National Library of Canada

Acquisitions and Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

NOTICE

The quality of this microform is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Reproduction in full or in part of this microform is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30, and subsequent amendments.

AVIS

La qualité de cette microforme dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

La reproduction, même partielle, de cette microforme est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30, et ses amendements subséquents.

Canada

GAME OF KNOWLEDGE

THE MODERN INTERPRETATION OF ART

EDWARD TINGLEY

Thesis submitted to
the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of requirements for the
Ph.D. degree in Philosophy

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

1995

© Edward Tingley, Ottawa, Canada 1995

National Library of Canada
Acquisitions and Bibliographic Services Branch
395 Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale du Canada
Direction des acquisitions et des services bibliographiques
395, rue Wellington
Ottawa (Ontario)
K1A 0N4

Your file Votre référence

Our file Notre référence

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-612-07888-4

Canada

UNIVERSITÉ D'OTTAWA
UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

Game of Knowledge:
The Modern Interpretation of Art

Edward Tingley
Doctoral dissertation, 1995

SUMMATION: A specifically modern approach to the interpretation of art is distinguished, rooted in the insight that cognitivity in interpretation must be oriented by sensitivity to the subject-object paradigm. It is shown that a specific modern theory of interpretation has become established in twentieth-century theory and practice. That theory is demonstrated to be a set of interpretative rules. The hidden dependence of those rules on specific conceptions of the nature of a work of art (qua hermeneutic entity) is revealed. Three such conceptions of the work of art that are basic to modern art history are articulated and critically examined by careful attention to actual works. Interpretation is shown to exceed the strictures of each model, with the specific consequence that the meaning of the work of art in modern times is systematically narrowed. Motives for that narrowing are discussed.

The thesis opens by explaining in what sense the interpretation of paintings, sculptures, and works of visual art in the modern era is scientific: even in its postmodern forms, it is an enterprise oriented toward making legitimate *cognitive claims* about the meaning of works of art.

I : THE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION

CHAPTER 1 explains how, in consequence, modern interpretation is run by *theory,* and articulates what the *modern theory of interpretation* is. Given their cognitive aim, the many approaches of art history are deeply informed by a crucial philosophical distinction: the difference between *subject and object.* Modern interpretation is shaped by the view that the subject-object dichotomy affords a crucial insight into the hermeneutic situation. Based upon this philosophy, a single theory of interpretation dominates twentieth-century practice in art history. Modern interpretation is thus a *method* – actually a set of interpretative rules of two sorts: *rules of content,* which are designed to direct interpretation toward an object (a work with its own claim to meaning, thus a thing problematically situated in relation to interpreters), and *rules of form,* reflecting widely shared opinions on the shape of good interpretations.

CHAPTER 2 examines the way these rules function in four classic interpretations of a single work by Botticelli, showing weaknesses in the theory and revealing its hidden dependence upon decisions about *what kind of thing a work of art is,* hermeneutically speaking. Works of art do not carry meaning by miracle; there is a mechanism of meaning. Accordingly, the modern view holds that when we understand how the meaning got in, we will know how to get it out. This involves unfolding *models of meaning.*

II : THE CODE MODEL

CHAPTER 3 introduces the first in a set of three currently viable models of how works of art carry meaning, demonstrating the popularity of this conception. By the *code model,* a work of art holds meaning because it is an assembly of semantic devices linked *conventionally* (artificially and arbitrarily) to meaning by artists' sign-meaning correlations. This model tells us what specific objective conditions we have to go in search of if we are to arrive at an interpretation with any cognitive status.

CHAPTER 4 investigates the code model against the kind of case thought to show it most forcefully: *iconographic signs* like the symbol of Cupid. A certain ambivalence in theorists' explanations of such symbols leads to the discovery that the main idea of the code model – that signs are artificial, arbitrarily attached to chosen meanings – proves false. In fact artistic signs derive their power to mean from a preexistent and inalterable connection with reality. A further look at *how symbolic images are read* (with a painting by Veronese) reveals the necessity of weakening the model's conception of "artistic conventions."

CHAPTER 5 further examines the code model, articulating (through the Veronese) a level of the work's meaning (its *'content'*) that can only be reached by thinking about reality, not looking for historical codes. Here the model's deep investment in a *linguistic* conception of meaning, makings images quite gratuitous, becomes clear. While Panofsky argues that images are interpreted by reading them according to *historically local codes*, it becomes evident that this is not the genuine basis of even his interpretations. The role played by reading images against reality is further demonstrated by investigating a dispute over the interpretation of a painting by Rembrandt. This shows that when we are developing and criticizing interpretations in any depth we go beyond the code model.

Thus the code model not only fails its own most central cases, it fails to make room for a deep kind of meaning that works of visual art plainly hold. This artistic content was invisible because beyond the resources of sign systems.

III : THE COMMUNICATION MODEL

CHAPTER 6 introduces the second popular model of meaning, again showing the support it is given: the *communication model*. A work of art is the communication of a person, thus meaningful (by codes or other means) only because of the mind behind it, which caused its meaning in a special kind of psychological *semantic act*. Thus the cognitive interpreter must seek the substance of an act of meaning in which the work's content was established.

CHAPTER 7 investigates the communication model by examining the idea of the act of meaning. By looking at the documented creation of Picasso's *Guernica*, it becomes clear that while an idea to be communicated may have motivated the work's production, the really significant level of meaning in the work (even for the artist) was the kind that gradually arose by the artist's reading of his own forms. A myth linked with the communication model is exploded: *semantic omnipotence*, that the artist can attach a meaning to a form. It so happens that the forms of a work of art can communicate only by their autonomous power to mean.

CHAPTER 8 treats the hermeneutic implication of the model. Forms may have autonomous power for the artist, but surely they must be read *in the perspective* of the artist, because only then will we approximate the experience that defined its communicative meaning. Examining an interpretation that attempts this (by Wollheim, of a religious work by Friedrich) reveals the *paradox of empathy*, which is that precisely if we follow the model, and take the idea of the artist's perspective seriously, that perspective will have to include a level of conviction or belief that we do not share. By pursuing the artist's experience, we can never arrive at it. Moreover, that pursuit trivializes (as artists like Friedrich do not) the problem of inducing a new outlook, and the depth of meaning such a thing involves.

Thus the communication model fails to account for the way visual forms have meaning. Correcting that picture shows that we have to interpret images as the artist did, by thinking about reality – and also not by toying with reductive conceptions of other minds. It is clear that the communication model again diminishes the content of art.

IV : THE CULTURAL MODEL

CHAPTER 9 introduces the third model of meaning: the *cultural model*. A work of art is an historical-cultural expression; it belongs to a world, and its meaning is invested in it by its place in that context (an individual and his life, a society and its culture, a religion and its beliefs). We have to know things about a culture to make sense of its works; the work's own context sets the framework in which the work's meaning can be unfolded.

CHAPTER 10 investigates the cultural model by examining two works of art that must be interpreted, the model suggests, in different kinds of historical context. Interpreting a work by Munch in a *psychological* context, one either arrives at a meaning that fails to take account of the image or must address the interpreter's views about the nature of love, outside any historical context of belief. Interpreting a work by Manet in a *social* context does reveal how historical knowledge is needed to register the depth of the work. But it reveals also that the work is, itself, an appeal to the spectator to connect the image with present life. To satisfy the contextual model (to see the work in terms of its own past context) is thus to fail to satisfy it, since it cannot recover what the work actually is: an appeal to life in the present. It appears that to understand a painting by Munch or Manet, one had better take seriously the fact that what it depicts is something real.

CHAPTER 11 pursues the investigation of the cultural model by posing its claim more radically: a work from a non-Western culture (a Hindu miniature) will surely show that its meaning must be determined by interpreting it within its own context (Hinduism). A careful examination of Hindu sources reveals the possibility of different and conflicting interpretations, and the difficulty of ascertaining what kind of limit 'the Hindu context' implies. It becomes clear that a context is not established methodologically, prior to interpretation, but something that 'constellates' as the by-product of an interpretation that stands on other grounds. Those grounds may involve truth-to-life, by no cultural standard.

Thus the cultural model fails to recognize that one cannot even understand a work of art historically, understand its historical message, if one does not recognize that every context amounts to something only when regarded as a context *in the world*. The work's 'own context' cannot be reductively posited as less than the world that is *the* context of all 'contexts'; thus the strictures of the model do not apply.

CONCLUSION

It has been shown how interpretation requires trampling the objective fences of the theorists. Since the object-conception has proved weaker than imagined, modern interpretation appears much driven by the will to *exclude subjectivity*. That will is fueled by three things. (1) The theoretical idea (which proves mistaken) that the subject/object paradigm tells us a lot about the hermeneutic situation. (2) A special interest in the foundation of a discipline, in the establishment of professional interpreters. (3) Not to be underestimated, the will in treating art to avoid looking at life, which art is often about. The cognitive enterprise of professional interpretation maintains a special *dynamic of mastery* over the work – not following conversations where they lead but leading the conversation. Modern interpretation is in effect a game: a goal-oriented operation of control that serves the interest of the professional; the work, far from being served in this enterprise, is deprived of its power. If theory clarifies the conditions for the possibility of understanding, imposing methodical controls upon interpretative encounters with works of art makes it easy for us to ignore what art often wishes to remind us of.

The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries. For it is this which principally hinders us from reflecting upon ourselves, and which makes us insensibly ruin ourselves. Without this we should be in a state of weariness, and this weariness would spur us to seek a more solid means of escaping from it. But diversion amuses us, and leads us unconsciously to death.

Pascal

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS vii

PREFACE ix

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS xiii

INTRODUCTION 1

1 The Age of Science
2 The Pursuit of Knowledge
3 The Figures of Modernity

PART ONE. THE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION

1 THE THEORY AND ITS METHOD 17

4 Theory and Interpretation
5 Legitimation
6 *The Rules of Content*
7 Subjectivity: What the Work Is Not
8 Objectivity: The Work
9 *The Rules of Form*
10 Adequacy
11 Simplicity
12 Coherence
13 Explanatory Power
14 Scope
15 The Rules of Interpretation

2 INTERPRETATIONS OF BOTTICELLI 67

16 The Method Examined
17 Venus and Virtue
18 The Natural Venus
19 The Cycle of Love
20 A Woman's Praise
21 The Method Reconsidered

PART TWO. ART AS LANGUAGE

3 THE MODEL OF THE CODE 98

22 Determination of the Object, i
23 Language as Sign System
24 Art and Codes
25 The Code Relation
26 The Code Model
27 Context and the 'Dictionary Fallacy'
28 Understanding, i

4 ICONOGRAPHY 121

29 Recovering a Code
30 Figures and Symbols
31 Symbols as Illustrated Metaphors
32 Convention: Symbol Versus Sign
33 Reading Symbolic Images
34 The Role of Context
35 Reading as Translation
36 Reading Allegories
37 The Revised Code Model

5 FROM CODE TO CONTENT 160

38 Objectivity and Context
39 The Role of the Code
40 The 'History of Types'
41 Codes and Genres
42 Codes as Historical Legitimations
43 The Particular Symbol
44 Content: Art and Language
45 The Meaning of Stories
46 The 'Dialectic' of Levels
47 The Content of Art
48 The Code Model Reconsidered

PART THREE. ART AS COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

6 THE COMMUNICATION MODEL 215

49 Determination of the Object, ii
50 The Conditions of Meaning
51 The Communication Model
52 The Causality of Meaning
53 The Act of Meaning
54 Perspective and Repertoire
55 Understanding, ii

7 THE MEDIUM 244

56 The Origin of a Work
57 The Refinement of Image
58 Change and Meaning
59 Forms and Their Meaning
60 Semantic Omnipotence
61 The Appropriation of Meaning
62 Forms, Symbols, Truth
63 Communication and the Limit of Meaning
64 The Revised Communication Model

8 THE CONTEXT OF ACTION 281

65 The Artist's Perspective
66 The Legitimate Mind
67 Repertoire
68 The Inscribed Perspective
69 Capturing a Perspective
70 Understanding
71 The Paradox of Empathy
72 The Communication Model Reconsidered

PART FOUR. ART AS CULTURAL

9 THE CULTURAL MODEL 319

73 Determination of the Object, iii
74 The Meaning of Historicity
75 The Power of the Historical Consciousness
76 The Historical Perspective
77 The Substance of Perspectives
78 Different Perspectives
79 Understanding, iii

10 HISTORICAL CONTEXTS 349

80 Types of Context
81 Ideology and Psychology: An Interpretation
82 Relative Meanings
83 The Context of Content
84 The Issue of Response
85 Ideology and Critique: An Interpretation
86 The Meaning of a Challenge
87 The Role of Historical Knowledge
88 The Revised Contextual Model

11 CULTURAL CONTEXTS 380

89 Difference
90 Religion
91 Meaning Relative to a World
92 Reconstructing the Context: An Interpretation
93 Disclosure and the Rule of Objectivity
94 Disclosure and the Rules of Form
95 The Intractable Context
96 The Constellation of Context
97 The Context of the World
98 The Cultural Model Reconsidered

CONCLUSION 424

99 Theory and Subjectivity
100 The Politics of Knowledge
101 The Knowledge Game
102 Modernity and the Voice of the World

BIBLIOGRAPHY 451

ILLUSTRATIONS Appendix

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Frontispiece	Max Beckmann. *Perseus Triptych*, centre panel. 1940—41 Essen, Museum Folkwang. Oil on canvas. 150 x 110 cm
Figure 1	Hellenistic. *Crouching Aphrodite*. Copy after original of later third C. Paris, Louvre. Marble. 97 cm high
Figure 2	Hellenistic. *Crouching Aphrodite*, rear view
Figure 3	Botticelli. *'Primavera.'* 1470s Florence, Uffizi. Tempera on panel. 203 x 314 cm
Figure 4	Botticelli. Mercury, detail of the *'Primavera'*
Figure 5	Botticelli. *The Birth of Venus*. 1470s Florence, Uffizi. Tempera on panel. 173 x 278 cm
Figure 6	Botticelli. The Graces, detail of the *'Primavera'*
Figure 7	Botticelli. Cupid, detail of the *'Primavera'*
Figure 8	Charles Lebrun. The representation of the passions Engraving in H. Testelin, *Sentimens des plus habiles peintres* (Paris 1696)
Figure 9	Greek. Mirror. c. 350 B.C. Paris. Engraving on bronze mirror
Figure 10	French. *Fortuna*. Fifteenth century Paris, Bibliothèque nationale. Illuminated manuscript
Figure 11	Otto Van Veen. *Blind Fortune Blinding Cupid* Engraving in Otho Venius, *Les Emblèmes de l'amour humain* (Brussels 1667)
Figure 12	Veronese. *Mars and Venus United by Love*. 1570s New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Oil on canvas. 201 x 161 cm John Stewart Kennedy Fund, 1910
Figure 13	Ottonian. *Christ Resurrecting the Youth of Nain*. c. 1000 Munich, Staatsbibliothek. Illuminated manuscript
Figure 14	Roger van der Weyden. Detail of *The Vision of the Three Magi* (right panel of the 'Bladelin Altarpiece'). c. 1452 Berlin, Gemäldegalerie. Oil on panel
Figure 15	Rembrandt. *Bathsheba*. 1654 Paris, Louvre. Oil on canvas. 142 x 142 cm
Figure 16	Rembrandt. *Lucretia* [?]. 1666 Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Oil on canvas. 111 x 95 cm
Figure 17	Peter Paul Rubens. *The Horrors of War*. c. 1637 Florence, Palazzo Pitti. Oil on canvas. 206 x 345 cm

Figure 18 — Picasso. *Study for* Guernica (Sketch 3 in Chipp). 1 May 1937
Madrid, Prado. Graphite on paper. 21 x 27 cm

Figure 19 — Picasso. *Composition Study for* Guernica (Sketch 6 in Chipp). 1 May 1937
Madrid, Prado. Graphite on gessoed board. 53.7 x 64.8 cm

Figure 20 — Picasso. *Horse's Head, Study for* Guernica (Sketch 9 in Chipp). 2 May 1937
Madrid, Prado. Oil. 64.8 x 92.1 cm

Figure 21 — Picasso. *Composition Study for* Guernica (Sketch 12, Chipp). 8 May 1937
Madrid, Prado. Graphite on paper. 24.1 x 45.4 cm

Figure 22 — Picasso. *Composition Study for* Guernica (Sketch 15, Chipp). 9 May 1937
Madrid, Prado. Graphite. 24.1 x 45.4 cm

Figure 23 — Picasso. *Horse, Study for* Guernica (Sketch 17, Chipp). 10 May 1937
Madrid, Prado. Graphite on paper. 24.1 x 45.4 cm

Figure 24 — Picasso. *Guernica*, state I. 11 May 1937
Photo by Dora Maar

Figure 25 — Picasso. *Guernica*, state II. 1937
Photo by Dora Maar

Figure 26 — Picasso. *Guernica*, states II and IIA. 1937
Photos by Dora Maar

Figure 27 — Picasso. *Guernica*, state IV. 1937
Photo by Dora Maar

Figure 28 — Picasso. *Guernica*. 1937
Madrid, Prado. Oil on canvas. 3.50 x 7.76 m

Figure 29 — Picasso. Mother and child, detail of *Guernica*.

Figure 30 — Picasso. *Mother with Dead Child* (Sketch 36, Chipp). 28 May 1937
Madrid, Prado. Graphite, coloured crayon, and gouache. 23.5 x 29.3 cm

Figure 31 — Picasso. Horse's head, detail of *Guernica*.

Figure 32 — Caspar David Friedrich. *Evening*. c. 1821
Hannover, Landesmuseum. Oil on canvas. 22 x 31 cm

Figure 33 — Caspar David Friedrich. *On the Sailboat*. 1818—19
St. Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum. Oil on canvas. 71 x 56 cm

Figure 34 — Edvard Munch. *The Vampire*. 1893/94
Göteborg, Konstmuseum. Oil on canvas. 80 x 100 cm

Figure 35 — Edvard Munch. *The Vampire*. 1895 (impression, 1902)
Coll. of Lionel and Sally Epstein. Colour lithograph and woodcut. 38 x 55 cm

Figure 36 — Edouard Manet. *Olympia*. 1863
Paris, Musée d' Orsay. Oil on canvas. 130 x 190 cm

Figure 37 — North Indian. Kangra school. *Kali*. 18th C.
London, coll. of Max Maxwell. Gouache on paper.

PREFACE

There are several reasons why this study is a long one. The first of these is the size of its object, which is the modern practice of the interpretation of art more or less in totality, as we see it in the discipline of art history generally, old and new. There have been recent calls for a contemporary overhaul or reconsideration of the problem of interpretation, especially in light of newer trends of thought — as, for instance, in these remarks (one by an art historian, one by a philosopher):

> Perhaps it is significant that the more innovative and 'interdisciplinary' work in the history of art has not set a high priority on reconceptualising the process of reading or interpreting images, ... The not infrequent pleas made over the past ten or fifteen years to take on board the sophisticated theories of signs and representations developed elsewhere in the humanities have not, at least on my reckoning, been accomplished by any very systematic, let alone recognizably new, strategies for discussing how visual images convey meanings.[1]

> What is necessary today is the serious pursuit of hermeneutic questions from within or, at least, from the viewpoint of the different disciplines of the social and human sciences. This pursuit must be theoretical, pragmatic, and historical in outlook, for it must deal both with general philosophical questions and with the particular methodological issues facing these disciplines today. One might envision, furthermore, a criticial history of hermeneutics, the study of its basic principles and strategies as they have evolved as parts of different systems of discourse.[2]

And indeed it happens that no systematic study of the interpretation of art has yet been conducted in English. Bätschmann's analysis, published in 1984 (*Einführung in die kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik: die Auslegung von Bildern*), remains untranslated; Roskill's *The Interpretation of Pictures* appeared in 1989, but is certainly far more piecemeal a study than its title implies. Neither addresses the matter with the thoroughness and the historical and philosophical viewpoint suggested by the above authors, and neither devotes significant attention to the critical dichotomy that the discipline of art history is most defined by. The following is an attempt to meet that challenge, and to offer an extensive examination of the modern understanding of the interpretation of art. It does not, however, do so in the spirit of the above quotations, and it is part of the problematic of the

1 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 32.

2 Mueller-Vollmer, "Hermeneutic Theory Since the Enlightenment" (1985), 45.

matter to show why that should not be done. For what is required is not merely analysis, but a critical understanding.

Periodically, writers have raised a fundamental problem in the discipline's approach to interpretation,[3] but I have come to feel that the substance of this problem is not easily registered in the very atmosphere of a *discipline*. That is, the *problem* of the problem is hard to grasp in the specific light of some of our most fundamental beliefs about interpretation. This is a situation conducive to length, for the task is now both to resolve the problem and to make it real. Neither of these things can be done at the usual level of discourse. Only a slower thinking brings to light the issues that hold the structure of present thought in place, and unless the discussion sinks to the level of detail, the theoretical problems of interpretation inevitably sound either hypothetical or far-fetched. Unless we leave the level of the usual theoretical critique, criticism will continue to sound like special pleading, which does not possess the power to influence how we think. Why, indeed, change how we think at all?

A further reason for length is the fact that the modern study of art is not a uniform phenomenon. I have said that my field is art history more or less in toto. That appears to be a large claim, given that the forms presently taken by that discipline are numerous and diverse, but the claim appears bigger than it is. It is my contention that they are all – from traditional to revisionist to psychoanalytic to feminist to sociological approaches – differentiated forms of three principal conceptions of *how works of art mean*. Substantially, the discipline rests on three pillars, and all need to be examined. To address only one would leave the principal thesis of the study a mere hypothesis, for any weakness in one of these conceptions is easily evaded by shifting to either of the others.

Thus the study that follows is divided into four main parts (each structured like the others). Part I presents an analysis of the theory of interpretation that has long been established in modern culture, *a general method that articulates the necessary conditions of a legitimate interpretation of works of art*. In order to be put into practice, a theory laid out in terms of necessary conditions requires further explicitation, and that is provided by three different (but related) conceptions of *the nature of the work of art*. Allied with the general method, these conceptions have become basic modes of the modern understanding of art: the work of art understood as *an expression in a system of signs* (part II), the work of art understood as *the product of an action intended to carry meaning* (part III), and the work of art understood as an *artefact belonging to a culture that endorses it with its meaning* (part IV).

It may be helpful to know that each of the four parts has the same form: an initial chapter in which the established view is presented, and then one or two chapters in which

---

3 For instance Hofstadter in 1966, McCorkel in 1975, Pontynen in 1986, and Preziosi in 1989.

that view is examined (against works of art). The final section of each part, where the conception is reconsidered in light of the discussion, present the gathered conclusions in a general form.

That being my method, I hereby open up two major avenues of criticism: one concerning the theories I examine, another concerning what I think I can say when the business is done. Another avenue I would like to point out is *closed,* not because I am afraid people will use it, but because it will take them nowhere worth going: and that is to argue that I have chosen in my technique bad examples of art, the wrong particulars. That is impossible, because I have always chosen works of art of the sort that the discipline is concerned with. My examples are always works of art with the features that link them with the method. A type of thinking that articulates basic or defining or typical features of works of art makes it easy to find representative examples, because the whole orientation of such a category is inclusive.

This, however, touches upon the first avenue of criticism, that the general theory and its concrete models (presented in chapters one, three, six, and nine) is not our system. I have taken some care, however, not to make that mistake. That we do not hold certain beliefs is a standard line of defense, and to convince to the contrary is the reason for the extensive quotation, which also lengthens these chapters. If it turns out, against my suspicion, that people do *not* believe this is how we think of the interpretation of art, then they will oblige, I hope, by ceasing to say the things they repeatedly say. For as I also show, they are not things said lightly. The conclusion is not a summation of what precedes it (which can be got from §§ 21, 48, 72, and 98) but discussion of the principal implication of those results. It is plainly the most important part of the study. It would be strange to arrive at the conclusions of those four sections (to understand the state of modern theories) without reading the message (understanding and assessing what purpose such deficient theories serve). Equally, it would have been pointless to begin with such claims, which to a discipline seem totally bogus without some painstaking preparation.

The final reason for length is a crucial one. We frequently behave as if something is so because it makes sense. It is a human failing, part of the burden of having a mind. The fact that we don't think of being able to think as a burden is a highly interesting fact that shows our utter vulnerability to the seductions of human thought, one of which is our failure to be vigilant against 'sense.' What makes sense is not always true. If we are really interested in the truth about a thing, it is usually necessary to do some sort of checking that goes beyond listening to a plausible argument.

We are careless about many things (at one time or another, about everything), but I am interested here only in our thoughts about art. The great problem is that, given the

direction of our culture since the eighteenth century, a setting has been created in which mistakes of this kind are impossible to avoid and almost harder to escape from. Its consequences are highly damaging: they are a major force in the dissipation of our civilization. Since the modern transfer of hermeneutics from private to professional life, these errors of sense have been elevated to theory. Theory is that kind of thing from which, once in, escape is unlikely. The main reason for that is the all-powerful combination of highly seductive conceptions (which one would need to resist, and to have *reason* to resist) and the theorist's prior commitment to unfold all possible consequences. When in addition there is moral backing behind the motivation to theorize, we have more or less of a prison.

In the literature on the understanding of art there has been some criticism of "seeing with the head." It is almost inevitable that the response to this is an argument for seeing with the eyes (with all the sensible things that can be said for it), but either-or situations in thinking are usually tip-offs that the issue is being narrowly treated all around. There is something quite obviously deficient in both views, because one thing I know for sure is that I am not a mind, and I am not an eye. And I know, furthermore, that when I bother to go into a gallery it is not my eye *or* my mind persuading my legs to get me there. *I* go in, because there is something important for *me* there. To stick to this language, what we would probably wish to stand behind is *seeing with the person* — which is seeing with the eye, the mind, the heart, the soul. To put it somewhat differently, to see from the same source from which (so at least we tend to say) artists work, when they are most interesting to us. In the shortest formula I can think of, to look with commitment to the business of living, a mysterious occupation in proportion to its importance. Perhaps it is strange to think of life as an occupation: life happens. But I think that is a misleading way to speak. It is not like a river in which we are pulled along, or the landscape that passes by: we are all up to something, in what we do and do not do, and we are deeply interested in this thing we are doing all the time — utterly, vitally interested. Perhaps that is something I ought to present as a 'supposition' behind some of what I mean to say, which anyone is free to reject. In the modern era, however, we are not really free to accept it. That is, we believe much more deeply in things that prevent such an attitude. That is a region of thought that it is difficult to reach. One of the most important ways to do that, where that thought concerns art, is to be careful not just to talk about art, but to talk while looking. My hope is that an approach that looks in some detail at works of art, as this does — at the very things the theory is meant to accommodate — will make a different and clearer sort of progress than further theory.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ten years ago my friend Murray Littlejohn passed on a book he thought might be of interest: Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. By the time I had read the first hundred or so pages I knew that my sense of having been let down by the studies I had turned to in order to become closer – it was a very incoherent sort of wish – to art was not the idiosyncratic quibble I had been led to think it was. I understood that the criticisms I had failed to launch as anything more than personal complaint were in the end matters of serious thought. I knew then that there was something to be said on the matter, for Gadamer had largely said it. I left my job in a national art museum and went into philosophy in order to find my way through the problem and see what there is to be seen. I owe a deep and practical thanks to Murray, therefore. And I owe my greatest debt of substance to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, for which (as an anonymous reader) I thank him deeply. I will think of Gadamer -- who was born the year this century dawned -- as my ticket out of one of the age's traps. It is a fine thing when someone frees you from a way of thought you once fought to be enslaved by.

In the lonely and austere world of academic life, there are two others I wish to recognize. I would like to thank William Dray for a moment of intellectual kindness that I have not forgotten, not only because it was so gratuitous and generous (thus remarkable in this world) but because his confidence has been there to remember at moments when I needed it. I have also learned some invaluable lessons from his calm and clarity.

For lessons learned I wish to express especial gratitude to Andrew Lugg, who without intending it has taught me something in philosophy that is substantial and irreplaceable. That is a feat of education in these times. Though it has not been possible to 'footnote' its appearance in the text, the plateau from which I have been able to look out on the field of a discipline is one I would never have found on my own. The tendency of the models that I discuss (models that are sometimes even opposed) is *uniform*, and that is something I learned only after folowing courses Professor Lugg taught on the theory of science and the history of geology, and, behind it all, on Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. The order of this thesis as well as its scope are both a product of that discovery. Difficult to pinpoint, this influence will be plain to anyone familiar with Professor Lugg's thought on

the nature of scientism. I would like in addition to thank him for presenting the example of a critical person who does not believe we are faced, in matters of thought, with other fools, or simply 'mistaken' views. That is a hard lesson to learn in academic life, and I give him the credit for my lack of disdain for all of the views I discuss here (none of which is stupid, backward, wayward, or even merely irritating). Any academic whose conduct in a classroom has helped me or anyone to become a marginally better person is someone to be counted.

I wish to thank my brother John for his help with my translations from the German (and a good day of bibliographic hunting) and also to thank Murray, once again, for turning the mechanics of thesis production into a laugh and a memory.

February 1995

Science is a method; it is not a field of study. Scientific method is applicable to all fields. It is the tool with which we find things out.

Samuel Caumann (1944)

Each period apprehends things with *its* eyes and no one will dispute this right. But the historian must ask each time how an object demands to be seen from its own point of view.

Heinrich Wölfflin (1915)

Since readers and viewers bring to the texts and images their own cultural and personal baggage, there can be no such thing as a fixed, predetermined meaning, and the very attempt to summarize meanings, as we do in encyclopedias and textbooks, is by definition reductive. Yet as soon as we are forced to draw from these views the inevitable conclusion that 'anything goes' and that interpretation is a futile scholarly activity since it all depends on the individual interpreter, we draw back. We then turn around, trying to locate, in the text or image, not a meaning, but the 'occasion' of meaning, the thing that triggers meaning; not fixity, but a justification for our flexibility.

Mieke Bal (1991)

INTRODUCTION

1 THE AGE OF SCIENCE

How we encounter art in contemporary culture is in an important way different from the encounter with art of any earlier age. What has made this difference is philosophy and scholarship. Increasingly since the nineteenth century, and today more and more, our encounter with art takes place through a medium of interpretation (museums and exhibitions, scholarly books, magazine articles, films and television programmes) at the source of which lies the discipline that we call art history, which has bound itself to philosophical theory. That theory teaches the viewer a sophisticated self-consciousness, and as a result art today is something it has never been. The very conception that the work of art requires a special form of approach, a special kind of stance, characterizes the modern era. It is not that in the pre-modern era the kind of stance at issue was never adopted by any person, but that as the pre-modern era had no self-consciousness about the viewer and his or her relation to the work no particular attitude toward the encounter with art held sway: the encounter was uncontrolled by any insight into its basic conditions. The modern era in our relation to art began around the close of the eighteenth century; it has exercised its influence on the culture and its relations with art increasingly through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, chiefly through the rise of institutions created to present works of art to the public. While the profit-motive of the art gallery made it perhaps an untrustworthy mediator, the museum and the university held as their foremost concern the utmost fidelity to the work of art achievable; the enterprise of those institutions was not profit but science. By the end of the nineteenth century, "nature and history are both

considered objects of scientific investigation in the same sense. They constitute the 'object of knowledge'."[1]

Science, though not science by too positivistic a definition, is at the heart of modernity: modernity is the age of science, and it is an age to which we still belong. Hopeful nineteenth-century thinkers (often positivistically inclined) were interested in bringing the humanities into the scientific programme, an ambition that provoked argument for more than half of this century over the essential difference between scientific inquiry and the study of both history and the arts (the explanation-versus-understanding debate), with the adjunct argument that the history of art must go beyond the assembly of fact and infringe the territories of criticism and value judgement. Just when the argument of difference appeared substantially settled, however, the scientific quality of science collapsed (Kuhn et al.), and we now find ourselves in a post-scientific era — at least by the old standard of 'science', perfectly articulated in Samuel Caumann's article of 1944. The probability of any writer wishing to claim that "art history is a science" could scarcely become smaller than it is today.[2] Now that science itself has been 'made human' — shown to be merely a system of human agreement, a praxis of consensus — the great spectres of science appear to have been pretty effectively exorcised. "Most readings [of works of art] are offered within traditions, communities, and institutions that set limits to the interests and purposes an interpretation may serve."[3] And despite initial alarms, the change has not made way for a "'silly relativism' — the bad inference from 'no epistemological difference' to 'no objective criterion of choice'"[4]: the hermeneutic limits of the discipline have not been set arbitrarily; they remain *cognitive* limits. In this post-authoritarian climate of comfort science lives on — lives on exceedingly comfortably, since now we pay it no attention. As Gadamer has remarked — and the remark is truer of nothing than of our relation to art — science in the nineteenth century never played the role in human life that it does in the twentieth.[5]

In the future we will likely look back upon the last quarter of the twentieth century — a time we have hastened to call postmodernity — as a particularly self-conscious moment of modernity. It is likely we will not escape modernity at all, because so massive an achievement will demand we stop doing something we continue to believe in as much as

---

1 Gadamer, "Foundations of the Twentieth Century" (1962), 115.

2 In 1976 Roskill's introduction to the discipline (as has since been amply noticed) opened with that claim; Roskill's desire was to show that art history is a practice formed "with definite principles and techniques, rather than a matter of intuition or guesswork." Roskill, *What is Art History?* (1976), 9. His later study (*The Interpretation of Pictures*, 1989), betrays no such inclination.

3 Stout, "Meaning of a Text" (1982), 8.

4 Rorty, "Texts and Lumps" (1985), 13.

5 Gadamer, "Foundations of the Twentieth Century" (1962), 111.

ever, something that has been built into the economy, something that is built (much deeper still) into the categories of thinking people everywhere in society. What I am not certain we can give up *is the discourse of knowledge,* with its seductive but parasitic and desolating philosophy. Postmodernity, as it penetrates our discourse about art, is by the fruits of its labours evidently the attempt to continue the project of science by other means. Other means, that is, than the objectionable scientism of the preceding generation and its alliance with positivist, empiricist, foundational epistemologies. Many people feel we have seen a deep change in the development of the discipline of 'art history.' "Postmodernism does not appear to be just another style or movement with its attendant new jargon; its affinities, fundamental attitudes, and habits of mind suggest a thoroughly new and different way of looking and thinking about art."[6] But philosophical revolutions are typically revolutions by reputation rather than substance. Scholarship has been keeping a close eye on epistemology and refashioning itself to match since the very birth of the discipline.[7] Episodic 'radical shifts' in thought are as endemic to the continuation of the scientific programme (*to the end* of its very scientificity) as radical hem-hikes are endemic to the fashion system.[8] The endeavour of science (the discourse of knowledge) is to represent, to describe, to make statements about the world — to capture an image of the world and its forces, in the domain of art as in the domain of politics and subatomic phenomena. That is where the problem arises. Despite the modern consciousness, art is not another subject matter for scientific knowledge. Art points in the opposite direction from science, but an art that is known in the ways that science knows points to the world that science knows, and it is not a world in which people can live very well. What does it mean to come to art through science? It is as if one were to extinguish the midday sun in order to see the light of a flashlight.

The reason it is not recognized that shifts of epistemology in the humanities are not radical and cleansing departures (but rather perpetuations of something) is that it has so far been impossible to register any problem in that something: because the ends are beyond suspicion, our problems must be problems of means. What fault, indeed, can one find with the attempt to picture reality to the best of one's limited ability, by being true to the (social) conditions of knowledge, in just as broad or broken down a way as those conditions permit, while raising in the process all the attendant problems and limitations of our claims

---

6 Klepac, "Deconstruction in Contemporary Art" (1984), 251.

7 Two fine demonstrations of this appear in Hart's outline of Wölfflin's epistemological sensitivity and Holly's account of Panofsky's.

8 Radical change in fashion demonstrates the new and the original, which are the goals of fashion as an institution. Radical change in epistemology serves a very different goal, but again, the goal that most defines the enterprise, which is scientific rigour: truth to the conditions of truth.

to know? By the evidence of continuing studies now with carefully articulated epistemological prefaces, it appears none, but that is the really deep question. It is even one that postmodern thought initially raised in an exemplary and unmistakable fashion. But in fifteen years there are no signs of any "incredulity toward meta-narratives," the legal underwriting of science. Lyotard understands 'modern' as I do: "I ... use the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some general narrative ... such as the hermeneutics of meaning."[9] There appears to have been some collective sigh-of-relief now that we have well and truly trounced the scientism Edgar Wind denounced as long ago as 1936: "the notion of a description of nature which indiscriminately subjects men and their fates like rocks and stones to its 'unalterable laws' survives only as a nightmare of certain historians."[10] But we are mistaken if we think science is done away with. The problem of 'science' — which well beyond a field of practice is a modern idol — lies not in the extremes but in the innocuous, not in its Cartesian technological aspect but in its supposedly benign contemplative aspect, as a form of inquiry in the tradition of Aristotle. The compatibility of that form of science with the humanities the antipositivist Wind was able to affirm: there are "points of correspondence between these two worlds — or, to be more precise, between the scientific methods which render each of them an object of human knowledge and experience."[11] The modern approach to art establishes it as an object of knowledge (indeed theorists lament that "it is a sad fact: art history lags behind the study of the other arts").[12] The study that follows is an examination of the project of knowledge that the modern age has turned upon art as it has turned it upon everything.

2 THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

The fact that there are even deep changes in epistemology — that the old conceptions of truth and knowledge have been impugned beyond recovery — does not mean the abandonment of the scientific project. Upon inspection, it is even obvious that it does not mean that but rather the continuation of the project: epistemology is the theory of knowledge, and there is no need to overhaul or revolutionize epistemologies unless knowledge continues to *be* the issue. (When I give up driving, I do not need a better-

---

9 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* (1979), xxiii—iv.
10 Wind, "History and Science" (1936), 256.
11 Ibid., 255.
12 Bryson, *Vision and Painting* (1983), xi.

designed car.) The radical transformations of epistemology have created a study of art significantly different from what used to be available, but it is important to my purpose to notice what remains common to both new and old. That will require that we not move too quickly past a fundamentally untouched conception of knowledge as representation, picturing, capturing, describing the state of things.

It is fascinating that 'representation' has a special and distinct meaning in connection with art, the sense in which a sculpture by a Hellenistic artist (figures 1 and 2) represents, depicts, pictures the appearance of a crouching woman. There is something comparable in artistic representations and art-historical reports that shows us what modern science is about. The two are aligned through the issue of what we might call (in as yet a very unphilosophical and intuitive sense) correctness. We might call the sculpture an accurate or inaccurate, good or bad, fair or unfair, better or worse representation of what it endeavours to represent (a woman), depending upon how we see or philosophically finesse the standard of that judgement. (She has, for instance, an extremely high waist, which makes her lower body in this posture a kind of massive ovoid. We might also ask to what purpose that choice, and her nudity, and her posture, were made, and perhaps ultimately judge such a depiction a mis-representation of its object — more an expression of the interests of its maker than a fair image of a woman.)[13] The idea of a *fair representation* is ineliminable from the matter of representing, and it is the business of modern interpretation to represent, to form a fair image of, the reality that is art — even if that representing activity is in some measure *constitutive:* "The representation that art history creates establishes its own reality," but establishes along with it "the need to account for *that,* as well as for whatever external object the representation configures." This is a responsible act. A discipline is not a diffident discourse; it "advocates something."[14] Every attempt to picture or capture some state of affairs, whether in images or words, must ultimately be held to account in some way. The epistemological throes of the history of modern thought are the perpetually collapsing attempts to formulate that standard, to find the correct way to think of what 'correctness' comes to; the standard must be conceived properly. Before Kant it was a kind of thing-in-itself. After Kant it was a kind of reference to self-established data, producing methodically verifiable facts. After, say, Ayer it was the satisfaction of socially "recognized criteria" for knowledge claims[15] (which lately has been

---

13 The reactive swing from veridicality to pure freedom of standard is a simplistic tendency: the situation is a continuum between false poles, and our true problem is where to mark the balance between them.

14 Shiff, "Art History and the Nineteenth Century" (1988), 48.

15 The standard of correctness is removed from a simple measure against the thing; regarding claims to *know* something, "the line between pass and failure" is set by a community, and decided ultimately "on grounds of practical convenience." A.J. Ayer, *The Problem of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth 1956), 34.

seen as the de facto standard of art institutions). Still more recently it has broadened to include other than "practical" considerations: no representation is adequate that reinforces an ethically faulty message (the issue of the *politics* of representation).

So with a very careful rendering of the notions of 'accuracy' and 'externality', the continued aim of science is to represent the world; it remains true that "to know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind,"[16] but 'outside' in a sense that has come to seem more ethical than metaphysical, for no one who writes today about created works of art is willing to treat them as mere extensions of themselves. In the works of art we study, "mind has congealed into permanent forms and confronts the subject as an 'other'."[17]

> Where we read truly, where the experience is to be that of meaning, we do so as if the text (the piece of music, the work of art) incarnates ... a real presence of significant being. ... These are not occult notions. They are of the immensity of the commonplace.[18]

Correctness ultimately is that: there is something to do justice to. Understanding involves an orientation to that other; it involves conditions of dialogue, in which one opens oneself up to the other's meaning.[19] This insight is and has always been the humanities' Achilles heel. It is the pivot of our total capitulation to science.

The fact that writers working in the humanities continue to caricature the philosophical presuppositions of the sciences obscures the continuity of the modern age. It happens that the theory of science has been able to absorb most every epistemological challenge that thought has thrown it, and facing this fact will force some recognizing that traditional art history has not been so epistemologically hobbled as theorists have been able to claim. A principal conclusion of Roskill's recent study of the interpretation of art — "there can be no avenue to truth, or ultimate key to meaning, apart from the history of successive interpretations made from particular positions"[20] — is not new. As Wölfflin had long ago read in Dilthey, we have no "presuppositionless" understanding of anything.[21] The problematic role of the subject as representer has never been forgotten, as demonstrated again by Ackerman in 1959.

---

16 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), 3.

17 Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (1980), 30.

18 Steiner, "A New Meaning of Meaning" (1985), 1275.

19 Bernstein, "From Hermeneutics to Praxis" (1982), 103.

20 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 89. The articulation of this particular conclusion is what Bryson calls "perhaps the book's greatest value." Bryson, Review of Roskill (1989), 707.

21 Dilthey, cited by Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston 1969), 121; Hart, "Reinterpreting Wölfflin" (1982), 293—95.

> We commonly slip into the shocking misconception that history is a science — that historians 'find out what happened,' without really intervening. But the historian, like the artist, exercises his taste and applies his acquired schemata in selecting his subject, in choosing certain facts from an infinitely large pool, and in formulating them into what we significantly call a 'picture' of the past. This picture, like its counterpart in the museum, has a definite style, and may be identified as characteristic of a certain time, place, and author.[22]

Interpretation requires some form of intervention, requires a position to work from. The point is that "interpretation need not cease to be *discovery* " because it operates in the service of interest and purpose.[23] The history of modern science, in the humanities precisely, is defined by the problematic of just description; through all its epistemological phases the primary aim has been to achieve the appropriate standard of representing works of art — not the mere raw-material of but the object of the discipline, that other which the discipline aims to represent as respectfully as possible.

> We should be suspicious of any effort to specify absolute standards of value, since it would be as unhealthy for critics as for artists to accept a common standard. But if specific value standards may be ruled out, there is a general standard imbedded in the philosophy of history that I am suggesting. If the goal of our studies is the discovery of the uniqueness of the work of art, this is because we are committed to a conviction as to the positive value of individuality.[24]

> Although we no longer shore up our historicism with such quasi-religious conceptions, the romantic ideal of cultural pluralism has continued to be the dominant ethical norm for interpretation during most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: it is more comprehensive and humanizing to embrace the plurality of cultures than to be imprisoned in our own.[25]

The epistemological sophistication of the discipline is driven by a kind of ethical concern to do justice to its object. The claim that there are no neutral or "innocent" ways of representing has never meant, and still does not mean today (as present sensitivities demonstrate), that all forms of representing are equal: that there are no illegitimate forms, no appropriating 'representations' that must be counted misrepresentations, nothing that can plausibly be called a distortion.

> Both painting the world and writing history are limited by at least two related conditions: the inherent limitations of symbolic systems to describe their subject and the subjectivity of the individual doing the describing.

---

22 Ackerman "Art History and the Problems of Criticism" (1960), 258. This thesis has recently been presented again by Carrier, "Objectivity in Art-Historical Interpretation" (1989).

23 Stout, "Meaning of a Text" (1982), 8 [emphasis added].

24 Ackerman, "Art History and the Problems of Criticism" (1960), 267.

25 Hirsch, "Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics" (1976), 197.

It remains reasonable to claim that discourse "misrepresents its subject."[26] There is nothing that can be called a distortion by long-defunct notions of veridical correspondence; the epistemology of 'distortion' has changed, but that change leaves the issue of legitimate and illegitimate representations quite as strong as ever — vitally strong, for it is the very basis of current concern over the "politics" of representation, which Eco calls "the dialectics between the rights of texts and the rights of interpreters."[27] I do not know of any writer who has truly embraced the indulgence in fiction that is occasionally presented as our only recourse, as in a remark by Forster (in a footnote) in 1972:

> Art appreciation ... corresponds to a position which accepts *a priori* the meaninglessness of artifacts, and is consequently free to indulge in any number of completely meaningless pronouncements about them. Only the prevailing cultural and academic consensus is powerful enough to restore a semblance of meaning in this approach, and that meaning may very well be that culture is the result of spontaneously reproduced clichés about a certain repertoire of objects which have their worth established on at least one level to everyone's satisfaction, namely on the market.

Forster himself, however, does not abandon the aim of "critical understanding" and faults enthusiastic interpretations that "can be readily produced on no foundations at all."[28] Critique does not erase the idea of standards: "We never reach a point where the entire background has been subjected to reasonable doubt — where would the reasons for doubting be in such a picture? — it is misleading to describe interpretation as relative to an ultimately criterionless choice."[29] Or again, "This handy pedagogical advantage, however, quickly exhausts itself. The seeming spontaneity of response only throws into relief the *complete unrelatedness* of the objects and their interpretations."[30] The importance of relatedness of interpretation to work of art precisely demonstrates the concern to represent.

The modern approach to art establishes it as an object of knowledge, something to be properly known, something to be understood, something to be seen — as much as possible, and in the limited way that this makes sense — for itself. The conception and the standards of a just representation change, and may indeed become quite complex. Just as in art the Hellenistic sculptor is not only inaccurate with regard to demonstrable anatomy, but perhaps fails to do justice to his subject in perpetuating a male-centred image of her, likewise in science there are distortions of the obvious and also ethical misrepresentations,

---

26 Smith, "Pictures and History" (1987), 98.
27 Eco, "Interpretation and History" (1992), 23.
28 Forster, "Critical History of Art" (1972), 463, n. 10.
29 Stout, "Relativity of Interpretation" (1986), 114.
30 Forster, "Critical History of Art" (1972), 463, n. 10 [emphasis added].

values masquerading as fact: both are counted active forms of distortion. Even though the reality we are investigating has no absolutely objective nature.

> The very idea that some particular object or image in the world has an intrinsic nature, meaning, or value no longer seems to be credible or valid. [This awareness] reflects ... a highly developed and extremely self-conscious awareness of the fact that human knowledge and the language used to communicate it are, in the last analysis, artificial constructs, i.e., both are human centred.[31]

That there is no absolutely objective nature does not destroy our understanding that there are things with a genuine nature that a writer can deform. Adorno, certainly, did not hold a naïve view of autonomous objects; there is a "claim to objectivity" even despite the fact that subjectivity is involved in the object's constitution, and objectivity cannot eclipse it:

> If it did, then the artless person who lets the work of art impinge on him as though [he] were some isolated *tabula rasa* would be most qualified to understand and evaluate art. This of course is not the way things work. Just as art itself is a dialectical process, so is the cognition of art. The more the viewer gives of himself, the more he penetrates the work of art, until he becomes aware of its objectivity as seen from the inside.[32]

We have to begin our assessment of the modern (post-Kantian) approach to art with the recognition that we see the work of art on a continuum of subjectivity: at the near end is our simple natural ignorance of the work — a kind of passive distortion on account of which we need to understand it. At the far end of the continuum is the active distortion - projection and subjective interference, the constraint of what is other to our own purposes. Though there is no pure objectivity whatever on this continuum, somewhere between these positions lies a thing that can be known, as we say, "from its own point of view." In a discipline, we report on that thing, and our concern *for it* — our *objectivity*, in that precise but overwhelmingly important sense — implies the third-person narrative of all science.

3 THE FIGURES OF MODERNITY

Thus three things characterize the approach to art that defines the modern, present age: the *scientific relation* (that our interest in art is an interest in knowledge), our reliance upon *theory*, and the specific recourse to *objectivity* in a very reduced sense. The three are closely related, and it hardly matters where in this triad one begins. If first the desire to

---

31 Klepac, "Deconstruction in Contemporary Art" (1984), 262.

32 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1986), 250.

understand art is established, and understanding is recognized as a subjectively implicated activity of mind, we have the critical importance of *theory:*

> To understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so).[33]

Theory will achieve that by establishing some standard by which to define *objectivity* — in the restricted sense of *that which has to do with the work itself.* If on the other hand we begin with a sense of respect for the individuality or identity of the specific work of art, with an entity distinct from me and my world (the concept of objectivity, again), then we are pushed to capture that distinctness (the scientific relation), and in order to preserve the scientific, entity-oriented, nature of our interest we must somehow establish the difference between representing and misrepresenting (thus theory). These are three basic figures of all established modern approaches to art.

Supposedly the end of the twentieth century marks a repudiation of the attitudes of modernity. But it is my sense that while some of the dissatisfaction registered by current thinkers holds the potential of such a rejection, the prevailing features of postmodern thought place it squarely within the modern approach. Clearly, postmodern thought relies upon the first figure, *theory;* in a sense it is even more insistent upon this than the traditional modern views. The theory it accepts is different, but my claim about the modern attitude is not that it relies upon any too specific theory, but that it is carefully built, established, upon a philosophical position. When twenty years ago the rarity of theoretical discussion was still lamented, the presence of theory was not ignored.

> The disappearance of a philosophical dimension to what we are doing is only apparent. Our notions of what constitutes the concrete work of art, how it is objectively observed, and how the truth of conclusions may be assessed, are all aspects of an implicit philosophy ....[34]

Today Preziosi comments that art history is "a discipline that by its very nature is a theoretical enterprise."[35]

The second figure, *objectivity,* appears to mark a point of basic rupture between modernity and the present. But through a tendency to enhance oppositions with tradition, the conception of objectivity has been artificially reduced in the contemporary

---

33 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), 3.
34 McCorkel, "Epistemological Approach" (1975), 36.
35 Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History* (1989), 20.

consciousness to less than it actually is: to 'absolute reality', factuality, autonomous truth. "Positivists," one author has noted, "engage in a rhetoric of objectivity; they argue as if factual documentation is the final arbiter, neglecting the historian-observer's own motivations, interests, and capacities."[36] In reality the modern conception of objectivity goes considerably deeper than this, and it is not naive but precisely *critical* — indeed, it is at the very *basis* of postmodernity's supposed rejection of modernity. "Modernity is the epoch of the great division between subject and object."[37] The conception of objectivity that defines the modern era is simply a *consciousness of the distinct and different positions of subject and object,* which involves fundamental awareness of the sensitivity of the relation between subject and object, the politics of subject and object. The modern approach to the work is fundamentally built upon the recognition of the subject's potential imposition upon and distortion of the object of his or her investigation. The modern scholarship often rejected today may have stressed some 'inner nature' of that object as the goal of its study; the postmodern response is to abandon that goal, as either a non-existent or a destination that is inherently unreachable, and to refashion 'study' as a kind of 'seeing-in-context' of works and their interpretations that rejects any claim to essentialism or scientific finality.

> From a postmodern perspective, I therefore abandon the search for truth that has characterized the traditional exercise of thinking in the Western world, in order to launch into a search for systems of perception and different forms of intelligibility .... [The aim is to indicate] a possibility of understanding the territory. But no final origin or destination is arrived at. The possibilities of expression and representation are unlimited ....[38]

But as Eco notes, "To say that interpretation ... is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object."[39]

> From a post-structuralist point-of-view (and I regard poststructuralism as the most important ingredient in the theoretical discourse concerning postmodernism), *meaning* can no longer be regarded as the preconstituted content of texts and/or pictures. *Meaning* (like value and identity) has to be produced in context. A sentence or picture is not a material container for an immaterial, extralinguistic object called "meaning" or "intention". Meaning is the effect, the force of the machine we call "language" (or textual activity to be more precise). Meaning is, therefore, also connected with efficacity (rather than with truth).[40]

The modern and the postmodern are merely a laxer (more philosophically optimistic) and a stricter (more pessimistic, self-restraining) response to the same recognized condition,

---

36 Shiff, "Art History and the Nineteenth Century" (1988), 27.
37 Bürger, "Aporias of Modern Aesthetics" (1991), 7.
38 Ivo Mesquita, *Cartographies* (Winnipeg Art Gallery), 23.
39 Eco, "Interpretation and History" (1992), 23—24.
40 Ericsson, "Rhetoric as Textuality" (1992), 174.

which is that there is something about the work to be captured and that something has a problematic relation to the interpreter, as a subject. "Though there may be no neutral interpretation, no single way of interpreting a picture as it really is, still some art historian's accounts can be true to the picture as it is."[41] Both "scientific and non-scientific (narrative) knowledge," Lyotard explains, "are composed of sets of statements; the statements are 'moves' made by the players within the framework of generally applicable rules."[42] "Objectivity in art history consists in agreement about standards of debate."[43] Typically 'postmodern' approaches to the understanding of art have changed their way of responding to our position in relation to the work, but that perception of our situation — subject versus object — remains untouched in its most crucial aspect.

In light of this, the final feature of the modern attitude (the centrality of the *discourse of knowledge*) also has philosophically varied forms. What it is in short I can explain obliquely by comparison with a parallel attitude toward art, the *discourse of judgement.* One way we have always related to art is by evaluating it, by judging how fine or strong it is. Kant and a great many other people have felt that this is, actually, a way of uncovering what is there in the work (though not naively *there*), discovering something about the picture itself. In that sense, the discourse of judgement is actually part of the discourse of knowledge, which is (however carefully we might wish to qualify what we mean) a matter of *grasping how things are with this work.* The lately rejected scholarly attempt to 'establish' the meaning of a painting or a sculpture was an attempt to do the same thing. The postmodernist endeavour that replaces it — to discuss the work and its meanings within specific frameworks, limited frameworks, thus avoiding closure or totalizing claims — is no less directed at representation, grasping how things are with the work. "Postmodernism is not so much antimodernist as it is a modification of modernism to preserve its humane ambitions without its essentialist meta-physics...."[44] Where modern scholarship aimed at fixing 'the meaning of' the work as a kind of objective scientific 'result', postmodern investigation (rejecting the image of scholarship) aims at uncovering the contextual framework within which 'a meaning' was or is read.[45] The interest in discussing the work 'relative to' a framework of meaning is precisely an attempt to find those narrowed conditions in which one *can* claim to have said something about the work,

---

41 Carrier, "Objectivity in Art-Historical Interpretation" (1989), 344.

42 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* (1979), 27.

43 Carrier, "Objectivity in Art-Historical Interpretation" (1989), 344.

44 Thomas McEvilley, "Tony Cragg: Landscape Artist" in *Tony Cragg* (Musée Départemental d'Art Contemporain de Rochechouart, 1992), 60.

45 Meaning exists according to existing forces: "Postmodernism seems very much disposed towards viewing reference and meaning as profoundly influenced and even determined by the dominant ideological and cultural forces at all levels." Klepac, "Deconstruction in Contemporary Art" (1984), 262.

avoiding the naive conception that we can speak about a work of art *tout court.* A remark made by Wittkower in 1955 is perfectly applicable today: "The arts, visual and non-visual, and the sciences are moving in the same direction. Our common task is no longer description and classification of phenomena, but investigation of function and meaning."[46] However one must adjust the conditions of discourse and limit the universality of one's claim, the purpose in writing about art is to be able to say something *about* it. Thus "for the semiologist or the poststructuralist interpretation can proceed in terms of how a given representation works to create the 'meaning' that it has."[47]

Postmodern writers have not altogether wished to unseat the work from the position of focal interest, to replace it with systems or power structures or other objects of study; they are no longer interested in the object-as-such, but they are interested in the work of art understood as part of a practice involving fictional images. It is precisely a part of the project of science to represent the fiction *as* a fiction. The productions of human culture do not "register only 'truths' but, rather, what has been said about the truth or what has been believed to be true."[48]

> Things and pictures present themselves as reality, ... Critical fiction, on the other hand, tries to express its own illusionism. The story and its telling are separated, ..., so that the absence of a pre-established link between representation and referent draws attention to the exemplary artifice.

To the scientific mind works of art tend to "solicit doubt rather than belief."[49] Where the key phrase of the modern theorist is "the work itself," the postmodernist wants at all costs to avoid such claims, and yet wishes in the end to "speak the work," to expose its function, to present it in the light in which it ought to be seen. The discourse of knowledge changes its shape according to all successful epistemologies, but since "knowledge is the form of an informational commodity"[50] that discourse will always be as sinewy and substantial as the underlying economy. There is no reason for it to diminish at all in a culture whose faith in science is ultimate. And so long as the philosophical underwriting of the campaign does the work that language makes possible, the cognitive project will have all the justification that it needs.

The world at the best of times is an imperfect place, but the modern world is also sick — deprived, systematically, of an essential factor in its health, something that gives

---

46 Cited by Bialostocki, "Iconography and Iconology" (1963), 777.
47 Shiff, "Art History and the Nineteenth Century" (1988), 28.
48 Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language* (1986), 84.
49 Ingrid Jenckner, *Visual Evidence,* exh. cat. (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1993), 23.
50 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* (1979), 5.

individuals the chance to make something out of life before that opportunity is taken away. The decrepit tools handed us by science are a joke in the face of what life throws us. As Merton has written, the modern person is a person who "has no longer any knowledge of anything except himself, his machines, and his knowledge that he knows what he knows." To that list of knowledge we can simply add the knowledge of art. When the business is to know, what matters is "not a knowledge of reality, but a knowledge of knowledge."[51] Knowledge of that sort is not something one can save oneself with. The modern person is out in a desert, living in "thirst and starvation in a wilderness of externals." Art, literature, religion are practically the only means we have of digging up sustenance in the desert of the world, and those tools have been broken by the scientific world view. A claim such as that cannot be too directly substantiated; that is the ultimate purpose of the following pages. The benign face of knowledge is above reproach, and the philosophy that complements it cannot be decisively faulted. In practice the modern study of art stands on three legs, and were it possible to register any weakness in one, the weight would simply be shifted onto the others; because language will never disappear, a means for recommending the programme will always exist. But shining a strong light on this language — the light of detail — in fact reveals its illusory qualities. Recognizing a pattern of weakness in the philosophy of these three pillars may reduce the 'inexorability' of the modern relation to art. And when the modern approach stands without its logic it no longer stands. Then the work of art may have the power to tell us something we need to know, in another sense altogether.

51 Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (1968), 5.

P A R T O N E

THE THEORY OF INTERPRETATION

Among the fundamental issues of a scientific art history, the question of "interpretation" has special weight. Not only is it becoming increasingly clearer that the correct interpretation of individual works of art is the prerequisite for all further contemplation of the work of art, and in particular also the basis of all true art history, but the question also concerns everyone who adopts an immediate concern for art, and not from scientific interests. What is at stake is our relation to works of art in general ....

In dealing with this question what is especially important today is to bring the practice of interpreting, as practiced with such great success by the leading art historians of our day, into uncompromising agreement with the theory of interpretation.

Hans Sedlmayr (1958)

The intensity of ferment and stimulus to rethinking brought about by [recent developments in art history] do not obviate the problem of an 'integral' method resting on common groundrules as to what constitutes evidence, and how that evidence is to be judged relevant and deployed, the rules being such that disagreement can occur in a nourishing way.

Mark Roskill (1989)

The hermeneutic game does not exclude interpretative rules.

Umberto Eco (1992)

1

THE THEORY AND ITS METHOD

4 THEORY AND INTERPRETATION

That a specific form of approach to the work of art is characteristic of the modern age, an approach that is universally advocated by writers of all kinds, means that we have an established theory of interpretation. On the surface, however, one established view of interpretation does not seem to prevail; people regard this a time of chaos and crisis in the study of art.[1]

> There never was, in fact, a holistic, comprehensive approach to interpretation that devolved from the modern history of the discipline. As in anthropology and sociology, which developed their modern status as disciplines more or less synchronically with art history, what one has is more like a layering of interpretations based partly on projects that read a body of material evidence in a certain way, and partly on the importation of "texts" that are deemed relevant.[2]

If, contrary to that perception, one view prevails, it would seem we ought to be able to name it, point to some manifest exposition of it. In fact it has no name, and there is very little concerted discussion of interpretation at all. The reason for that is more obvious than we think: the problems of interpretation are essentially solved. Sketching the development

---

Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 96.
Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 92.
Eco, "Overinterpreting Texts" (1992), 60.

1 Bryson, Review of Roskill (1989), 706.

2 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 90.

of art history in one of the few and most recent studies of the interpretation of art, Mark Roskill notes that by the nineteenth century

> something has changed in the interim — in the way the images are read, in the inwardness of understanding implied, in the forms of comparison with other art adduced — that enables us to read into the content of those texts a greater interpretative sophistication. What has happened is that the practices of art history, as understood today, have got under way. They have created a measure of agreement as to what needs to be done procedurally, in the way of gathering the materials together, correlating them with one another and tying them to the historical evidence.[3]

The motivation of this congruence was partly the modernist project and its triad of knowledge, objectivity, and theory. As I have noted, change in recent years has not disturbed that situation — because it is not really opposed to it. There is a view of interpretation that is fundamentally shared by modernist scholars and postmodernist theorists (practitioners of "the current revisionist mode of interpretation")[4] alike. Whether one thinks this is so depends upon how deeply one looks, and how much or how little one is willing to call a theory.

What hides the fact of a prevailing theory is certain differences nearer to the surface — four kinds of difference: differences of method, over certainty, over the aim of "understanding," and over the viability of interpreting at all. These certainly have the appearance of deep conflicts, splitting the field into competing theories of what interpretation is. Theorists and philosophers of art frequently talk about "the hermeneutic fray,"[5] presenting interpretation as a troubled area, full of dispute and uncertainty. But diversity is not reflected in the fact that certain basic limitations are uniformly imposed upon the interpretative encounter with works of art by writers of all sorts. The divergence appears in the approaches embarked upon second to that basic uniformity. It concerns the status of "methodologies that have developed alternative ways of conceptualizing what has been left aside by the traditional 'canons' of interpretation (as in feminist studies)"[6] — that is, approaches to new material, but not necessarily a different form of approach. The issue between the traditional projects and revisionist interpretations is not method but *interest;* each has a distinct question, from which distinct meanings follow;[7] that different interpretations arise hides the fact that these are "conflicts about immediate aims and not about meanings."[8] So these different methods are merely differences of *approach* in the

---

3 Ibid., x.

4 Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 181.

5 Bryson, Review of Roskill (1989), 704.

6 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 91.

7 "There are several modes of interpretation corresponding to different aims with which we interpret." Stecker, "Incompatible Interpretations" (1987), 302.

8 Hirsch, "Dimensions of Hermeneutics" (1976), 206.

most concrete sense: like the view of a house from the highway, from its gardens, and from the air, presenting different "aspects" of the building.[9] They may not be equally desirable, but that raises differences of merit.[10] It does not constitute a dispute about what interpretation is, about the basic conditions of interpretation; to call a 'method' what is actually a 'question' hides what a method really is.

A more fundamental conflict of 'theories' appears to arise around the issues of knowledge and understanding, the very aims of a discipline, but I suggested in the introduction that differences at this level are far less significant than imagined. Modernist scholars have long been sensitive to the problems of knowledge and truth, recognizing the artificiality of questions such as Which is the correct interpretation? (as if there could be only one) and Can any interpretation be proved? (as if *proof* were the only proper basis of acceptance).[11] It is worth recognizing how very little of all the claims established art historians have made about art is affected by thinking of them as tentative, hypothetical. framed by certain specific interests and concerns. It is difficult and likely impossible to find a scholar offering his or her research as the total or last word on the meaning of the works studied. "All determinations of textual meaning are probabilistic, ... all critical assessments are ultimately uncertain."[12] We hope only to be able to distinguish the more from "the less adequate" interpretations: "the 'correct' interpretation is to be conceived as an asymptote of knowledge, which these interpretations — coming as they do from different 'sides' — approach in all conceivable ways, though they can only approach it."[13] The strict historicism that excludes present-day questions is now regarded archaic, and the majority of those who write about art are whole-heartedly aligned with Hauser in 1958:

> Works of art ... are like unattainable heights. We do not go straight toward them, but circle round them. Each generation sees them from a different point of view and with a fresh eye; nor is it to be assumed that a later point of view is more apt than an earlier one. Each aspect comes into sight in its own time, which cannot be anticipated or prolonged; and yet its significance is not lost, for the meaning that a work assumes for a later generation is the result of the whole range of previous interpretations.

---

9 Abell distinguishes different "approaches or points of view," different "directions of attention or emphasis." Abell, "Toward a Unified Field" (1970), 725, 727. Carrier notes that conflict between interpretations is possible where it hinges on "some matter of fact," but not between interpretations that "offer differing personal viewpoints," but a difference in viewpoints is not merely personal, but may be an orientation toward different aspects. As he also notes, "locating the possible conflict between ... interpretations is [sometimes] difficult." Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation" (1987), 24.

10 As Baxandall has illustrated, the different elements of different interpretations sometimes depends "on our frame of reference"; the basis of giving "privilege" to one specific set of elements "is that one is really studying economic structures rather than ... general history." Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 28.

11 For instance, "interpretations of works of art are valued, not so much for correctness, as for their validity and perspicacity" Osborne, "Interpretation in Science and in Art" (1986), 3.

12 Steiner, "A New Meaning of Meaning" (1985), 1262.

13 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 188.

> We are now living in the day of the sociological interpretation of cultural achievements. This day will not last for ever, and it will not have the last word. It opens up new aspects, achieves new and surprising insights; and yet this point of view evidently has its own limitations and inadequacies.[14]

A third level of possible hermeneutic difference concerns the very objective of "understanding," and here there are differences in our usage of the term that if not distinguished (it has been noted) "cause confusion in talk about art." Modern theory distinguishes two principal usages. In one sense understanding refers to a "cognitive" endeavour, the attempt to learn about something: "refers to knowledge." Claims to understanding in this sense "are publicly corrigible, correct or incorrect, probable or improbable." Beside that is another sense, as when we say "that's how I understand it": "the phenomenal or phenomenological" understanding, according to which "'that's how I understand it' ... entails: 'That is how it may be seen, taken'; it does not entail: 'That is how it is.'"[15] Postmodern theorists accept this simple claim about usage, but they typically reject the purpose of the distinction, which is to clarify the alignment of scholarship with cognitivity over against subjectivity. That rejection, however, needs to be articulated a little more carefully to be understood for what it is: a rejection of the epistemology of interpretation or understanding, not of the *cognitive* endeavour. Interpretation as 'knowledge', grounded in correctness or truth, revealing how things are rather than how they may be taken to be, is rejected; the claims of the postmodern writer about works of art are precisely that: positioned ways of taking the work.[16] But it is not recognized forcibly enough that contemporary writers are not presenting their claims about the work as merely personal "takes"; the aim is to say something about something, to represent as fairly as possible. We continue to be interested in
"cognizance of the object," which is essentially "comprehension."[17] Only the idea of knowledge involved here is merely "methodically regulated cognition."[18] It is a contemporary truism that "meaning is dependent upon what the viewer brings to the picture," but a distinction continues to be made between meaning that is thereby imposed or *projected* upon the work and a meaning that, while rooted in subjectivity, respects the claim

---

14 Hauser, *Philosophy of Art History* (1958), 3. "One of the most radical and most characteristic features of postmodernist art is that of *discursiveness*. ... it eschews even the possibility of the single truth or the single, all encompassing meaning that resolves all internal ambiguities and ties up all loose ends in a given work. Structurally, it enables work to change (its meaning) in and through time: it ensures an open-endedness to the work that permits the spectator continually to add something new or different to the work." Klepac, "Deconstruction in Contemporary Art" (1984), 266.

15 Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 129, 130.

16 "As Sura Levine has put it, 'all interpretation is *positioned* — whether that position is contextual, empirical, psychoanalytic, or mercantile.'" Bryson, Review of Roskill (1989), 707.

17 Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 75.

18 Bubner, *Modern German Philosophy* (1981), 55.

of a kind of objective identity of the work itself. To ignore that difference is to pretend that the polar spectrum of subjectivity (sketched in § 3) has no negative features at all. And in every case there remains a *basis* (to be epistemologically finessed in opposition to traditional claims about grounds and foundations) for assessing the cognitivity of the claim — that standard of 'correctness' (§ 2).

It is the need for a basis that explains the self-conscious shift from the rather too simple 'interpretation of' art[19] to 'interpretation within' specific contexts, narrowed purviews within which claims about meaning are demonstrable, and any context not discovered is imported. The "naïveté of response" of earlier interpreters does not suffice; "the difference here from present-day writings can be attributed to sheer lack of sophistication as compared with what came to be expected in the way of commentary in nineteenth-century accounts ... and still more with what holds for today."[20] For example, within the institutional theory a work of art *can* be said to *have* a meaning (in an appropriately relative way) in respect of an art world that reads it for or endows it with a certain kind of significance (even if that is not its only or perhaps even its deepest meaning); the interpretation of a work within that setting shifts the basis from the interpreter to a state of affairs in the world. There are ways of reading, and contexts of meaning, and in that sense meanings and interpretations; frameworks of interpretation within which one's claims are arguable — in that sense, "publicly corrigible" — exist. Moreover, contemporary investigators of past art continue to be concerned with assembling more rather than less probable circumstances of a work's creation or reception, as means of telling us about the operations of art. Contemporary writing remains opposed to the solipsistic interpretations traditional scholarship rejected.

Last to be noted is the opposition over the project of interpretation itself — as in Susan Sontag's charge that "to interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world, in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings'."[21] This is not, however, an opposition to interpreting but to too-reductive kinds of interpreting and to interpretative closure. What is rejected is not those sufficiently tentative efforts to understand works of art, advanced as merely partial attempts, but the presumption of a discipline that proceeds to tell us what the works of our history mean, more or less once and for all. It is not interpretation itself that is rejected, but the decisive and summary programme. Providing we have prised our talk out of the epistemologies talk may have been joined to, providing it is clear *what kind of claim*

19 "Unless we wish to deceive ourselves, we can no longer get away with the notion of an immediate consciousness." Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 81.

20 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 6—7.

21 Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (1967), 7.

one is making and with what circumspection one makes it, what continues to go on in contemporary writing is the "interpretation" and "understanding" of the human productions called art. These are the revised forms of interpretation. Interpretation is unavoidable; as Panofsky maintained, the moment a description of a work moves beyond colours and lines it necessarily breaches the territory of meaning. "It is obvious that historians of philosophy or sculpture are concerned with books and statues not in so far as these books and sculptures exist materially, but in so far as they have a meaning."[22] Even the formalist rejection of meaning was not a rejection of interpretation and the 'search for meaning,' but rather a dogmatic insistence upon an exclusively formal kind of meaning. The only thoroughgoing rejection of interpretation is silence, or a shift to the margins of art (to talk about such non-interpretative matters as artist's techniques or the art market). But contemporary writing continues to attempt to talk about art at the level that it matters, which is the level of meaning. Despite the decisive opposition of postmodernity to "objective" projects, art writing stands obviously much closer to the interests of cognitive scholarship than it does to those of self-interested subjectivity.

This alliance is explained by an underlying theory, which lies at the level of the cognitive project and its deepest philosophy, a philosophy of the problematic lay of subject and object. It is a theory that roots modern interpretation in an insight into the nature of reality, the substance of which is captured in a phrase from Dürer: "The first is the eye that sees, the other is the object that is seen, the third is the distance between."[23] Beneath differences in our specific questions (about iconography, or the uncovering of ideology) — questions selecting, in effect, among the thousand things that might have a bearing upon all possible meanings of a work — and beneath deeper differences of epistemology, there is a fundamental continuity in the recognition of "distance" and the difference and distinction between cognitive and personal interests. The basis of that continuity is an undisturbed recognition of the work of art as an individual, an entity, an 'other' (in the sense of not-I): the work of art as *a thing deserving of respect for an identity of its own,* that attitude that is unique to the modern era.

When writing about works of art is indifferent to or demonstrates disrespect for the work's specific identity, or nature, or individual context — how one expresses this is a

---

22 Panofsky, "A Humanistic Discipline" (1940), 14; Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 167.

23 Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 150. Panofsky saw the parallel of the subject/object relation between pictorial representation and the cognitive representations of discourse. "Just as it was important for the Middle Ages to elaborate a system of perspective based on the realization of a fixed distance between the eye and the object, so it was equally important for this period to evolve an idea of historical disciplines based on the realization of a fixed distance between the present and the classical past." Panofsky, "A Humanistic Discipline" (1940), 4 n. 3.

matter of one's secondary theory — we continue to regard that as abandoning the cognitive project.[24] Whereas one form of 'understanding' clarifies different aspects of the work (with reference to the artist's problematic, or social mores, or iconographic traditions), different facets of its human reality, the other holds no cognitive claim, and has nothing really to say about *the work* at all. The deepest theory of interpretation lies in this widespread agreement among interpreters of all stripes about the necessity in any attempt to write *about* works of art of respect for the object and the entailed conditions of "cognitivity".

> Different meanings to differing audiences, or in differing periods, form part of the identity that is being studied. The work of art represents a special kind of cultural object: physically unchanging for the most part, and persisting as a constant through differing approaches to its character. The attempt to recover the said identity must necessarily remain speculative, however systematic methods of recreative description and hermeneutic linkage to external data (such as biography) may become.[25]

We currently argue that "the boundary between facts ... and the putative application of those facts, to support a certain reading of the work's identity, is never totally erased,"[26] but epistemological shifts in our views about the basis of what we call "evidence" in interpretation does not undo the importance of the *notions* of evidence or relevance. Evidence is connection with the entity (however far we may be from thinking of it as a thing-in-itself)[27] that we seek evidence *of;* our interpretative material, if it is worth exploring, must display relevance to the case of the work. Hermeneutics implies "a common object," something "with a possible variety of different but equally correct perspectives on it;" at the basis of our conception of interpretation is "a certain notion of the object."[28] That we are aiming no higher than to reach "plateaus of consensus" about such things as methods and evidence does not imply that we are writing about nothing, that our writing has given up the attempt to represent the work in any way at all. Interpretation is what it has been since the modern era began: representation —

> the bringing into being of a considered text that, if generally accepted, causes the work of art that is its subject to be viewed in a certain light. ... It has as its most basic function the highlighting of certain components of the work, in a way that enhances responsiveness to the roles that they play

---

24 The first type is corrigible with respect to "the appearances of the object in question"; the second is correct with regard to the interpreter's "desired ends or purposes." Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 137.

25 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 98.

26 Ibid., 87.

27 Indeed, that was already Panofsky's view: "In epistemology the presupposition of this 'thing in itself' was profoundly shaken by Kant .... We believe to have realized that artistic perception is no more faced with a 'thing in itself' than is the process of cognition; that on the contrary the one as well as the other can be sure of the validity of its judgments precisely because it alone determines the rules of its world (i.e., it has no objects other than those that are constituted within itself)." Panofsky, *Idea: A Conception in Art Theory* (New York 1968), 126; cited by Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 151.

28 Carr, "Interpretation and Self-evidence" (1979), 139.

> and so leads to a sense of perception gained as to why they are featured in that fashion. Together, the choice of focus and the highlighting function amount to a presentation of the work in words, contrived so that prevailing or emergent conventions of discourse about visual images impart the conviction of an appropriate and insightful fit between the two.[29]

Thus "the institutions of art history [cannot] do more than support or supply ways of filling gaps, both material and conceptual, in what is taken to be relevant knowledge pertinent to the works themselves."[30] Across its revisionist lines, the academic community displays a remarkably tight sense of its objective, and, accordingly, a fairly unified sense of what a correct or fitting approach to what passes as a legitimate interpretation of a work of art comes to. In this respect, the problem of theory — of the basic conditions and requirements of interpretation — has been settled.

The interpretation of art is not an area of crisis; it has never been less so. In virtually all our dealings with art at a level of intellectual sophistication we are agreed upon the constraints to be applied if we are to attempt to talk about the work. The evidence is everywhere: in the absolute sway, within all manner of approaches to the work of art, of a fundamental set of principles; in the things typically said of interpretation by way of criticism of, and justification of, the interpretations advanced; in the scattered theoretical discussions devoted to the subject. If we did not agree upon how to interpret, our disagreements would go much deeper than disputes about "the particular interpretative procedures" enjoined by different interests,[31] deeper even than the usual epistemological divisions; if we did not agree, we would not advance interpretations virtually all demonstrably marked by the same restrictions. A theory of what it means to interpret a work of art, to the end of understanding it, has been in place for more than a century. We work at understanding through disciplines that have settled these issues — disciplines now undergoing a reaction against conservatism, against certain conceptions of what it means to know, but that have never undergone a truly deep philosophical revolution. Contemporary writers who mark a decisive break between the new approaches to art and the scientific tradition of art-historical scholarship are exaggerating differences that concern only the narrower, more strident conceptions of science — conceptions that have long been unrepresentative of established art history — playing upon stereotypes held by a younger audience that can hardly avoid placing their own 'critical' writing in a special light. Objectivity as neutrality and value freedom, scientificity as the facilitation of truth, certainty,

---

29 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), vii.
30 Ibid., 89.
31 Ibid., xi.

absolute and final knowledge: these are not the real issues of the notions of science and objectivity in the study of the arts.

> Is there in hermeneutics an analytical dimension which, in contrast to the normative, is logically deductive, empirically descriptive, and neutral with respect to values and ethical choices? The spirit of the present age inclines us skeptically to assume that such a pretense of objective neutrality would merely be a mask for a particular set of values.[32]

The continued rejection of these conceptions is also the very best way to obscure the continuity of the real endeavour of the scientific project that defines the modern era. Science is cognition, the representation of reality, the endeavour to make claims about the world, the collection of information. Postmodern writers do not continue to belong to the institutions of that enterprise (the universities) out of cynicism. We shall come to see, I hope, that beside the significance of adherence to the cognitive enterprise, it is of little importance to argue *in what shape* the claims ought to be advanced (as neutral or theory-laden, as value-free or value-based, as truth or warranted assertion, as certain or probable, as absolute or relative, as final or infinitely revisable).

We interpret according to a theory — even though there is little in the literature of the discipline that answers to a treatise, an explicitation, an analysis of what interpretation demands.[33] That is because what deserves the status of the term 'theory' is both deep and

---

32 Hirsch, "Dimensions of Hermeneutics" (1976), 197.

33 There has been a certain recurrent complaint about the "empiricist bias" of traditional art history and its corresponding disinclination of the discipline to theorize about itself — the "antitheoretical ... stance of art historical practice." Elkins, "Art History Without Theory" (1988), 358, 376. "A specifically empiricist paradigm of art history, one dedicated to the mass accumulation of factual and nostalgically interpretative descriptions." Pontynen, "Theory and Practice of Art History" (1986), 467. "Discussions of theoretical issues have no sure place in art historical writing. Sustained theoretical arguments in the body of art historical texts have become uncommon (Erwin Panofsky's major theoretical statements are mostly early works), and theoretical issues are taken up instead at the close of articles — as *envois* — in prefaces, and in introductions to books." Elkins, "Art History Without Theory" (1988), 355.

When it was noted that "for 'two generations or more' theoretical activity in art history had 'stagnated'" (James Ackerman, cited by Elkins, 356) it is the generation of Panofsky and Gombrich that was taken to mark the end point. There may be something to this view, for, theoretically speaking, the situation of the discipline is utterly different than it was in the nineteenth century, or even early in this, when philosophical study was a more natural part of a scholar's training. Panofsky, as has often been noted, had close contact with the philosophy of Cassirer, and as I have already discussed, the 'scientific' development of art studies came about through substantial familiarity among historians with idealist philosophy. Nowadays, in complete contrast, there is so much factual and technical learning in art historical training that philosophy is the last thing students of art have occasion to bother with. But to say that theory is "peripheral" to art history (Elkins, 356) is potentially misleading, unless it is specified what exactly is meant. It is theory that has limited theorizing. The limited amount of theoretical assessment in the discipline follows to a large extent, surely, from the widespread sense of satisfaction that the theoretical phase of the discipline fought a long battle that was in the end substantially won. The study of art was theoretically *developed*. Theoretical discussion has been peripheral because a theory that is considered sound has been built into the discipline; the work is done. There is no missing theory, "waiting to be eloquently stated, but something which is presupposed in a vague and variable manner by the art historical texts themselves. (The conventions, desires, and beliefs are not positions but inferences, conjectures, based on the texts and the ways we speak about them.) Art historical practice, for example, has an objectivist intention: it takes itself to be (or to approach) 'a science with definite principles and techniques,' which can exclude theory and generate texts by appealing only to previous non-theoretical texts and to the facts. This intention is rarely stated, exasperatingly slippery to formulate clearly." Elkins, 358.

elementary (mutually magnetic conditions). The theory of interpretation is established inside a philosophical distinction that lies in deeper soil of the human consciousness than contemporary critique has yet turned; it belongs to our "categories." While there are innumerable expositions of that theory, they would not fill treatises, because the theory is fundamentally simple; though it is not a 'common-sense' approach (one cannot picture it developing without the philosophical thinking that made a place for it), once the basic elements were lodged in the modern mind it required no great elaboration or articulation to complete. It is old, and by now a matter of deep inheritance, having been passed on implicit in the approach to art that we have learned *from other interpretations*, the ones we are exposed to when we are exposed to art. Sedlmayr left us a fine picture of how such a theory is learned:

> Since the necessity of the interpretation of works of pictorial art as a precondition for knowledge of their history can no longer be disregarded, there is something astonishing in the fact that one is not instructed in this primary art of one's own discipline. Even my generation received no instruction in the interpretation of works of the visual arts; training in art-historical method concentrated on other questions. One learned interpretation from the model of the great interpreters, without thinking much about it, even without making use of the term interpretation, and perhaps at the outset that wasn't at all the worst method. Things are not very different today.[34]

The 'theory' that I shall speak of is a theory that is a concrete translation of the *critical dichotomy of objectivity* to the specific task of interpreting cultural creations: art, here — but in the modern age, literature, poetry, music, dance, myths, rituals, and sacred texts no less.

