pdf](http://www.krablabab.nl/docs/articlesquibbs.pdf).

14. Quoted in “A Max Ernst Retrospective Opens Today in NY,” *Blouin Artinfo*, March 11, 2008, available at <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/117/a-max-ernst-retrospective-opens-today-in-ny/>.

15. Iannis Xenakis, *Formalized Music: Thought and Mathematics in Composition*, trans. Christopher Butchers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 4.

16. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), pp. 103, 90.

17. Quoted in Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, 2 vols. (London: Pallas Athene, 1967), 1:367–70.

7. *Comparative Arts*

1. Quoted in the booklet accompanying Col Legno WWE 20038 (2000), pp. 5–6.

2. “*Este palacio es fábrica de los dioses*, pensé primeramente. Exploré los inhabitados recintos y corregí: *Los dioses que lo edificaron han muerto*. Noté sus peculiaridades y dije: *Los dioses que lo edificaron estaban locos*. . . . Yo había cruzado un laberinto, pero la nítida Ciudad de los Inmortales me atemorizó y repugnó. Un laberinto es una casa labrada para confundir a los hombres; su arquitectura, pródiga en simetrías, está subordinada a ese fin. En el palacio que imperfectamente exploré, la arquitectura carecía de fin. Abundaban el corredor sin salida, la alta ventana inalcanzable, la aparatosa puerta que daba a una celda o a un pozo, las increíbles escaleras inversas, con los peldaños y balaustrada hacia abajo. Otras, adheridas aéreamente al costado de un muro monumental, morían sin llegar a ninguna parte, al cabo de dos o tres giros, en la tiniebla superior de las cúpulas.” Jorge Luis Borges, “El Inmortal” (1947), available at Apocatastasis, <http://www.apocatastasis.com/el-inmortal-jorge-luis-borges-carthapilus.php>.

3. “Der realste aller Kunstarten ist die Tanzkunst. Ihr künstlerischer Stoff ist der wirkliche leibliche Mensch, und zwar nicht ein Theil desselben, sondern der ganze, von der Fußsohle bis zum Scheitel, wie er dem Auge sich darstellt. Sie schließt daher in sich die Bedingungen für die Kundgebung aller übrigen Kunstarten ein.” Richard Wagner, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1850), p. 51.

4. Beethoven’s holograph of choreographic notes for the scenario for #1, from the Berlin “Landsberg 7” sketchbook, as cited in Rainer Cadenbach’s essay in the booklet accompanying *Beethoven: Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus*, Teldec 4509–90876–2 (1995), p. 4.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

6. Ezra Pound, “Postscript to *The Natural Philosophy of Love*,” in *Pavanes and Divagations* (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 210.

7. F. T. Marinetti, “Tactilism” (1924), in *Selected Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), pp. 111–12.

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