5 LEGITIMATION

One of the critical claims levelled against the notion of the "scholarship" of art is precisely that interpretation is unavoidable. Traditional art historians have long noted this.

> For art history to be *art* history it must pass through the needle-eye of interpretation. One who wishes to stick to the illusion of the "solid basis of facts" evades the problem of interpretation and finishes in the stony wasteland of a history of empty forms. One who wishes to get through the problem through intuition alone returns to the obtuseness of subjectivism.[35]

---

34 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werke" (1965), 181.

35 Ibid., 181.

If we assert that 'factual' art history is actually rooted in interpretation, that its claims are merely interpretative, what is the lesson? Simply that it is not sufficient to advance one's claims on a factual basis. Unless we are to conclude, as very few do, that there are no even merely consensual standards at all (a condition that would leave vested traditional interpretations intact and unobjectionable) we must investigate the basis of interpretations. We have to ask how to draw "the limits of interpretation,"[36] to ask "how ..., within the writing of art history, is agreement reached, or assent to a particular set of interpretative findings arrived at?"[37] There is, in other words, a need for *legitimation:* a way of establishing what counts as a truly cognitive representation, as an interpretation respecting the meaning identity of the work.

What is rejected is not the idea of legitimation, but specific paradigms of legitimacy and the exaggerated claims once made for them. Certainly we are right to dismiss that archaic attitude that expressed faith in philosophical guarantees of certain knowledge, but more often than we realize, the once much-discussed matters of the "grounding," the "validation," the "correctness" of interpretations had to do with the issue of basic cognitivity rather than the positivistic guarantees of certainty they are mistaken for.[38]

> What grounds do we have to validate a given interpretation? Interpretations that are not discredited or ruled out by the text or work of art of which they purport to be interpretations are minimally warranted; interpretations that appear to be unobtrusive from the point of view of their intended audience are validated in a stronger sense. We may not be able to offer firmer grounds for the validity of a given interpretation.[39]

Traditional theorists speak in the language of verification and correctness. Any valid interpretation "is understood to be checkable in some way. There must be, in other words, criteria of interpretation." In discriminating among competing readings, we need "a reliable criterion for the correctness of understanding."[40] Postmodern theorists talk rather of the "justification for" the interpretations we advance.[41] As Danto has noted, "foundationalism is not greatly in philosophical vogue, but even a non-foundationalist philosophy has to defend and justify its practices."[42] Thus Weitz speaks of "interpretation as the giving of

---

36 Beardsley, "Limits of Interpretation" (1966), 176.

37 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 20.

38 It is really much too simple to say that "the concern with validity in interpretation was itself an offshoot of the positivist theory of scientific validity, which contended that truth is independent of the observer or researcher who discovers it." Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 51.

39 Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 126.

40 Beardsley, "Limits of Interpretation" (1966), 176. Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 78.

41 Bal, *Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (1991), 12—13.

42 Danto, "Discoveries in Perspective" (1985), 842.

reasons in support of an hypothesis,"[43] and Carrier contrasts the philosophical tack of the modern art historian with the rhetorical, emotive one of the older variety: "The philosopher aims to persuade by getting the reader to understand an argument. Vasari's *Ekphrasis* recreates the painting; Steinberg wants us to weigh his argument."[44] So far as the need for legitimation goes, there is really no opposition at all between "a relativist who maintains that no absolute criteria can determine the superiority of one interpretation" and "a rationalist who demands that argument take the form of logical and compelling reasons for preferring one alternative to another."[45] In every case we are talking about a basis on which both to assess interpretations and to propose interpretations as worthy of the works under discussion.

What is legitimation? It is the "justification" or "warrant" that claims about the meaning of works of art are genuine claims *about* those works. There is an obvious difference between something offered as 'fact' and something offered as 'valid' — that is, not as the truth, not as a final or complete claim about what a work means, but as *an interpretative statement demonstrably free of the obvious and nullifying fallacies*. Validation or legitimation is not a warrant to claim final knowledge but insurance, based in theoretical reflection, that operations undertaken in order to represent or understand a work of art are not already *incapable* of representing or understanding it. It guarantees they do not fall prey to categorical errors that make understanding impossible. The theory became important exactly for this crucial if minimal security, and it continues to play this role untouched by any antipositivist argument. Legitimation defines *what counts as a legitimate effort to understand a work of art*, an adequate representation (even though only partial and tentative) in opposition to efforts that are unable to claim cognitive status at all, efforts constitutionally incapable of representing the work.

We do not live in an age when there is no standard, for instance, of curatorial discourse, as we can appreciate by comparing contemporary exhibitions to the Nazi-organized *Degenerate Art* exhibition of 1937. While we grant even those authors their right to opinion, we could hardly call them 'curators' for the very reason that their texts do not pass for discussion of the works at all. Texts in the catalogue of that exhibition claimed to demonstrate certain social facts, but we do not think of them as samples of cognitive writing. Not because they are unscientific, because they are rooted in values, or because they are rooted in values we reject, but because they are nothing but subjectivity *masquerading* as representation. The ridicule heaped on primitive sculptures demonstrates a

---

43 Weitz, "Interpretation and the Visual Arts" (1973), 105.
44 Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation" (1987), 25.
45 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), xii.

fundamental lack of attention to the guidelines of cognitivity, to the demonstrable qualities and circumstances of the works themselves: they are *expressions of self* posing as *representations of objects*. Understanding imposes a task upon the interpreter; there are basic questions that require answering:

> How do we identify the artwork? How may we choose between conflicting interpretations? What is the relation between an interpretation to the interpreter's goals?[46]

> The problems are the eternal ones: What are we looking at? What do we need to know about it? Who are "we"?[47]

Questions, that is, concerning the nature of object and subject, of the work and the interpreter's own dispositions. Through a general answer to these questions, the theory is able to reject the claim of some interpretations to represent the work; the theory clarifies certain basic conditions of understanding, conditions of what can be taken to count as a legitimate grasp of *the work,* a just representation.[48]

Through these conditions, the theory was set up to guide interpretation *by limiting it*. The 'grounding' or 'validation' of an interpretation retains that kind of significance; it does not imply, as it rarely ever did, *ex cathedra* claims to correctness. Criteria of legitimate understanding are not criteria of having understood; rather, *they rule out*. Hauser argued that there is no such thing as having understood a work of art: "a work of art is a microcosm whose totality is indescribable by the historian."[49] For some "understanding" develops with the "improvement" of interpretation;[50] Hauser believed there were merely different historical moments of the work. Some have believed that understanding presumably lies in the direction of a "synthesis" of approaches;[51] others doubt these approaches are compatible, believing that "a spectrum of approaches to the work of art does not add up to seeing it more completely as it is."[52] What all agree on is that whatever level

---

46 Carrier, *Artwriting* (1987), 136.

47 Charlotte Townsend-Gault, in *Sightlines* (Montréal 1994), 145.

48 As, for instance, here: "Thus it is not only the functioning of the imagination but also, and perhaps most importantly, the problem of the *nature of language* which must be investigated anew. This investigation should undoubtedly take into consideration the latest achievements in the field of linguistics. All this, however, means that the *problem of understanding,* of hermeneutics, must also be reexamined. Textual analysis as developed by biblical exegesis, jurisprudence, and classical philology should now be clarified epistemologically. The question which a new hermeneutics would have to answer within the ontological frame of reference already mentioned is 'how can a critic communicate, in terms that are universally valid, the result of an act of comprehension which can be realized only individually and subjectively?'" Lohner, "The Intrinsic Method" (1968), 170 [italics added].

49 Hauser, *Philosophy of Art History* (1958), 154.

50 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werke" (1965), 183.

51 Abell, "Toward a Unified Field" (1957), 727.

52 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), xii.

of understanding one can have depends upon interpretations that are advanced by respecting certain limiting conditions.

Recognizing the basic difference between subject and object implies guidelines for legitimate representation. And while the theory that unfolds those guidelines is not complex, it contains a number of specific directives,[53] directives whose effective purpose is to constrain the interpreter's activity. As Wind remarks:

> By the application of the critical method the [interpreter's] raw excitement is refined to a more thoughtful mode of behaviour. He does not simply follow his spontaneous emotion, instead he appeals (more or less accurately and successfully) to a system of grammatical and critical rules, on which he bases his interpretation and which, in their turn, are tested by being applied.[54]

Underlying the approaches ("the particular interpretative procedures") of current art writing, there is a *method*[55] — an unfolding of the practical implications of what was originally a philosophical insight (the critical dichotomy of subject and object) into a set of rules to be applied to every interpretation oriented toward understanding. These rules are "controlling principles"[56] that ensure actual *discrimination* among interpretations. There are two different classes of rule, which we might differentiate as *rules of content* and *rules of form.* Here is one theorist's rather complex introduction:

> If you take matter like that of the last paragraph and shake it, it sorts itself out into three interconnecting criteria or — as I would prefer — three self-critical moods of a commonsense sort. As a student of the classical tradition I think of these as external decorum, internal decorum, and parsimony; but you will prefer me to refer to them as (historical) *legitimacy*, (pictorial and expositive) *order*, and (critical) *necessity*. They are not modes of proof but stances from which one may reflect on the probability of one intentional account [of meaning] as against another.[57]

We shall see, in more detail, what these distinctions are.

---

53 "We should be careful to distinguish rules from principles.... Rules attempt to direct our actions, whereas principles attempt to guide our consciences." Pontynen, "Theory and Practice of Art History" (1986), 475.

54 Wind, "History and Science" (1936), 260.

55 I use 'method' in a restricted sense. While there are many "methods" or "methodologies" in current practice, these I think of as various "approaches" to works of art. A method, however, is a more fundamental and systematic form of approach that may be present in all these approaches, brought to bear in order to constitute them as basically cognitive — in fact, precisely as Preziosi defines it: "Any methodology is a set of explicit and implicit stage directions for taking up declamatory, analytic positions — positions from which to make statements that are *dans le vrai*." Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History*, (1989), 34. A method has the further distinction of being rooted in a specific theory (in this case, a critical theory of objectivity) — in that sense, I will sometimes call it the 'theory of interpretation.' But a method is distinct from a theory in the respect that it is the translation of that theory into a set of directives, outlining what one must do to realize a certain objective (here, achieving a legitimately cognitive interpretation of a work of art). In relation to its origin, it is a theory; in relation to its application, a method.

56 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 14.

57 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 119—20.

6 THE RULES OF CONTENT

Rules of content might equally well be called rules of substance, or material rules, for they concern the content or substance of the interpretation advanced of a work of art, the material the interpretation is formed of (for instance, a specific Christian allegory). Rules of content are designed to ensure the *cognitive relevance* of an interpretation: that a prospective interpretation is directed at the work. So far as how the interpreter regards his or her project is concerned, it may make some difference how the interpreter talks about that object: As the nature of the work? As the work itself? As the identity of the work? As the work in its surrounding conditions of production, or reception? As the work situated within extant systems of perception? But again, beneath these genuine differences of epistemology lies the unified basis of the modern conception of science, which is inherent to the investigative study: the conception that there is some state of affairs whose condition is to be respected, one that must be protected against appropriative forms of discourse that can be shown, in certain perhaps limited ways, to misrepresent or distort. Indeed, it is remarkably invisible to those who claim a break with modernity over the issue of cognitivity that there is no reason for specifically epistemological differences if postmodern writers are no longer interested in making claims *about* anything, if revisionist histories are not just fictions but *pure* fictions. Adorno, for instance, spoke of 'orientation to the object.'

> Aesthetic feeling is not what is being aroused in us. It is more like a sense of wonderment in the presence of what we behold; a sense of being overwhelmed in the presence of a phenomenon that is non-conceptual while at the same time being determinate. The arousal of subjective effect by art is the last thing we should want to dignify with the name of aesthetic feeling. True aesthetic feeling is oriented to the object; it is the feeling of the object, not some reflex in the viewer.[58]

There are many ways of conceiving this orientation. For instance, Greenberg's concern with "limitations — without which criticism would become arbitrary, unconnected to its object."[59] An interpretation is purported to "give information" about the work and its circumstance, and accepting an interpretation gives one a sense of learning something "about the work."[60] Other expressions of this concern follow:

---

58 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1986), 236. The same point is made by Osborne. "The aesthetic attitude is a cognitive attitude in so far as attention is concentrated on the mental object with a view to bringing it into more and more luminous awareness of it rather than on our own affective and emotional response to it." Osborne, *Art of Appreciation* (1970), 48.

59 "Complaints of an Art Critic"; cited by David Batchelor, "Abstraction, Modernism, Representation" in *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1991), 48.

60 Beardsley, "Limits of Interpretation" (1966), 176.

> Perception or contemplation [*Anschauung*] is the attempt to experience the picture as itself.[61]
>
> The hermeneutics of art must concern itself with the work of the painter, since firstly the painter belongs to the community of discourse and, secondly, this investigation brings to a halt the hunt for meaning. ... Interpretation of the work of the artist cannot go wrong if it identifies its object as the work.[62]
>
> This "correct" conception can also be designated as the one that is "innate" in the work of art.[63]
>
> The task of the interpreter would be, for instance, to see the work of art not with the "eyes" of the interpreter, but, as it were, with those of its creator, in its own inherent lawfulness, according to the mind that has created it. One can also conceive of the process as a kind of restoration, restitution, even a resurrection of the work of art in its lost immediacy.[64]

This orientation to do justice to something that is outside and different from us is the motivation that we call *objectivity*. This sense of objectivity is obviously substantially different from the one it immediately brings to mind, a totally neutral representation of the truth. That sense has long been defunct in art studies,[65] and it is highly questionable whether typical discussions of objectivity in much earlier theory truly had to do with detached knowledge.

As I have said, postmodern writing has not rejected the orientation to a state of affairs that is inherent to the notion of study, and that underlay modernist concern with "the work itself," and in all that follows it is not really necessary to continue noting the differences between traditional and postmodern approaches to art, to continue articulating the postmodern parallels with the typically modern concern with the "work itself." I would ask the reader who is concerned about that to recognize his or her affinity with the basis of the modernist position — to recognize, beneath differing epistemologies, the enduring concern that defines all *modern hermeneutics* against an earlier age of interpretation unrestrained by this ideal: the concern that the interpreting writer acknowledge the eye, the object, and the distance between; that he or she is oriented to a situation that, in a decisive if not absolute way, stands outside, apart from, and indifferent to the subject's interests, wishes, and desires. That there is *something to respect* is the underlying premise for which

---

61 Bätschmann is using a term that is richer in German than "perception" (with its empirical sensory connotations) is in English. Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 131.

62 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 83—84.

63 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 111.

64 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werke" (1965), 185—86.

65 One writer comments on an author who "equates objectivity with *absolute* truth. His attack against this concept is, as such, justified, but in the issue at stake here, it is only an unfair manoeuvre, as the opponent at which it is aimed has long been dead. Although this concept of truth is occasionally still found, unreflected, among hard-core natural scientists, it hardly exists anymore among philosophical theoreticians." Gottfried Gabriel, "Postmodernism as a Return to Rhetoric" in *Stillstand switches* (Zurich: Shedhalle, 1992), 204.

method was originally developed: respect for otherness is basic. For prior to modern hermeneutics, which is defined by this form of objectivity, was another form:

> To take a central example from the history of interpretation: by the eighteenth century an impressive victory had been won over certain medieval modes of interpretation, so that by then anachronistic allegorizing seemed to be permanently repudiated. Under the post-medieval view, since Homer and Virgil were not Christian their texts could not legitimately be regarded as Christian allegories. Schleiermacher, in the late eighteenth century, was merely codifying the work of his humanistic predecessors when he stated the following as a universal canon of interpretation: "Everything in a given text which requires fuller interpretation must be explained and determined exclusively from the linguistic domain common to the author and his original public." Under this principle, Christian allegorizing of the ancients is deprived of all legitimacy, and the way is thereby opened to an interpretation that is truly historical and scientific.[66]

Hirsch was not naïve about the epistemology of that shift, however it may once have been understood:

> [Schleiermacher's] norm of legitimacy is not, of course, deduced at all: it is chosen. It is based upon a value-preference, and not on theoretical necessity. His preference for original meaning over anachronistic meaning is ultimately an ethical choice. I would confidently generalize from this example to assert that the normative dimension of interpretation is always in the last analysis an ethical dimension.[67]

The basis of *objectivity* (wrested from its antipositivist reduction) is a motivation that Hirsch traces to Kant, which is that human beings, and as "an extension and expression" of human beings, works of art, "should be conceived as ends in themselves, and not as instruments of other men."[68] As Hirsch notes, "the vocation of interpretation has always carried ethical duties," and Ricoeur remarks that "whereas the definition of objectivity was 'logical', it has now become ethical."[69] A method based upon the motive of objectivity explains what you must do to find the meaning a thing like a painting withholds, the meaning that *belongs* to it. Rules are meant to close down the paths to distortion, and one major highway is those approaches that do not accept that there are conditions to be respected. For example, the path of subjectivity.

---

66 Hirsch, "Dimensions of Hermeneutics" (1976), 195—96.

67 Ibid., 196.

68 In another expression, "To encounter a work of art *as* a work of art is to encounter it for is own sake, and not as a means towards any purpose." Morstein, "Understanding Works of Art" (1975), 351.

69 Steiner too bases hermeneutics in ethics. As he observes, "the resort to certain ethical postulates or categories of respect of our interpretations and valuations of literature and the arts is older than Kierkegaard." Steiner, "A New Meaning of Meaning" (1985), 1262. Indeed, on this count it has been noted that interpretation is capable of offering a kind of moral training: interpretation is "a discipline especially suited for imparting to young people a habit of tolerance and a sense of esteem for foreign opinions." Betti, cited by Sedlmayr, "Interpretatieren von Werke" (1965), 181. Hirsch, "Dimensions of Hermeneutics" (1976), 208—09. Ricoeur, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History" (1952), 31.

7 SUBJECTIVITY: WHAT THE WORK IS NOT

Consider E.H. Gombrich's remark that the study of art "must be intolerant of subjectivity, it must aim at objective results."[70] In light of the foregoing, we shall perhaps adopt the charitable view that what is stated here is that interpretation is objective in principle (oriented toward a meaning that belongs to the work and its circumstance), however little that objective meaning may be fully or sufficiently revealed in practice. This condition is entirely unaffected by the conviction prevailing today that objectivity in our *results* is effectively impossible. Even if it were shown how what a 'traditional' historian like Gombrich might call objective results is not objective (not free of the introduction of subjective values),[71] that would not contradict his point; it would not tell us that there are no conditions of meaning to "aim at." Fair criticism could be that Gombrich is establishing an unobtainable goal, and causing subjective results to be mistaken for objective ones. But that is not to argue that the distinction should be abandoned, and indeed it is not: it would be entirely empty to make the critical point that subjective results are being given a false status were there no externally constituted conditions of meaning to be misrepresented.[72] All that we require is "a clear distinction between the knowing subject and his object."[73]

The distinction that Gombrich makes is not overturned at all by the discovery that perfect objectivity in our work is unrealizable; art history will become critical "to the extent that it becomes cognizant of its own subjectivity."[74] We aim at the reduction and the control, if not the elimination, of subjectivity. In fact objectivity is not only an aspiration; it is "the difference between a good and a bad subjectivity": the method is not directed at an inevitable and constitutive subjectivity, but only at a negative form, a narrow or exploitative

---

70 Gombrich, "Reason and Feeling in the Study of Art" (1979), 205.

71 "Although established art history pretends to be objective, it is in fact allied to a conservative ideology and very involved with the art market." Glueck, "Clashing Views Reshape Art History" (1987), 22.

72 An author observes that "traditional notions of truth, essence" are "concepts that are now widely accepted as value-laden and contingent on subjective frames of reference." Mary Anne Moser, "Inevitable Tension: Art in Electronic Culture" in *Angles of Incidence*, ed. Sara Diamond (Banff 1993), 25. The claim here is not that there is no negative subjectivity (opposed to objectivity), but that a negative subjectivity exists and occurs within claims to objectivity. The point may be there is nowhere subjectivity cannot be found, but if subjectivity were both ineliminable *and* irreducible, the fact that truth is subjectively "contingent" could hardly be a *criticism*. Unless nothing is to be 'true' in any sense, the critical thrust must be that subjective involvements be identified and controlled, so that a judgement of truth is "as objective as it can be," and not less. Stout, "Meaning of a Text" (1982), 8.

The subject/object opposition continues to be the basis of critique. Where the traditional theorist was concerned with the misrepresentation of objective reality (by subjective projections), the postmodern theorist is concerned with the misrepresentation of subjective reality (the failure to acknowledge the subjective dimensions of scholarship).

73 Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 63.

74 Shiff, "Art History and the Nineteenth Century" (1988), 48.

subjectivity.[75] Indeed it has *long* been recognized that a positive form of subjectivity remains among the preconditions of interpretation.

> To arrive at an interpretation which is as objective as possible, [the interpreter] must — and this is not immediately self-evident — bring his subjectivity into play. "It is certainly correct that the task of the interpreter is solely that of seeking the intended meaning of a foreign (past) declaration," and for works of visual art that means, to restore adequate perception. "But such a sense is not something that the signifying form would offer the interpreter ready for use ...; it is on the contrary something that the interpreter must recognize and reconstruct in himself with his sensitivity and intelligence, with his powers of perception and the inventive categories of his experiential knowledge." "For just this reason the endeavour of many historiographers to divest themselves of their own subjectivity is completely nonsensical: without it the interpreter would in fact lose the eyes with which he sees; just as a dove deprived of the air, which, as Kant says, it may tend to consider merely an flight-impeding obstacle, would thereby lose the means by which it is able to move at all."[76]

"How, then, is it possible to build up art history as a respectable scholarly discipline, if its very objects come into being by an irrational and subjective process?"[77] Through the "vulnerability of the work"[78] interpretation poses, in a particularly strong way, the problem of "the sovereign subject."[79]

Legitimate interpretations continue to be those demonstrably oriented towards conditions of the work, conditions of meaning that can be misrepresented; that meaning is not relative to us,[80] is not determined by our varying situations, our taste, our interests, our random knowledge. Panofsky spoke of the neglect of the work in subjectivity,[81] Bätschmann of its appropriative "conversion."

> The question remains whether in ... the project of the recovery of meaning we take too short a route and only apparently solve our problems. We cannot spare ourselves from travelling the long route from the intended sense as one of the moments of the painting to the painting as the object of interpretation. ... We cannot afford a conversion of the works to our immediate needs, either for our sake or for the work's.[82]

---

75 "Thus we have a feeling that there is a good and bad subjectivity and we expect the very exercise of the historian's craft to decide between them." Good subjectivity is "investigative subjectivity," bad is "passional subjectivity." Ricoeur, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History" (1952), 22, 30, 31. The negative conception of subjectivity was articulated in relation to art by Hegel, *Aesthetics*, I, 96ff.

76 Sedlmayr, "Interpretatieren von Werke" (1965), 187, citing Betti.

77 Panofsky, "A Humanistic Discipline" (1940), 15.

78 "The reader ... in whom every book or work finds its completion at its own risks." Ricoeur, "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History" (1952), 22. "The objectivations contained in what is handed down are themselves completely dependent on an interested mind in order to be brought to the understanding." Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (1980), 30.

79 Vattimo, "Hermeneutics and Nihilism" (1986), 454.

80 The "meaning of the work" versus "its significance for us." Nordenstam, *Explanation and Understanding* (1978), 15. "The meaning of a work of art is not, or not necessarily, what it means to me." McFee, "The Historicity of Art" (1980), 307.

81 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 24.

82 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 81.

The first rule of content thus establishes, as a necessary condition of understanding a work of art, that the goal of interpretation is an orientation to the thing through the avoidance of subjective influence. Thus those "arguments that developing an explicit consciousness of one's implicit subjectivity is the first step towards objectivity."[83]

> What might constitute an objective interpretation? Can we talk of 'objective interpretation' in the context of art? It may be that we can talk of 'persuasive interpretation,' interpretation that appears to match with what we know of the artist's intentions or with what might emerge as a common feature in the public perception of the work. Perhaps objectivity in this context is best defined in terms of what it is not. It is not idiosyncratic interpretation that bears no relation to what we actually know of the production of the work or its history in terms of public perception pertaining to it. It may be, however, that an idiosyncratic interpretation draws public attention to a quality in the work that was not apparent before.[84]

> I myself am active as a subject in interpreting, otherwise [the legitimation of interpretations] does not come about at all, and hence I must reveal the rules and motives of *my own* action. I must explain in the strict sense not only the historical conduct of others but also my own. Argumentation in interpretation does not mean to prove, but to set forth the reasons why and how one has arrived at this interpretation.[85]

This first rule brings concreteness to the subjective implications of the motive of objectivity, because it involves an articulation of the precise nature of negative or bad subjectivity, which has several distinct features. The "reconstruction" of the context of meaning

> is complicated by the fact that [the observer's] spontaneous interpretations are founded, consciously or unconsciously, on patterns of behaviour and attitude proper to his own culture, and thus must always be wrong.[86]

> This askesis of the observer with respect to any practical or indeed 'existential' considerations which might affect his view of the phenomenon, this *'epoché'* as Husserl calls it, is fundamental ....[87]

> The first rule by which to make the vivid character of the work of art "sound" is: the ability to remain silent. To be silent and "still." Thinking and wanting must be brought quite to silence. Modern people achieve this required state more easily before the sight of nature than before works of art, ...[88]

> The initiative, therefore, should lie on the side of the work of art. Where the work is not granted this, interpretation lacks its "natural" basis. The interpreter becomes active too early — that is,

---

83 Davey, "Nietzsche's Aesthetics" (1986), 332.

84 Radford, "Meaning and Significance" (1992), 61.

85 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 159.

86 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 80—81.

87 Nodelman is discussing the structural analysis of art on the model of "structural analysis practiced by Lévi-Strauss and by the *Strukturforschung* school." Ibid., 82.

88 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 115.

> before he has allowed himself to be seized by the total mood of the work of art. His premature 'understanding' becomes a misunderstanding and thus an obstacle to genuine understanding.[89]

Bad subjectivity is made up of patterns of reading and attitude peculiar to oneself[90] or one's time alone;[91] the motivations of existential considerations, or involving the preoccupations, emotions, and desires of the individual;[92] judgements based on "preference";[93] "poetic"[94] and uncontrolled intuitive[95] readings.

> The observer, as perforce a non-participant in the convention and value-systems presupposed by the society or work of art in question, is strengthened in his objectivity by the minimization of his tendency to interpret — or indeed even to observe — in terms of affective reactions generated by a naturally biased and partisan position.[96]

Distance from the work, which creates strangeness, may actually help the interpreter to restrain his or her particularity, his or her tendency to see the work within an individual framework. To be a legitimate interpretation (one oriented toward a fair representation of the object), an interpretation must not be formed from this material. Thus it is a *rule of content*. Such content may in some cases be shared by the work itself, but in that case we must find it by orienting ourselves toward the work (anticipating rule two, which says that an interpretation must be formed only of a content known to belong to the work's *own* circumstance).

---

89 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werke" (1965), 185.

90 Objectivity is limited by "the subjectivity of the individual doing the describing." Smith, "Pictures and History" (1987), 98, 99.

91 "The first [interpretative stance], legitimacy, is a matter of external propriety. Much of this is straightforward, a normal avoidance of anachronism. We try not to suppose things in the painter's culture which are not there." Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 120.

92 "As long as it remains in the state of personally felt values there cannot be the slightest guarantee that these feelings correspond to the ones held by the historical person with whom the historian empathizes." Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 66. Part of the "problem of subjectivity" is "the emotional subjectivity" that influences our representations. Smith, "Pictures and History" (1987), 100.

93 The interpreter must not efface subjectivity, all he "has to do is to exclude any personal preference concerning the result." Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 65.

94 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 53. Bryson comments on Roskill's assessment of the approaches of Walter Pater and Kenneth Clark, driven by "the critic's own intuition or powers of empathic projection," a route that is "closed off by art history's professionalization." Also, "given the protocols of modern art history, Roskill asserts, it is no longer possible simply to glide between the work of art and the supposed inner state of the artist, in the manner of Freud in his commentary on Leonardo. Other, and more 'objective' mediating terms are needed, terms that will not depend on the critic's private hunch (or fantasy, or caprice)." Bryson, Review of Roskill (1989), 706.

95 Betti distinguishes "*Auslegung* (objective interpretation)" from "*Deutung* (speculative interpretation," the latter characterized as "remaining dependent on intuition and the internal coherence of an a priori established system." Betti, cited by Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (1980), 30. Subjective interpretation involves free "meaning-inference": "The dialogue that should occur between the historian and the mind objectivated in his sources would fail completely and turn into a mere monologue because one partner would be missing altogether: the partner that should be represented by the text as the unchangeable mind of an Other" Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 70.

96 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 81.

Any content derived from the situation of the interpreter must be verified as fitting or belonging to the work, for otherwise that path leads one away from the external circumstance — the problem of *projection*. The essence of projection is the externalization of self. As we shall see, there is no problem with externalization in itself, which does not need to be stamped out. But it does need to be eliminated from activities that are cognitive, for its presence nullifies them.

> We may be tempted to fall back on a false interpretation, a surrogate which consists of a reading based, not on the work itself, but on what we would like it to be. As happens, generally, in human relationships: the only way to get on with people is to seek in others what already exists within ourselves.[97]

"*Projective* readings" serve the purposes that dream interpretations do: here "there is an active and reflexively self-justifying use of association to extrapolate on the character of the imagery, considered vis-à-vis the overall impression that it makes and those features of it that register most strikingly."[98] The imagery is only a means of understanding oneself; the object of interest is not the material but the self. An interpretation seriously built out of contingent subjectivity is thus either a *mis-* interpretation or no interpretation at all. Hence the first rule of the method: *suspend one's self-involvement in order to approach the conditions of the work.* On whichever part one lays the stress (calling it a rule of objectivity or of subjectivity), this rule calls us off a route leading away from the work.

The point of a method is to direct practice, and my claim about the theory of interpretation is that it is the norm of our practice; all of the rules have been taken into interpretative studies. As I have noted, the rules can be used in two practical ways: in justifying and also in criticizing interpretations. Meyer Schapiro's dismissal of Heidegger's interpretation (in "The Origin of the Work of Art") of a painting of boots by Van Gogh — earth-bound "equipment" whose meaning Heidegger found emblematic of material want, loneliness, conditions of the world-bound — is based upon this first rule.

> Unfortunately for him, the philosopher spins a story. He has drawn from his encounter with the painting of Van Gogh a moving ensemble of associations with peasants and with the earth, which the painting itself does not support, and which are founded rather in the social vision of the philosopher himself, with all its pathos of the primitive and the earthy: Heidegger has effectively "imagined everything and projected it into the painting." His relation to the work constitutes an experience at once too rich and too poor.[99]

---

97 Zeri, *The Art of Reading Paintings* (1987), 31.

98 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 53.

99 Schapiro, "Nature mort comme objet personnel" (1968), 7 [a retranslation to English from French; I was unable to find the English original].

The interpretation of art does not involve the expression of a philosophy. In the following example you can see the rule used again to eliminate an interpretation of several works by Botticelli. The criticism is familiar, that this is an interpretation whose content does not come from the situation of the work but exclusively from that of the interpreter; the historian is Michael Levey, writing in 1960, and the interpretation he is dismissing is from Walter Pater, from 1870.[100] Pater's understanding of Botticelli, Levey writes, fits "perfectly" into the pattern of his own conception of man's dilemma — "a complete concept itself the theme of all Pater's work: the duality of Christianity and Paganism." Which is to say that in the faces of Botticelli's Madonnas and Venuses Pater sees women "with the dilemmas of a don in North Oxford in 1870, one who can see no solution but to be uncommitted [to Christianity]. Taking now the face of Venus, Pater brushed it with the preoccupations of so many creative people of his period."[101] In short, Pater's interpretation, flouting the first rule of a method intended to lead us toward the work and not the interpreter, was again a projection of his own concerns. In a straight appeal to the first rule of the theory, Levey calls Pater's approach "subjectivism," and moves on to more serious efforts: that way you don't understand a work, you "paint" a meaning onto it.[102]

In a note Levey adds the following interesting remark, that "Pater's own highly personal interpretation is not of course invalidated by his subjectivism." In calling Pater's interpretation valid, is Levey accepting or rejecting the rules of content? This is "validity" in another sense altogether. Theorists are not interested in curtailing people's freedom — as Mannings has asked, "are there wrong reasons for responding to a picture?"[103] But it remains to be asked what an interpretation "not invalidated" (in this sense) actually does, and we are returned to the cognitive and non-cognitive senses of "understanding." The second type, even if we call it understanding, even if there is no reason to dismiss it (since its aim is simply different), and even if we cannot maintain it bears "no reference at all to the work, or is in no way conditioned by it" (since it is "parasitic upon and derivative from cognitive understanding")[104] — the second way is not even *oriented toward* understanding the work of art. However you frame it, "'meaning to the individual' says very little about the work itself."[105] Even if it is eternally right to claim that the work and our interests in

---

100 Michael Levey, "Botticelli and Nineteenth-century England," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XXIII:3—4 (1960), 291—306. Pater's article first appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* and was republished in 1873 in his *The Renaissance*.

101 Levey, "Botticelli" (1960), 302—03.

102 Ibid., 302 n. 62.

103 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 149.

104 Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 138.

105 Radford, "Meaning and Significance" (1992), 55.

connection with it cannot be wholly separated, we see the *orientation* in each case as fundamentally different. For instance, an interpreter's "personal involvement" with a Christian message "refers his experience back to his *life*," something that is not sufficiently "disinterested" to be counted as knowledge; on the other hand, an interpreter who proceeds by an "analysis of formal and iconographical elements" at least "thinks in terms of *art*."[106] 'Subjectivism' does not hold out the prospect of understanding; there are "limitations imposed on knowledge by subjectivity."[107]

Levey was making a point about tolerance; granting subjectivism "validity," in Levey's sense, is to give Pater's interpretation a place among interpretations (to see it as one kind, among kinds of interpretation) while at the same time maintaining a strict division between these kinds, which need to be distinguished on a cognitive basis. It is the basic critical opposition between subject and object. Subjectivity is permissible, but it is "highly personal," private.

> As we must have theoreticians as well as technicians, so we must have amateurs as well as professionals. The amateur, in the traditional sense of the word, has two preëminent qualifications for our job. First, as implied in the word itself, that he loves art. Second, that he is a non-professional, that his primary attachment is not to his career or to his colleagues, but, and here let me interpolate, to his own interests, and to those of his contemporaries at large.[108]

But permissible as that may be, the theory articulates that attachment to our "own interests" does not produce a representation of the thing it purports to explain; that is not even its intent. Pater's interpretation is valid as a sort of interpretation, but it has no cognitive value, and it is cognitive value that understanding is concerned with. In this light, Pater's interpretation clearly has nothing to do with the work of Botticelli, its ostensible object, and thus it is not true understanding at all: as a means of *understanding*, it *is* invalidated. A further instance — a line of praise from the jacket of the most recent serious monograph on Botticelli — makes reference to Pater and many others who made Pater's mistake, which is common. "Scrupulous attention has been paid to detailed, accurate descriptions of all the major works, sweeping aside a long legacy of inaccurate and subjective misinterpretation."[109]

While claims to objectivity have diminished, subjectivity remains a diversion from the object. It is worth noting in these two examples how the rule of subjectivity has an

---

106 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 149—50. The author's further attempt to claim these are not wholly distinguishable seems rather perfunctory, but his point is not unarguable.

107 Smith, "Pictures and History" (1987), 100. It is evident that we are not talking any longer of subjectivity at the Kantian level.

108 Ackerman, "American Scholarship" (1958), 362.

109 The book is by Ronald Lightbown: *Sandro Botticelli* (London 1978).

essentially negative form. To that extent the critique is insufficient; it indicates what path not to take but leaves us without further direction. The rule of subjectivity indicates where the material of an interpretation is *not* to be found. But the rule constraining the material of legitimate interpretations needn't be put negatively; subjectivity can be controlled also by certain positive guidelines. There is the orientation to the work; the overcoming of subjectivity will be made "by appeal to the work in question."[110] Holly comments on Schleiermacher's position:

> Disinterested objectivity just will not do; the individual must be provoked into a primal encounter with the work. In rediscovering the object on its own terms, we must enter into a dialogue with it, human being speaking to human being, across space, across time: a confrontation of like with like. *Before we may do so* effectively, however, higher understanding must always situate the object or event in a larger fabric of meaning.[111]

But to what about the object do we turn? What is needed is a substantial indication of where the material of a legitimate interpretation can be found.

8 OBJECTIVITY: THE WORK

If the rule of subjectivity tells how not to interpret — more precisely, specifies where the content of a correct or legitimate interpretation is not to come from — the rule of objectivity specifies where this material *is* to come from. It is based upon the reality, the "interior structure," the properties or nature of the object in question. "Problems of the theory of art" must be addressed "to the question of what the work as itself brings forth."[112]

> Kaschnitz objects to the prevailing terminology and methods ... of Wölfflin, and to 'style-criticism' in general, that these are concerned solely with the effect of the work of art upon the beholder, with the 'impression', rather than with the interior structure of the work itself.[113]

---

110 Beardsley, "Limits of Interpretation" (1966), 176.

111 Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 39 [emphasis added].

112 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 163.

113 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 83.

We must turn, as modern theory expressed it, to "the work itself," and as postmodern writers advocate, to the work within established "systems of representation."[114] But what is the work, and what are the relevant structures?

The theory-ladenness of description has long been noted in art history. "Every theory of interpretation presupposes *implicite* a theory of the essence of the work of art."[115] It may not be necessary to put this quite so strongly, in terms of "essence"; the problem of subjectivity concerns the distance, the *gap*, that necessarily exists between subject and object — a gap that is most visible when we recognize the difference between a participant's and an observer's understanding of other cultures.

> The participant understands and knows his culture with an immediacy and spontaneity the observer does not share. He can act within the culture's standards and norms without rational self-consciousness, often indeed without having formulated standards as standards. He does not, for example, have to list to himself five requirements of altarpiece paintings: he has internalized an expectation about these over a period of experience of altarpieces. He moves with ease and delicacy and creative flexibility within the rules of his culture. His culture, for him, is like the language he has learned, informally, since infancy: indeed his language is one large articulating part of his culture. The observer does not have this kind of knowledge of the culture.[116]

The existence of this gap must be acknowledged and dealt with, and the rule of objectivity clarifies what this involves. In fact, as Erwin Panofsky explained, the very problem addressed by the first rule delivers this answer *of itself*. It is an unavoidable fact, Panofsky says, that interpretation depends upon "cultural equipment."

> There is no such thing as an entirely "naive" beholder. The "naive" beholder of the Middle Ages had a good deal to learn, and something to forget, before he could appreciate classical statuary and architecture, and the "naive" beholder of the post-Renaissance period had a good deal to forget, and something to learn, before he could appreciate medieval, to say nothing of primitive, art. Thus the "naive" beholder not only enjoys but also, unconsciously, appraises and interprets the work of art; and no one can blame him if he does this without caring whether his appraisal and interpretation are right or wrong, and without realizing that his own cultural equipment, such as it is, actually contributes to the object of his experience.

Precisely as an historical entity the work possesses not only its own range of meaning but also its own native contexts, and hardly ever does this happen to include our own. But "there is a role for a sort of empathy to help cope with the fact that mind now is not what mind was in, say, the fifteenth century."[117] Panofsky goes on to explain what redress this suggests.

---

114 "In order to avoid [an] apparent regress into subjectivity, the postmodernist's move is to locate all signs and their references to an extant system of representation that is presently operative in the culture." Klepac, "Deconstruction in Contemporary Art" (1984), 257.

115 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 100.

116 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 109.

117 Panofsky, "Humanistic Discipline" (1955), 14.

> The "naive" beholder differs from the art historian in that the latter is conscious of the situation. He knows that his cultural equipment, such as it is, would not be in harmony with that of people in another land and of a different period. He tries, therefore, to make adjustments by learning as much as he possibly can of the circumstances under which the objects of his studies were created. ... He will do his best to familiarize himself with the social, religious, and philosophical attitudes of other periods and countries, in order to correct his own subjective feeling for content.[118]

The second rule of the theory of interpretation is to transpose yourself into the situation of the work: to give up your own perspective for that of the past, the work's circumstance or society, and to interpret from within an established semantic context.

It has not always been as clear as it is today (when it is constantly repeated and unmistakable) that meaning exists only in a context. A political observation is made concerning this fact, which is that the advocates of world-views have either naïvely or knowingly exploited that ignorance about the conditions of meaning, acting as if signs simply *mean* — that is, 'have' their meanings, in an absolute sort of way. Paintings were understood to carry truth, hold a metaphysical meaning, and against modern thinkers (such as Heidegger) who have attempted to restore this view, theorists have insisted that the "concept of the metaphysical power of art remains completely theoretical."[119] Because meaning exists only within a context, paintings hold their meanings only in a relative way, and the fact that it is only 'for such-and-such' that something means undermines the significance of a large category of meaning altogether. But at the same time it establishes the framework in which meaning does exist.[120] The second rule is served by the notion of *semantic contexts*, cognitive rather than projective contexts: settings close to the work's creation, or linked to its ideological purposes or historical reception, in terms of which meanings were configured that are closer to the work itself than our unrestrained interest-driven interpretations and the context of our self-concerned subjectivity. The material of an interpretation is to be drawn from these frameworks of reading in terms of which the work derives its meaning.

There are different general ways in which to particularize, in concrete terms, what the semantic context of a work might come to. Of the six historically prevailing interpretative approaches to art catalogued by Abell in 1957, only three retain any cognitive

---

118 Ibid., 16—17.

119 Schapiro, "Nature mort comme objet personnel" (1968), 9.

120 "The very idea that some particular object or image in the world has an intrinsic nature, meaning, or value no longer seems to be credible or valid. ... Human knowledge and the language used to communicate it are, in the last analysis, artificial constructs, i.e., both are human centred. ... For this reason, there seems to be a fundamentally anthropological orientation to postmodernism. ... The question is not whether some particular statement is true, but why it is thought to be true by a particular culture at a particular time and what criteria confirmed this truth." Klepac, "Deconstruction in Contemporary Art" (1984), 262.

validity;[121] in the decades since, those categories have been refashioned to accept new questions that correct the values behind some of the old. Interpretations are now developed in terms of any or all of the following: the context of an *historical visual code* (of which the work is a concrete expression), the context of *the artist's specific communicative actions* (the purposive formation of the work), or the *historical world to which the work belongs* (the context from which it was created and/or to which it was delivered, beyond the control of the artist).[122] For a work of art is not merely the isolated thing we see on a museum wall; every individual work is rooted in a "whole matrix of assumptions, values, and usages."[123] *The context is effectively part of the identity of the work of art;* the context is a constitutive extension of the work itself.[124]

These are the three general sources from which the material of legitimate (cognitively relevant) interpretations can be assembled.[125] The rule of objectivity or context is clearly established: "that the resituation of works of art in its widest sense must lead the way to interpretation is so self-evident that here only a few indications are required."[126] A more recent formulation follows (from the preface to a history of art), and touches upon the several definitions of context outlined above:

> There is still a further difficulty to our appreciation of works from times gone by; art presents us first of all with a visual stimulus, and we see it all, whatever its original context, through the lens of our cumulative experiences .... If we are to avoid the pitfalls of judging all art by our own experience and our own subjective views, we have to learn the background against which a work was created; what the historical and social conditions were under which the artist lived and worked,

---

121 Defunct are "Aesthetic Materialism" (exemplified by the nineteenth-century Semper), which interprets art — that is, understands or explains it — as determined by implications of its material; "Aesthetic teleology" (Riegl), which interprets it as the outcome of an immanent "will to art"; and "Pure Visibility" (Wölfflin, Fry), which interprets art in terms of formal significance. Abell, "Toward a Unified Field" (1957), 725—26. The former two are non-cognitive because fundamentally they are expressions of their interpreters' commitment to a story of universal history. The latter is non-cognitive — illegitimate, rather than merely narrow — because it misses the lesson of objectivity: it relies totally upon the imposition of the interpreter's uncontrolled habits of formal reading. (As Panofsky noted, of the three "most widespread views of the concepts" that are "used in the modern academic study of art," the most quickly and easily dispatched is the understanding of interpretation based on "aesthetic experience," based on "the impressionistic experience of a modern beholder." Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 20, 24.

122 To give two instances of newer approaches, Marxist interpretation fits chiefly into the third of these, whose conception of "world" encompasses material and ideological dimensions of meaning. Feminist interpretation fits into them all, for a feminist interpretation — say of Artemisia Gentileschi — can concentrate on the gender codes she worked with, the rebellious communicative purpose of her pictures, or the world in which those works were launched and perceived. Among Abell's traditional divisions, "Iconography" (exemplified by Panofsky, Mâle, Wind) falls under the first of these, "Historical Determinism" (though not as a form of determinism or why-explanation) under the third, and "Biographical Criticism" under the second or third, according to whether biographical material is relevant to intended or unintended meanings. Abell, "Toward a Unified Field" (1957), 725.

123 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 80.

124 Lyas, "Intentional Fallacy Revisited" (1983), 294.

125 Parts II to IV of the present study are devoted successively to these three distinct conceptions of interpretation.

126 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 100.

> who his patrons were and what their information was on taste and style, and what philosophical views affected the artist's (and everyone else's) way of seeing the world.[127]

According to the theory, one brings to one's encounter with sculptures, paintings — indeed, cultural creations of all kinds — such reflections as these.

> You will also have realized that it would be futile in this case to try to understand the painting without an intimate knowledge of the religious attitude of the man who had it painted above his tomb.[128]

> 'Legitimacy' and 'generic appropriateness' urge us to check that what we claim is so is conceivable in the culture and does not ignore its sense of kind. ... What we say ... should be actively consistent ... [with the work as a whole] standing in a legitimate relation to the external facts.[129]

> An explanation of a work ... must be compatible with the historical circumstances of origin in so far as these can be ascertained from documents or by other objective methods.[130]

The first rule warns against subjectivity, which means giving yourself up to objective conditions. The second rule articulates what this means, what objective conditions are; it clarifies that understanding is *historical,* that the meaning of a work is a human dimension relative to historical conditions. Together the rules of content decide the legitimacy of interpretations: that is, they are employed in the formation of valid interpretations, but as we have seen they are also used to criticize them.

Some examples. Here is one in which an interpretation of a Renaissance altarpiece by Piero della Francesca is faulted for being developed from content considerably prior to its creation, and thus remote from the work's semantic context (in sense three, context as the historical world of the work):

> The criterion of legitimacy would raise questions precisely about arguments from late antique and medieval, rather than fifteenth-century, texts and artefacts; and indeed about whether such layered and multiple intention was compatible with either the theory or the practice of the fifteenth-century altarpiece image.[131]

Consider the rule of objectivity applied now to an interpretation presented in 1907 by an historian called Strecter of another Renaissance picture: one of Botticelli's most famous

---

127 Sara Cornell, *Art: A History of Changing Style* (Englewood Cliffs 1983), 8—9.

128 Saxl, "Why Art History?" (1948), 355.

129 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 119.

130 Hauser, *Philosophy of Art History* (1958), 243, in support of Karl Mannheim, *Beiträge zur Theorie der Weltanschauungsinterpretation* (1923), 27.

131 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 122.

works, known since Vasari as *Primavera* or *Spring* (figure 3). Streeter writes, "I have already expressed my conviction that Botticelli's purpose in *Spring* was purely decorative. The whole poetical significance of the picture, I believe, lies in its name .... The glories of the springtime, this is Botticelli's subject." Which means that Streeter dismisses any deeper reading: "the picture is a pure fantasy, of which the elements are developed in relation only to their artistic quality."[132] Right away, of course, we see the dogmatic traces of turn-of-the-century formalism; this is an interpretation that belongs to the 'art-for-art's-sake' movement that set the taste of Streeter's time. 'Formalism' is a good example of what Panofsky called "subjective cultural equipment," and the conclusion appears plain: had Streeter bothered to follow rule two, the rule of orientation to the work, the rule limiting him to the human context of the work itself, he would have encountered a Renaissance very different from Victorian England; it might have led him to an interpretation that was of interest outside essays like this one. "Formalist aesthetics" was "an attempt to justify theoretically a certain aesthetic ideal" that was itself based on "mistaken interpretations of the intentions of the nonobjective arts."[133] As Panofsky notes, this sort of interpretation does not have to do with an "historical object," "the work of art," or "the artist," but with contemporary prejudices, with "the psyche of a modern beholder" and his "inclinations of personal taste."[134] As Panofsky writes, "He who teaches innocent people to understand art without bothering about classical languages, boresome historical methods, and dusty old documents, deprives naiveté of its charm without correcting its errors."[135] So the theory warns against subjectivity, which means orienting oneself to external conditions; a genuinely cognitive understanding establishes historical limitations.

9 *THE RULES OF FORM*

Thus far the standard hermeneutic method is 'material' in nature — that is, a method discriminating legitimate from illegitimate interpretations on the basis of matters that have to do with the origins of the specific *content* of those interpretations. There is also a

---

132 Streeter, *Botticelli* (1907), 67—68.
133 Hofstadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 100.
134 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 24.
135 Panofsky, "A Humanistic Discipline" (1940), 19.

component that deals with *form;* a hermeneutic theory without a formal side is incomplete. A positivist image of interpretation suggests that an historically minded interpreter proceeds (respecting rules one and two) by collecting all the documents pertaining to the work whose significance he or she wishes to interpret, and that once this is done the mass of their collected evidence (assuming it is adequate and properly assembled) will point by itself to the meaning of the thing under examination. It will point, that is, in one direction only. It suggests also that that interpretation stands upon this material evidence alone, and, by corollary, also *falls* by evidence alone. But it is hard to find that merely common-sensical view of interpretation advocated in any of the literature.

One of the main reasons it is recognized fantasy is that it is rather plain that historical evidence does not always point in clear and distinctly compatible directions: a faultlessly collected mass of evidence might well suggest more than one direction — indeed, historical contexts are capable of offering evidence for contrary interpretations. Kemp, for instance, has noted how open Christian thought is to substantially opposed views of Botticelli (the resort to that context "proved nothing other than the variety and subtlety of Christian philosophy in demonstrating, on the one hand, the incompatibility and, on the other hand, the compatibility of rational science and received revelation, with all shades of opinion between").[136]

Surely this apparent conflict is nothing but an indication that, whatever the quality of evidence, more is needed, and the clearest indication possible that the interpretations suggested are as yet only *hypotheses,* still to be tested by further investigation. One shall have to test, for instance, which set of the various circumstantial *implications* of interpretations A and B is borne out in the case, add that to the mass of evidence, and see where one's material points then. But the material for that test is not always there, and the rules of interpretation are rules for present practice. The problem is how to assess and by what standard to develop interpretations here and now, when our material may well be and probably is inadequate. The theory of interpretation is directed not at a perfect representation of the work, in its meaning but rather at a definition of what, in our own practice, constitutes our best chance of perceiving it even from a narrow and limited point of view. Interpretation is not an ideal project: we would like a hermeneutic method that allows us (if rationally permissible) to discriminate better and worse interpretations at the present state of our knowledge, given that we cannot now and usually never will know everything we might. It will be necessary to suspend interpretation (until such time as

136 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 212.

evidence in the web of material by which we read the past is more decisive) only if there is no other way to discriminate among interpretations.

If the material considerations of method close the distance between the context of the interpreter and the context of the work (picture that as the distance between two cities), we still need to reach that precise point, among historically possible interpretations, that marks a legitimate grasp of the meaning of this work (we need to reach a specific address). We have a way to do this. We *do* in fact dismiss interpretations *despite* the soundness of their evidence; not every historically based interpretation is regarded correct. How, among all the interpretations we might make from within the context of the past, do we recognize the interpretation we are looking for, the one that presents the most plausible of plausible readings?[137] The answer lies at a further level of theory, and the rules that articulate it are the *rules of form*. Because to know the meaning of a meaningful thing is knowledge, the conditions of knowledge apply likewise to interpretation, and what the theory has shown is that what is objective (with an identity of its own) has a level of universality. Hauser notes,

> Whenever we ascribe to an intellectual structure objective meaning ..., whenever we expect or demand that others look at it the same way as we do, we are dealing with something that may indeed be derived from empirical conditions, but can never be reduced entirely to them. Whenever we discover or invent this structure or pattern, we think of it as having a meaning that must for others have the same reference and the same validity that we ourselves ascribe to it. This meaning, in its objectivity and with its reproducible pattern, is *toto genere* different from any subjective and ephemeral contents of consciousness, fluctuating emotions and moods that come and go ....[138]

There is a way of identifying a legitimate interpretation from the outside, as it were. Representations are accessible to all; that is why studies of art are published rather than not: they present statements that have an implicit validity for others, that can be held up to a certain measurement or test. Just as "a scientific theory once formulated and accepted is in principle common property, not varying from man to man,"[139]

> something more is involved in this striving for verification: the hope of *agreement*. Initially, the same work of art is reflected differently in different observers — even if each one maintains "silence." In the "correct" and probably correct interpretation the observers, coming from different sides and never completely casting off the difference of their initial impression, approach a new impression in which they all come to agreement. It is an agreement that the work, grasped in its own spirit, effects in them.[140]

---

137 "Economical and cogent explanations" are "preferable in the absence of anything to verify them." Summers, "Painting in Political Context" (1986).

138 Hauser, *Philosophy of Art History* (1958), 170—71.

139 Osborne, "Interpretation in Science and in Art" (1965), 12.

140 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werke" (1965), 185.

> This agreement is the great meaning of the new demand for an "objective" way of looking at art, deeply united with other tendencies of our time.[141]

A legitimate interpretation will be an interpretation upon which we can agree in certain limited respects: one *whose merits or virtues* are clear. This introduces the formal features of interpretations. Agreement does not depend simply upon content, upon how an interpretation fits the purported facts, upon alignment in beliefs linked to content. Indeed, that is hard ground on which to agree, because subjectivity is far too easily drawn into judgements based on the work's 'substantive' conditions. Besides accuracy, "we want our interpretations to have other virtues such as explanatory scope, power, and simplicity as well."[142] Agreement hinges substantially upon the recognition of certain *external features* by which valid interpretations are distinguished—*features so unambiguous that their recognition cannot be obstructed by subjective mind.*

By formal features I mean external properties, general features that every interpretation might possess no matter what its content, for the right interpretation among historically developed ones will necessarily have particular surface qualities. Of course, we cannot elaborate a method with rules that contradict the two rules we already have, and it is a condition of any formal rule that it not reintroduce the subjectivity that the rules of content were established to reduce. That would be a possibility if the formal features to be discerned could *not* be seen by anyone given a basic exposure to the practice of interpreting. The rules of form can be operated by everyone alike; they are a means of interpretation that does not depend on how interpreters think. Applied to any set of hypothetical interpretations, these criteria on their own single out the most valid.

Perhaps the easiest way to introduce the formal side of the theory is to make a comparison, in fact, with the theory of science. It is fascinating to note how remarkably closely the formal virtues compare to what are called the 'virtues' of good theories in science, that familiar set of equally formal qualities that distinguishes a good scientific theory: empirical adequacy, simplicity, coherence, power, and scope. The surprising thing is that the 'hermeneutic virtues' are not merely analogous, they are the same. In addition to the two rules of content, there are five rules of form. Here is the full list of rules that make up the modern theory of interpretation:

---

141 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 128.

142 Stout, "Relativity of Interpretation" (1986), 116.

RULES OF CONTENT

1. subjectivity	the content of an interpretation must not be formed out of bad subjectivity, out of what has *nothing to do with the work*
2. objectivity	the content of an interpretation must be formed out of *the work's own identity*, out of what has to do with the work itself

RULES OF FORM

3. adequacy	an interpretation must be adequate to the work; it has to *fit* the work that it interprets
4. simplicity	it can't be overcomplex; it must be *simple*
5. coherence	it cannot contradict itself; it must form a *coherent* whole
6. explanatory power	it must *remove puzzlement* about the work, by finding actual *meaning*
7. scope	it needn't fit or bring clarity to *other* works, other circumstances, but if it does, it gains added plausibility

The criteria of a good scientific theory have been observed to be their *adequate* treatment of the phenomena ("experienced fact and observation are the ultimate criterion of all theory," which must thus be "falsifiable by fact"), their "simplicity and elegance," their "lucidity for the understanding," their "predictive power or *fertility* in leading to new avenues of

knowledge," and finally their comprehensiveness or scope. [143] In the hermeneutics of art the same standards apply. It is interesting to notice how often the argumentative structure of typical essays in interpretation is outlined by these rules; interpretative articles commonly set out systematically to satisfy them.[144] Occasionally, one also sees the rules stated in abstract explanations of interpretation itself. Where the formal rules are most overt, however, is not in the development of interpretations but in their criticism. In critical essays, formal features of interpretations are constantly called upon to discriminate among various contending candidates, or to establish the credentials of the critique; as we shall see, the rules are often made explicit.

10 ADEQUACY

> 'Legitimacy' and 'generic appropriateness' urge us to check that what we claim [in our interpretation] is so is conceivable in the culture and does not ignore its sense of kind. But it also points more insistently to the need for *internal adequacy* in explanation. ... What we say [should] be consistent with the painting in every part.[145]
>
> This "correct" conception can also be designated as the one that is "innate" in the work of art, that fits it (is adequate to it).[146]

By the rule of *adequacy*, an interpretation must fit the work that it interprets: interpretations are "answerable to the perceptible features of that work of art."[147] Interpretation concerns "the properties of a finitely bound object."[148] "A genuine interpretation, drawn purely from the work of art ... has always to withstand the test of holding up in the face of the concrete work of art."[149] It must do that in two distinct senses: in both *quantity* (it must fit all that is

---

143 Osborne, "Interpretation in Science and in Art" (1986), 7.

144 Interpretative essays are often built out of the following components: with regard to rules 1 and 2, legitimation of the objectivity of the interpretation's content (documentation, appeals to historical knowledge, and the discussion of conventions and precedents). With regard to rule 3, the rule of adequacy, a seriatim interpretation — that is, an interpretation working through all the elements of the picture. With regard to rule 5, the rule of coherence, some discussion of connectives — that is, a justified linking of the meaning of the interpreted segments. And with regard to rule 4, the rule of adequacy, a concise summation of the overall interpretation, in which both the simplicity and the coherence of the interpretation can be put on display.

145 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 119 [italics added].

146 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 111.

147 McFee, "The Historicity of Art" (1980), 308.

148 Margolis, "Deconstruction and Its Victims" (1985), 203.

149 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 126. "An interpretation can be discredited only if it is ruled out by the author's text." Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 124.

there) and *quality* (it must fit what is there exactly as it is there). It is a necessary condition, rooted in basic cognitivity. An interpretation that ignores the work does not give us its meaning.

With regard to the quantitative aspect, an interpretation is good only to the extent that it interprets everything that the work offers to be interpreted: *it must deal with all the data of the work*. As expressed by the social historian Karl Mannheim in 1923, "an explanation of a work must ... fit every perceptible feature of the work in the interpretation."[150]

> The observer must at first confine himself to pure description, confident, as in Husserlian phenomenology, that the entire being of the phenomenon is inherent and given in its appearance, if the appearance be permitted to present itself fully and without distortion.[151]
>
> According to these criteria, the correct interpretation will be considered the one that makes the particular features of the work of art understandable, features the others simply take for granted.[152]

Here, as an instance, is a formal critique of an interpretation, based upon this rule of adequacy. It comes from an old monograph on Botticelli; the work in question is again the *Primavera*, and the same A. Streeter whose own interpretation we deemed deficient by the rules of content makes a criticism by appeal to the rule of adequacy, a criticism that stands today because it a faultless application of the method. Streeter in 1907 comments upon an interpretation by Ernst Steinmann from ten years before. Steinmann had argued that the *Primavera* was painted in illustration of a contemporary Florentine poem that celebrated the meeting of Giuliano de' Medici and his "inamorata" Simonetta Vespucci; Streeter responds with a narration of the event described in the poem, and concludes by a simple comparison with the painting:

> The connection between the poem and the picture, which have nothing in common except the forest glade and the flower-embroidered robe (this, by the way, not worn by the chief figure), is so slight that one wonders it can ever have been advanced as a serious explanation .... The passage in question leaves the right-hand group in the picture quite unaccounted for, and makes no mention that Giuliano happened at that moment to be masquerading as Mercury.[153]

---

150 Hauser, *Philosophy of Art History* (1958), 243, in support of Karl Mannheim, *Beiträge zur Theorie der Weltanschauungsinterpretation* (1923), 27.

151 Nodelman quotes Lévi-Strauss, "On the observational level ... all the facts should be carefully observed and described, without allowing any theoretical preconceptions to decide whether some are more important than others." Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 82.

152 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 112.

153 Streeter, *Botticelli* (1907), 65. Shearman comments on Steinmann's *Sixtinische Kapelle* (1901) in reference to contemporary hermeneutics: "it is almost certain that Steinmann would not now be counted as interpreting, not doing *real* interpretation, and to the extent that this is true it shows how narrowed and deracinated our definition of the hermeneutic enterprise has become." Shearman, *Art and the Spectator* (1988), 4.

The rule states that an interpretation has to offer an explanation of what is there in the picture — as it says, everything there, and everything there *as* it appears (the qualitative aspect). Which means in this case that you must interpret not only the young man fitted out with Mercurial winged boots and wand, but a young man turned from the scene and preoccupied with something above him. Qualitative adequacy in fact marks a connection with the rules of content, for the thing to be interpreted is not merely the whole work just as it appears, it is *the whole work as it appears when it appears as it truly is:* for instance, as it appeared at the time of origin.

> Acts of understanding have their object in the meaning of the picture, their goal in the recovery of the meaning. The localization of the meaning within, in what is hidden beneath the surface, in what is real, expresses in many metaphors the loss of meaning; that is confirmed by the conception of understanding as the re-production of meaning — indeed, usually one says, imprecisely, it is supposed to be a re-producing of works of art.[154]

The *Primavera* affords a good illustration of this point. Interpreting the painting just as it appears, you would need, it seems, to interpret the obvious pregnancy of the woman at its centre, and some historians have done just that (for instance, Francastel in 1952).[155] But by the rule of adequacy as affected by the rule of objective content, you must see the things the interpretation must deal with for what they are; 'data' is an unreliable notion. Adequate recognition may require special knowledge: "certain features which we *can* see in a work are such that we can only see them there if we have a knowledge of the context of the work;" as in the case of identifying a chess piece, "I need a knowledge that mere scrutiny of its surface features cannot give me."[156] Franscastel's interpretation was wrong because, while it accommodated appearance, it did not do this; by already misreading the work, he encountered 'data' to be counted in his interpretation that were in fact not there at all. Is this woman pregnant? As subsequent writers have been compelled to remark, "the bulge in Venus's belly — mistakenly taken for an indication of pregnancy by some writers — ... is a conventional feature in the full-length portrayal of women in Flemish art of the fifteenth century" — and likewise, the point is, in the art of Florence.[157] At the time this picture was painted the gravid figure belonged to a feminine ideal, pregnancy being so valued a moment of a woman's life that it was beautiful.[158]

---

154 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 78.

155 Francastel, "Fête mythologique au quattrocento" (1952), 396 n. 1.

156 Lyas, "Intentional Fallacy Revisited" (1983), 295.

157 Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli* (1976), 120; see also Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences* (1960), 195 n. 4.

158 In fact you can see this quite plainly in the *Primavera* itself, for the likewise pregnant-looking figure at the far right is Chloris at the moment she is caught by her first lover. The Renaissance "idealisation of pregnancy" is noted by J.C. Flugel in *The Psychology of Clothes* (1966), 148—49, 160.

A proper definition of adequacy raises the problem of 'givenness' or 'obviousness' in cultural settings. As Bätschmann notes, "Max Imdahl has ... differentiated between *recognizing* seeing, which relates painting to data known outside the picture, and *seeing* seeing (*sehenden Sehen*), which is directed to whatever sense-data painting by itself brings forth."[159] The object of interpretation "is a datum of some sort, but a datum *as understood.*"[160] What this actually indicates is that the rule of adequacy operates secondarily to rules of content — rather, not so much secondarily as beside it. Argan speaks of the special relation between seeing (as "re-creative synthesis") and research:

> It is not true that the art historian first constitutes his object by means of re-creative synthesis and then begins his archaeological investigation — as though first buying a ticket and then boarding a train. In reality the two processes do not succeed each other, they interpenetrate; not only does the re-creative synthesis [the 'recognizing seeing'] serve as a basis for the archaeological investigation, the archaeological investigation in turn serves as a basis for the re-creative process; both mutually qualify and rectify one another.[161]

This provides the answer to a basic interpretative question inseparable from adequacy. To follow the rule of "adequacy," interpreting everything in a work, requires that one solve the problem of "sufficiency" or *semanticity:* How much of what is in a work has a meaning to be interpreted?

> With pictorial representations we cannot determine whether a scene has or does not have an iconographically fixed content.[162]

> On the question of symbols, the most persistent problem is knowing where to draw the limit. The whole subject is constantly liable to over-interpretation.[163]

This again is more than a merely quantitative question. On one level one asks Which of a work's motifs *has* specific meaning? But one also asks, Does any? Without some objective indication "it is impossible to know how far to go" in interpreting; "there will be a problem

---

159 Max Imdahl, "Zum Verhältnis zwischen Bildautonomie und Gegenstandssehen" (1974) in *Bildautonomie und Wirklichkeit. Zur theoretischen Begründung der modernen malerei* (Mittenwald 1981), 9—50; Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 27.

160 What is evident in the work "is, indeed, 'given', but it also involves interpretation: that which actually refers in the meaning-situation is the *interpreted-given,* and not the *given* alone." Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 46—47. "What is obvious to a particular person or to a few people may not be obvious in general. One might, for some purposes, want to distinguish the obvious in general and the obvious to me from the obvious to the expert or initiate or insider." Barnes, "Remarks about the Obvious" (1983), 29. "Only the given qua interpreted has meaning. Within the total artistic organism any detail at all can be interpreted in the present completely differently from what it was in the past and so have a completely erroneous formal effect upon us." Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 32.

161 Panofsky, "A Humanistic Discipline" (1940), 16. As Sedlmayr too remarks: "my vision had been transformed by knowledge; by 'seeing through knowledge' I had come to understand something essential about the work. To be sure this was only *one* step among many that were to follow, leading to a better understanding, to a 'formed seeing.'" Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werke" (1965), 195.

162 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 65.

163 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 153.

in knowing where to stop, and, indeed, in knowing whether we should have started [to attribute meaning] at all."[164] What that second question really asks is What kind of meaning is involved here? An image that is merely a representational depiction of a thing is not by that token meaningless, because it is not symbolic.[165] Semanticity is the issue of how much in a work has meaning, which involves deciding what kind of meaning it has. The answer in a general sense is evidently, everything that the appropriate knowledge (through the rule of objectivity) reveals to be meaningful, and as far as it is revealed to be meaningful.

So it is clear also that interpretation has levels, which one can see by comparison with the rule of adequacy in the theory of science. On the one hand, one can certainly talk of '*empirical* adequacy', which stresses the fit at the level of 'seeing-seeing', between one's interpretation and what is indisputably and demonstrably there in the picture. In Botticelli's picture there are undeniably wing-shaped configurations of paint on the boots of the left-hand figure; we know that merely by looking, and pointing them out is all the argument there is that the reading 'winged boots' fits the image. But that this figure with winged boots is Mercury (that the interpretation 'Mercury' also fits the image) cannot be settled empirically, or not empirically alone. Qualitatively, there is more in that figure than a man in winged boots, since here the winged boots happen to indicate a god. Discerning those levels, interpreting 'what is there', involves a good deal more than fitting an interpretation to things one can point at; to interpret fully demands more than merely 'empirical' adequacy. "Some of the real properties of a thing require the possession of contextual knowledge for their detection."[166] Adequacy, in sum, is accounting for 'everything', but everything by a somewhat sophisticated standard, a standard that can be determined only through the rules of content.

11 SIMPLICITY

By the rule of simplicity — known likewise as economy or parsimony or necessity (what is required, as opposed to what is not strictly called for) — an interpretation must have a

164 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 213, 214.

165 A battle was fought some years ago over the tendency of the success and prestige of iconography to establish symbolic meaning as not a form of but the very type of artistic meaning. See, for instance, A. Pigler, "The Importance of Iconographic Exactitude," *Art Bulletin* XXI (Sept. 1939): 228—37, the reply by Panofsky, *Art Bulletin* XXI (Dec. 1939): 403, and especially Creighton Gilbert, "On Subject and Non-Subject in Renaissance Pictures," *Art Bulletin* XXXIV (1952), 202—16.

166 Lyas, "Intentional Fallacy Revisited" (1983), 294.

certain elegance; it must not be unnecessarily complex. Of two equally adequate, equally historical interpretations, the better interpretation (if it is either) will be the simpler of the two. One asks the question, "What is the simplest sufficient, material explanation that is consistent both with the facts and the kind of explanatory model which can be confirmed in other contexts?"[167] One brings to interpretation the fewest possible ancillary conditions. As for "the functional look" of a probable interpretation,

> for this one falls back on weak forms of old general criteria: economy and pragmatic utility. The simpler way of reaching a certain level of coherent explanation is likely to be the more attractive: there is an obligation to demonstrate the need to invoke this or that bit of circumstance.[168]

As one reviewer notes, Ginzburg "admires the elegance of one of the interpretations" of Piero's *Baptism of Christ.*[169] And to cite another instance, here is another of Streeter's criticisms of an interpretation of the *Primavera,* relying now upon the rule of simplicity:

> Jacobsen has suggested an interpretation which would be pretty if it were not too far-fetched and intricate. ... Elaborate allegory was undoubtedly a taste of the late quattrocento, but would any great artist, however much a "child of his age", devote some of his best work to such a confusion of ideas as this?[170]

There is something interesting to note in the Streeter/Jacobsen example just cited, which is how the rule of simplicity overrules an interpretation with some claim to historical legitimacy — a job for which the formal rules are especially valuable. Instances of this rule used both in the critique of interpretations and in the development or defence of an interpretation are easy to come by. Here is a positive example, again of an interpretation of Botticelli (the *St. Augustine* in the Metropolitan): the author notes that in "the friar's habit" worn by Augustine "we have an individual feature that precisely matches the evidence with no redundancy, insufficiency, or special pleading."[171] Another example concerns Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ:*

> The criterion of necessity finds the readings unparsimonious in offering such multiple explanations involving so many external circumstances: things seem over-elaborate. The same four peculiarities can be more coherently explained, with a piece of low iconography like the one that follows.[172]

After which the author identifies a virtue of the newly proposed interpretation:

---

167 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 214.
168 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 119.
169 Summers, "Painting in Political Context" (1986).
170 Streeter, *Botticelli* (1907), 66.
171 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 214.
172 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 123.

> A self-critical explanation has led, then, to a reading of the picture that is iconographically minimalist .... No hidden meanings are necessary to explain it.[173]

Evidently, the desired simplicity may be of more than one form: on the one hand *simplicity of interpretation in the interpreter's labours to make a case,* and on the other *simplicity, a certain conciseness, in the interpretation itself.* The simplicity of an interpretation may lie in the argument required to make it plausible, but it may also apply to the work's meaning, and concern the awkwardness or subtlety of the 'message'. Here is the rule used again in this second sense (both positively and negatively) with reference to three interpretations by Leo Steinberg, Gombrich, and Vasari of Michelangelo's *Conversion of St. Paul:*

> Steinberg makes the painting sound so much more subtle that even Gombrich's defence of Vasari itself requires, perhaps paradoxically, more sophisticated theorizing than we can easily attribute to Vasari. But although Steinberg gets us to see the picture differently, his account does not explicitly contradict the earlier [interpretations].[174]

The best interpretation does not necessarily oppose those it replaces, and an interpretation that makes the work appear more subtle may be preferable to one that makes it seem less so. How do we know when?

Notice again Streeter's remark about the rejected interpretation of Botticelli: "Elaborate allegory was undoubtedly a taste of the late quattrocento, but would any great artist, however much a 'child of his age,' devote some of his best work to such a confusion of ideas as this?" That it is a "great artist" who would not produce a complex allegory suggests a possible qualification of the principle of simplicity; the suggestion is that the standard of simplicity to be applied in a given case is relative to the given situation, since it is altogether certain that works of art have been produced with complex meanings.[175] This is another contrast with the case of science, for whatever we might suspect about the basic conditions of nature, we can be sure that there are human minds that work in complex ways. Indeed the passage also suggests that complexity is even a matter of taste. As a standard, the concept of 'simplicity' is not, again, a merely quantitative notion. If it is to be correctly applied, the principle has to be formulated somewhat more carefully than I have done: an interpretation must *have the degree of elegance that it ought to have in the given context.* To be able to apply the second rule of form, one must work out that degree of

---

173 Ibid., 131.

174 Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation" (1987), 24.

175 Because of this Summers nullifies Ginzburg's approval of an interpretation on the basis of elegance: "We cannot be sure that this is correct, however, since, for all we know, events themselves may have been messy rather than elegant." Summers, "Painting in Political Context" (1986).

· .nplicity that is applicable to the interpretation sought. Hence the rule of simplicity too has its historical or 'material' dimension. Generally speaking, simplicity is something of a comparative virtue, but where a specific context identified through the rule of objectivity establishes a specific quality of simplicity, an interpretation without it is discredited: it becomes a necessary condition.

12 COHERENCE

By the third rule of form, the rule of coherence — or unity, or order — an interpretation must have a unity, in two distinct senses: an interpretation *must not contradict itself,* and it must not hang together loosely but *form a meaning that works as a whole.* That "an explanation of a work must ... be free from contradiction"[176] in fact represents the second of the two basic 'canons' of interpretation enumerated by the hermeneutic theorist Emilio Betti ("the second fundamental canon, ... the canon of totality and the coherence of meaning of hermeneutical investigation").[177] Moreover, interpretations are "all explanations in the sense that ... interpretations function as hypotheses that attempt to bring coherence and intelligibility to works of art."[178] As Gadamer has remarked, in our approach to understanding we have an "anticipation of 'perfect coherence'": "the perfect coherence of the global and final meaning is the criterion for *the* understanding. When coherence is wanting, we say that understanding is deficient." Some philosophers have criticized this requirement as a normative element, a bias in favour of certain qualities of meaning, but Gadamer does not exclude the incoherent work. Works of art with no unity of meaning are uninterpretable; we can only interpret their fragments, or find some singular significance in the fact of their incoherence itself. Coherence is a kind of limit condition of interpreting, of finding meaning at all.

> To begin with, this perfect coherence can be understood in the sense of an anticipation of a purely formal nature: it is an 'idea'. It is, nevertheless, always at work in achieving understanding. It signifies that nothing is really understandable unless it is actually presented in the form of a coherent meaning. Thus, for example, it is implicit from the outset in our intention of reading a

176 Hauser, *Philosophy of Art History* (1958), 243, in support of Karl Mannheim, *Beiträge zur Theorie der Weltanschauungsinterpretation* (1923), 27.

177 Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology" (1962), 59.

178 Weitz, "Interpretation and the Visual Arts" (1973), 112.

> text that we consider the text to be 'coherent', unless this presupposition proves untenable, in other words, as long as the message of the text is not denounced as incomprehensible.[179]

What it is that makes coherence a criterion of legitimacy is more evident, perhaps, than with the other virtues. That interpretation is a form of cognitive representation, an interpretation of a work's meaning will mirror the unity of that meaning. Naturally, this level of coherence depends upon the specific constitution of the work of art. But it is exactly that the rule of objectivity directs us toward. As Baxandall explains:

> That positing an intentional unity and cogency entails a value judgement and hypothesizes a high degree of organization in the actor and the object will not worry us. Only superior paintings will sustain explanation of the kind we are attempting: inferior paintings are impenetrable. What may appear as a lack of unity or organization in the explained painting is liable to be a sign of incompleteness in the explanation, a failure to take into account a circumstance that resolves this or that apparently detached element into an intentional unity. Thus, on the whole, the explanation positing the more complete and embracing order is preferable.[180]

This objective dimension of the criterion raises, again, the fact of a certain fluidity in its nature. Just as what has meaning in a work is subject to contextual conditions, what form of coherence is appropriate also depends upon context. That there are quite different forms or models of unity operative in different eras was an influential point made in the recent theory of history,[181] and the point has been carried into the hermeneutics of art.[182]

As an example, consider an instance where coherence is used not in criticism but in defence of an interpretation. One must interpret all the details, and simply, but also link them into a consistent whole. Two authors write, summing up their interpretation of Botticelli's *Primavera:* "So one thing can be said of this picture without fear of contradiction: the imagery is of Spring, which begins when Zephyr transforms Chloris into Flora and thereby brings forth the first flowers":

> A painting called "Spring" less than a hundred years after it was created may be nothing more than its name tells: a series of delicate poetic images, all associated with that season and all having their sources in the mainstream of the classical tradition.

---

179 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 40, 46.

180 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 120—21

181 Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (London 1978).

182 Bryson is writing specifically about the coherence of historical accounts, but the deeper issue concerns *historically variable conceptions of order*. "What constitutes a coherent narrative is very different, for example, for Vasari and for a modern art historian such as Eve Borsook. Vasari, in his account of Uccello, writes about medium, location, and subject; he comments on the handling of perspective; he refers to compositional format and coloration. Eve Borsook subsumes this account into a much more comprehensive narrative, structured by the protocols of professional art history in the mid-twentieth century. The rules her writing follows are fairly clear-cut, and they are shared by a general community of interpreters." Bryson, Review of Roskill (1989), 705.

With this introduction, these authors go on to demonstrate, as a strength of their interpretation, the link that each of the figures has with the season of spring.[183] It is a task of interpretation to make "the internal coherence of the symbols in the painting ... clear."[184] Baxandall offers an excellent description:

> The second [criterion], order, is a matter of adequately comprehending an internal organization, posited in the object one is addressing and reflected, in a different and informal guise, in the nature of one's explanation; both have an internal consistency. If the word did not have technical senses in both hermeneutics and the philosophy of truth I would have liked to call it *coherence:* 'order' sounds bland. The area I have in mind is articulation, system, integrality, ensemble.[185]

We ask, therefore, whether an interpretation is "intellectually sufficient,"[186] whether the reading proposed has any kind of unity or fails to bring the flux of reading under control. About an interpretation of Piero's *Baptism* Baxandall comments:

> The criterion of order is worried by the darting about of attention the readings demand, back and forth across field and in depth, and also by their detachment from strong pictorial suggestion in the painting's own organization.[187]

Coherence too is a necessary condition; satisfying the first two rules, but not this one, is insufficient. An interpretation that dealt with every element in the work, and that was appropriately simple, but that was an aggregate of meanings that did not make sense together, a sum of smaller interpretations that did not make a whole, would not be what we think of as an interpretation at all. The interpretation that is adequate to the work, and simple to the extent required, but that most fully integrates all the piecemeal interpretation, that draws all this interpreted material together into a whole that is meaningful *as* a whole, is certainly the one to be counted most valid. "The best assurance an individual would have [facing the immense task of full understanding] would be established by the coherence and consistency of the different things he was inclined to say about the work."[188] The claims of an interpretation are "summative statements" that "function as hypotheses about what make coherent and intelligible the various elements" of the work:

> As hypotheses, they are neither true nor false; instead they are more rather than less adequate in so far as they do render coherent, without distortion or omission, the ostensible, describable elements of the works.

---

183 It was a "cosmological allegory." Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli* (1976), 128, 129.
184 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 211.
185 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 120.
186 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 214.
187 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 123.
188 Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 142.

Moreover, these judgements of coherence are not themselves made by criteria, "necessary, sufficient, or central"; they are "descriptive, yet non-condition governed." The coherence must simply be recognized.[189]

13 EXPLANATORY POWER

The rule of "explanatory power" could perhaps be explained as an aspect of coherence. Indeed, when you look at some of the explanations of coherence that I have cited, it is effectively encompassed there. But I separate it because it is a crucial feature different from the considered aspects of coherence, and one that is hard to define. Coherence as non-contradiction is unmistakable, and coherence as unity of meaning easily grasped, but the "comprehensibility" and "intellectual sufficiency" of an interpreted meaning is getting at something deeper. Perhaps there is a simple way to make it clearer: an interpretation is oriented to understanding, but in one way it is an explanation. "Most good interpretations, like most good explanations, resolve puzzles. Their success in resolving puzzles is what makes them good."[190] An interpretation must explain what is puzzling in the work, must explain the presence of those of its elements and qualities that raise puzzlement, answering such questions as What is going on here? and What is the connection between these things? A genuine interpretation must "remove whatever mysteries the appearance of the work poses" — puzzlement of the sort that Michael Baxandall mentions with regard to Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ:*

> Is there, then, no puzzle in the Angels needing explanation? It seems to me that we have here reached a point where individual response must take over; certainly your feeling about this has quite the same status as mine. My feeling is that there is still something to explain ....[because] the Angels are quite unusually complex and differentiated in their interacting group.[191]

To be plausible account of a work, an interpretation must *eliminate problems* and *make the work intelligible,* which is something that goes beyond mere unity.

In its simplest sense, this virtue is a kind of super-clarification. Occasionally, interpreting brings to light a whole level of significant detail in the work that had gone unnoticed, giving a sense to everything; one has an interpretation that at once reveals and

---

189 Weitz, "Interpretation and the Visual Arts" (1973), 105, 108.
190 Stout, "Relativity of Interpretation" (1986), 104.
191 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 130.

deepens. "The explanation must pay its way, and the most obvious style in which it can do this is to solve an observed puzzle in the object not previously observed."[192] An interpretation with power is obviously one that

> makes 'visible what had not previously been apparent' [which] once given, is visually self-evident, so 'that the picture seems to confess itself and the interpreter disappears'.[193]

In a way this is only a kind of enhanced adequacy, and it is becoming clearer how these virtues are in some ways internally connected and not easy to separate in a logically exclusive manner. The virtue of explanatory power has obvious links with adequacy (for an interpretation that explains what is in the work must fit the work) as well as coherence (for a meaning that removes puzzlement is a coherent meaning). But this criterion goes further still, for an interpretation may address all the work's features, simply and coherently, but may yet not achieve a quality of meaning that is truly sufficient, in a somewhat new sense. We are interested in a quality of "cogency" that goes beyond coherence.[194] Indeed, these other criteria somewhat lean upon it. When we think of the criterion of adequacy — the fit of an interpretation to the work — the core of that conception seems to involve quantity; adequacy is a reading of *all* the elements that are present. But in fact that is not the case: virtually no interpretation is required to assign a meaning (directly or by implication) to every visible thing and relation in a painting, and how far one need go cannot be answered numerically, by determining (historically, by the rule of objectivity) the number of meaningful elements the work contains. For in interpreting we are not simply, not even primarily, following a kind of script; we are searching for sense. Adequacy is determined by a condition of *sufficiency of meaning*, which is a point at which no further explanation is required.

Sufficiency here has the sense of *value* of meaning, a meaning that not only holds together but comes to something — the difference between a sentence that is grammatically sensible but empty and one that makes sense, the difference between a purported meaning and a meaning that makes sense. This is something hard to define or reduce to conditions.

> The third mood [or criterial approach] is critical necessity or fertility. One does not adduce explanatory matter of an inferential kind unless it contributes to experience of the picture as an object of visual perception.[195]

---

192 Ibid., 119.

193 Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation" (1987), 21.

194 "If all that historical information I laid out ... does not prompt other people to a sharper sense of the pictorial cogency of Chardin's *A Lady Taking Tea*, then it fails: I reported an experiment and it has been found not repeatable. Not only my critical points but my historical claims are thrown out." Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 136—37.

195 Ibid., 121.

> The fact that one has grasped a meaning does not yet make it certain that one has grasped a significance.[196]

A work of art did not merely 'have a meaning' for an artist, but held meaning, and in this direction an interpretation of art "we assess ... for its insight and interest rather than for correctness."[197] The basis of such a judgement remains to be clarified, and the great danger is to flout the rule of subjectivity. But not every conception of a substantial meaning is a subjective conception. The standard of sufficiency depends upon the context. And again it is a necessary condition, for to satisfy all the other rules (of both form and content) and finish with a meaning that made no sense, that matched the work but really did not remove its perplexity, would make a poor claim of cognitive understanding. For sense, like coherence, is an objectively rooted criterion reflective of the fact that originally, for the artist or audience for whom it was produced, the work was neither mysterious nor of no significance.

14 SCOPE

A final criterion is scope — known also as fertility and fruitfulness — which has to do with the power of some interpretations to clarify more than the work they are of, just as a scientific theory of one phenomenon may prove itself by explaining phenomena outside the original focus. For it is common that the meaning of a work be related to things outside it (the most obvious of these things being other related works). An interpretation that sheds light on other problems recommends itself as knowledge, because of its scope.

> The greater the number of 'messages' which make sense in the light of a particular solution, the smaller is the danger that the correspondence is merely fortuitous.[198]

> To whomever this "criterion of greatest fruitfulness" is insufficient, the task is given to establish other criteria for the discrimination of interpretations of one and the same work, all of which make the same claim to correctness.[199]

---

196 Iser, *Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), 150. Iser makes reference to Frege.

197 Osborne, "Interpretation in Science and in Art" (1986), 6.

198 Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies" (1945), 66.

199 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 112.

Roskill compares early and modern interpreters of Hogarth's engravings, noting how an interpreter did not used to be concerned with the way interpretations of several pictures were at odds with one another:

> There is a greater self-consciousness in the modern writers as to whether such differing interpretations are or are not compatible with one another; and second, that they tie their analyses together more explicitly with those that they make of other prints [conceivably related to it].[200]

While this is not necessarily a fault, "the interpretation that is most convincing may be the one that offers a way of making two or more ... readings hang together."[201] Scope is a less important virtue because it is weaker; it is not a quality *necessary* to legitimate interpretations, which has the consequence that it is the only criterion that cannot be used negatively. An interpretation without scope is not inadequate, but scope is a virtue wherever it is present.

15 THE RULES OF INTERPRETATION

This, then, is the method. "At each stage of our historical explanation we should ask a series of questions about the position towards which we are progressing," questions about the hypothetical interpretation with reference to simplicity and adequacy, historical possibility, and satisfactoriness and adequacy.[202] Is anything left out — anything so obviously crucial as these basic conditions of all genuine interpretations? Unquestionably, interpretation involves a great deal more than can be spelled out in any set of rules, but the aim of a method is not a reduction of all one's steps. In fact the rules have three general functions. The entire method establishes *a standard for the legitimation of interpretations, in the two senses of support and critique,* while supplying at the same time *general guidelines for the development of legitimate interpretations.* As Baxandall has noted, "These may appear blunt tools but energetically applied together ... they can cut radically."[203] The rules work together, and a calculus of all the virtues of any prospective interpretation will have substantial power to validate and rank interpretations. Any interpretation that does not develop its content as the rules of content direct, or that does not display the form that the rules of form indicate, will not be counted legitimate, in the sense of an interpretation with any cognitive claim to make about the work it supposedly represents. It is exposed as an

---

200 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 15.
201 Ibid., 80.
202 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 210, 214.
203 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 121.

interpretation incapable of providing understanding of its object. Between them, the rules of content and the rules of form indicate that what is to count as a legitimate interpretation is determined not by private subjectivity but by establishable historical conditions, and that what distinguishes such an interpretation is a clear and distinct set of objectively ascertainable, objectively demonstrable virtues. "Critical interpretation does not always 'tacitly claim correctness,' and usually it does not claim to be guided by a rule."[204] But though the procedure of interpretation is not reducible to rules, modern interpretation adheres to a standard that ensures it has cognitive significance, a standard for determining what interpretation affords understanding of its object, what does not.

My aim in this chapter has been to draw together and articulate — more comprehensively and in more detail than we are used to seeing — the essential theory of interpretation that our culture relies upon to represent the meaning of works of art. That is, I have tried to present as clearly as possible the method (in the form of two sorts of rule) and to show at the same time that it is followed. The following chapters are an exploration of this method, examined in the only detail by which it can be assessed at all, which is in actual interpretations studied against the works they are about. History makes it clear that our concern over art is the basis of our interest in the power of a method and the developed rules. That being so, it is hard to imagine that anything could be decided about these issues without looking at a single picture, and thinking these matters through in the detail they gain when they are actually applied. Our confidence in the theory rests in the tacit supposition that by now the assessment has certainly been achieved, yet it is difficult to cite any work where it has been done, and what there is normally passes with only general comments about actual works.

What we are in the habit of calling a test of method are its 'results', but results in hermeneutics are not comparable to the situation that term comes from, which is the case of science. The meaning of 'results' in science has to do, for the most part, with prediction and control: if our methods of building theories (and the logic behind them) build us theories by which we can predict and manipulate natural phenomena, we win a kind of confirmation of those methods, perhaps one quite external to the logic by which we built them. But understanding is not regarded a practical science; it is a purely cognitive endeavour. The aim is not knowledge in order to do anything, but what Adorno has called "the bliss of knowing."[205] It is a pleasure not dependent upon whether that knowledge is certain; where certainty is impossible, knowing what one can know to the limit one can

---

204 Hampshire, "Types of Interpretation" (1964), 108.
205 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1986), 21.

know it is all the bliss that knowing ever offered. Thought and not action defines for us what it means to understand and to make sense of a work of art, and develops also the interpretations that deliver that sense. In that case, does the fact that we end up with sense test anything at all? We have merely put an idea into practice. Examining a theory of understanding is a more complicated affair than either thinking about it or getting it to work; it certainly must involve works of art.

2

INTERPRETATIONS OF BOTTICELLI

16 THE METHOD EXAMINED

I would like to begin to examine the theory, which we have now seen reconstructed from occasional theoretical/methodological comments of interpreters, by looking at the rules of interpretation just laid out, and to examine those rules in the only way that I think truly sensible: by examining their role in actual interpretations, as carefully as we can. Not just one and not just any interpretation: I would like to examine a series of good interpretations — at the very least, carefully conducted interpretations, by credible interpreters, which have established themselves as at least plausible. What is a plausible interpretation? We answer this according to the method. A plausible interpretation is an interpretation that satisfies the rules of form and content, and it is plausible to the extent that it satisfies them. Let's look at some actual interpretations of a painting, which is what all of this theory is meant to fit.

The painting I wish to consider is a famous image, Botticelli's *'Primavera'* (figure 3). I choose it first because it demands interpretation: in their monograph on Botticelli of 1976 L.D. and Helen Ettlinger introduced it like this:

> None of Botticelli's paintings with mythological figures are straightforward illustrations of a classical text, and a great deal of ink has been spilled over their interpretations. None has received more attention than the *Primavera* or *Spring*. This beautiful work has tempted the ingenuity of writers and scholars for over a hundred years, all of whom have tried to explain it, [and to] provide each figure with a name and significance.[1]

---

1 Ettlinger and Ettlinger, *Botticelli* (1976), 118.

It has been called "one of the most abiding puzzles of Renaissance art history"[2] but it has nonetheless given rise to interpretations with substance, whose conflicts and status are well worth the trouble to examine. When in 1945 E.H. Gombrich came to write about the painting, he suggested that "anyone interested in problems of method can do no better than to study the conflicting interpretations of the *Primavera* and the discussions which centred round them,"[3] and this is just the approach I want to take. In the following pages I would like to make a fairly careful summary of what you would find if, wishing to discover the meaning of Botticelli's *Primavera,* you did what modern wisdom suggested and read some reputable studies in the area of Renaissance painting. And I would like to compare the different interpretations that that would give you. In particular, let's consider, by looking at them, *what interpretations involve* and *what is really at issue when one is thrown over for another*. We already have the answer to that: when one interpretation is replaced by another, it is because it either critically fails the rules in some way or satisfies them significantly less well than the alternative interpretation. If that is the case, the examination we are about to make will exemplify the theory. It might, to that end, be an especially helpful exercise if the reader would make the effort to determine which interpretation of the *Primavera* is most likely right — to try to make up your mind and attempt to understand how you did it. In the course of what follows I will certainly have to omit much of the accompanying arguments, but will attempt to do justice to the evidence for these interpretations so that that exercise will not be totally foolhardy. And then of course, there is the method to rely on.

17 VENUS AND VIRTUE

Let's first consider Gombrich's interpretation, from 1945. This is how he himself summed it up. The so-called *Primavera* is known to have first come from

> the Villa di Castello [outside Florence], which was owned by the cousin of Lorenzo de' Medici, Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco, who remained a patron of Botticelli. Documents show that the villa was acquired by and for him in 1478, when he was an adolescent of fifteen. This is the period into which the *Primavera* fits on stylistic grounds and so it has long been suggested that it was commissioned when the new villa was fitted out for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco. Now it turned out that in this very year [the great Florentine Neoplatonist Marsilio] Ficino had sent the young Medici a moral exhortation couched in the form of an allegorical horoscope. It culminates in an appeal to the young man that he should fix his eyes on Venus who stood for Humanitas. Let him submit to the charm of this beautiful nymph, ...[4]

---

2 James H. Beck, "In Detail: Botticelli's *Primavera,*" *Portfolio* V:4 (July/August 1983), 39.

3 Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies" (1945), 37.

4 Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies" (1945), 33. Page references to this work are henceforth given in the text in parentheses.

Gombrich's suggestion is that the picture was painted for the fifteen-year-old Medici as a kind of exemplification of the virtuous lesson in his tutor's letter:[5] in accord with some meaning that was its purpose, a classical humanist (who was perhaps even Ficino himself) drew up the programme of this painting, choosing its cast of characters and their combinations and actions. The purpose was a lesson by symbol.

What we see at the centre of the work, then, is Venus, perfect beauty, as Humanitas, the emblem of all human virtue. For it so happens that for Ficino, Gombrich notes, the image of the good *was* beauty, and Gombrich quotes Ficino from another source:

> Much do the philosophers argue, the orators declaim, the poets sing, in order to exhort man to a true love of virtue.... I think, however, that virtue herself (if she can be placed before the eye) may serve much better as an exhortation than the words of men. ... If we could present the wonderful aspect of Virtue itself to the eyes of men there would no longer be any need for our art of persuasion.[6]

As Gombrich says of the painting, "its very beauty is part of its theme." It presents to us the garden of this Platonic Venus, where she is so significantly *seen*, surrounded by "her train": Mercury, from the story of the Judgement of Paris (in which Venus eclipsed her rivals), and near him the three Graces, exemplary companions of Venus; on the right, the goddess of Spring, lauding Venus with her flowers, and so on. Gombrich doesn't attempt to say what all these figures might have symbolized: tney are the companions of Venus, and may have had no exact and many potential meanings — as he points out, that is how the Renaissance read the myths (59—61).

Gombrich suggests, in fact, that the visual appearance of the painting is more determined by its literary sources than by an intended meaning. He quotes a passage from a story by the Latin writer Apuleius in which Venus, Mercury, and the Graces all appear: it is a passage containing what seem strikingly accurate descriptions of one or two of the figures in the painting — in particular, the fleeing woman at the right, whose identity remains to be determined. Gombrich suggests that a hypothetical corruption in the available edition of Apuleius might have led these Renaissance scholars to mistake what was in reality a description of Venus for the description of another figure, who they identified as Flora. Botticelli's depiction of the figure in Apuleius' description as 'Flora' would have rested upon this mistake — though the faulty edition is a conjecture, not a fact, developed only to explain the striking similarity between a Venus described by Apuleius and the gauze-

---

5 "I do not claim and cannot claim that Botticelli's painting illustrates the letter. What I propose is rather that it was intended to serve a similar purpose" (33).

6 Ficino to Lorenzo il Magnifico de' Medici and Bernardo Bembo, 1470s (45).

covered girl in this painting. If the painting were to be retitled — since on Gombrich's view it is nothing like a mere evocation of spring — it would be called, perhaps, *The Garden of Venus, Embodiment of Virtue.*

We can set aside the question of whether this is the meaning of the *Primavera.* Is it, simply, a legitimate interpretation, one worth turning to to understand Botticelli's painting? The only way we have of answering that question is our understanding of what makes for legitimacy. Does Gombrich's interpretation satisfy the rules?

The rules, in fact, explain quite a lot about what he has done and intended to do. Gombrich's first step was an objective one (the satisfaction of rules one and two)[7]: Gombrich looked for a sense of the painting in the "Circle" of the man for whom it was made, and at the precise time in which it is believed to have been painted he discovered an ethical interpretation of Venus that was addressed to exactly this young patron. Gombrich was cautious and careful to note that "there is still a big gulf separating the picture and Ficino's text" (46), but the remainder of his argument went toward narrowing it: accounting for each of the remaining figures, which he did through a reading of a classical text known to the Renaissance. The very point of this "historical approach," as Gombrich explained, is to overcome subjectivity.[8] When you also consider the form of his interpretation, and appreciate that what he has attempted to do is to accommodate, simply and coherently,[9] everything that the picture presents, removing puzzles (the purpose of his explanation of the essential arbitrariness of the image) — the satisfaction of rules three to six — you appear to have an interpretation that fulfils all the necessary conditions of the theory.

Between dismissing, as he does, the subjectivity of numerous past interpretations (Pater's among them) and setting out on this historical approach, Gombrich has taken several additional steps in order to satisfy the rules, just as we might expect. What are these steps? We appreciate now that despite the fact that the rules offer general guidelines in developing interpretations, they do not specify just how they are to be satisfied. When Gombrich makes the shift from projection to establishing, as he puts it, the "concrete significance" of works of art (39), he has now begun to ask a very precise question. His

---

7 'Entirely' objective, given the most that objectivity can mean: the sincere attempt to adopt a perspective built in the context of the object, not the context of the subject.

8 "The beautiful pages which have been written by masters of prose on the emotional import of Botticelli's figures remain purely subjective unless the context in which these figures stand can be established by outside means" (39).

9 As he notes, his interpretation "proposes to show that a coherent reading of Botticelli's mythological paintings can be obtained in the light of Neo-Platonic interpretations" (31, 36).

aim is likely as simple as Panofsky's: "to understand art."[10] But in fact there is something quite particular that Gombrich wants to know, and it is what those people involved in producing this painting (the painter, the patron, the author of its programme) intended to achieve with it: how they wanted it to be read or how they themselves read it. This is no arbitrary or surreptitious narrowing of focus. It is a simple formulation of the nature of the object, which is needed to unfold the necessary *concrete implications* of the rule of objectivity. The aim is to understand the work of art, but how are we to develop our interpretation out of what has to do with the work itself except by registering what the work itself is. "The need for a more strictly historical interpretation of Botticelli's mythologies" is not based arbitrarily on the historian's vested interest, but is argued by a closer recognition of what a work of art is. Where Victorian interpreters took the work as a canvas on which to play out their favourite Renaissance story, a genuine concern for the work begins with what it is, a created artefact. Gombrich recognizes that it is (in part if not necessarily *in toto*) what it was historically meant to be (36—39).

Thus he admits, for instance, that as an interpreter he has to face the following problem: that "the fact that a given myth can be interpreted symbolically does not prove that it was intended in a given instance to be so interpreted." He needs to uncover "the way these works were intended to be approached," and it is this question that inspires the "more strictly historical interpretation." This conception of his goal in interpreting is bound together, plainly, with a conception of the nature of the painting itself, recognized as something essentially historical, as something expressive of an historical intention. To approach the work itself is the philosophy behind the two most basic rules of the theory, but they do not tell us how to do it. The rule of objectivity tells us that the work's own identity be respected, but it remains for that identity to be ascertained.

Gombrich, then, has a more precise question than 'what does this mean?' — indeed, *must* have in order to apply the rules at all. On the surface his interest may seem just 'to understand', but it is a very particular conception of understanding that he is pursuing. Making this objective precise (the unravelling of the work's meaning for its creators) tells us what Gombrich is actually doing, but it tells us more than that. It clarifies how the rules of the method *only begin to apply after* the objective of understanding has become more particularized, rendered more concrete than just 'understanding': it is the understanding of a certain type of object. That is, applying the rules relies partly upon a kind of thinking that is not a matter of rule-following. For the two initial rules can be

10 "Far from destroying the works of art of the past, these attempts to establish their concrete significance only help us to recreate their aesthetic meaning" (39).

followed at all only by sketching the limits of the work's identity and establishing what kind of meaning the work of art as itself has.

This is perhaps not a very momentous discovery, but it is something worth clarifying here because it sometimes appears as if the method, the rules, the historical approach, simply follow as a matter of course from the nature of the goal, which is the understanding of art. The method is the simple *means* by which to arrive at understanding, but in reality it is more than that: it is a part of understanding itself, because it leads us to answer the question What is this thing we want to understand? If the theory is to be followed and the method is to be applied, boundaries of the identity of the thing will have to be outlined, the nature of the thing given some definition. Without that, we could not know how to follow the rule of objectivity. Once interpretation is oriented by the motive of objectivity, we cannot proceed straight into understanding. If one is to direct oneself to *do* something that approaches the object, to proceed in the direction of that object, one's actual aim has to be made precise. Understanding the work of art *qua historical expression* (in so far as it is something once intended to mean something) is a response to the theory that gives one something to go after. Any interpretative method oriented by objectivity works according to some description or sense of that object. One of the most fascinating things about the modern theory of interpretation is the almost total absence of argumentation about this unavoidable preliminary, which can be called the *determination of the object*. Thus Gombrich's rhetorical question: What else can a work be than what it was when it was made, and for which purpose it came into being?[11] We shall examine this further in parts II to IV, but we might suppose from the present instance that such matters are not settled by any philosophical argument, but rather by raw intuition.

Naturally, understanding a work of art whose nature we have understood to be an historical expression of intention requires us to know the initial function of the *Primavera*, and it is this that determines where you have to look (into the context of Florentine humanists) and what exactly you have to interpret (what Florentine humanists saw in the painting). I will call the transition from the determination of the object (as an historical expression) to the more precise situation of the circle of Ficino in Renaissance Florence the refinement of Gombrich's *aim* — the completion of the discernment of identity. Where the *objective* of interpretation is to understand the work of art for itself, and the *determination* an identification of the nature of a work of art in general, the aim of the interpreter must be a more specific discrimination of the nature of the particular work in question. It will serve

---

11 "The historian's task is to establish the precise meaning of the symbols used by the artist. ... The question as to what Venus signified 'to the Renaissance' or even 'to the Florentine Quattrocento' is obviously still too vague for the historian to obtain a well-defined answer. It must be narrowed down to the question of what Venus signified to Botticelli's patron at the time and occasion the picture was painted." (39—40)

henceforth to limit the material relevant to his interpretation. The determination of the object and the materialization of the interpreter's specific aim are what select the relevant material for an interpretation.

So it is actually a determination of the work of art that gives the rules of content their power to discriminate. Since the *Primavera* is an historical expression, the rules of content direct you to know something about the work's origins, and then something about Florentine humanism, and what Florentine humanists would have seen and thought (as Gombrich says, "who his patrons were and what their information was"). And this introduces another matter beside the determination of the work and the narrowing of one's aim, one that might be called the matter of *belief*. Your labours of interpreting are directed not merely by an intuitive identification but also by the specific things you know, or merely believe, that are relevant to that condition. Your efforts are directed by the type of thing that you are aiming to interpret, but also by your detailed knowledge of it. For instance, if you consider you know (as Gombrich had reason to do) *when* this painting was painted, and for *whom* it was painted, and if you know of a letter to this patron discussing the meaning of the classical goddess who happens to occupy the centre of the picture, an interpretation like Gombrich's appears to be a very good one; no one before him had considered Ficino's letter.[12] The point is not simply that to interpret you have to know things: that is obvious. It is a reminder that what we call a legitimate interpretation — an interpretation with a genuine cognitive claim — is singled out as much by what you know and believe as by rules. It is not too difficult to imagine interpretations before Gombrich's that were formally perfect and materially valid, but only as good as the knowledge they were built on. There are, certainly, errors of belief. It is obvious that the cognitive viability of an interpretation is measured also by the truth of various things you believe that are part of, or the basis of, or implicated in in various ways, the interpretation you develop — for instance, those two beliefs about the date and the patron, which were at the root of Gombrich's interpretation.

Clarifying the nature of the work and knowing relevant things are some of the necessary preconditions of interpretation — indeed they are decisive preconditions, because they deliver and restrict the material the method is to work with. Moreover, as we saw in chapter one, that specific material will have a bearing upon the function of the formal rules; as the *material* of an interpretation changes *it changes the way the rules work*. The formal rules get their shape according to both the determination of the work's identity and the relevant things that we believe. Consider the rule of adequacy. One thing it cannot be is accounting for 'everything in the picture,' 'all the pictorial data.' What 'everything' in a

---

12 Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences* (1960), 196 n. 7.

work *is* depends upon what that work is — upon its identity, for instance, as an historical expression. We recall that the rule of adequacy operates alongside the rules of content, but that means that it operates second to the determined aim (the work qua artefact) and the specific knowledge one has about the original circumstance one is examining (Renaissance or Florentine humanism). The list of what we must interpret in this painting is established only through the rule of objectivity. That means clarifying what kind of thing the work of art is (a work produced to express) and narrowing the aim: establishing, through specific knowledge, the relevant circumstance (Florentine humanism). What 'everything' means to Gombrich is consequently 'everything that a Florentine humanist would have seen' (no pregnant Venus, for a start).

The same is true of the rule of coherence, which likewise gets its definition from the material that is marked out by a determination of identity and the things one believes that are relevant to the work so identified. Coherence — an interpretation further on in this chapter will show this much more clearly — comes to mean only that sort of unity of meaning that a Neoplatonist could find to be unified, for a sense that 'hangs together' does so given a capacity to see it. In the same way as the pregnancy of a figure depends upon us, the clarity of a meaning may depend upon us. The mind of a humanist might find order where I cannot, and it is his order that Gombrich considers to be *there*. We ought to be careful not to confuse this: it is not, to be sure, that the *meaning* of the concepts of adequacy or coherence changes according to the material case; it is that what they amount to, their effect, is different according to the circumstance. 'Unity' means the same thing for everyone, but what in a given situation is a unified interpretation follows upon the work's identification. The exact bearing of these notions in particular cases (exactly where they begin to work as criteria) is dependent upon establishing the work's identity and laying out what specifically is known about it.

This is merely a clarification of the method. What has been made clear is that *the method cannot be applied except in the shape it is given by some specific determination of identity and some person's beliefs*. Does this preclude what the theory looks for: a cognitive standard of interpretation applicable to everyone. No. The method itself is not relative, since the general notions of unity, adequacy, and so on remain applicable in every case. It is only that in a given case — given the work in question, according to its determination as an historical expression, and given what one believes about the things it is consequently necessary to know about it — the concrete senses of unity, adequacy, simplicity, and so on, are not independent of these variable elements. The method stipulates that. What we tend to overlook about method is its two concrete extremities: the role of *an intuitive conception of what a work of art is*, which gives the rules of content sufficient

meaning that they can discriminate (so that the theory can actually be applied), and the connection or interconnection of the method with *our beliefs about the matter of each individual case*, which determines the specific effect of the rules of form. We overlook, in other words, the *application* of the theory to the concrete conditions the theory was designed for. We can simply append this explication to the theory already outlined.

18 THE NATURAL VENUS

Gombrich's interpretation of the *Primavera* was opposed in 1952 by Erwin Panofsky.[13] For what reasons? As we should expect, for reasons in line with the theory. In part, for the rule of adequacy. Panofsky claimed that Gombrich's explanation that Mercury (figure 4) is pointing to heaven as in Apuleius, "indicating by a sign that Jupiter has sent him," is nonsense (194 n. 2);[14] Panofsky considered that what Mercury is doing (he holds his caduceus in a flotilla of wispy clouds)[15] is just not reducible to "pointing," and he is not "leading" the Graces, as Gombrich claims, but flatly indifferent to them. Because the Mercury *in the painting* is not interpreted, at the most basic empirical level, the interpretation is not adequate to the work, and fails. There was criticism as well from another part of the theory — that Gombrich's interpretation works only at the price of complications: it bases the painting on a Latin text whose content 'fits' the image rather awkwardly, and then only given a quite peculiar reading of the words. Unnecessary complexity (194 n. 3).[16] By consequence, the correspondences that Gombrich was able to make between his interpretative material and Botticelli's work can only be regarded as coincidental.

So Panofsky begins again. There is a poem, he says, by the Florentine poet Poliziano that describes the "realm of Venus" in a way that is almost a description of Botticelli's painting; a single scene of this poem "enumerates all the elements that play their part in Botticelli's picture: Venus; Cupid; Spring; Flora [as Poliziano describes her] 'granting welcome kisses to her amorous husband,' *viz.*, Zephyr; and the dancing Graces" (193). This is the Realm of Venus exactly as Florence knew it; there is no need to bend a

---

13 In lectures Panofsky delivered that year at Uppsala, published in 1960 as *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*. Further references are given in parentheses.

14 See also Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies" (1945), 52.

15 Always visible, although rather obscured by grime until the painting's cleaning around 1983.

16 Gombrich himself was first to recognize this weakness: "the emendation and interpretation of a text to make it fit the picture which it is supposed to explain is open to serious objections on the grounds of method" Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies" (1945), 52.

remote passage of Apuleius to bring this group together. By recourse to a Florentine poem Panofsky has come by it, then, in an elegant and historically plausible way. Further, as Botticelli presents the figures in the painting (dancing, showering roses, pursuing love), they become more than mere associates of Venus; they actively celebrate her. That celebration is the painting's subject. But what, then, does this festival of Venus mean? For though we have objectivity, adequacy, simplicity, and coherence, we are also looking for explanatory power: we want an explanation that gives the work a meaning, but a meaning that makes sense. To see the work as a "festival" of Venus does not in fact entirely remove our puzzlement.

Panofsky accepted that the painting had, as Gombrich had claimed, a philosophical significance sketched by Marsilio Ficino or one of his followers, but for Panofsky this was a different type of philosophy than the sort Gombrich had proposed: not vague moralizing but systematic Neoplatonism. Ficino was after all one of the most thorough of Platonists: in 1469 he had completed his translation for the Medici of Plato's entire corpus, at the end of which ("fighting deep melancholy") he began writing his *De amore*, a kind of commentary on the *Symposium*. There in the *De amore* Ficino presented the realm of Venus as the realm of beauty — an important realm in his Christian Platonism because beauty, Ficino tells us, is the origin of love, and love is that force that "'calls the soul to God'" (185). What kind of beauty, and what kind of love? As Panofsky explains, Ficino, erasing the division that Aquinas had drawn between the good and the beautiful, elaborated a Christian view that "abolished all borderlines between the sacred and the profane" (188). Human beauty (the painting's reserved and graceful Venus) inspires human love — *amor humanus*. Thus we are given the story of Chloris and Zephyr, the wind god whose union with Chloris transformed her into the goddess of spring. Human love is sensual, but it is love, and being love it is worship: adoration in flesh, a bodily worship of the perfection that is beauty. (*Amor ferinus*, the kind of love that animals know, is a physical passion that is no more than that: it adores nothing, and serves nothing but its own appetite [185].) The painting, then, is a representation of Ficino's conception of love, a force with two aspects that Ficino symbolized as two Venuses. *Amor humanus*, natural love as a pathway to God, is being given the honour due her. What the *Primavera* should be called, Panofsky suggests, is *The Realm of the Natural Venus* (199).

But if this is the interpretation, where, we might wonder, is the rest of Ficino's theory, for human love is the way of only half the human soul (sense and emotion)? There is a higher level of soul, which sees an even higher realm of beauty: Ficino symbolized it in the Celestial Venus, who "dwells in the sphere of Mind" and engenders a love — the transcendent *amor divinus* — that draws us "to an enraptured contemplation of that which

transcends not only perception but even reason" in the highest grasp of Mind (185, 198). It is a significant omission, since this way, by a concise and fitting interpretation of the so-called *Primavera,* Panofsky found an interpretation of Botticelli's second striking picture of Venus — also painted for Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco and, unique as a subject in Botticelli's time, fully as perplexing. As the *Primavera* is not really about spring, the famous *Birth of Venus,* also in the Uffizi (figure 5), is in fact *The Advent of the Celestial Venus.* Ficino's dual conception of love, figured by two forms of the one goddess, explains both pictures. Panofsky cites Ficino: "each of the two Venuses 'impels us to procreate beauty, but each in her own way.'" For Panofsky the *Birth of Venus* becomes "a theophany rather than a festival," and the *Primavera* "a festival rather than a theophany" (199).

Yet before this interpretation is complete, a lingering question about the *Primavera* requires an answer: who is Mercury, the puzzle that Gombrich managed so poorly? Panofsky's solution, by contrast, not only deals with the Mercury we see but meshes nicely with the reading he gave — (it also passes on a piece of Ficino that, by the genius of coincidence, comments upon the attitude of philosophy in the face of beauty, the encounter of theory with art). Mercury is Reason. For Ficino reason "has no direct access to the sphere of the celestial Venus." Moreover, reason is cold, and turns away from, and "is even hostile to, the activities of the natural Venus"; it does not take the route of beauty and love. As Panofsky writes, Mercury, as the *Primavera* pictures him,

> can dispel but not transcend the mist which befogs the "lower faculties" of the soul: he may be said to express the dignity, but also the loneliness of the one psychological power which is excluded from the precincts of *Amor divinus* and excludes itself from those of *Amor humanus.* (200)

Isn't this a clearly finer interpretation than Gombrich's? The theory tells us it is: it accommodates what is there, in the grossest sense of 'seeing-seeing' (Mercury's peculiar action, and the behaviour of the other figures); it is less awkward; it gives the work a meaning that makes sense in terms of Ficinian philosophy; and it turns out to have an unexpected scope — the last of the hermeneutic/scientific virtues. And in this case it may well be these formal virtues that do the final work of discriminating between the two interpretations, both of them historically plausible; just as the theory says, it is the formal virtues themselves that lead us to the most legitimate interpretation.

But this case, where the formal virtues do indeed discriminate, is not just any case. It is the case where the method happens to work, and it works here because of those conditions that the method overlooked. We need to ask, given *what* can one interpretation

overcome another by formal qualities alone? And we are back with the adjustment made after Gombrich. Since the rules apply only in relation to a determined object and specific knowledge, only when both the aim and the knowledge behind two interpretations are *the same* is it left to formal things alone to discriminate between interpretations. That, of course, actually follows from the fact that the application of rules such as adequacy is influenced jointly by both factors. Panofsky's question is the same as Gombrich's; he makes it evident, if you look for the signs, that he too is concerned with "the artist's intention" (189). And there is no difference regarding belief; what each scholar believed about what was relevant to this question was not crucially different. Both followed indications of date and patronage to examine the circle of the patron's tutor Marsilio Ficino, and both went on to explore Ficino's teachings, merely settling in different areas of his thought. When the same question is asked, when the same facts are accepted, in these conditions the better interpretation is likely to be turned out by a simple calculus of the virtues. It is fair to wonder, however, whether this alignment of conditions is typical or even very common. If the formal rules work in only one sort of case, they have a far smaller stature than the method gives them.

19 THE CYCLE OF LOVE

In 1958, several years after the essays of Gombrich and Panofsky, the most detailed interpretation of this painting that has so far been developed was presented by the art historian Edgar Wind.[17] Wind's interpretation too is opposed to Gombrich's, but it is interesting to note how his criticisms differ. As Wind wrote, Gombrich's arguments (a mere "aggregate of Neoplatonic quotations") "unfortunately ... lead all around the programme of the picture but not to its centre"; Gombrich "does not explain the programme of the painting" (100—01, 101 n. 1). What form of critique is this? Unlike Panofsky, Wind is not faulting Gombrich for neglect of something in the picture (inadequacy). Neither for overcomplexity. Nor is it a hidden difference with respect to criteria of content, since Wind has determined the nature of the work in the same way: it is an historical expression; his aim is identical: he too is interested in the sense that its Neoplatonist authors devised the painting to convey.[18] Which rule is the critique based on?

---

17 Wind, "Botticelli's *Primavera* " in *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance* (1958). Further references given in parenthesis.

18 Thus Wind's careful articulation of rule two in the introduction to his book, provoked by the problem that "distance in time" poses for present understanding. The approach of his entire work, Wind tells us, is set by the following question about "the Renaissance painter": "By what method can his knowledge now be reconstructed

The issue seems in some way to concern the criteria of coherence and what we have called explanatory power, in that the deficiency of Gombrich's interpretation has to do with its meaning as a whole, and with a quality of explanation that Wind considers is missing. But the link with these criteria is not totally clear. The issue is plainly not coherence in the more concrete senses: Wind is not saying that Gombrich's interpretation is contradictory or does not hold together. And he is not saying that there is any mystery that Gombrich leaves unresolved. He claims that his own interpretation does "explain the programme," which I think must be understood to mean, *offers a more satisfying, a superior, sense of what all the figures in the work are doing together.* What Wind said is this: we agree that the original interpretation, the interpretation that explains this picture's existence, is Neoplatonic, but what Gombrich produces is not a Neoplatonic interpretation; it is a mere shadow of Neoplatonist thought. The rule involved in this criticism now appears to be the second rule, the rule of objectivity, but Wind did not claim that Gombrich had not recovered the work's own context, for Wind took his lead precisely from him. Neither was he claiming that that context was improperly narrowed down, or that the facts were wrong, for he focused upon the same Neoplatonic circle built upon the same facts.

Wind claimed that the reconstruction was too loose, a mere "aggregate" of Neoplatonism. This is a criticism that can be mounted on the basis of the rule of objective context, but delivered only through *Wind's specific understanding of Neoplatonism.* It has to do with a difference of belief about matters pertaining to the work's origins — belief, however, based not on a difference of fact but on a different conception of Neoplatonism, one built out of the details of Ficino's philosophy as Wind reads them. If all are agreed that the right interpretation is to have true Neoplatonic substance, what interpretation that is will depend upon your understanding of Neoplatonism. As Gombrich later wrote of his own interpretation, "Edgar Wind objected on philosophical grounds."[19] A detailed look at Wind's interpretation shows you how different a meaning a difference of belief such as this can lead to.

Ficino's theory of love you will recall from Panofsky's interpretation, and though there is no indication in Wind's essay that Wind knew of Panofsky's account, the two interpretations greatly overlap. But at the same time they are in a sense opposed, since the "theory of love" that Panofsky found laid out in two paintings Wind discovered in the *Primavera* alone: the *Primavera* is a painted 'representation' of the "two consecutive phases of one coherent theory of love" (101).

---

historically?" His answer — recovery of this intellectual context by "reading and influence" — was identical to Panofsky's, and is the established historical approach. (21—22)

19 Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies" (1945), 34.

The creation of spring, which is played out by the three figures at the right of the painting, who present a story from Ovid, "is only the initial phase in the Metamorphoses of Love that unfold in the garden of Venus," goddess of love.[20] Wind cites a passage from Ovid's *Fasti* that, in its utterly perfect fit with the painting, surely provides the right description of what is happening in this half of the painting. Ovid wrote about a "nymph of the fields" whose name was Chloris (the Greek word means 'pale'). It is the story of how Chloris found her husband, the wind god Zephyr, whose caress transformed her into Flora: "Goddess," Zephyr told her, "be queen of flowers."[21] Wind writes, "the awkwardness of the shy ... creature, caught against her will by the 'gale of passion,' is transformed into the swift poise of victorious Beauty. 'Till then,' according to the *Fasti*, 'the earth had been but of one colour.'" The roses and cornflowers that with Zephyr's touch and the breath of his mouth pour forth from Chloris' mouth fall straight into the lap of Flora, who strews them over the ground (102). What is this story of the birth of a goddess and the origin of colour, flowers, and spring but the story of the origin of beauty. And what does this mean? Wind answers, as his interpretation demands, in Ficinian language:

> In the guise of an Ovidian fable, the progression Zephyr—Chloris—Flora spells out the familiar dialectic of love: Beauty arises from an harmonious disagreement between Chastity and Love. (103)

Amor humanus, that is to say, is productive: it unfolds into new beauty. And it is the first stage of the progress of love, for this fruitful passion is only part of the work of Cupid, servant of Venus.

Cupid, above Venus at the centre of the picture, directs his arrow at the Graces, whom Wind associates (through their appearance and the meaning of their Latin names)[22] with the Ficinian triad we encountered in the painting's right half: Beauty, Chastity, and Passion (figure 6). If you look closely, you will see that the Grace his aim would find has set her eyes on Mercury, standing indifferently at the edge of the scene, glancing upwards through the clouds that he is parting with his staff — an ostensible relation of parts, something *in* the picture, that neither Gombrich's nor Panofsky's interpretation explained. This portrays the second stage of Ficino's theory. Wind writes:

> If it is the hidden light of intellectual beauty ... to which Mercury raises his eyes and lifts his magic wand then his posture also agrees with his role as 'leader of the Graces'; for in turning away from the world to contemplate the Beyond, he continues the action begun in their dance. The Grace of Chastity, who is seen from the back, looks in his direction because it is the transcendent love

---

20 Wind, *Pagan Mysteries* (1958), 103.

21 *Ovid's Fasti*, trans. J.G. Frazer, Loeb Classical Library (1967), 274—77.

22 On the left Laetitia Uberrima (Abundant Pleasure) and Voluptas; in the centre Splendor and Pulchritudo; and on the right Viriditas (Juvenescence) and Castitas. (103—04)

> — *amore divino* — toward which she is driven by the flame of the blindfolded Cupid. While she remains linked to her sisters by the 'knot which the Graces are loth to loosen,' she unites and transcends the peculiarities of Beauty [to her right] and Passion [to her left] by following Mercury, the guide of spirits. (108)

While, in the initial phase of love, *amor humanus* produces beauty, in another phase, *amor divinus* produces transcendent love — indeed, the two phases are cyclically linked. Here is Wind's nice summary:

> If Platonic Love were understood only in the narrow, popular sense in which it means a complete disengagement from earthly passions, the solitary figure of Mercury would be the only Platonic lover in the picture. But Ficino knew his Plato too well not to realize that, after gazing into the Beyond, the lover was supposed to return to this world and move it by the strength of his clarified passion. The composition of the painting is not fully understood, nor the role of Mercury quite comprehended, until he and Zephyr are seen as symmetrical figures. To turn away from the world with the detachment of Mercury, to re-enter the world with the impetuosity of Zephyr, these are the two complementary forces of love, of which Venus is the guardian and Cupid the agent .... What descends to earth as the breath of passion, returns to heaven in the spirit of contemplation. (108—09)

Botticelli has painted much more than a simple Primavera: he has depicted the entire *Cycle of Love,* which has both its end (perfection in itself) and its origin (God-given passion) in the divine.

There is something wonderful about this interpretation. With all these figures marvellously linked, and so many of their gestures, their glances, given so precise and coherent a sense, surely this is the best if not decisively the *right* interpretation. If we are inclined to think so, what is it that leads us? Apparently the rules, which are understood as the steps we must take in order to arrive at the most plausible revelation of the work's meaning. Is it by satisfying the conditions of the method that Wind's interpretation stands out? Like Panofsky's interpretation, this one deals very nicely with what Botticelli troubled to show us. One of the strengths of Wind's account is his treatment of the problematic Mercury: "the crux of any interpretation of the *Primavera,*" he says, "is to explain the part played by Mercury" (106). Wind gives sense both to Mercury's gesture and to his indifference to the Graces and the entire scene — satisfying, in other words, the condition of adequacy. Indeed, Wind's interpretation also brings significance to many details (including a virtuoso exegesis of the postures of the Graces)[23] that were wholly mute in the other two interpretations — that enhanced adequacy that was a partial sense of explanatory power. Is it therefore better? For the question arises once again, *how much* has to be accounted for,

---

[23] Wind weaves into his interpretation the expressions of their faces, their dress and undress, the differentiated forms of their three pairs of hands and feet, and their orientations one to another (104).

and *in what detail,* to make an interpretation 'adequate' to the work? Indeed we recognize that "not all gestures or spatial relations implied by the work are meaningful."[24]

The method's solution to this problem was the rule of objectivity: there is an historical background against which the abstract rule gets the definition it requires. Plainly there is no self-evident checklist of the semantic elements in a painting, the things to be given an interpretative sense; what those things are is determined (through our identification of the work as a human expression) by our resituation of the work in its context. But there is also no readily demonstrable historical index. If you have Wind's aim, you will have to assess to what things in the work or to what sort of thing the artist or the programme designer would have assigned a specific meaning; that is something that still must be judged, and there are many historical possibilities. By turning to the conception of the appropriate historical limit we get nothing actually by which to answer real questions. Consider as an illustration Wind's interpretation of the Graces: the subtle features of their postures, glances, and interlaced fingers might tell us, as Wind says they do, that the Grace Chastity is opposed to Passion and aligned with Beauty, but can yet be "initiated into Love" by a beautiful passion.[25] This may offer a powerful explanation of the details of the women's faces and forms, yet not satisfy us; it is perfectly acceptable to claim that this is too pedantic an attention to such features as fingers and feet, and there is no historical argument to be made either way. Quite plausibly, these details might show us just the grace of the Graces. According to the way we look at it — rather like those pictures such as Wittgenstein's duck/rabbit drawing, which are also puzzles of interpretation — both interpretations feel 'enough'; both fit the facts of the picture and both are compatible with what we know of the semantic proclivities of Renaissance interpreters and artists. What this tells us is simply that the choice between them, if we require to make one, will depend upon something other than abstract claims about criteria of adequacy and explanatory power concretized through the rule of objectivity.

Consider another rule: plainly, Wind's interpretation is *not* simpler than the others. It is more complex, but in that respect, I think, we would hardly call it weaker. For its increase in complexity also increases the focus, as it were, with which we view the picture. And the result of that was to bring into Wind's interpretation those many details that the other accounts failed to treat. Wind's interpretation has a kind of increased adequacy. And is it more coherent? It is, certainly, coherent: Wind offers an account that leads, right to left, through all the figures and then back again (through God's implicit presence in heaven) in a genuine Neoplatonic circle. But coherence is coherence: simpler interpretations have a

---

24 Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation" (1987), 24.

25 "In so far as dialectic can be danced, it has been accomplished in this group" (104).

coherence among fewer parts; this interpretation, among many. Coherence is a quickly exhausted criterion; once you have it it is of no use in discrimination, and you can have it in all shapes. According to the theory, a calculus of the virtues was thought to discriminate among competing interpretations, eliminating those that have no claim to legitimacy. Here our calculus does, to some extent, and then stalls; it fails to discriminate and leaves us looking for sharper criteria. What we have discovered is this: the formal virtues do not distinguish the best interpretation; the rules of form have the power simply to eliminate the obvious failures. They are rules that take us a relatively short distance toward the work's meaning.

What does distinguish the best interpretation? Rather, we have two questions: What leads us to prefer one of these interpretations (if not the rules of form)? and What is the legitimacy of that force or faculty? Just as the difference between these three interpretations of Botticelli depends on the beliefs they follow upon, the interpretation to prefer may depend upon what you think of those beliefs — upon what you yourself believe. Both Gombrich and Wind accepted that Botticelli painted to a Neoplatonic programme, but perhaps only Wind, who delved into Ficino, looked at the painting with the kind of understanding that its humanist author might have had. This is something the interpreter must decide — decide in the sense of 'take individual responsibility for,' for there is no non-interpretative way to determine what 'real' Neoplatonism looks like. Gombrich conceived of this humanist project as a general thing, and paid attention to a letter. Once correcting his obvious errors (Mercury), there is nothing factual to prevent us from once again considering the viability of reading the picture as *The Garden of Venus, Embodiment of Virtue*, understanding it as an image where a simple kind of beauty uncomplicated by stories might work an effect upon the heart of the young Pierfrancesco. Gombrich believed (and there is much evidence for doing so) that Renaissance artists were open to using classical stories without special intent, merely for the sake of their classical origins. And it is clear to us from both Panofsky and Wind how human beauty figures in Ficino's theology. Wind, on the other hand, thought Ficino's undertaking *must* have involved a much finer articulation of Neoplatonism, and paid attention to the *finesse* of his theory. But Wind's interpretation is better only if you insist that a Neoplatonic allegory such as this has to have more system and philosophical subtlety than Gombrich's 'simple' (yet also deep) moral lesson, and the basis of such a claim about Neoplatonism derives no support from the rules whatever.

Having said this, we have to introduce to the discussion of belief a suggestion, perhaps a disruptive one, that runs quite counter to the logic of rule following, merely because the suggestion arises here as a truly real answer to our first question, about the

basis of preference. Do we really believe that Gombrich and Wind proceeded step-wise: first committing themselves to the level of detail their beliefs about Neoplatonist interpretations compelled them to pursue, in accordance with their picture of Ficino, and proceeding to judge all interpretations by it? Or is it not more realistic to imagine that their ideas about the kind of Neoplatonic programme that 'had to be' involved were actually *based* upon the sort of interpretations they had managed to develop, rather than the *basis* for those interpretations? That is a dialectic in which the interpretations themselves, because satisfactory in some way, become evidence for the nature of humanist programmes. While we are pursuing this inquest into the logic of interpretation it is important at least to make room for our intuitions of realism, whatever place we finally accord them. Did Gombrich and Wind proceed step-wise, as the method suggests they do, or did they notice some correspondence (in each case different) between the image and Ficino, and then pursue that correspondence (each in different ways) until they discovered a plausible reading, a way of seeing the whole — a reading, that is, that satisfied them (as we have seen, in a way that overshoots the limitations of the rules). Did Gombrich pay attention to a letter, and *then* conceive of humanist projects as something general? That each account should work in its particular way would be reason in itself to favour a certain view of Neoplatonic image-making; the neat picture is its own argument. That kind of hermeneutic 'success', however uncontrolled, is *inevitably part* of the way in which we develop conceptions of historical reality. For on what other basis could Gombrich, or Wind, or Panofsky arrive *a priori* (as a methodological corrective) at a conception of Neoplatonic image-making?

If, on the other hand, we take the more rational view and see these conceptions of Neoplatonic interpretation as beliefs *guiding* interpretation, it is clear that the right interpretation is not a matter merely of what rules you follow, but even moreso of what you accept. Wind and Gombrich, rationally compared, can be separated only on the basis of different conceptions of Neoplatonist image-making. The strength of their interpretations rests, and can be measured, only in the substance of our own thought, the material beneath our own point of view. And in this respect the rational and the irrational approaches are, surprisingly, closer than we imagined, for the basis of a 'correct' conception of Neoplatonism and of a favoured interpretation, one that we judge 'works', is the same. It is a matter of conviction. In that regard, if *any* interpretation is to be preferred it is because in that case there is something we have found it preferable to believe. Thus far the method shows a certain weakness in deciding among interpretations at all; an interpretation has the strength of the beliefs it is tied to.

20 A WOMAN'S PRAISE

One last interpretation of Botticelli's painting is worth attention — this one radically opposed to all those we have considered — just because it gives so dramatic an illustration of the effect of beliefs upon interpretation. Its author is Ronald Lightbown, who wrote the latest substantial monograph on Botticelli in 1978.[26] His interest was identical: to find out how this painting was originally meant to be interpreted.[27] But one belief in the 'substructure' of his interpretation, one that determined its entire direction, was crucially different. Lightbown discovered evidence to show that the *Primavera* was not painted for the fifteen-year-old Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco in 1478 (the year of the didactic letter, or the years of his Neoplatonic upbringing), but for the twenty-year-old Lorenzo in 1482, when he married Semiramide d'Appiano. Since Gombrich, Panofsky, Wind, in fact every interpreter after 1908 had believed differently,[28] they all looked for clues to meaning around Lorenzo's humanist tutors. Lightbown looked instead around his marriage, and he interpreted this painting as a wedding present in praise of a bride.

Here Venus stands as the goddess of "love and marriage." Her arbour is guarded by Mercury (thus his sword, helmet, and military cloak, attributes that are all missing from customary depictions of Mercury), dispelling the clouds that darken less auspicious matches not favoured by the goddess who gives her blessing here.[29] "No clouds ... are permitted to chill or darken the garden of Venus." That here love touches even the Graces, Lightbown says, "is an obvious compliment to a bride." And what of Ovid's story of Chloris and Zephyr, telling us of a union that literally transformed a woman into a goddess? It is a tale "of love ending in marriage. In the background is the tempting beauty of the virgin nymph, in the foreground the smiling satisfaction of the young wife" (77—80). This author asks:

> How then should we interpret the picture? Its principal action lies between Venus and Cupid and the Grace whose heart they intend to pierce with the arrow of love and to fire with its flames. That love, we know, is one that will enjoy a lawful fruition in marriage, just as Zephyr's ardent pursuit has ended in his happy marriage with Flora. (81)

In Lightbown's account, even the spring season so gloriously present here has significance, since the wedding took place on the first day of May. And that is not the only

---

26 Lightbown, *Sandro Botticelli* (1978). Further references, to volume I, appear in parentheses.

27 The goal of interpretation in this study is to reach a "sense of the significance of these pictures in their own time .... to establish what they represent and why they were painted" (70).

28 Accepting the primary research of the scholar H.P. Horne, in *Alessandro Filipepi, Commonly Called Sandro Botticelli, Painter of Florence* (London 1908) (80).

29 Thus interpreting the raised hand of Venus that has perplexed many. See Gombrich, "Botticelli's Mythologies" (1945), 38.

'obvious' feature of the painting that this interpretation seems for the first time to accommodate. The following remarks are implicitly addressed to Gombrich, Panofsky, and Wind, all three.

> The great argument against interpreting the *Primavera* in too lofty and didactic a mode is the sensuality, discreet but unequivocal, which pervades it. ... [In addition] much that is otherwise inexplicable becomes plain if this interpretation is accepted. ... The frank, if restrained carnality of the picture, so strange if we see it as an *exemplum* of *humanitas* or any other moral virtue, is understood at once when we remember that marriage was celebrated in fifteenth-century Italy with a candidness of rejoicing in the ending of the bride's virginity .... (81)

Well, this is a nice account too. Is it preferable? Has it a better claim to tell us about the work? Our question now is whether the method gives us the basis on which to answer that. Every interpretation after 1908 had accepted that the *Primavera* was painted when its patron was about fifteen, and this bit of 'knowledge' set boundaries on the interpretations it made sense to consider — given, certainly, that one's aim lay in uncovering the original interpretation. If you believe something different, if you look at this picture accepting that it was painted at the time of its patron's marriage,[30] the situation is almost transformed. An entirely different interpretation arises, also subject to the test of the virtues (so far as they go), but as they apply second to what you happen to think. Here it isn't the formal rules that mark this as a better interpretation, if indeed it is. It has merely the kind of coherence you would expect it to have, given what you consider the work was for (praise rather than philosophical subtlety). It is not markedly simpler than Panofsky's interpretation, yet it *is* simpler than Wind's interpretation, though complexity was rather a virtue in Wind's case, because of the resulting increase in adequacy: the criterion of simplicity doesn't assist us much. Is it more adequate? Mercury's military trappings, the blessing gesture of Venus, and the spring setting are all given a specific explanation for the first time, though in fact they all had a general explanation before (the returning problem of 'semanticity'). Now, on the other hand, we no longer have an explanation of the gestures of the Graces or the symmetry of the two halves of the picture.[31] If Lightbown's interpretation is considered more adequate, it must be because for the first time the specific carnality of the picture is accounted for. But in that case, the assessment would depend equally much upon a matter of belief, a belief we share with Lightbown: the judgement that this carnality is inadmissible to Christian philosophy. This is a matter of conviction, judgement, and not a simple

30 The case is painstakingly made by Lightbown (72—73, 80).

31 The circular motion down from Cupid and up again through Mercury, down through Zephyr and up to Cupid.

historical conclusion, for Wind and Ficino did not think that way, as demonstrated by their explanations of *amor humanus*.

For seventy years, no one thought of the carefully researched date of this painting as erroneous, or as a "cramping influence" on interpretation, which is what Lightbown called it (80). Lightbown began his search for meaning on a different basis of information. The issue, then, between his and other interpretations also concerns fact. By the theory we have to interpret without misconceptions that foreclose on the nature of the object (material belonging to the ignorant pole of bad subjectivity); the erroneous nature of the old date given to the *Primavera* drew interpreters away from its most substantial semantic setting. The trouble here is wrong beliefs, of a more factual sort than we examined above — factual in the sense of having to do with more demonstrable events than we discussed above (the nature of Neoplatonism or Christianity). The cognitive motivation of modern interpretation establishes that the revealing or semantic context of the work necessarily involves such matters — thus the injunction that interpretation must have its "source" in "traditional 'documents'."[32] Facts are relevant to resolving disputes in interpretation.[33] The main effect of beginning an interpretation from an erroneous date is to fall afoul of objectivity: we are not even approaching the context that our identification as a culturally situated expression makes crucial. In light of the theory, Lightbown has reason to expect that the earlier interpretations are now effectively discredited. Until it has been demonstrated (by the kind of painstaking scholarly argument with which Lightbown overturns the old date) that the factual basis of an interpretation is sound enough to be accepted, interpretations may satisfy the rules but still fall short of the goal, which is cognitively specific. Someone sensitive to this fact would have to set our present understanding of art (based on masses of incomplete research) into a cloud of tentativeness and doubt.

Lightbown's interpretation has the further effect of deepening our appreciation of the dependency, which the method recognizes, of the rules and matters of judgement. While the method determines legitimacy (an interpretation's cognitive relevance) it is not the sole basis of an interpretation; a good interpretation according to the method, such as Wind's, is good by the rules, but the rules as run against a background of belief. That belief has an ultimate claim at least over the rules of form, for when it changes, all of the old interpretation's virtues are rendered null. The rule of objectivity, which is what encourages this rigour of fact or belief, and which, as we have seen, shapes the rules of form, has a greater stature than the list of rules makes plain.

---

32 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 27, 28

33 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 147.

21 THE METHOD RECONSIDERED

There are gaps in the theory of interpretation. That isn't surprising: there are gaps in every theory. A theory is a model, and a model only works if you leave things out. The only issue concerning omission is whether the things left out are part of the structure or the function the method aims to portray; omissions such as those are critical. After looking at the rules beside the kind of interpretative material they are supposed to shape, it appears that we need to say more in defining them than we usually say. The method we typically voice is simpler than it ought to be. If discussions of interpretation are really to do it justice, if we are to understand sufficiently what we are doing, we need to make some adjustments.

The first problem concerns the *formal rules;* our conception is certainly far too simple if we run into as much difficulty as we did in getting these criteria to do some actual work. Take, for instance, *simplicity*. Because it is not a necessary condition, it cannot discredit anything. We have a rule that is in fact extremely weak. Its strongest but narrowest sense (marking interpretations that work with strain, as in Gombrich's invention of the corrupt edition of Apuleius) has edge but little scope; there are few interpretations likely to fail it. Wind's account does not fail that test, yet it is still not simple, and the fact that it is not was not a deficiency, because its complexity was so finely matched to details of the work that it gave the interpretation a close fit to the work.

> This criticism [i.e., adequacy or explanatory power] will often work against the other two [simplicity and historical plausibility], and quite rightly so. There is no guarantee that the materially simplest explanation is correct. There is an intuitive, almost 'aesthetic' element in the judgement to be made of how far to go beyond the minimal explanation.[34]

Simplicity is not necessary since sometimes complexity is better. Of course, we say, the rules have to be worked all together; judging an interpretation involves a kind of calculus of the effect of all the virtues taken together. But how does one judge, actually, whether the increased adequacy of Wind's interpretation outweighs its complexity (its recourse to subtleties like the matching of the Graces' feet and hands with Ficino's theory), and how do we compare it in those respects to Gombrich's? Well, certainly, the matter has to be weighed. That, however, is a much more surprising conclusion than it sounds, because by pursuing the details of *how rules function* (which no method explains) we have passed out of the realm of rules. The rules are not just factors of some sort or other, but criteria precisely of ranking, evaluating — ostensibly clear features that distinguish valid interpretations. They are the reasons why interpretation is not a matter of mere *preference.* But if there is no indication of how to judge whether a complex but adequate interpretation

---

34 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 214.

is better or worse than a simple interpretation that is also adequate (at a lower level of detail), and if we must simply 'judge' or 'weigh' the best interpretation, are we applying the rule of simplicity at all: are we relying upon *criteria* to indicate what is best? It seems not. Simplicity, though on paper it seems to do something, has no edge.

Coherence presents a somewhat different problem: it appears to have an edge (unlike simplicity, either of self-contradiction or disorder spells immediate failure) but there is very little for that edge to cut. A meaning that does not contradict itself, and that hangs together as a whole, fits by far the greater number of interpretations ever advanced.[35] None of the four interpretations examined of the *Primavera* could be called incoherent. Yet the difference in unity between the meaning Gombrich found in the work and the meaning found by Wind is immense: they offer a 'whole' that feels utterly different, and yet they are both 'wholes'. The criterion is virtually without substance, and the rule of coherence is a second weak step in the calculus of rules.

The criterion of *adequacy* introduced a comparable but more complex problem. Beside explanatory power, it is certainly the most decisive rule: we know when an interpretation utterly fails to take account of something that demands explanation (Gombrich's treatment of Mercury). But again, this affects only relatively few interpretations, and the nature of images allows one many ways of 'accounting for' something. For instance, we might account for the figure of Mercury in number but not in detail. Panofsky's interpretation gave Mercury a place in the work's meaning (representative of reason), as indeed the figure demands. But he did not give any meaning to Mercury's military kit, as Lightbown did (Mercury as guardian of happiness). Which is adequate? Both are adequate, but one in number, the other in number and detail. Which sense of adequacy is important? The rule is becoming unmanageable through the problem of semanticity (the issue of how much meaning there is). Does it become empty? No, the burden of the discrimination shifts to rule 2: the iconic features of a work can be determined by research. The point to be made is that adequacy is not so much a criterion in itself but an aspect of the rule of objectivity; the weight of the rules is travelling to the top of the list.

The 'criterion' of *explanatory power* raises a distinct problem, for upon examination it seems a criterion (an external legitimation) in name only, for when we attempt to make it concrete we are driven back to 'judgement'. When is a puzzle resolved? We simply judge which interpretation offers the best explanation — in reality we have achieved no insight at all into what it is that makes it 'best'. Explanatory power is troubling for another reason; it

---

35 "I do not see any way o preserve the metaphor of a text's *internal* coherence. I should think that a text just has whatever coherence it happened to acquire during the last roll of the hermeneutic wheel, ... Its coherence is no more than the fact that somebody has found something interesting to say about a group of marks ...." Rorty. "The Pragmatist's Process" (1992), 97.

is problematic precisely against the objective focus of modern theory. Does an interpretation that I judge explanatory, that resolves my sense of puzzlement about a work, that satisfies me as sufficient, constitute a basis of cognitivity? In fact the drive of an interpretation stands behind the subject not the object unless, once again, 'sense' is given an objective orientation. My conception of sense must be bracketed, and an historical standard established for each case. A closer look at the formal rules has increased our awareness of their dependence upon the rules of content, whose importance is now magnified.

As non-positivists we grant that the method has chiefly to do with ranking: "questions of validity are questions of relative validity."[36] But the satisfied shift in the discipline of art history from truth and correctness to probability or merit is still concerned with discrimination. When we hear the rules explained, it appears that some kind of summative calculus will rank the better and the worse interpretations and draw a hard line between the legitimate and the failed. In this chapter we have looked at four interpretations of a single painting. How does the method rate them? Gombrich's is the only one that appears to fail, failing to interpret Mercury's gesture and straining credibility by some play with sources (but on the first point, we could easily slip in Panofsky's interpretation of Mercury, and on the second, Gombrich's interpretation does not so much fail as weaken, for the suggestion is not impossible.) How do we rank the other three? The rules, in fact, do not do rank them, because they are satisfied by all, in the different forms those criteria can assume. Panofsky's has the added virtue of scope (but that is a non-necessary criterion); Wind's has a certain ponderousness, but a magnificently enhanced adequacy (yet we cannot actually call the adequacy of Lightbown's inferior). Lightbown's interpretation possesses a certain veracity, but a veracity that hinges upon detailed but *highly* subtle documentary arguments that may yet be overturned, and that may push his interpretation toward complexity, according to how we see it. These interpretations do not fail the method, nor yet display any notable deficiency — except in relation to beliefs you may have about the nature of Neoplatonic imagery, the involvement of Ficino, or the circumstance of the work's commissioning. Preference seems to hinge upon matters of belief, which the method barely treats.

The second issue follows from the first, which illuminates a specific *line of dependency* that is not initially visible in a list of rules. As we already knew, the rules of form rely upon the deeper determinations of the rules of content; we now see how deep that reliance is. We also see that the rules of content rely, likewise, upon a deeper determination of the nature of the thing we are concerned to know; the method did not bring to light our

---

36 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 124—25.

entire process, which begins with the recognition that we cannot hope to approach the meaning of the thing without identifying what kind of thing it is, and hence where its meaning is to be found. In fact we can unfold three distinct preliminaries, which we might call *identification, elaboration,* and *reconstruction.* The first of these is a determination of the general nature of a work of art: for instance, to identify Botticelli's *Primavera* as a *kind* of object or entity — an historical expression, a work with a communicative purpose, which is the very thing that brought it into being. The second is an elaboration of the concrete significance of that recognition, unfolding what specifically that means: to identify Botticelli's *Primavera* as the expression by commission of Florentine Neoplatonists or of a prince honouring his bride. Elaboration is a narrowing of one's aim, and the last step is to pursue the chosen course in a reconstruction of that context: to bring together what we can know about Florentine Neoplatonism. This whole operation is the *objectification* of the work of art, the making concrete of the work's own reality. The theory of objectivity is the philosophy behind it, and it is crucial to defining the formal rules. 'Everything in the work,' for Gombrich, is 'everything that a Florentine humanist would have seen' in the way that Gombrich understood a Florentine humanist.

It is not necessarily a deficiency of the method that the relevance to interpretation of issues of *belief* is not given much attention, but without it one easily gets a false image of how the rules work.[37] Just as the formal rules tend to lean upon the rule of objectivity, it leans upon something the list does not include. Even if Wind's critique of Gombrich is mounted on the basis of external rules it is delivered only through *his* understanding of Neoplatonism; though the criteria are the same, there is a difference in the 'reconstruction' of Neoplatonism, Wind's "philosophically" different understanding of Ficino. Our choice between them would likewise depend upon our own sense: if the right interpretation is to have true Neoplatonic substance, what interpretation that is depends upon our understanding of Neoplatonism. Does that suit the theory? Just as a mistake about the fact of *when* the painting was painted can render interpretations like Gombrich's and Wind's mistaken, we would need also the right understanding of Neoplatonism. But here we need to face a difference, which the theory can accommodate, between a 'fact' (something capable of decisive demonstration) and an 'opinion' (something we believe but cannot very effectively demonstrate). Obviously, interpretations must be judged in the face of what is thought to be the truth.

---

37 It causes trouble everywhere it arises in disputes of interpretation, as for instance in the interpretation of history; a key discussion in that connection is W.H. Walsh's "Can History be Objective?" in his *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (New York 1967).

We have asked in this chapter what it is that legitimate interpretations involve, what is really at issue when one is thrown over for another. The answer we tend to give — that one is abandoned for another because it critically fails the rules, or satisfies them less well than a different interpretation — now looks simplistic, because there is plainly more going on within that operation. It is less the rules that discriminate than the beliefs defining them. Interpreters have different notions affecting the identification, the elaboration, and the reconstruction of a work of art and thus the consequent conditions in which the meaning is to be found. That has one notable consequence with respect to the increasingly apparent dependency of the rules of form. We are not going to get any unified set of virtues by claiming (as the method must) that these criteria will be defined by each particular historical setting, because our reconstructions of those settings are so often crucially different. Our look at one painting, with one origin, has turned up numerous senses of adequacy, simplicity, and coherence. If these formal rules are not generally applicable, *they are not comparative*. As we recognize, "an interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us."[38] If an interpretation is to be preferred, it appears the case that it is to be preferred because of something it is preferential to believe. But as what defines a good interpretation shifts toward matters of conviction, our conception of what *the method* is for falls apart. It is perhaps apparent, then, why some theorists reject the formal rules altogether: "Material completeness, fruitfulness, or a resulting coherence of meaning I cannot recognize as arguments for the correctness of an interpretation."[39]

The final adjustment to be made concerns the deepest move behind the method, the step that I have called *'identification'*. The method's most substantial rules require us to form a sound conception of the general nature of the work of art itself, for without it the method could not win the cognitive power it is about. To know the work, in its meaning, requires knowing what kind of thing the work of art is: "anything may be the object of understanding and ... analysis of understanding x depends on the x."[40]

> The object of understanding determines the sense of understanding it, and elucidation of what it is that one claims to understand clarifies what it is to understand it.[41]

Without this understanding "how [do we] validate evidence for relevance and irrelevance to the work in question?"[42] Just as in physical restoration the restorer attempts to give a

---

38 Heidegger, cited by Davey, "Nietzsche's Aesthetics" (1986), 333 n. 19.
39 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 161.
40 Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 131.
41 Ibid., 139.
42 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 209.

painting back its own appearance, by fundamental analysis the theorist sets the work in its own category, on which basis the historian can isolate the semantic context that is its own. A single aim drives the desire to obtain a correct grasp of the current "appearance of a work," of its "original effect," and of the "nature of the object."[43] And as restoration depends on scholarship, scholarship depends on a deeper level of thought; they are all moves of orientation toward the entity we wish to know about.

> One has to determine whether the work of art still stands before us in the condition in which it left the hand of its creator. Where that is not the case, the work must be returned to its original condition. Often that happens in actuality — as, for instance, in the restoration of paintings. In most cases, however, it takes place within the viewer's imagination.[44]

As Panofsky recognized early on, identifying the work's basic nature is the necessary and deepest foundation of a hermeneutic method. "The grasp of 'immanent meaning' is based on a grasp of the essence of a work and conditions of its existence."[45] Later he would express it more in terms of the necessary theoretical basis of cognitive endeavours:

> In directing their attention to *certain* objects they obey, knowingly or not, a principle of pre-selection dictated by a theory in the case of the scientist and by a general historical conception in the case of the humanist. ... We are chiefly affected by that which we allow to affect us; and just as natural science involuntarily selects what it calls the phenomena, the humanities involuntarily select what they call the facts.[46]

The importance of this insight is still recognized: "To some extent we *do* legislate [interpretation] in advance. The idea that we should stand in front of a picture with absolutely open minds, that we exercise no stringencies at all, impose no demands whatever, is hard to make sense of."[47] In developing an interpretation it is necessary to rely upon "categories which are valid *a priori* " that reliably reveal the basic nature of the work of art.[48]

But what is it, specifically, that accomplishes this identification? It is not the theory of objectivity; the theory does not identify the work but tells us there is something with an identity to be grasped. It goes only so far as to clarify that an object is at issue in understanding, and that a separation of what belongs to self and to other is essential if we are to discover it. For the theory to be followed and the method applied, boundaries must

---

43 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 31—32.

44 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 98—99.

45 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 28, 29, 31. "According to Panofsky, the inherent ... meaning of works of visual art can only be grasped by an interpretative act based upon the deduction, a priori, of categories that are essential to 'the being of the work'." Editor's introduction to Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 17.

46 Panofsky, "A Humanistic Discipline" (1940), 6.

47 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 150—51.

48 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 26—29.

be marked, and marking boundaries of identity is the task of a more abstract and categorial thinking.

> Without theory we are barely justified in describing and analysing works of art, dating them, reconstructing, icono-graphing them, but we cannot evaluate or interpret them.[49]
>
> Those who deny the importance of theory in the practice of art history are in fact oblivious to their own.[50]

We might call identification a task of philosophy, but this does not seem to us a philosophical matter, rather a matter of intuition. It is basic insight that asks What else can a work be than what it was when it was made, for which purpose it came into being? Each of the interpretations examined in this chapter is based on the same apparently implicit answer: the work is a human product; it is the product of a mind intent upon conveying meaning; it was produced to have meaning, and by consequence is inherently meaningful, for it is that meaning that explains the work's existence. It is that initial grasp of what the work is that gives specific substance to all the rules; identification provides what a cognitive discipline needs, "a readily negotiable bridge between the grand generalities of theory and the particulars of practice."[51] For the rule of subjectivity, it defines *what specific aspects* of subjectivity are irrelevant; for the rule of objectivity it defines *where precisely we must look* for a content belonging to the work; and for the rules of form it defines *what particular shape* the formal rules must take. The applicability of the entire method depends upon this identification; without it, legitimacy remains a theoretical dream.

It is apparent, upon examination, that the method is not the method we believe we have and the one we continue to recommend. A more developed sketch of the rules according to how they actually work will take the foregoing into account, including all its parts and clarifying their systematic interconnection — specifically, the logical suspension of the method from its cognitive 'ground' in a grasp of the object of interpretation and the key position of the rules of content:

---

49 Ackerman, "American Scholarship" (1958), 361.
50 Pontynen, "Theory and Practice of Art History" (1986), 467.
51 McCorkel, "Epistemological Approach" (1975), 42.

The System Of Rules

	BASIS:
1. identification	the work of art must be *identified* as what in general it is, and its specific nature *elaborated* in order to establish from where its meaning must be derived
	RULES OF CONTENT:
2. subjectivity	the content of an interpretation must not be formed out of subjective material that has *nothing to do with the work as identified* (as per 1)
3. objectivity	the content of an interpretation must be formed out of material marked out by *the identification* (as per 1)
4. veracity	the content of an interpretation must be developed according to one's *belief* about the things relevant to the historical setting indicated (as per 3)
	RULES OF FORM:
5. adequacy	an interpretation must *fit* what has meaning in the work, to the adequacy required by the historical setting, according to one's understanding of it (3, 4)
6. simplicity	it must be *simple* to the extent required by the historical setting, according to one's understanding of it (3, 4)
7. coherence	it cannot contradict itself; it must form a *coherent* whole by standards of the historical setting, according to one's understanding of it (3, 4)
8. explanatory power	it must *remove puzzlement* about the work, while creating no sense incompatible with the work's setting (2—4)
9. scope	it needn't fit or bring clarity to *other* works or circumstances of its setting (3, 4), but if it does, it has added plausibility

The key position of identification in this picture of the rules raises a single question: What is the status of any identification?

> The danger is that, regardless of technique, historians must make certain theoretical assumptions about the nature of art ... before they can assemble their data in any order. Would be technicians

> make them too, but they do so unconsciously or, I should say, they accept them unawares from the past. In doing so they may well be fostering a bad philosophy or diluting a good one.[52]

Parts II to IV of this study examine the three principal forms of identification operative in modern interpretation. Modern interpreters are too well informed to be shy about the necessity of taking a position. "It can be freely admitted that an aesthetic ... aimed at the history of meaning, must 'listen to artistic objects according to certain concepts fixed from the outset.'" As Panofsky regards them, concepts that "could certainly completely characterize all artistic phenomena."[53] In a discussion entitled "The Interpretative Model" Kemp has observed that

> much art history assumes that the process of understanding consists of looking at the visual and other evidence, asking relevant questions, and honestly providing answers of a nonarbitrary kind. But 'evidence' in this schema assumes its status only in relation to presupposed questions; that is, it has special significance only in relation to a given explanatory goal. And the 'question' gains its legitimacy from one or a series of expectations or predicates, normally shared by the intended audience, for the answer.[54]

We have seen that the explanatory goal is determined by what we identify the work to be; few are willing to count that identification a shared prejudice.

> In the history of art, our questions will be determined by our image of what is important in the process of making a work of art, and even more fundamentally what is important in 'art' itself. If, for example, we believe that art is essentially a series of signs communicative of social systems, our most valued evidence will be that concerned with the action of art in its social context.[55]

All that remains to be explored about modern interpretation is the cogent intuitive support that these bases of practice are rooted in. The question has been raised,

> all attempts to explain phenomena are notions relative to interest; the answers we obtain are influenced by the questions that we ask. But toward which interests (or within which contexts) should the scholar operate?[56]

We need to explore the answer that has been given. We have to understand why the work of art must be identified as modern hermeneutics identifies it: as an expression in a semantic system, as a meaningful communication, and as a cultural entity constituted within specific worlds.

---

52 Ackerman, "American Scholarship" (1958), 360.
53 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 29, 30.
54 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 207.
55 Ibid., 207.
56 Pontynen, "Theory and Practice of Art History" (1986), 474.

P A R T T W O

ART AS LANGUAGE

The reading of a painting, no matter what era it belongs to, is not the business of an innate and mysterious talent that a certain manner of looking possesses by nature, but an often complex and difficult apprenticeship in hierarchically ordered codes that permit us, so far as is possible, to reproduce the creative construction of the artist in its conscious and unconscious aspects. Codes that translate in an inherently complex manner the ideologies and the representations of an epoch, a class, a social group, a culture ....

Louis Marin (1971)

The naturalized sign is an arbitrary cultural construct that presents itself as the real or the natural; it is therefore the bearer of ideology and the mask put on 'real' conditions. ... Naturalized signs inhibit critical thought through the strength of their claim to a proper, univocal reading; ....

Richard Shiff (1988)

3

THE MODEL OF THE CODE

22 DETERMINATION OF THE OBJECT, I

To interpret, we must know what kind of thing we are interpreting: that is fundamental. Grasping the most basic and recognizable nature of the work of art is the root of the theory's cognitive development. That is the entire orientation of modern hermeneutics. To interpret a thing, one has to know what sort of thing it is — indeed, that is required even to know to what extent it is interpretable at all. This fact, that we are not interested in 'interpreting' meaningless things, reminds us that the concept of interpretation is inherently cognitive, oriented toward something, a meaning that is, that exists in some way. To 'interpret' what does not, in any contextual sense, possess its own meaning can only be to provide that meaning found missing; that is, it can only be pure projection, and pure projection is fundamentally not what we understand interpretation to be. To know whether there is meaning to interpret is a crucial preliminary. Thus we must identify the class of *the meaningful,* and then determine what is the specific semantic mechanism of the work of art, through which it belongs to that class: that is, we must establish *by what means it holds its meaning.* "One of the most striking phenomena of advanced twentieth-century thought has been the increasing utilization of the concept of structure as a tool of understanding in the human sciences."[1] This chapter articulates one such clarification: one fundamental and

---

Marin, "Comment lire un tableau" (1971), 99.
Shiff, "Art History and the Nineteenth Century" (1988), 39.

1 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 79.

widespread manner in which works of art are presently identified as meaningful things, containing meaning in certain specific respects. "In the absence of any coherent theoretical explanation of what painting is"[2] we are left in a weak position in which to proceed to understand it. That is why there are established models of how works of art mean. I have not yet made it clear, in what has been said thus far about the identification of — the determination of the nature of — the object of interpretation, that there does not appear to be an infinite number of ways to picture the work of art, a great number of models. Or rather, of the many historically imagined ways, there are chiefly three that hold our attention, three in which we continue to believe.[3]

The identification at issue in this chapter, as the sources I cite will demonstrate, is well established and widespread. The last chapter finished on the question of the legitimacy of these identifications, which is in some sense crucial *precisely if* hermeneutics is to be developed as a cognitive enterprise (our modern concern). This chapter demonstrates the cogency of this first view. As we expect, it is not proofs or subtle deductive argument but intuition, insight, and basic reasoning that lend our identifications credence; it is the credence on which we have confidently established a standard of legitimate interpretation, an interpretation capable of telling us about the works we are concerned to know. We are looking for a genuine sense of the work of art by which an objectively oriented hermeneutic method can be structured and controlled. It is plain that we do not want merely a *basis;* if the objective aim of the theory is not to be undermined at its deepest level, it is necessary to sustain the claim that our identifications truly characterize works of art, present them as they genuinely are, are the most respectful categories of apprehension. The basis of identification still remains rather nebulous, and the historical attrition of these arguments suggests a certain vulnerability. It is only by looking that we will gain any real insight into

---

2 Watney, "Modernist Studies" (1984), 104.

3 We must show reluctance to claim that identifications are obvious or self-evident; the now established forms won their 'obviousness' far later than we may suspect. One of the defunct conceptions, which held credence long into this century, was the 'Hegelian' view of art, a conception that it took substantial battering to eliminate (two of the best known discussions are those by Gombrich, in *In Search of Cultural History* [1969], and Arnold Hauser, "Art History without Names," *Philosophy of Art History* [1958], 119—276): the conception that the work of art is, essentially, the product of a kind of supra-individual tendency inherent in the nature of things. Works of art appear in answer to problems that arise of necessity from a self-perpetuating artistic force or "will to art" (Alois Riegl's *Kunstwollen*). The view was held by Riegl, but also Wölfflin and the early Panofsky, who noted that a work's "immanent meaning" is the product of a "formative force" of creation that goes beyond the artist's "subjective expression of feelings" Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 33. A key concept in this view was the concept of "law," which we now consider a particularly vacuous notion in connection with art. Panofsky in 1920 viewed Riegl as being faithful to the real nature of art in directing "his attention to the inherent laws underlying artistic activity" Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 19. Once tremendously important, the view is now dead. McCorkel notes that it had become impossible to sustain in the thirties. McCorkel, "Epistemological Approach" (1975), 37. And as Gombrich observed, "*Kulturgeschichte* has been built, knowingly and unknowingly, on Hegelian foundations which have crumbled." Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (1969), 6.

where they come from. This chapter, then, elaborates our understanding that a work of art is an expression in a language — in a sign system through which meaning is encoded.

23 LANGUAGE AS SIGN SYSTEM

How do we know that paintings and sculptures are meaningful, thus interpretable? One of our most basic apperceptions concerning works of art is that they are productions, humanly made, thus fundamentally historical. This tells us a great deal that is crucial to the concretization of the rules of content. But those rules can be concretized precisely enough to have methodical implications only if we go further, and distinguish works of art from other artefacts (such as hammers, earrings, or shoes). Works of art are *artefactual expressions; they are expressions in humanly devised languages*. Language is our most primary model of the mechanism of meaning. Gombrich's teacher Julius Von Schlosser, for instance, in the earlier part of this century allocated art to the sphere of "language" because language is "characterized by preserving artistic conventions and stereotypes."[4] Works of art, we know, belong to systems of signs.

We believe that recognizing the work of art as an expression or a statement in a humanly devised language tells us something essential (though plainly not metaphysically essential) about it. Artistic images are unlike natural images precisely in being humanly structured to mean. This structure determines equally the substance and the limit of their meaning (a limit broader than one reading only, but a limit nonetheless, exclusive of many misreadings).

> The image which is discredited or sometimes contaminated by ingenuous associations, combinations, or even by banal confusions (through assonance) with other latent images in the memory is the document of a culture of the diffused image; it is a *signifiant* to which may be attributed, as to the words of a spoken language, many *signifiés*. For this reason iconologism, much more than Wölfflinian formalism, confronts the problematic of art as that of *linguistic structures*.[5]

The possibility of 'interpretation' at all is *based* on this fact about works of art, that they are a linguistic means:

---

4 Bakos, "Art Historical Process" (1983), 121.

5 Argan "Ideology and Iconology" (1975), 299 [emphasis added]

> The basic meaning of 'interpret' is ... 'verbally to unfold or disclose' the information encoded in any communication be it written or spoken words, gestures, smoke signals or pulses of light from a laser beam.[6]

> Meaning in art may be extremely complex in some situations, but to the extent that it does what it does, to the extent that it communicates thoughts, perspectives, experiences, and the like, then at base it is subject to the same conditions as language. Artists must work within the domain of some publicly identifiable organization of signs or symbols.[7]

It is in this way, above all, that a work of art is analogous to a text (thus the historical relevance to art of the tradition of hermeneutics, whose object was entirely textual). A text, and a simple expression of language like a sentence, are meaningful structures built from the configuration of semantic components. And how do we *understand* the meaning of an expression of language? By learning the language that it is built of. By an established view of language, the meaning of a linguistic expression is uncovered by reading the opaque sign according to the semantic system within which, according to which, it was formed.

A language is commonly understood as a system of semantic devices: a set of ways of meaning things (by lexicon, by syntax, by inflexion, ...) that functions, capturing and then conveying its meanings, by virtue of an overall regularity. Languages are humanly devised semantic systems, and as inventions they are historical constructions: their historical fixity determines the limit of the meaning of signs. A work of art likewise belongs to an historically devised semantic system: it is a meaningful expression constructed through the devices of a pictorial language — "the 'language' of the artist, the rules and conventions that he adopts."[8] Thus the importance of "the determination to read the work of art as a structure of signs."[9] We are familiar with pictorial language at perhaps its least subtle in the devices of advertising.

> Today, images that are to deliver their messages quickly and clearly operate an analogous system of conventional signs or visual stereotypes, though the system is much less closely articulated than in renaissance religious narrative and the specific meanings are almost always defined by an accompanying text.[10]

Though there may be a difference in subtlety, it is by devices that the work of art also holds what meaning it has, and it is through the public system of these devices that it conveys that meaning to us.

It is because we are able to identify or define works of art as tokens of language that we have insight into what is required to understand them; we know from what conditions

---

6 Osborne, "Interpretation in Science and in Art" (1986), 3.
7 Radford, "Meaning and Significance" (1992), 61.
8 Ibid., 66.
9 Kuspit, ""Traditional Art History's Complaint" (1987), 347.
10 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 31.

the meaning of a linguistic expression derives. Pictorial meaning has been humanly established, and

> pictorial semiology sets itself the scientific task of describing and understanding simultaneously the mechanisms of their articulation (in the creative act) and the process of reading and deciphering (in the act that answers to it, contemplation) — what Poussin called the "delectation" of the eye realizes this enigmatic operation of reading the visible and seeing the intelligible: which is to say, the meaning of the painting.[11]

The deficiency of earlier art history was to some extent its failure to address this most fundamental level of meaning.

> Our methods of style description, iconographic interpretation, and contextual commentary depend upon external comparisons — with other works of art, cultural conventions, and social situations. Hardly ever do we attempt to deal with the communicative functioning, the visual mechanics, so to speak, inherent in the work of art itself.[12]

It is by understanding the human mechanism of meaning that we can ask, "which signs convey, or trigger, which meanings?"[13] Interpretation is thus the re-articulation of the devices of meaning that belong to the language. By recognition of the fact that the work of art is, essentially and unavoidably, a linguistic expression, the theory of interpretation gains its final concretization.

Through this identification, what precisely one must do to follow the rules of content is made clear; two more or less distinct operations of the method can now unfold. The identification of the work as a semiotic phenomenon can be *elaborated:* that is, one must proceed to determine what historical language the work is a token of, and that elaboration leads one into a *reconstruction* of the precise linguistic conditions (to the extent that we can know them) of the expression at hand, in terms of which its meaning is held. Through identification, we have uncovered the limits of a truly cognitive interpretation: to understand this work of art, the content of our interpretation must finally be restricted by and constituted through an understanding of how the language of art works, and through a sound understanding of the language of art operative in a specific time and place. "We require a concrete and highly developed notion of artistic meaning for the foundation of artistic hermeneutics."[14] What we are to bring to light about the work are the conditions of the working of its language, the broader semantic system of which it was originally part,

---

11 Marin, "Comment lire un tableau" (1971), 99.

12 Rosand, "Art History and Criticism" (1974), 437; Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 171—72; n. 40.

13 Bal, *Beyond the Word-Image Opposition* (1991), 12.

14 Hofstdadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 98.

the framework that fixes its meaning. For to identify a work of art as an expression in a historical language means it is a part of something larger, which is the language itself.

Given this determination of the object, we now also recognize how the work's identity stretches beyond it — an important insight for distancing our sense of objectivity from the old empirical objectivism. It was objectivism, likening the work to its physical singularity, that raised problems over 'special knowledge', knowledge going beyond the empirically given. Understanding the work as a token of a language makes obvious the prejudice behind that paradigm.

> [The meaning of a work of art] cannot be grasped without reference to something which lies outside the work itself.[15]
>
> The external boundaries of works of art, for instance the frame of an easel painting, must not be identified with the 'boundaries of their being.'[16]
>
> Some of the real properties of a thing require the possession of contextual knowledge for their detection.[17]

The language is a constitutive part of the work. What, specifically, are the features of language that we must uncover?

There are, evidently, two established "semantic models" to guide us, one of British origin, one of continental. The first, which lays stress upon purpose and intent, is "the concept of language as the invention and means of expression for thought," which is a conception that is more closely focused upon the act and conditions of communicating than the language that effects it; the other, which is associated with the "father of modern linguistics" Ferdinand de Saussure, is "a concept of language as an elaborate system of signs." Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (1916, English trans. 1959) had an important effect from early on in this century, which was "to emphasize the arbitrary nature of the relationship between language and things."[18] The authors of the recent primer *Essential Art History* suggest that it has supplied the basis for our present understanding of the linguistic nature of art.

> Since the 1960s art history ... has come under increasing pressure to recognize that art, far from being an exclusive and somewhat mysterious language, shares common ground with other forms of communication, from road signs to mathematical equations. We owe to the Swiss linguist

15 Lohner, "The Intrinsic Method" (1968), 170.
16 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 100.
17 Lyas, "Intentional Fallacy Revisited" (1983), 294.
18 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 12—13.

> Ferdinand de Saussure the insight that all languages, whether visual, verbal, or symbolic, use 'signs' in a conventional, not natural way.[19]

We have long recognized that a "language is a system of signs, different from the things signified, but able to suggest them"[20] by some non-natural means. What do we need to know about that 'system' to understand a language's ability to convey meaning? The crucial thing is that it is a publicly established set of sign-meaning relations, a substantially fixed correlation between the signs of the language and the meanings they stand for. "The secure fixing of signs in a system, the code,"[21] is codification. In understanding art we are concerned with "culturally encoded systems of meaning," "the highly developed codes of a culture,"[22] "systems of visual signification prevailing in a particular culture and period."[23] We understand languages as essentially *codes*, and through our identification of art as language "code" is a term recurrently used in the hermeneutics of art.

A humanly established structure of meaning-conveyance is an *established code of correspondence between meaning and sign*. That the meaning of signs is deliberately established, in this conception, is a crucial feature, for it clarifies the distinctness of artistic from natural images, obscured during those unenlightened ages when works of art and constellations of stars were read in exactly the same way. (That works of art were initially collected in "Wunderkammer," along with bits of coral, weirdly shaped rocks, and other wondrous objects, is indicative not only of the nature of interest in art but also of the hermeneutic applied to it.) And as Norman Bryson has commented, "Saussure's conception of the sign is exactly the instrument we need to cut the knots" of the notion that painting is a 'record of perception'.[24] "Much recent painting positively invites the viewer to read its marks and motifs as signs rather than as expressive gestures or records of observation"[25] — thus the value of those techniques that have been developed to deal with "the form and structure of systems of signs."[26] It is certainly probable that this development in our

---

19 Greenhalgh and Duro, *Essential Art History* (1992), 267—68. Guy Bouchard has suggested to me that the subtlety of Saussure's *Course* does not appear to be reflected in the talk of theoretically minded art historians. It is very likely, indeed, that theorists have not taken pains to properly translate the system to the visual arts; the 'pedigree' thus applied to the code model may therefore be overstated by these authors. But for our purpose it is interesting to note the academic legitimacy that is sought for the kind of basic insights into code function that, as I show in this chapter, are common in the discipline of art history.

20 James, *Principles of Psychology*, XXII.

21 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 45.

22 Marin, "Comment Lire un tableau?" (1971), 89.

23 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 95.

24 Cited by Kuspit, "Traditional Art History's Complaint" (1987), 346.

25 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 30.

26 Ibid., 29.

understanding of art has had an effect upon art itself, for it is the way artists too look upon what they do.[27]

Certainly a language, on the face of it, does not look altogether like a code structure. Of the language we use, it is more difficult than it first appears to articulate any strict system of correlations and contextual conditions. And certainly in learning a language we are not actually presented with 'structures': we know the meaning of a hand-wave, for instance, not because we have been shown the correlation and conditions (*this*, in this circumstance, means *that*); we have simply learned about waving. But if the learning of a language does not teach us about its structure it surely teaches its structure, implicitly.

> As long as an utterance is phrased in language that is familiar to us and refers to a situation that we know by experience, understanding will be immediate and we shall be unconscious of the mental process involved.[28]

> One of the most important characteristics of this system is its tacit, largely unconscious nature; it is so 'obvious', so all-pervasive, that there is no easily available horizon against which it can be seen as a special phenomenon, deserving notice or comment.[29]

The practices we mimic and take up are a rule-governed system. The linkages of the structure have been tacitly understood, and they are respected in *effect* in simple behaviour taken over as ours. We learn, just in belonging to a culture, how to employ language; it is only when we are not a part of that setting that we need to bring the inner structure into the open.

> Texts are understood in the contexts of their surrounding conditions. These conditions are spelled out if there is a need for interpretation. But once an interpretation is accepted by an audience, the spelling out of these conditions can recede into the background; the interpretation becomes unobtrusive for that audience.[30]

We must recall the position of "the observer, as perforce a non-participant in the conventions and value-systems presupposed by the society or work of art in question."[31] According to our understanding of what we are interpreting, today legitimately cognitive interpretation is understood to require the recognition and the reconstruction of these codes.

---

27 "Much recent art shows an increasingly sophisticated sense of sign systems, encoded messages, and of ways in which they can be decoded and deconstructed." *Atque Ars: Art from Mount Allison University, 1854—1989*, exh. cat. (Sackville, Owens Art Gallery, 1989), 24.

28 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 18.

29 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 92.

30 Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 125.

31 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 81.

24 ART AND CODES

A code is a system of artificial relations, by which one thing is more or less arbitrarily established as meaning some other thing. The most banal examples reveal this: American Morse code, in which ···———··· means SOS; or an invented code, in which *a, b, c,* ... might mean *z, y, x,* .... Writing is a code, in which the letter *s* means a certain sound. This item-per-item system of replacements is technically a cipher, but the basic conception of code is the relation of artificially standing-for. Thus one also has codes, in which the ensemble *enahr* might mean *dismantled.* A lexicon too is a code, such that a set of letters (or the sound that set means) itself means something. With pictographic writing, which approaches representational imagery, the sign-meaning relation is somewhat less arbitrary, for there is an element of resemblance: some pictographs look like what they mean, and are suggestive of their meaning. But reduced to such simple forms they are not usually highly suggestive, and to that extent the correlation even of pictographs requires explicitation.

Art would appear to be considerably less like a code than pictographs, for there is obviously a vast region of artistic meaning captured by visible resemblance, not explicit coding. This is the area of simple *representations:* where the image of a child obviously resembles a child no interpretation is required, in the specific sense we are interested in here. But there is less distance here than we suspect, and to see this we can turn to a distinction commonly made between interpreting and *describing.* We don't say that a depiction of a child (for instance, by Mary Cassatt) is interpreted; we tend rather to say that we can simply 'see' the child — we understand that level of the picture's meaning without assistance. As theorists have taken pains to explain, however, that does not mean on a basis of nothing. There is a required fund of knowledge that permits us to do so, which belonging to a culture such as ours tends to endow us with. Given the knowledge, representations are obvious to us — we simply know their meaning. Thus there is a kind of 'training in correlation' even with representations.[32] But this brings to light the real difference between describing and interpreting, which is that "interpreting" names the situation where the knowledge is missing, in which we don't know the meaning.[33] The connection of images with meaning is also expressed as a "transcendent" relation, where the visible thing in some way "points beyond itself."[34] Interpreting, in a very broad sense, takes place in all the situations we describe using expressions like

---

32 "We more easily overlook the fact that we are reading codes when we see a landscape painting." *Atque Ars: Art from Mount Allison University, 1854—1989,* exh. cat. (Sackville, Owens Art Gallery, 1989), 25.

33 Barnes, "Remarks about the Obvious" (1983), 37.

34 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 45.

> 'connotes', 'symbolizes', 'denotes', and 'refers to'. In each case there is something, the signifier, and something else, the signified, and the former in some way refers or points to the latter, whether by denoting, connoting, symbolizing, imitating, or otherwise referring.[35]

But interpretation in the usual sense applies to those situations where this reference is obscure.[36] Where the reference of imagery is not fixed by self-evidence (by prior training, the implicit learning of codes), it is fixed by external reference to the code. To understand the code that art works by, it is important to appreciate the differences among these various types of meaningful 'representation' "such as being a sign of, being a symbol of, copying, imitating, representing, expressing."[37]

25 THE CODE RELATION

Theorists who have studied the function of artistic signs have distinguished types of sign on the basis of these *differences of relation* between sign and meaning. Consider Cassatt's sketched image of a child. Just as does the word, a drawing of a child 'means' a child. So there is a relation of meaning — a semantic relation — between artistic images and things, or the concepts that represent them in our minds. But it is a relation of a very particular sort, and different from the relation between words and their meanings. The kind of image in question here is what Panofsky calls, technically, a motif, and what I have called representation: this is a first type of artistic sign.[38] The first kind of relation, between the representational image and its meaning, Panofsky calls *natural*, on account of the fact that there is an objectively existing resemblance between the thing that is meant and the sign that represents it. The semantic relation is struck on that basis. This class — Panofsky calls it "the class of *primary* or *natural* meanings" — would include, by virtue of the relation that characterizes it, both pictures and pictographs.[39] For present purposes what serves to

---

35 Hofstdadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 91.

36 "In interpreting one is in a weaker epistemic position vis à vis the Other than in describing. Whereas in describing the person must be in a position to know whether the statements constituting his or her description are true of the object, in interpreting the person must not be in a position to know this, but must be in a position to know 'that the statements constituting the interpretation are plausible, reasonable, or at least defensible on evidence provided by the interpretandum.'" Barnes, "Remarks about the Obvious" (1983), 32.

37 Hofstdadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 90.

38 Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 28—30.

39 But some pictographs, not all: the qualification regarding the pictograph is that it be sufficiently 'articulate' that one can identify its meaning on the basis of resemblance alone (for this is how, as Panofsky explains, natural meaning is conveyed: we are able to connect the sign and its meaning by likeness). A further qualification might concern the meaning we give to 'natural', which ought to be understood in a merely relative way, but it is of no great concern for my purposes that the ability to recognize the similarity between a flat and greatly schematized image and the thing it represents might well involve, as Panofsky himself made clear, some kind of acculturation (see § 40).

define this class of sign is not the nature or origin of one's ability to read them but the visibility of the similarity between image and thing — that we identify what is meant because the sign actually *looks like it.* [40] For in the next class we are tempted to say nothing like that.

Where the relation between sign and meaning is not 'natural' we have a second type of signification. This kind of relation is, as Panofsky explains, *secondary* or *conventional,* on account of there being no resemblance whatever between the sign and what is meant by it: the connection is artificial, established by convention. Consider, for instance, an image we have already seen, representing a child with wings and a bow and arrow (figure 7). We recognize those features by virtue of simple resemblance; the image itself, at a level Panofsky calls formal and others the level of "the first-order properties of a painting (patches of paint)," suggests its natural meaning.[41] This collection of contours, tones, colours, and their various analyzable relations (wings relative to back, bow relative to hand) simply happen to mean for us a winged child carrying a bow. But as we also tend to know, there is another level of meaning here. The image understood *as a motif* (winged child with bow) possesses a meaning of its own: the first-order meaning becomes a second-order *sign,* the sign of a further level of meaning. As it happens, a winged child with a bow is the sign of Cupid or Eros, the symbol of love.

What kind of relation holds between that sign and its meaning, which is love? Here we have, certainly much more obviously, the level of the code. The relation is

---

40 Panofsky says little about what defines the class of representations; he says that we can simply 'identify the sign with' the referent; we "recognize" it on the basis of practical experience. "The objects and events whose representation by lines, colours, and volumes constitutes the world of motifs can be identified ... on the basis of our practical experience. Everybody can recognize the shape and behaviour of human beings, animals and plants, and everybody can tell an angry face from a jovial one. It is, of course, possible that in a given case the range of our personal experience is not wide enough, for instance when we find ourselves confronted with the representation of an obsolete or unfamiliar tool, or with the representation of a plant or animal unknown to us. In such cases we have to widen the range of our practical experience by consulting a book or an expert, but we do not leave the sphere of practical experience as such." Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 33. His introductory example is a case not from art or verbal language, but from the language of gestures. "When an acquaintance greets me on the street by lifting his hat, what I see from a formal point of view is nothing but the change of certain details within a configuration forming part of the general pattern of colour, lines, and volumes which constitutes my world of vision. ... When I identify, as I automatically do, this configuration as an *object* (gentleman), and the change of detail as an *event* (hat-removing), I have already overstepped the limits of purely formal perception and entered a first sphere of *subject matter* or *meaning*. The meaning thus perceived is of an elementary and easily understandable nature, and we shall call it the factual meaning; it is apprehended by simply *identifying certain visible forms with certain objects known to me from practical experience,* and by *identifying the change in their relations with certain actions or events.* ... Psychological nuances will invest the gestures of my acquaintance with a further meaning which we will call *expressional.* It differs from the factual one in that it is apprehended, not by simple identification, but by 'empathy'. To understand it, I need a certain sensitivity, but this sensitivity is still part ... of my everyday familiarity with objects and events. Therefore the *factual* and the *expressional meaning* may be classified together: they constitute the class of *primary* or *natural* meanings." 26—27 [emphasis partly added]

41 "The first-order properties of a painting (patches of paint) do not resemble people, but the perceptual experience of a man in the painting emerges from the perception of the painting's first-order properties." Davies, "Authors' and Painters' Intentions" (1982), 70.

conventional, for there is only an arbitrary or artificial connection between sign and meaning. While we might discuss artistic codes at the level of representation, for purposes of introduction there is more clarity to be gained by focusing upon symbolism. How does a code work? At some moment in the history of artistic imagery, the sign of a winged child with a bow became *correlated* with the concept of love, and in such a way, in such a setting, that this sign was instituted, and the connection held. Perhaps the connection may not have been utterly arbitrary; there might have been some special reason for this particular choice. But a reason for tying the sign of a winged boy to the meaning of love is still not a natural link; the relation is artificial.[42] This is coded meaning, a type of meaning fundamental to works of art. With the code relation sketched, it is important to appreciate what exactly is involved in setting meaning up in this way, for it is this mechanism that constitutes the social extension of the work itself. This is what identification went in search of: understanding the mechanism of meaning is exactly what is needed to reveal what objective interpretation concretely demands.

26 THE CODE MODEL

When the rules of content, directing us at what belongs to the work, are concretized, they direct us to look for evidence in the work's historical setting of just these features of linguistic mechanism. Following theorists and interpreters who have explained it, we can recognize four elements that are basic to the functioning of a code structure, four things defining *the model of the code:* the notion of *convention;* the *institution of meaning;* the place of semantic *rules;* and the specific role of *context*. The "foundation of artistic hermeneutics" requires that we clarify the hermeneutic implications of the role these features play in the functioning of artistic languages.

In art "meaning is more than a matter of intention, it is also a matter of convention."[43] As we have noted briefly, the notion of *convention* or conventional meaning stands in contrast to the notion of natural meaning. Meaning cannot be expressed merely as a matter of will, and artificial languages have to be devised because there is no natural way

---

[42] Panofsky again illustrates this level of meaning with a gesture: "... when I interpret the lifting of a hat as a polite greeting, I recognize in it a meaning which may be called *secondary* or *conventional;* it differs from the *primary* or *natural* one in that it is intelligible instead of being sensible, and in that it has been consciously imparted to the practical action by which it is conveyed" Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 27. That the recognition of natural meaning is merely "sensible" does not seem to me a still popular notion, but this makes no difference; the real distinction is the second matter, the *intention to correlate* the meaning with the sign, which is institution.

[43] J.R. Searle, cited by Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 9.

to express the things that we want a language for. The range of meaning that can be expressed naturally, by such natural signs as there are, is far too restricted; the kind of meaning that we want a language to carry is not naturally bound to any sign. *All we can do is to make a basically artificial connection;* in a language, the relation between the meaning and its sign is man-made.

> The substantive issues that a semiological analysis would have to confront [in art history] have long been the stock in trade of art-historical analysis — the conventional nature of visual representations, however realist the rhetoric of the imagery might be, the cultural specificity of the meanings that are read from visual images, and in particular their grounding in codes and stereotypes operating in a particular art form and culture at a particular historical conjuncture.[44]

We talk about signs and "the symbolism attached to them."[45] Art expresses meaning by a "set of conventions" that are "made by fiat," by "signs previously agreed upon,"

> sets of conventions of one sort or another more or less arbitrarily set up and accepted; and in each instance, what means has the character of an artifact. It means what it does mean, because the conventions are as they are.[46]

Certain "linkages ... of word with image" are set up.[47] The allegorical "manner of stating meaning ... must be regarded as conventional in the fullest sense of the term."[48]

So a language is built of conventional relations between meaning and sign. But for a conventional sign to function it has not merely to be assigned a meaning; it must also convey it. Precisely because the sign is conventional, it will not do this on its own; because it is artificial, this linkage of sign and meaning must be generally established. It must be set down in a public way (as the conventional correlations of words are in a published dictionary). It must be made known to the entire group of persons for whom the language is to function as a means of meaning, made "common" for artist and interpreter.

> Without those conventions which form a sort of code common to artist and spectator, the work would be indecipherable, and art, not acting on a specific and accepted cultural terrain, would not collaborate, as it often does, to modify that terrain.[49]

We have come further in understanding how art operates than to think that, being visual, it simply borrows from *real* vision, and thus possesses a message

---

44 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 29.
45 Blunt, *Picasso's Guernica* (1969), 311.
46 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 41, 45, 48.
47 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 30.
48 Summers, "Problem of Art Historical Description" (1982), 303.
49 Argan "Ideology and Iconology" (1975), 302.

> 'untroubled by the culturally produced and culturally determined codes of recognition.' These codes 'descend' on and replace the field [of vision] with an 'ideologically saturated,' 'almost perfect replica.'[50]

As we have noted, it is now a commonplace that even so-called 'realistic' art feeds off codes.

> Pictorial representation relies on making marks which codify what they represent. ... Painting or the 'language of painting' is a closed system making reference to the world outside by virtue of deploying internally organised differences which are functions of the sophistication of the system to which they belong.[51]

Understanding, at all levels of meaning, involves recognizing these established correlations of meaning.[52] Just as "the representational character of a painting arises from one's recognition in the painter's work of the conventions of pictorial representation,"[53] so the interpretation of symbolism involves knowing the linkage used. We do not interpret a religious image merely by reading it; what we do is to recognize a "coded sign denoting an event in a narrative sequence that was deemed to have particular significance"; we see the work according to an established system of religious imagery.[54]

This *social and public establishment of the artificial linkage,* on which basis conventional meaning works, is what is meant by the *institution of meaning.* In fact there are frequently, though not always, two aspects to institution: public explicitation and public acceptance. For a conventional sign to work it is not enough that its correlation with a meaning be publicized, since the correlation might be totally ignored; languages do not work on the basis of ignored correlations. A conventional linkage of sign and meaning is truly instituted only when effectively instituted, when the correlation is *accepted* by the audience. As we know from the case of spoken language, this frequently happens without the linkage being fixed in a public way: somehow, without any formal inauguration or stated agreement, a word or a sign is taken up and used for a specific meaning. That phenomenon of de facto institution is actually a specialized meaning of the word 'convention'. "Things become symbols by the way people respond to them."[55]

> Objective meaning, in this case, lies in the fact that our shared experience of the use of a word or symbol leads us to agree upon its meaning, and thus is established a convention for its correct

---

50 See Kuspit, "Traditional Art History's Complaint" (1987), 346.
51 Smith, "Pictures and History" (1987), 98.
52 Davies, "Authors' and Painters' Intentions" (1982), 69, 71, 72.
53 Ibid., 71.
54 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 30.
55 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 153.

> usage. It is then by reference to this convention that I can objectively recognize whether the word or symbol is being correctly used.[56]

The important thing is that the linkage is established, not the way that happens. The original availability of the code is what explains how art has been understood throughout history, and on what basis its cultural influence was exerted.

In art, the expression of meaning depends upon "a shared vocabulary of agreed symbols."[57] What does it mean for symbols to be agreed upon, a linkage accepted? It means the correlation is consistently followed. Codification requires an "invariable attachment of signifier ... and signified."[58] If an 'established' sign is used by members of a community sometimes for the established meaning, but sometimes for some different meaning, the system will be compromised; the linguistic machine will break down. Conventions must be both "established and maintained."[59] This is the relevance of the concept of *semantic rule*, whose importance in language function is generally accepted,[60] and nicely expressed by a clear-thinking character in Eco's *The Name of the Rose:*

> In every human language there are rules and every term signifies *ad placitum* a thing, according to a law that does not change, for man cannot call the dog once dog and once cat, or utter sounds to which a consensus of people has not assigned a definite meaning, as would happen if someone said the word 'blitiri'.[61]

Sufficient irregularity in practice makes the system fail; without consensus in usage that 'dog' is to be used for the barking animals, a dictionary could not serve to institute anything at all. The real problem is hermeneutic: without a more or less fixed linkage, some will know what is meant, but many will guess the wrong meaning. A sign or symbol is considered to be "a thing *regarded by general consent* as naturally typifying or representing or recalling something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought."[62] If the sign becomes a functional part of the language for the community of interpreters, that consent becomes embodied in a de facto semantic rule. The important role played by this fixed *regularity of connection* is the third element of the code model.

---

56 Radford, "Meaning and Significance" (1992), 59.
57 Ibid., 55.
58 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 45.
59 Davies, "Authors' and Painters' Intentions" (1982), 72.
60 "As far as linguistic meaning is concerned, its dependence upon linguistic rules is now widely agreed upon." Beardsley, "Limits of Interpretation" (1966), 176.
61 Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, trans. W. Weaver (San Diego 1983), 47.
62 Concise Oxford Dictionary, cited by Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 154.

Rule, also, has two important aspects: *it keeps the sign intelligible*, but at the same time *it creates a standard of correct reading*.[63] Regularity is important both for permitting artists to use signs and for permitting interpreters to read them for their precise meaning. In the model book created by Charles Lebrun to illustrate how to depict the *passions*, human expressions of emotion (figure 8), we can see an instance of the institution of codes (establishing fixed links of sign to meaning), the attempted creation of a rule, and the implicit value of fixity in making these signs functional for artists' expressive purposes and 'univocal' for the interpreter, for Lebrun's

> schema was meant to help artists express, unequivocally, the affects of their figures. And with the help of the schema the observer could *unlock the representation in one way*.[64]

Interpreters today still rely on this regularity of sign use; the "human sciences depend upon assignably regular structures of language in virtue of which particular utterances and acts may be correctly interpreted."[65] On the basis of the code structure of the usage itself,

> the historical content (both cultural and artistic) [remains] established so that when the art historian investigates the grammar of the work, its signifying structure, he has some sense of the rules of syntax and semantics with which he is dealing.[66]

Thus it is the code, by the power of institution and the rule that maintains that institution, that fixes the meaning of the sign, even over the actual intention of the artist.[67] Rules also solve the problem of semanticity: by the code model there is further meaning when a symbolic correlation was made (made use of) by the artist, and just that quantity of meaning. Because the artist is working in an historical language, there are precisely as many symbols as that artistic language permits, and it is knowledge of its rules that disclose which visual elements have meaning.

---

63 "To understand a language is to know when and how to use it; the performance is rule-governed and publicly corrigible." Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 134. If the meaning of art is "something that has been extended, perhaps gradually, from language in general to the nonlinguistic, then the idea of regularization of use goes with it, and there must be rules for (meaning formation and) meaning interpretation." Beardsley, "Limits of Interpretation" (1966), 177.

64 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 46 [emphasis added]. Bätschmann uses the word *einstimmig*. The English "unequivocal" loses the German meaning — that a sign has, literally, 'one voice' — which is the key here, more to the point than saying it is not ambiguous or unclear.

65 Margolis, "Schleiermacher Among the Theorists" (1987), 364.

66 Holly, on Panofsky's semantic analysis. Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 182.

67 "The publicly verifiable and thus objectively available concept of meaning [is] the meaning that is publicly agreed in respect of words and symbols generally. In this context, a work of art has meaning if it communicates effectively. Its meaning is the publicly perceived understanding, what the work communicates to people whether or not ... this coincides with the artist's intentions. If I say, 'I am going out' but state that I mean to say or intend to say, 'I am staying in,' the words 'I am going out' do not in any circumstances come to mean 'I am staying in.' They have an objective meaning that is publicly recognizable and stands independently of any intentions I may have in stating them." Radford, "Meaning and Significance" (1992), 56.

It is important to know, for the purposes of a hermeneutic theory, how codes are linked to a cultural setting, a *context*. In art, dictionaries recording such rules of correlation are effectively missing; Lebrun's work is one of conspicuously few dictionaries we can cite. Since the image "is incompetent to point beyond itself" to the meaning (a sign by itself cannot make the reference 'a means z'), what serves as the "ground" of that correlation, what establishes it in any given case, is a *context that is constituted by the spectator's general knowledge*.[68] The 'dictionary', as it were, is spread throughout the knowledge of the audience for which a work is made. A correlation of sign and meaning is often first established, or thereafter sustained, by a text that is familiar to the work's audience, a text belonging to that "specific and accepted cultural terrain." It is familiarity with such a text that frequently clarifies the meaning, and their often canonical stature tends to sustain the correlation and preserve the rule; a tradition is a kind of social training. Communicating with each other depends, more than upon a shared reality, "upon a shared language and a shared environment."[69] So the conventions of art carry their meaning because its audience knows the linkage, by direct knowledge of texts or by training. "Only in respect of some body of beliefs may anything refer meaningfully to anything else or be said to have meaning."[70] For instance, in interpreting religious art "the religious interpreter must gain guidance from religious practice," from "this closed canon," just as "it is from the closed system of laws and statutes that the judge must gain guidance in the judicial decision procedure."[71] A thing can mean something only with reference to a "meaning-situation" against which it possesses that significance.[72] It is because of this social basis of languages that the meaning of a work is determined by the work plus the meanings of the audience of the artist's period,[73] just as in a language meaning is fixed by the meaning of the words at the time they were written.[74] The effectiveness of a symbol is due not to intention or novelty, but to "its potency in a given context."[75] Thus the correlation of meaning is carried not by intent but by an existing context.

> The words which the poet writes in a given passage depend for their meaning in one sense on the personal context and the author's intention (his word as *parole*), but they depend also, in a sense more important to the critic, on the wider context of the language (his words as *langue*) and

68 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 45.
69 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 15.
70 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 39.
71 Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 121.
72 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 2.
73 Davies, "Authors' and Painters' Intentions" (1982), 68.
74 Ibid., 68.
75 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 154.

> culture. Otherwise they would never, here and now, there and then, make sense to anybody but the author himself.[76]

The reason this is hermeneutically important is that while the knowledge and training that perpetuates these semantic rules is perpetually lost, the fact that such rules were learned from a cultural context — sometimes actually recorded in various ways in the vestiges of those cultures — means that it remains possible in principle to recover them, through a reconstruction of that knowledge.

Once the work of art has been identified as an expression made within a sign system, the implications of this fact must be elaborated. What does it mean, hermeneutically, for a work of art to be an expression in a language? The model of the code is the elaboration that answers this, and in answering tells us how the rule of objectivity can be served. Any interpretation with a claim to tell us about the meaning of the work will have to be developed by the recovery of codes — by collecting the instituted references of sign that are established within an historical context — and interpreting the work on that basis, not through that part of mind not "identical with [a mirroring of] the context."[77] Meaning is knowledge in a "disclosed context,"[78] and disclosure of the context means the interpreter must uncover the background of the code.

> If the analyst is not at the same time an historian, if his analyses are not founded in historical erudition, they are only the pastimes of an amateur.[79]

27 CONTEXT AND THE 'DICTIONARY FALLACY'

Have we any reservations about this model of meaning? The code model explains how an artist like Botticelli can represent love, by using the sign of a winged child according to the rule that links it to love, a rule ultimately based in Renaissance culture, its knowledge, its textual sources, its traditions of talk about art. It is that established regularity of usage that allows Botticelli to represent that meaning in an interpretable way, and that today permits us to interpret it. But 'regularly respected' correlations and 'laws that do not change' do not mean that once a sign-meaning relation has been established, the meaning of the sign is

---

76 Wimsatt, "A Fallacy Revisited" (1968), 223—24.

77 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 47.

78 Ibid., 49.

79 Helmut Herzfeld, *Initiation à l'explication de textes français*, 10; cited in Lohner, "The Intrinsic Method" (1968), 150.

eternally fixed; the same sign might well be used elsewhere for a different meaning. The rule element of the code model only apparently tends to suggest a system of one-to-one sign-meaning relations, but what the rule truly addresses is the reading of signs, not the nature of the system. A code that allows us to "unlock a representation in one way" only does not necessarily imply a system of one-to-one relations. This oversimplification Gombrich has called "the dictionary fallacy." The fact that signs can carry different meanings simply complicates the kind of rule needed; it is rarely so simple as sign *s* = meaning *a*.

> It is this crucial fact that is sometimes obscured through the way iconologists have tended to present their interpretations. Quite naturally the documentation provided in their texts and footnotes gives chapter and verse for the meaning a given symbol can have — the meaning that supports their interpretation. Here, as with language, the impression has grown up among the unwary that symbols are a kind of code with a one-to-one relationship between sign and significance. The impression is reinforced by the knowledge that there exist a number of medieval and Renaissance texts which are devoted to the interpretation of symbols and are sometimes quoted dictionary-fashion.[80]

It is understandable, then, why talk simply of a 'code' might sound simplistic; "there is a false reduction of meaning to a simple relation between object and meaning."[81] That this is an oversimplification is evident even from the way we understand the simple language of gesture, for with a gesture we need to know not only the established correlation between sign and meaning, but the circumstance within which this correlation properly holds: is a wave of the hand a greeting or a farewell — and when it is made from the stage or by a complete stranger, is it really to be understood as either? Since the reconstruction of codes involves the recovery of the historical setting, the notion of a sign system is broadened to include that functional element of language, the situation or background that clarifies in what circumstance a sign means one thing, in what another, and in what again nothing at all. Thus in clarifying how we are to understand art Bryson urges recourse to "Saussure's conception of the sign," cautioning, however, that we take care not to "end up with a perspective as rigid and unhelpful as the old one, a perspective in which the meaning of the sign is defined entirely by formal means, as the product of oppositions among signs within an enclosed system." What is needed in addition to the crude picture of a code as a mere table of correlations is to reveal "how signs interact with the world *outside* their internal system."[82]

---

80 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 12.

81 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 37.

82 Bryson, *Vision and Painting* (1983), xiii.

The notion of context reaches beyond too simple a conception of sign systems. In fact the kind of rule at issue is more complex than it may appear, something to the effect that in *some* situation sign *s* will mean such and such, and in *some other* something else: sign *s* = meaning *a* only in the appropriate context. Reading a code is an operation that involves a calculation of context.

> We may call it the principle of intersection — having in mind the use of letters and numbers on the sides of a chequerboard or map which are used conjointly to plot a particular square or area. The Renaissance artist ... had in his mind a number of such maps, listing, say, Ovidian stories on one side and typical tasks [related to the semantic function of the work of art] on the other. Just as the letter B on such a map does not indicate one field but a zone which is narrowed down by consulting the number, so the story of Icarus, for instance, does not have one meaning but a whole range of meaning, which in its turn is then determined by the context.[83]

In the example of a depiction of the story of Icarus, the specific context, Gombrich explains, may be in one case the artistic decoration of a fountain, and in another the decoration of a Bankruptcy Court. The intersection of the story with fountain decoration shows that the meaning of the representation is merely its "association with water"; the intersection with the latter, that the representation is "a warning against high flying ambition."[84] Signs in themselves have a range of meaning, narrowed by the context; a sign may figure in a string of codes, but which code we should turn to is indicated by the circumstance. A sign means something only in relation to a context that must be uncovered.[85] Our basic model of meaning relation has thus not two but three basic terms, making up a "triangle of linguistic interpretation" formed of connections between the utterance or sign, the language (a system of codes) and its background, and the specific situation of the expression; it is this model — this "triangle of interpretation" — that is applied by the legitimate interpreter to arrive at meaning.[86]

How are we to establish what the revealing context is? "To accomplish this, technique for exploring the context is of course necessary; and such technique we have, already developed, in experimental observation and ideal experimentation or rational analysis." The context is nothing but that "specific and accepted cultural terrain" in which the intended correlation was imbedded, that shared background which secured the meaning on the basis of familiarity with a text (the one that originally instituted the correlation) or a

---

83 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 8.

84 Ibid.

85 This is a second sense of context, which might be differentiated as the context of the code and of the work. The sense noted in § 26 concerns the cultural background that sustains specific codes, from which those correlations may be reconstructed. Context in this sense concerns the specific circumstance of an individual work (a commission, the setting it was first given, the background of its creation), with which some coded readings but not others might be compatible.

86 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 16—18.

common tradition of reading (the one that disseminated that way of reading within the community) or a common training. For that context originally contained all the material by which the conventional linkage was secure. Cultural research and rational inference may in some cases prove difficult; that difficulty has to be faced.[87] If our research into context uncovers only a context "inadequate ... to fix the referent," it is preferable, and closer to knowledge, to suspend judgement about the meaning. It would be fallacious to "regard the reference [between sign and meaning] as determinate" when it has not been shown to be so.[88]

What is needed is a sense of the context, the situation in which correspondences hold, but this adjustment to the simplistic picture does not alter the important fact that language, complex as it is, has a rigid structure; conventions ensure that they are followed "in one way" (in which respect they are comparable, some have observed, to social conventions: "once accepted, conventions impose definite limitations; one may be arrested and imprisoned for violating them"[89]). The principle of intersection may allow many meanings, but it sustains the fixed schema of rules; though a convention is ultimately arbitrary, in a given context the reference of a sign is "definite." As we have noted, it is this rigidity that makes the language work.

> Implicit ... is an assumption that a communication of which an interpretation is offered does have a meaning and that the interpretation is correct or incorrect in relation to that meaning. The meaning is determined by the common conventions operative in that mode of signalling, for example the rules of a language.[90]

An instituted sign functions in a language, conveying the meanings it is meant to, according to the rule of its correlation and against the background that makes that correlation (and no other) unavoidable. There is a "strict compulsion ... imposed by the structure of the context."[91] Natural signs do not work by this system, but if a conventional sign is to retain the power to convey the meaning it has been unnaturally yoked to, it must be bound to that meaning by humanly constituted, therefore temporally specific, circumstances.

---

87 "Where the feat is intrinsically impossible, the assertion [that the sign has some specific meaning] can never be tested; but one is quite justified in suspecting that, in such a case, we are not confronted with a genuine meaning-situation and the problem of the reference is only a pseudo-problem." Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 49.

88 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 49—50.

89 Ibid., 45.

90 Osborne, "Interpretation in Science and in Art" (1986), 4.

91 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 46; see also the afterthought on "compulsion," 51.

28 A MODEL OF INTERPRETATION

Despite recent talk of new theories of meaning, this conception has held its ground for many years.

> The not infrequent pleas made over the past ten or fifteen years to take on board the sophisticated theories of signs and representations developed elsewhere in the humanities have not, at least on my reckoning, been accompanied by any very systematic, let alone recognisably new, strategies for discussing how visual images convey meanings.[92]

The code model of meaning endures because it is sound. In identifying works of art as expressions in a system of signs, and by understanding how such a language functions, we are fulfilling a basic directive of the modern theory of interpretation, that genuine interpretation must be directed by the nature of the work. Once the work is recognized as a meaningful production, the specific mechanism of its meaning can be elaborated and the theory of interpretation brought to fulfilment. We now have a fully complete model of legitimate interpretation, one that satisfies the theory and clarifies exactly how cognitive understanding of a work of art is to be attained.

Recognizing the work as an expression in a conventional language requires a reconstruction of that language through an examination of its traces. Reconstruction is a fundamental step that is carried out by means of many specific techniques of research (dating, connoisseurship, provenance research). Our search within that context for the code serves the rule of objectivity because according to our fundamental identification of the work (a linguistic expression), the context is clearly a constitutive extension of the work itself, the very framework within which its meaning is held. Exploring the context involves a phase of *searching:* hunting until one finds (perhaps using the principle of intersection) various correlations of the work's signs with their historical meanings. The next step is the *application* of the recovered codes, reading the work according to those correlations and in connection with the work's specific circumstance.

> Details not obvious in their implications ... may be read in the same kind of general way as one unravels the details of encoded messages. ... Another kind of interpretative procedure ... comes into effect when puzzlement is engendered and there is no clear indication as to how the different elements of the visual ensemble fit together. Data, which may consist either of images corresponding in certain of their features to the object under scrutiny, or of texts which can be held to throw light on the character of the object in some pertinent way, are then combined with interpretation of those data to yield speculative suggestions, arrived at inferentially, as to how an adequate representation in words may be achieved.[93]

---

92 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 32.

93 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 66—67.

The final procedure is *formal checking:* applying the rules of form (as they are determined by the reconstructed context) to the interpretation arrived at, in order to check its formal legitimacy.
This model of interpretation gives the rules concrete substance and satisfies the objective motivation of modern interpretation.

Here we have "an interpretative theory" that is "inferentially arrived at" as opposed to one that is simply imposed.[94] Does the account we have just seen, whose insights often appear in explanation of modern hermeneutics, answer our questions about interpretation? There is a dangerous tendency among philosophers, the theorists who take after them, and those influenced by their discussions to imagine that a few more arguments or observations of the sort I have been citing might settle the matter, but the truth is that at this level of generality no answer is decisive. After all these arguments the question still remains: is a work of art to be understood, for the purpose of understanding how to interpret it, as an expression in a language? Despite all the cogency of the code model, we have so far not examined in any real detail a single case of what we mean by a code. The 'examples' have all been generalized and schematic. The problem is not that nothing general and schematic can be true, but that at this level alone we can never know if it is true. Until we have bothered to consider it, we do not know what relation holds between our general talk and the particular instances we take it, intend it, to represent. So far we have examined the features of this conception through only cursory examples, to the extent that these characterizations have involved examples at all. But the functions we are trying to describe are real, and it is time to look at actual works of art. What we are trying to describe is the way art truly communicates its meaning: convention, the institution of meaning, and the application of contextual rules will have to be facts of history, not just theoretical events. We need at this point to look very closely at the function of artistic symbols without too much specific prompting from the theory.

94 Ibid., 67.

4

ICONOGRAPHY

29 RECOVERING A CODE

As we understand it, a code is not merely a way of meaning, but a way of meaning in so far as it establishes a way of reading. *Iconography* is that major branch of the hermeneutics of art that is devoted to the unravelling of conventional meaning: the interpretation of symbols and symbolic images. Methodically speaking, as we have seen, it is the historical recovery of lost codes. But what, concretely, is a code like, and how exactly do we use it to interpret? I should like to answer this by examining two of the most venerable and detailed explicitations of the method of code interpretation, by Erwin Panofsky (who has been called "the undisputed master of the theory of interpretation in the history of art")[1] and E.H. Gombrich.[2] One of the examples of conventional meaning used by Gombrich we have already looked at in a general way: "a winged youth."[3] We recall him from Botticelli, hovering above the central figure of the *Primavera* (figure 7). It so happens that we know

---

1 Skubiszewski, "Deux approches en l'histoire de l'art" (1973), 611. Despite the recent broadening of art-historical inquiry, the value of Panofsky's theoretical work has not weakened. *Studies in Iconology* "has had a significance for the development of art-historical methods comparable only to that of Riegl's." Bialostocki, "Iconography and Iconology" (1963), 777. "It is now orthodox for a student of past art to attempt to situate his or her study in a context and to decipher, on some level, the personal and cultural ideas that it embodies. Pursuing the always-elusive 'meanings' of works of art, scholars trained within the last thirty-five or forty years continue to demonstrate their special debt to Panofsky's later works." Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 158.

2 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 12—16.

3 Ibid., 2—3.

without recourse to demonstration that this is Cupid, and that Cupid is a symbol of love. We talk about 'codes' in art partly because of that structure: a basic relation here of two terms, sign and meaning, one of which must be translated into the other for the meaning to be read.

winged youth = love

Here we have a simple but concrete instance of coded meaning.

How, at the end of the twentieth century, do we know how to read this particular sign? Ostensibly because at some point in our lives we have been taught, in effect, that specific correlation — that this image is, stands for, and means Cupid, a symbol of love. The symbol of Cupid is an interesting case, because it is a sign whose background of knowledge has survived for some twenty-two centuries (figure 9). Its initial institution is an event that took place in classical times, and the subsequent history of the sign demonstrates an enduring respect for this particular correlation: for some two thousand years (with a few gaps) the generations have effectively carried forward the rule, a winged boy with a bow means love.[4] What sort of event was that original institution? Of course we don't know anything about it. Certainly we have no record of the first time the correlation was made; the historical record of original institutions, when institution involves records, is infinitesimal. But a code is not explicitated only once, when it is devised. In the course of its effective life the correlation may be reiterated many times over, and it is the recovery of such reiterations in the reconstructed context that very often constitutes the recovery of a code. The iconographer often searches the context for just such repetitions. There are many instances from classical times of exactly this, and it is on that basis that we know that the Cupid sign had the meaning that it does today even in the third century B.C. How, when we look at this Greek eros, do we know what meaning it holds? We know because of texts that articulate the code in which this sign was used — texts like the following, from an elegy by Propertius written in the first century B.C.:

> Whoever he was who first painted Amor as a boy,
> Surely you must agree that he had a marvellous hand.
> He it was who first saw that the life of lovers lacks reason,
> And that great goods are lost through their small worries.
> He, too, gave him wings for good reason,
> And made him fly about the hearts of men:
> For we are in fact tossed by the rolling waves
> And the wind that drives us is never steady.

---

4 There are "innumerable representations of Cupid [with this appearance] in Hellenistic and Roman art" Panofsky, "Blind Cupid" (1939), 97. The history of the image seems traceable, therefore, to the third century B.C.

> Deservedly also his hand is shown armed with barbed arrows,
> And the Gnossian quiver hangs from his twin shoulders:
> For he strikes from afar when we think we are safe from the foe,
> Nor does anyone go scatheless from the wound he deals. ...[5]

According to our view of symbolic languages, correlations of this sort are needed just because there is no natural image by which to express such an abstraction as love. There is, accordingly, no natural relation between the notion of love and this image, an infant with wings and arrows. In fact it is the absence of such connection that appears to explain why such passages as this one from Propertius exist: as theorists continually remind us, the image, alone, stands in need of explanation, because unlike the natural symbol it will not explain itself. So Propertius' verse is a literary echo of the institution of a sign for a certain meaning; the text explicitly ties the image to a meaning that language, unlike the pure image, has the capacity simply to state. For it is a fact that the investiture of a sign with a certain meaning is most decisively effected by language, and it is this special power of language to explicitate such correlations that makes texts (like this ancient poem) so important to iconography. Texts of this kind, if they do not actually institute a correlation, repeat or reaffirm some prior institution, and they are evidence that that earlier act of correlation has not lost its force; they are evidence that the rule that originally correlated image and meaning is still respected. We can easily see how these texts present three of the aspects of codes – convention, rule, and institution: they are made necessary by the looseness of the link of convention; they articulate a rule; and thereby they perpetuate an institution. The text, then, reveals a code, and it is genuinely like a dictionary entry (explaining a potential meaning of a sign) in that it does not create the correlation, but records a correlation once instituted and still respected in practice.

30 FIGURES AND SYMBOLS

What a code is in the case of an image like that of Cupid thus seems fairly clear, but the picture is already a little oversimplified. Even here there are nuances to be marked, for we have seen, to begin with, that the figure of the winged boy stands for not one thing but two: "the winged youth as an archer calls up one and only one figure in the mind of an educated

---

[5] Cited by Gombrich in "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 133. Panofsky also notes that Propertius describes Love in a famous elegy "as artists depict him": "as a nude, winged infant, carrying bow and arrows, or a torch, or both. ... These are his attributes [also] in Seneca's Octavia, in Apuleius' Golden Ass, and in many Hellenistic epigrams. ... Further instances abound both in Latin and Greek literature." Panofsky, "Blind Cupid" (1939) 96, 96 n. 4.

Westerner: it is Cupid."[6] But of course, it is also love — or to put it in what may seem a better way, the motif or image means Cupid, and Cupid means love. In other words there seem to be two relations here, which doesn't fit our model of artistic signs. To fit it will require asking whether *both* are relations of convention.

Because interpretation progresses from a basis in representation, it has levels. For Panofsky, the sphere of conventional meaning itself has two levels: a level he calls the level of allegories and stories and a level of themes and concepts.[7] Gombrich has made exactly the same analysis, but showing a little more precisely how those two levels are related to one another. Taking everything into account (plus the prior relation of form to motif) we now have three distinct levels of meaning, which we move through in sequence. Each level consists of a particular kind of *relation* between a sign and a meaning. The first level of meaning (the basic level of motif already introduced in § 25) we have called the level of *representation;* the relation here is the one that holds between the pure form of an image (a configuration of paint) and the things it depicts (boy, wing, bow). But now there are two further relations, which establish two further levels of sign and meaning: the relation between that concrete representation of winged child and the visible god Cupid, which Gombrich calls the level of *illustration,* and the relation between the illustration of Cupid and the abstract conception of love, which he calls the level of *symbolization.* We might lay out these levels and relations as follows:

sign ——————————————> meaning

form: a sub-interpreted configuration of paint ——————> *representation:* winged child

[by *relation* of representation]

winged child ——————————————> *illustration:* Cupid

[relation of illustration]

Cupid ——————————————> *symbol:* love

[relation of symbolization]

---

6 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 3.

7 "The sphere of secondary or conventional subject matter, viz., the world of specific themes or concepts manifested in images, stories, and allegories." Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 29.

Note the sequence that runs through these levels, which is that the sum or product of sign-meaning relation at one level becomes the sign of a further meaning at the next: it is a cumulative progression.[8] What is of interest to us, however, is that (as we should expect, according to the established model of the artistic sign outlined in § 26) both Panofsky and Gombrich explain these two further levels as two levels of conventional meaning.[9]

The relation Gombrich calls illustration is less familiar to us than that of symbolization, from which in many treatments of symbolization it is not clearly distinguished.[10] But if it is a type of conventional meaning, it is a type worth distinguishing. A better name for it than illustration might in fact be *personification* or *figuration,* taken very literally. Cupid is the *figure* of love: that is, he is a kind of bodily materialization of an abstraction, as if the concept of love were itself to take physical form, the form of a human figure. Thus it is a kind of mixture (befitting its middle position) of the concrete (the pictorial image of a god, as in figure 9) and the abstract (the force that that god 'embodies'). And there is something important about that verb 'embody' that is exactly fitting. In those classical stories of which he is a part, Cupid is not a mere sign of love, a mere signal; *he is the being of love*. Though he symbolizes love, he does not represent it as a mere token for or sign of it; *he is the being of love itself* — Cupid is love embodied, the *figure* of love.

We are most familiar with the idea of figurations in the form of personifications, which are really a type. Cupid or Eros is one of Gombrich's own examples, which he calls the "personified abstraction" of love or charity; another is Justice, the figure of the principle of justice; another is the British Empire, figured as a lion — the figure of a state.[11] I prefer to call these figurations rather than personifications not primarily because the abstraction that is embodied is not always embodied as a person, but because the name stresses the defining feature of the entire class: *the rendering into the form of a figure what in reality is not*. Despite, as Ficino explains, its relation to bodies, one thing love is not is an embodied

---

[8] Specifically, the form is the sign of the meaning 'winged child', both forming the representation; the representation is then the sign of the meaning Cupid, both forming the relation of illustration; and so on. "It looks quite plausible to speak of various 'levels of meaning' and so to say for instance, that Gilbert's figure [the *Eros* in Piccadilly Circus, London] has a *representational* meaning — a winged youth — that this representation can be referred to a particular youth, i.e. the God Eros, which turns it into the *illustration* of a myth, and that Eros is here used as a *symbol* of *Charity*." Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 2—3.

[9] Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), for example, on 177. "[A painting] may also *symbolize* an idea. To those conversant with the conventional meanings attached to these images the woman with the balance will symbolize Justice, the lion Courage or the British Empire or any other concept conventionally linked in our symbolic lore with the King of Animals." Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 124.

[10] Panofsky, for instance, does not differentiate them: "Images conveying the idea, not of concrete and individual persons or objects (St. Bartholomew, Venus, ...), but of abstract and general notions such as Faith, Luxury, Wisdom, etc., are called either personifications or symbol·." Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 29 n. 1.

[11] Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 124—25; Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 2—3.

reality. But while figurations are fictions, the things they figure are not fictions: they may be abstract conditions or concepts (fortune, charity), physical forces (like the wind figured by Zephyr), feelings or states (such as melancholy or love). To say that figurations are fictions is to say simply that however we do, in reality, encounter the things they figure, we do not encounter them figured. It remains simply to note that figuration is merely an option of symbolization, since it is possible to symbolize abstractions also by mere things (for instance, divine love symbolized by the sacred heart of Christ).

31 SYMBOLS AS ILLUSTRATED METAPHORS

We are looking into a clear instance of an artistic code, based on essentially conventional meaning. Analyzing it has turned up two aspects or relations of conventional meaning: figuration and symbolization. Understanding conventional meaning will involve clarifying how they function, and there is a potential confusion here that we might eliminate. As noted, figuration (when it occurs in an image at all) appears to occupy a sort of middle position in the sequence from representation to symbolization: the meaning of the representation of winged boy is Cupid, and Cupid symbolizes love. What further light we can throw on this sequence appears when we ask a question that may seem unnecessarily subtle: is it *Cupid* that is the sign of love, or is it the winged boy? If we ask whether the relation between the image and *Cupid* is conventional, we ask a question very hard to answer. Cupid, *excluding what Cupid symbolizes*, is only a name; certainly it is arbitrary that some specific figure be called 'Cupid' or any other name. The oddness of the answer shows us that the question is misapplied: the significant relation is not between the image and the name, but between the image and what the name names. The name Cupid is not actually, despite what we thought, a middle term between representation and symbol (winged boy—which is Cupid—which is love) as much as it is the name that we attach, for purposes of linguistic reference, to that two-term relation: the relation 'winged boy—love', taken as a unit, is called Cupid. The relation to focus upon stands between the representation and its symbolic meaning: love, the meaning for which the winged boy is a sign. (It is after all love itself, not the sign, that is named Cupid; the origin of his name is *cupido*, the Latin for desire.)

Once clarifying that the main relation is that between representation and concept or symbolic meaning, it is now important to take note of some equivocation in the theoretical literature about the exact nature of that relation. Our familiar theoretical talk (apparent in chapter three) indicates how strongly we think of this as a relation of convention, whose

several aspects were noted in § 26 — the main one being that no natural connection exists between a winged boy with bow and arrow and the reality of love. It is that fact alone that explains the recourse to the procedure the code model indicates. After Saussure, arguing that meaning, even at the level of representation, is conventional or artificial rather than natural has been an intellectual industry for decades of this century. The same has been said of what relation exists between a figure and the meaning it figures: it is purely a matter of arbitrary convention that abstractions or immaterial realities like love or justice should be given human form, and it is pure artifice to embody them. Panofsky, for one, is quite clear but rather cursory in stating that the correlation between the sign and the abstraction that is its meaning is a matter of convention.[12] Gombrich, who took actually a much closer look at the mechanism of symbolization, says much the same thing, but he appears at some moments to contradict this explanation, arguing (contra the theory) that symbols in art are not conventional.[13] Given the depth at which he appears to have examined the matter, it is an odd confusion. If one takes a close look at what Gombrich himself has to say about symbols in art, this slippage is easily explained, and reveals something unexpected.

In a long essay entitled "Icones Symbolicae: Philosophies of Symbolism and their Bearing on Art,"[14] Gombrich undertook to clarify the precise nature of the relation between sign and meaning in the 'symbolic images' (the Latin of the title) that are characteristic of art — to clarify, in other words, the precise nature of the principal relation we have been discussing. He felt that doing this involved making a certain important distinction between two opposed 'theories of symbols', both of ancient origin but, as Gombrich argues, theories that have each held sway in two different phases of history, before and after a break he locates early in the 1700s.[15] One of these was ultimately rejected, because "it is by the nature of [its] argument an irrational doctrine";[16] the survivor is our own theory — in fact it is the theory presently under discussion: the theory of the code, the symbol understood as a conventional relation between a sign and a meaning. By modern estimation, the defunct theory never truly explained how artistic symbols worked, but it remains important just because during a long period of the history of art it was *taken* to explain them. To know that theory — and this is Gombrich's point — is to grasp the basis

---

12 The entire category of symbolic meaning is called "conventional meaning." Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 29.

13 Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948).

14 E.H. Gombrich, in *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, II, 2d ed. (London 1978), 123—95.

15 Joseph Addison's *Dialogue on the Usefulness of Ancient Medals*, of 1726, is regarded as an index, for it rejects the prior view. Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 181—82.

16 Gombrich calls it an "irrational conception"; the notion of the "open sign" containing a "message of mystery" is now regarded as "an absurdity." Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 160, 182.

of a *different logic of institution* than we are used to, and resurrecting defunct theories of symbol-making is a crucial part of the reconstruction of background knowledge from which historical codes can be recovered. Gombrich distinguishes the two theories by connection to the two great competitive philosophic systems of the early modern era: the essentially modern theory, the one I am exploring here, he calls the Aristotelian theory; the other is of course the Platonic.

The theory that Gombrich calls Aristotelian is fully compatible with our conception of the symbol. In fact the Aristotelian theory offers us exactly what we have been looking for: an exact understanding of the nature of this conventional relation between sign and meaning in artistic symbols. For when we say that the relation between an arrow and love is "arbitrary," are we being truly precise? The Aristotelian theory explains that conventional symbols, the signs in artistic codes such as the sign of Cupid, are in fact "illustrated metaphors."[17] How an illustrated metaphor works we'll consider first from the position of the artist, by asking How is a conventional symbol formed? The starting point, plainly, is the thing that the artist wishes to symbolize, the thing that the symbol stands for — for instance an abstract thing like love; it is the symbol's task to 'mean' this. First, then, is the thing to be symbolized: love. The second step, as Gombrich explains, is an important one: in preparing to choose an effective symbol, the artist must turn to some definition or characterization of the thing to be symbolized, to some *essential feature* that differentiates love. Of course there may be more than one such feature (the many 'aspects of love'); the point is to choose one of special importance. For instance, it is one feature of love — an important feature — that love *strikes*. Having selected this feature, for the purpose at hand, how is the sign itself chosen (the third step)? *If* the job has been already done, the artist may simply borrow an image from some text where the correlation is already made, but this is not what interests us. If a sign can be lifted from a text, a pictorial symbol has already been formed, by the text's author, and what we are asking is just that: How was it done? What the symbol maker does is to look for some material, representable, thing that possesses the chosen quality of love (in our example, its power to strike), but one that possesses it *in the same way* — that is, as an essential, not merely incidental feature. Moreover, as an artist we are looking for a thing that possesses that feature in an especially *visible way*. Love strikes and an arrow strikes, and an arrow can be seen to strike — and that is no incidental capacity, because an arrow is *made* to strike. So the artist chooses the

17 "The Aristotelian conception of the symbol as an illustrated metaphor." Ibid., 182.

arrow to symbolize love, as the arrow did both for the Greek draughtsman and Botticelli (figures 7 and 9).[18]

The point that Gombrich means to stress with the theory of the 'illustrated metaphor', and of his slight equivocation, is now clear: in art *the relation between sign and meaning is in fact neither altogether arbitrary nor entirely artificial.* An arrow not only shares this power to strike that characterizes love, but shares it in the same way, as a defining quality (since striking cannot be eliminated from the arrow without the arrow ceasing to be an arrow). *Possessing* an analogous quality is precisely what gives the symbol its *power* to symbolize. The arrow has, naturally, and essentially, and visibly, the same quality that love has. Love is not gentle: love strikes : that is how love is. With context set aside, there are, then, *three* elements in the most basic relation of symbol and meaning, whereas by the model of the code we expected only two: instead of there being a meaning and a sign artificially bound to it, as the theory suggested, there is a meaning, a sign, and a quality that links them that they both actually possess in the same way — love : the power to strike : an arrow. There is a discovered and natural area of 'shared nature'.

Does this seem a weak sort of bond? Gombrich does not remark upon the fact, but there is especial power in such linkages, which I believe is one of the foremost reasons why there are pictorial symbols or symbolic images at all. With even a single object such as an arrow there can be not one but several aspects of shared nature. An arrow not only

---

18 This 'Aristotelian' theory was originally a prescription for the devising of symbolic images, and of course not all symbols followed it well. Moreover, there are different and less strictly philosophical sorts of 'essence' than 'that without which a thing is not itself.' Thus, as Gombrich notes, "within the definition 'accidental' features are allowed and even welcomed," if they manage to tell us something crucial about the thing. For instance the lion of the British Empire: the lion possesses power not quite essentially, for there are weak lions, and not in any pointedly visible way, and is for those reasons a somewhat weak symbol, but lions are typically powerful and to that extent not ineffective symbols of power.

Another related case is interesting and will become important to us further on: as Gombrich notes, the symbol designer Cesare Ripa argues that "it would be a mistake to represent Beauty simply by an image that is supremely beautiful, 'for this would merely be explaining *idem per idem*.' [Ripa] has therefore represented Beauty with her head in the clouds ...." Ibid., 143—44. But artists were unimpressed with such a treatment, and Ripa's approach to representing Beauty was wholly ignored. For an artist, the most powerful way to communicate beauty (by essentials, and visibly) is to demonstrate it — strictly speaking, not a metaphorical expression but a directly essential one. Thus there are many ways to convey "the natures" of things, and in as many ways as there are, we have signs of different character and strength. Eco lists fourteen kinds of symbolic relation, of which connection "by a common characteristic" is only one. Eco, "Overinterpreting Texts" (1992), 46.

strikes — that is, suddenly, and violently (as love) — it leaves stricken: that is, it *alters the state* of the one it strikes (the transformation worked by love). There is analogy moreover in the state it brings on: the wound brings pain (the pangs of love). Further, the wound of an arrow goes deep (the depths that love reaches). Depending upon the choice, there can be tremendous richness in a sign. And we have only begun to examine the sign of Cupid, which is not restricted to the arrow alone. We have left out the bow, a weapon that strikes from a distance ("across a crowded room," as the song goes); and the wings, which give Cupid flight (the 'flightiness', the coming and going of love); Cupid's age and thus naïveté (the perpetual foolhardiness of lovers); his nakedness (love cannot be hidden). That these are not our imaginative projections upon this particular historical sign is indicated by texts such as that of Propertius.[19]

This principle of the formation of artistic conventions, which Gombrich calls the illustrated metaphor, is precisely the explanation given by Panofsky in his own discussion of artistic symbols. Panofsky devoted an essay to a ninth aspect of the symbol of Cupid: Cupid's blindfold, which we notice once again in Botticelli's *'Primavera'* (figure 7). Through this particular sign we can return to the issue of the conventionality of artistic codes with the device of illustrated metaphor in mind. Images of the blind Cupid can be traced back only to the middle ages, and for that reason the institution of this symbolism is understood to be later than that of the classical Cupid, who is simply nude and winged with bow and arrow.[20] But this symbolism works no differently from the other 'attributes' of Cupid that we have examined. As Panofsky explains,

> this attribute belongs in the same class as other specifically medieval motifs such as the Wheel of Fortune, the mirror of Prudence, or the ladder of Philosophy, which differ from the attributes of classical personifications in that they give visible form to a metaphor, instead of indicating a function.[21]

The metaphor illustrated here, that "love is blind," is familiar from spoken language. Simple as it is, it is a metaphor that presents a fairly complex assertion. Love is *indiscriminate,* in that it strikes all manner of people alike, and in this respect Cupid's blindfold has the very same significance as the blindfold worn by the figure of Justice,

---

19 "Propertius' Elegy, already mentioned, not only describes the image of Cupid but also gives an allegorical explanation of his characteristic aspects: the childlike appearance symbolizes the 'senseless' behaviour of lovers, the wings indicate the volatile instability of amorous emotions, and the arrows the incurable wounds inflicted upon the human soul by love. ... The Mythographus II feels obliged to account for the nakedness of Cupid in the same way as Fulgentius had accounted for the nakedness of Cupid's mother Venus: 'the turpitude of love is always manifest and never hidden.'" Panofsky, "Blind Cupid" (1939), 104—05.

20 The image seems to appear first in thirteenth-century poetry. Ibid., 95, 105.

21 Ibid., 110.

whose judgement falls without consideration of the recipient.[22] But love is indiscriminate in a different way as well, a way that could positively not be shared by justice: love impairs judgement. To be stricken is often to be blinded by the attractions of the beloved, so that faults go unnoticed: love *misjudges*, it fails to see. Expressing both senses, an early poet has Cupid say, "I am blind and I make blind."[23] Panofsky cites explanations of the image of the blindfolded Cupid left to us by Boccaccio and a friend of Petrarch, covering both points.

> The allegorical interpretations of this newly acquired handicap are as unflattering as possible. [For Boccaccio] Cupid is ... blind "because he does not mind where he turns, inasmuch as love descends upon the poor as well as the rich, the ugly as well as the handsome. He is also called blind because people are blinded by him, for nothing is blinder than a man influenced by love for a person or thing." Or: "Painters cover his eyes with a bandage to emphasize the fact that people in love do not know where they drive, being without judgement or discrimination and guided by mere passion."[24]

This dual impairment is a condition actually shared by both the literally depicted state (wearing a blindfold) and the state in mind, love; the two states are not related by mere correlation. To see this in a wholly different example, consider another of the symbols mentioned by Panofsky: the Medieval symbolization of the concept of fortune or human destiny, according to which the personification of Fortuna is represented turning a wheel (figure 10). According to the model of the code, the wheel is a conventional sign artificially linked to the concept of fortune. But we have now seen the process by which that sign was formed; it is the literal illustration of a metaphorical characterization of human destiny. The basis for choosing the wheel is the same as before: an essential quality shared between the meaning and the sign that will visibly represent that meaning.

fortune : instability, never remaining stable : a turning wheel

A wheel not only possesses this quality of instability that characterizes human lives, it has it in the same way: as an essential, not an accidental quality, since turning cannot be eliminated from the wheel without the wheel more or less ceasing to be itself. In the same way, fortune cannot be made to stand still, guaranteed to remain stable: *that is how fortune is, in essence*. That human life is *inherently and unavoidably* unstable is the great truth about human affairs that the medieval mind wanted understood.

---

22 Or does the blindfold of Justice mean something else, as it did to a man badly served by the legal system in Texas (convicted by a reasoning that appeared inscrutable, as vividly documented in the film *The Thin Blue Line*)? "That's why she got that blindfold on: we don't see behind the closed doors."

23 Thomasin von Zerclaere in "Der wälsche Gast" (c. 1215). Panofsky, "Blind Cupid" (1939), 105.

24 Berchorius introduction to the *Moralized Ovid* and Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum*, IX,4, cited by Panofsky, Ibid., 107—08, nn. 38, 40.

We can now see that, precisely according to the Aristotelian theory that Gombrich presents as the modern view, the relation between the thing to be symbolized and the symbol that represents it (at least in cases such as these) is not, in fact, *either* arbitrary *or* artificial. Not arbitrary because in the forming of symbols the artist is not actually free to make just any correlation of sign and meaning, and not artificial because of the reason why: the artist is enjoined to look for something *that has* the required meaning. This principle — the very core of the principle of illustrated metaphor — was laid out quite explicitly in what is perhaps the most famous symbol book or 'iconography' ever written, Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1593, which Gombrich cites. It is not always appreciated that the *Iconologia* was not written as a key to the interpretation of symbols (an interpreter's 'dictionary')[25] but rather as a manual instructing artists how to create symbols and containing a store of ready-made symbolizations. The principle of formation was again not artificial coding but, as we by now expect, the exploitation of actual qualities. What Ripa explained in his introduction is that, as artists,

> we have to look for the similitudes that exist between these concepts [that we wish to symbolize] and material things, and which function as substitutes for the words as used in the images and definitions of the orators.[26]

It is important to notice that the issue stressed here is *choosing, selecting* the visible sign; Ripa is not talking about fabrication or invention: we have to "*look for* the similitudes *that exist*" between concepts and visible things. Symbols are made by being chosen. Hence that aspect of the sign for which it is called a convention is not truly, if we look carefully at real signs, that the correlation is either arbitrary or artificial, since it is *neither*. The choice of the feature to represent the concept is not arbitrary, because it must fasten upon an essential feature. Neither is the choice of thing to represent that feature arbitrary; the thing must simply possess it. And they are not artificial, because these similitudes are not man-made;

---

25 According to Beardsley these are a basis for understanding art as language: iconography and its "official rulebooks" present strong cases of rule-based interpretation. Beardsley, "Limits of Interpretation" (1966), 180.

26 Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 143. The mention of "the orators" is important, for the symbol would truly symbolize only if the chosen feature was truly part of the definition of both the sign and the meaning to be symbolized: i.e., only if both the wheel and fortune were both *truly defined* by instability. Thus the appeal to the philosophers who have correctly defined the elements of reality.

With reference to Ripa's book, Gombrich explains that in art, "as with language, the impression has grown up among the unwary that symbols are a kind of code with a one-to-one relationship between sign and significance. The impression is reinforced by the knowledge that there exist a number of medieval and Renaissance texts which are devoted to the interpretation of symbols and are sometimes quoted dictionary-fashion. The most frequently consulted of these dictionaries is Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* of 1593, which lists personifications of concepts in alphabetical order and suggests how they are to be marked by symbolic attributes. ... Ripa establishes quite explicitly that the symbols he uses as attributes are illustrated metaphors [i.e., an image of a lion illustrates a metaphor establishing the symbolic link between lion and courage]. Metaphors are not reversible" [i.e., courage might be associated with the lion, but the lion is not associated only with courage]. Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 12—13.

they must be naturally present. The connection is one that the artist acknowledges but does not create or force together by "fiat"; the sign of arrow, blindfold, or wheel is not invested with its meaning. Love does strike. And if the state of being blindfolded or the turning of a wheel are in some way humanly-made features of reality, that level of fabrication has no bearing on the issue; once the wheel and the blindfold are invented, their qualities are there simply to be recognized. A wheel may be an artefact, but its reality is that it turns. It is precisely from the *pre-existence and inalterability of reality* that the artist draws the power of the chosen sign.

The 'conventionality' of the symbol must therefore have to do with something else, with the area of freedom that still remains after these conditions are satisfied. What freedom is the artist left? First, obviously, that among the essential features of love or fortune, artists are free to choose the one that they want to present; choice in the quality to be presented is not determined arbitrarily but by what the artist wants to say. Beyond that they are free to choose, among all the objects that in the nature of things objectively share that chosen quality, the object that they wish.[27] The chosen quality might after all be possessed by many actual things — in fact we have already seen a case of this. Both love and fortune have been symbolized in art through the same quality: love and fortune both are flighty and unstable. Indeed, it is an important part of the message of the medieval figure of Fortuna that *none* of the conditions of human life (love not excepted) is guaranteed to last; love is only human fortune, and just as stable. Wings and the wheel both convey instability, and artists chose the symbol they wished. That there is freedom here is clear from the fact that they also chose other solutions, for indeed, there are not just two things in the world that put unsteadiness on display. An interesting engraving by Otto Van Veen (figure 11) shows another choice: there both Cupid and Fortune are perched upon a ball used as a pedestal, another 'conventional' device for instability.[28] (We also find a particularly articulate application of the blindfold sign, noticing that a blindfolded Fortuna is blindfolding Cupid, suggesting precisely the point noted above: that *all* the conditions of human life are uncertain, and our blindness in love is only an instance of our basic blindness about the course of our lives.) While the link made between the meaning to be represented and the thing chosen to represent that meaning is in none of these cases artificial, the choice of one thing over others is pretty much arbitrary, beyond quite incidental considerations of decorum, precedent, etc. The conventionality of the symbol, therefore, is principally that

---

27 This point is made by Summers, who nevertheless goes on to consider such symbols "conventional in the fullest sense of the term." Summers, "Problem of Art Historical Description" (1982), 303.

28 Panofsky traces this choice to a pseudo-Ciceronian text whose date he does not give. Panofsky, "Blind Cupid" (1939), 124.

there is *some freedom of choice within the range of things that are naturally linked to the meaning in question.*

We are able to recognize, now, in what way our standard picture of artistic codes is exaggerated, and we should modify it somewhat. Whatever we intend by the 'conventionality' of the symbol, in many or even most cases[29] it will not be that the correlation of sign and meaning is artificial. Far from being artificial, artistic codes such as we have examined turn out, in fact, to work by reflecting conditions of reality; that is not just their purpose but their *means*. They are rooted in metaphorical assertions about the nature of things. In our conventional codes, then, "conventionality" means that the artist can choose a sign from among those objects that themselves possess a certain quality, objects that, because they possess it, have the power to suggest that meaning; the artist does not give the depicted thing that meaning, for it is on the basis of possessing that meaning that the chosen signs are found.

32 CONVENTION: SYMBOL VERSUS SIGN

By the theory of the illustrated metaphor (which we are exploring as an explicitation of the precise nature of artistic codes, "the conventional nature of visual representations") it is the purpose of the symbol to represent, in some essential way, the concept that it symbolizes: to bring out the quality of instability or of uncertainty that characterizes love, life, or both. In fact that is the very strength of the symbol in contrast with other types of sign. Symbols do not just represent but "embody the 'essential' attributes" of what they symbolize[30] — the represented thing *has, as a real quality, the quality it is used to represent.* The consequence of this oversight is the failure of the theory to distinguish *symbols* from *signs*. It is a significant failure, because a hermeneutic method designed for signs is not what art requires.

The important thing we have uncovered in codes is this *realism* of the artistic sign, the significance of which can perhaps be made clear by examining a somewhat different relation of signifying, the relation that holds, for instance, between the word 'l-o-v-e' and the concept of love. The word is a sequence of letters, and looking at those letters tells us nothing about the concept it stands for. The word serves as a kind of device that, by an

---

29 On the evidence of the few symbols considered one cannot make a very broad claim, but investigation of symbols repeatedly turns up this metaphorical basis; indeed, Gombrich's claim is that that is how symbolic images are generally designed.

30 Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 173.

entirely artificial or non-essential linkage, serves merely to call up a conception that we already know — one that we already carry, as it were, fully formed in our heads. At its origins this linkage was entirely something *made;* it was in no way discovered, and in no way drew upon any existing meaningful state in reality (such as the capabilities of arrows). Moreover, it is entirely arbitrary; the components selected for the sign (the particular letters of the word 'l-o-v-e') answer to nothing in the nature of love. A sign of this sort is precisely what the code model describes. It is purely 'conventional' in all the senses of that theory (where the notion goes to indicate a convergence in usage, the arbitrariness of the linkage, and the artifactuality of the linkage, the man-made correlation). *This* kind of sign, the kind that exists wholly by convention, we might call a *sign* proper, as something distinct from a symbol.

The works of art that we have been looking at, however — not only the famous Botticellis but the lesser Van Veens — do not use signs, in this sense; they use symbols. The symbol is only partly arbitrary (love symbolized with wings rather than a ball), and it is not artificial at all, where the sign is both (love signified by the word 'l-o-v-e'). We have seen that 'convention' in art applies to the degree of arbitrariness that lies in the choice of object truly possessing the quality that to the artist is important; a second use of the term 'convention' — the most idiosyncratic use in the literature on art — is related to it. A convention is one choice among several that happens to have become standard; it is a *tradition of symbolization,* a standard specific metaphor that is used again and again — as in the following, where the author speaks of the "grounding [of artistic representations] in codes and stereotypes operating in a particular art form and culture at a particular historical conjuncture."[31] This author is not talking about a "code" as the model understands it at all, but rather about symbolic linkages that are used repetitively and without innovation, involving metaphors that have, in addition, probably become unfamiliar with time. The issue here is that force of conservatism parallel to and inhibiting innovation; "geniuses are able to transcend all conventions."[32] 'Convention' here singles out a standardized symbolization, not necessarily one that is arbitrary. As has been noted of Gombrich's view,

> according to him there is only one kind of art and all art is of a sociological nature. All art is primarily a language, a particular way of social communication. As a consequence of the social nature of art, artistic forms follow the social function of art. The principal social task of art is to maintain social conventions. Art fulfils this task by maintaining artistic stereotypes, by artistic tradition ... to preserve status quo.[33]

---

31 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 29.

32 Bakos, "Art Historical Process" (1983), 120.

33 Ibid., 121.

As a tradition, therefore, a symbolic choice has a life span, and these choices change: arrows for the power of love (a choice that has survived from ancient Greece until the present), or wings for love's instability (equally enduring), a wheel for fortune's, and then later a ball (choices of signs whose meaning we are no longer, for some reason, able to penetrate).

In an entirely different sense, however, signs and symbols both possess a kind of 'artificiality' (giving us a third sense of conventionality). Both the symbol and the sign are *artifice* in the sense that they are both *devices* to which mankind has resorted as means of communication. As explained by a Renaissance theorist, the symbol is "nothing else but a rare and particular way of expressing oneself";[34] to the extent that it is a tool this symbolic ability is "a kind of artifice which the orator or poet finds it useful to analyze and master." But it is important to point out, given the foregoing, that here device and artifice mean man-*chosen* and *utilized,* not fabricated or man-made; the parallels (between love and arrows) are recognized to exist, they are not 'set up'. "It is ... we," Ripa says, "who *select* and use symbols for communication." [35] By the Aristotelian theory, a symbol is a metaphorical illustration made through the free selection of a pre-established analogy — a relation pre-established not by man but by the state of things; it is merely a "comparison ... based on qualities objects really possess."[36]

So we make an adjustment to the sign-system theory. Artistic symbols are conventional in the sense that the artist freely chooses whichever metaphor he or she wishes to illustrate; the concept to be conveyed demands a natural choice, but it does not demand any particular choice. They are conventional also to the extent that some of these illustrations become, at different times and places, the standard and invariable means of representing a concept, to the exclusion or disfavour of others. Finally, they are conventions (qua artifice) in the sense that they represent a humanly chosen means of conveying meaning, but the meaning symbols convey is not attached to them but found in them. Symbols are conventional in those senses alone. The *relation* that exists between the sign and its meaning is, on the other hand, not a convention at all. The thing that happens to be selected is not artificially linked to that meaning, but possesses the desired quality on its own; that a wheel has an affinity with fortune or fortune with a wheel is a relation to be recognized as a fact (presuming we can see the analogy), not a relation to be instituted. All that might be instituted is the choice of a wheel (versus a ball, etc.) as a means of expressing the quality of uncertainty. And it is not *made a means of conveying* that

---

34 Scipione Bargagli, cited by Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 162.
35 Ibid., 162, 178, 184 [emphasis added].
36 Ibid., 162.

meaning, for it has that capacity by its own nature. Only the particular comparison is man-made; the 'correlation' of meaning to symbol is already there to be exploited. Institution is understood as the establishment by fiat of a sign-meaning connection. But the connection is the very thing not established by fiat, and it is that fact from which the symbol derives its power. Institution is the selection and usage of a specific pre-existent relation, such as the one that holds between being smitten and an arrow.

Artistic signs are not quite as the model of the code depicts them. They are not mere signs (comparable to Morse codes, road signs, artificial gestures such as hat-tipping); they are symbols. Henceforth, we are going to have to consider codes (at least in regard to images like these) as sign-meaning linkages, arbitrary in their particularity (this motif versus that) but not in their linkage, which is a real and existing connection not created by artists: a *symbolic* linkage.[37] Even the most frequently cited, common-garden instances of artistic codes (such as Cupid), which have been explained to work as illustrated metaphors, turn out to possess an unexpected quality. The meaning of a sign, such as a boy with bow and arrow, is not set there by agreement but is a meaning hidden in the depicted things for those with the capacity or the insight to see the similarity between the sign and the reality — love, or human destiny — that the artist is speaking of. And this is actually an extraordinary discovery, because it is precisely such a quality that opposes the modern, rational understanding of artistic signs to the irrational, archaic tradition that Gombrich regarded as always fallacious.

> The other tradition, which I have called the Neo-Platonic or mystical interpretation of symbolism, is even more radically opposed to the idea of a conventional sign-language. For in this tradition the meaning of a sign is not something derived from agreement, it is hidden there for those who know how to seek.[38]

---

37 In its definition of the symbol in art, the *Encyclopedia of World Art* (1960) appears at first to recognize this in some sense, but then comes down quite clearly with a classic formulation of the code model. "Symbolized conceptions of art are those in which the intrinsic identity of the sign and the thing signified is fundamental; all artistic images, therefore, being by their very nature signs of something else, constitute symbolic forms that of themselves identify the thing signified." But the case at issue here is only, apparently, the representational aspect of art. "In allegorical conceptions of art, on the other hand, the meaning is never held to be implicit in the sign but is merely associated with it, so that the more specifically artistic element in the work of art, the image, is regarded as the temporary clothing of a meaning which is not identical with it but which rather finds its most complete and appropriate expression in the conceptual formulation, to which the artistic image serves merely as an introduction." Oreste Ferrari, "Symbolism and Allegory," 792—93.

38 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 13.

33 READING SYMBOLIC IMAGES

The issue we are heading toward concerns interpretation. Understanding the working of isolated symbols, extracted from artistic images, is naturally only a very preliminary step to understanding the interpretation of symbolic images. We can examine the significance of the code model further by considering the problem not of forming symbols (as in the discussion of the technique of illustrated metaphor) but of *reading them*. How, actually, are symbolic images read? If we are to regard symbols as illustrated metaphors, uncovering the meaning of a symbol is surely uncovering the existing middle term, the quality shared between the sign and the meaning. But the familiar code model is a simpler sign-meaning relation, according to which interpreting is the context-assisted recovery of semantic pairings of signs with meanings. Since illustrated metaphors are not signs but symbols, with three terms, interpreting will likely be something different and more complex. Intuitively, it would appear to involve bringing to light the essential feature shared by the concept and the sign chosen to convey it; reading the symbol means *recognizing* in some way the powerful, penetrating force of both the arrow and love. But one question we cannot ask is, What quality is shared by an arrow and love? If we have already completed the reference to love it would appear that interpretation is over: we have the meaning already. How, then, would one discover that a symbol such as Cupid meant love?

It makes perfect sense to suppose, as an hypothesis, that one would do the reverse of what the artist, or the originator of the symbol, has done.

> The solution of the puzzle, the decoding of the pictorial signs proceeds strictly in the reverse of the creation of the puzzle, coding. For the solution of the picture puzzle one must not only know or find out the language into which one must translate, but must also guess the figures of the puzzle's invention.[39]

The hermeneutic import of the model of the code was exactly this, that the interpreter discover some record of or evidence of the full code in the historical setting so as to be able to read the correlation in reverse, from sign back to meaning.[40] Let's look at such a process. The artist, of course, begins with the abstraction. In devising a symbol, as Ripa explained, "we have to look for the similitudes that exist between these concepts and material things": the artist's question is first, What in particular is distinctive of the conception I wish to express? and then, What object shares this quality in the same essential

---

39 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 36. Understanding is "an inversion of the creative process." Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 57, 87.

40 "The iconologies were conceived as a common lexical basis both for the production of art as well as for its contemplation. There one could learn not only how to pictorially represent a concept by its attributes, but also how one would have to decipher a pictorial representation to get back to the concept." Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 40.

way? Now since the interpreter, plainly, begins with the sign, the interpreter surely does just the opposite. The interpreter's question is, What in particular is distinctive of this sign whose meaning I wish to penetrate? — that is, what is distinctive of a wheel, of an arrow, of armed little infants with wings? Having answered that question, the interpreter would then ask, What concept also possesses that quality? If this reversal is, truly, the manner in which the code is broken, then it will be possible to demonstrate it by turning to a new example.

We shall move on in time, however, to consider a work painted a hundred years after Botticelli's, a painting by Paolo Veronese (figure 12) that for the moment goes without a title, so as not to preclude what we are about to attempt: an interpretation of the work aided by nothing but our revised analysis of artistic codes and symbolic images. According to that analysis, we have to look at the work by moving systematically through the levels of sign and meaning. At the lowest level, form and representation, we have no trouble at all. Our understanding is immediate; it takes no mental labour to 'understand' everything represented here; as Panofsky suggests, we register representations "automatically," "by simply identifying."[41] A woman, a man, two little children with wings, a horse; trees and sky, a building; clothing, weapons, ... It is pointless to *list,* to begin converting all this to language, for we see a great deal, and though all the individual details are quite clear it is more difficult than it might first have appeared to state exactly what is represented. The woman is nude, essentially; but she is jewelled and partly covered. She leans an elbow upon the man, and raises a leg over his knee; but how exactly do you name her action — what exactly *is* her action? With her right hand she holds her breast, or rather appears to press from it drops of milk. By contrast to the woman, the man is clothed. He wears a rich leather-and-bronze armour; his helmet lies beneath him. He is holding (raising, lowering?) a cloak before the woman. It is likely *his* sword that is being carried (lifted? offered?) by the child at right. The winged child at the left is tying, it appears, something around the woman's calf. And the horse is tethered to a tree. What appears at first to be a building is perhaps not a building, exactly, but a ruin or an architectural decoration; it has a sculpted herm.

Also at the level of representation, the two principal figures have expressions that we can quite easily register — registering along with them all their ambiguity — but we have even greater difficulty naming those expressions. We have to acknowledge, quite simply, that that is impossible; we can mark a few boundaries but not capture what we are trying to delimit. The woman's expression is very affecting: a gentle smile, almost a laugh,

41 Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 26.

but restrained and inward-looking. The man is pensive, thoughtful; perhaps there is a look of distraction — distraction, that is, but not detachment. The child at their feet has a curious expression: there is an uncertainty in his face (a look of daring, of mischief, of unease?). Even the child in the distance, as little as we can see of him, has an expression: an open-mouthed excitement.

As Panofsky explained, the level of representation has divisions: Panofsky divided it into motif (object and action) and expression. Regarding *motifs*, concrete objects, most everything in the picture is clear, but not immediately clear, of course. You have to have seen a sixteenth-century helmet, for instance, to identify the thing on the ground as one. More: to have seen such a thing and learn (and how could you learn it except by being told in some way?) that it is a sixteenth-century helmet. Here we encounter that 'special knowledge' — to put it more naturally, that background or training — that is effectively a part of languages. It is a fact that you must have seen many things in life in order to make out the list of things we have passed over. There has been much discussion about what kind of preparation you do need, but I am not concerned here to offer a total explanation of how we read pictures; we need only recall that for interpretation some kind of cognitive preparation is required. As Panofsky explains it, it is experience that supplies that capacity, and of course the requisite experience for some aspect of interpretation may be something that we do not yet have — knowledge of the look of Renaissance helmets, for instance, for without it the thing in the picture will not look like a helmet at all.

If, passing beyond objects, we consider the area of *action*, however, there is a certain ambiguity that acquired experience cannot so decisively resolve. As we have already seen, the positions of the figures suggest different *possibilities* of meaning, possibilities that are raised by our experience; on the face of it, there is more than one way to read what we see. We cannot call this simply ambivalence of meaning; we will probably want to distinguish ambivalence, an uncertainty created by the artist, an aspect of meaning itself, from a subjective ambiguity, one due to the interpreter's circumstantial inability to settle upon the actual meaning. This "plenitude of meanings,"[42] that there are manifest or apparent possibilities of meaning, is something we have already discovered in the figures' expressions. It is not, looking at the face of the man, that we have no idea what we are seeing; it is that expression alone suggests different directions of interpretation. The same applies to some of the action of the picture, which is still 'fluid', tending in more than one direction of meaning. The man may be covering or uncovering the woman; a meaning has not become concrete. At the level of representation, then, it would be too quick to say that

---

42 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 14.

the meaning is entirely clear here, interpretable on grounds of experience, learning, or both. Much of what representation encompasses is clear, but key elements such as expression and action remain uncertain; we are presented with various more or less distinct possibilities of meaning.

If interpretation is a stepped process, we will want to settle the meaning at the representational level before moving on to the level of symbolism. But if that is how interpretation ought to proceed, it happens in fact that we already want to know the symbolic significance of the things we have made out, which marks a movement into the second level of meaning. Here a difficulty arises that we have encountered before, in the problem of *semanticity* (raised in § 10). As we have seen, from the point of view of the interpreter a work of art bears no specific indications of whether, precisely where, and exactly how elaborate a symbolism has been used.[43] The theory explains that we resolve this by knowledge of the context and artistic language, and now we are ready to pursue this suggestion in detail. Familiarity with artistic signs tells us that there are actually three general indications of the existence of symbolic meaning. The first of these we can call an indication *internal to the work,*[44] which occurs when the work itself raises a question or presents a puzzle: symbols stand out as 'making no sense', as not fitting the scene in any sensible way.[45] Symbols tend to draw attention to themselves; making no apparent sense, they call for a deeper reading.[46] Is there any inherent evidence of symbolism, in this sense, in the Veronese? More than one thing is especially notable about the woman: her pose, and her expression; her nakedness, and her fairness, especially beside the man; her decoration, with the unusual strap she wears across her chest; her action. But a particularly puzzling thing are the drops of milk at her breast, made noticeable by the placement of her hand. Is it puzzling only given some special cognitive background, only for certain groups of people? I suspect not: it is as unnatural and in need of explanation for us as for Renaissance Venetians. If this phenomenon had some natural and familiar significance amidst the surrounding action, we would not be puzzled, but it has none; by almost any standard of

---

43 The trouble is that it is not always possible to identify what in an image is a representation, what has this kind of meaning: "The ornamental monsters round the base [of London's statue of Eros] no doubt are meant partly to represent marine creatures, but where in such a composition does the meaning end and the decorative pattern begin?" Ibid., 3.

44 According to a distinction commonly made in the theory of interpretation between "internal evidence (i.e., evidence provided by the interpreted work)" and "external evidence (i.e., not provided by the interpreted work," or what I have been calling special knowledge. Matthews, "Describing and Interpreting a Work of Art" (1977), 12—13.

45 As in Panofsky's remark that "There is so obvious an improbability in the combination of temple and narthex in the Master of Flémalle's *Betrothal of the Virgin* that we cannot help interpreting this contrast as indicative of a deliberate antithesis." Cited by Białostocki, "Iconography and Iconology" (1963), 781.

46 Surely the suggestion that some elements in a work are simply given as symbolic involves forgetting the problem of "givenness." We ask, they do this given what knowledge or preparation? Surely, sometimes given that level of human experience, however small it may be, that we generally share.

familiar human behaviour it stands out as strange. It is plausible to suppose that these drops of milk are present to convey a symbolic meaning, and before we consider external indications of symbolism, we might just attempt to read this particular sign as the code model suggests we should: by a reversal of the method used to devise them — the method of the illustrated metaphor.

How would we proceed? As interpreters we have been given a possible symbol (by what we are calling internal evidence). Our first question, prompted by the method of illustrated metaphor, will be What is distinctive of this sign, essentially? What quality is distinctive of a drop of milk at a woman's breast? What I myself think, thinking quickly, is of its life-sustaining quality; indeed, it is humankind's first food, and keeps alive the helpless. It is also a woman's gift — when you think of it, a woman's specific gift, one a woman alone can give. It is also nourishment from her body itself. *Several* possibilities, not all apparently related. It would appear that symbolic objects, too (not only expressions and actions) possess that hermeneutic 'fluidity' we noted at the primary level of meaning; they suggest various directions of symbolic reading. It would be wrong, however, to imagine that we have answered our question with this list of significances — to think that they all come to more or less the same thing, that a common element runs through them or they are reducible to some predominant concept. None of this is true. We have given *too many* answers to our very first question; we have a *list* of essential properties.

Right at the start we discover that the process cannot be reversed. In fact this is apparent even logically. Finding the 'essential' quality of a thing by contemplating the thing is *not* analogous to or a mere reversal of what the artist does. What the artist does is to select a quality already important by virtue of the meaning he or she wants conveyed. An artist focuses upon a love he or she already understands to be painful, and thus is already pushed toward one essential quality. The interpreter has no such prior impetus but his or her own subjectivity, which the method precisely intends to constrain. Because we have given *too many* answers to our first question, we are in real difficulty proceeding with the next step. The artist's next step is to choose some thing possessing that quality, and that, too (a movement from particular quality to complex thing), is altogether different from the movement the interpreter must make from a thing with many qualities to the one particular one at issue. What allows the artist to make the one-to-one step from 'pain inducing' to an arrow is missing when one must move from the thing to one meaning in a list of possible readings. The interpreter cannot reverse the process. Having isolated no quality, it is impossible to decide what concept also has this quality. If reversal of the code is the process of interpreting, we have a right to feel totally baffled.

34 THE ROLE OF CONTEXT

To get anywhere with our interpretation will have to involve another tactic, and before we find it we can return briefly to the problem of potential symbolism to consider other ways in which the presence of symbolic meaning can be identified. Beside internal indication there is also an *external or contextual indication,* which is something that can be historically checked, and the remaining two approaches are its two types, direct and indirect.

The *external but direct indication* of symbolic meaning is the strongest form of indication, and fully aligned with the code model, for it is precisely what the model directs us to: *the recovery of the historical code itself* — the discovery, that is, of explicit correlations of meanings with the signs depicted in our painting, and correlations made precisely in late Renaissance Venice. The external but *indirect* indication is based upon *successful interpretations* of other works of art drawn from the historical setting in question (Renaissance Venice). That is, one comes to have a sense of what is and what is not symbolic that is gradually built up out of successful symbolic interpretations. For knowing the tradition to which the artist in question was exposed gives us the artist's own experience of the language, the very thing that established that artist's own sense of what is and is not symbolic. Traditions of symbolization involve not only habitual correlations, but habits in the choice of vehicles for symbolism. A journal study that endeavours to establish "Venetian attitudes" toward artistic symbolism provides a perfect illustration of this. In establishing Venetian habits, its author turns to surviving written artistic programmes where symbols and their meanings are explicitly linked:

> It may be thought that ... I have relied too much on the few programmes that happen to have survived. My response would be that these constitute the best evidence that exists about Venetian attitudes regarding such decorative schemes.[47]

It is shown, further, that artists such as Veronese "worked in a relatively straightforward and systematic way."

> Far from drawing on esoteric texts and endowing the paintings themselves with several distinct levels of meaning, they generally seem to have used the most readily available manuals [Cartari, chiefly] to produce schemes which were supposed to be comprehensible to educated people and for the most part unambiguous in their content.[48]

It is plain how this approach too respects the rules of content.

---

47 Hope, "Veronese and Venetian Tradition of Allegory" (1985), 389.

48 Ibid., 428.

As the above citation suggests, scholarly reality, the scarcity of evidence, compels us to recognize degrees of strength, according to how close it is possible for a modern interpreter to get to the work's own setting with either direct or indirect external evidence. Consider (as an instance of an explicit correlation external to the work) Propertius' ancient verse identifying the winged boy as love. As a basis for the interpretation of Veronese, naturally there is a continuum of strength from weaker to stronger, according to what we are able to claim:

i Propertius' text was prior to Veronese's time (and might have been known by Veronese)

ii Propertius' text was known in Veronese's time (and might have been known by Veronese)

iii later paraphrases of Propertius' text were written in Veronese's time (and might have been known by Veronese)

iv Propertius' verse (or a later paraphrase [e.g., by Cartari]) was definitely known to Veronese

These claims are increasingly stronger, and interpreters are constantly making use of all levels of argument; the key issue for the method is not their relative strength but their equal legitimacy, by contrast with interpretative approaches not based upon evidence at all. The main purpose of the recourse to external evidence — in both identifying what elements are symbolic and in interpreting them — is to satisfy the method and systematically exclude interpretations that make no attempt to approach the context at all.

Returning to our reading, what conclusion are we to draw? Simply, that our next step must be to take the context into account merely so as to determine what motifs in the painting we are to press for symbolic meaning. This does not mean that a rearticulation of the code theory as a metaphorical correlation is either false or just hermeneutically useless; it has simply become clear that the method of illustrated metaphor does not alter the importance of the context. We cannot uncover the meaning of a symbol, or detect the presence of meaning, by immediate scrutiny.

> We are never, clever as we may be, able to decipher the text from the pictorial representation. The passage from the text to the picture is final and not reversible. We can retrace the path if we have the text, but not otherwise.
>
> The great undertaking of iconologists clearly shows that the [conception of] pictorial codification therefore fails [as an interpretative paradigm], because it is always only a one-way street; we can indeed move from the text to the image, but not the reverse.[49]

49 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 39—40.

Codification "fails" when it has to work alone, without any further assistance or information, and this happens to bring to light the artificiality of the situation I have given us to work with. The way I have set up the interpreter's situation, we have attempted to read an element that appears symbolic not only in isolation from the cultural setting, but in total isolation from all in the work that surrounds it. There is an entire picture surrounding these scant strokes of milk-white paint. Other symbols are after all more obvious, and against *their* meaning one aspect of the 'essential' significance of drops of milk might well stand out. But the implications of that correction obviously reach much further. If it is an artificial restriction to exclude the influence of other clearer symbols in the work, why is it not also artificial to exclude other sources of information? The code model requires the interpreter to take account of the context, and in an attempt to explicate how symbols are read it is inappropriate to commit the interpreter to face the work "unaided."

> Taken in isolation and cut loose from the context in which they are embedded none of these images could have been interpreted correctly.[50]

> In order to improve imperfect understanding of [a work's] meaning it is necessary for the interpreter to supplement the text either by adding to it information that readers previously lacked or to look at the text from a different point of view. Most practical criticism is a mixture of these alternatives.[51]

We have ended up once again with the full code model of interpretation, which requires reconstructing the work's context: hunting through that context for constitutive evidence of the correlation by which the work is given meaning and material adequate "to fix the referent" (the co-ordinates of Gombrich's chequerboard schema, stemming from the work's specific purpose or occasion); then reading the work according to that correlation; and finally applying the rules of form to check the final interpretation arrived at. These are the conditions of understanding according to our model. Moreover, merely to stipulate 'pure' conditions of reading, and then analyze what happens, is not really to examine the workings of symbols at all; we would clearly do better to stick closer to art in the way or ways we commonly experience it.[52] And the fact is that in the history of the viewing of art (not excepting works of genius) one tends to encounter individual works with some form

---

50 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 12.

51 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 9.

52 It is important all the same to acknowledge the difficulty of fully analyzing our actual process of interpreting. The reason why analysis focuses on pure conditions is the need for scientific controls: any explanation of interpreting that relies on other interpretations is going to be inconclusive, damaged by the problem of regress. There seems to be a hole in the explanation that cannot be closed until one can take out of one's explanation products of the very thing one is attempting to explain. We can ignore this problem here because we are not really conducting any experiment or attempting to model any process. We are just trying to see how much we can say already about how we already interpret works of a'.

of hermeneutic assistance, and where one hasn't a clue (as also happens), interpretation draws a blank until one gets some. What do I mean by assistance? Sometimes, of course, a person who tells you things, but more often, probably, other works of art that do mean something (about which, very likely, you have been told something too).

Pursuing the reading of Veronese's painting, it is necessary to recover the work's semantic context. What, concretely, is such a context? It is interesting to note how rarely, given the importance of the concept, this question is answered. In our explication of the model we unfolded two somewhat different forms of context: the context of a language and its usage (§ 26) and the context of the specific work's production and intended function (§ 27). Theoretically, a context is

> the *total* whole which is relevant to the verification of an assertion or denial of a relation of reference ['x means y']. Precisely what this total whole is may be difficult, even practically impossible, to determine in any given instance; indeed, it is just this difficulty which renders verification far from simple and which stands in the way of our making glib assertions about absolute knowledge. But, whether determinable or not, the context ideally at least is the *entire structure or entity* which furnishes the logical ground of the relation of reference ....[53]

As the code model clarifies, Veronese chose his symbols for specific meanings against the background of an established language, a tradition of symbolization and symbolic usage with which he was familiar. Rather than attempt to read Veronese's symbols directly, our interpretative model explains that we must gain some insight into that historical language.

> One cannot completely understand most works of visual art — even on a purely perceptual level — without having some idea of the religious worship, and the political and social institutions for which they — according to their external historical sense — were originally created. But the path to a reawakening is open only where this knowledge has passed into perception, dissolving into the capacity to bring to life, to recreate, the perceptual basic content of works of art.[54]

As Gombrich has suggested, "more is altogether involved in the interpretation of representational conventions than literally 'meets the eye'";[55] in addition to being able to read the representations (aided as even that is by knowledge), it is natural to possess a little information *at the level of symbolization as well.* "But just as principle precedes physical form, it is only by first becoming familiar with certain ideas that the physical object can be properly understood."[56] We must *with reference to Veronese's context* identify the elements that are symbolic, establish the three-term metaphorical code by which Veronese's symbols held their meaning, and read the work accordingly. How do we proceed?

---

53 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 43 [emphasis added].
54 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 98.
55 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 3.
56 Pontynen, "Theory and Practice of Art History" (1986), 476.

35 READING AS TRANSLATION

Our first tactic of reading (by reversal) failed; our second will do exactly what the model tells us to do. Simply to make use of our familiarity with this symbol, we might focus our attention first on the most prominent of Veronese's Cupids. Any person in Veronese's time who did not already know the meaning of a winged boy would simply be told it — 'and this is Cupid, god of love.' Any reconstruction of Veronese's context will certainly bring forth that much identification; as Hope has told us, Veronese made use of Vincenzo Cartari's compendium, a systematic primer on the classical gods and their meanings. Research tells us the children in Veronese's picture are Cupids, personifications of love. Further, a check with the context of the work's production (Gombrich's "principle of intersection") — an historical investigation of the role this work played in the collection of its owner-commissioner — makes such an interpretation perfectly fitting. This does precisely what the model explains we must do. "The convergence between the results of iconographic 'decoding' and information about 'commissioning' not only allows us to select among different possible readings, the author argues, it also reduces the possibility of error 'practically to nothing'."[57] Is it the recovery of a code? Many of the theorists canvassed in chapter three would say yes, for a code is usually understood as this simple sign-meaning relation (winged boy = Cupid or love). But as we have seen in this chapter, visual symbols have more complexity than that. If Cupid is a symbol, an illustrated metaphor, we do not have a two-term connection fixed by the intersection of a context but a three-term connection. Recovering the linkage 'in this context Cupid = love' is not to recover a code but merely its outer terms. That may be all we require to know; on the code model, that is all the meaning there is. But to do only that is to take no account of our precise and historical understanding of artistic signs as illustrated metaphors; indeed, it makes that explanation wholly gratuitous. And to ignore it is to ignore the way it can be used by an interpreter.

If we combine the acquired knowledge that 'Cupid is the god of love' with the understanding of symbols as illustrated metaphors, the interpreter acquires a whole new tactic of reading. For if one knows the outer terms of the metaphorical relation, one is able to ask a question that *is* comparable to the one the artist asked: we can ask What is the analogy between love and a winged boy? What is the common element between love (which Cartari tells us Cupid personifies) and this particular image of Cupid? With these *two* points of reference even vaguely sketched, the possibilities of meaning we intuit from the image alone become much more decisively narrowed.

---

57 Summers, "Painting in Political Context" (1986), on Ginzburg.

Let's look again at the painting, considering this somewhat developed model of the code in connection with the nude woman we see there, who is perhaps more central to the work's meaning than is Cupid. Accordingly, we search the context for a code linking this representation to a meaning, and let us say we discover a text such as Alexander Ross's *Mystagogus Poeticus, or the Muses Interpreter*, which says the following under the heading of 'Venus':

> Shee was the goddesse of love and beauty.... She was also painted naked, ... [and] by this nakednesse is meant, that love cannot be concealed or long hid.[58]

What we have here, according to the revised conception of the code, is a record of the following three-term metaphorical 'convention':

nude woman : unconcealedness : love (named Venus)

As the woman is unconcealed, so "love cannot be concealed or long hid." We have uncovered a complete historical code and thus are now able to read, with historical legitimacy and relative strength (subject to support of the work's purpose), from the symbol to its meaning. While it may appear that we have taken adequate account of the revision, there are two problems with even this account of interpretation.

One of them is that the middle term is effectively skipped over as *unnecessary*, for what purpose does it serve in our interpretation (other than deference to a conception of how symbols are formed)? We are still interpreting on the basis of a correlation external to the work, and the middle term is hermeneutically redundant. The other problem is that this plucking-out of a recorded code for theoretical purposes (as is common the hermeneutics of art, and encouraged by the code model) is a misrepresentation of the real historical situation, as Gombrich has adequately warned us. In effect we are merely projecting a chosen explanation onto the work, for a search through 'the context' produces not just this one metaphorical relation but many, *too many* such relations. The text actually reads as follows:

> Shee was the goddesse of love *and* beauty.... She was also painted naked, ... for she strips men of their estates; and the whore will leave them naked at last; or her nakedness may signifie that all

---

58 The work cited is an English work of the following century, and thus not extremely close to the narrow context. But as in our continuum of proximity and strength of argument (outlined in the preceding section) we can call this a comparatively weak but still legitimate argument, for we have good reason to think that the symbolism of the principal gods was very widespread and long-lasting in Europe. It is likely we could find an earlier Italian work with the same import. *A Critical Edition of Alexander Ross's 1647 Mystagogus Poeticus, or the Muses Interpreter*, ed. John R. Glenn (New York 1987), 549, 551.

> things should be open and naked among lovers, and nothing hid in the heart; or by this nakednesse is meant, that love cannot be concealed or long hid.[59]

Not only are there numerous middle terms, and numerous possible meanings, but the first line tells us that Venus is the goddess of love and also the goddess of beauty (recall also Gombrich's and Wind's interpretations of Botticelli), and familiarity with Veronese's tradition tells us that she is the goddess of marriage (recall Lightbown's), and lasciviousness, and vanity as well, all of which makes interpretation by recovery of documented codes still inconclusive. We do not have a demonstration of meaning. However, if we give up not only the two-term sign relation of the simplistic code but also *the translation pattern that virtually defines code reading* — the cashing-in of a sign for a linguistically articulated meaning (whether we do it in a simple left-right sign-to-meaning movement or we use Gombrich's more elaborate co-ordinate schema) — we encounter neither of these problems. And we are prompted to do that by our understanding of symbols.

Reading these images is not a matter of translating the visible symbol to a conceptual meaning, skipping over the middle term of the metaphorical relation; it involves filling in and concentrating upon that space. Despite the clarity and explicitness of such explanations as Ross's, and their sure fit with the image, such codes, whether derived from direct evidence (as here, in an artists' image book or in classical poetry) or from indirect (found in inherited knowledge, in the traditions of art, or elsewhere in Veronese's own work), have nothing to offer us beyond *suggesting the range of meanings that Venus might have*. As Gombrich has made adequately clear, the sources leave us still unsure of the meaning of the image. According to Gombrich's refinement of the model, what is needed is more factual information about the work: who it was painted for and what kind of person they were, where the painting was intended to be hung, what other works it was to accompany, and so on. Though in Veronese's case our information about the purpose and uses of his allegorical paintings is adequate to complete an argument of this sort, and contextually narrow down the work's meaning, it is not very complete or certain; there is certainly reason to invoke that theoretical situation called the inadequate disclosure of context, which requires us to refrain from inadequately based projections concerning the work's meaning. But the main and final point is that contextual information does not conclusively resolve the problem of possibilities of meaning. Paying attention to the fact that Veronese painted this picture for Rudolf II of Prague[60] might lead us to the conclusion that the meaning of Venus

---

59 Ross, *Mystagogus Poeticus, or the Muses Interpreter*, 549, 551 [emphasis added].

60 Rearick, *Art of Veronese* (1988), cat. no. 68.

is simply her nakedness, since Rudolf is known to have relished "highly erotic, mythological canvases, depicting primarily the amorous adventures of stylized, contorted couples."[61] In that event the work has only a negligible symbolic meaning. But this matching of code and context in deference to our theoretical conscience (our conscientious service to theory and model) has the immediate consequence of turning us away from the work. Interpreting the work, on the contrary, involves attending to it.

In my view, it is our business now to *read* what meaning is there by looking at the work we see. The suspension of interpretation for dearth of specific context is warranted only by a theory that ignores the nature of the symbol. Moreover, Gombrich's recourse to factual information is not satisfying, because all it could serve to do is to foreclose the project of interpreting the work upon the discovery of some circumstantially warranted match; Gombrich is still looking for a key to translation. Our fourth tactic of reading involves reading what we see. If we truly understand the image of this woman as a symbol, we will discover her meaning by looking at her, for *the artist has correlated image and meaning visually:* Veronese has linked the woman to the specific meaning of Venus that he intended by a quality that is pre-eminently visual. It is by asking ourselves *how this woman is portrayed* that we are pointed in the direction of who this Venus is, of the specific meaning of Venus in this work. What are the things most noticeable about her? Her nakedness, for one, and her decoration. When we look at these features, thinking of the possible meanings of Venus, a natural link is struck right away with beauty. The way she is presented — unclothed, but ornamented with bands and gleaming pearls, which emphasize her presentation to the eye, that she is meant to be seen — makes her a highly effective personification of beauty. Looking at her this way, the *grace* of her pose (with the lovely tilt of her leg), of her hands, of her expression, which we had not taken to be symbolic at all, suddenly becomes so. Vis-à-vis the appearance of the work, it is Cupid, rather, who is love; what visibly distinguishes Venus is her beauty, and it is that quality of beauty that suggests what Venus is goddess *of* here — though, in the face of all the painting presents to us, that is hardly the limit of her meaning.

In fact, she takes on a sense in this picture that the notion of the code and the traditional codes it sends us to do not even prepare us for. For if we look at her closely, we recognize that it is not just physical beauty that distinguishes her, but her *fineness* (the delicacy of her ornaments, of her expression, the extraordinary lustre of her skin) and her marvellous grace (the set of fingers, hands, wrists, the tilt of body and leg, the way she gently leans upon Mars) — it is this fineness and grace *precisely in contrast* with the rough,

---

61 Watson, *Wisdom and Strength* (1989), 38; citing R.J.W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World: A Study in Intellectual History* (Oxford 1973).

stolid, brooding Mars. Venus is, here, an exemplifying emblem of all these qualities, which are not easily summed up into a concept, and which to the extent they can be named (by 'beauty', for instance) are not captured and known at all, but simply categorized. If we take specific account of the contrast with Mars, which is the dramatic chord of the image, we begin to see her as the personification of an ideal that is meant to correct and soften the ways of the man — not merely *the* man, and not necessarily men, but mankind. We can see the gods in this painting as representing aspects of humankind: a brute, primitive force, and a refined, finessed manner that moreover has the power to bring the violent temper into harmony with it. It is by no means an accident that this particular contrast is marked by the contrast of a woman with a man. Who are these gods but the personifications of woman and man, precisely in terms of distinctive and distinguishing qualities, and through them ideals of behaviour and society.

It is important to recognize the general significance of this result. Symbols, as we have explained them, do not convey mere abstractions, vague conceptions like 'love' or 'beauty'; *they convey the substance of conceptions,* love understood *as* something (as a force with the power to strike), beauty understood *as* something (as grace, and a force of refinement or civilization). A symbol, in this way, has far more eloquence than a concept named by a mere word, for a symbol is the analogue not of a word but of something closer to an ostensive definition, a demonstration, an articulate insight into the character of the thing. A concept says where a symbol shows; and the symbol shows not what the concept says, but what it means.

Venus is the female balance of the man, in this marriage of Venus and Mars; she is the feminine qualities that balance and temper the masculine — that soften the man in order that he can be close to what is different from him. What the painting presents us with is the roughness, the severity that is by tendency masculine, beside a conception of woman as a force of civilization: a model of grace, influencing the acceptance of difference for the sake of companionship. It presents a contrast of two temperaments not in opposition and conflict, but harmonized. The middle term in the relation 'woman/grace/Venus as beauty' amounts to far more, in the material offered by this painting, than any concept of beauty we might have had to offer. What beauty is — its qualities, its content, its role, its influence — are all part of what the picture demonstrates. The woman is not just Venus as "narrowed down," by a natural metaphor or a contextual index, to 'beauty'; she is Venus, the personification of beauty, in the sense of an emblem that *explains to us what beauty is*. The revelation of this meaning is not delivered, therefore, by an historically disclosed code by which to translate sign to meaning, for there is no recorded code that contains *any such meaning as this* at all. The meaning of the image is delivered, finally, by the power of this

image to tell us something specific, given various suggestions of general meaning, various possible directions of reading. The detail of the work clarifies the nature of this Venus. The meaning stands, finally, on the basis of the 'substance' of what is said: something rings true in this reading of grace and its power, and what rings true is that very thing — the importance of grace. Our claim to having uncovered the work's meaning (if only in part) rests on having found an interpretation with substance. There is a power and sufficiency of meaning, a meaning that makes sense to us (the qualities demanded by explanatory power in § 13).

In this case, what the historical code supplied was not even the final term of the translation, but only a certain rudimentary categorization of the meaning: the idea of beauty, in the abstract, which gave us a *direction to follow*, an idea that focused our attention upon the work in a way that brought us into contact with a great deal of what is visible in the image. Interpretation suggested a way of reading that also brought more than just one sign to life. The depth and the power of this natural connection between the inarticulate idea of 'beauty' (drawn from our historical knowledge of Venus as goddess of beauty) and numerous aspects of this image make this a far more *significant* reading of the work than, say, to regard Venus as the goddess of lascivious love, which we could do only without giving much attention to — by disregarding, almost — the manner in which she is depicted here.

The coded image is read, therefore, in a way that is not so much a reversal as a sort of *repetition of the process by which it was coded.* For we began here with a 'given' (historically produced) range of possibilities of symbolic meaning (Venus as love, beauty, lasciviousness, ...), and our procedure was then to look for a significant quality shared by those potential meanings and the woman as Veronese depicted her, something that is not unlike the artist's selection of a quality shared by two things. One sense came out of this with great adequacy and explanatory power; one sense of Venus was illuminating of the work: Venus is beauty. But reading the image using such a procedure as this — moving *through* the image toward a powerful *illumination* of this sort — was not a matter of translating, because the meaning of 'beauty' that *is* revelatory here was not contained in the code at all. The process of reading this sign was not to end up with an abstract concept such as 'beauty', but to uncover a specific and particular sense of beauty as a civilizing force, in a tempering relation with qualities of masculinity, something that is not abstract but that is repeatedly visible throughout the work.

That illuminating sense coalesced among the general possibilities raised by historical knowledge through an attentive and imaginative examination of the symbols of the work and their manner of depiction. An illuminating sense, of this sort, cannot be dictated by any

circumstance external to such an interpretative-imaginative working-through of the sign's features, for it is only that that both defines and secures the meaning that we uncover. It is claimed that an "interpretation must rely either on an oral tradition or it must be institutionally supported and sanctioned."[62] But the phrase "must rely on" is ambiguous, and usually understood in the wrong way. If it means 'for validation', the claim is false; it is the power of the reading that held it. If it means 'as a source of content', that meaning is trite, for from where else are our basic associations likely to come? The rough content, a general notion of the work's meaning, may be dictated by the context, from sources external to us, objectively, in accordance with the method. But that any such proposed meaning is at all related to the genuine sense can only be determined in the interpreter's examination of the work. It was by freely exploring, in an historically uncontrolled way, the *detailed* possibilities of meaning that the woman's features themselves suggested (following the basic prompting of the historical code Venus=beauty) that beauty itself came to be understood as a force of civilization, in all its senses. The only objective constraint on that operation was the work, as we see it.

36 READING ALLEGORIES

How far does this revised sketch of reading take us, and what is its legitimacy? It is natural in our encounter with symbols, we have accepted, to be given certain facts and possibilities of meaning (such as the names of the personifications involved and what those figures are figures of), facts on the basis of which one can often fill out, in the way just demonstrated, a reading at the level of symbolism. But certainly that is not always the case, and it will not give us a complete interpretation, because the meaning of discrete symbols does not give us the meaning of an entire work. With the *'Primavera'*, for instance, the problem was not simply to identify and string together the symbolism of its figures, but to identify the subject matter of the work and to give the whole a coherent meaning; not one of the interpretations examined was merely a sum of component interpretations. There is, therefore, a further level of meaning which we might think of as higher (or deeper) than that of figures and their symbolism, a level that we can examine at the same time as we explore one final tactic of reading. Sometimes, in order to resolve the meaning of a 'preliminary' level, we have to leap ahead to a further one. Theorists tend to believe that an illegitimate procedure. The correlation must be secured at each level before proceeding on to the next.

---

62 Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 127.

"I know of no theory of the interpretation of art in art history that does not establish a hierarchical order. Either layers of the work are built upon one another or individual acts of understanding are arranged in a hierarchy."[63] But perhaps that is not what we always do.

That further level is the level of *allegory*, which has to do with the *significance of the relations* that exist between the work's individual symbols. For relations between the depicted symbols (as between Venus and Mars) are suggested by the action in the work; we have to attend not only to how Venus is represented, but to what she is doing. It is preferable, really, to think of this not as a wholly new level, but rather as a higher stratum of symbolism, which we have been discussing, for it works in much the same way, by analogies. Just as isolated symbols held their meaning through analogy (e.g., the analogy of nakedness and love), the link here is also analogy, but now an analogy of relationship. *The relation of the represented symbols in the painting is also the relation of the concepts or meanings that they symbolize.* Consider, for instance, the Cupid in the background of Veronese's picture, who is actually walking away with the sword of Mars. This is not merely a way of composing symbols; it depicts a symbolic relationship: the literally depicted relation between the motifs expresses the relation between the symbolic meanings of those motifs. As Cupid is to Mars in the painting, love is to might: as Cupid disarms Mars, love removes the threat of might.

This reading, like the reading of Venus herself, is an interpretation in a sense that appears to stand somewhat closer to personal understanding (how I take it) than to demonstrably cognitive understanding. It is a reading that involves and builds upon some notion of or belief about the significance of love, for there are other plausible ways to describe the same action (love brings peace, love weakens, love 'unmans'). In describing these relations, as in developing a reading of Venus, we re-encounter the problem the rules of content are designed to address: the problem of the cognitive legitimacy of freely reading what we see; we involve a subjective faculty that does not rely upon collected facts or external support. By the theory, whether there *is* a relational meaning, and which among several possibilities of meaning is the appropriate one, and whether the one elaborated is legitimate, requires to be established in some objective way. But at the level of individual symbols, our recourse to the historical context to find some kind of standard by which to answer these questions did not provide one. Certainly, we were able to find precedents to decide that in Renaissance Venice signs such as Venus have a symbolic meaning, but no such check was made for all the motifs interpreted in Veronese's picture. The recourse to such grounding of interpretations was eventually suspended, primarily for lack of evidence.

---

63 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 76.

When we explored the figure of Venus so as to articulate the meaning she held as the goddess of beauty, we simply read her image, freely unfolding the suggestions of very specific gestures, her expression, her ornaments, and so on. Legitimation could not be carried to the very bottom of the practice; there is a point at which one has simply to start reading.

We can look upon this 'impulse' to move ahead in two different ways. Applying the strictest kind of opposition between subject and object, this has to be counted an illegitimate impulse; though they are focused on the appearance of the work, these readings are not necessarily grounded in the work as it truly *is*. But it is clear what kind of argument this is: it is philosophical, a necessary recourse not to the thing itself but to our understanding of its boundaries. That is, we cannot claim the obvious exclusivity of subjective and objective reality; indeed, the theory has already made it clear that there is a level of overlap or compatibility between subject and object (§ 7), there is a region of 'good' subjectivity which is that very thing that makes interpretation possible. If one holds a less oppositional understanding of what the object is, these forms of reading are not obviously legitimate and are perhaps even necessary. What is illegitimate has to be defined, perhaps, on the basis of more concrete misrepresentations. We also have to recall the objective dimension of explanatory power itself (§ 13): that the work has a 'meaningful' meaning of some sort is fundamental to our conception of it, and it is possible that we must find that meaning by sorting through what kinds of sense we can come up with. It is perhaps philosophically mistaken to impose too strict a standard here. Moreover, all the interpreted relations must work together, and the rule of coherence too may play a kind of reciprocal role in defining what counts as the work itself.

Consider the second Cupid, in light of this less dogmatic philosophy. If you look carefully — and you tend to miss this when you simply *look* at the painting, without any sense of the symbolic meaning we have just developed of the picture — you notice that the ribbon Cupid is tying passes not only around Venus' calf, but around Mars' as well: Cupid is binding them together. Again, that action presents a relationship, this time among three figures: to make an initial, free, cursory suggestion, love unites beauty and might. That would make perfect sense of the relation of this Cupid, but we have to make sense of all the relationships together, and it does not fit the interpretation of Mars and the Cupid at right, for might unarmed is no longer might. We therefore abandon that reading of the group Cupid, Venus, and Mars. Another suggests itself that takes account of all four figures, though taking all the relations together leads one to explore more subtle or complex interpretations, such as this: the man bound to beauty by love loses his fierceness. This captures the sense of — perhaps better, gives sense to — not only the action of Cupid in

relation to Venus and Mars but the relationship between Venus and Mars themselves, a relation we had already begun to explore in determining the meaning of Venus alone: the beauty that tempers roughness. When an interpretation 'comes together' in this sort of way we have an actual experience with legitimating power. As we saw with the meaning of Venus herself, among the possibilities of meaning that imagination suggests (prompted by acquired information and directed by the imagery), there may be some that are especially illuminating, in a sense that appears to reconnect us with the rules of form. The question of how much meaning there is and what it is appears to be answered by an interpretative explanation with an especially intense or satisfying explanatory force. Interpretations that seem to bring the whole work together in a way that makes it highly visible and alive with meaning. The metaphor of illumination is quite fitting, for working through the various possibilities of reading that our search for analogies suggests, we find some that throw light on and bring to life recessive details of the work that had previously escaped notice or seemed merely incidental; what had appeared unimportant or accessory becomes filled with significance. Among all the possible readings of symbols and symbols in their relationships that our pursuit of metaphorical qualities suggests, there may be some senses that stand out, senses that recommend themselves chiefly because of a quality of experience. Perhaps legitimacy leans more strongly upon explanatory power than we had supposed.

Our tactic of reading does not need to be changed, then, but merely has to extend into the allegorical stratum of meaning: to take account of the significance of the depicted relationships between the symbols (and the relations between the relationships — for interpreting the two Cupids has just shown how the *relations* themselves carry mutually influential senses). Allegory is analogous in every respect to the level of the symbol above (or beneath) it. Like the personifications or figures, the relations between them can also be named: Cupid binding Venus and Mars (allegorical works of art are often titled in this way). In that description we have the meaning of the work at the level of what we might call *subject matter*. That interpretation is plainly incomplete, however, because it is empty: because these figures embody meanings, it is not *what* Cupid does that matters but the meaning of what he does. That too can be neatly expressed: love disarming power by beauty, which is a formula that gives us the meaning at the level of *allegory*. Subject matter names the relations of figures: allegory unfolds the meaning of the symbolic relations. We also know that the means by which allegorical meaning is suggested (analogy) is comparable to the means employed at the level of symbolism. If we picture the entire interpretative schema, bringing all the levels of meaning together, it comes to something like this:

sign ——————[means of suggestion]——————>meaning

levels of meaning:			
I	REPRESENTATIONAL		
	form (paint configurations)	resemblance of visible features	**representation** (winged child)
II	SYMBOLIC		
i	representation	resemblance of essential qualities	**figure** (Cupid or Love)
			symbol (love)[64]
ii	symbols	resemblance of essential relations	**subject matter** (Mars and Venus bound by Cupid)
			allegory (love disarming power by beauty)

37 THE REVISED CODE MODEL

It is worth listing the several things we have learned about interpreting (at least interpreting a work such as Veronese's allegory of Venus, Mars, and Cupid), potential adjustments to be made to the model of the code and the method behind it.

First, we have clarified the symbol-meaning relation that defines a code, which we can see is actually not conventional, in the sense in which it was first understood to be conventional, but natural. Artistic codes of the sort we have examined are thus not two-term sign-meaning relations, but three-term relations involving qualities shared by the sign and its meaning.[65] Artistic signs are joined to their meanings by

64 Note that figure and symbol are not two levels of meaning, but two aspects of one level of meaning; that is because they are *both meanings of the same sign*, which is the representation. Likewise with subject matter and allegory: two aspects of the meaning of the symbols.

65 In just the way that representations share perceptual qualities possessed by objects (a contour, a relative placement of features, specific proportions). "Certain characteristics of perceptual signs [our perception of objects] are capable of being translated or carried over into pictorial signs" Walker, "Art History Versus Philosophy" (1980). 20.

natural metaphoric relations, not artificial correlations. They are symbols: they possess the qualities that are their meaning; their meaning is not assigned to them.

We have also examined two levels of symbolic meaning (the level of figure and symbol and the level of subject matter and allegory), examining two common forms of that natural relation.

And with these things clear, we have begun to explore how the meaning of the two levels of symbolism is read — a discussion that has brought out several things:

> interpreting artistic symbols is not translating those symbols, from sign to meaning, according to a cultural code;
>
> interpreting symbols requires us to penetrate the middle term (the metaphorical quality shared by both symbol and meaning), which reveals the full meaning of the symbol;
>
> that is a task in which cultural codes, certain direct information about symbols, may be instrumental, in raising important suggestions of meaning that could otherwise be unavailable;
>
> such codes, however, neither resolve nor adequately complete the meaning, which can be amplified only by examining the appearance of the symbols (and symbolic relations) so as to uncover the middle term (or shared quality);
>
> there is no properly methodical way to establish culturally what in a work is to be read symbolically or allegorically (and to what depth) before embarking upon such an interpretation; only an illuminating interpretation (an interpretation with an unspecifiable degree of explanatory power) appears able to secure, retroactively, the soundness of such an interpretation;
>
> and finally, interpreting is to some extent, sometimes, an interpretative progression through the levels of meaning; but a still uncertain reading at the symbolic level may be secured by looking for a satisfying reading at the

> allegorical level — success at 'preliminary' levels may depend upon success at higher levels.

How does this influence our understanding of interpretation according to the model of the code? The most significant shift has to do with the basis upon which we elaborated our hypothetical reading of the symbolic and allegorical meaning of Veronese's painting, so far as we have progressed with it. By what method did we make that reading? By identifying the signs (for instance a nude woman, and the relation between Venus, Mars, and Cupid), but less according to historical precedent than the method appeared to advocate. Interpretation was guided by certain rudimentary knowledge about the symbols (such as the names of the personifications and what *in general* they are said to represent), but this was knowledge of no proven pedigree, and in its detail the interpretation was driven primarily by those things in the work that our eye was drawn to understand, and it proceeded just to the extent that finding a *satisfactory* meaning, by no historical standard, seemed to require. This is plainly a much laxer procedure than we were prepared to expect, and it pushes the interpretation of symbolism directly into that irrational category Gombrich believes we should reject.

> Where symbols are believed not to be conventional but essential, their interpretation in itself must be left to inspiration and intuition. The reason is not far to seek. Conventions can be learned, if necessary by rote. The symbol that presents to us a revelation cannot be said to have one identifiable meaning assigned to its distinctive features. All its aspects are felt to be charged with a plenitude of meanings that can never be exhaustively learned, but must be found in the very process of contemplation it is designed to engender.[66]

Perhaps we shall need to pay some attention to that laxness.

---

66 Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 159.

5

FROM CODE TO CONTENT

Our attempt to interpret symbols includes an intuition of essential qualities (the meaning of drops of milk); the possibilities of reading that historical knowledge raises are narrowed by our freely conducted reading of the work's details (the specific beauty of Venus); a meaning comes together around a sense that rings true (grace as an ideal taught by women). These modifications to the code model place a certain pressure on the objective method the code model was designed to serve. Which are the relevant qualities of a wheel, whose predominant qualities are few, might be easy to guess, but we should hardly expect that the relevant quality of a drop of milk or Venus' string of pearls can be known so easily; it is an established record of that quality, surely, that resolves that problem. A reading of Veronese's picture as an emblem of conceptions of masculine and feminine, moreover, comes from no historical evidence whatever. The inherent indeterminacy of all but the most penetrable signs must require us to make a turn from work to context for additional help. Without an external demonstration of the meaning, the rules of content will not be adequately served and the revision just made to the code model will compromise the method itself: it drives interpretation away from cognitivity.

It is possible that we have undervalued the contribution of the context. With respect to such aspects of the image as the identity and possible symbolism of the nude woman, the context was exactly what we turned to. The companion who in Veronese's time says that

this is Venus, and Venus is love or beauty, is *telling us* the code; nowadays we need to reconstruct it, and hunt for some source that records it. As we know, the code might be stated in more than one way: the record might deliver the whole thing, sign, middle term, and meaning (some source that says nakedness means lust, by means of its quality of inciting desire). On the other hand it might give us just the correlation of sign and meaning, middle term omitted. Indeed, the fact that such 'middle terms' are frequently missing in the historical records the code model is based on may require us to diminish the relevance of illustrated metaphor. And most symbolic interpretations of art do not concern themselves with it, regarding it not part of the work's meaning but rather as a *rationale* (now of little relevance) for the artist's original choice of symbol. While Gombrich explains that symbols are constructed through metaphors, he does not go on to suggest that it is important for us to elucidate the metaphors used. All that matters is the referent; the means of referring is of no issue to interpreters at all. That, indeed, is how texts like Cartari's *Imagini degli Dei* and Ripa's *Iconologia* are used by modern interpreters: to cite an instance, an interpretation of Veronese's allegorical decorations at the Villa Maser notes, of one of the rooms, that "on the ceiling we find Juno, Hymen, and Venus, deities of marriage taken straight from Cartari."[1] No effort is made to explain on what basis these gods and goddesses represent marriage, as Cartari himself explains; all that is important to interpretation is what they signify, as a translatable sign-meaning relation. The established correlations that historical languages are built of afford us, as the model explains, external corroborations of our interpretations; that is their special cognitive importance. Before we can be certain that the revision made to our hermeneutic model sketched in § 37 has any substance it will be necessary to take a second look at codes.

39 THE ROLE OF THE CODE

One thing we have not adequately explored is how in interpretation a code 'secures the meaning' of a work, what its exact role is. What sort of interpretative aid is it? There is considerable talk about codes "making sense" of images and "providing the key" to their meaning, and on the surface this appears an unambiguous event. But there is more than one thing that 'providing a key' might come to — actually four quite different things — and our familiar talk about sign systems does not trouble to clarify what exactly it is that a code gives us.

---

[1] Hope, "Veronese and Venetian Tradition of Allegory" (1985), 419.

(i) *Knowing historical correlations of sign and meaning makes it easier for us to find a reading that makes sense of the image.*
One way to understand the contribution of the code — the weakest contribution of the four — is that it *raises for the interpreter a possibility of interpretation*, one that might never have arisen without it. This corresponds to the role the code played in § 35, where traditional meanings of the figure of Venus raised suggestions we could explore. It is a weak role because while the code raises possibilities of meaning it does not establish them as correct, as the standard model has it do. The code serves only the 'context of discovery'.

(ii) *Knowing these symbolic codes makes our interpretations more historically correct.*
Another possible function of the code is to *historically legitimate an interpretation* that may already have arisen, and may already make sense, but that without legitimation by a code derived from the historical context has no cognitive status as a reading of the given historical work. In this case the code does not actually prove that the interpretation applies to the given work; it merely guarantees its historical plausibility. What it proves is that the interpretation serves the rule of objectivity (an interpretation formed according to an appropriately established historical meaning is thus formed within the work's own context).

(iii) *Codes show when a correct reading has been found.*
The third contribution — the most powerful — is to serve as our cognitive guarantee, the "key," in that sense; the code is what 'secures' an interpretation that may have arisen without it and that may possess historical legitimacy on other grounds. Where a code derived from the appropriate historical context fits the work and its specific setting, it simply dictates the work's meaning: the meaning can be simply 'read off'. We might express this by saying the code is a *necessary or sufficient condition of validation.*

(iv) *Knowing the symbolic codes is necessary to making sense of the image.*
The final way is harder to describe but no less significant. We can well imagine an existing and legitimate hypothetical interpretation that is coherent but lacking in sense to us — lacking in explanatory power: it may fit the work and belong to the context, but the sense it offers does not make the work meaningful, dissolve the puzzle that the work poses us (as in the explanation of the *Primavera* as a Festival of Venus). The final possible contribution of a code might be to provide not so much

> the interpretation but the actual *sense* of any possible interpretation: it supplies, in other words, the material that makes a given interpretation actually meaningful. The role of the code is to *supply the explanatory power.*

It is plain what the differences among these are. Of the four, it is the third way of understanding what recorded codes do that appears to capture the suggestion of the standard code model, according to which, in specific context *c*, sign *s* = meaning *m*. The code functions in the 'context of proof'. The first fails short of the usual view, for it has to do only with what in theory of science has been called the 'context of discovery' (concerning only the means by which our hypotheses of meaning arise), whereas the second has to do exclusively with the 'context of legitimation', which concerns the basis on which any hypothesis has cognitive potential. The fourth possibility concerns something that is actually more basic than all of these, for it suggests that the code supplies those unclear conditions according to which a potential interpretation not only fits a work but 'makes sense' of it. We need to look primarily at the third version.

On the standard model, a code functions in a rule-like way, and determines the meaning itself: it lays down the rule, and where it fits, we follow it to the meaning — that is what guarantees the effectiveness of languages. In semaphore, computer languages, lexica, the correct reading is ensured only by the mechanistic following of each separate correlation. Though this is an essential feature of true coding, and some contexts of language use, it is unlikely that it applies at all to the case of art. Look again at how we understand the symbolism of Venus in Veronese's picture. We see the woman in the painting; how do we know that she is Venus? There is more than one way open to us. It might be the case (as it probably is) that we are told she is Venus: by the person we are with, by the label on the wall, by the caption on the page. On the other hand, we might look at a number of other works of art with similar figures who are called Venus. Or turn to an image book, like Ripa's, or Cartari's, where the prototypical image of Venus in Veronese's time is defined as typically nude:

> This goddess was made nude so as to show, ..., for what she is always prepared, which are lascivious embraces, which we enjoy better nude than clothed, or to show why the one who is turned always to lustful pleasures remains often undressed.[2]

As an English printing of Cartari expresses it:

---

[2] Vincenzo Cartari, *Imagini de i Dei*, 535.

> With the Grecians the image and picture of this goddesse was set forth naked and without cloths ...: meaning therby, that al venerous and licentious people are by such their inordinate lust, like beasts, deprived of sense, and left as it were naked and despoiled of reason and the cloths and garments of understanding; and often times also stripped and wasted of their pristine and former riches, and goods.[3]

Alternatively, we might find a poetic text that does the same thing, since the explanation of an image needn't be done in images at all (it is interesting to know that both Cartari and Ripa were first published without illustrations). But to whatever form of code we appeal, identifying the figure as Venus does not tell us what she means as a symbol; the gods, we have seen, are no more univocal than other signs, and have manifold aspects. Certainly Venus is the personification of love, but with Botticelli we have had a taste of the possible meanings of even that 'one' significance. It is no accident that the one specifically naked goddess personifies love, and the reason is not merely that she is "dressed for love" (Isabel Allende) but that, as Ficino noted, she inspires love.[4] Beauty is another facet of the significance of Venus, and not an arbitrary one. And it is further linked to her beauty that she personifies also vanity. We do not yet know the meaning of the work if all we can do is name a figure and cite the range of its possible meaning. After the codes are found, we still need to answer the question Who is Venus?

The discovery of a pedigreed correlation (one with the appropriate historical legitimacy) supposedly clinches this — for instance, this text from Plutarch that Edgar Wind cites as clarifying the meaning of Veronese's painting:

> Harmony was born from the union of Venus and Mars: of whom the latter is fierce and contentious, the former generous and pleasing.[5]

If we look at Veronese's painting, we come to recognize how nicely this fits it. If we add to this that coordinate of local context stressed by Gombrich, we have even further support: the creation of harmony is a perfect subject for a head of state. "Rudolf, who had just become Emperor" when Veronese's pictures were produced, "was pleased to show that he attached more value to the qualities of peace and love than to Mars's warlike attributes."[6] Now, by the model of the code, such a text is taken to *tell* us the meaning of the picture by virtue of the fact that it makes a fitting (of both work and context) and explicit correlation between a set of signs (Venus, Mars, and their union) and a set of meanings (generosity

---

3 Under "Venus" in Richard Linche, *The Fountains of Ancient Fiction* (1599).

4 "Certainly the gods, or as our theologians say, the angels, admire and love divine beauty, and men admire and love the beauty of the body. And this certainly is the praise of Love." Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, trans. S. Jayne, rev. ed. (Dallas 1985), 37.

5 Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 48, in the *Moralia* 370d—371a; cited by Wind, "Virtue Reconciled with Pleasure" (1958), 82.

6 Watson, *Wisdom and Strength* (1989), 63.

and pleasingness, fierceness and contentiousness, harmony). Interpreters (such as Gombrich, for instance) continually lend support to this rule conception of codes: a close-enough historical match settles meaning.

> Like all kinds of historical detective work the solution of iconographic puzzles needs luck as well as a certain amount of background knowledge. ... If a complex illustration can be matched by a text which accounts for all its principal features the iconographer can be said to have made his case.[7]

But is this truly the way in which a text (such as that verse of Plutarch, which "matches" the work perfectly) clarifies for us the meaning of a picture? Does such a text "account for all its features," and if it does so, does it then dictate the reading we are to make?

Some of the qualities of the imagery we did not, of course, need pointed out by any code. The power and fierceness of Mars is 'palpable'. So, even moreso, is the beauty of Venus — and also her *generosity* . This last quality we had not so neatly isolated, but generosity is *precisely* one of the meanings that the hand at her breast and the few drops of milk suggested when we questioned the image alone, helped only by the most obvious connotations: it is a literal illustration of the metaphor 'giving of self'. And then harmony — that is the very thing we saw in a whole range of noted features: the intertwining of the couple's gestures, Mars' service, their gentle compatibility, the composure and kindness of their expressions. The text did not supply that meaning. The text 'speaks' to us of the meaning of the work, but not because it matches the depicted forms and supplies by correlation their intelligible meanings (as a code that states that in context c, $s^1 = m^1$, $s^2 = m^2$, etc.). What the text of Plutarch does here is not state the meaning of Venus and Mars but orient the reader, who is able to see a range of visible meanings that the features of the work themselves possess; it enables us to see, and thus offers a meaningful way to scan the entire image, drawing in 'peripheral' features we might never have listed as primary, but which in light of this suggestion of meaning come forth as central (more of the work's features come to the fore in light of this potential interpretation than they did in the unassisted, purely material observation). "An interpretation," Steinberg says, "is 'probable if not provable'; it makes 'visible what had not previously been apparent'; and once given is visually self-evident."[8] Plutarch's text suggests a particularly illuminating reading that is *secured* (accepted) on the basis of the meaning that the signs can be seen to hold. The text not only has to 'account for the features' (in the sense of mentioning the principal objects depicted in the work) but offer a meaning that is amplified by the way those things are represented there (a deepening of adequacy), and fit them in such a way that the whole

---

7 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 6.

8 Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation" (1987), 21.

image acquires an illuminating sense (coherence and explanatory power). With all of this I would expect Gombrich to agree.

But that text from Plutarch becomes a code for or a 'key' to Veronese's painting not simply because it is historical and fits the context, nor because it lists the main figures and provides them with an explicit sense that fits that context, nor even because it offers a meaning that 'belongs to' or is finally articulated by the nature of the imagery itself, that has an enhanced adequacy and coherence in relation to this work. All of those facts taken together deliver a reading that is virtually established, but for one final thing. As the rules of form make clear, a reading must not only fit and bring order to the details of the work, it must do so in a way that gives the work a meaning sufficient to explain it. Works of art are not created merely to be coherent. We can recall, from our experience with Botticelli's *Primavera,* that not every adequate and coherent interpretation is actually satisfying. This has to do with the criterion of explanatory power, whose nature is not adequately suggested by the notion of 'explanation', the satisfaction of curiosity. The reading of the Veronese according to Plutarch has explanatory power; we accept that Plutarch's text applies to Veronese's picture because this historical and deeply adequate reading leads us to a powerful reading, one that has power in terms of its meaning, not merely in terms of its qualities of form and historical legitimacy. *We do not accept the reading as applying to the work on account of the text, we accept the text as applying because of where it leads us.* The text, therefore, does not dictate or secure the meaning, but rather plays a role in facilitating a meaning that we accept, finally, on other grounds.

That becomes perfectly clear when we notice how other historically fitting texts that correlate these same signs with other meanings are rejected when the interpretations they suggest are not satisfying. We have a particularly fine example of this in the painting by Veronese. We have already had cause to recognize how long-standing is the symbolism of Cupid, whose wings mean the impermanence of love. In the Veronese there are two Cupids, but minus the bow and arrow it is only their youth, nakedness, and wings that distinguish them. We might ask, what is the meaning, here, of their wings? It is true, certainly, that we turn to tradition to find out: their meaning is clear not only in countless representations of Cupid but in numerous written texts. But that direct and explicit correlation of sign and meaning does not *tell us* the meaning of the sign here; rather it offers a possibility of meaning to be accepted according to the rules of form. It does not dictate or stipulate, in rule fashion, what the sign means (wings equal fickleness). In the case presented by this work, the coded meaning (by the correlation of sign and meaning laid down by a tradition alive in Veronese's time) is a possibility that we reject, apparently for reasons of coherence. The most prominent Cupid is *binding together* the man and the

woman; we are prepared to believe that the love we are introduced to here is *not* evanescent. But coherence is not the rule that eliminates it, for binding does not exclude breaking; it makes it possible. Though it fits the image perfectly, what the 'code' tells us does not make sense of the image, but by a standard of sense that goes beyond cogency, and has to do with explanatory power, substance, strength of meaning: it is more satisfying, it delivers a more powerful message, to see this work as the emblem of an ideal, and ideals are not affected by the vicissitudes of fortune. Wings, in the correct historical context do not 'equal' fickleness, and the simplistic rule-conception must be dismissed. Codes do not dictate meaning: *we find which code applies on the basis of discovering meaning; we do not discover the meaning on the solitary basis of the code.* Codes are legitimated quite as much by explanatory power alone as by the rules of content.

Codes are in this sense answerable to interpretations. To put it another way, they are a source not of verifications (per iii, above), but of possibilities of meaning (per i). Which is to say that tradition is important as a source of content, not as a source of demonstration; it is important as initiating possible directions of interpretation, not as a method of translation. The 'rule' aspect emphasized in the code model is positively the most useless to hermeneutics. A text such as Plutarch's text is not a code at all, understood as the record of a rule. In this case, it did not *supply us* with the meaning of the figures in the work, since that significance was already apparent merely from the way Veronese rendered them. Instead it outlined a possibility of reading, a way of seeing or looking at the work, which delivered a reading that without it might not have come together quite so completely and clearly. It is the power of that meaning in the face of the work that decides us, not a rule.

40 THE 'HISTORY OF TYPES'

Do codes do anything more than raise possibilities of meaning? A good way to answer this would be to look at an important discussion by Panofsky that provides one of our most articulate treatments of the code model. Languages are historical, and any specific language is an historically distinct one that a person is versed in just by virtue of belonging to a particular age. To return to the original formulation, communication through a language can work only if those one addresses know the code that is used, and to the extent that codes are historical, this means the code used at the time in question. To know the meaning of an expression means recovering the convention of its time. And as the theory has explained, and as still seems to be true, the institution of codes is contextual: correlations of signs and meanings are fixed by the specific beliefs and knowledge of a context. Isn't this, after all,

what the failure to understand tells us? Meanings fall away from their signs because we lose the language of the past that bind sign and meaning together, and confront human creations not with the correlations of their own grammar but with those of our own. Isn't it because of this that signs remain opaque to us? Thus the need to recover codes. Panofsky put it this way: we need a knowledge of "the history of *types* (insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, specific *themes* or *concepts* were expressed by *objects* and *events*)." But again, how does such knowledge function, hermeneutically? How exactly does this knowledge of correlations secure the meaning, operate, as Panofsky expresses it, as a "corrective principle of interpretation"?[9]

Panofsky explained the way in which, in the successful reading of images, we rely upon historical codes when interpreting at all the levels of meaning so far distinguished (representation, figure, and symbol). We might go back to the basic level, representation. As I have presented it, essentially following Panofsky, with representations the relation between sign and image is natural. But Panofsky was cautious here, for while there *is* a relation of visual similitude between the form and the thing that is represented, there are also elements of dissimilitude that obstruct our ability to recognize, on the basis of image alone, the object represented — due to the extraordinary difference between real things and flat daubs of paint, on the one hand, but also to the fact that not all representations are realistic. This problem we recognize as the same one that Gombrich pointed out in relation to symbols: while the symbol indeed possesses self-evident aspects that lead us toward a certain meaning, it also possesses aspects that lead us away from that meaning.[10] It is to resolve the problem this poses the interpreter — the problem of the 'fluidity' of images, which lean in more than one direction of meaning (§ 33) — that the code comes into play. In order to read these images (whether at the level of representation, symbolism, or allegory) we need to know how such an image was read at the time it was made, a reading that was a correlation of this "type" of image with a specific meaning. We need to uncover that traditional correlation (which may indeed exploit some natural relation) by which a type of image conveyed only one of the meanings we might naturally link to it. As the image itself remains fluid, we must look beyond the image. We look for codes: conventional correlations (understood in the proper way) between signs and meanings made in a specific historical culture.

With conventions of representation, certain types of image are meant to depict certain motifs, certain objects and events. Panofsky explains that,

---

9 Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 41.

10 "Metaphors are not reversible" — i.e., courage might be associated with the lion, but the lion is not associated only with courage. Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 12—13.

> while we believe that we are identifying the motifs on the basis of our practical experience pure and simple, we really are reading 'what we see' according to the manner in which objects and events are expressed by forms under varying historical conditions. In doing this, we subject our practical experience to a corrective principle which may be called the history of style.
>
> Our practical experience [has] to be corrected by an insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms (history of style).[11]

Does Panofsky mean we *do* read or we *should* read in this way?[12] To answer that we might do well to restrict ourselves to Panofsky's own examples. How, he asked, do we know how to read — that is, understand the representational meaning of — an image from a tenth-century Ottonian miniature (figure 13). Simply looking at it, we distinguish in the upper half of the image a set of buildings surrounded by a wall with towers, which we recognize to be an ancient city. To read the picture, we need to figure out where in the scene the city is; it appears to be suspended above the heads of figures whose feet are clearly depicted touching the ground. On the basis of visual evidence alone — mere similitude to the look of things in life — we seem to see figures on the ground and a city in the air. But, as Panofsky explains, we are not meant to read it this way. We ought to look, Panofsky says, beyond the image and its natural representational similitudes; we have to recover the Ottonian representational code. What that code tells us is that pictorial space in tenth-century Germany is not solely naturalistic; that is, it tells us that the space above figures might not be sky, as it is in life, but an available place in which to put a piece of visual information.

> In a miniature of around 1000 'empty space' does not count as a real three-dimensional medium, as it does in a more realistic period, but serves as an abstract, unreal background.

Once we know this code we can read the 'hovering town' as a kind of stage prop: it is not *in the sky* at all; it merely indicates that the action of the picture takes place near a city.[13]

Panofsky's argument presents the established code model. That codes are historical, that such conventions are relative to times and places, and that the code must be rediscovered for each such locus, Panofsky wished to prove with the following example. The problem of interpretation is the same as with the Ottonian miniature and the pictorial material is similar: this time it is an image in a fifteenth-century Flemish altarpiece, where once again something appears to float in the sky (figure 14). As before, we have a motif

---

11 Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 35, 38.

12 Panofsky actually expresses his inquiry in different ways, speaking of the second work he discusses (see below) he says, "How do we know that this child is meant to be an apparition?" and "How do we know that he hovers in mid air?" It appears, therefore, that his question concerns how we actually do make sense of the image. But in introducing the inquiry he says "how do we achieve 'correctness' in operating on these three levels?" Thus his question appears concerned with validation. Ibid., 33—34.

13 Ibid., 34.

easily identified by basic similitude: a naked infant. But trusting natural similitude, we are a little puzzled about what is going on, the spatial representation. Is this child floating, levitating? Or is the child mere information not *in* the scene at all, as per the German convention of five hundred years earlier? As Panofsky explains, there is a still further possibility of meaning, for this might be either an actual child (miraculously levitated) or an *apparition* of one. Contemplation of the image does not settle this problem. To read the image we need the historical code, which tells us what 'aspect' of the image (in the duck/rabbit sense), which way of reading it, we are to take to understand it. According to the 'history of types', Panofsky tells us, we find that the code for "unsupported figure" in fifteenth-century Flanders involves a different correlation from that made in Ottonian times: "while the unsupported figure in the van der Weyden picture counts as an apparition, the floating city in the Ottonian miniature has no miraculous connotation." Picture space in Flanders is "realistic" space, and thus a floating child can be understood only in the most plausibly naturalistic way: appearing in the air as an apparition.[14] Thus the conventions of these times differed. That we can grasp the correct reading

> in the fraction of a second ... must not induce us to believe that we could ever give a correct ... description [of the motifs] of a work of art without having divined, as it were, its historical "locus." While we believe that we are identifying the motifs on the basis of our practical experience pure and simple, we are really reading "what we see" according to the manner in which objects and events are expressed by forms under varying historical conditions.[15]

Here we have two distinct codes by which the same sign, the same visual form (an object with no visible contact with the ground), carried different meanings in different ages. It is concrete evidence, surely, that the language of art is a code language even at the level of representation.

Panofsky evidently considered this argument sufficient, without looking into what it actually implies. We understand a motif by first situating it in its historical locus and discovering, in effect, the rule that is operative there (in c, $s = m$). It is notable that Panofsky says nothing about how we do this. In fact, what steps must we take? (And we can pursue at the same time the question raised in § 39, still not fully answered, What does the code we come up with give us? Does it raise a possibility of meaning, legitimate the answer, dictate the work's meaning, or generate the work's sense?) How did Panofsky himself recover these two codes for his theoretical purposes? As we can expect, such codes

---

14 Panofsky is unfortunately vague about what the convention he wants to differentiate from the Ottonian one actually *is*. It is interesting that he does not bother to state it, and formulating it in such a way that it excludes the possibility of a real child floating in the air is not easy, but it probably involves the following sort of logic: fifteenth-century space is realistic-scientific, and science excludes levitation, which is physical, but not apparitions, which are psychological.

15 Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 34—35.

are never spelled out in a simple lexicon; there is no rule book in which to look up the sign 'object suspended in space' — the difficulty even of clearly verbalizing such a sign makes it obvious just how improbable such rule books are, and how intuitive such 'rules' must be. We have already seen virtually the only sort of rule book that exists for artistic signs: 'iconologies' like Cartari's (suggesting how to depict Venus or Cupid in a recognizable and authentically classical way) or Ripa's (explaining how to represent concepts such as fortune by means of analogy with things). Those are some of the firmest examples of historical convention we have. But we have also seen (in §§ 35 and 39) that they do not define or fix for a given period an historical correlation — that Cartari, whatever his intention might have been, does not establish even for the Venice of his own time a *rule* for the representation of Venus or Cupid. Cartari offered to the artist and thus to the interpreter a possible symbolism. Though the iconologies (full of sign-meaning relations as they are) appear to offer the most manifest instances of historical codes, they are not codes in the strict sense at all.

Panofsky, however, did not claim that these conventions are recorded; he believed they were not. There are no written records at all for codes of the kind in his examples, and for this level of reading he does not suggest that we look for textual sources.[16] That does not imply that there are no rules of representation; in fact it brings the case of art closer to the model by which we are trying to understand it, for languages do not work by written rules either. Languages are taught not simply by rule but by example. There are rule-like correlations, we imagine, that are implicitly 'absorbed' in the training that the students of a language receive, and because of this fact what we are looking for in recovering an historical code is not so much a record of the code (something *explicitating* the correlation between sign and meaning) as *evidence* of the code.[17] Since records do not actually exist, the usual task is a rational reconstruction of the learned correlation. As the theory tells us, the evidence for this reconstruction can be found in the tradition that the artist absorbed it from; the way in which we find it is to learn it, in the way in which the artist learned it.

We look, therefore, at the works that the Ottonian artist looked at. But how do we reconstruct the code from doing that? How can looking teach us that in tenth-century Germany pictorial space can mean unrealistic space? Evidently, we grasp the archaic pictorial language in the same way as we learned our own spoken language: by a trial-and-error of reading, by that guessing of meaning through which we learned the language we

---

16 I am sure also that Gombrich's repeated stress on documentation tends to overstate the extent to which even he considers texts relevant to interpretation.

17 To return to the distinction made in § 33 and 34, Panofsky (here at least) appears to emphasize the importance of external and indirect evidence of codes, whereas Gombrich's stress upon texts appeared to emphasize internal and direct evidence.

speak.[18] We discover it by looking at, and by simply interpreting, as the German apprentice once did, Ottonian pictures. Eventually, one way or another, we find a reading that makes sense of these works, a reading that from one picture to the next delivers an interpretation of what goes on in them that is acceptable. That is one of the prominent ways in which we learn a language: by relying on what meaning we can fathom of the things said to us, and then correcting that interpretation as necessary. In fact that is precisely how Panofsky claimed he had discovered the Ottonian code: by reading Ottonian pictures and deriving a way of reading that works for them.[19] What exactly is that code? Not a rule that all Ottonian space is schematic, because the space on which the figures of Christ and the litter-bearers stand is not. Not a rule that all unsupported objects are not real but informational, for that would have made it impossible for Ottonian artists to paint falling objects and birds in the sky. The rule would have to be more complex: unsupported objects are not floating but merely supply information about the scene where reading them as floating does not make sense of the image. But what do we have here? We have an unnecessarily complicated way of saying that space is schematic wherever this makes sense.

And what kind of a 'rule' is a rule like that? It is a rule that we construct out of making sense of the picture in that way; it is a generalization based on an experience of the work (an experience that was not rule-guided) in which a specific reading was discovered and found to make sense. Where did the way of reading that defines this Ottonian code come from, the thing that I am calling 'schematic space'? For Panofsky (as probably for the Ottonian apprentice) the schematic reading likely arose as a free possibility. We can imagine an Ottonian apprentice being told, 'No, the city is not in the sky, this is just to show where the story happened,' but it is improbable that most of this work's audience, or even many, learned it that way — as is more or less demonstrated by children's drawings: children freely use both kinds of space, without any instruction whatever. What this means is that the first step of Panofsky's *reconstruction* of the code was finding a way of reading this picture and others like it on his own. Panofsky reconstructed these 'implicit conventions' of other times by coming up with a meaning that works, seeing how widely it works, and taking it as a rule, and that is the approach he recommends.[20] This happens to give us a

---

[18] Among certain possibilities of how to understand an unfamiliar term (however we come by them), we settle on one by our best guess and see where it takes us, deciding eventually on the basis of the outcome.

[19] We must "correct the interpretation of an individual work of art by a 'history of style,' which ... *can only be built up by interpreting individual works.*" Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 35 n. 3 [emphasis added].

[20] The method is "synthesis rather than analysis"; "the individual observation assumes the character of a 'fact' only when it can be related to other, analogous observations in such a way that the whole series 'makes sense'." Ibid., 32, 35 n. 3.

decisive verdict regarding the fourth possible service a code might perform (§ 39). Codes are not needed to create, generate, produce, or constitute the *sense* of a reading. In the course of reconstructing this code, Panofsky did not already need the code to find a plausible way of reading the image. Knowing a correlation may tell us how to read, but the way of reading itself *must in principle be accessible without the rule*. Panofsky's recovery of the rule that Ottonian artists use space non-naturalistically depended upon the sense that he discovered in Ottonian art by *looking at Ottonian pictures and interpreting space non-naturalistically* — by interpreting without a code. (Any other interpretations he developed presumably left contradictions and puzzles in the meaning of Ottonian pictures).

A code we discover by deciding how to read a work is not what tells us how a work must be read. A code understood either as the source of the sense of our reading (per iv) or as the necessary foundation of a reading (per iii) involves a logical circularity, which turns up once you inquire into how such codes are recovered. What Panofsky did was to interpret those prior works without aid, to find some way of reading (in whichever way possible) that made sense of them, some way that fit the work and made sense of it. Imaginative reading is the *source* of our "insight into the manner" in which things are represented and symbolized "under varying historical conditions," and the *satisfaction* of that reading (on no foundation but Panofsky's judgement) was what secured it as a code. Earlier in his career, Panofsky was interestingly enough one of few theorists genuinely concerned to keep hermeneutics free of circular methods: "the vicious circle of interpreting the work of art on the basis of perceptions which we owe first of all to interpretation of the work."[21] It is fascinating to read the footnote offered in his later theory in which he 'overcomes' this problem. There Panofsky forthrightly explains that a code is established by making interpretations of a given feature without a code; but these methodically uncontrolled interpretations divest their subjectivity when the given correlation begins to fit many works, so that

> the whole series "makes sense." This "sense" is, therefore, fully capable of being applied, as a control, to the interpretation of a new individual observation within the same range of phenomena.[22]

It is plain, first of all, that this formulation itself undermines the classic conception (as per iii) of a code as the necessary ground of a correct interpretation, for the ultimate basis is plainly and simply finding a satisfying way of reading a group of analogous images. Since

---

21 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 21.

22 Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 35 n. 3. See also Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics" (1978), 297—98.

the power of the code itself derives from sheer sense-making, it is not the code that provides the validation.[23]

We have finally eliminated two conceptions of what a code does. It is *not a rule that dictates meaning* (iii). It is not a *necessary condition* of validation, because its indirect reconstruction must be based upon doing what Panofsky did, *finding* a successful interpretation. And it is not a *sufficient condition*, because it may be rejected; the acceptability of an interpretation depends not upon the rule but upon the power and satisfactoriness of the interpretation.[24] The code is a rule of thumb, which we can ignore if necessary. It is also *not constitutive of the sense of an interpretation* (iv), because it is a rule of thumb based on, distilled from, reading without rules. It *could not* be constitutive of meaning, for how then could we read other Ottonian pictures, in order to learn the Ottonian code, in order to read our initial Ottonian picture? To 'reconstruct codes of representation' (to form conclusions about "the manner in which objects and events are expressed by forms under varying historical conditions") we have to interpret the works. When we examine Panofsky's method, we find that sensible interpretations are our only substantial evidence for the conventions we imagined necessary in order to generate sensible interpretations.

---

23 *Circularities* in hermeneutics, however, have to be treated delicately; "circular reasoning is intrinsic to hermeneutic thought.... [It] is vicious only if you have a certain ideal of knowledge: that of total objectivity." Hart, "Reinterpreting Wölfflin" (1982), 295, 296. The famous hermeneutic circle has figured in the theory at least since Schleiermacher. Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics* (Evanston 1969), 95.

One of the tasks theorists give it it is able to handle: to see if our guesses are substantiated by the context. Hauser articulates this process precisely: "One begins with a more or less arbitrary assumption conditioned by one's historical situation, that is, with an intention or an act of will and a hypothesis appropriate to it; then one follows up the course thus marked out or one modifies it according as the facts that emerge agree with it or not." It is a simple recourse to the material, which one uses to vet ones guesses — but a circle in that the initial guess limits what one will find ("what 'new facts emerge' depends in part upon the preconceived idea, upon the provisional review and the original choice of course. One is continually driven from one course to the other without ever reaching a final solution"). In other words, the circular element amounts to the fact that the recourse to the data is no final or foundational test (contra positivism). Hauser finds this "no peculiarity of the historical studies" but a basic motif of "all forms of knowing and willing." Hauser, *The Philosophy of Art History* (1958), 153—54. But that is not its legitimating role.

"The circular flow of interpretation — 'circulus methodicus,' as Panofsky called it — leads the interpreter to reexperience the fabric of meaning in which the object of investigation was once entangled." Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 41. But *if every interpretation must be checked by the recovery of a convention,* and conventions can be consolidated simply by reading prior works in a sensible way (interpretation), then circularity has a specific logical consequence: it becomes in fact *not* true that every interpretation must be checked by the recovery of a convention. We can have the circular logic, but we cannot have it as *the mechanism of that specific rule*. The rule — assigning the legitimating function of the circle — is simply a fiction. As Gadamer says, the "circle of understanding is not a 'methodological' circle." *Truth and Method* (1960), 261.

24 "The interpretation that is directed to what is unsaid or elicited (brought forth) can and indeed must be grounded. But the grounding cannot be achieved through evidence of the agreement between characteristics of image and text." Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 58.

41 CODES AND GENRES

It is worth noting, in this connection, the decisive parallel that exists between interpretation on the code model and a technique that is strictly analogous to it. 'Genre interpretation', proposed by Hirsch in literary hermeneutics and taken over into the interpretation of art, recommends precisely what the code model does, though at another level. While the code theory says that similar signs using different historical codes mean different things, genre theory says that similar features of works in different artistic genres mean different things. Both theories require us to determine the code or the category as a *necessary prerequisite* to an objective interpretation, the issue in each case being the reduction of the work's subjective possibilities of meaning to the meaning understanding must uncover. Genre interpretation is a kind of correlation like a code (in $c, s = m$). As Gombrich notes,

> Hirsch comes to the conclusion that the intended meaning can only be established once we have decided what category or genre of literature the work in question was intended to belong to. Unless we try to establish first whether a given literary work was intended as a serious tragedy or as a parody, our interpretation is likely to go very wrong indeed. ... People have been known to laugh at tragedies if they took them to be parodies.[25]

In looking at a painting

> we are bound to see it not merely *as* a picture but as a picture of a certain *sort*. And our decision as to what sort it is, as to its genre, will condition our whole response from that point onwards.[26]

Gombrich believed that in art

> we see a [repeated] confirmation of the methodological rule emphasized by Hirsch: interpretation proceeds by steps, and the first step on which everything else depends is the decision to which genre a given work is to be assigned.[27]

Reading a work according to genre is analogous to reading according to code because a genre is a kind of meaning category. Identifying the genre serves to indicate what general kind of meaning a work has: to eliminate false possibilities, to keep the interpretation within certain bounds. A prime example of a genre interpretation in art we encountered with Lightbown's critique of all three Neoplatonic interpretations of the *'Primavera'*: its features of frank carnality shifted it, in his view, from the sacred genre to the secular. The same sort of comment has been made concerning Veronese's *Venus and Mars*, one of six comparable allegorical works believed to have been painted for Rudolf II.

---

25 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 5.
26 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 151.
27 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 21.

> Equally significant, so far as Rudolf's tastes were concerned, each of the six pictures shows a woman who, if not totally naked, is in some way seductive or in a state of *deshabillé*. Veronese could not have done this if he had painted religious subjects for the Emperor. ... But nudity, provided it was set amid a morally uplifting theme, was acceptable.[28]

Knowing the earmarks of a genre closes down avenues of interpretation, and as Gombrich has noted, "all iconological research depends upon our prior conviction of what we may look for, in other words, on our feeling for what [sort of meaning] is or is not possible within a given period or milieu." [29]

The similarity with codes extends to the way the "rule" of the genre works; the qualifications developed in the preceding section apply to it too. A genre does not dictate a specific range of meaning; what a work means depends upon many further judgements. Genres are not necessary to unfolding the work's meaning, since formulating the rule of a genre is based upon interpretations that do not rely on it. It is absurd to stress the *necessity* of reading a Renaissance picture according to its genre, because we must develop our repertoire of genres by interpreting other Renaissance pictures (if genres are actually constitutive of a work's meaning, we would again never have been able to read the works from which we initially formed them). Thus they, too, do not supply the basic *sense* of a work; we must inherently be able to find sense without genres. Genre gives us a sense of different ranges of meaning — as Gombrich expresses it, of "what is possible"[30] — something that may be useful in finding directions of interpretation to explore.

42 CODES AS HISTORICAL LEGITIMATIONS

One possible function of the code outlined in § 39 remains to be assessed: a code may give an interpretation its historical legitimacy (ii). Perhaps Panofsky's claim was not that knowing about conventions is *necessary* to interpreting, or provides what sense we make of the image, but that reading according to these habits of representation makes our interpretations *more likely to afford us real understanding of the work we are interested in* — that is, they serve solely the rules of content. The only role left to rules of code or genre, other than the weakest role, is to legitimate an interpretation historically. It is perhaps in this

---

28 Watson, *Wisdom and Strength* (1989), 62.

29 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 7.

30 We have dismissed his proposal that we must develop a sense also of interpretations that are "not possible." To *rule out* an interpretation at the level of genre is to use the genre as a form of validation, a limiting rule, whereas we have seen that the meaning of a work cannot be decided by a rule alone.

sense that a code operates (using Panofsky's language) as a "control" upon interpretation: an objective limitation ensuring that the content of our readings is formed within the work's own context.

A code (such as the Ottonian rule about space) seems adequately suited to serving the rules of content. Interpretations of code or genre proceed by deriving an historically fitting precedent for the interpretation of a sign or a genre of work, and reading the work accordingly. "Historically fitting" means that the precedent is drawn from a context considered the work's own; we have seen what that can come to in the interpretations of the *Primavera*. Loose Neoplatonist morality, Ficino's Christian philosophy, and marriage celebration all belong to the work's 'own' context, for all those interpretations had historically legitimacy. Obviously, legitimacy is not very decisive in the way it brings us close to the work; a code understood as serving the rules of content serves them weakly. But in fact it only serves the rule of objectivity weakly. The really decisive function of the code is the suppression of subjectivity: if the recourse to past meanings is not the generation of sense (per iv), not the demonstration of meaning (per iii), and does not narrow historical meanings to the one sought, it is an attempt above all to undercut the subject's tendency to devise a meaning in a non-cognitive context. The ensurance of legitimacy concerns what is elmininated from interpretation: any meaning already found to have occurred in the past will be categorically free of belonging to bad subjectivity. Codes and genres are steps in the direction of the work, but primarily by backing away from subjectivity.

It is interesting to follow where this logic takes us. Undercutting subjectivity by a recourse to codes involves a shift of attention from the work at issue to other works, works that become more constitutive of its meaning than it does. For to engage with codes and genres, the reading of the work *must be superficial and general*. Codes and genres necessarily involve general rather than particularized signs (nude woman, rather than this specific one), general rather than specific features (characteristics that define a genre, and therefore are common to many works). If the details are read too closely, the signs will become so individual that no tradition will be found for them. It is obvious but often overlooked that every reading of a symbol involves a *mental reduction of the particulars of the signs the work contains*. In Veronese's picture it is the woman simply as nude and attractive that fits her into the code for Venus, not the woman as posed in this specific way, ornamented in this way, or acting as she does (her hand at her breast, involved with Mars). If those elements are counted as part of the 'sign', we no longer have the sign for Venus, and the work will not fit the convention.[31] Moreover, with these shifts of attention away

---

31 With genre interpretation likewise there is a shift from work to category. It appears that we are enabled to determine the genre of the work in advance of interpreting it, for the purpose of interpreting it, by focusing upon

from the individuality of the work the meaning of the work is aligned with the meaning of other works.[32]

It appears reasonable to think — setting philosophical definitions of objectivity aside — that what a painting means on the basis of reductive historical correspondences or categorizations may have considerably less to do with the painting itself than a meaning determined by consideration of the work's own specific features. We may continue to accept that historical codes function as historical legitimators, but the stringency of that conception (function ii) is once again lost. Codes do not produce interpretations we can automatically call *a priori* objective: interpretations based on codes may guarantee an historical pedigree, but the question of whether we have moved closer to the work remains. It is a "common indictment" of the interpreter who focuses upon the historical background of works that this shift of attention often involves a neglect of the work itself.[33] The cognitive legitimacy of an interpretation can and indeed must be further checked on the basis of attention to the work's specific details — the objective orientation of the rule of adequacy requires it. Interpreting only within the limits of existing readings can never hope to take sufficient account of the individuality that characterizes all the most impressive works of art, the works most demanding of interpretation. To do that is to base the theory of interpretation upon the reading of repetitive, conservative art, and to devise a method that *succeeds* by reducing the meaning of the richest works to common denominators. It becomes clear finally that, if we are truly oriented toward the object, the role given to conventionality in interpretation must be controlled by considerable sensitivity to the particularity of each work of art. It has simply to be faced (countering the model of the sign system) that our idea of semanticity — what in the work requires to be made sense of — cannot be determined or limited by historical facts. It is ungroundable without risk of a diminution of the object. That diminution can be prevented solely by an attention to the work that is unregulated.

---

certain limited features that will fit it into one genre or another. But it is questionable what kind of attention such an approach pays the work; surely we can be satisfied about the genre of a work only once we have, and not superficially, interpreted it: read it *in detail* and judged the quality of our reading. The category by which we are told to make sense of it can only arise as a consequence of making sense of it. Just as, it would seem, the only true way to decide whether a poem is comic or tragic is to decide whether it reads better as tragedy or as comedy.

32 "Art history is concerned in the main with trends and movements in the field of art; yet the only artistic reality is the work of art. All concepts are risky abstractions if they go beyond the single, individual, concrete object of an aesthetic experience in order to embrace a number of different works. They replace the particular and unique creation by a category ...." Hauser, *Philosophy of Art History* (1958), 160—61.

33 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 2.

43 THE PARTICULAR SYMBOL

There is a distinction to be made, even within the realm of what we call 'art', between symbols that work merely because of the *thing* they are — what they are mentally or conceptually (a wheel, blindfolded eyes, a drop of milk) — and symbols that work also because of how they are, because of what they are mentally *and visually*. In the second case it is not only the thing that has meaning, by that thing's essential qualities (the mentally discoverable essential qualities of the concept of wheel); the appearance of the thing bears meaning as well. It is a vastly undervalued quality of works of art. In fact, in iconography and the discussion of symbols one often has the sense it is not recognized at all. Where it is not appreciated, the real content of works of art is effectively ignored. It seems unacceptable even on the face of it to suppose that the symbolic content of different works of art composed of the same symbols — of which there are *many* in the history of art — comes to much the same thing (as it is the tendency of the code model of meaning to suggest). A code-driven iconography does not find great differences of meaning in vastly different works of art using the same symbols. To expect that visible differences should not bear directly on a work's meaning is surely a deep misunderstanding of so material and visually sensitive a medium as art.

It is exactly this, moreover, that marks the tremendous disanalogy between art and written language, which linguistic models of interpretation tend to ignore. It is correct, but almost false, to say that both art and writing work by appearance, because the analogy is grossly asymmetrical: as the look of the letters 'l-o-v-e' bring us to the meaning, so does the look of the winged boy. But the means art has by which to carry meaning (the look of that boy) has no analogue whatever in written language outside type design and graphology. Imagine that the distinct look of a word would alter its meaning — in fact, something it commonly does in advertising. That exploitation of appearance, of how words are rendered, is exceptional in written language; art begins, in this sense, where language *ends*. Art is the realm of the 'how'. It is peculiar how widely this is overlooked in our much repeated talk of codes. The objective motivation of our interpretative method was to understand the work for what it is. Surely that means that those respects in which works of art are distinct from other expressions of language, *because* they are works of art, are of special importance to that effort.

> The object of that branch of scholarship which claims to explore the nature of art should concern itself precisely with those things which distinguish art from other spheres of activity.[34]

---

34 Jurij Tynanov, *Modern Russian Poetry;* cited by Lohner, "The Intrinsic Method" (1968), 157. Some of the recent resistance to claims like this follows from ignoring the difference between saying that a work of art must be

The model of the code in fact influences this neglect, because it is not designed to accommodate it.

Iconography pursued on the model of the code deals with symbols, but really symbols in so far as they are *symbol types*. Reading ordinarily proceeds by identifying the representation and then, with the required knowledge, identifying a generalized symbol type (a 'Venus and Mars', a 'Madonna and Child', a 'Last Supper'). Iconography is "a science which can be reduced finally to the formation of *classes of objects* having certain common countersigns."[35] The meaning of the work is then determined according to what a general symbol of this type meant in the given context (or as close as we can come to it, often not close at all). There is no straightforward way to add to this approach the *appearance* of the symbol, for the more particularized the symbol, the less it has to do with other usage. The proposal is that signs are read like words, which carry the meanings they did when written. But when we check the usage of a word, all of it is checked; there is no residue, nothing further that could be taken into account.[36] Symbols, however — in fact all visible things — also have an individual appearance,[37] and that is a problem for the code model. A code that took account also of the form of the symbol would undoubtedly become too complex to function in a sign system. In fact, the problem goes deeper than that: were the meaning of a sign to vary with the appearance of each sign, the whole idea of a code system would come undone, for the code built out of individual appearance would be just about as vast as the range of works it existed to explain. If that does not appear utterly to confound the code model, picture the doubling of every image, once in the work and once articulated in the record of the code.

But why should different works of art with the same symbolism *not* come to the same thing? One can answer this question in the same way as we identified the work of art as being an expression in a sign system: it is a matter of intuition. Art is the realm of the particular, the realm of the *this* — this face, this figure, this gesture, this sky, ... It is an influence of the code model that we sometimes tend to look upon that specificity as a kind

---

understood for its distinctness, and that it must be understood only for that. Some writers appear to argue *against* understanding a work for its "distinguishing features" qua art ("the features that art does not share with the things that are not art") as if that would exclude from attention many features for which art is valued ("its surface features," "qualities of colour," shared by real things, for instance). Lyas, "Intentional Fallacy Revisited" (1983), 297. But of course it would not, because the real principle at work here is objectivity: that the work be understood for what it is, which includes both its uniqueness and its similarities.

35 Argan "Ideology and Iconology" (1975), 298 [emphasis added]. "As a symbol the leaf loses its individuality and particularity; *any* falling leaf is a symbol of transience, not just this one." Osborne, *Art of Appreciation* (1970), 31.

36 Words, like symbols in the code model, are reduced to exclude their particularity. It is only the general form of love, *love* and love that matters, and with this particularity stripped away the entire word is present.

37 "I have never seen a stone which is no stone in particular." Marlene Creates, cited by Susan Gibson Garvey, "The Specificity of Place," in *Marlene Creates: Landworks 1979—1991*, exh. cat. (St. John's, Nfld.: Art Gallery, Memorial University, 1993), 15.

of unavoidable accident of imagery — almost a drawback, since where symbolism is concerned a work of art offers an excess of information that is a positive distraction from symbolic communication. Schematic symbols are in this respect *superior* to artistic symbols, which tend to play with their symbols in ways that obscure them. That is one of the greatest reasons why iconography has given so much attention, as has often been noted, to "artistically impoverished figurations,"[38] where the symbolic intent is not diluted or veiled by excessive play with the motif.

Accordingly, the conception of the code influences our understanding of works like the painting of Veronese that we have been looking at, which is nowadays sometimes looked upon as a late indulgence in allegory (by the 1570s a waning interest) for the sake of splendour and colour, but not symbolic meaning.[39] Works like this are understood as bearing an only slight message at the symbolic level (and thus symbolically comparable to other such works), while their real substance is identified with their particular visual charm. We are allowed, even encouraged, to shift out of the realm of symbolic meaning to enjoy the splendours of Veronese's drawing, colour, texture, mood. The very fact that there is a shift *to make* between simplicity of meaning and richness of form — the fact that our attention drifts so readily from one to the other — is taken as reason to regard the symbolic meaning of the work as a mere "pretext" for painting. This understanding of art and its history is often encountered: for centuries, to paint meant that one had to paint something, and one draped one's art over the feeble frame of some likeable and unchallenging subject matter. The code model's capacity to respond to appearance splits our experience of a work into two levels of divergent importance: the work has meaning as appearance, and meaning as sign. The appearance is either the extraneous peel on the good fruit of its symbolism, like an orange. Sedlmayr has expressed it nicely:

> ... the beautiful colours, the pleasing light, the congenial balance would themselves be, in a manner of speaking, only "finery" with which the creator of the picture had dressed up the insignificant process. They would be only the subjective "taste" of the painter, belonging in no necessary or objective way to the subject.[40]

Or it is the lovely flesh around a disposable core of meaning upon which it hangs, like a pear.

What it is important to recognize here is how closely this whole set of conceptions fits the reductive nature of the code. We need to consider the plausibility and the

---

38 Argan "Ideology and Iconology" (1975), 299.

39 Just as are Titian's Venuses: "Venus, of course, offered the proper iconographic context for this celebration of female sensuousness ...." David Rosand, *Titian* (New York 1978), 33.

40 Sedlmayr, "Zwei Beispiele zur Interpretation" (1958), 137.

implications of a broader conception of artistic symbols, a view that conceives symbolic meaning as the *product of both the symbol used and the way that symbol is presented.* How does such an understanding of meaning fit the schema of meaning levels, laid out at the end of § 36? It adds a fourth level of meaning, which neither Panofsky nor Gombrich allowed for. For according to this view, which counts a work's particularity as vital to its identity, beyond a work's basic symbolism is a level of meaning that is the narrowing, refining, and nuancing of that symbolism by means of the work's individual appearance. Panofsky did distinguish a level of meaning beyond symbolism, which he called the level of "intrinsic meaning or content." But what Panofsky meant by content is the relevance of the work's symbolic meaning to the culture from which the work came, how the already uncovered symbolism fits and further reveals "the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion."[41] As Panofsky intended, this is actually a shift of attention from work to culture; the work becomes a "symptom" of something we want to know about the culture. The level I am discussing, however, is still involved in constituting the work's symbolic content, and what tendency of the culture it might reflect is of no particular concern. I want to use Panofsky's term, which seems better suited to this purpose than to his, and will call this new level the *level of content.*[42]

According to this conception, it is the particularity of the work in question (perhaps more than other works and general traditions) that both completes the meaning and determines precisely how the symbolism of its preceding or more superficial levels is to be read. The work's appearance is thus not at all extraneous to its meaning, for the whole symbol is the work itself, image and appearance. This undoes that tension existing between work as image and work as symbol, a tension that forces a schismatic kind of reading involving two kinds of meaning that have little to do with each other. Also, the work will no longer mean the same as other works, unless it actually looks like another work in the how as well as the what. It is only too rarely asserted that an interpretation that "fits a whole group of similar works ... is thus too general, too little differentiated."[43] It is not intended to suggest that every symbolic work of art will turn out to have an extraordinarily distinctive meaning by consequence of every difference in its appearance, or even that the way symbols are presented always influences their meaning. What is proposed is simply

---

41 Panofsky gives the example of the introduction in the fourteenth century of Nativities where the Virgin Mary kneels on the ground before the infant Jesus. The meaning of this symbol is her adoring supplication, but the 'intrinsic meaning' of that is that "it reveals a new emotional attitude peculiar to the later phases of the Middle Ages." Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 30, 40—41.

42 "Content" as in the 'rules of content' is a related use, but specifies something more general: the rules of content are restrictions concerning the work's meaning in general, while content here specifies only the deepest level of the work's meaning.

43 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 195.

that we make allowance for the existence of such a level of meaning at all, without which the theory cannot deal with some especially important works of art. We shall have to look at this more concretely.

44 CONTENT: ART AND LANGUAGE

The sort of thing that I am calling content we have already begun to explore with Veronese. In fact we moved directly into the level of content in § 35 while trying to settle which basic symbolism Venus carries in Veronese's painting, precisely at that moment when we understood that Venus is linked to her meaning *visually*. Because Venus has more than one historical sense it was necessary to narrow down the possibilities, which was done not by recourse to a code (which says in such-and-such a context Venus means ...) but by recourse to the image, simply by asking How is Venus portrayed? The answer to that question not only led us to one of the possibilities of the conventional symbolism more than to the others (that Venus is beauty); it led us beyond that meaning, deeper into a reflection provoked by the image into what beauty is. For to identify Venus as beauty (understanding the symbol as a representation by 'essence') requires that we explore her image for real, essential characteristics of beauty, the qualities that define it. It led us, in other words, into an exploration of the meaning or the reality of beauty itself — and in precisely this setting: in connection with the feminine.

What did we identify as Venus' beauty, according to the way that Veronese painted her? More than prettiness or the fineness of her traits, her beauty was her grace in contrast with the roughness of the male: the tenderness, calmness, and kindness of her expression; the extraordinary refinedness of her gestures, of her posture, of the poise of her leg and the gratuitous ripple along her side. Her beauty, moreover, is her grace not just by contrast with the man, but in its effect upon him: here, beauty is the harmony brought by beauty into the business of life, the tempering effect of the refined feminine manner on the rude force of action — an effect aptly named 'civilization'. Through the figure of Venus the work emblematizes this perfect and harmonious relation of action and manner, qualities that tend to distinguish man and woman. In our world the *masculine* has argued the what of action, the things to be done; but the *feminine* has governed the how, the way in which they are to be done. It is a familiar opposition, and to say "men act, and women appear"[44] is usually to apologize for how little women have been granted. That way of thinking, however, forgets

---

44 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth 1972).

the power of appearance, which paint can render: it is not only action that is power, for manner can transform utterly. Veronese's painting shows us that only when this feminine 'ethos' is brought into life — when masculine and feminine are bound together — can human action achieve its only possible perfection. What Veronese's complex image brings us, examined at all its levels of visibility, each level of meaning read flexibly into the next, is a picture, a definition, of beauty: a way of looking at and understanding the importance of beauty through its unique contribution. And that is an understanding of the *meaning* of beauty, what in reality beauty amounts to, what it tells us, and what it tells us we should do. The painting presents beauty in such a way that we can see it is not just passive "appearance" but a genuine force. The image leads us to recognize that beauty possesses an ethos, a *way*. And it shows us that that way is taught us in the grace of women, whose poise is an entire lesson.

Where have we wandered, to finish with a meaning such as this? Not, as the code model would have it, into the abstract and socially established meaning of the concept of 'beauty', having made the contextual connection Venus = beauty. We have strayed into the painting, looking carefully at Venus and how she is presented, both in herself and in her principal relation in the painting, to Mars. An *established conception* of beauty (the kind of thing fixed in a code) is not at all of importance here, for one of the most significant lessons of this case is that *we do not really know what beauty is* — or know all that it is, or remember what it is — until we see it as the painting presents it. Not an effete and sweet surface but a manner by which the hard course of action may be transformed into something fine and great. Not a quality for which women (according to a feminine ideal) are adored and made marginal, but in which they become our teachers, whether we are women or men. We are talking here about a kind of meaning, a meaning of a complexity, force, and feeling, that is not registered *anywhere in the culture* but *in* a painting or a sculpture. We do not go to the concept to learn about the beauty that Venus symbolizes: we go to the painting to learn about the concept. To arrive at the thought 'Venus is beauty' is effectively meaningless until we bring to interpretation an awareness of, contemplation of, and reflection upon the particulars of the work.

What I am most aware of in articulating this example of 'content' is how little I am actually *saying*. The words 'delicacy', 'tenderness', 'refinedness' to which I have recourse to say what I mean by 'grace' ... all these words are *simple*, and deliver their tiny concretions in an atmosphere of poverty. If they suggest more, they suggest possibilities that are positively unwanted (an unappealing sense of 'refinedness', for instance, comes readily to mind, but has no place here at all). Yet, despite both problems, the meaning that these words must capture is neither vague nor uncertain: when the words are spoken before

the work, the sense becomes perfectly clear. In *seeing what is here* and calling it refinedness, *we see exactly what 'refinedness' is:* not a word, nor so little as a mere word conjures. In front of the painting, we are being acquainted, or reacquainted, with what this word names in a way that we cannot manage in our heads alone. It is an important fact, moreover, that what we learn when we have done it *cannot be written down.* "In fact, language is not very well equipped to offer a notation of a particular picture. It is a generalizing tool."[45] With regard to understanding, language is *far* more a tool than a content.

> In his studies, the art historian hears about and reads of the works; through language he is instructed to see what he reads and hears, and then he himself writes in that language, which experts have demonstrated to him as the language of expertise. He writes in this language of things displaying lines, colours, surfaces, spaces, and objects. Language guides seeing, it points out things in paintings, it fastens onto what is represented, and it appears that seeing could not get along without language ....[46]

> In an art-critical description one is using ... terms not absolutely; one is using them in tandem with the object, the instance. Moreover, one is using them not informatively but demonstratively. In fact, the words and concepts one may wish to handle as a mediating 'description' of the picture are not in any normal sense descriptive. What is determining for them is that, in art criticism or art history, the object is present or available — really, or in reproduction, ...[47]

Language is a tool not only in describing but in interpreting. As we have seen with Veronese, linguistically formulable concepts like 'beauty' do guide seeing, and some concepts have great power to reveal things in a work — Baxandall has put it very effectively: "they are super-ostensive."[48] But concepts are tools; they influence seeing: contra the code model, *they are not themselves the content.* The content unfolds from the work, as few have explained so clearly as this:

> The description has only the most general independent meaning and depends for such precision as it has on the presence of the picture. It *works demonstratively* — we are pointing to interest — and ostensively, taking its meaning from reciprocal reference, a sharpening to-and-fro, between itself and the particular.
>
> The concept sharpens perception of the object, and the object sharpens the reference of the word.[49]

The term 'beauty', which named a possible meaning of Venus, led us to look for content in the painting in a focused way; when something crystallized in that effort (the interpretation this section began with), the painting itself clarified the meaning of that

---

45 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 3.
46 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 31—32.
47 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 8.
48 Ibid., 116.
49 Ibid., 11, 35 [emphasis added].

concept, clarified a meaning that common language had not captured. What that meaning is was expressible in only a crude way, and without reference to the painting would have been utterly without force, without its true substance.[50] To commit that meaning to language would require a kind of expression as virtuosically articulate as the painting itself. The model of the code underestimates the specific articulateness of art. Since it locates the symbolic meaning of works of art essentially within the realm of language, the code model advances the rationalist prejudice that the only voice in existence belongs to words.[51] The problem with the code model recognized in chapter four was that it offers too simple a picture of what interpretation actually involves. The problem recognized here is if anything even more important: our conception of signs not only does not fit its case, *it seriously narrows and limits the kind of meaning we believe works of art to hold.*

What kind of meaning do we think a work like Veronese's painting holds. The following comment, quite typical of art historians, is meant to offer a clarification of the specific meaning of art.

> Suppose, while you are looking at a painting of the Madonna and Child in its original location in a chapel, you are asked: "What's the painting for?" A manifest answer is: "To illustrate, beautifully and expressively, an article of faith, and thereby to heighten devotion." Now suppose that same painting moved to the wall of a museum and hung, let's say, next to a representation of Leda and the Swan. To the question "What's it for?" the obvious answer now is: "To be contemplated, admired, and enjoyed." Note that each of these is a valid answer to the same question — within the institutional setting in which that question is asked.[52]

Beyond the schismatic relation between these two modes of meaning (one of which has a deeper investment in appearance than the other), we notice a use of the term ' illustration', by which is meant the visual presentation of some preexisting content, in this case "an article of faith." The article of faith is complete prior to the illustration; the illustration serves merely the function of distribution and rhetorical influence (essentially, the functions of advertising). In order to manage this — to fix this meaning precisely and serve as widely accessible devices of conveying it — artistic codes must be simple relations; the correspondence between sign and meaning must be exact and clear, so that the relation can

---

50 It is difficult to argue with those writers who do not see this, but it is also hard to understand them. One imagines they have succeeded in writing out the content of some serious work of art they have interpreted without feeling horribly frustrated. I, on the other hand, am among many who always feel incompetent in speaking about the meaning of even bad works. "Traditional art history" maintains "a kind of mystical belief in the ultimate irreducibility and specificity of the visual experience." Kuspit, "Traditional Art History's Complaint" (1987), 346. But it *is*, simply, impossible to describe experience, and this depth of experience *is* mysterious.

51 It is interesting to find contemporary theorists who are almost insistent that art is reducible to language, ardently supporting a current trend of "reducing art to text, turning visual art into linguistic art, vision into sign — in effect arguing the case for Derrida's assertion that 'the collusion between painting ... and writing is constant.'" Kuspit asks, "Why is art history reluctant to reduce the work of art to text?" Kuspit, "Traditional Art History's Complaint" (1987), 345.

52 Abrams, "Sociology of Modern Aesthetics" (1985), 23.

be read back in a precise way, and it is made exact and clear by reference to language. That being how codes are, in reconstructing them we tend to keep the components of sign and meaning simple. Cupid means love; Venus means love, or beauty, ...; a woman and a wheel mean human fortune. On the one hand, the consequence of respecting a model such as this may appear extraordinary: if the code *is* the actual *unit* of the work's meaning, exhausting the resources of the code gives us all the meaning the work holds. The work gives us the sign: from the sign we turn to the code: and in the code we end up with a meaning reducible to something as simple as ... a story, a sentence, a single familiar concept, a name, a word.

> In the end, iconography functions only if ... we can repeat the passage from the text to the picture. We can identify texts and attach pictorial representations, whose intended meaning we can suppose to be this text (a name, a concept, a story, a programme).[53]

Such as the meaning of Venus, which is beauty: a mere concept, its content abstract and vague. On the other hand, we are able to quell any occasional astonishment about artistic meaning by recalling the purposes that art commonly serves (the illustration of messages, the manufacture of belief, the voicing of resistance). Yet this conception of art is itself a product of the conception of art as a system of signs; the model here is explaining away its own genuine strangeness. Hofstadter writes about the remarkable blindness of our approach, which he discusses through the example of Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* (figure 15).

> A statement like 'This painting represents Bathsheba at her toilet' does not even begin to touch upon the essential artistic content or the equally essential visual form of the painting. Hence it is not competent as an instance of the interpretation of art. It is usable at most as a datum for the construction of an interpretation. But for an interpretation we need statements of the sort that I have indicated ..., namely, statements in declarative language that try to name and describe the integral concern ... as it is articulated in the painting as a painting, that is, as an artistic visual form.[54]

Since code relations, as interpretations of art continually demonstrate, are relations of meaning fixed initially in language, the meaning of art is essentially linguistic. Countless approaches to the interpretation of art emphasize the centrality of linguistic forms of correlation between image and meaning. Beardsley, for instance, stressed the significance of establishing the truth of statements of the form *s* represents *m*. But as Hofstadter remarks,

---

53 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 61. Kuspit speaks of the resistance of "traditional art history" to "the new reductionist interdisciplinarianism [that is] interested in the work of art only for its exchange value, that is, the linguistic value it can be exchanged for" — something it sees as "a repression of visual art." Kuspit, "Traditional Art History's Complaint" (1987), 348.

54 Hofstdadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 94.

> this statement is not, as Beardsley thinks, interpretative of the painting as a painting. It is only an auxiliary statement that an interpreter makes use of in developing his interpretation of the painting.

Iconographic description is not understanding,[55] yet there are few interpretations that proceed much further: it is extraordinary how often interpreters halt their activities once the basic symbolism of sign or allegory has been identified. Indeed, I find it interesting that the entry concerning Veronese's *Venus and Mars* in the catalogue of the collection to which the painting belongs opens with the words: "The gestures of the man and woman are not satisfactorily explained by the traditional title, *Mars and Venus United by Love, ...*"[56] It would be extraordinary if they could be — if the central action of a work could not only be summed up in language, but also encapsulated in a title. As Bätschmann has observed, a reading along these lines is not seeing with the eyes but with the dictionary.[57] Another writer has criticized this approach, concentrating on an earlier period, rejecting, "the now rather tired assumption that early medieval imagery is almost entirely symbolic in character, ... effectively constituted by the minimal visual sign required to denote a particular religious scene."

> The surviving apologies for visual images formulated by the church in the middle ages clearly indicate, however, that religious paintings were not just thought of as legible pictograms, ... but were also seen as functioning to impress the scene depicted more vividly on the spectator's mind than words would do. The religious function of the image was by no means thought to be exhausted by mere recognition of the event or figures shown.[58]

To "impress the scene more vividly" is, as we have been discussing, to amplify it with a meaning that words cannot easily capture.

> The conception that a picture must be as univocal as a statement, or the process of reading must finally bring the image to the full unity of a statement, is likewise a reduction of the seeing of pictures. On the contrary, one can learn from the debate not only that pictures are not statements (i.e., are not analogous to spoken translations of factual content), but also that they must not be reduced to statements.[59]

Content has been omitted from the developed schemas of artistic meaning because, for lying beyond the linguistic boundary of the code, it was invisible. The resources of codes are trivial beside the phenomena of works of art; because they speak and say what cannot

---

55 Ibid., 92.
56 Zeri and Gardner, *Venetian School* (1973), 84.
57 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 23.
58 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 31.
59 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 50.

easily be said, the visible resources of artistic images have a capacity for meaning that codes do not possess.[60] The voice of the code is *far weaker* than the voice of a work of art.

45 THE MEANING OF STORIES

I have been dwelling in these chapters upon symbolic art, art that conveys at least some of its meaning by the use of symbols. To repeat, the reason for this concentration is that symbolic imagery offers the *firmest* example in art of the semantic function of sign systems, by which art — and art in general — is commonly taken to work. To assess that conception against actual works of art, it was useful to explore previously devised schemas of *levels of meaning*. The level I am presently discussing is the level of content, one which (for reasons just noted) theorists have left out of their analyses. I suggest it is a level of meaning essential to the way art in particular conveys meaning, and it is at the same time one that the code model is particularly incapable of explaining. The reason for that inadequacy is not only a code's excessive simplicity (the language-boundness and the crudity of meaning it imposes), which we have just explored, but also the fact that the code model contains an *artificial picture of the context* in which the meaning of a work is determined. This we shall explore in the remainder of this chapter. That context is oversimplified in one respect, and overcomplicated in another. But we shall have to proceed slowly, since what takes place at the level of content is still too broadly sketched.

Without making any great general claim for the schema of levels, it may be worth extending its application outside the realm of specifically symbolic art to works of art that do not make use of the kind of thing we commonly call symbols. As you move through history, the importance to the function of art of symbolism of that classic kind tends to diminish; after 1600 the most familiar kind of iconography has less and less to do. In the process of examining the code model, it is worth considering the scope of the schema's mechanisms in relation to other types of art. The work we shall look at was produced almost a hundred years again after Veronese's: a painting by Rembrandt from 1666 (figure 16). It is perhaps quasi-symbolic, a painting that borders on symbolism. We appear to have a figure with attributes, but the woman that Rembrandt has depicted does not have the 'universality' and grandeur of a goddess. Rembrandt presents a rather intimate view of a particular moment and an individual, real woman: it so happens that, as we know from

---

60 One finds extreme expressions of the primacy given to language more frequently than one might expect: "factually one cannot form an adequate impression [of meaning] without being able to name the thing that one notes in the work of art." Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 190.

portraits, she has the features of Rembrandt's wife Hendrickje. As Lawrence Gowing has remarked, when looking at Rembrandt we notice how "Italian idealization has no place for specific individual regard: the ideal is constitutionally under-featured."[61] Influenced by this specificity, there is long-standing agreement that the painting depicts a scene from Roman history: though its subject is not conclusively settled, most sources agree that it depicts Lucretia at the moment of her suicide. The individuality of the woman tells us that we have really passed from myth to history, a difference whose significance it is interesting to explore in the process of interpreting this work, or attempting to do so.

The identification of a scene from history is once again a task of iconography, and it is done in exactly the same way as the subject matter of symbolism was revealed; we can suppose that the code model applies here as well, in the manner that follows. The meaningful features of the image are identified and are matched against texts that serve as "keys," texts that correlate those visual elements with a specific subject and a particular identity. What are the elements that draw our attention here? Though it is a simple image, here are many things here. Knowing the story of Lucretia, we might say what we see is obviously a woman's suicide with a dagger. The action of the event is entirely related by Livy in the following words: "she drew a knife from under her robe, drove it into her heart, and fell forward dead."[62] According to Panofsky, stories historic or mythic function in the *same* way as individual symbols: a story is understood culturally to have a certain meaning, and the story itself becomes established as a *sign* for that meaning.[63] When that meaning is to be conveyed (when it is appropriate, for instance, to some occasion),[64] the story is illustrated for the purpose of conveying it; an image is made that fits some scene of that story — some *identifying* scene, one on the basis of which the specific story can be identified. Clearly, this is the model once again, the code structure being only slightly more complex than in the case of isolated symbols — the artist begins with a meaning and links it to an image:

meaning : story : representative scene : image

---

61 Gowing, "Rembrandt in Bereavement" (1988), 732.

62 Livy, *The Early History of Rome*.

63 Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 29.

64 The appropriateness at specific historical times of certain types of image to certain specific places and occasions (the decoration of fountains, or bedrooms, or libraries, and so on) has been discussed by Gombrich as the 'theory of decorum'. For instance, in the Renaissance it was appropriate to decorate *studies* with subjects such as philosophers, hermits, and subjects expressing solitude. Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 7—11, 20—21.

Broken down and looked at from the interpreter's point of view, the relations of this code are as follows: the image represents the scene by a visual correspondence of object and action; the scene represents the story by presenting a crucial moment, or sometimes a series of moments, that are *peculiar* to that story; the story represents the meaning, which is some particular meaning it has been correlated with by the artist or the culture. On this model, when we interpret a work that depicts a story, we have not only to recover the story, but recapture also the *link* between the story and its meaning, for without it the work is not fully interpreted. We cannot determine that connection for ourselves, because it is part of the story only *as read* by the culture in question; we need the code. We need to establish a correlation that will tell us that in a certain context (the Venetian High Renaissance, or seventeenth-century Holland), and in a certain sub-context (a marriage present, or the decoration of a study) a given story (or given subject) has such and such a significance.

Codes have to be reconstructed. We have discovered, however, looking at the details of Panofsky's explanation, that with symbols and representational conventions the code that we reconstruct is ultimately based, and only can be, upon a plausible interpretation that is codeless. The same thing must happen here: we can only establish the 'code' that such-and-such a story tends to have such-and-such a meaning *in* a certain context by the accumulated readings of many such images, free of the assistance of codes. And further, the traditions of correlation that we reconstruct (now between the story and its meaning) are not matrices that in a rule-like way dictate or automatically translate the meaning of the images that fit them. Our historical rule about what a given story tends to mean merely establishes a possible way of reading that in each case we will accept (or dismiss) on the same basis upon which we established the trend — *by making sense of an image*. In this regard at least, there is no apparent difference at all between historical subjects and mythical allegories; the satisfactory reading of the image will be the basis, the ground, of an accepted interpretation as much in the case of the Rembrandt as in that of the Veronese.

What is involved in making sense of an image? One thing recognized in the examination of Veronese's painting was the paucity of an interpretation that stops before reaching the level of content. Another thing recognized (in § 36) was how there is sometimes a kind of dialectic in the reading of levels, according to which a proposed reading at one level can be corroborated or dismissed by a reading at some other. The right interpretation of the symbolism of Venus was established for sure only when a full reading at the level of content was possible. Readings prior to addressing the matter of content are not, therefore, merely incomplete; they are hypothetical. When we have entered the level of content — the only level at which we really begin to take full account of the work 's

particularity — we put all our prior work of interpretation to its real test. It appears that the grounds for the acceptance of an interpretation as a whole are, in part at least (it is a necessary condition) the cogency of that interpretation at the level of content. It is this suggestion that I should like to explore in connection with the Rembrandt.

In an article published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1988, Lawrence Gowing raised a question about the correctness of the traditional interpretation of Rembrandt's painting as the suicide of Lucretia.[65] It is interesting to look at the 'logic' of his critique in connection with the suggestion of the legitimating or 'foundational' role of the reading of content. Gowing raises the problem of the picture's interpretation by comparing the work with two other supposed depictions of Lucretia's death, both of which he argues are difficult to reconcile with Livy's story. Each of these two other paintings[66] "illustrates the exchanges between a still-living woman and a man whose horror and tenderness are neither lustful [as Tarquin would be] nor vengeful [as would be Lucretia's husband Collatinus]." A particularly discrepant feature for Gowing is the extremely calm appearance of the woman in these pictures, whose "inspiring serenity is again hard to place in the story." What have these observations about other pictures to do with Rembrandt's? In Rembrandt's image a woman stands, a bloodied dagger in one hand, her white shift stuck to her side by a flow of bright blood. Gowing notes that there is no other image of a Lucretia "who displays the stain of her blood like a tragic pennant." Her gaze is focused, turned aside in the direction of her left hand, which tugs at what appears to be a bell pull. Her face wears an expression of great tenderness: her brow is marked by only the faintest trace of discomfort, so faint as to be uncertain. The expression of the woman — serenity, tenderness, trouble are a few words that we can use to reflect, but not evoke, its complexity — is the centre of the picture; it is the thing that draws our attention. The "inspiring serenity" that Gowing noted in the other works is even more prominent here, and its discrepancy with the Lucretia story even more pointed.

The other significant element of those other works is the second person depicted there. Even though there is no such person depicted here, Gowing notes that all three paintings

> show a single figure that implies a two-person relationship rather different from those in which Lucretia figured. This woman seems to address a companion in the position of the spectator — in fact to address the artist — in a role quite unlike that of the Lucretias whom we recognize.

---

65 Gowing, "Rembrandt in Bereavement" (1988), 732, 741.

66 A relief from the school of Riccio in the Victoria and Albert Museum and a picture by Bramantino in the Tola Busca Collection. Ibid., 741.

Though it does not affect his point, Gowing is not quite accurate here: the gaze of Rembrandt's woman is not directed at the spectator; neither does it appear focused on someone who is present. And for some reason Gowing does not mention the pull she grasps, which has to be noted: it appears, in fact, that she is calling someone. And it is probable that, with this concentration on her face, her thought is focused on that person not present but nearby. Gowing's conclusion remains perfectly apt: there is an "implicit dialogue" in this image.

Noticing these two features of Rembrandt's painting affects the matter of its interpretation because neither is appropriate to the story of Lucretia. But not appropriate in what way — or perhaps we should ask, at what level of meaning? This is not a symbolic image but an image depicting an event from history; to give the type a name, we might call it a *portrayal,* an ugly but less limited term than the old name 'history painting'.[67] With portrayals the schema of levels is analogous to that of symbols. As before, there is first a level of representation: a relation between the forms marked by the paint and things recognizable by virtue of visible resemblance. On this basis we make out the things I have just listed, describing what it is we see in Rembrandt's picture (blood, a bell-pull, a serene face, ...). The second level is analogous to the level of figure and symbol; it is the level at which any beings represented in the work are named for who they are (the winged boy is identified as Cupid in a symbolic image; in a portrayal the person portrayed is identified — here, Lucretia). But here, of course, there is no figuration, for Lucretia unlike Cupid is not the embodiment of any concept: Lucretia is the name of a woman, not of a personification. We can unite figuration and this sort of case under the general heading of *identification,* the level at which the subject of the work can be named, identified. One could not say, however, that Lucretia unlike Cupid does not 'mean anything'. Panofsky included portrayals in his own scheme because they have historically bound conventional meanings. There is something that makes Lucretia worth depicting, for an artist or a patron, and she was depicted to bring it to our experience: meaning is the raison d'être for images. In fact, both symbol and portrayal have meaning in the same way, in the sense that in both the same kind of *relation* holds between the representation and its meaning.

It is the real and essential qualities shared by love and an arrow/wings/being-blindfolded that link the representation of Cupid with its meaning, which the image symbolizes; it is a kind of natural-essential relation, which points out important qualities that love possesses. The same kind of relation exists between this representation of Lucretia

---

[67] As a portrait depicts a specific person's features, a portrayal depicts the actions of a specific person — a category that includes real figures from history, people thought to have lived, and even fictional characters, providing they are fictional *people* in the story, and not supernatural or allegorical types.

and her meaning. For the thing that makes Lucretia worth depicting is also, in an important way, essential to her as well. Essential, as before, not solely in the sense of a feature without which the thing would not *be* the thing it is (without which love would not be love, or Lucretia would not be Lucretia) — a far too technical way of thinking. Essential, rather, in picking out a feature that defines the concept or the person in some *crucial* way, for us, in picking out some central fact about the thing in question — central not absolutely or autonomously (whatever that could mean) but from the point of view of a human being. That love can wound is a fact about love, and not a merely incidental one: it is a part of the significance of love, crucial to understanding what love is — that is, crucial to people, who are sensitive to suffering. That Lucretia killed herself out of the horror of having been violated is a fact about her, and not an incidental fact: it tells us something deep about her, her life, what happened to her — indeed, about *who she is*. Who she is not in name, and not necessarily who she was to herself, but who she is in importance, in relation to us. It is a fact of her life for which she assumes significance, and in that way (and no less than the pain of love) it is an essential quality. The few representational objects used here to identify her through this scene of her life (her sex, her dagger, her wound) are therefore not arbitrary conventions, freely chosen features of the story that serve to indicate it; neither are they mere devices of identification.[68] They are chosen because they are essential to Lucretia. By them, the image directs our attention to the meaning — which is the significance, the essence — of Lucretia's story, just as the image of Cupid directs our attention to its meaning, the essence of love.

Pointing out this parallel seems to bring us to a somewhat surprising conclusion. We turned to this work to examine a case distinct from a symbolic image; portrayals of stories and events seemed a new type. Yet the significance of the preceding paragraph is that the portrayal appears to be a symbol, in the sense that it shares the kind of relation of sign and meaning that characterized a symbol:

object : essential quality : meaning

As the features of Cupid are not ciphers of a code but rather the manifestation of aspects of the nature of love that are put on display in the image, in Rembrandt's image the essential significance of Lucretia's story is also manifest through represented things. The structure is not entirely the same, for those things do not themselves *possess* the qualities essential to

---

68 Again, there is perhaps an element of convention, and again it is of little issue to the matter of interpretation. To convey who she is, the reality of her being, the fact with which she is identified, some other moment of the drama Livy told might conceivably have been chosen (although in Lucretia's case it is hard to picture any other instant that would embody the reason for which she is being remembered).

Lucretia's meaning (we do not look at the qualities of her dagger, for instance, in the way we would a symbol). The objects here do something different: they focus our attention on an action, her self-destruction, which is something important to us. But just as with symbols, "the visual articulation is the form of the content"[69]: how the work appears is how the work 'persuades' us to concentrate on what it is about, and to grasp the things of importance. As Iser remarks, "stories are not told for their own sake but for the demonstration of something that extends beyond themselves."[70] And if we are sensitive to that experience we will choose to speak differently than the model suggests, for again (as with Veronese) we are not involved in translation, completing semantic *correlations* — the relation of something meaning something, a conception that codes constantly reinforce.

> The interpretation which is in question in the criticism of art is [not] interpretation guided by a rule, least of all, a rule that allows one to refer the deeper meaning from the manifest content. The interpreter of a work of art, who is a critic, is not a cryptographer, who *translates* the work. The work is not an oracle or a riddle. This would be a theory of literature, and of art generally, as essentially allegory.[71]

The symbol of Venus did not merely signify; she extended or made articulate the meaning of the correlation 'beauty'; she brought to sight the qualities of her meaning. Here too, we are not merely 'directed to the story that is meant'; we are faced, directly, with *what Lucretia did.* The reason it is important to note this is not to mark similarities between symbol and portrayal, but to clarify what sort of thing artistic content is, and to bring to light its immediacy, its presence in the work and our experience of it. The meaning is not found encapsulated in some remote text that the imagery sent us to find. It is manifest *in* the imagery. Recognizing the immediacy of the meaning of artistic 'signs' we may now return to our problem: an analysis of Gowing's criticism of the long-accepted identification of Rembrandt's painting as a depiction of Lucretia.

46 THE 'DIALECTIC' OF LEVELS

As far as we have gone in the schema — to the level of *identification,* the level at which the work's subject can be identified — the painting offers us all the elements that traditionally secure an identification of Lucretia; the woman in Rembrandt's painting possesses all her

---

69 Hofstdadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 94.

70 Iser, *Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), 123.

71 Hampshire. "Types of Interpretation" (1964), 105. Hampshire's point is more substantial than he thinks. Theorists occasionally see through the translation paradigm without recognizing how fundamental to understanding art that recognition is.

typical 'attributes'. We have satisfied the interpretative conditions of the code model, and have "made our case": in the context of seventeenth-century Dutch art, and in a fitting context of production,[72] a dying woman holding a dagger is Lucretia, the Roman woman described in Livy's story. That model is the legitimation of the painting's past and continued interpretation as *The Suicide of Lucretia*. We know that Livy was familiar to Dutch culture, and Rembrandt in fact painted another Lucretia, today in the National Gallery of Art in Washington (1664). But as Panofsky argued, there is more involved in iconographic identification than correspondence with texts.[73] Indeed, there is more than even Panofsky's argument gave us.

According to Panofsky we have to know how Lucretias were painted in the tradition that Rembrandt would have been influenced by. That is exactly what Gowing undertook to discover.

> I should add that in a long search I have not found a single certain Lucretia who has withdrawn the dagger from her wound and holds it as Hendrickje does; nor one who displays the stain of her blood like a tragic pennant; nor yet one who, having completed her action, remains so clearly alive and in serious communication.

The real benefit of Gowing's recourse to traditions of depiction, however, was not to make sense out of an otherwise unintelligible painting, nor to directly validate or invalidate any proposed meaning. It enabled Gowing to notice several ways in which Rembrandt's painting departs from the tradition of Lucretia representations (chiefly by her withdrawn dagger, and in the nature of her expression and the "implicit dialogue" of the picture), though in other less subtle respects it fits the traditional treatment of Lucretia representations reasonably well.[74] By our usual view, the tradition must either support or throw doubt upon the identification as Lucretia, for an interpretation either fits the tradition (and is to that extent legitimated) or does not (and is accordingly disqualified). But this is the code understood as a law, something that *fixes the limit of possibility* for how the meaning of the Lucretia story can be represented. That conception is inimicable to history. To some extent the means by which all works carry their meaning are perpetuations of traditions of representation, symbolization, and so on. But the role the standard conception assigns to traditions of imagery sits very strangely where art is concerned, for surely artists are often people attempting to say what has not been said, to say something more fully than before,

---

72 The specific circumstances of the work's production are unknown, but some scholars have shown the political dimension of the story, "pure political allegory in the circles of Rembrandt's patrons." The revenge of Lucretia had an importance beyond her: "They murdered Tarquinius and while they were at it overthrew the monarchy and instituted the Republic." Schwartz, *Rembrandt* (1984), 330.

73 Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 36—37.

74 As Nordenstam remarks, a work's peculiarities stand out especially in comparison with other works of art. Nordenstam, *Explanation and Understanding* (1978), 74.

trying to bring home something usually passed over. With a story such as the story of Lucretia, why should an artist not endeavour to find some more affecting or significant way to present Lucretia and her act than the way the tradition has established? For the content of a work is not infrequently involved with truth (truths about love, about the significance of beauty, and of numerous other forces of human life). "Nomological explanation" works through generalization, but "our interest as historians or critics is more often idiographic, towards locating and understanding the peculiarities of particulars."[75]

Our question is, when a work does go beyond those traditions, on what basis do we interpret such an extension? "It is immediately evident that our understanding must be guided by the peculiar linguistic customs of the epoch or author themselves"; but we must determine the meaning of "unconventional language" as well.[76] If the work is "typical" the tradition it typifies will be useful, but "if it is atypical, the relevant answer lies elsewhere," and no amount of 'confirmation' by sources is going to be of help.[77] The fact that the imagery diverges from the established 'sign' for a given subject matter does not mean the work does not depict that subject; just as an historical code cannot dictate a reading for every use of its imagery, neither can it deny that reading where its imagery is altered or rejected. "In the end, iconography functions only if the intention of the text is traditional."[78] There must be room for "geniuses ... able to transcend all conventions."[79] But the problem with this conception lies deeper; *laws* of representation contradict the idea of tradition itself, for that there are historically bound traditions at all tells us that traditions change. Rules in art can be changed at any moment, or lightly ignored, at will. This is nowhere better illustrated than in an anecdote about Beethoven.

> Once, during a walk, I spoke to him of two pure fifths which produce a notable and lovely effect in one of his first string quartets, the one in c minor. Beethoven did not know of them and insisted that I was wrong in saying that they were fifths. As it was his custom always to carry music paper, I asked for some and wrote down the passage in question for him, complete with all the four parts. When he saw that I was right he said, 'Well, and who has forbidden them?' As I did not know how to take this question he repeated it several times, till at last, full of amazement, I replied: 'But it's one of the elementary rules.' Then he repeated his question once more, whereupon I said: 'Marpurg, Kirnberger, Fux, etc., etc., all of them theorists!' 'In that case, I permit them!' was his reply.[80]

---

75 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 13.

76 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 43.

77 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 213.

78 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 61.

79 Bakos, "Art Historical Process" (1983), 120. Our idea of a sign system must have "sufficient openness of structure so that inventive minds can be seen to exceed (and thereby to alter) the apparent strictures of language so far received." Margolis, "Schleiermacher Among the Theorists" (1987), 364. As Kant explained, "the genius gives the rule to art."

80 Ferdinand Ries, in *Beethoven, Letters, Journals, and Conversations*, ed. M. Hamburger (New York 1951), 47–48.

Panofsky's account not only offers no specific resources for the interpretation of departures in symbolism, it leads us to ignore their existence. For as Panofsky explains, the power of the code derives from the fact that it can make sense of many comparable images. Panofsky lays an extraordinary amount of stress upon the scope of a rule, the number of cases it can make sense of; in fact, that is the thing that legitimates our reconstructions of code meanings. He goes so far with this thinking as to say that any historical instance in which the rule does not work forces us to develop a new super-rule that can deal with all the old cases plus the new one.[81] But this is theory running wild.

Interpretation does not require super-rules that are never contradicted but, as we have seen, simple generalizations whose correlations we can ignore whenever we find a work that the rule does not suit. And the *basis* of our decision that the rule does not suit it is nothing more than the fact that we are dissatisfied (in a way that we have been clarifying in connection with the developing criterion of explanatory power) with the 'sense' that rule delivers: we simply judge that it does not make sense enough. Interpretative rules built from the experience of interpreting can never be anything but generalizations of patterns of sense-making, and it is that sense-making that supports them. What that judgement rests on is a thing we are now attempting to make clearer.[82]

Gowing made his survey of Lucretia images in order to see whether Rembrandt's picture matched them; he discovered that it did in prominent ways and in more subtle ones did not. As a test, this was not decisive, and Gowing did not reject the interpretation on the evidence of historical norms. He did so for other reasons, and it is only when we know them that it becomes truly clear on what Gowing's criticism of the established interpretation turns — and on what basis, also, his interpretation stands. What the comparison did most effectively was to isolate the work's differences, and in so doing draw attention to features that distinguish the image, for three features not found in the traditional Lucretia imagery stood out: the withdrawn dagger, the "implicit dialogue," and above all the calm upon the woman's face — as it happens, features for which there is no clear tradition at all. Having exhausted the code without settling the interpretation, Gowing had to proceed on some other basis, and he gave close attention to those features. With the particularity of this work

---

81 "If, however, this new individual observation definitely refuses to be interpreted according to the 'sense' of the series, and if an error proves to be impossible, the 'sense' of the series will have to be reformulated to include the new individual observation." Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 35 n. 3.

82 As Gadamer explains, the experience of historical reality can never supply "a pure method. There will always be a certain means of deducing general rules from this experience, but the methodological meaning of this step forbids that one draw a law, properly so called, from it and for ever afterwards subsume the complex of given concrete cases in an unequivocal manner. The idea of experiential rules always demands — the rules being what they are only through use — that they be *tested* in use. This is what remains valid, in a general and universal way, for our knowledge in the human sciences. They never attain an 'objectivity' other than that which all experience carries with it." Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 22—23.

more visible, he turned back to the story. He did so in order to check whether these features are "accounted for," but by a standard that the code model does not do much justice to.

It was not a matter of checking whether the features are explicitly mentioned in the story, for even if they were not, for fairly obvious reasons the interpretation could not be discounted; it was necessary to determine whether they *fit* the story, and deciding that involves something rather more complex than 'checking'. It required that Gowing think about what Lucretia's drama is about, and his conclusion was that these particular details are "hard to place in the story." It would appear that the basis or the standard of his critique is the *story,* the text of Livy that tells us what a depiction of Lucretia can possibly include. But this shifts the attention off the thing we ought to notice. The story is, certainly, the standard of the check, but a standard is a thing we have to match; not a thing that tells what matches it. *When* a certain image does or does not represent a story is a matter of *judgement,* and it is crucial to understand all that this judgement involves.

Indeed, in this case the Lucretia story does not say that there is no 'implicit dialogue' between two figures: on the contrary, it says there is.[83] Nor does it say that Lucretia did not die with serenity. How Lucretia died, and with what demeanor, are not in the words of the story; but they *are in the story,* because it is a story about what happened to a real woman, about reality. Gowing judged that in this world the relation between Lucretia and either Tarquin, who had assaulted her, or even her husband Collatinus would not be tender and calm at the moment of her self-imposed death, as it is here: Rembrandt's painting shows "a single figure that implies a two-person relationship rather different from those in which Lucretia figured." And given the feelings behind her suicide, Lucretia's death would not be placid, as this woman's *is.* Gowing did not accept that *Lucretia* would die in the manner that Rembrandt's painting so powerfully depicts; when she died she would have looked different from this. This is the basis on which he rejected the traditional identification.

Gowing's basis is reality: he made a judgement of truth, a judgement about what we can accept as true of the world that this story comes from, which he identified as ours. Because a woman who killed herself in shame and horror would not look like this, the identification as *Lucretia* is wrong. Many will be tempted to disqualify such a method, for it does not quite satisfy the objective correlative of the theory. For some critics, basing an interpretation upon truth "has somewhat too much pathos," is too "lax."[84] For there is no historical limitation to apply here. But indeed, why should there be, and how could there be? Rembrandt's image is a portrayal: a representation of death, and thus a representation of

---

83 "With these words," Livy writes, "she drew a knife from under her robe ...."

84 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 8.

how death really is. Gowing's 'method' includes judgements about reality because Gowing regarded Rembrandt's painting as 'about' something more than a text, for a text opens onto the world. The meaning of the work has to do with considerably more than traditions of imagery; that is only the level of its means. Its end is to say something, about something. Because Gowing took the painting seriously, he refused to accept that it could be saying something that is not true.[85]

Why should he treat the work as expressing truth — truth, according to his own judgement — rather than expressing the artist's opinion of the truth? Here an interpreter faces a choice. And what are the considerations of that choice? The only reason we have to treat the work as expressing a mere belief about the world (requiring us to withhold judging its meaning against truth) is the possibility that the work distorts the truth, depicts this situation falsely — the *possibility* that there is a *difference* between how Rembrandt saw things and what the interpreter believes. We are not actually in a position to say this is probable, but it is certainly possible. Were the two images of reality not possibly different, they would simply be the same; the possibility of that difference is the only reason to import the idea of mere belief. But why, indeed, should we methodologically favour that possibility; and to favour that choice is effectively to change it to the presumption of difference? A work of art is more than an image: "representation becomes artistic only when it is brought into the context of the mind's concern with what is represented." To the extent that we take a work seriously, we take it to involve "a differentiation of importance and triviality" in essential correlation with the world.[86] Gadamer has reminded us of the bearing this has upon understanding, for to really *hear* what someone is saying requires that we suspect them of saying something about the world.

> In reading a letter, to aim at the personal *thoughts* of our correspondent and not at the matters *about which* he reports is to contradict what is meant by a letter. Likewise, the anticipations

---

85 Wimsatt has discussed this standard of interpretation in literature, with reference to a theorist's interpretation of William Blake's poem "London," which discusses prostitution, with particular reference to the interpretation of "the two violently juxtaposed themes at the end of the last line" — "the Marriage hearse." The critic's proposed interpretation treats this phrase as expressing the view that marriage is an evil: "If there were no marriage, there would be no ungratified desires, and therefore no harlots." Wimsatt's response to this is as follows: "One thing, however, which perhaps he does not notice, or perhaps does not worry about, is that these ideas are silly. (Why wouldn't there be *many* ungratified desires, as many at least as there were losers in stag combats, or wooers rejected, or pursuers eluded, or matings frustrated? and *many* harlots? and *many* whore-masters?) ... I myself think the poem is better than that meaning, and to judge from the contexts where the poem has often appeared [anthologies of great poetry] and from earlier critiques, it would seem that most readers have also thought so."

Wimsatt considers it a standard of interpretation that the sense we make *should amount to something* or fail to treat the work as worth the effort. Interpreting a work of art is naturally oriented toward *meaningfulness*. "I have set up this discussion of the poem as a frame of reference within which a student may be able to see the direction in which his own mind moves in search of evidence for the meaning and value of a poem. When he can clearly see the difference between the directions and the results, then let him decide." Wimsatt, "A Fallacy Revisited" (1968), 217—20.

86 Hofstadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 93.

> implied by our understanding of an historical document emanate from our relations to 'things' and not the way these 'things' are transmitted to us.[87]

We have no reason to treat a work of art differently. Indeed, there is actually something to lose if we do, for then meaning necessarily diminishes; not only is there a drop from meaningfulness to mere meaning, what is lost is some of what we have come to see defines explanatory power. "Articles of descriptive facts are produced with little concern for the possible actual truth, as opposed to semantical or historical truth embodied in the art objects studied."[88] Gadamer, as Bätschmann notes (rejecting his view), approaches the experience of art

> not to discover what [that experience] thinks itself to be, but rather to find what it is in truth and what its truth is, even if it does not know what it is and cannot say what it knows.[89]

Even the methodically best interpretation has to fit more than conventions; it has a bearing on reality. Where, in relation to reality, does one draw methodical limits? We know only the reality that we know, the world that our judgements draw for us. Gowing counted Rembrandt as an other in the face of the same reality, speaking to him of the state of things. The basis of Gowing's criticism of the traditional interpretation is a judgement about the world; the basis for determining what is fitting of the story is something that is not in the text of the story at all, for even the story of Lucretia is spoken into the world; a story is to be read against the truth we know. We have, now, the ground upon which Gowing rejected the identification of this painting as the suicide of Lucretia: it is the *ground of truth* — not methodological truth, truth in terms of the correct way to read signs, but in terms of life: it is 'truth to life'. On this basis, Gowing could reject that interpretation without even an alternative with which to replace it.

It is informative, however, that an alternative identification was also found; the basis for critique was also the basis for establishing an interpretation. As Gowing's critique stands upon a judgement about what is not true to life, the new interpretation rests upon a judgement about what is. There is another story from classical history, the story of Arria and her husband Caecina Paetus, who was condemned for his role in the Dalmation rebellion. Gowing relates it thus:

> Paetus was condemned to death but could not in his frailty muster the strength to stab himself. So Arria took the dagger from him, stabbed herself and as she gave it back told him "Paete non dolet" — it does not hurt.

---

87 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 46.

88 Pontynen, "Theory and Practice of Art History" (1986), 472.

89 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 89; Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 7—8.

Immediately upon reading this story, Rembrandt's image springs to the mind's eye. The painting's withdrawn dagger is indeed *in* this story, but the message of this account is that the "match" with a story is not, contrary to the way we think of it, a simple comparison between two things, image and text. What it will take to *fit* a story of self-sacrifice will depend upon what such a thing would look like. There is a background that makes the comparison possible. Arria's suicide is done for her husband, for love of whom she has led the way into death. In that "implicit dialogue" we have watched Rembrandt's woman thinking deeply of him; her face is an embodiment of Arria's message, "It does not hurt." We see a woman implicitly telling her husband that there is nothing to fear in the death he must accept. The reason why the picture joins itself so forcefully to the telling of this story is that we believe it is *fitting* that Arria, acting as she does, should look this way, observed in the midst of her ultimate gift, alone, where even her husband does not see her (she is now calling him). That is a judgement filled with implications about sacrifice, meaning, and death. *Most* immediately, that judgement brings us face to face — quite literally face to face — with her message, since it is in her expression that we see it: there is nothing to fear in the death you must accept. Do we ourselves really accept that as true? Perhaps we do not. But it is this question — precisely this matter of the ease of death, the meaning of love and sacrifice — that we contemplate, led there by the fit of this image with the story.

Here it is important to note a distinction I think must be made between reality and realism, one that has a great deal to do with the significance of art. We are not talking about how such a death looks as a real event; we are talking about a portrayal: *an image that reveals the event for what it is, presenting its internal reality*. Gross reality, life as it happens, is not a fully accomplished reality; events in gross reality do not always look like what they are. What *truly happened* was a loving sacrifice, and this image shows us that. Gowing's critique has to do with the true appearance of a suicide, but focused in terms of the nature of what happens in the story (here an act of sacrifice, in the story of Lucretia an act of horror). To judge whether Gowing's interpretation fits, we must consider within ourselves whether such an act, an act of that kind, has indeed this nature, this beauty. To the extent that that is real for us, Gowing's interpretation becomes secure — but indeed the issue goes well beyond the 'security' or 'legitimation' of an interpretation, for in that case the painting not only has a meaning, it has meaning. Genuine interpretation leads further than the issues that concern the theory of interpretation. We pass from image to story, and from story into life. What relation of the three we finish with is settled only by our own judgement of reality.

One of the most important things to recognize is that the path Gowing's interpretation has taken has led us beyond the levels of representation and identification. Judged at those levels, the interpretation of the work as Lucretia is not discredited, which is why this reading is continually republished in the literature. Interpretations aligned with the code model do not venture far beyond the historical matching of representations, and that is the reason why many have thought Rembrandt has painted a Lucretia who has withdrawn her dagger and killed herself with serenity. It was only in carrying interpretation further, examining the image in relation to the reality of its subject matter, that that identification was seen to be faulty. There are two methodical points to draw here: that interpretation not only proceeds further into the level of content, where there is some reference to reality (as we saw with Veronese); it must do so merely in order to secure our reading at the lower level of identification. Which is to say that interpretation is not a stepped process, not a progression of readings from level to level, each level of reading secured before we can move on to the next (thus securing the interpretation as a whole).[90]

The common distinction between meaning and significance, "between the univocal, open, meant sense and a second, mediated, sense, brought forth only *through* this initially manifest sense," does not work as neatly as the theory has it, because on that theory significance "presupposes that the first manifest sense is already constituted."[91] The identification of this woman as Arria can only be made by moving onto the level of content; it cannot be settled first. Determining, as here, the meaning of a work even at the level of identification (identifying what story the work presents) reaches further than codes, into our picture of what life is like. To judge the image as the representation of a human story is to judge it as a representation of life, and because of that determining even subject matter — deciding if that identification stands — involves a judgement about whether the features of the subject are captured in the work. It is a judgement that brings the work into contact with reality. With this new level added, the full schema of levels might be diagrammed as follows.

---

90 Panofsky's picture: "As the correct identification of motifs is the prerequisite of their correct iconographical analysis [identification of the story], so is the correct analysis of images, stories, and allegories the prerequisite of their correct iconological interpretation." Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology" (1955), 32.

91 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 58 [emphasis added].

sign ——————[means of suggestion]——————>meaning

levels of meaning:			
I	REPRESENTATIONAL		
	form (paint configurations)	resemblance of visible features	**representation** (a wounded woman with a dagger)
II	SYMBOLIC		
	representation	resemblance of essential qualities	**identification of portrayal** (the Suicide of Arria)
			symbolic identification (the self-sacrifice of Arria)
III	CONTENT		
	identification of portrayal and its symbolism	truth to life	**content** (the suicide of Arria understood in relation to its real-life implications)

47 THE CONTENT OF ART

The level of content is a level at which the work's image of reality is held up against our understanding of life. In *this* context, the context of life, the relation between the identification and the particular image (that image in all the detail that the painting presents: a suicide, but a specific suicide carried out in just this manner) is *tested*. Gowing believed that reality supports the interpretation of Arria, but not the interpretation of Lucretia: a death of self-sacrifice can look like this, but not a death of humiliation. The context of life is a kind of crucible in which the link between the representation and its identification is proved sound, by surviving as 'true'. In this test it either holds (as does the relation between Rembrandt's image and the story of Arria) or breaks (as does, I too believe, the relation between that image and the story of Lucretia). To the extent that we can accept it, the interpretation holds; to the extent that we cannot, it fails.

Perhaps we ought not to call this a third level of meaning, but merely a way of testing the meaning of the level of identification. But moving beyond that level actually gives us a content that identification cannot provide. When we have identified the painting as the *Suicide of Arria* (something we could do merely by reading a caption or a label on the wall) and explain what this suicide means (something we could do by reading a paragraph in Livy, or an entry in an exhibition catalogue, or Gowing's retelling) we are left with

something very different and much less than when we take this 'information', read it against the entire painting, and ask ourselves whether what we see is a fitting representation of it. The interpretation is *tested* within our understanding of reality. But if the appearance of the work leads us to do this, to ask this question, we are not free simply to test, check, and give an answer. Once having moved into the context of life, what we are doing is no longer merely testing. To scrutinize the face of Arria with the thought fully in mind 'the face of a woman going into death' is not a step of method: it is an encounter with our own understanding of the meaning of death. It is facing "the concern ... articulated in the work."[92] The image presents something to contemplate against the background in which we best understand it. Hofstadter writes of Rembrandt's *Bathsheba* (figure 15):

> A Rembrandt painting of a Bathsheba is not a merely objective depiction of a naked woman but the articulation of a profound concern, of the nature of deep and understanding love, penetrating insight, and tender compassion, regarding human beings and the mysterious truth of their existence. The naked woman is used by Rembrandt to get this concern *visually* articulated. The visual articulation is the form of the content. To understand a Bathsheba by Rembrandt is eventually to grasp such an integral concern.[93]

The imagery of a work gains its meaning through the way we think and feel about what it pictures.

The picture of Arria speaks to us about death. It gives us something far more and quite different from the information that we get at the level of identification. It gives us something different from information. *It gives us a kind of experience of reality.*[94] The level of content is the level of that experience.

The depth at which the level of content engages us, and the kind of meaning at issue at such a depth, is made poignantly clear when we consider something about this painting noted by Gowing that I have not mentioned. The woman that Rembrandt has painted as Arria is his second wife Hendrickje, who is familiar to us from many of Rembrandt's portraits of her (the most famous of which is perhaps his *Bathsheba* — figure 15). But Rembrandt painted this picture in 1666; Hendrickje had died three years before in 1663. For Rembrandt the background of this story was the departure of his own loved wife, who did go bravely into death before him. Gowing notes, "from beyond the grave Hendrickje was still encouraging the old man with the assurance that he was most in need of, 'death does not hurt'." *The Suicide of Arria* is Rembrandt's meditation on the terror or the benignity of death, the thing that had touched and taken a dear life of his own. It was a

---

92 Hofstdadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 93.

93 Ibid., 94.

94 Through what the work presents "something happens to our own store of experience." Iser, *Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), 132.

meditation full in the crucible of his own loss. What we see in the painting is an answer in which many things are brought together. Death and the death of the one we love most: the death that must be accepted: death accepted out of love, calmly and in devotion: death that is nothing to fear. This complex of meaning was meaning spoken into the soul, the only place where death is ever faced.

The threat is everyone's, the loss not only Rembrandt's. The potential of that loss is shared by everyone who either loves or would love; before we even encounter this painting, we stand in an implicit relation to its meaning. We are all required to understand the death not only of ourselves but of those we love. To the extent that we bring ourselves to face what is inevitable, we prepare ourselves for it, but perhaps even moreso, we live it: we live the life that has its way with us, not averting our eyes. The meaning of the painting, carried to its depth, its full *content,* is meaning in these terms. It is the task of art, if of anything, to lead us to real experience — that is, into our souls, or wherever that place is where we look at life and give our honest response. Sedlmayr has spoken of a peculiarly familiar mistake, "to believe that the work of visual art is absorbed only with the eyes, or only in the head-region. In reality, however, comprehension of the work of art involves the whole person."[95] He cites Konrad Fiedler, an artist and theorist who believed that through the experience of a work of art "we see ourselves in a new relation to the world."[96] In the world of art we continually voice such thoughts in a platitudinous way, but somehow such sentiments fail to make contact with our established views of interpretation. It is a *part* of the method, the activity, of interpretation to lead us to feel and to think at the same time, and to see what we think we and the world are like — and to do that so as to know how to live.

48 THE CODE MODEL RECONSIDERED

If one looks at the full sequence of difficulties we have encountered, it becomes clear that we do not, in the end, have a series of revisions to make to the code model.[97] That identification of the work of art — a conception "widely held today of what it is for a

---

95 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 116.

96 Ibid., 127.

97 To rearticulate what a code is in terms of the natural connection at its centre is more or less to outstrip the meaning the word 'code' is borrowed for. When a symbol is established, when an object is set up to have a specific meaning, nothing really artificial takes place: the artist *sees* in the object the meaning that he or she wishes to convey, and chooses it for that reason (the power to cause pain: the capacity to flitter away: the binding together of two things). But it is somewhat wrong to call this 'setting up' or 'establishing' or 'devising' or 'declaring by fiat' a *correlation* of meaning; the idea of 'correlating' suggests an artificial linking, whereas the relation already exists, and the artist relies on or exploits it.

picture to have meaning" — is fundamentally false; it involves too great an investment in theoretical sketches.[98] Looking at the detail of works of art allows us to fight free of the influence of the rather simplistic pictures of language that pure thinking necessarily develops. Those sketches are used, nonetheless, as the philosophical basis of a modern method of interpretation, a method that supposedly guarantees the realization of an objective concern with the reality of the work. The way our minds work, it is far too easy to be impressed with the slight amount of 'testing' these theories usually get; we continually underestimate the significance of Goethe's warning, "Because everybody can talk, everybody thinks he can talk about language."

There is, moreover, a pattern in the oversimplifications of the code model. The code model consistently exaggerates the elements of system; there are essentially three.

> The model emphasizes that interpretation is a kind of calculus: that there are *external indices that determine the meaning* (established conventions, traditions of usage, principles of intersection).
>
> The sign-system model conceives *meaning as essentially the thing to which a sign refers,* and interpreting is thus the deciphering of this reference. The model emphasizes that the work, as an expression in the language of art, is a means of expressing certain information, *material fundamentally accessible to language* (the illustration of doctrines, the representation of concepts, the depiction of stories).[99]
>
> The model also emphasizes the artist's manipulation of conventions, the primary role of *artificial devices in the establishing of meaning.*[100]

The important thing to be seen in this pattern is the way in which it serves the discipline's most basic conception of objectivity, as the orientation toward an object with a nature to be

---

98 Many approaches to art today are based upon "the belief, explicit or implicit, that pictorial meaning is primarily determined by rules, or by codes, or by conventions, or by the symbol system to which the meaningful picture belongs. I reject this belief," writes Wollheim, who claims that though they may tell us something about "linguistic meaning," in art these things are not "primary determinants of meaning." Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 22, 44; Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (1980), 132—33.

99 Gombrich discusses the comparative unclarity and clarity, respectively, of the work on the one hand and a text or written programme (a text identifies the work's figures and states their meanings) on the other. A question "will spring to mind when we read such a programme and compare it with the finished painting. ... Whether we could have found the meaning of the pictures without the aid of this text, in other words, whether we would have been successful in reconstructing the programme from the pictures alone. ... The answer is in the negative, ..." Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 10—11.

100 Even Ripa in 1593 was inclined to lean this way. "Unless we know the names it is impossible to penetrate to the knowledge of the significance, except in the case of trivial images which usage has made generally recognizable to everybody." Cited by Gombrich, Ibid., 13.

known. It serves the more postmodern formulations of business in the very same way: the postmodern investigator is interested less in a 'nature' than in a human state of affairs — a mechanism, a meaning-structure, a rhetorical programme, but in every case a condition whose existence in the world we are enjoined to accept. The semantic context remains external. Our manner either of identifying the work or elucidating its language tends to maximize those particular features that are cognitively demonstrable. On the face of it, that would seem an extremely innocent procedure — that a discipline of knowledge lays stress upon knowable features of a work of art. But that is not what is happening in the code model. The code model does not draw attention to or stress particular features; it defines: it describes the hermeneutic mechanism of art; it tells us how a work of art holds its meaning, and, in the process, it tells us what kind of meaning art has. The model is a definition of art that emphasizes its demonstrable qualities, specifically by the systematic minimization of all those elements that are subjectively tinged.[101]

The precise features of the meaning and interpretation of art that the code model failed to accommodate are precisely those that are regarded subjective, that open the door to subjectivity. There are actually five such features:

> The model underplays the role (in interpretation and in holding meaning) of a work's *appearance*, and it does so because of the uncontrollability of a visually based reading. Because appearance is unavoidably particular, there is no way we could count on an image that means by appearance to convey a message — or so we think.[102] Art becomes unusable as language. Moreover, interpreters are left on their own; a work that means by appearance can mean whatever its appearance suggests, and art becomes a vehicle of subjectivity rather than an object of understanding.
>
> The model excludes precisely that element of artistic symbols that has to do with reality,[103] and thus with subjective judgements about reality. That the symbol

---

101 Hasenmueller notes, for instance, the anti-subjective emphasis of Panofsky's "history of types." Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics" (1978), 295.

102 The images contain their own possibilities of meaning; we *might* divine them, more or less, merely by looking; then again we may not. Sometimes, for many possible reasons, the inner quality that captures that meaning really remains obscure to us, but that does not imply that an external source that clarifies the connection essentially contains the meaning. The external source is a guide; it directs us to see something in the image itself, a meaning that the image holds sufficiently well on its own.

103 Just as the painted form of a drop of milk contains a resemblance to the real thing (by virtue of its shape and its colour), the painted drop of milk pressed out by Veronese's woman contains a resemblance to generosity (by virtue of the meaning 'giving of self', which pertains to both). Because the world is not just a world of *things*, realism does not amount only to physical resemblance. This conception of meaning is not so strange a thing. For one thing, although it works entirely differently from words, it is not altogether unlike language, for metaphors

functions through a *natural link with meaning* raises precisely the same problems encountered with appearance.[104] Because the 'essential' qualities of represented objects are not universally given, we could not count on an image that means by essence to convey its message; we have a dysfunctional language.[105] Moreover, if interpreters are left on their own to 'divine' meaning through essences, a work that functions in this way is again thrown open to subjective interest.[106]

The model excludes the *level of content.* The level of content, as we have seen with both Veronese and Rembrandt, involves recognition of the link of the work's imagery with reality. It is because of this, fundamentally, that the meaning of a work of art is not instituted, fixed by an established "relationship between the sign and what is signified." Pictures acquire meaning "from their own content."[107] Reality as a component of interpretation — especially reality subject to no historical definition — is a frightening prospect for a discipline interested in cognition, for a content manifest through reality is too fluid to be known.

The model hides the reliance of interpretation on *judgements of sense,* replacing these operations with decisions controlled by external criteria. Accordingly, it

---

are rooted in this same realism. As Heidegger noted, "the word is a hint, and not a sign in a sense of mere signification." Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York 1971), 27.

104 It is rare for theorists of art to recognize in what way artistic signs are, because they *possess their meaning,* more properly symbols, a distinct type of sign. Sometimes they do, noting "the total failure of [our] theoretical model to account for the analogical aspect of visual signs — that is, how they can evoke meaning by way of visual resemblance to things." Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 31. Unfortunately, this author attributes this analogical power only to "'realistic' elements in a painting that are not explicitly coded by artistic convention," and does not really escape the model at all. Merton discusses the modern "incapacity to distinguish between the *symbol* and the *indicative sign.*" Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (1968), 2.

105 The rule-like element of the code was required in the model to ensure that a merely arbitrary correlation could be read back from sign to meaning, for there is no other basis on which to read an arbitrary sign. The fact that that relation is not wholly arbitrary bears the burden that the idea of rule was required for. Contrary to what we were lead to expect, the entire possibility of interpreting does not break down if there is "no objective canon of correspondences," if the rules are continually ignored by artists.

Under the influence of the code model (a code being something characteristically impenetrable from the 'outside'), I believe we are swayed to exaggerate the difficulty of discovering these inner, natural qualities, whose penetration often demands merely (as throughout our interpretation of the Veronese) the simple labour of thinking, 'contemplating' what we see, working through the levels. That a woman's milk is a nourishment specific to women is not a meaning that needs to be established by recourse to a code; it is a significance that needs simply to be read from the work with an awareness of reality.

We have made use of the middle term in other ways as well ways: sometimes by looking for the common quality that exists between a symbol and a traditional, potential reading (beauty, shared by a depicted woman and a goddess of beauty); and sometimes it was by simply intuiting the obvious quality of a sign, by no other means than contemplation and thought, a quality we then took as its meaning (the Cupid binding Mars and Venus, the Cupid disarming Mars).

106 "The interpreter sees himself confronted with the artful play of 'equivalences' in the work of art, in which a formal accent can be balanced together with a spiritual one. Real and ideal values balance one another in an 'into-and-through-each-other.' To understand this play is the task of the interpreter, which would be hopeless were there no objective canon of 'correspondences,' of 'analogies.'" Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 190.

107 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 137.

> cannot acknowledge that lower-level interpretations are not secured until meaning at the level of content is settled, or permit the reading of content to influence our reading at other levels.[108]
>
> The code model excludes an understanding of meaning that is *not fundamentally linguistic,* a pictorial translation from verbal language. It excludes a conception of artistic meaning that is not only not rooted in language — that is, in fact, critical and defining of concepts rather than subservient to them — but that a verbal language is virtually incapable of reflecting. Cognitive projects work in a linguistic medium, and with that conception there would appear to be some basic futility in attempting reports of knowledge where art was concerned.

Interpretation is plainly both a far more sophisticated and less "controlled" business than the mechanistic conception of the model (building on a likeness with strict code and using translation tables, in however sophisticated a way they are designed). Artistic codes do not function as we have come to think they do. "The story of Icarus, for instance, does not have one meaning but a whole range of meaning, which in its turn is then determined by the context."[109] When "meaning is determined by the common conventions operative in a mode of signalling," how do we use those conventions? Conventional correlations of sign and meaning are not rules, but at most rules-of-thumb: in the appropriate context they do not dictate their meanings, because whether the rule applies to the case, whether the rule works, depends upon other things. Established traditions may *suggest* that space is to be read in a certain manner, or that a work belongs to a certain genre (caricature, or portraiture), or that wings mean fickleness, or that Venus means love, but they are not evidence that any specific work whatsoever, regardless of its origin, *should* be read in any of those ways: they do not *determine* the meaning. We follow the suggestions, and doing so may be what finally puts us on the path of the correct reading, but whether they tell us the meaning of the work depends upon whether we are satisfied with the reading we get, by other standards. Standards by which we sometimes reject these suggestions. Although a convention may *offer* a way of reading, the only thing that establishes the meaning of the image is the sense that is made. A text that fits the work, an established tradition that

---

108 With the portrayal by Rembrandt, Gowing jumped 'ahead' in order to settle an interpretation at a lower level of meaning (identification subject). Moving to the level of content meant securing meaning not only with reference to the detail of the image, but with reference to truth about the world, as Gowing saw it. This was the basis on which the meaning of the painting at the mere level of subject matter was established: the traditional identification was rejected, and a new one accepted. That is, it was only when the painting *amounted to something,* said something meaningful in relation to the world, that the meaning at the 'lower' levels could be settled.

109 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 8.

matches it (even if it is the original programme written for the work itself) does not solve anything: it offers a way of reading, a possibility of meaning, that we accept, if we can accept it, not because of its fit, which is necessarily only *general*, but because of *the quality of the reading that material allows.*

What the rule we have actually says is this: 'sign *s* means meaning *m* in context *c*, unless that makes no sense according to other criteria of the method' — or even more simply, '*s* means *m* when *s* means *m* makes sense of the work.' That is not much of a rule, and may not be a rule at all. It is certainly not a rule that tells us when *s* means *m*. And it is not a rule that tells us how to make sense, or that supplies the basis of making sense. It is a rule that gives us the statusless content *m* — that is all. For the historical plausibility that that content may have (as in the case of Wind's interpretation of Botticelli) does not yet justify it. Even the most powerful historical 'fit' does nothing more than establish a possibility of meaning. It does not apply to the work that it does not help to make adequate sense of. In short, there are criteria for the application of a code that are not reducible to a rule at all. They are the criteria of sense that are the unclear workings of the formal rules, of which the most important has come to be explanatory power. The code model emphasizes rules of content and exaggerates its autonomy; it hides its own reliance upon — indeed, subordination to — sense.

Indeed, it is questionable that the criterion of explanatory power is really what we were led to believe it is by the theory. The meaningfulness of the interpretations of the Veronese or the Rembrandt has to do not only with the resolution of puzzles, not only with the intensified way they may deal with the details of the work, but substantially also with the quality of what those interpretations produce. When we are talking about the power of an interpretation, we are not really talking about a criterion at all; that merely objectifies an unclear kind of judgement that has to do not only with the removal of puzzles, but with their replacement by something that is meaningful: not merely the 'learning' of a meaning, but the constitution of a kind of experience. For Nietzsche, as one writer notes, the "interpretative process involves an ordering, heightening, or enhancement of experience."[110]

The cognitive distinction between subjective and objective is maintained by theorists in order to protect the work's integrity.

> The word 'meaning' can be used to mean 'significant.' The phrase 'This painting means a lot to me' may be rephrased to say 'This painting is very important or significant to me.' This significance may relate to some association established in the mind of the observer between the

110 Davey, "Nietzsche's Aesthetics" (1986),.340.

> present perception and some other experience, but this 'meaning to the individual' says very little about the work itself.[111]

But this distinction can only be maintained if determining the meaning of the work itself stops, and completes itself, below the level of content, or if the level of content is kept free of judgements about truth. But while the historical context of the work offers possibilities of reading that may be crucial to discovering the final sense, the 'semantic context' of the sign-system model (the setting within which the meaning of signs is 'determined') cannot be identified with that. The interpretations of both Veronese's *Venus and Mars United by Cupid* and Rembrandt's *Arria* — or *Lucretia,* according to what you are constrained to believe about the meaning of the woman's face, in the context of life — depend upon reading these images in a setting that reaches beyond these levels and their considerations.

Some theorists have argued that the semantic context of the revealing interpretation is wholly contained inside some "religious, legal, artistic, or literary context." An interpretation conducted by stepping outside that framework of knowledge and concern is not acceptable; "such procedure cannot be justified except by reliance on institutional sanction."[112] But there is no institutional context for the realities that furnish symbols with their meanings. Symbols are not natural signs, if by that we mean 'explicit correlations' (the $s = m$ formula) established by reality itself. But reality itself establishes the resemblance the artist notices and uses. Thus there is an analogy between the symbols of art and of dreams: "The interpretation of a dream is an interpretation of symbols, which are neither exactly natural signs nor the conventional symbols of a language."[113] There is no institutional context in which the meaning of dreams is fixed. And there are none for the realities that make Venus' union with Mars more than a story of names, or for the realities that clarify what an expression on the face of a dying woman might mean, and what it might not. The model's idea of semantic context has more to do with fitting a context onto the work, reading "signs within an enclosed system." It appears to design context according to the requirements of its own prior commitment to the philosophy of objectivity. "The purpose of the interpreter is to make himself a *mediator* between the text and all that the text implies."[114] It is always something about the world.

---

111 Radford, "Meaning and Significance" (1992), 55.
112 Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 126—27.
113 Hampshire, "Types of Interpretation" (1964), 103.
114 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 41.

The impulse behind the code model is to determine the basic nature of the work of art's semantic power, an identification made so as to establish by what procedure we can interpret the object and reconstitute its meaning for what it is. It is philosophical work to lay the boundaries of identity, for it involves a determination of theoretical constructs such as essence, essential conditions, structure, inherent constitution — as in Panofsky's argument that works of art must be

> considered not in relationship to something outside themselves ... but exclusively in relation to their own being. They must be considered ..., however, in the light of standards of determination which, with the force of a priori basic principles, refer not to the phenomenon itself but to the conditions of its existence and its being 'thus'.[115]

But it is cursory philosophy that has fixed art within the model of the code.

> Anyone who proposes to deal with artistic meaning by means of a concept that applies indifferently to the meanings of a noun, verb, a road sign, a map, a photograph, a statement in theoretical physics, a ritual act, a storm cloud, a wedding ring, a halo, and the label on a broom, and that consists in nothing but the abstract idea of referring or pointing to, has maneuvered himself into a position in which all he will be able to see in artistic meaning is just what is common to art and nonartistic meaning. But this means that he will have left the art out of the meaning.[116]

Perhaps the code model is not quite that simple, but it is certainly reductive and far closer to this poverty than to the thing it presumes to describe.

The code model may apply to those works of art that fail to use the full or particular resources of art. For all I know, that may be the majority of works of art, but my concern here is not how to understand all or even most works of art, but what is really involved in understanding *some*. That model may, therefore, furnish a very useful tool, but it is never presented as expressing 'the conventionality of *some* works of art', 'the code structure of *some* artistic signs', and it has broad influence. I want simply to make room for what is left out, and would not like to be heard as proposing a better general theory. The fact is that there are *many*, among the deepest and most powerful works of art that work with signs, that the code model fails.

---

115 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 28.

116 Hofstadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 91.

P A R T T H R E E

ART AS COMMUNICATIVE ACTION

The notion of art objects as communicative tokens or forms of message material, in short, as language, is a metaphor that has risen like a phoenix from the ashes of nearly every methodological framework in the history of the discipline and deeply pervades the entire history of writing about art in the West. ... Indeed, what could be more natural than a view of art as a form of social communication?

Donald Preziosi (1989)

If an artist is going to make his paining mean something, it is not enough that it should arouse *an* experience in the mind of the spectator. Equally it is not enough, if the spectator is to understand what the painting means, that he should have *some* experience or other in front of it. Something more specific is required. ...

What a painting means rests upon the experience induced in an adequately sensitive, adequately informed, spectator by looking at the surface of the painting as the intentions of the artist led him to mark it. The marked surface must be the conduit along which the mental state of the artist makes itself felt within the mind of the spectator if the result is to be that the spectator grasps the meaning of the picture.

Richard Wollheim (1984)

6

THE COMMUNICATION MODEL

49 DETERMINATION OF THE OBJECT, II

Modern interpretation is a hermeneutics of identity; it is directed by the insight that understanding, before we talk about particular methods or techniques, means the orientation of interpretation toward a thing with its own claim to being, thus a thing problematically situated in relation to interpreters, spectators with a subjectivity whose content is not inherently composed so as to respect that identity, grasp it as is (to the extent that is humanly possible). This has a methodical consequence, which is that the *first* step of modern interpretation, in every case, wherever it is legitimately concerned with understanding, must be to identify the work as the kind of thing it is, as a meaningful thing — specifically, to clarify in what way, by virtue of what, it is interpretable. That determination of identity is required to give the further progress of interpretation a truly objective bearing, to direct interpretation genuinely toward its object. Only by seeing the work for what it is will we know what constitutes understanding it. A hermeneutics of identity therefore begins with, and thereafter limits interpretation by means of, a careful determination of its object. In part two we examined one of the most widespread of such identifications: recognition that the work of art is an expression in a language — language, understood as it usually is, as a system of human conventions. We have seen, however, the limitations in the way that sign system is usually pictured; on account of it that identification is inherently flawed. But we do not yet have reason to give up our understanding of art as

essentially linguistic, and the solution to the problems encountered may be to shift to a second conception of language, which is often advanced to counter the principal limitation of the sign-system model. A system is an objective structure, and though we may look at language in such a way, a proper understanding of meaning — the thing that is really the issue of hermeneutics — must, perhaps, look beyond it, to take into account the *source* of that meaning. Perhaps the conclusions arrived at in § 45 were demanded only by too limited a conception of language Those problems may have arisen not because the conception of language that identification was based in was false, but because it was simply incomplete. Perhaps it needs to be completed.

The alternative view of language gives substantially more attention to its subjective aspect, the roles of utterer and audience, artist and spectator. "Implicitly we treat [a work of art] as something with a history of making by a painter and a reality of reception by beholders."[1] Works of art are not merely things, not *just* concretions in some sign system; there is a mind behind them. That we should identify language and its instances as both objective structures and as means of human expression was something emphasized by Schleiermacher, in 1819.

> 'Objective-historical' means to consider the statement in relation to the language as a whole, and to consider the knowledge it contains as a product of the language. ... 'Subjective-historical' means to know how the statement, as a fact in the person's mind, has emerged. ... Since we have no direct knowledge of what was in the author's mind, we must try to become aware of many things of which he himself may have been unconscious .... Before the art of hermeneutics can be practiced, the interpreter must put himself both objectively and subjectively in the position of the author.... On the objective side this requires knowing the language as the author knew it. But this is a more specific task than putting yourself in the position of the original readers, for they, too, had to identify with the author. On the subjective side this requires knowing the inner and the outer aspects of the author's life.[2]

Understanding not only requires recognizing that the meaning we are concerned to grasp exists in another mind, but recognizing that we must grasp it by assuming the position of that mind. This same thinking applies equally to works of art:

> To understand the painting as a painting, we have to grasp it in its subjective aspect as well [as its objective], and eventually in its total related subjective-objective structure. For a painting – so far as it is a work of art — does not merely represent an object or even an objective world. It also articulates a concrete spiritual attitude — containing elements of feeling, cognition, and conation — of a subject toward the objective content that is represented.[3]

Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History* (1989), 44.
Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 22, 44.

1 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 7.

2 From Schleiermacher's *Compendium of 1819* ; cited in Mueller-Vollmer, *Hermeneutics Reader* (1985), 83.

3 Hofstadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 92.

Works of art are "objectivations of mind."[4] "The photograph seems to give proof of existence of the object or person that appears there. Painting gives proof not of what appeared in the work, but of the existence of the concrete individual who painted it."[5] A work of art is made, by someone, purposefully, for a meaning it has in its making, and Margolis (citing a remark made by Dilthey about Schleiermacher) offers a vital reminder that the basis of interpretation lies in just this aspect of the work's nature:

> The aphorisms present to us ... the impelling thought from which his hermeneutics developed: the essence of interpretation is the reconstruction of the work as a living act of the author.[6]

There is purpose in the creation of the work, but so far no attention has been given to what in creating a work of art the artist is doing. And what the artist sets out to do is not only to realize an inner experience of his or her own, but to deposit a thing in terms of which that experience, or a substantial part of it, can be had by others — to create the conditions of a kind of communication.

> One assumes purposefulness — or intent or, as it were, 'intentiveness' — in the historical actor but even more in the historical objects themselves. Intentionality in this sense is taken to be characteristic of both. It is the forward-leaning look of things [like works of art].[7]

Plainly, that 'intentiveness' is not irrelevant to the work of art understood as an expression in a sign system; quite the opposite: it is precisely because of the importance of the artist's aim to communicate, or to convey something, that the model of the code arises. A code is understood as precisely that: an effective means of communication, a way of concretizing meaning for purposes of being read. "A poem or an historical painting is, in a sense, a vehicle of communication."[8]

A work of art is linked to action in a triple sense. The work is the product of activity, but the manipulation of the artist's materials is the external means of an inner act, an act of meaning in which an inner meaning is externalized. And finally, the physical product itself expresses, the work effects a kind of action of its own. Works of art are a form of *communicative action*, an informing of materials with meaning, precisely in such a way that meaning can be read, whether their authors wish communication or not; they are a medium of meaning transfer between author and interpreter. Interpretation must proceed from this recognition, which involves acknowledging the relevance to the meaning of art of

---

4 Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 92.
5 Janice Gurney, "Destruction of Value," *Photo Communiqué* (spring 1988), 35.
6 Margolis, "Schleiermacher Among the Theorists" (1987), 363.
7 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 41—42
8 Panofsky, "A Humanistic Discipline" (1940), 12.

human *making*, of the relation of making to a *mind*, of the *purpose* of that activity, and of its *communicative* significance; these conceptions reflect our basic understanding of what a work of art is. They need to be understood if the work of art is to be properly approached by any hermeneutics.

50 THE CONDITIONS OF MEANING

Works of art are *made:* that is a fact of their nature that distinguishes them from other visible, sensory things — such as, for instance, a stained wall, or a natural vista. They are, and not in a way that is merely peripheral, creations: human artefacts, products of activity.[9]

> Whereas the historian envisaged by many methodologists of history seems primarily concerned to explain actions or events like Caesar crossing the Rubicon or the French Revolution, we are typically concerned to explain certain material and visible deposits left behind by earlier people's activity — for this is one of the things pictures are.[10]

> It was in opposition to the narrow determination of interpretation in terms of meaning to learn what it could mean if interpretation found its object not in the meaning but in the picture. The picture is a work, a product of work.[11]

> We cannot totally exclude from our response to pictures an ultimately historical sense that they were purposefully made by someone.[12]

This is a fact of vital hermeneutic importance to an objectively oriented hermeneutics, for it marks out the area within which understanding must take place. There is a purposefulness in artistic activity; works of art are usually involved productions. The simple labour involved in making a painting or a sculpture makes it quite unlikely that one could arise by accident (in the way that strings of words, for instance, sometimes do). It is hard to imagine a work of art being 'made' purposelessly, without being read. (Not even anti-art is purposeless; indeed, it is a paradigm of purposefulness.)

> Just as the semantic system of language depends upon a primary interest in utterances as vehicles for communication, so the conventions of pictorial representation presuppose a primary concern with the painter's intention to represent something in his painting.[13]

---

9 Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 86.
10 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 13.
11 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 82.
12 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 135.
13 Davies, "Authors' and Painters' Intentions" (1982), 72.

This purposefulness shapes our conception of what interpretation is. Thus Danto argues, "my theory of interpretation is instead constitutive, for an object is an artwork *at all* only in relation to an interpretation."[14] To make, methodically and painstakingly, is to have intent to make; to undertake making a work of art is to mean something by what one does — it is a pursuit of meaning, which occurs in relation to the artist's mind. Making and meaning appear bound together in the same process.

A meaning comes to be present (in its peculiar objective/subjective way) in a work of art as a consequence of being made to occur there. And because art is made, meaning is something *caused*, made to happen.

> Both inquiries into what works of art are *of*, or what they represent or signify, and inquiries into what they express or mean are properly inquiries into causes, and ... explanations of representation and expression are properly claims about how works of art have been or are caused or produced.
>
> How art is *in general* interpreted is an aspect of how it is generally seen as produced.[15]

Theorists are sensitive to the "contradiction between art conceived of as a man-made form and art conceived of as a superhuman expression of spiritual contents," a distinction by which we have overcome many of the inadequacies of nineteenth-century art history. The fundamental error of those theories is understood to be a failure to limit interpretation by a correct assessment of what the work of art is. Because the work of art is an artefact, meaning is artefactual. We are interested in works of art, not the "self expression of spirit by means of art," and in the late twentieth century to see "art as a creative expression" (limited, therefore, by particular circumstances) is to recognize one of its most basic defining qualities.[16] If understanding is to be achieved, a responsible interpreter will have to address that aspect of a work's nature. "The issue [is] ... whether we can develop this sense [of being purposefully made by someone] without becoming irrational or wild."[17]

Theorists are still dissatisfied with hermeneutic discussions that make "a great play of rigorously reconceiving painting as sign," but then proceed to advance personal interpretations "in no more conceptualized a way than most art critics." Understanding the work's meaning as something caused is a force of redress, because an interpretation

---

14 Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), 44.

15 The view of these authors is that "the prevailing modern models of interpretation and explanation" must look more carefully at "the conditions of production of art," to which traditional art history has given too little attention. Baldwin et al., "Art History, Art Criticism, and Explanation" (1981), 432, 435, 440.

16 Bakos, "Art Historical Process" (1983), 119. Bakos is not talking here of the old 'expression' theory of art (according to which a work is the externalization of emotion) but of the broader conception of the production of the work of art as directed by a consciousness. "One must no longer consider the individual work as something existing (or as something becoming ...), but rather as something that has become, as a product of numerous operative factors ...." Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 124.

17 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 135.

developed in attentive connection with the realm of cause will also be distanced from the realm of subjectivity.

> In my view, the best recent work is that which genuinely pauses before the question Barthes posed: "How does meaning get into the image?"[18]

Many theorists are as concerned to look at these conditions of the origin of meaning as to understand codes.

> You could argue that there are as many good reasons today to set in motion a thorough reconceptualising of the *processes* whereby visual images represent things and convey meanings.[19]

> Granted that the individual object or artefact remains the essential unit of study for the art historian, the role of explanation in [art history] particularly has to be that of building a bridge between the personal signification on the one hand, and on the other the use of visual imagery as a social and interpersonal means of communication. ... The circumstances of generation and reception for individual works of art ... need ... to be integrated ... into the consideration of how signification takes its force.[20]

> [An] inquiry into conditions of [artistic] production ... will in fact be limited by presuppositions about what have counted and will count as the conditions of interpretation or as 'meaning'. To do this is to put the cart of 'meaning' and understanding before the horse of reference and explanation.... If a meaning has been deposited in a work of art, then art history must ask *how* that meaning was possible and how it was possibly produced.[21]

The significance of such conditions is evident in our most examined conveyor of meaning, language. Why does language 'mean' at all? It is claimed that "linguistic communication essentially involves acts."[22] Consider, for instance, signs in verbal phrases constituted other than by a human act, accidentally, as in a windblown fragment of poster that rearranges the syntax of words. Whether any 'sign' is invested with meaning will depend upon its origin, upon the prior occurrence of what we might loosely call an *act of meaning*. Meaning is something made to happen: something put into signs, bestowed upon them, invested in them, initially projected onto them — we express this act in many ways.

> Awareness that the picture's having an effect on us is the product of human action seems to lie deep in our thinking and talking about pictures ... and what we are doing when we attempt a historical explanation of a picture is to try developing this kind of thought.[23]

---

18 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 32. "Whatever does get into a poem presumably is put there by the poet ...." Wimsatt, "A Fallacy Revisited" (1968), 199.

19 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 30 [emphasis added]

20 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 86—87.

21 Baldwin et al., "Art History, Art Criticism, and Explanation" (1981), 435, 439.

22 J.R. Searle, "What is a Speech Act?" [1965], in *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. A.P. Martinich (Oxford Univ. 1985), 125.

23 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 6.

The basic question of "our interpretative model" is "How is content determined and by whom?"[24] For instance, does an actual sphere, notwithstanding what qualities it might naturally share with various real states in the world (see figure 11), *mean* instability? Does a child's ball? Without some indication of a corresponding human event, by which meaning is 'bestowed', we do not claim that any appearance of a sign carries meaning at all — even a meaning we might attach to it by virtue of a code. "By itself alone, no symbol, I take it, either means or has meaning but is merely a sound or an imprint on a physical object."[25] The ball may mean instability *in* a code, but because the code itself is an artefact. A code has meaning because of its maker.

Finally, that a work of art is an 'expression' in a language means that it has an inherently communicative potential, whatever the artist's actual purpose in creating it. A work of art is the expression of a speaker, created for the meaning it held in the mind of the artist; in that sense it is the expression of a maker's meaning. And typically, it is meant to have the power to affect an audience.

> The many modern writers who speak of the *language* of painting or of music, nearly all regard these arts as modes of communication; and, further, they hold that knowledge of the artist's intention is necessary to establish what has been communicated, and is pre-requisite to speaking correctly of understanding the work in question.[26]

Artists tend to wish not merely to have an experience, to simply manifest meaning, to expel into the work for him or herself alone the meaning he or she wants to materialize; there is often a desire that that meaning be recognized, and communication, in that sense, is a part of the social efficacy of works of art.[27] The suggestion, however, is not that art is essentially communication (an offering to a spectator); it is that it is essentially potential communication. Wollheim expresses the view most articulately: the artist works with a viewer in mind, but that thought of a viewer with whom to communicate

> is not categorical, it is hypothetical. It is of the form, 'If there is a spectator, let him have such-and-such an experience', rather than of the form, 'Let the spectator have such-and-such an experience'. In other words, the thought does not presuppose the existence of a spectator, nor does it necessarily carry with it the desire that there should be a spectator. For this reason it is wrong to think of painting ... as inherently a form of communication.[28]

But paintings are formed with the power to mean, given the original conditions of perception. Even when the artist works solitarily, with no genuine regard for an audience,

---

24 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 213.
25 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 39.
26 Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 132.
27 Ackerman "Art History and the Problems of Criticism" (1960), 265.
28 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1987), 96.

the use of art's vehicles, of its language, means that the work can be read: art is a potential communication, in essence, by virtue of its means. The creation of a work of art is a process of objectifying meaning in a language of forms — not merely in the sense of expelling something inner and making it material, but in the sense of making material with meaning, an externality in principle accessible to others. Meaning is put into art, established there, purposefully, because making a work of art is inherently a communicative act.

It is not important to indicate these features of art just because they frame our conception of art. It is important because these features are the material basis upon which hermeneutics has any hope of serving its purpose, which is to understand the work of art. In the methodical structure of modern hermeneutics, these conceptions become central determinants of those specific activities that constitute legitimate interpretation. What are the specific hermeneutic implications of this model of the meaning of art?

51 THE COMMUNICATION MODEL

The model of the code attempts to explain how meaning is laid down, and thus how it must be uncovered. It endeavours to explain not merely how to create a work that captures one's meaning, but how to create a work that makes that meaning known to others. The purpose of the sign-system model is, in fact, to explain how communication through images is made possible. Alongside that stream of theory that considers language as concrete *langue* (an objective sign structure) is another that treats it as active *parole*, fundamentally tied to its speaking subject. It would be a mistake, I believe, to ask which it really is, for that is not the significance of the distinction. The two are complementary.

> Meaning in language ... requires a communicator, a receiver of that communication, and a shared means of expression, a shared vocabulary of agreed symbols as well as individuals with experiences to describe and with wishes, desires, and beliefs to communicate.[29]

Art, which we understand as a language, is an analogous phenomenon. Artist, work, and viewer are *effectively* a triad of transmitter, medium, and receiver.[30] The work of art conceived as an expression in a sign system (part II) is a consideration of means, an analysis of how communication is made possible. The work of art conceived as the token of a communicative act (part III) is a consideration of causes and ends, the origin and the purpose of the sign's creation, which includes the fundamental determinant of its meaning.

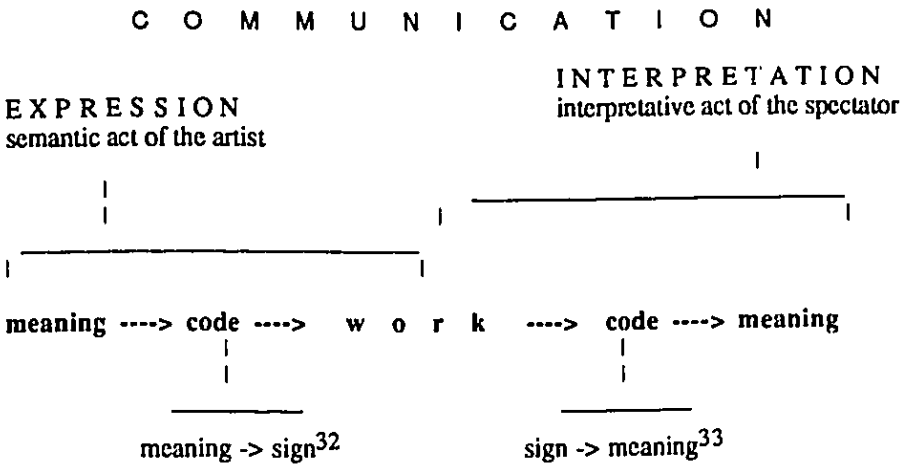
---

29 Radford, "Meaning and Significance" (1992), 55.

30 Fry, *Art History as an Academic Study* (1933), 15.

The present conception focuses on the conditions of communication; it concerns that in terms of which "intentions, beliefs, and emotions" are conveyed in art.[31]

Thinking of art as inherently communicative clarifies the importance of interpretation. As part of such an act the work is fully realized as what it is only when that communication takes place. A work of art is not only more than a thing; as a mere thing yet to fulfil its purpose, yet to achieve its potential to mean, it is hardly itself at all. The work becomes what it is when its formative meaning is realized again in a legitimate interpretation. The hermeneutic cue to this realization is that, the material of the work being the central or medial element of a potential communication, meaning lies at its origin in that original act. On the one hand, there was the existence, the urgency, of some sort of uncommunicated meaning that motivated the process of making. The conception of the work as a token in a sign system concentrates on the means by which we read the work, once created, and upon some of the ways by which an artist can express a meaning. But it too lays stress upon the presence of an original, motivating meaning, for the code is always a link between meaning and sign. In effect, we interpret the code as the "key" that unlocks the case in which a meaning has purposefully been placed; were there nothing there to discover, there would be no need of such a key. The complete communication model, presenting how a work of art functions as a communicative action, can be generally diagrammed by extending the (modified) code model, somewhat as follows.



31 Lyas, "Intentional Fallacy Revisited" (1983), 302.

32 For the *artist*, the link from meaning to sign may be made by:
meaning + knowledge of tradition (or)
meaning + essential quality (or)
possible other means

33 For the *interpreter*, the link from sign to meaning may be made by:

This is a familiar picture.[34] The activity of the artist begins with a meaning to express; the artist then fixes his or her meaning in the work by recourse to a convention (an established sign-meaning relation built, itself, out of a quality shared between sign and meaning); the work is configured as the sum of these encodings. The work is the starting point of a corresponding process of interpretation. Communication takes place as the product of these two processes managed respectively by artist and spectator. The work itself is the medium, the element that links the two. There is widespread agreement about this obvious triadic structure, artist (and semantic act) / work / interpreter (interpretative act).[35]

> The literary work of art exists essentially within the triad of poet, work, and reader. Such an assumption must be the starting point of any critical effort.[36]
>
> One of the few aspects of reading on which there seems to be general agreement is the semantic model of the elements involved in arriving at the meaning of a literary text. The three elements are the text itself, the author (without whom there would be no text), and the reader (without whom the question of the meaning of the text would not arise).[37]

In fact we have already encountered this schema and its symmetry in the problem of reading as the reversal of the process of coding. The right half of the model articulates the *interpretation* of the work, aimed at the understanding of meaning. The standard code model presents interpretation as the reverse of what the artist has done. In some cases, as when the essential quality of a sign is plain, or when the interpreter has the artist's full complement of resources (knowledge of the tradition and its habits of convention), the process is rather mirror-like.[38] But we were compelled to recognize the exclusion from that model of other elements without which this process could not deliver an acceptable interpretation, which is what it is supposed to do — specifically, judgements of sense in the broader context of content. The relation of that context to the process of encoding is still unclear. So far, moreover, we have considered only examples of symbol and 'portrayal', and the basis of *their* sign-meaning connection. But there are other kinds, or ways, of

---

sign + essential quality + judgement of truth + formal rules (or)
sign + knowledge of tradition + judgement of truth + formal rules (or)
possible other means

34 Preziosi outlines the same five-part structure. Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History* (1989), 46.

35 Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 57. This triad is also noted by Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History* (1989), 44.

36 Lohner, "The Intrinsic Method" (1968), 168.

37 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 11.

38 This last case is the situation Jackson diagrams as the whole process. Jackson distinguishes two mirrored triangles touching at the same point, the work. On the side of utterance, one triangle is drawn by the speaker's path through the *situation* or context to the *language* used to the *work;* the other, on the side of interpretation, is the interpreter's reverse path from work to language to situation. "The triangle of linguistic interpretation is a mirror image of what may be thought of as a triangle of linguistic utterance. [A mirror image] because although they consist of the same elements the elements are employed by each in the opposite sequence." Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 16—17.

meaning that are crucial to art, and that because they are not so clearly conventional appear to fall outside the code model. An identification of art in terms of the code model focuses upon only one means of meaning, and this focus is too narrow to be a basis of hermeneutics.

How, for instance, do we understand the role of

> the marks and motifs redundant to the image's function as conventional sign — [the role] of generating connoted meanings that amplify and give further articulation to the simple denoted message. How you define those aspects of the images' 'realistic' infill that coalesce into metaphors, or signifiers of connoted meanings, a highly problematic question once you move from verbal description to visual depiction, is left completely vague.[39]

One means of 'meaning' involves the exploitation of purely visual resources, the *language of visual forms:* the value of knowledge of that language "for the understanding of the way works of art functio: as communicating devices, influencing as well as reflecting our whole perception of reality, need hardly be pointed out."[40] Another manner is by private *association:* "The meaning of words is the history of words, and the biography of an author, his use of a word, and the associations which the word had for *him*, are part of the word's history and meaning."[41]

> On reflection we may be prepared to grant the possibility of another kind of symbolism, not conventional but private, through which an image can become the *expression* of the artist's conscious or unconscious mind. To van Gogh the orchard in bloom may have been a symbol of his returning health.[42]

The element marked "code" in the above diagram has to be extended to include all these means of semantic relation. The right half of the model articulates the *interpretation* of the work, aimed at the understanding of meaning. The left half diagrams the manifest *endowment* or *expression* of meaning.[43] It is by shifting the focus off the code and onto the semantic act behind it, theorists propose, that we can achieve a more inclusive and properly based picture of what interpretation demands.

---

39 Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 31.

40 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 92.

41 Wimsatt and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1945), 7.

42 Here Gombrich distinguishes three pictorial means of meaning: by representation, by symbol, and by association. The "three ordinary functions of images may be present in one concrete image — a motif in a painting by Hieronymus Bosch may represent a broken vessel, symbolize the sin of gluttony, and express an unconscious sexual fantasy on the part of the artist but to us the three levels of meaning remain quite distinct." Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 124.

43 'Expression' not in its traditional English sense (which has to do with an emotive way of producing art) but as analogous to the sense of the German *Außerung*, the externalizing of an internal content.

Works of art are "instruments of human consciousness."[44] "Art is the objectification of cultural wisdom."[45] Works of art are materializations of human acts of meaning. The two views are corollary sides of one understanding of art: art as language, as sign, implies the deeper conception of art as communication. Not a different view of art in contrast to the 'semiotic' view, this merely involves a broader scope of understanding. Art is not merely the use of symbols; symbols are used to convey.

> For linguistic science it is fundamental that language is an affair not merely of *expression* but also of *impression*, that communication is of its essence, and that in its definition this must not be overlooked.[46]

> For the artist to communicate the meaning that he intends he must be aware of the publicly identifiable forms that carry significance in terms of what he wants to say.[47]

The hermeneutic implication devolves from the model's principal thesis: a work of art created to manifest a meaning is a work that is *given a meaning* to communicate. Even Hegel noted the basic dynamic:

> We begin with what is immediately presented to us and only then ask its meaning ... we assume behind it something inward, a meaning whereby the external appearance is endowed with spirit.[48]

It becomes clear that hermeneutics is directed at a primary semantic act. What do we know about this act — this endowment, investing, imparting, transfer, creation of meaning?

52 THE CAUSALITY OF MEANING

Because we know that works of art are made, and know that making them is a process of meaning, we know an event of 'meaning endowment' always lies behind them. A stained wall poses no hermeneutic problem because there is no content there to read; since no content has been imparted, 'interpretation' is a matter of making whatever associations we wish to make. With a work of art, there is always something to be read. Among all possible interpretations, there is one interpretation "from which the work of art arose, and that has received its visible material form."[49]

---

44 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 9.
45 Pontynen, "Theory and Practice of Art History" (1986), 468.
46 C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, cited by Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 9.
47 Radford, "Meaning and Significance" (1992), 58.
48 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, I, 19—20; cited in Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation" (1987), 25.
49 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 111.

The artist turns to the code for the reason that the meaning must be captured and fixed in some way if it is to be read out of a picture.[50] In that code (with whatever background it actually functions) the material work *holds* its own meaning — the jewel box, as it were, has its own power to contain the bracelet. But just like the jewel box, the work does not just happen to *have* that meaning: the bracelet is in the box, from where it can be taken, because it was put there. The German for the "content" of art is *Inhalt* — literally, what it holds within — and we can borrow this term to capture the condition of holding a meaning that has been deposited. *The work holds its meaning because meaning has been put into it.* The work's communicative potential is its Inhalt, the meaning invested in it by the artist. Sedlmayr explains this by a metaphor that overcomes the weakness of mine, which is that with art (unlike jewellery boxes) the form of the container is not an indifferent thing (as Betti too noted),[51] and is conditioned by its content.

> The particular content poured into the form of the vessel modifies it in special ways, and every modification of the vessel effects a chemical relationship with the 'content', so that in the end content *and* form are dependent upon what appearance the form has and ... how the formed content is.[52]

We need, certainly, not to overstate the importance of this insight. Does a work of art carry only what meaning was purposefully put into it? No. Some critics attempt "to secure the truth of their descriptions of particular works of art by going behind them to the mental process and causal antecedents by which they came about." But understanding a work of art cannot be reduced to this, because "not all knowledge about a work can be put under the heading of intentions."[53] Some things are known better to interpreters than to authors.[54]

> It is pretty generally believed nowadays that works of art ... contain a multiplicity of valid but not always completely compatible meanings which become apparent only in the course of time and not all of which were consciously known to the artist or intended by him.[55]

---

50 Artists work with the recognition that "A represents B if and only if A was intended to represent B and the representational character of A is rightly believed to be such that it is a public matter that B may be seen in A." Davies, "Authors' and Painters' Intentions" (1982), 71.

51 Form is more than a "shell or wrapping, the transmission of which would affect a transference of the thought contained within it." Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 54.

52 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 189—90.

53 Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 137.

54 The examples mentioned by Stern, however, are not knowledge that is of any clear *hermeneutic* significance, but rather various types of classification. "The kinds of expression available to the author, the clichés of a given form of discourse, the conventions of a given style of literature, the limits of good taste." Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 122.

55 Osborne, "Interpretation in Science and in Art" (1986), 4—5.

Indeed, all human actions, of which the creation of a work of art is merely a type, are interpretable well beyond their original purposes — because they can be *understood as* many more things than their agents might have thought, and they can be examined in light of many things those agents were not aware of. This fact is not as resisted as it used to be, because it is clear that it is not contrary to the claim of this model, which is that the most fundamental form of every work's meaning — that in terms of which the work came into existence — is a meaning that work was given; former discussions were burdened with the limitations of either/or thinking.

There remains an asymmetry between these realms of meaning. An objective hermeneutics is oriented toward the identity of the work, relying upon distinctions made about the nature of a thing. To understand a work in terms of the intention it realized "is not *the* proper way to think about pictures. There are many proper ways, which in normal perception we combine."[56] The question of a cognitive endeavour oriented toward the work is, Do all these forms provide the same depth of insight into this object? For many it is doubtful that to argue, simply, that "*we cannot totally exclude* from our response to pictures an ultimately historical sense that they were purposefully made by someone"[57] does full justice to the unique stature of precisely that kind of meaning. For surely to understand a thing according to some forms of its nature is to know it more deeply than to understand it according to what it is contingently, or secondarily, or with reference to issues that are remote from it. It is not only "possible to distinguish between dominant and subordinate meanings,"[58] cognitively it is essential. Everything in existence falls into infinite genera, but while these innumerable categorizations are all equally true of a thing, they are not all equally relevant to what we call 'understanding' it. To understand someone as a human being, or as a man, is a deeper recognition of being than to understand him as a clerk, as a person with thick fingers, as someone with a thread hanging from his sock, or as a mass composed primarily of water. 'In fact we would not call that knowledge a recognition of being at all — 'understanding' is an axiological concept, a connection of essence and value. It is true that modern hermeneutics no longer supports the conception that a work must have only one form of meaning.

> It is regarded as a defect, the defect of ambiguity, if a communication allows of a multiplicity of meanings, [but with art] the assumption that the object to be interpreted has or should have a single meaning in relation to which the interpretation is correct or incorrect no longer holds good.[59]

---

56 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 135.

57 Ibid., 135 [emphasis added].

58 Walker, "Art History Versus Philosophy" (1980), 23.

59 Osborne, "Interpretation in Science and in Art" (1986), 4.

But this does not, plainly, lead us to the conclusion that all sorts of interpretation are equally close to the work. Where the issue is understanding, there is a hierarchy of being; to the extent that we are truly concerned with the work, there is one form of meaning that is of particular importance.

The identity of a work of art (a thing created for a purpose) is to be constituted largely — centrally for understanding, but not exclusively — by the purpose for which that work initially came into being. There is a meaning for which the very work exists, its 'originary' meaning. Surely there is a vital distinction to be made between the meaning of a work in various senses and the meaning that was made part of it, that was its purpose, and that explains its existence. People, by contrast, are not instrumental entities, created for a purpose, but there is a parallel to be drawn between a work of art and a human action. To refuse to see a specific action in terms of its purpose or expressive cause (to refuse to see the emotion behind a gift, or the pain behind tears, or the disdain behind withering remarks) and to see them rather as other things that they are (to see the gift as a token of niceness, the tears as a glandular function, the remarks as a habit) is not a mere and thus benign 'shift of attention'; it is a failure of understanding. None of those identifications is false, but the interest of understanding aims at something deeper than what is *merely true of* the thing we are concerned with. The view that our concern with works of art is directed merely at determining various facts or 'true things' about them is false.[60] Understanding these human acts requires appreciating what brought them about. Likewise, art is not merely action *among other things*, and to understand a work in any other way, *excluding* that level of its nature, is to misunderstand it. To understand art requires that we interpret it in terms of its purposefulness. For though the act of meaning is not the whole origin of a work's meaning, it *is* the whole origin of the work's communicative potential. As that potential is the motive of the work's creation, the semantic act is *the source of its most essential meaning*. Inhalt — humanly caused meaning, the meaning imparted — is central. One cannot claim to understand the work at all if one does not uncover it; once it is uncovered, one has more than a mere fragment of its substance.

---

60 Some theorists have relied upon the view that "appreciation is a matter of understanding what is true of a work," in order to argue the relevance of intention, to argue that "knowledge of the artist and the artist's relation to the work seems to be relevant to appreciation." Lyas, "Intentional Fallacy Revisited" (1983), 292.

53 THE ACT OF MEANING

Accidental paint strokes and stains on walls are meaningless because none of these things has been purposefully invested with meaning in a semantic act. But what is it to 'put meaning into' a work of art? It is important to ask,

> far more thoroughly and systematically than ever, what distinguishes the mind of the poet and, correspondingly, that of the reader? What is *the nature of the act which has its issue in the literary work of art*, and [thus] what is the character of the process which results in our understanding of it?[61]

> How does meaning get into the image?[62]

The main hermeneutic import of the communication model is that we understand the interpreter's business through the artist's. Surely we can better understand understanding, getting the meaning out, by understanding what I have called the 'act of meaning', getting the meaning in. We have simply to trace a purposeful process back to the act that directed it.

What do we mean by the act of meaning? There are two general ways we can picture it. One way to conceive of it is as an *inner or mental event,* one that is specifically distinguished by a thought and a desire: an imagined meaning plus a desire to do something to objectify that meaning. At the back of the large process of communication (the entire diagram in § 51, an act of meaning itself, in a broad sense) is a more basic act, the one with which the diagram begins: the thing that first sets artists off on the search for the right image. Clarifying what it really is 'to mean something' in this sense is a notorious philosophical problem, but some things seem clear in at least a general way through a normal distinction we make between meaning and saying — meaning being something both prior and necessary to saying. 'Meaning something', for instance, is surely involved in the familiar condition of being ready to say something, of '*having* something there' (in some way) to say and communicate. This is neither communicating nor even saying, but being in what we think of as a kind of special mental state defined by both a *thought* and an *intent.* We know, furthermore, that we can 'mean' something without communicating it, but we do not also imagine we could communicate that thing without (in this rarefied sense) 'meaning' it. We express things unawares all the time, but Inhalt (the central form of art's meaning) necessarily involves both an inner content and the desire to manifest it.

Beyond the act of meaning in that inner sense (having a meaning and intending to express it) is an *outer sense:* the manifest action, the long process of the work's creation in

---

61 Lohner, "The Intrinsic Method" (1968), 169 [italics added].

62 Barthes, cited by Potts, "Difficult Meanings" (1987), 32.

which the first level materializes, being gradually objectified in material form. The two parts often feel like one and the same, and artists often express an utter closeness between the inner thought/feeling and the outer creation (for instance, the composer Peter Maxwell-Davies: "What I think is the music that comes out").[63] But the inner kind of meaning that directs the hand seems distinct, for there are also intentions to mean that never become realized in works at all (mere ideas of works). As Schleiermacher noted, "Every act of speaking is based on something having been thought."[64] Some demand of meaning must always pre-exist the work, for it is only that that can explain the basis on which an artist uses codes. And though a sign may have various possible meanings, it is in respect of certain ones that it is chosen to realize an intention. That limitation in the act imposes a limit in the meaning: to the extent that the mental act of meaning that concretized the work involved no other meaning, there was no other meaning *put into* the work. It is that mental match between an inner sense and a visual sign that is the basis on which the artist has used the sign for the purpose of communication, and it is this aspect and this aspect alone that constitutes the work's Inhalt.

It is easy, however, to misrepresent what actually goes on in this act, to oversimplify it. For one thing, we do not believe that the meaning of art is something one can hold in the head like an idea — what Nordenstam calls "the blueprint model" of intention[65] — an almost barbarous simplification that substantially compromises our understanding of art. The word 'expression', for instance, which I have been using in a special sense, is certainly inadequate to the extent that it tends to imply this, suggesting there is a meaning already constituted that merely requires (in the German for 'expression') *Außerung*, 'externalization'. But the *causal role* assigned to thought does not imply that there is always a meaning 'in mind' prior to the work; perhaps that is rarely the case.[66] The meaning

> does not precede the creative act, but is rather preceded and instigated by it. This is, in fact, just what Paul Valéry was speaking of when he said: "If, as happens from time to time, people ask me, or are troubled — and sometimes quite deeply — about what I wanted to say ... I reply that I did not want to say, but to act, and that it was the impetus towards action that led me to say what I did."[67]

---

63 Peter Maxwell-Davies, CBC radio interview, 1993.

64 Schleiermacher, *Compendium of 1819;* cited in Mueller-Vollmer, *Hermeneutics Reader* (1985),75.

65 A model specifying that intention exists fully formed in advance of "search for means and the pictorial experiments." Nordenstam, *Explanation and Understanding* (1978), 100—01.

66 The code conception is rather more burdened with this weakness, for according to it the artist must know the meaning of a work prior to working, for that is the very basis of choosing a sign.

67 Marcel Brisebois, Foreword, *Geneviève Cadieux,* exh. cat. (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain, 1993), 70.

When we think about it, we come to imagine it likely that the meaning communicated is not already there, but *arises* as a gradual sort of content out of the interaction of these two parts of the act of meaning, inner (thought and desire) and outer (hand and eye). In the beginning there is an idea of some sort, surely; then, once 'translated into form', this idea becomes amplified or clarified, a process in which the meaning is somewhat changed, developed, increased; and in that external process, new (inner) ideas arise that motivate new (outer) marks, and in that way a complex of meaning arises in the material object. The initial, inner meaning is perhaps gradually laid down, but that is not all that is going on, and the final communication is the result of an interplay between ideas of that motivating sort and, very likely, 'new' meanings that arose from the external action itself. We are no longer fooled into imagining the work, in its meaning, as something initially whole in the artist's head, and into picturing creation as merely a process of depositing — the main reason being that too much of the meaning of a work of art seems *inconceivable* apart from the manifest appearance of the signs and the forms, as we have seen with Veronese (§§ 43—44). The content of art is *bound* to its appearance.

> A static notion of intention, supposing just a preliminary stance to which the final product either more or less conforms, would deny a great deal of what makes pictures worth bothering about, whether for us or for their makers. It would deny the encounter with the medium and reduce the work to a sort of conceptual or ideal art imperfectly realized.[68]

So in that way too the metaphor of a bracelet put into and taken out of a box is quite inadequate. The intent of an artist's allegory cannot be reduced even to what that artist says of it, because pictures give experiences that are different from those of words. "Language is not the most important bearer of meaning."[69] It is impossible, frankly, to hold in mind apart from the works the kind of meaning that art presents. Only the work can hold its meaning in *our* minds. So far as the model is concerned, we need only distinguish two sorts of mental event (in a succession of instances of them), one focused on a motivating meaning that drives the action, the other being the artist's response to what he or she has made, registering the meaning that is read, which finally brings the action to an end. One is free, as the case may be, to assign a greater or lesser role to the motivating sense, and regard the deposit of meaning in the work as a transfer or as something more complex.[70]

---

68 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 63.

69 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 35—36.

70 One might give it a strong role, according to which the artist *creates* the work's meaning, in an efficient end-means process, based on a clear transfer of meaning. Or one might give the initial sense of meaning a weak role, according to which the artist effectively *discovers* the work's meaning — a more complex and exploratory process, involving the manipulation and retention of forms, which achieves a 'transfer' only in effect.

If acts of meaning in that way constitute the central meaning of works of art, then art carries this meaning by consequence of an *intention*. We need to look carefully at the connection between making and meaning, because it is not difficult to raise problems for rushed generalizations. Are there not works of art that are effectively meaningless, in some important way, and some that are meaningless despite their intents? And what is the implication of those kinds of intent unrelated to meaning, such as the desire to sell a painting?[71] As Wollheim has noted, "few words have caused such barren discussion in aesthetics as the word 'intention'." Wollheim, however, proceeded with a careful formulation of all that it seems necessary to say, which is that an *intention to mean*, understood as the principal causal condition of a work's meaning, causes the work's meaning only when it is successful, when it is accompanied with a calculated execution that has the power to *manifest* that meaning.[72] The role of the material work cannot be too much stressed.

> The visual stimuli or cues that the eye receives here are not simply the expressive accompaniment to a preconstituted message or embellishments in its rendition ...; they are its communicative vehicles.[73]

Intention is thus "a cause, that is to say if we have the model of intentions as thoughts which precede and bring about actions."[74] Even a looser conception of intention, accepted by other theorists ("a man's intended actions are specified, in Miss Anscombe's phrase, by the 'description under which' he did them"[75]), establishes a content that follows from the purposefulness of the artist's action. Wollheim's exposition of this view is the fullest and most cautious.

> How do we select out of the many many descriptions true of [an action] that under which it is intentional?
>
> The answer I propose is this: Corresponding to each description of an action is a thought [belonging to the agent], and an action is intentional under a certain description if what guides the person's action is the corresponding thought. A thought guides an action when it both causes it and forms its character.[76]

It is through this specific sense of intention that we are interested in the originary meaning, that meaning that brought the work about, and that, when creation succeeds, becomes its

---

71 Noted by Baldwin, Harrison, and Ramsden as a potentially viable form of understanding of a work of art. Baldwin et al., "Art History, Art Criticism, and Explanation" (1981), 435—36.

72 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 8, 18—19.

73 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 97.

74 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 159.

75 Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 136.

76 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 18.

meaning content. Our present conception of intention is thus more faithful to the objectivity and the particularity of the work than the one that has been debated and resisted for decades, which gave an absurd amount of power to facts apart from the work, facts that could never be truly significant. As Wimsatt notes, the intention outside the work is always subject to the corroboration of the work itself.

> The closest one could ever get to the artist's intending or meaning mind, outside his work, would be still short of his *effective* intention or *operative* mind as it appears in the work itself and can be read from the work.[77]

An intention that actually causes meaning in a work is "the intention of the artist as the picture revealed it," with whatever further information was necessary to perceive what the work itself contains.[78] Despite the confusions this concept has given rise to, intention is therefore central in understanding both the act that imparts meaning and the meaning that a work, by consequence of it, comes to possess. As Danto believes,

> we cannot be deeply wrong if we suppose that the correct interpretation of object-as-artwork is the one which coincides most closely with the artist's own interpretation.[79]

Intended meaning is the meaning a work was created to have, provided we understand its causality in the correct way. There is no reason why intention may not be only retroactively clear, though active in an inchoate way all through the process. A meaning only manifest upon the work's creation is equally intended, for the meaning fixed in that experience is no less the meaning that made that artist paint; it is the meaning that this work, undertaken to have a meaning, eventually came to have. And if we think more about this, we will realize that in this respect there is no difference between a work whose creation was driven by an already clear meaning (however few such works there may be) and one begun in search of a meaning (as artists often insist they work).[80] *When* the meaning was crystallized does not alter the fact that works of art are made with intent to mean: and they are finished when they mean what suits the artist. At the moment the artist accepts the meaning read in the work as his or her own, *that* is the meaning that it *has*. What is present may be no more fully articulable, and no more independent of the work, than the artist's acknowledgement in the face of his or her own creation, "That's it." What "that" is is the intention. At the crucial point, however, the meaning is there in the artist's

---

77 Wimsatt, "A Fallacy Revisited" (1968), 221—22.

78 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 8.

79 Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), 44.

80 It is sometimes an artist's "intention to find out what he really intended": that is, to understand what meaning the artist's actions is gradually realizing. Nordenstam, *Explanation and Understanding* (1978), 102.

mind, held there by the work. Rather than speak of the act of meaning, which perhaps gives a deceptive impression of the play of forces involved, it may seem preferable, then, to speak of the moment of the *final constitution of meaning*. By now we have strayed a long way from the simplistic look of the communication diagram, which is somewhat misleading. Creation is not the simple or complex step from holding a meaning entirely within to manifesting it in a work, but neither is it a process directed by nothing; it is something in between.

The important thing, however, is the hermeneutic significance of this understanding. Recognizing the fact of this causal connection and its crucial role in the establishment of meaning tells us what meaning a work does and does not possess. The work's content is defined in that experience in which the artist looks at the work that has been developed and sees in it the meaning that makes it finished. Though a sign may have various possible meanings, it is only in respect of a psychological event recognizing certain ones that it is accepted as realizing an intention. A work of art, through the act of meaning that semantically informs it, has a content defined by an experience in one specifically important mind. The meaning a work has when it is finished is a meaning that has been truly configured in it by artistic means, and which the artist has read from those means.[81] What this elaboration of the act of meaning makes clear (regardless of what relative power one assigns to external action or inner meaning) is that the meaning of art is specifically psychological.[82] The artist's mind is its source, is where the meaning of the work is formed, whether one regards the act as a transfer from mind to work or rather as a final registering of the meaning the artist reads there. Prior to that point there was some kind of standard by which to make the decision, "This touch renders the meaning, that one does not" (whether the meaning itself was or wasn't fully present). But by the time the work is completed, the desired meaning has *been* present in the artist's mind, for it is on that basis that it is considered satisfactory and complete. By virtue of the causality of meaning, it is the artist's experience that is decisive of what the work contains; understanding the work will mean achieving or approaching as one can that experience. Interpretation requires the subjective "re-cognition" of the original experience of meaning.[83]

We can illustrate all these elements in relation to a single work of art — for instance, one painted in the century of Rembrandt by Peter Paul Rubens. The description that follows

---

81 "The artist is essentially a spectator of his work." Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 39.

82 As Wollheim explains, this is a "general account of pictorial meaning which locates pictorial meaning in a triad of factors: the mental state of the artist, the way this causes him to paint, and the experience that a suitably informed and sensitive spectator can be expected to have on looking at the artist's picture. I call this a psychological account." Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 44; also 17, 22, 71, 86, 89, 188, 357.

83 Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 62—63.

is Rubens's own description of an allegorical picture he had painted thirty years before (figure 17), a description offered to satisfy another artist's inquiry about the work.

> The principal figure is Mars who, leaving open the Temple of Janus (which it was a Roman custom to keep closed in times of peace), advances with his shield and his bloodstained sword, threatening the nations with great devastation and paying little heed to Venus his lady, who strives with caresses and embraces to restrain him, she being accompanied by her Cupids and love gods. On the other side Mars is drawn on by the Fury Alecto, holding a torch in her hand. Nearby are monsters, representing Pestilence and Famine, the inseparable companions of war; on the ground lies a woman with a broken lute, signifying harmony, which is incompatible with the discord of war; there is also a Mother with her babe in her arms, denoting that fecundity, generation, and charity are trampled underfoot by war, which corrupts and destroys all things. In addition there is an architect, lying with his instruments in his hand, to show that what is built for the commodity and ornament of a city is laid in ruins and overthrown by the violence of arms. I believe, if I remember aright, that you will also find on the ground, beneath the feet of Mars, a book and some drawings on paper, to show that he tramples on literature and the other arts. There is also, I believe, a bundle of arrows with the cord which bound them together undone, they when bound together being the emblem of Concord, and I also painted, lying beside them, the caduceus and the olive, the symbol of peace. That lugubrious Matron clad in black and with her veil torn, despoiled of her jewels and every other ornament, is Europe, afflicted for so many years by rapine, outrage, and misery, which, as they are so harmful to all, need not be specified. Her attribute is that globe held by a putto or genius and surmounted by a crest which denotes the Christian orb. This is all that I can tell you.[84]

As Gombrich commented when citing this passage, "there are not very many great works of the genre [of symbolic image] to which the artist himself has given us the key"; this is "one of the few." Having already studied an allegorical work, we know something about the basis of the meaning of the elements in such a painting. But what we are considering now is the fundamental act through which the symbols are chosen and the work itself becomes meaningful. For though the links between these signs and their meanings may be real, substantially autonomous of the artist, the fact that in this work they and no others appear, and appear here *for* a specific meaning, is the result of a highly discriminating purpose. The codes operative with this work play their role second to an intent; that intent was realized, ultimately, in an experience in which Rubens read the meaning the work came to be given.

The meaning of Rubens's allegory is psychological in that, at the end of the process of painting it (he together with his assistants), Rubens read the meaning in it. Is that to say that the account in his letter is an interpretation? That seems wrong. In fact Rubens's letter reminds us of a special relation that exists between the artist and the work, which is that the artist knows the meaning of the work differently from the way everyone else knows it. We don't suppose that Rubens, replying to his colleague, was compelled to hunt out his painting and interpret the image; Gombrich noted that he "described its content from memory." Would we say, then, that he is *recalling* his own interpretation, the one he made

---

84 Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 126—27.

of his painting when he had finished it? Even that pulls the artist too far outside the original activity. An account like his is very likely closer to a recollection of two things: both what Rubens was after through the whole process of painting — his motivating meaning, the meaning he *meant it to have*, which by well chosen signs well articulated he *put into it* — and his experience of seeing the meaning that had been successfully realized. That final experience was the standard by which the work was judged to express its intention. The artist, in both ways, is plainly the 'source' of meaning, even if in a rather complex manner. The significance of every element can be traced back to Rubens's own response in the ultimate constitutive experience. What we want to say is that Rubens did not simply use the signs; more precisely, he used their meanings for a meaning that was *his own*. With either a pre-existent or perhaps only a final sense of what he wanted to convey, Rubens collected the symbols that would in fact, by virtue of essential linkages, hold that message in the work itself, such that the work would configure it again in the minds of like-minded spectators.

54 PERSPECTIVE AND REPERTOIRE

This clarifies another hermeneutic implication of this model, which is the importance and the precise nature of the work's semantic context. There is a distinction between a *context* and a *perspective:* if a context is a cognitive setting, a perspective is the view of a subject who has occupied that setting.[85] The content of a context must be grasped in a mind, and "necessarily does so if it is accurately to be called a context of a meaning-situation — by itself, apart from a perspective, it is strictly speaking not a context at all."[86] To see the work as it was created to be seen, the spectator must enter the perspective, and to do that he or she must gain access to the background the artist relied upon. If the meaning of a work is configured in an original, intentional, psychological experience, that meaning has a specific background. In the experience of the work, there is something other than the work of which the artist is aware. Though a painting may have its own power to mean, it does not project a specific meaning into the artist's mind unaided.

So long as one looks, for instance, at a code on its own — Mars and his meaning — it is possible to think of the meaning of a sign as something objective, something 'there', an almost concrete feature of the work understood as a sign. It exists in respect of a

---

85 The distinction is made by Cunningham: "The context functions in a perspective when it plays a rôle in some mental history." Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 33—34, 38—43.

86 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 42—43.

context, but a context is not merely another objectivity. It is also subjective. Subjective, that is, solely in the sense of human, happening to a person, inside someone. It is of course a mistake to identify meaning with a pure sign-meaning relation, omitting the role of a mind, "as if one could significantly say that the meaning of a flag is simply its reference to the country." This "forgets that apart from a perspective there can be no such relation of reference." "Nothing has meaning unless it is thought about." The significance of Mars, even the power of an arrow to cause pain at a distance or the instability of a ball, are the meanings of those objects only through recognition. *Perspective* is a crucial element of the circumstance in which meaning exists to *be* interpreted. A perspective is the view from a mind, "that in respect of which or 'for' which the reference [*s* means *m*] holds." Mind is recognized as a necessary condition of the existence of meaning in forms and symbols; "the meaning-situation is essentially psychological."[87]

To take the most banal example, Veronese was satisfied that he had painted a Renaissance helmet because of a knowledge of what such a helmet looked like: the psychological event of 'seeing a helmet' was not delivered by the form of the image alone, but took place only given that familiarity. This, to recall the discussion of the levels of meaning (representation, symbol and allegory, subject matter and content), we have already seen in some detail, for the marks of the material are configured as objects, concepts, and truths only by virtue of some background of experience that is drawn upon. For the artist to see a configuration of paint as a helmet, or Mars, or a climactic rhythm, and so on, there must be a specific *repertoire* of knowledge. What now becomes clear is what repertoire — rather whose repertoire — this must be. The communication model clarifies that meaning is 'put into' the work through a complex act that terminates in an experience in which that meaning is read. The mind that constitutes that meaning, in that act, belongs to the artist. Danto explains that "the structure of interpretation ... in part at least must be governed by what the artist believed."[88] But it is the artist's mind as it exists within that critical action that is relevant; it is only the "occasional mind" that defines the meaning that the work contains, that "cross-section of his mind which functions on the occasion," that background of thought that is "actual" and "instrumental" in the work's production.[89]

We recognize that understanding the work means understanding it as a specific person's experience, but one must not mistake the role of that psyche. Once the work is completed, the artist's mind is redundant. There is a certain experiential background to the work by which the artist recognized it to have the meaning desired, a background that

---

87 Ibid., 34, 35, 40—41.

88 Danto, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), 129.

89 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 40.

constituted the context of the work's initial reading, an initial reading in which its communicative meaning was finally established. What is important, what is constitutive and reconstitutive of the work's meaning, is the *content* that formed that original and decisive experience, a content that is presumed shared by the artist's original audience. The work, whenever it is seen against that original background of knowledge, possesses again the meaning that the artist, as prototypical reader, read in it, for it was in that reading that the meaning was finally achieved. The artist's *own mind* is not the background against which the work must be read; what is important is merely certain knowledge and information that belonged to it, relevant to the original experience, a cognitive content that might be possessed by any mind.[90] Indeed, that is what the artist counts on; a certain unity of mind or experience is a condition of the possibility of communication.

> The intended audience [may be] unaware of some assumptions, conventions, or conditions relating to the circumstances surrounding that text or work of art. In pointing to these assumptions, conventions, and surrounding conditions, the interpreter supplies at least partially what a given audience found lacking in order to understand a text or work of art. ... The texts are understood in the contexts of their surrounding conditions. These conditions are spelled out if there is a need for interpretation.[91]

The work holds its meaning, therefore, in an original semantic context configured by a certain repertoire of information that was decisive of an original experience. What is needed is a "*reconstruction* of the conditions which made those experiences possible."[92] In respect of contents of mind,

> the true criticism of an original work of art must consist in an examination of the attitude, motives, and procedures of the artist who made it and not in an examination of the emotional or other reactions aroused by the work in spectators other than the artist.[93]

The meaning of a work, of a sign or a form, will be recognized when sign or form is read by a mind with the right definition, the appropriate repertoire. That mind is the *legitimate mind,* a specific kind of knowledge, a specific repertoire, that effectively belongs to the work; the subjective condition of its meaning. We must "curtail what can legitimately go into the spectator's cognitive stock."

"Is there any principled way in which we can decide that some information is legitimate, and some illegitimate?"[94] The work is certainly a guide to our reading, but it is not a sufficient guide to that constitutive experience. The work does not deliver the

---

90 Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), 45.
91 Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 124—25.
92 Nordenstam, *Explanation and Understanding* (1978), 79.
93 R.H. Wilenski, *The Modern Movement in Art* (1927), xii.
94 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 89—90.

repertoire; we need to recover the material that established the perspective of the artist's reading. Naturally, we are not going to have access to either a profile of the artist's mind or the motivating sense of intention; at the most we may have a brief sketch of the artist's manner of reading (as with Rubens), but even then we need to know in what way to elaborate and finesse such a reading. The inner part of the act of meaning is eternally and fundamentally closed, and anything that is prior to the *outer* manifestation could not in any case contain the meaning we are looking for. There is no direct way to penetrate the relevant psychological experience. In interpreting we must remain aware "of the somewhat nebulous and undemonstrable part of the causal net we are attempting to reconstruct — namely, the artist's own intuitions and thoughts,"[95] but in fact we need only the repertoire. The work must be seen against the cognitive background possessed by the artist, the determinations of thought that configured the constitutive experience.

That content may be accessible in either of two ways: it may be a viewpoint we can all assume, accessible to us merely as human beings. Wollheim emphasizes the role of a universal human experience; certainly, artists cannot hope to communicate by relying upon knowledge that is specific to *them*. It is incontestable, however, that sometimes they do, and when they do not, one cannot neglect the influence of time. We have no natural idea today what 'general knowledge' in seventeenth-century Flanders was. The erosion of time, which explains our loss of familiarity with the names and meanings of the gods and with stories of Roman history, we have already had full occasion to note.

> We no longer understand the content of our own past culture; we must unlock it; we must reacquire cultural knowledge, familiarity with literary sources and the sources of themes and representations.[96]

This is something we can hope to recover through investigation of the specific setting of the work's production.

That, too, will deliver the solution to the problem of semanticity (§§ 10, 21, 33): determining what in a work has meaning, and what kind of meaning. What meaning exists to be read depends upon a prior act of meaning, involving a specific repertoire, and no act of meaning involving a specifically modern or specifically foreign repertoire could possibly have taken place. On this basis alone we can eliminate any interpretation using cognitive contents inaccessible to the artist. The determination of the work thus offers a rational basis for the rule of subjectivity. But that is only a negative formulation. To know what kind of meaning is present we need to rebuild the artist's views: what did the artist take to be

---

95 Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 214.

96 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 60—61.

symbolic? For reasons discussed in part two, Rubens's letter does not contain the work's meaning (although Gombrich speaks of it as the "key"), but it does give us substantial insight into his view of what has meaning, and what kind of meaning it has. Should that be inaccessible we need to consider the views of his or her audience, on the inference that the artist was reading the work with this in mind.

55 UNDERSTANDING, II

Through this clarification of the nature of a work of art — of how the work is given meaning — the rule of objectivity thus receives a precise definition: the work is what it is only against that background of knowledge that constituted that original experience of the work, that framed the act of meaning. Historical research is thus necessary, and it is research aimed at a component of psychology, a repertoire. Interpretation is the pursuit of an "originary sense" within a specific understanding of the origin of meaning and its external conditions.[97] Though we have no access to acts of meaning as psychological events, we are able (variously according to the evidence) to determine the kind of cognitive background the production of a given work might well have involved. There are different ways to proceed. One might work, as it were, from the ground up, filling out the framework of knowledge before reading the work. Or one might speculatively develop a reading whose basis in the artist's thought might later be tested.[98] One might, for instance, obtain evidence of a link between an event in the artist's life (one that supplied a kind of emotional repertoire through which the forms were read) that would have influenced the reading of a certain subject matter. Or one might explore the specific purpose the work was produced to serve, as an indication of the relevant background. The purpose of a work can often be inferred from historical circumstances.

> The maker of a picture or other historical artefact is a man addressing a problem of which his product is a finished and concrete solution. To understand it we try to reconstruct both the specific problem it was designed to solve and the specific circumstances out of which he was addressing it. This reconstruction is not identical with what he internally experienced: it will be simplified and limited to the conceptualizable, though it will also be operating in a reciprocal relation with the picture itself, which contributes, among other things, modes of perceiving and feeling.[99]

---

97 It appears somewhat unfair to the complexity of the actual arguments to say that theories of meaning typically "begin by favoring either intentions or contextual significance, proceed by specifying the kind of intentions or contextual significance the theorist deems basic." Stout, "Meaning of a Text" (1982), 4. Both are involved here, and not on the basis of favour.

98 For instance, with Picasso's Portrait of *Kahnweiler*, finding "an 'intention' appropriate to the character and genesis of a portrait that looks as this one does" Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 16.

99 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 14—15.

In that respect we have a kind external reconstruction of the sort of experience that decided the work's meaning.

In relation to any of these we have an indication of the specific role of the rules of form. We are given evidence that any such reconstruction is significant when the reading it affords us has special illuminating power. For instance, one might determine the philosophical, religious, or political position of an artist (such as his exposure to Neoplatonic philosophy), and find in that repertoire a reading that has tremendous explanatory power (such as was the case with Botticelli and his link with Ficino).

Most importantly, an historically demonstrable repertoire gives us a keen edge by which to exclude the illegitimate, interpretations that tell us nothing of the work. "The possible interpretations are constrained by the artist's location in the world, by when and where he lived, by what experiences he could have had."[100] Consider, for instance, a Greek Aphrodite (figures 1—2). We may have the idea (as did both Winckelmann and Goethe)[101] that such a sculpture is an expression of Greek spirituality. But according to our clarified picture of the work of art as a kind of semantic act, that is to imply something about the sculptor's (or through the sculptor, the patron's or the public's) way of thinking; it is to imply a belief in the spiritual reality of the gods, and a belief brought to bear precisely in the execution of this Aphrodite. Can we check such an hypothesis? Modern scholars, certainly much better informed than Winckelmann (who was pioneering the material techniques of scientific archaeology), believe that we can, and there is specific evidence of the debased state of Hellenistic spirituality, according to which the gods were mere armatures for quite specifically secular meanings. In fact we now believe that the perspective taken on these sculptures was rooted in "the universal dominance of sexual love in the Hellenistic world." [102] Understanding is a matter of historical criticism into a background of information and belief. If pursuing a legitimate distinction "between what a painting means and what falls outside its meaning, between what is, and what is not, part of its content,"[103] it diminishes our view of these works, we are merely adjusting to the world as it is. We proceed by testing whether what a given reading would imply about

---

100 Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), 45—46.

101 About another Hellenistic Aphrodite, the Medici Venus now in the Uffizi.

102 Onians, *The Hellenistic Age* (1979), 37, 57, 58, 70. "Many famous Aphrodites followed in Hellenistic art, semi-naked and naked, callipygian and bashful. These were multiplied by Imperial copies and are now prize exhibits in museums, but they can make little claim to a place in the history of religion." Burkert, *Greek Religion* (1985), 155—56. Wollheim notes the "instructive" case of "works that have been systematically misidentified, e.g. pieces of Hellenistic sculpture that for centuries were believed to have a classical provenance." Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (1980), 148.

103 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 249.

those who created it is demonstrable, and the most important thing is what we do the research for. Historical research is the means, and it is pursued for external access to the psychological reality in which the meaning of the work is historically suspended. The object is to recover the work as itself, not as we wish it to be.

7

THE MEDIUM

56 THE ORIGIN OF A WORK

Art gets its meaning by virtue of being the work of a person, and a person who employs signs and forms in a purposeful, purposefully meaningful, way. The artist uses those signs and forms as a means of giving specific meaning to the work created. Understanding the work as a meaningful artefact, something with communicative content, affects the way in which we approach its interpretation. Interpreting a work of art so understood will involve approaching, in so far as we can, that meaning put into it, that meaning for which it was created — at least in so far as our objective in interpreting is to understand the work for itself. And uncovering that meaning put into it will involve giving attention to the work's actual production (the process of meaning-endowment), which is to say, both the activity itself and its circumstances.

It is important, again, to look at an actual work. And if we are to gain any understanding of the relevance of the act of production and its context to the matter of interpretation and understanding, it will do no good to consider a work about whose circumstance we know only little; we will see the relevance of such information best in a case where we have something to work with. For that reason we shall leap three hundred years to consider a painting about whose production we have quite exceptional knowledge, Picasso's *Guernica*. It is a perhaps surprising but especially interesting fact that there are

only a handful of works of art about which entire books have been written,[1] and *Guernica* is the object of two upon which I shall draw.[2] What we know about Guernica will permit us to look at two prominent aspects of artistic meaning (and thus of interpretation) discussed in chapter six: the specific nature of the act of meaning in which a work is endowed with its meaning, and the relevance of the context in which that work is purposefully produced.

These few preliminaries introduce the case at hand, the production of *Guernica* as a communicative action, as a work of inherently communicative meaning — indeed, communicative action in both the inherent sense, which applies to all art, and in a more concrete sense, which applies to only some works of art (though conceivably many). Action in the second sense cannot happen except through the existence of the first, and shows the fundamental correctness and unavoidability of this model's determination of the work of art. In *Guernica* Picasso not only manifested in a work of art a judgement that was his own inner content; he did so in order that it be grasped by interpreters, that this judgement be registered in other minds. The model of communicative action is what makes political art conceivable. In January of 1937 Picasso was approached by a Catalan friend, the architect Josep Lluis Sert, and some officials from the Spanish embassy in Paris, representatives of the elected Republican government that Spanish Nationalists under Franco were fighting to overthrow.[3] The war had been escalating since a military uprising in the summer of 1936, and the delegation that visited Picasso was aware of the opportunity afforded by the Paris Exposition Internationale, scheduled to open in four months on May Day, for which a Spanish pavilion was to be built — a pavilion, of course, that would be devoted to the Republican cause. The group wanted Picasso to lend them his support, specifically by decorating the building. Picasso was by then already considered a 'great' artist, and though he was a Spaniard known to the world that fact had as yet no political overtone, for Picasso's sympathies were not public knowledge. In fact he was already on the side of the Republicans, and though his political involvement was much overshadowed by the affairs of his art and private life, he was not indifferent to a war that had unleashed

---

1 As was once remarked, "the art historian tends to look at an individual work in order to discover the elements it has in common with other works. He has little sense of the integrity of the individual work, which the literary critic takes as axiomatic ...." Now, when such comparative histories, are less popular, attention has shifted somewhat to works of art in their relations to certain cultural conditions of critical interest; studies devoted to individual works continue to be by far the exception. "In literary studies, books devoted to individual works are a matter of course. They are not in art history." Svetlana and Paul Alpers, "Ut Pictura Noesis?" (1972), 439, 445. It remains as interesting as ever to know why this is.

2 Both are extremely thorough studies: Herschel B. Chipp, *Picasso's Guernica: History, Transformations, Meanings* (1988), and Arnheim, *Picasso's Guernica: Genesis of a Painting* (1962).

3 The facts in the following sketch of the main events in the production of *Guernica* are drawn from Chipp, *Picasso's Guernica* (1988).

considerable violence in his native province. Picasso was asked to supply a work for the pavilion, of unspecified nature; it has been thought unlikely that any suggestion as to its subject was offered. All that was really needed was for Picasso to stand with the Republicans before the important crowds of the Exposition Internationale. Picasso's answer was, however, indefinite; it was unusual for him to produce work upon request and he was not sure he would be able to do anything.

After some three months had elapsed, he did, though, make some small effort. On 18 and 19 April 1937 he did some rough sketches for a large mural for the pavilion; its subject classic for him, the artist and model in the studio. The sketches seem a little perfunctory, as if Picasso had not really felt the drive to work, and by 27 April those twelve small sketches were all he had produced. On that day, however, French radio reported the bombing on the day before of the town of Guernica. By evening one French paper (edited by Picasso's friend Louis Aragon) carried a story calling it "the most horrible bombardment of the war." Next morning the communist paper *L'Humanité,* a paper Picasso read, carried the headline "A THOUSAND INCENDIARY BOMBS DROPPED BY THE PLANES OF HITLER AND MUSSOLINI REDUCING THE CITY OF GUERNICA TO CINDERS." But for days thereafter, reports explaining the destruction of Guernica conflicted. The press was greatly partisan: the papers favouring Nationalists claimed that fleeing Republican extremists had dynamited the city; the papers favouring the Republicans reported that the town had been bombed and strafed for a period of three hours by Luftwaffe aircraft under Franco's order. One was left to decide the probable truth on one's own.

On 1 May (with the pavilion's opening deferred till the end of the month) Picasso made another drawing for the mural, but now altering his plan almost entirely. He sketched a bullfight scene, borrowing from the 'studio' sketches a figure with an outstretched arm. In the eleven days that followed he made twenty-one further sketches, developing this idea and articulating its details. These were the preliminary sketches that would become *Guernica* — but we have reason to ask in retrospect whether they are *about* Guernica, for the figures involved in the new scheme do not derive from anything in the newspaper and radio reports or the very scant published photographs from Spain. Picasso's knowledge of what went on in Guernica was actually very limited and highly circumstantial. Of course, he did not go there; there were no real eyewitness reports and few available images: at first, one photo of casualties which actually came from an earlier attack, and later (30 April and 1 May), some of Guernica's destroyed buildings. He knew there was destruction, in which all reports were united. That he believed it had been caused by Nationalist forces we presume from the images he began to develop: a trampled woman, a stricken horse, a fallen soldier whose fist is raised in the communist salute (in state I of the canvas).

It is important to note the significance of the personages chosen for this first group of sketches. Where did they come from? There had been no report, for instance, of military casualties in Guernica: why then the soldier? And why the horse and the bull? We know, from Picasso's oeuvre, that Picasso had been working with the vocabulary of the bullfight since as far back as 1917; it is a subject he had drawn even in childhood. Its three main personages in particular — bull, horse, and picador — had for twenty years been the dramatis personae of numerous drawings and etchings -- sometimes with the addition of a figure extraneous to the bullfight: a sleeping woman, who had borne the features of his model and mistress Marie-Thérèse. It was her distinctive form that Picasso had employed for the model in the earlier 'studio' plan, and she was carried over in his first sketches for *Guernica*. As Anthony Blunt remarked in his study of the painting,

> These figures — human and animal — and the symbolism attached to them were not evolved at a single blow but have a long and complicated history, not only in the work of Picasso himself but in European art of earlier periods.[4]

To use them, with their complex history, rather than the anonymous figures that might well be thought better suited to the actual event, was undoubtedly a choice significant to the work's meaning.

So Picasso had let three months pass, making only twelve small sketches, before changing his subject entirely on the first of May. Less than two weeks later he had made twenty-two sketches and blocked out his subject on the largest canvas he had ever worked with (11 May). Sometime before the Spanish pavilion was completed (its opening finally delayed until the second week of July), Picasso informed his friend Sert that though he did not know whether the painting was finished, Sert could pick it up. Picasso had completed it, therefore, in eight to ten weeks of work. His progress with the canvas in those eight to ten weeks was recorded by his then companion Dora Maar in a series of remarkable photographs, which (together with the drawings that prepared and accompanied painting) have made it possible to appreciate what kind of thing was involved, creatively, in the production of this one large image.[5] It is important to keep a sharp focus on the interest this holds for us, which is not so much (remarkable as that is) the insight we have into the impressive workings of Picasso's mind and eye: the exploitation of accidents, the leaps of imagination in the orientation of his figures, the elegance and power of his solutions to seeming chaos. It is rather *the changes made*, understood solely as *steps in the production*

---

4 Blunt, *Picasso's Guernica* (1969), 13.

5 The development of the painting is followed in chapters six and seven of Chipp's book, chapter three of Arnheim's.

of a meaningful image. We are interested in the artist's activity as the specific labour of an *act of meaning*.

That there should be labour at all in the production of a meaningful image we have so far made little allowance for. Our model went only so far as to say that the artist, to convey what it is desired to convey, 'selects' the sign that conveys it, as if this were a more-or-less straightforward matter, or rethinks that message on the basis of the work's progress. But if the meaning was either present to begin with (thus simply translatable) or the mere end result, what is the significance of artists' claims to struggle? We might say that the labour of creation has nothing much to do with the production of meaning, but that would be a radical response. It is more or less dismissive of art understood as a medium of communication to answer that the struggle is aesthetic — that art as a specifically visual messenger just happens to demand fussing (like a society girl who will consent to deliver a letter only once she is dressed and done-up for the occasion). Modern theorists, on the contrary, are fond of asserting that form and content are linked — plainly not so irrelevant to each other. We might take a close look at the steps of *Guernica*' s production, just in order to examine the act of meaning in a concrete way, and our focus will be Picasso's changes. For *Guernica* is an example of a realized communicative act that was plainly not decisive and simple but gradual, perhaps even tortuous. We want to think about these choices according to the model, not as flights of creativity (which they remain) but as decisions in a process of 'utterance', of the 'expression' or 'constitution' of meaning.

57 THE REFINEMENT OF IMAGE

I would like to make use of the substantial work done in the recovery of Picasso's procedure and look first at the drawings that led up to the painting, then at the progressive development of the image on the canvas itself. It is worth asking, as a kind of anticipatory methodical caution, what we can hope to discover. Certainly not the psychic part of the act of meaning, the artist's awareness of or sense of what is to be said, on the basis of which pictorial choices and changes were made. What took place in Picasso's mind vanished with the moments when it happened. But if we remember the crucial *role* given to this mental state in the explanation of communicative action, we will understand the various changes to the image as *evidence* of its crucial influence. The model tells us that is how to understand them. Because these changes are made not simply to 'refine' an image, but to refine it *hermeneutically* — that is, to fit the work for the communicative purpose it is meant to serve — we can expect the progress of these changes to chart not only the unification of

forms but also the definition of a more and more articulate statement. To trace that development is, as it were, to follow the surface manifestations of an act directed from below the surface. I shall try to be brief, but brevity past a certain point tends to change 'investigation' into the 'illustration of theory', and I want to be sure of staying this side of that line and not be too greatly selective. There is a lot to notice, and even without paying close attention to everything Picasso was concerned with in the following survey of the work's development, we will gain some needed exposure to what the external manifestation of the act of meaning involves.

Picasso noted the date and order of most of his sketches, which are nicely reproduced entirely in sequence in the appendix of Chipp's book (whose numbering I shall borrow). We can follow Picasso's work day by day. Day one is 1 May 1937, and it is interesting to pay attention simply to the substance of the day's six sketches. Picasso's first sketch is a composition study, trying out the positions of several main elements. One distinguishes several figures (identifiable by comparison with the two sketches that followed it): the bull, with a small winged figure on its back, a fallen horse, a woman leaning from a window with a lamp in her outstretched hand. The top half of sketch 2 stretches the composition, testing how it might fit the space Picasso had to fit (a very wide rectangle) while the bottom half begins exploring the forms of the bull and the horse. The styles of the two figures are quite different: the horse is a structure of dislocated forms, only minimally horse-like, while the bull is simplified but quite natural looking. A form that Picasso set on the bull's back is a miniature Pegasus figure on some sort of cushion.

Sketches 3, 4, and 5, save for one small detail, are all devoted to the form of the horse: What shape should it take? Sketch 3 (figure 18) repeats, almost identically, the disassembled horse Picasso had tried out in sketch 2, now with a squared opening in the body. Three radically different, very childlike, horse variations follow on the same sheet: one makes the opening an obvious wound, spilling out entrails; in another the horse's neck is violently twisted, turning the head upside down. Sketch 3 also carries the other figure, Picasso's first exploration of the woman with the lamp, here drawn in a rough, smudgy style different from that used thus far; her most striking feature is her long, dramatically outstretched arm, swelling towards the identifiable lamp. Sketch 4 is an extraordinarily crude, emphatically childlike, drawing of the horse, static in stance and with a bit of clever play with the tiny ears, eyes, and nostrils. Sketch 5, likewise devoted to horse alone, tries an expressive, naturalistic style unlike anything yet essayed: it is a drawing of a distressed and shrieking animal struggling to get to its feet, its hind quarters collapsed; there is the first suggestion of any real anatomy (the shapes of bones, fetlocks, and hooves).

Sketch 6 (figure 19) is a consolidation of the day's work. It is another composition study, but this time one in which nothing looks tentative; all the figures are laid down with firm, precise lines, and Picasso has used instead of small sheets of notepaper a poster-sized gessoed board. The personae remain the same: the fallen horse, whose stance and expression are borrowed from the naturalistic sketch, but whose style reverts to the schematism of before (its head has for the first time a strong and interesting form and its tongue now appears, a pointed wedge; the tiny winged horse now flies out of the rent in its belly); the bull, simple and static, as in its last appearance in sketch 2; and the woman, her arm still outstretched but now narrowing rather than swelling (this time her head, newly rendered as a round and amoebic shape, swells as it cranes out of the open window). On the ground, a new figure is laced through the feet of bull and horse: an impassive soldier with closed eyes — a soldier, we know, because he holds a spear and wears a Roman-style helmet (soldier-convention)

The second day of work is the following day, May 2, which Picasso begins by making three pictures of the horse's head. Sketches 7 and 8 are very close variations of the head that appeared in sketch 6, playing with the positions of teeth and marking the first placement of tones. Sketch 9 (figure 20) is the first rendering in oil, a fully painted version of the horse's head that combines the innovations of the two studies before it. Being the first rendering in oil, it is the first trial of colours, which are white and grey on solid black. Sketch 10 is like sketch 6, a composition study in pencil on a gessoed board, but there is further playing with all the forms. The bull is now in flight, and the horse's head (which keeps the form just developed) is now turned upside down somewhat as in sketch 3. The lamp woman is larger and cranes even further, now leaning more into the depth of the space, whereas before she had merely stretched across the top of the picture; her gesture and expression are subtly altered. The supine warrior is pointed the other way round, and is now minus his helmet and spear tip. A new element is a second woman visible under the soldier's legs, unconscious, like him, but smaller.

The next sketch is made sometime before 8 May, when two more follow it: it is a fairly small sketch on a piece of cardboard, trying the horse head again (turning it up, and changing teeth, tongue, and outline) and totally reconceiving the bull, this time as a startled and bellowing creature (open-mouthed, like the horse, and with the horse's formerly sharp tongue). Sketch 12 (figure 21), the first of 8 May, is another composition study, the first attempting to stretch the now developed scene to fit the proportions of final canvas. In this study Picasso returns to a static conception of the bull and to the again down-turned head of the horse, but there is an important addition. The dead or unconscious woman introduced under the soldier at the right of sketch 10 is gone, and is replaced by a living, almost Pietà-

like group of a woman rising from the ground with a tiny child-figure slung over one arm; she is bellowing at the sky. Sketch 13 is a dual study, sculpting the current version of the horse's head and, especially, carefully articulating the detailed forms of the woman and her dead child. A striking element is the first appearance of blood, which traces fern-like patterns on their bodies. Sketch 14, of 9 May, is devoted to this group alone: it is the first drawing in pen-and-ink and is a faithful redrawing of the group from the day before, varying only details. The composition study that follows this, however (sketch 15; figure 22), shows several new thoughts: it is Picasso's first attempt to work out the arrangement of tones through the entire composition (what is to be black, what white, what grey) but it also introduces new figures. A raised fist rises out of a window, and now the heads of three fallen figures can be made out in the jumble on the ground; one of these, a male figure at left, is embraced by a grieving woman who turns her head to the sky in an almost exact echo of the mother at right. Sketch 16, also of 9 May, returns to the mother, gingerly testing her form altered to climb a ladder, her head and neck now thrown back a full ninety degrees.

Five sketches follow on 10 May. Numbers 17 and 18 return to the horse: a full-figure study (figure 23) that explores a second use of a more naturalistic image, and still more work on the exact form of the horse's head — especially the mouth (How open should it be, and what shape?) and its teeth. Sketch 19 is of the bull's head, the second attempt (jumping back to sketch 10) to present it as a human face; in sketch 10 it carried human lips and eyes, but now has merely token bull-like features. With sketch 20 Picasso does the horse again, redrawing the mouth, and the legs, and — for the first time — adding colour: a subtly managed but garish play of red, blue, yellow, and green. The colour of sketch 21, a colour variation of the mother and child on the ladder, is intense and even disturbing.

The next day, 11 May, Picasso begins the canvas. He continues to draw (the 'related' sketches run eventually to forty-five in number) but it is plain that from this point drawings begin to serve purposes quite different from the development of the image in the painting. For instance, many continue to use quite vivid colour after Picasso had certainly committed himself in the painting to the grey-scale. The most searching work goes on on the canvas itself, which Picasso completes in six to eight weeks between 11 May and mid July. Stages of its development during these weeks are recorded in the ten photographs taken by Dora Maar, each of which has been labelled a state (I shall cite the state numbers that Chipp follows).

State I (figure 24) shows how Picasso marked his canvas before doing any tonal work: this involved a choice of all the figures, the resolution of their placement, and a fairly detailed conception of how, at least in basic form, they are going to look (the division of their parts, the orientations of those parts, their profiles, their size, their expressions, ...). The bull returns to the form of sketch 12 (figure 21), and is a bull (more bull than bull-man), but not quite decisively. The horse is largely a composite of sketches 17 (figure 23) and 10. The warrior has, for the first time, fully open eyes; he retains the straight-upraised arm and clenched fist of the salute, but his arm now appears fastened to an almost cross-like support. In fact the soldier's body has been brought fully into the foreground where it is now wholly visible and actually cruciform. The woman and child have been passed from right to left, and the second grieving woman from left to right, away from the soldier and now bending over a fallen woman (reintroduced from sketch 15 and now beside a small dead bird). Above this group the woman with the lamp remains, much as she has always been. All these familiar figures, placed for the first time in a rectangle of the exact proportions, and set as close together as Picasso had conceived them, left a fairly substantial strip of the canvas at the right end empty. The right fifth of the picture is now filled with a wholly new figure, a woman engulfed in flames, but Picasso has used the same head that he had developed for the woman and child in sketch 16 — thrown back, mouth open, an X of eyes and eyebrows — her upturned cry is now a shriek of physical agony. Something else new in the full work is a set of dividing lines painted through the forms that mark out certain triangles within the composition, most of them pointed at an invisible mark somewhere off the canvas directly above the soldier's fist, which thereby assumes the focal position of the work. The repositioning of the grieving woman has changed her in a way that has something to do with this: when placed at left her upward glance had been pure grief, but moving her to the right has focused her glance on this invisible focal point.

The next substantial alteration is visible in state II (figure 25), in which Picasso has begun to black-in some of the background and foreground areas, and to define, by tonality, some of the triangular sections marked off in state I. The rather confused foreground is simplified: the fallen woman is somewhat altered (the bird deleted) and there is a clever simplification of the right end, in which the figure leaning over her is now joined to the foot that had belonged to the figure in flames at the right end, so that her body now stretches all the way to the corner of the picture, rising towards the important centre. The only other alteration to the design is even more striking: the clenched fist that was already focal in state I has been surrounded by a giant circle — the only circle in an atmosphere of fragments — from which radiates a corona of soft petal-like shapes, and the soldier's fist has been filled

with flowers or a shock of wheat. Another, smaller change: in state II the tongue of the horse reverts to the pointed wedge that was last seen in sketch 10. The photograph of state IIA (figure 26) — the only one of Dora Maar's photographs to record a detail rather than the entire canvas — is devoted to a further and especially striking alteration to the head of the horse. Upturned in sketch 2, both upturned and downturned in sketch 3, upturned again in 5 to 9 (figure 20), and then downturned in 10 and 12 on (see figure 23), the head of the horse has already gone through a long sequence of orientations. Now Picasso flops it once again, this time by painting the nose on the chin and moving the eyes and ears to the jaw in suit — a stunning transformation that gives the horse, with brutally outthrust chin and craning neck, a strangely powerful expression.

State III substantially advances the in-painting of forms, carving out a bright triangle that peaks not at the fist, but further right, nearer the lamp of the craning woman. The most striking change made now is the elimination of all the symbolic features of the previous states — the sunflower shape, the wheat, the fist, the raised arm, and the crucifix body are all gone. A pointed almond-form remains where the sun was, and the soldier is now reduced to a head and two arms.

By state IV (figure 27) Picasso has more than half the canvas filled in, establishing what is to be dark. One especially dramatic change is now made: the head of the horse is painted out of the somewhat cluttered middle of the broad central triangle and repainted (as transformed in state IIA) above and to the left of it, directly under the almond where the sun-form had been, which is strikingly altered: the former petal-shapes have changed into jagged rays. The body of the bull, which is all that had occupied this space after the elimination of the fist, is taken out of it (swung around to the left of the bull's head); the bull's face and expression are now substantially altered.

State V eliminates the dead woman (of which only a head remained), develops the hand of the soldier (which is taken further in what we might call the last sketch, sketch 45, dated 4 June), and adds to the woman in flames, throwing a dark shadow across her body and moving the flames around her. The photograph of state VI records only one change: an attempted reconception (a simplification, or a new idea of tonality?) of the three women's bodies, by means of strips of wallpaper Picasso stuck straight onto the canvas. By state VII these are gone, the figures left as they were, though a bird is lightly sketched on the bull's back. The major change now is the entire redesign of the soldier: the body has been painted out, and the head (redone according to sketch 44) and arms are loose dismembered body parts. Eliminating the soldier's body is part of a substantial clarification of the picture's centre: a kind of perspectival tiled floor now fixes the soldier, the woman and child, and the horse (whose body parts have all been defined by a "horse-hair" patterning) clearly in

space, while defining what is figure and what is ground. Some strengthening of tonal contrasts brought the painting to state VIII, which is the state we still see, the realized work (figure 28).

58 CHANGE AND MEANING

What has been the point of all this narration? One thing this long, no doubt tedious, account has certainly driven home is that there has *been* a lot of change — more, certainly, than I have dared to capture in an already tiring narrative. I have gone to these lengths in order to once get a feel for the kind of thing that the act of meaning actually involves. As we already knew, that act is not merely a psychic phenomenon in which a conception, a meaning, a state of feeling (language fails here) that the artist wishes to lay down — sometimes, precisely so as to be recreated in us — is randomly linked in his or her own mind to some pictorial form that is to serve as its sign, in a kind of forced marriage (a link of mere association). Neither is that act merely a matter of the syntactic linking, in an aesthetically effective way, of some pre-established signs of a code. That the code model does not apply here could not be more clear. Chosen signs that mean simply by *linkage* to meaning are not altered by change. Both the code model and meaning by association are unable to explain the labour we have seen Picasso expend — unless they go on to split form from content, and isolate this change from the register of meaning. But it does not make sense to suppose that what Picasso was doing over sixty or seventy days of work was merely drawing in the chosen signifiers and painting up an appropriate frame for them. The entire event was an act of meaning, an act in which Picasso was struggling to bring a meaning to form: that is to say, it was a process of finding the material elements that conveyed — *did* convey — the kind of meaning that Picasso wanted, at least in the end, to express.

As I said in preface to this account, what we have examined is an external process driven from within the artist by a state of mind focused upon the meaning that Picasso, in this instance, wished to realize in a specific work. What *was* that first moment that initiated work on this picture, other than a shift in that state of mind? When on 1 May, having heard the news of Guernica's destruction, Picasso made another sketch not of an artist with his model, as he had being pursuing, but of a town and figures in distress, there was not merely a shift in *imagery*. Indeed, Picasso's 'brief' was to produce *a* painting, and the studio subject fulfilled that request, but the slowness with which his work was going suggest we develop a somewhat richer notion of *purpose*. The purpose, the motivation, of *this* painting, the one we now see, was more than a commission; it concerned the event of

the destruction of a Basque town — more significantly, the importance of that event, as Picasso felt it. But if that feeling of outrage and protest already held the meaning that Picasso wanted to convey, what, once the picture was begun, was all the change about? If we are to understand that change as belonging to the process of the act of meaning, a change in the forms is a change required so as to say what Picasso wished to say.

Apart from what it might leave out, in the series of changes traced above we might distinguish the most prominent as being of two general sorts. One type of change is *the gradual metamorphosis of features* (the developing form of the horse's head, for instance); the other is the business of *deletions and repositionings*, a somewhat different kind of activity (for instance, the moving of the horse's head). And for our own ease we might consider these the development of *two sorts of form:* the form of discrete elements (to which the sketch-making was mostly devoted), and the form of the painting itself, as a whole, advanced mostly on the final canvas. We'll look first at the second sort.

The drawings in which Picasso had developed the form of the horse had buried it in a section of the final canvas that ultimately became one of the most complicated (figure 25). But the form of the horse's head was far too important to be buried, and so Picasso moved it to the position of centrality, directly under the flash of the light (figure 28). Likewise the group of mother and child was moved from the right of the canvas (figure 21), where figures were accumulating, to the left (figures 22), where her head was finally framed within the dark oblong marked by her back and arm and the neck of the bull (figure 28). The hand of the soldier beneath her was enlarged to make it more prominent, and the foot of the kneeling woman opposite was enlarged to match it, creating a symmetry that more emphatically defines the triangular construction at the centre of the canvas (figures 25, 28). Not only are the foot and hand thereby given positions of attention, this triangle that they strengthen collects more power. Why is that important? The strength it gains is the strength to build and peak in a kind of violent crescendo around the forms of the horse's head, the flash of light, and the lamp of the leaning woman. This chaotic central triangle not only effects the explosion (the violent blast that is central to what is happening here), it draws attention to these three elements, which are not only given attention but are given attention in *this* manner. We see them by a cataclysm — indeed, 'in the light of' a cataclysm. Change of the second sort, then, is in part a kind of *staging* whereby the actors are not only made visible but are almost thrown into our eyes, whereby what we are meant to see is not overlooked, because buried or hidden. It is also a kind of *colouration,* in which what we see is presented in a certain light. Neither of these purposes can be thought 'aesthetic', in the most familiar senses of aesthetic; they are ways of facilitating and also directing our

reading — 'See this, and see it this way.' Because they concern what we are meant to see, they are part of the means of meaning.

The other sort of change is involved with meaning in perhaps a more direct way, for what *are* the things the artist wishes us, and in a certain way, to see? This question returns us to the problem of communication as we had originally framed it; the problem of *choosing what is to be seen* includes choosing the symbols that convey intended meaning. It is this kind of change that makes it obvious that here at least the artist's selection of signs is not a matter of turning to rules, tabulations, the reliance upon a code. Very little of the imagery in the final painting can be explained as an application of conventions whose meaning has been established, as signs chosen by 'looking up' the form culturally linked to the meaning the artist was concerned with. Moreover, the constant change we have seen the individual forms undergo does not fit the familiar code model well.

Consider again the horse, one of Picasso's first concerns. A horse in distress certainly fits a meaning we can imagine Picasso pursuing, but *all* of Picasso's some twenty-two versions of the horse present a horse in distress (figures 18—27). Picasso was concerned primarily with how the creature should look. His tentative shifting between naturalistic and abstract renderings shows uncertainty about the style of the work — again, something we suspect was not an 'aesthetic' concern, but a concern about the means of realizing the sort of meaning to be conveyed. A naturalistic rendering would show the facts about how a struggling horse looks, but what kind of facts are those? Anatomical facts. I think it was instantly clear to Picasso, from only one or two essays in that direction, that such facts are not the sort relevant to his meaning. It is other facts that mattered, and to present them Picasso needed an image that drew attention to other things: not how a stricken horse in the real Guernica would have looked, but what, for instance, the horse would have experienced. The 'abstraction' of the painting is thus a kind of device: a type of treatment of the image that without losing the suggestion of living human and animal forms was able to present a highly selective set of qualities.

That is the aim behind Picasso's long experimentation with the form of the horse's head, which he drew numerous times before turning to the canvas. The two things evidently of greatest concern to him were the position of the neck and the form of the mouth. What is the difference, with regard to what is put on display — with regard, thus, to meaning — between one such form and another? It is the power of Picasso's changes that strikes us. I have already commented on his masterful flipping of the head (figure 26), merely by moving nose, eyes, and ears, and the power of the expression that is achieved by this: the brutality of the outthrust chin and the extremity in the craning neck. The pointed wedge of the horse's tongue is already highly evocative of a shriek when it appears in

sketch 6 (figure 19); as introduced to the painting in state II (figure 25) — a sharp form protruding from inside the round cavity of the horse's mouth — it seems to draw that shriek from the centre of the horse's living being. The difference between one form and another is *meaning*, for by pursuing this sort of change Picasso has put on display in one form, and in an especially strong way — that is, in a way that allows us to feel their nature — all of these things: violence, brutality, extremity, a shriek of agony, a shriek from the centre of a living creature.

Consider as another instance the final appearance of the woman with the child (figure 29) — a form that through loose kinds of likeness identifies her as a grieving woman, but that accomplishes something far more emphatic too. For within the constraints imposed by the necessity of likeness, the form that defines her condenses her to a gesture, singling out a specific constellation of elements. She bellows — that is what she does — the concerted effect of numerous motifs (her thrown-back head, her falling hair and hanging ear, the sweep of her back — and the motif used in the horse: the hollow cave of her mouth pierced by the thin, strident point of her tongue). There are no tears on her face — or on any other face in this painting. Thinking about why that might be brings us substantially closer to an understanding of what the morphology of forms is all about. Tears, of course, show us that someone cries, but *that* someone cries is a less significant fact about crying than what it is like. I can put this even more bluntly: that someone cries is meaningless information if it is not known and remembered what crying is; indeed, whenever one fails to recall what crying is, the fact of crying is nothing. The face of this mother is swimming with her pain: her 'crying organs' (her eyes and the orifices of her nose) *are* tears, depicted in tear shapes; the flowing form of her head shows her face melted into grief. What other 'things' do we see in her? Her body is nothing but a woman's skirt and two pendulous breasts that point down at her child, one of them especially heavy and full — a part of her self still achingly her child's, but now somehow deprived of their own nature. And then the blasted form of the hand that hangs by the infant, in disarray at the onslaught of emotion, deprived of what it touched and hence dead. That hand, turned in to the picture — a giant, swollen, heavy hand, hanging and scored by lines — the miserable flesh, which receives and wears its pain. In the final painting we see that specific type of form (leaden, swollen flesh creased with lines) several times over: powerfully in the monstrous, turgid appendage of the dead soldier, and again in the feet and lumbering leg of the kneeling woman opposite. The sensitive, vulnerable, tentative body. The grieving mother is far more than a form that *means* grieving mother, because she teaches us things. What it is to feel grief, which we see in her face and body both. What grief is for, which we see in her graphically shown relation to her child. What that relation of mother and child

is: not a relation but a form of being. And what the body itself is, visible in her heavy, marked flesh: a record of pain, a medium of the world.

Thus the materialization of meaning is not a matter of simply 'using' forms that have been tied to meanings, but neither is it a matter of 'creating' signs, if by that we mean tying, by some psychic forced marriage, a form to the meaning in one's mind. It is a matter of finding, discovering — or creating, if that is the language you prefer — the forms that say what is to be said, that do some articulate speaking of their own. Each of these manipulations of imagery has by virtue of its appearance a specific power to emphasize and suggest. What *form* is, regarded in this manner, is easily defined, and the breadth of so simple a definition tells us a lot about what an artist's labour is for. A form is anything that can be altered in the artist's material, all such features being factors of appearance: the shape of objects, their outlines, details of pattern, placement, size, orientation, depth, darkness, colouration, complexity, surface. *All of these are pictorial features that already possess in their various ways, in themselves, the capacity to direct the attention and to evoke sensations and thoughts.* Every mark has a certain speaking power, and it is the artist's task to turn that voice to a decisive end. Change in the work is this control of voices, which we have seen is not a matter of fixing something to be said in a preferred form but rather of arriving at (whether one calls it finding or creating) the signs that say what is wished.[6] What the artist is doing is working toward an alignment of his meaning with the meaning of the forms he has laid down, and which he has the power to change. In such project, the artist does not appear to have any instantaneous or absolute access to the 'right' forms, the ones that say what is to be said. Sometimes the forms are just *there* (as when in sketch 6 Picasso simply draws the dagger-shaped tongue — figure 19), but even then there is usually a time before they are there. Creation itself is a peculiar phenomenon of searching by invention and manipulation, out of which the right forms arise.

59 FORMS AND THEIR MEANING

In fact there is something more to be learned about the meaning of forms from Picasso's trials. It is well worth considering some of the figures that Picasso abandoned, knowing them, as we do, to have been abandoned. Why did Picasso drop them, retaining the figures that he did? In the course of Picasso's work on the picture there were two figures stricken with grief: the mother and child in the final picture and the woman who appeared briefly in

---

[6] As Arnheim notes of Picasso's picture, "there were many experiments in trying to define the content by working out its shape." Arnheim, *Genesis of a Painting* (1962), 134—35.

sketch 15 with her arms around the fallen soldier (figure 22). When compared with the mother and child in the final state, the thing that strikes us most about that group is actually its shallowness. The relationship between the anguished girl and her dead man is immediately clear: one knows what it is, and can certainly imagine, empathetically, translated to our own lives, what the significance of her loss is. But there is nothing in the image that encourages us to do that; in fact, there is something almost dull about that image of embracing lovers — something that may stem from its high commerce but probably comes from something deeper. An image of that type — indeed, an image like an image of mother and child, another abused icon or 'sign' of high feeling — would need features with a special power to pierce through the familiarity and dullness that envelops it. By contrast, the image of the mother and child that Picasso replaced it with is all eloquence (figure 29). If one looks at it carefully, one does not have to make any effort of empathic reading or translation: the image takes our hand and leads us straight into the contemplation of anguish. And whereas with the girl and her soldier we identify or 'get' — just like that — the relationship between them, as a kind of fact, the relationship between mother and child we not only identify but know: we know how it is, not merely that it is. The appearance of the woman's desolate breasts above the limp form of her child draws us into a recognition of the viscerality of the relationship of mother and child, and the viscerality — the self-damage — of a mother's grief. We have moved right beyond the recognition of the fact of an event to its *understanding*.

We can make a distinction here between images that present facts — a predicative kind of meaning (*that* x) — and images that do more than state, or in fact present a meaning that cannot be expressed in a statement at all (what it is like to *be* x, what it *means* for x to be so). It is a distinction that explains change in the work. The same distinction is evidently involved in the choice of other images that appear in *Guernica*. One of these concerns the matter of tears, which we have already touched upon. Tears appeared in sketches 31, 32, 34, 35, 36 (figure 30), 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, and 42, but on no face in any of the work's states. Tears indicate suffering, but the fact of suffering does not deliver much: it does not give us much insight into what suffering is or is like. Given what was already known about the event, it was of no importance to say 'people suffered' in *Guernica*. Indeed, if we look honestly at something we commonly overlook — how little it costs us to state such facts, and the impoverishment and weakness of such talk — we may come to recognize just how little importance statement has in certain regions of life. Unless, perhaps, in speaking of suffering we could make the significance of suffering briefly alive to us — which would not be a thing of no consequence. The meaning of suffering is not, in certain important ways, either *something we can state*, or indeed, *something we already know*. It is a

knowledge that perpetually lapses, and it is only brought back from its depths by experiences more insinuating than the mere sight of tears. Indeed, it lapses in ways that other knowledge does not probably *because* it cannot be captured in any simple formulation such as a statement. The eyes of the grieving mother (figure 29), which show no tears but *have become* tears (eyes whose function is to cry), begin to tell us — strange as it seems they should — about 'grief'.

This difference between fact and quality, external fact and inner nature, the fact of x and the meaning of x, is not, evidently, merely a difference of degree: we are not given the same thing, only deeper. We are not given just a deeper, more intense contact with grief, or direct as opposed to indirect contact. It is a different kind of knowledge, whose substance is different. It is for almost the same reason, I think, that Picasso did not carry to the canvas the entrails of the early sketch 3 (figure 18) and the blood of sketches 10 and 13—16 (visible on the child in figure 22). They prompt a recognition of facts, and nothing more. Omitting them also, perhaps, because they are powerful prompts to bogus emotion, emotion that one 'thinks' — attaches to the recognized facts — but does not have. This would explain well why the dismemberment of the soldier in the final work (whose statue-like quality has often been remarked upon) is treated so genteelly: that treatment prevents us from leaping to the intellectual meaning 'massacred human being' (because it does not look like one) and induces us to contemplate the image, and learn thereby (as from the soldier's hand) such things as touched on above, flesh as the canvas of pain.

The problem of 'factuality' explains the elimination of one of the most memorable forms to be abandoned: the upraised fist that appeared in sketch 15 (figure 22) and that in state I was given to the soldier, who was in addition 'crucified' (figure 24). Chipp reveals the semantic context of that sign: his illustrations of posters and propaganda photographs[7] show how this gesture, the communist salute, was understood as an emblem of solidarity among the Republicans. The appearance of the fist, and as the very focus of the painting, would have been almost literally a statement, even if not a simple one: an identification of the victims as Republican supporters; an assertion of future victory; an exhortation to stand firm; a call to arms. But to be *told something*, about and because of the event of Guernica, is very different from being given understanding of what that event was and is — what it was, not in the sense of what factually happened, but in the sense of what it meant and means. Hence, I think, Picasso's elimination of these and other forms (the crucifix imagery that aligned the victims with Christ, and the tiny winged horse in early sketches, a departing soul attesting to death — see figure 19), forms that Chipp calls "commonplace conventional

---

7 Chipp, *Picasso's Guernica* (1988), 98.

devices for conveying general ideas."[8] What was the problem with them, which got them omitted: their commonplaceness, their conventionality, their generality, their intellectualism — all these things? Without going into it deeply, we can see how each of the abandoned forms we have been discussing did nothing that could not be done just as well verbally: they expressed the fact that souls departed and lives were lost; they identified the dead as victims, martyrs; they asserted dignity and aimed to rally steadfastness; they showed that people suffered. In that sense they are all forms of pictorial statement, 'utterance' in an almost literal sense. But in light of what we have seen of the painting's final shape, we might well imagine that the meaning of *Guernica*, the *content* of the painting, was to be something different than statement. Content, as we understood it in § 46 and § 47, had to do with the nature of reality. We may begin to suspect, now, that the nature of things in this sense is not something that can easily be *told*.

60 SEMANTIC OMNIPOTENCE

Having looked at the process of managing forms, we can now see a little more clearly what the act of meaning comes to. What explains Picasso's labour, the perpetual change of form? The struggle to lay down his meaning. We see now that to manifest one's meaning is not to discharge it directly into the material, or Picasso would have come to the point a little more directly than we saw. It is a complex process of creating the right meaningful forms: which is to say, finding the forms that serve one's purpose. Sedlmayr repeats the words of one of history's great formal innovators: "Even a Kandinsky knew that 'the problem of the artist consists not in the creation of form, but in the adaptation of the form to the content.'"[9] We can resist, then, a common fallacy about what semantic activity involves, which might be called 'semantic omnipotence', which assigns an artist a virtually unfailing power over materials, a power to make the materials of art carry his or her will. It is not a foolish error, because many expressions we commonly use to discuss the "creation of meaning" tend almost inevitably to suggest it: for instance, "giving a form new meaning," "the meaningful manipulation of materials" — or, in the remark by Sedlmayr just quoted, the "adaptation of form to content," which all too readily aligns with the fallacy. We casually say things like, "With this subtle change the artist has given the form an entirely new meaning." Unproblematic in the instance, when we draw upon such remarks in the building of a

---

8 Ibid., 97—98.

9 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 189.

hermeneutic theory (to understand 'how meaning gets into a work') we often misunderstand them. This 'adaptation' is not a process in which an artist, by reshaping a form, endows it with a new meaning. To adapt a form is to change it for another form. The altered form (we could think of the head, mouth, or tongue of *Guernica*'s horse) may be *much the same form,* at the general level, only generality does not deliver the meaning. Why, after all, alter it? At the level of detail, on which the meaning functions, the 'adapted' form is not the same form, despite its 'family resemblance' with earlier heads or tongues. We are misled by our language to imagine a kind of discharge of meaning into the empty vehicle. Of course we can say that by altering the shape of the tongue Picasso has changed its meaning, but we should not be enticed to say that meaning has been *added to the form.* The artist has just seen his or her way to a different form, with its own inherent power.

The fallacy, of course, betrays a certain hangover of nineteenth-century genius theory, according to which the artist commands the forms to speak his or her meaning; the artist's mind is utterly effective. It is an image of power, and it is fascinating to note how the communication model,[10] involving an initial act of *bestowal of meaning,* parallels the Frankenstein story. As Dr. Frankenstein claims (by his own genius and skill) the power to make life from dead matter, the artist claims the power (by genius again) to give meaning to mute and senseless shapes. In reality, as we have seen, there is no such power to be had. The mistake of both Frankenstein and theorists who profess this view is not to lay claim to what is not rightfully ours (and thus disturb an order) but *hubris,* the attribution to human beings of a power that we do not possess. Forms, regardless of how they came by it, have their own meaning, and it is that fact that makes art, and artistic communication, possible. The artist merely commands speaking forms to speak for themselves, which is not commanding them at all, but accepting them for his or her purpose and allowing them to be what they are.

In order to avoid the fallacy, we have to underline a fact that the communication model either overlooks or makes peripheral. In order to see what meaning is there, so as to see whether that meaning is right, the artist *reads* what his or her hand has done. That is to say that artists know for certain what the meaning of a form is not from inside, not from the certainty of some act of meaning in which the form is bestowed its meaning: the artist knows from outside, by reading the mark for itself, undirected by intentions. We are coming to see the shortcomings of the model's conception of what causes the meaning that is there in the work. Understood in a certain way, it is wrong to say even that the artist *indirectly* causes the meaning: to claim that the artist eventually (after certain circumstantial

---

10 As well as the code model, through its understanding of convention as the arbitrary selection of vehicles for meaning.

detours) manages to discharge the meaning into the forms. The cause of meaning is not a kind of transfer into form. Forms are brought into being; the meaning of those forms is read; a judgement is made about whether the intention is served by that meaning or not. Eventually, the work is relinquished for the meaning read in it. That the artist is a reader of forms is the reason why, as the more sophisticated versions of the model explain, the meaning of the work is known only at the end of the process. Sedlmayr cites the nineteenth-century philosopher Franz von Baader: "The artist fully achieves his idea only in the completion of the work of art."[11] Baxandall speaks similarly of Piero della Francesca's *Baptism:*

> If there is an act we study it is Piero's relinquishing the *Baptism of Christ* as more or less fulfilling his purpose, and this [act], while assumed by us in important ways, is too artificial an object to be the centre of our attention. ... Our actor is purposeful relatively more towards the deposit of his activity and its effect than to the activity of hand and mind that produces it. We address a thing to which the maker's intention was attached, not a documentary by-product of activity.[12]

The work is not a by-product of some inner act of meaning that is the *real* object of interpretation, and it is not merely the external manifestation of that inner act; the meaning is fully realized in the effect of the work alone. The artist finally "relinquishes" the work — the term is excellent — for the meaning that he or she sees there.

When the communication model explains that meaning is caused, through its relation to an intention, through purposeful activity, it is not clear whether the fallacy of omnipotence is being courted or resisted. One does not simply execute one's intention, one realizes it through action, reading, and specifically judgement — a judgement that says either the right meaning is there or it is not. And from the case of *Guernica,* we can see that there are two distinct standards of 'right' meaning, of the realization of intention. The judgement, one might say, looks in two directions. On the one side, it examines the forms in relation to the artist's initial sense, the motivating meaning, the meaning the artist went after in making the form in the first place (Picasso's allegiance, empathy, and so on). Picasso may indeed have begun to work that way, identifying in himself his outrage, his wishes, and searching for the forms to state them (thus the departing souls, the raised fist, and the cruciform). But though they expressed that motivating meaning, the forms that merely state are the forms that Picasso abandoned. The judgement, therefore, involves something else: it not only looks back to the 'intended meaning', it judges whether the forms say something worth saying. The model pictures intention as "a cause, ... the model

---

11 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 121.

12 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 14.

of intentions as thoughts which precede and bring about actions."[13] The content of a preliminary intention plays a role in the work's creation and indeed is a part of the work's cause, but the content of that thought is not what constitutes the work's meaning. Intention is not merely directed from behind, by specific meanings to express, but directed toward a meaning the artist may not yet know. In this case, we can identify in Picasso a will to produce a kind of meaning *fitting of the event,* one that does justice to the event. The forms are accepted on the basis of their *meaningfulness.* The right forms are not simply those that express the aforethought meaning, but those that serve the ultimate purpose, which is to say something true — here, to render Guernica as what it is.

The communication model understands art as communicative action, understands the purpose of art as manifesting a meaning. The artist's action is directed by the intent to express, in the same way as the physical act of talking is directed by the will to say something. In that picture the service to reality plays no part, whereas in art it is as much the determinant of what is said as any prior ideas of what to say. The forms that simply matched feelings that Picasso could easily articulate to himself (and that he could hold in mind for matching) did not serve his *ultimate* intent, which was to paint the event of Guernica, the nature of that event, to register *what* had taken place. Certainly, its nature *as* Picasso understood it. Guided by Picasso's own sense of the event he looked for the forms appropriate not just to the sense that provoked the search (his outrage and pity), but appropriate also to what that sense was about, Guernica itself. It appears that he gradually became convinced that the meaning of 'facts' (expressible in the pictorial statements that people died and suffered and so on) was inadequate — but inadequate not to his originary, intended meaning (which they fit perfectly) but to the event. The shallowness of facts was *not* the measure of what had happened in Guernica. Picasso had begun working with a sense of what meaning to express, but it was when he stopped working that he knew precisely what his meaning was. It was an idea of Dvorak that "art does not only express spiritual ideas, it also creates them."[14]

Work on the painting was a matter of finding the forms that did justice to his subject, but *that in itself* was a matter of *transcending his own initial characterizations:* discarding the inadequate conceptions the mind throws up and approaching ever more closely the true nature of his subject.[15] The communication model understands the cause of meaning too narrowly in terms of a purely instrumental action. The purpose of painting in

---

13 ..lannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 159.

14 Bakos, "Art Historical Process" (1983), 120.

15 "In painting a picture the total problem of the picture is liable to be a continually developing and self-revising one. The medium, physical and perceptual, modifies the problem as the game proceeds. Indeed some parts of the problem will emerge only as the game proceeds." Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 62—63.

works of art such as *Guernica* is not solely to render the artist's meaning, but to decide or discover what that meaning is to be,[16] and *that* is something that involves judging whether the meaning one reads in the forms fits the event they are attached to.[17] The artist is a "maker of meaning," but only in consequence of both reading his meaning in the forms of the work by a surrender of his initial ideas to an understanding of the truth he is concerned with.

The act of meaning, far from being the exercise of some kind of *semantic will* upon dumb material, is a search in which intuitions about the right forms are pursued and various wrong turnings (the discovery of mute forms, or perhaps highly vocal forms that say what one does not wish said) are identified as such and given up. *The meaning of forms is thus not, in some psychic or human act, put into them: it is in them.* Forms are sought for a capacity that they have, and that search is what change in the development of a work is about.

61 THE APPROPRIATION OF MEANING

We can return to the schema of communication now (§ 51) with a more substantial understanding of the process the diagram schematizes — with more understanding, in particular, of the role of the work, whose stature in relation to the act of meaning is now much larger than it was. The artist begins with a preliminary sense of meaning, one that suggests to the artist possibilities of form that *might* realize it. The mark is made, the artist looks at it, and makes the decision whether the meaning that is there is a meaning that is wanted, that serves the purpose, in both senses of purpose. Of these it is the ultimate purpose that holds sway, for a form that expresses the preliminary meaning but does not say what the artist can stand behind is abandoned.

What it is important to note here is that, *strictly speaking, there is no transfer of meaning in this process at all,* although it is not hard to see why, when the whole process produces a meaning that the artist accepts, one chooses to speak of it *as* a transfer. It is a kind of transfer, *in effect,* given that there is some kind of exchange here between inner and outer, but what does not happen is that something at first only inner (however unformed

16 "When, at the end, [Picasso] was willing to rest his case on what his eyes and hands had arrived at, he had become able to see what he meant." Arnheim, *Genesis of a Painting* (1962), 135.

17 "Picasso did not deposit in *Guernica* what he thought about the world; rather did he endeavour to understand the world through the making of *Guernica*." Ibid., 10.

and tentative) comes to stand manifest in the work. The meaning is *first* registered *there in the work.*

> It is ... not quite true that this visible character first arises purely in the mental representations of the artist, then is shaped into representations, brought to definition, and finally appears distinctly for the first time merely projected into the material of the image; rather the development of this visibility is accomplished in and by means of the concrete appearance of the material of the work.[18]

There is plainly no 'semantic quantum' that has been *moved* from the one position to the other. If we are to understand the process and not deduce it from our language, we can see that the artist's role is not to put meaning in (Where? In what move?), but simply to make the mark — not a random mark, but a mark of precisely the type that would seem, in advance of making it, to fulfil what sense of meaning he wishes — and then, *seeing what meaning it does have,* to decide whether that mark is one that carries the meaning desired. The work, in its various stages, delivers meaning constantly, on its own. The artist keeps the forms that serve the end and blots out the rest. But what does it mean to serve the end?

> When someone relinquishes a piece of work as being done with, they are making a qualified statement of retrospective intention or a retrospective statement of intention or both.
>
> Even in the extreme case of an accidentally made mark — and certainly in the case of a deliberately accidental mark — if it has been left, it has been judged suitable.[19]

The role of the 'inner' act of meaning, however we think of it, has become hermeneutically negligible. Indeed, it is an unmanageable notion unless simplified to a monolithic 'meaning' that probably figures very little in the actual process of creation. For speaking realistically, "there is not just *an* intention but a numberless sequence of developing moments of intention...."[20] We have no access to these moments, and the only approximation we have of them (if we take them to be important) is their product, from which we read them back. From the point of view of method, however, that would obviously be pointless; the *emptiness* of that kind of circularity Panofsky long ago made clear ("the vicious circle of interpreting the work of art on the basis of perceptions which we owe first of all to interpretation of the work"). What is the relevance of a proposal claiming that "we can determine the artist's real psychological intentions only on the basis of the works before us — and these works for their part can only be explained by these intentions"?[21] There is no reason to rely upon the articulation of an inner act; the work is a means of communication,

---

18 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 120.
19 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 66, 67.
20 Ibid., 63.
21 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 21.

but its *source* of meaning is its own forms. Certainly there is a connection with a mind, but that is not overlooked. A work conveys because through its forms it has meaning, not because it passes meaning on (though as a human product it can be, and is, used as a token of communication). The work is not in fact a *container* of meaning at all. It serves the purpose of conveying meaning because the artist chooses the meaning that it has; communication is

an *appropriation* of the meaning of the work's forms. The intention is fulfilled only by the sign's own power to mean. Will does not *determine* meaning except indirectly, through the choice of form; the artist accepts the meaning or does not.

What we have found is that, in every form retained in a work (whether created in a stroke, developed, or borrowed from another work), the artist has encountered a meaning that he has judged suitable for his purpose. The meaning of that form is *appropriated:* that is, the voice of the form can be taken over to serve the artist's purpose, but it is accepted for its own voice. We might say that in so doing the artist finds a form that says what he or she *intends it* to say, but even that way of putting it lies open to misunderstanding, for the intention did not invest the form with meaning. This is something substantially more complex than a transfer; the jewellery box picture of the act of meaning (with meaning put into the work like a necklace into a box) is not the right picture at all. The work of art indeed carries a message, but it does not, actually, *get* a message. The forms of the work are not given any message at all; they are made, and *then* there is meaning. Those forms are accepted for the message they have, and the work is the message of all the forms together. The work of art "subsists in a peculiar marriage of the mental and the sensory, of visible appearance and invisible meaning,"[22] but that marriage is not a bringing together of something external (a pictorial form) and something internal (a mental meaning), which becomes joined to it or bestowed upon it. The external form is found and assessed for a meaning that it already possesses, and a judgement is made about whether that meaning is 'satisfactory'. The artist's mind directs this process not by transfer of meaning but by judgement of meaning. Plainly the meaning does not flow, in successive acts of meaning, from mind to form; it is judged to be present in the forms the artist has managed to produce. And the judgement does not "confer" meaning; the labour of developing a work of art would become incomprehensible if it did. What the artist has done is to configure forms in which the meaning can be read.

Artists have a facility with form, but that facility with which artists pour out images is not power over the image. The artist's facility is to produce marks: every mark, by virtue

22 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 189.

of being one, has a visual quality, and each quality has a voice. But that marks are easily made is not to say that one has the power to produce any particular voice. To have command over the production of forms is not the same thing as to have command over the meaning of forms; one can alter them infinitely, but they will be able to say only what it is in the power of the form to say. The artist's communication is wholly dependent upon what the produced forms say of themselves: this demonstrates the autonomy of the form, just as we encountered the autonomy of the symbol; the two together demonstrate the *autonomy of meaning*.

> What goes for the symbol goes *mutatis mutandis* for the allegory (one cannot allegorize purity by a prostitute or a manure heap), and in somewhat different ways for the metaphor and finally for all pictorial marks and means: forms, colours, rhythms, composition schemas, formats, materials, techniques, etc. The suitability or unsuitability of pictorial means is thus grounded in the thing itself and withdrawn from the caprice of a simple wilful act on the part of the artist.[23]

Baxandall refers to something he calls "the authority of the pictorial character, forms, and colours," by which the progress of interpretation must be directed. Specific readings

> are attached to forms and colours by a sort of practical entailment .... If the character of the forms and colours does not demand or manifest them, we do not invoke them. ...
>
> In a verbal explanation of a picture the authority of such matters, as compared to the significance of something or other found verbalized in some directory of symbols, is difficult to drive home. But their authority is primary, if we take the visual medium of pictures with any seriousness at all; they, not symbols, are the painter's language.[24]

Baxandall rejects the role of symbols in art, but of course the reference to the "dictionary" makes it clear that he is thinking of the code model of symbolism, which is the only model with any currency. The issue is the power of the form to mean. Yet is it the form that means, or the artist? It is the artist, but by *means* — by the *inherent* means — of the work. As Panofsky has explained, a work of art is action in a different sense from an historical event. History, or the "historical study of the phenomenon of action," deals with the results, products, consequences, or traces of human action. The study of art, however, does not: "its productions represent not the expressions of subjects but the informing of materials."[25]

I have tried to think of another illustration that demonstrates this 'transfer that is not a transfer' and in which the true relation between the artist and the work are exactly captured, for it is not — this, in my opinion, is an extremely important point — the *relation*

---

23 Sedlmayr, "Problem der Wahrheit" (1958), 154.
24 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 132—33.
25 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 18.

of power, where the box is my tool, which I take up when I please, fill as I please, and compel to serve me. The modern theory of interpretation, on both the communication and code model, advances a master-servant, agent-means relation that in the case of art is false.

> Poets by and large do manage to say what they mean. [But] there is a sense in which, even when their words are 'peculiar' or catachrestic, poets remain the 'servants' of their language rather than its 'masters'.[26]

It takes a more complex image than we tend to peddle to get the two positions right, and I have not found any other way to convey it but by a story. It is a story about a message, which I might call 'the predicament of the message-sender,' and I ask your patience in allowing me to set up this predicament with the weight of real predicaments, which will require a little bit of storifying.

> The background is this, as briefly as I can: a man has insulted another man who envies him and in return is challenged to a duel, which in a fit of pride he accepts. The night before the duel he walks the long way to the duelling ground, a barren stretch far from the city. It takes him all night to reach it, in the silent company of his dog. Dawn arrives, with his challenger's carriage: pistols are loaded, paces measured; the shots are fired. Our man knew he would miss, and did; the other man expected to hit, and hit. With elation he watches his opponent fall — and then, sit up: the shot had only broken his leg. The challenger throws down his pistol in disgust and drives off in a rush.
>
> Leaving our man alone, unexpectedly alive. His joy naturally overwhelms him — then, for the first time, he understands the stupidity of his action, for his first thought is of his wife, whose existence he remembers now with acute shame. More indeed than by his wound, he is stricken with the agony he is suddenly aware she is feeling, and he is desperate that she should not be left to think him dead. For the horrible thought dawns that he cannot rush home to her. In his present state the entire day will pass before he can hobble home to reach her. He has given her nothing other than *the experience of his death*. He is frantic, now, to send her a message. ... By his dog!
>
> But how, how will he do it? — the predicament of the message-sender. He can send his dog home alone. But, he thinks, what effect will that have? He will confirm for his wife the very thought he is desperate to take from her: his dog comes home alone, perhaps excited and barking! And of course his messenger, his

26 Wimsatt, "A Fallacy Revisited" (1968), 215.

dog, cannot understand him: he cannot *tell* his dog anything. Neither can he send him with any note: there is nothing whatever to write with. Nor can he attach any personal token to him, for he is aware that to receive any piece of his clothing might be taken as a cruel signal of his *death*. There is no intimate sign he could send that she would know he alone could think to send (a privately valued object, a secret knot — nothing): no sign has ever been set up for *this* situation. The man stares, lost and empty, into the dry land around him. The dirt, the rocks and weeds, bright spots of blue among the waste — cornflowers are growing here and there.

And now he knows. He gathers up the cornflowers and knots the hard stalks around the dog's collar, tying on a wreath of blue flowers; and then, shouting his wife's name over and over, he sends his dog running home with a joyful smack on the rump. His success elates him, and he looks around for a crutch.

The predicament of the message-sender is this: there is nothing there to *give* one's meaning to, no way to *say* (as in so many words) the message that must be carried, no *previously arrived at means* by which to convey it. Even if one might speak the message, the spoken message is impotent to carry one's meaning, for the message-bearer can hear no meaning. The message-sender must give the messenger (which by analogy is the canvas, the *vehicle* that 'moves' the meaning to its recipient) something that will *speak a message of its own*. The message-sender cannot not take the messenger and, as an omnipotent agent, endow or imbue him with all his inner subtlety, even with so unsubtle a message as "I am alive" (thinking, absurdly, "My dog I *make* my sign"). If he is not deluded and has not grossly mistaken his power, if he has not collapsed, in his anxiety, and forgotten the position of the other, he must face above all else his own impotence: his powerlessness to 'make symbols'. All he can do is to look, find, and choose. He looks around the barren ground for the thing that of its own says *life*. The cornflower is not *given* and does not *bear* an intimate message: it *has* the tenderness, the intimacy, and the life that *is* the message.

62 FORMS, SYMBOLS, TRUTH

We have been examining a pictorial manner of meaning that seems quite different from the manner that was the focus of part II, symbolism, but in light of where we have arrived it is worth pausing to look at the two together — even if just to get a less broken picture of the issue we are considering, for both forms and symbols are equally vehicles of meaning.

Indeed, that expression is important: both forms and symbols are means by which what is meant in a work is said. As we have already been compelled to recognize in part II, while there may be a difference between form and symbol the two are not *highly* separable, symbols in art being necessarily visual. In the discussion of symbolism it was not long before we ran into form as an element important to the meaning of symbols themselves: the factors of the *appearance* of things (§ 43). It may now be obvious that Botticelli's allegory of love and Veronese's allegory of Venus and Mars are not works of symbolism while Picasso's is a work of form: that contrast cannot be drawn without ignoring the fact that in every case these artists have laboured to control the forms, to manage all the voices of marks on the picture surface. It was on account of the particular appearance of Veronese's symbols (the kind of thing controlled by decisions of size, texture, contour, colour, etc.) that those symbols were found to hold their deeper levels of meaning, the levels at which the work first began to have much to say at all. It is, in fact, important to examine an analogy between forms and symbols that by now may not be altogether surprising.

The conclusions that we have just reached about the nature of forms — that meaning is not put into forms in some psychic act of bestowal, but part of them, and that forms are sought for the meaning they have — are the very things we have discovered about symbols (§§ 31—32). Symbols, we have seen, are the images of things that happen to *possess* certain qualities important to the artist's meaning. Symbols also, as it was necessary to discover, are not invested with their meaning and thereby made: symbols are sought. These are the features of symbols as distinct from signs, and it is symbols that artists such as Veronese have tended to rely upon. The dynamic we have now found to exist between artist and form is the same one we encountered with symbolism. When the artist works by symbol, the artist communicates through the symbol's own power to mean, by an appropriation of the meaning of things and their inherent features. To recall what Ripa explained, the artist's task is to *look for* the right symbol, the right real thing. When the artist works by form, he or she is also involved in a search — a search not for things and their features but for forms and their qualities. The artist communicates through the form's own power to mean, by appropriation of the meaning of forms and their qualities. It is a search, in both cases, for visible things that possess a meaning of their own that can be used in a communicative expression.

These clarifications were important to the discussion of codes for allowing us to understand what artistic signs are: specifically, to avoid misunderstanding what we mean when we talk about the 'conventionality of signs', an expression that commonly misleads. But the discovery is equally important to the discussion of communicative action, because it clarifies what the 'act of meaning' (a notion with an equal power to mislead) is actually

about. It is not the *investment* of a sign with its significance, but the search for and *choice of* a sign that has the *right significance*. The notions of 'instituting a sign' and of 'creating a form' are both burdened with the identical illusion: the illusion of 'semantic omnipotence', that meaning is bestowed on features of reality. The meaning in a work *belongs* to the forms and to the signs that are in it, which the artist humbly makes use of.

It may seem that mere finding and choosing leaves no allowance for the power of creativity, but the work we have looked at makes it easy to resolve this problem. Anyone might follow the order to find a sign for the expression of grief; any artist might know from his or her own experience what grief is, and conceive a form to 'carry' that meaning. But there are few who would succeed. There is a task here (at which one might fail), which is to find a sign that says, in some significant way, grief — not the word, but the reality. The role of genius, brilliance, creativity, or ability (as one chooses to name it) is the inexplicable capacity that allows a person to drag up from wherever forms come the eloquent form, not one that will be hitched to some meaning in an inner psychic ceremony but one that comes already speaking it (or speaking enough of what is to be said that it can be modified into full eloquence). This may well demand repeated trials, but give us all the trials we ask for, we would not discover Picasso's anguished woman.

Picasso moved away from symbols, and for the most part communicated through the qualities inherent in the forms his artistic powers enabled him to develop; the similarity of form and symbol must be deceptive. It indeed seems that there is far more freedom (that one has more power to 'mean') if one takes the formal route. It is worth looking, therefore, in just a little more detail at what goes on in the production of a form as opposed to the selection of a symbol. Eric Newton has discussed one specific aspect of Picasso's means of expression in *Guernica* that we might concentrate on for this purpose: the *distortion* of natural forms, the way in which the natural or 'correct' appearance of things is pulled out of shape. Not wholly out of shape, of course, for it is only because the original is still recognizable that we speak of 'distortion' (that family resemblance existing between the heads of real horses and Picasso's variations). Newton discusses in particular that focal form of the painting, the head of the horse (figure 31).

In distortion, evidently, there is both a resemblance and an inaccuracy in the representation.

> The horse's head, more ruthlessly "distorted" than any other piece of imagery, has been arrived at after a longish sequence of experimental drawings [see, for instance, figures 20, 23, 26] — attempts, as it were, to see the inside of the open mouth, to isolate the teeth, to turn the thrust-out tongue into a dagger, to reduce the eyes to tiny circles as though they were sightless in death.[27]

27 Newton, "Art and Communication" (1960), 333—35 carry the full discussion.

What we need to ask, for present purposes, is what the artist is trying to do in distorting in this way the true form of a shrieking horse — recalling that Picasso appears not to have excluded, at the start (as in sketch 5), the possibility of rendering the horse without distortion. One answer goes like this:

> The artist, if he wished, could pin his faith on a close rendering of appearances but finding that this failed to deliver the message he had in mind, he deliberately *distorted* those appearances in order to make them expressive [— expressive *of* the meaning he wished to convey] .... According to [this] theory of distortion an artist continually departs from what he sees in order to express more clearly what he feels.

Newton, however, is dissatisfied with this, not because of its concentration upon feeling but due to the remoteness from the world, the self-serving detachment suggested by the image of the artist employing the 'technique of distorting'.[28] What is of particular interest is what he says in attempting to correct that explanation of distortion. The important thing, he says, is the *accuracy* of the image with respect not to the appearance of things but to the *meaning that must be expressed.*

> The great artist subordinates "what is seen to that which *is* " even though in doing so he may ... make recognizable references to what is seen. This is not an easy notion to grasp, but I believe it must be accepted for all art though it is only in the case of extremists like Picasso that the difficulty becomes acute.... [In 'distortion'] we are concerned not with departing from what is *seen*, but with approaching more closely to that which *is* and then translating it into some kind of visual equivalent.

Newton's point is that to call this play with form 'distortion' sets the emphasis upon the wrong thing: the primary thing is not the representation of appearance (thus distortion as a breakdown of that appearance) but rather a certain kind of meaning and the approach to that meaning (which may involve transforming ordinary appearance, relatively unimportant, as forms have the power to do).

That is exactly the way in which — so it appeared — the image of the grieving mother was conceived. The minimal qualities of likeness served as a kind of subject (in the grammatical sense), while the specific way in which those features were drawn (the distortion, the 'added form' they were given) served, so to speak, as the predicate — showing what was 'true of' the woman. That is, the woman was presented *as* what the image depicted her to be (showing her grief and its depth, her loss, her relation to her child, her vulnerability). This analogy of predication clarifies how the production of a form (the

---

28 "To speak of distortions is surely to misunderstand the creative process and to think of the artist as somehow taking a stand at a certain distance (a distance always chosen by himself) from the world of phenomena, and doing his best at a fixed distance to express himself."

form of the mother, or of the horse) is a way of saying or showing something about the thing depicted. Between saying and showing, the correct choice is the latter, because (as I was most concerned to emphasize when discussing that image) nothing is merely *stated* here. To look upon it as a statement, one would have to think of it as a statement that says not only 'grieving woman' (or 'grieving woman!' or 'a woman is grieving' or 'women grieved in Guernica' or 'women grieve in war') — all of them inadequate and absurd conceptions of what art does — but that delivers also something of the nature of grief. A statement that does not give a definition, but rather shows in an experience *what grief is*. That is not something that sentences typically do, even sentences defining concepts, for sentences defining concepts do not *give an experience*, even an approximating one, of what they present.[29] What drove Picasso's experiment with this image (I hesitate for evident reasons to say, 'What was foremost in his mind') was what a woman suffers on the death of her child — what is true, in other words, about a mother's grief. It is that that Newton meant in talking about the importance of "that which *is*."

The issue in the choice of a form is an issue of truth, an issue of truth in one respect more than the model recognizes: one must truly represent one's meaning, but the very purpose of that meaning is often to represent some state of affairs, and the choice of form must do justice to it. This is an ignored aspect of a work's content whether the work deals in form alone or in symbolism as well. "An aesthetic interest in paintings is, it would generally be accepted, indifferent to the existence of the represented subject."[30] But the non-existence of grief would not simply make this form uninterpretable (as Panofsky explained) — that is the trivial conclusion — it would empty the form of all its meaning, for Picasso is not interested here in the expressive or aesthetic power of the form of forms, but in the *relevance* of the form of forms. Picasso was impressed by an event and its human significance, and wanted to say what it is that impressed him — wanted to convey the message of grief, but precisely in order to show *what grief is*, for to show what it is is to register its importance.[31]

Only in reading his drawn image did Picasso discover that the form of the stricken mother (which in state I [figure 24] appears to have sprung Athena-like fully armed from Picasso's head, substantially transformed from sketches 12—14 [see figure 21]) possesses the power to direct the mind, directing it to contemplate the bodily relation of mother and

---

29 The only analogy to be drawn with verbal statements is with predications in poetic or imaginative language — though that connection between poetry and imagination and *imagery* makes it clear that we are not dealing with so different a case as at first may have appeared.

30 Davies, "Authors' and Painters' Intentions" (1982), 75.

31 It is far too simple to reduce the purpose of *Guernica* to "communicating an emotion of suffering and grief." Newton, "Art and Communication" (1960), 326. For grief is not merely a state of feeling; it is a calamity. It is hardly just a feeling that is important.

child (the mother's own body as a bond of identity with her child), the immensity of this form of pain, human flesh as the dumb 'canvas' of suffering, and so on.

> The invented images of grief, cruelty, or hope are no longer pictorial imitations of the gestures and facial expressions of grieving ... persons. They are *translations into line and colour of grief itself* made readable by minimal references to women or warriors.[32]

Picasso's reading of the image was the discovery of an *evocative form* built of the resources of shapes, lines, contrasts, echoes, orientations, tied to familiar traces of the human body. To discover the fulfilment of his intention, Picasso read these forms as they were painted, and let himself be directed by them. He did, in other words, precisely what we do. As Newton puts it, if a little too economically, "the images are formal embodiments of an abstract emotion," "translations into line and colour of grief itself."[33] This is easily misheard as mystical talk; we can avoid that obvious mishearing by recalling the way the arrow was a visual embodiment of an abstract quality, a visible thing that itself contains a quality of love. This embodiment (a making-material or making-visible) is not a matter of finding some sort of referring device; it has to do with conveying true things bound to grief, things that define it. What is perfectly expressed in Newton's "embodiment" is that phenomenon when *what is true of grief is revealed by visible qualities in the forms themselves, their own material qualities*. To talk of "embodiment" is not meant to suggest a Platonic transubstantiation of the abstract reality into substance.[34] It is a way of expressing a real phenomenon: the recognition that there are forms (configurations of shapes, lines, tones, etc.) as indeed there are things (existent objects and events such as arrows, wheels, gracious gestures, etc.) that possess the power not only to suggest an abstract quality but to manifest something of its actual reality, to express its nature, to make that reality actually *present to experience*.[35] There is no question that this is an extraordinary event; that is one of the major powers of art. It is precisely the way in which we understood the specific quality of symbols; forms have the same potential. Indeed, embodiment is a more familiar

---

32 Ibid., 335 [emphasis added]. The phrase "made readable" is also noteworthy: for a certain form to be recognized as grief at all requires a certain kind of association with the situation where grief occurs. The naturalistic "references" are important not merely to predicate grief of people, as I suggested above, but even to the reading of what is predicated.

33 Ibid., 339.

34 In Gombrich's lengthy discussion of this very aspect of the symbol he makes no effort to *understand*, actually, what people such as Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino, and Christophoro Giarda are saying; he repeatedly calls such talk of embodiment "irrational" and "mystical". Gombrich, "Icones Symbolicae" (1948), 145 ff, 182 ff.

35 "Rather does the creative person think deeply *through* what he observes so sensitively; and his observation consists in seeing the appearances of our world as embodiments of the significant facts and forces of existence. This perceptual wisdom of the artist would be called the symbolic attitude if the word 'symbol' had not been deformed beyond recognition." Arnheim, *Genesis of a Painting* (1962), 9.

event than we think. Hofstadter talks, interestingly enough, about a different expression of grief.

> What do we hear when we hear a moan of grief? Surely not a sound on the one hand and grief on the other hand, and the sound like the grief, and the sound pointing to the grief in virtue of its apparent likeness! Also, surely not a sound that itself literally *has* grief or is *in* grief as a sound! Thus, neither does grief belong to the moan as a quality of it, nor is it an object referred to by way of the moan's resemblance to it. A moan of grief is neither itself grieving nor a copy of grief. ... A moan of grief does not in any way *signify* grief ... as pointing beyond itself to grief as something else.[36]

A moan, if we listen to it, makes the grief present to us, makes us feel what it is. The mechanism of this is of no importance, were we able even to explain it; what matters is to see what it is not, and to see its effect. To hear a moan is a kind of remote and safe yet troubling experience *of* the grief of the person who suffers. The experience is present to us, not merely in the sense of happening within earshot. We know something of what it is like. The sound embodies it. It is not a mystical phenomenon.

We tend to resist the idea of things being *present* in other forms; we prefer to say, rather, that they are *reflected* in them, or *referred to* by those forms. But that is what the both the symbolic and the formal 'relation' is not — a relation. We do not like to think of things as being *present* in images, imagining all sorts of problems.[37] But what *is* a thing if not, in part, its own distinctive features; and do those features not exist elsewhere? A portrait, for instance, is only a picture of someone who exists independently; that person is certainly not present in the picture. And yet we identify people by qualities that distinguish them from all others, by qualities that endear us to them, yet that *can actually exist in a drawing or a sculpture:* the shape of an eye, the expression of a mouth, the set of shoulders. "What appears in the field of vision is the *thing, in* a picture of it ...,"[38] at least through some of its features, and to the extent that the image does justice to its object, is *true* to it. As Sedlmayr has claimed, "it is only because there are correspondences of a characteristic kind between the sensory and the mental that a work of art is interpretable at all."[39] This goes beyond both the sensory understood as representation and the mental understood as linguistic content. We can recognize in images more than things, objects and events, coded messages, but truths about reality itself.

---

36 Hofstdadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 96.

37 For instance, "that what is seen in a picture must have the time and place of the picture *qua* picturing device." Aldrich, "Pictures and Persons" (1975).

38 "It is Tom appearing in the phenomenal space of the picture." The objection that it cannot be because Tom is in Africa is mistaken, based on a confusion of senses of the expression "in the picture." "The space-time characterization of the device will not do for what appears in it." Ibid., 603—05.

39 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 189.

63 COMMUNICATION AND THE LIMIT OF MEANING

The most crucial feature of the communication model is its hermeneutic significance, which is that the meaning of the work of art is tied to the act of meaning in connection with which it is made.[40] Understanding what that act consists in — specifically, that it is not a transfer of meaning — may have some influence on this. If a work of art means by a meaning that its forms and symbols *themselves* possess — a meaning for which, in the first place, those signs are chosen and accepted by the artist — what does that tell us about the meaning the work has? The forms of the work possess a power to mean of their own; the artist relies upon that potential, reads that meaning and accepts it as the content of his communication. *Does the artist, by his or her reading of the forms, limit their meaning in any way?* The artist does not limit the meaning of the work's final form; the artist limits the meaning of the forms developed, by changing them, eliminating formal qualities with undesired meanings. But the meaning of the accepted form is controlled by nothing. If the power of the work's elements to carry and evoke meaning should outstrip the artist's purpose, extend beyond that meaning for which the artist has chosen them, then surely the work means — the work itself — as much as it is able to convey, whatever that might be. Because of the way that artists rely upon the autonomous meaning of artistic forms, there is meaning in those forms that as for the guarantee of its existence needn't be traced to any mind.

The meaning of expressions cannot thus be "cabined and confined within the purview of human interests and purposes."[41] The meaning of art is linked to the act of meaning, but the act of meaning itself turns to the means that art relies upon, the pictorial means of form and symbol. Because the artist's intention works only through the image, it is the image and not the intention that determines the scope of the work's meaning. Understanding according to the intention of the artist in *no* way imposes a limit upon our understanding of the work itself.[42]

> The only trace of what the author wanted to say is the text we are interpreting. But that very text may also testify against the author, it may betray the author, it may tell us what the author did not want to say.[43]

---

40 "If the meaning of the text is not the author's, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning." Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (1967), 5—6.

41 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 37.

42 Davies, "Authors' and Painters' Intentions" (1982), 72, 73.

43 Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 123.

The limit of meaning cannot either be drawn by knowing "the pure, original state of the work."[44] Because of the way in which a work of art means, it can mean something not actually *in* that original situation — the matter depends upon the breadth of reading the work itself makes possible. And further, even though communication was the work's function — indeed, the purpose for which it came into existence — the way in which it means is not limited by that in the slightest. Beardsley's remark was utterly fitting: "The objective critic's first question, when he is confronted with a new aesthetic object, is not, What is this supposed to be? but, What have we got here?"[45] What we have here is always, in a general way, a configuration of forms and symbols with an autonomous capacity to mean. "The general principle is: All art is essentially meaningful, and in art it is meaningful form that counts."[46] For the nature of a work, even deeper than its function, is to mean. It is only because of that capacity that it can serve such a purpose. The meaning of a work as interpersonal communication is the meaning that, in the artist's mind, it may in some way have matched; but we know nothing about such matchings, which are fleetingly bound within a single consciousness. What we can be certain of, on the other hand, is that the work was created to be read.

The artist's own process of communication is based upon a respect for the sign's own quality, without regard to what purpose the form or symbol is to serve. *Forms have an identity prior to communication,* and it is by that identity that they serve communication at all. It is nothing but arbitrary to regard a work of art as *fundamentally* the objectification of an act of meaning. Only once forms and symbols have made themselves felt can they (and they cannot, if they do not say the right things) be taken to serve the purpose of communication. Thus works of art, which have meaning in so far as they *are* symbols and forms, cannot be defined on the basis of an identity — an identity as tokens of communication — they in fact acquire *for already having* a nature of their own. That we make the mistake of falsely determining the nature of the work of art is explained by the interest we take in that purpose it was meant to serve. An interest in the specific purposes that led to a work's production and manifest existence is naturally very great, by no means incidental to its meaning, and not deserving of any form of dismissal. But there is more to every image than the identification of an aspect. When we understand how an image serves such a purpose, and understand the artist's working relation with forms, we are compelled

---

44 Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 160.

45 In the "Intentional Fallacy" of 1958, a "viable statement of the thesis that the intention of a literary artist qua intention is neither a valid ground for arguing the presence of a quality or a meaning in a given instance of his literary work nor a valid criterion for judging the value of that work. " Wimsatt, "A Fallacy Revisited" (1968), 195.

46 Hofstdadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 90.

to recognize the autonomy of a work of art with regard to its meaning, for all its viewers. As Panofsky noted (though in somewhat the wrong connection), "works of art have their own artistic intentions."[47] For the early Panofsky, art itself, art as a whole, had its own ineluctable trajectory. That idea has now lost its charm; art as a whole is an abstraction about which we can say very little. We can talk more reliably about concrete and particular works of art, recognizing that each painting and sculpture has a power to mean, greater and lesser according to what it consists of, that is inalienably its own.

64 THE REVISED COMMUNICATION MODEL

Again, it is worth listing what we have learned about interpreting a work such as Picasso's *Guernica*, potential adjustments to be made to the model of communicative action.

> First, we have clarified how the act of meaning — the act that, on the model, defines the meaning of a work of art — relies upon artistic form. While the work appears to derive its meaning from a transfer from the mind of an artist, in fact the artist's control of meaning operates through the production, alteration, and retention of images that have their own power to mean. The work is not a 'vehicle' for a meaning that is bestowed upon its forms.
>
> We have clarified the autonomy of meaning: the power of forms, like the power of symbols, to suggest a meaning. It is through this capacity of the forms themselves that the work is an emissary of meaning.
>
> And it has become clear that, because this power is a fundamental property of all imagery, it can convey just what it has the capacity to convey. That fundamental capacity is something that purposes depending upon it cannot limit.

On another level, our understanding of intention has broadened in an unexpected way.

> While on the model the meaning of a form is identified with the artistic intention it successfully serves, we now appreciate what it means for a form to serve that intention. In the case of a work like *Guernica*, it is a dual service: in the lesser

47 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 25.

sense, a form serves intention when it fits the meaning that was already held in mind; but in the more important sense — more important because this second criterion belongs to the ultimate intention, and in the event of conflict it overrules the first — a form serves only when it does justice to the reality the work is directed to speak of. So far there is no obvious consequence of this. All that it has been important to recognize is that it is a deep part of the artist's approach to the form to judge its voice in relation to the world that voice is meant to speak of.

8

THE CONTEXT OF ACTION

65 THE ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE

The one thing obvious about the revised model is its complete omission of the original psychological aspect of meaning. Showing the irrelevance to interpretation of the artist's *initial* state of mind, that initial inner meaning — which is intention understood too simply — does not eliminate the role of the artist's final reading, with which the model also and more fundamentally identifies meaning. I have proceeded effectively as if the artist's subjectivity is merely instrumental in the process of creation, but of no hermeneutic importance. Yet the subjective conditions by which the forms were read for that meaning for which they were accepted by the artist are the very conditions, certainly, that determine the work's meaning. To understand a work of art as an inherently communicative entity requires recognizing not only the decisive qualities of the work as form/symbol, but also a *semantic context* with a decisive psychological content.

> In the case of pictures, it is specific sociocultural conditions that make them an interpersonal, rather than an intrapersonal, form of communication, through the way in which a mediating response extending itself from patrons, collectors, and supporters of the artist through to a potential public of a larger kind endows them with signification.[1]

---

[1] Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 49—50.

And without giving attention to the very conditions by which the artist recognizes meaning, the conclusions of the preceding chapter are of no clear status. For the meaning I attributed to the forms *themselves,* the meaning for which the work was relinquished, is in fact meaning recognized from a specific point of view. It may appear that I have spoken as if the meaning of forms, the meaning that serves the artist's purpose, belonged simply to the forms, whereas the theory articulates that the meaning in a work is meaning relative to a psyche, which is the artist's. Certainly, any claim that the meaning I recognize in the artist's images was the meaning the artist saw there is to project, in effect, my cognitive repertoire onto the artist, as if both Picasso and I brought to the perception of *Guernica* the same semantic context. We need, therefore, to examine these two things: the legitimacy of the model's conception of context, and the contribution of individual minds and its effect upon meaning.

As we have seen more than once already, we need to know things in order to read a painting, even at the level of representation. It is only through familiarity with the forms of a child, a horse, the look of distress, that we understand even in a general way what *Guernica* is about. And we know that as representation is the lowest level of meaning, there is substantially more to see here than that. In light of this, one has to look again at the importance of recovering knowledge of the context of production. Why, exactly, is that necessary? It is claimed that "ignorance concerning the author, his circumstances, his intentions while composing the text will be certainly of no help to the interpreter,"[2] but the question really to be answered is what the interpreter needs help with. Sedlmayr claims that "it is not possible to recreate the work of art without coming to know things that actually brought about the artist's creation."[3] Saxl, indeed, once spoke of this precisely in connection with *Guernica:* we need knowledge of its context to understand Picasso's painting.[4] Another writer has commented about a picture Picasso made a few years later (after the Nazi occupation of Royan), asserting that "background information will enhance the sense of meaning that we derive from the work."[5]

Guernica, about which we know a great deal, again offers us the chance to clarify the exact relevance of such knowledge; we can undertake a more substantial quality of research into the background of its production than is possible for most of the works we encounter in museums. *Guernica,* as is entirely clear, had a purpose. We suspect that Picasso was not concerned to assemble a large collection of forms each with its own power

---

2 Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 123.

3 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 115.

4 Though, indeed, the full object mentioned was Picasso, his work, and the age. Saxl, "Why Art History?" (1948), 356.

5 Picasso's *Nude Dressing Her Hair* (1940). Radford, "Meaning and Significance" (1992), 56.

to mean — differently, without a doubt, relative to different minds with their variable repertoires. Even if Picasso's forms have their own power to mean (thus a range of meanings relative to different subjectivities), it was not *that power* that directed the formation of *Guernica*, but *the power of the forms in the eyes of Picasso*. That single fact shifts the whole dynamic of interpretation, for in understanding the work, recognized as an inherently purposeful artefact, it is surely only *a special subjectivity* that shapes the meaning we are looking for. *The forms of the work have meaning within a perspective*. It is Picasso's way of reading those forms that matters, for their meaning was defined by that specific subjective background against which they were developed, chosen, retained to play a role in the meaning of this image. That context of production, that purpose, that specific perspective, that way of reading through which these forms were made, that judgment relative to purpose through which they were retained, constitutes the work's semantic context; that is the context within which the work's meaning is defined. We shall have to attempt to discover with what sort of mind (with what experience, what awareness) Picasso looked at the final painting and knew that it was finished, for the work in that perspective is the work constituted with meaning.

Is there not, after all, something to know merely in order to see it, as Picasso intended it, as a depiction of Guernica? There is no question, given the purpose of its commission, that that identification was intended to be made. But it is not apparent from the work itself that the painting even depicts an historical event; indeed, perhaps remarkably, it isn't even clear what sort of event we see, other than a scene of violence where the cause or the aggressor remains either invisible or ambiguous.[6] Looking at the painting does not tell us that it depicts a bombing, or the bombing of a Spanish town in the midst of civil war, or the brutal tactics of Fascism. And it is important for us to recognize how none of this knowledge (which Picasso possessed in still more depth than this — this is merely the crudest sketch of what Picasso certainly believed and felt about the destruction of Guernica) has figured at all in the reading explored in chapter seven. A question is perhaps raised, then, about the status of that interpretation (advanced only in part, with reference to details). Nothing said there about the meaning of the work's forms was based upon the knowledge that the Basque town of Guernica was bombed, and 'adding' that knowledge retrospectively doesn't alter the interpretation, because it doesn't affect the reading of the forms at all. But, surely, knowledge of what the 'original' of *Guernica* was certainly figured in the background of Picasso's reading, was an essential

---

[6] It is interesting to note the number of interpretations of *Guernica* (and the amount of argument they have involved) that have struggled to decide whether any of the painting's figures represents the aggressor. The various interpretations of the painting's figures is surveyed by Fisch, *Guernica by Picasso* (1988), 124—30.

part of the semantic context. It would thus *be* background necessary for understanding the work, without which our interpretation is undermined, according to our model, as subjective.

Here, however, the question arises of how critique ought to proceed. What is the next step in the argument, and on what basis is it made? To dismiss the interpretations of chapter seven according to the model is not to do what this study is devoted to: to find some way of testing these models, against interpretations or their objects. And neither accepting some interpretation as the standard nor reasserting the theory is an actually critical response. Perhaps what is required is a closer examination of the case itself.

We may well find it strange, sensitized as we are by the theory, that knowledge of *Guernica* would *not* influence the way the forms are read. As it happened, no recourse was made to knowledge of the original event itself, to specific politics, or to ideological positions. It so happens that that knowledge has no purchase on what the work presents. Though it is not apparent what 'point of view' we examined the work from or what 'cognitive set' we examined it with, an interpretation that ignores historical facts is subjective. Yet from the point of view adopted, nothing examined in the work failed to make that substantial kind of sense that I have called illumination. The work spoke of the *meaning* of loss, grief, suffering. These, in fact, are things of primary relevance to any understanding we might care to form of the bombing of Guernica, of war, and of ideological positions concerning the use of force. Indeed, it is not hard for us to imagine that an understanding of grief tells us more of the nature of the event of Guernica, more than an understanding of politics and knowledge of the kind of information usually identified with 'historical context' will tell us about what we see in this painting. It is possible, also, that this answers our question about critique. Whether we are to take the communication model as the measure of the interpretation or the interpretation as the measure of the model will depend not upon some finer philosophy, some deeper level of argument, but upon what each choice gives us, the benefit of answering one way or the other. Weigh their consequences. If we overturn our manner of interpreting (because it does not accommodate the correct semantic context) and reinterpret according to the model (beginning with the relevant historical facts), we achieve nothing but the placation of our theoretical conscience. The interpretation itself does not win anything from theory but the abstraction of legitimacy; and in fact it loses something. It loses depth, because the meaning of the work has been shifted from direct contact with reality to the expression of a judgement (Picasso's, about Guernica) and the prosecution of a political argument (the Republican cause). What we achieve is something *less important to the Republican cause* than reading the work as we did: an assertive protest against the bombing is empty beside a

kind of experience in which the spectator is led to see *what actually happened*. Knowledge of the context, quite to the contrary of Saxl's suspicion, does not deepen our understanding of *Guernica;* and if it is made the basis of our interpretation, it will succeed only in delivering a meaning that repeats in the language of the picture what we already knew, from far simpler evidence, to begin with: Picasso's outrage, the cruelty of the Nationalists, the horror of war. It is unlikely that what we finish with by interpreting according to our knowledge of "things that actually brought about the artist's creation" will be anything of significance by comparison with what we experienced by reading the forms. The details *present* in the work itself focus on facts of human experience that are inherently intelligible apart from those circumstances. If what theory delivers has less value, will we follow the theory?

It is hard to see, in fact, what the model would expect us to do in this case. Can an interpretation of *Guernica* directed by such knowledge actually make much use of what is in the painting? It doesn't require a position of any sort to respond to the significance of the woman's face and form, and the dislocations of the horse, and to attempt to respond to them 'in a factually informed way' gets us absolutely nowhere; we haven't the faintest idea of what we are to do. There is a practical reason why in chapter seven no knowledge of historically reconstructed "background information" was relied upon to give the work what sense was found. It is the work that directs its interpretation. We are driven outside the work *by the work,* when (equipped as we come to it) we are unable to make sufficient sense of what we see (as was much the case with Botticelli and Rembrandt, and only a little the case with Veronese). We need no external knowledge to tell us that in this painting we are witnessing the kind of suffering experienced in a real event, whether produced by human or natural causes; we do not need documentary evidence to know that such suffering exists, and is humanly caused. Everyone knows this: Picasso did not rely upon documentation to tell him to paint a grieving mother and a dead child. The relevance of the image and its connection with the world in general is clear to us in our understanding of the content. And we understand the content by looking carefully at the picture without, at least in this case, any special knowledge at all. Knowledge of the presence of Picasso's picture at the Exposition Nationale may tell us something of its political objectives, and understanding a use of the work may well be a part of understanding it. But it is a secondary form of understanding, because to understand a use of the work is to understand a use of it *via its meaning*. Picasso's political objectives were served by a work 'about' (in that wretched phrase) suffering, and the communication of that content does not rely upon any knowledge of circumstance.

The strict form of the conception of the communicative function of the work of art regards the work as containing a meaning registered within the maker's own subjective perspective. It is that conception that clarifies the exact import of the rule of objectivity: the work, as an act, is not only its signs, its forms, its material, but the perspective in which all that material was framed; only both together capture the meaning that belongs to a work that is essentially a purposeful expression. An interpretation that addresses only the work's material is based on a partial grasp of the work's nature, and the meaning it delivers will correspondingly be distorted. This view has certainly not been disproved by anything I have demonstrated about the nature of the act of meaning. And it is necessary to return to that theory, for this is the third time that an interpretation has strayed freely into an unlimited, critically unexamined context of belief, knowledge, and experience: the interpretations developed of the *Venus and Mars*, of the *Suicide of Arria*, and of *Guernica* have all been freely formed in an *untested perspective*. The strong conception of art as communicative action requires that all of these interpretations be suspended pending corroboration of the historical legitimacy of the perspective that is adopted. It does not yet reject these efforts, but it does invalidate them: they are not legitimate candidates for the responsible interpretation of these works of art. "The context cannot be identified independently of the artist's beliefs. If historical meaning is concerned with what a certain pictorial element conveys to an artist relative to a certain background, this background must be the source as the artist, rightly or wrongly, believes it to be."[7] It may yet be that, without knowing it, we interpreted within the cognitive framework that existed for Veronese, or Rembrandt, or Picasso, but prior to any such confirmation the method we have used fails the rule of objectivity — a rule articulated according to our understanding of what a work is and the conditions in which it holds a meaning that is its own. But the irrefutable logic of the strong position imposes a task for which the resources may be missing. On the face of it, there is no way to establish the universality or the non-universality of the thoughts our interpretations involved. Indeed, the very analysis of those interpretations into thoughts might be difficult.

That is the strict version of the model, according to some, a too strict version; that judgement about meaning is to be 'suspended' where there is insufficient external confirmation is to impose an extreme kind of rationalism. For many believe that meaning is a more immediate encounter.

---

7 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 189.

> Works of art of all sorts [seem] to be full of meaning. Indeed, they seem to me to be the most intensely meaningful forms with which I am acquainted. Waiting to decide whether I am to treat them as having meaning until I can tell whether it would be valuable to make that decision consequently appears to me to be an exceedingly odd enterprise. It is in my view a fact that art is meaningful, not a matter subject to prescription and the pragmatics of choice.[8]

A more immediate conception of interpretation is not necessarily counter to the theory, for the model distinguishes two kinds of repertoire; it allows for a slightly 'ahistorical' view of the human psyche, and it judges our interpretations somewhat differently. This view also requires, and no less strictly, that the work's meaning be read from within the perspective of the mind that constituted it, but it does not apply the same historicist scepticism, according to which the natural components of our psyches are presumed anachronistic and inappropriate until proven historical. Indeed, there is a genuinely theoretical choice here, and it may be argued that modern theorists have chosen the second over the first. It is precisely this decision that is the basis of theorists' recognition (from Schleiermacher to Hauser) of the inalienability of 'good subjectivity' (§ 7).[9] Once all subjectivity is suspected of cognitive negativity, the cognitive project is doomed; there is no basis on which to recover it. On this view the original context does not require explicit recovery, demonstration of the appropriate frame of mind, because the heart of that original semantic context is presumed available to us: it is a shared human knowledge. Discrepancy — that there is a critical difference between our context (as interpreters) and the semantic context of the work — is indicated not by scepticism; it will be *advertised,* turned up by a difficulty in making sense of the picture. We are directed to supplement our own minds only when we encounter puzzles that our present way of thinking is unable to resolve. All that needs recovering, in effect, is *whatever cognitive information time may have removed* (familiarity with Renaissance helmets, Neoplatonic theories, the meanings of Venus). The rule of objectivity is observed by reading the work from our own perspective and turning to historical views when that perspective fails to provide adequate understanding (when it runs afoul, that is, of the rule of explanatory power). We serve the rules of content through a perspective shared with the artist because it is human, our principal objective guide being

---

8 Hofstadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 89.

9 As Dilthey held, "Every work of art and every historical deed is intelligible because the people who express themselves through them and those who understand them have something in common; the individual always experiences, thinks, and acts in a common sphere and only there does he understand." Holly 1984, 34; Dilthey, "The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Studies." It is on the basis of that shared subjectivity that theorists have established "the principle of humanity," which states that in interpreting relative to another mind, all circumstances being equal, "you should ascribe to x whatever attitudes you would have acquired under x's circumstances." Stout, "Relativity of Interpretation" (1986), 108.

the material of the work itself. Panofsky long ago established this logic with reference to artist's statements,[10] and his view has often been echoed.

> It cannot be that on principle [the author] is an infallible guide. As a commentator on his own works he enjoys no prescriptive, or creative, rights. If he says there is red in his poem, we will look carefully in the expectation of *finding* it.[11]

Our reading of the work and what clarification is thereby achieved tells us whether an artist's statement or any other historical information has *actual* bearing upon its meaning.

Though the two approaches are decidedly different in discrimination (one provisionally dismissing and the other provisionally supporting the interpretations that have been essayed here), both versions of this conception share two basic assertions of the model: *a specific historical psyche constitutes the work's essential meaning*, and *a legitimation of the mental background of our interpretations is possible in principle*. To assert the first without the second would be methodically empty; unless one can show that one has recaptured the context, there is everything to be lost by asserting that interpretation depends upon it. The strong view isolates those specific contents of perspective by basic research (minimizing its reliance upon modern conceptions); the weaker view presumes upon an arguable continuity of human thought. It is not a specific weakness of these positions that neither can be proved. There are no operations to call upon by which to shake out the active cognitive components of an operation of mind, to peer into the original act of meaning (so as to compare the original psyche with ours), or to prove the essential compatibility of human thought. Both the stricter and looser conceptions are rooted in a theoretical 'position'. What it is important to note, however, is that each position opens up its own weakness. The weaker conception: to the extent that it acknowledges the semantic role of an original psyche, its reliance upon the work plus explanatory power (which is a reflection of *our own* capacity of understanding) to demonstrate where the modern psyche needs supplementation is obviously problematic. It compromises the theory's claim that the rules of adequacy and explanatory power must be defined according to the work. What makes sense to us (as in the case of Botticelli's 'pregnant' Venus) is no index at all of the original psyche. The weaker conception cannot live up to its first assertion. The stronger conception, while it demands that we historically legitimate the interpretation's material, cannot satisfy that demand. For there are virtually no ways actually to argue that the cognitive content any interpretation works through truly belonged to the original situation, unless that content is highly narrowed. It is just impossible to develop any interpretation of

---

10 Panofsky, "Artistic Volition" (1920), 21—22.

11 Wimsatt, "A Fallacy Revisited" (1968), 211.

Guernica at all on the sole basis of what we know Picasso to have thought or believed in connection with the event of Guernica and the material in his painting — unless we are prepared simply to presume (and not demonstrate) that Picasso held certain beliefs and dispositions. And the ones we will presume he had are undoubtedly the ones our prospective interpretation requires him to have had.[12] Fulfilling the criterion in this way plainly undoes it completely, for its very purpose is to preserve objectivity in opposition to subjectivity. In fact both conceptions are bogus method; they are rationally fitted up in order to provide a standard of legitimacy, but a look into their detail shows that neither can actually be carried out.

67 REPERTOIRE

That a specific psyche plays a role in the creation of the work is obvious. That a specific psyche is definitive in the constitution of meaning is a theoretical supposition, one of the variety 'What must happen is ...'; it is a conclusion that follows from accounting for the appearance of meaning on a model such as the model of communication. We do suppose there was a specific way in which the artist read the work at the point that it was regarded finished; it is reasonable, also, to see that as 'the reading on account of which' the work was regarded finished. We can be certain as well that there was an original 'content of mind'. But the theory requires the second thing, some form of insight into that original content so as to legitimate the material of the interpretation we will proceed to advance.[13] We know there is no direct way to demonstrate the content of any psyche, much less that of a mind active in the past. But is there any *indirect* way, a form of inference or reconstruction capable of producing something of relevance to interpretation that also has substance enough to constitute what we want to call the meaning of the work? The objective motivation of the theory orients interpretation toward something that is rich and subtle, because individual. What is this repertoire and what can we recover of it?

---

12 There are theorists who appear to want to build such a rule into the method, as in "the principle of the best explanation." That is, in understanding a poem by x we should "ascribe to x whatever attitudes would be assigned by the best explanation of x's linguistic and nonlinguistic behaviour." Stout, "Relativity of Interpretation" (1986), 109.

13 As an instance: "The chapter on 'The Period Eye' is an attempt 'to find categories of visual interest within which to address the forms of the sculpture.' Its aim is not so much to extend, refine, or articulate our own immediate responses by testing them against historical facts or explanations, but to reconstruct, as far as possible, *the visual culture within which the works were produced* and to derive from it articulate terms of criticism and visual appreciation." Puttfarken, "Causes and Circumstances" (1981), 483, citing Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors* (1980) [emphasis added]. Shearman advocates his approach, citing Baxandall's chapter as an example. Shearman, *Art and the Spectator* (1988), 3.

Wollheim discusses the artist's "repertoire," knowledge of which becomes our "cognitive stock." He is more meticulous than many theorists in allowing the richness and subtlety of the kinds of thing that influence how we see. A repertoire, a frame of mind, a cognitive background, includes such things as knowledge and beliefs, but also such things as thoughts, experiences and memories, feelings, desires, commitments.[14] Given a picture of what a perspective *is*, the proposal that we can interpret on the basis of a universal mind looks incredibly strained, for what it says is that over so broad a range of categories as this our minds are alike. To think merely of beliefs, and then only of the beliefs a person has acquired from his or her own experience, shows the peculiarity of such a suggestion. People have experiences, and by consequence beliefs, by virtue of being the people that they are (to speak in merely broad terms, people of a certain age, sex, class, race, character), by virtue of the circumstances to which they are exposed, and in light of whatever else they have learned. In that respect people are all fundamentally *limited* — they are one age and not all, one sex only; they experience these circumstances and not those, and have learned what they have learned and nothing more. Their repertoire is correspondingly particular. Recognizing that limitation is one of the essential lessons of human life.

Gaining access to a background as rich as this is certainly problematic. We have difficulty even in bringing our own repertoire into the open. In front of an image we can well become aware of some of what lies behind the way we read it; we can lay hold of some of the knowledge, beliefs, memories, or desires that influence what we see in it. But this is never a reliable operation; we are constitutionally ignorant about the role of such content (it is never the background that is at issue, and its content is not introspectively accessible).[15] Yet the theory operates as if we have this capacity in respect of not just ourselves but other people, people on whom we have not even laid eyes. The communication model leads us to search, in every case, for a highly *specific* kind of thing: contents of mind that were the semantic background of the creation (through the reading) of one particular work, at one moment of the artist's life, or perhaps over the course of that work's creation. There is every chance that that background might be something unique and momentary in the artist's life, or might be something deep and recessive — might in other words be something that a distant, merely general knowledge of the artist can never be fine enough to reveal. It is time to investigate this desideratum of modern theory, rarely

---

14 "Many art historians, in their scholarly work, make do with a psychology that, if they tried to live their lives by it, would leave them at the end of an ordinary day without lovers, friends, or any insight into how this had come about." Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 9, 19, 44, 86, 104, 130.

15 At any rate not at will, and not in toto: *specific* beliefs, for instance, come to light in connection with the occurrence of *particular* events, through particular insights.

discussed in any detail. I should like to approach the problem of the constitutive psyche once again, this time changing the example. It is altogether possible that (contrary to the suggestions of Saxl and others) Picasso's *Guernica* is a work whose meaning *is* constituted by a level of psyche that is widely shared, and not largely reliant upon the sort of information we usually think of as contextual. I should like to move back a century, therefore, to a context many regard as plainly narrower and less widely shared; it will allow us, also, to take advantage of one of the closest accounts of the issue of repertoire that I know: Richard Wollheim's investigation, in his remarkable *Painting as an Art*,[16] of the role of repertoire in our understanding of the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich (1774—1840). That this issue should be discussed in relation to Friedrich is especially significant, because it presents us with a case where the meaning of an artist's work is radically affected by the outcome.

Friedrich is still not a well known artist in the English-speaking world, and I should like to begin by indicating a distinctive and important feature of his work that has been characterized as his tendency to paint "something unremarkable" (figure 32). "Before Caspar David Friedrich, no major Western artist had fashioned canvases as empty as these. Contemporary viewers wondered at the disorienting barrenness of Friedrich's landscapes."[17] It is difficult in the history of landscape to find representations of nature that are less infused with 'picturesqueness' and the other devices that commonly establish the meaning of landscape paintings, yet Friedrich's is a body of work that often verges upon, one might almost say, the banal. If there is more to Friedrich's work than there appears in these random-looking, subjectless slices of nature, *where does it come from?* The answer to this question, as Wollheim has astutely noted, has to do with the relation between the outer, visible world and the inner world. Wollheim introduced his discussion with a remark left by Friedrich about precisely that relation.

> The artist should paint not only what he sees before him but also what he sees within him. If however he sees nothing within him, then he should also omit to paint that which he sees before him.

It is not a self-explanatory statement, but Wollheim sensibly understands it as indicative of the special relation that exists (at least with a certain type of art) between the work and the artist's mind, the work and the artist's outlook or world-view. In response to Friedrich's injunction he asks,

---

16 *Painting as an Art*, delivered in 1984 as the A.W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. It was Wollheim's citation of Friedrich's aphorism in the context of that discussion (138) that clarified its fuller significance.

17 Koerner, *Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (1990), 18.

> But how is an artist who is capable of this dual vision to paint? How does he do justice to it in his work? And the answer must be that, first, he projects what he sees inwardly on to what he sees outwardly, so that his thoughts and feelings are allowed to colour *his perception* of nature, and then, as he starts to paint, this perception of nature becomes his subject-matter. He paints nature as this perception colours it. He paints it expressively, and what he expresses is the attitude to life that Pietism inculcates in him.[18]

Friedrich painted the world as coloured by the vision of Christian Pietism; the world (in fact a piece of it, hardly more than a few acres of north-eastern Germany) as it is pictured today in Friedrich's landscapes is the world as it appears to a Pietist. It is perfectly reasonable to ask the question this raises: does the world *look* different to such a man? How *does* the inner vision "colour," actually affect, the appearance of the outer? We are certainly prepared to grant such colouring when we look at the eschatological landscapes of John Martin, the elemental animism of Turner, or even certain pictures of Constable, suffused as they are with beneficence. But to look at these vacant landscapes of Friedrich is to find no apparent trace of vision whatever: nothing seems imposed, there is no coloration; no unreal light is cast, no shape is altered, no detail is made 'interesting'. If "what the artist sees within him" cannot be seen in what the painting shows us, where does it make its appearance, and how does it affect the world that he sees (just as Friedrich claimed it ought most to do)?

That is the question that Wollheim wishes to answer, and his answer links these landscapes of Friedrich with the topic of this chapter: the semantic role of the artist's mind. As Friedrich claimed, the vision is something that occurs inside. His own vision (as a Pietist, and the Pietist that he was) provided the frame within which Friedrich saw the world, and the meaning he saw in the world devolved from it — just so with the world he saw in his paintings, that external world rendered methodically and precisely. The same inner perspective gave his painted landscapes the meaning that he saw in the world itself; if Friedrich could paint the world just as his outer eye saw it, his inner eye would suffuse it with the meaning with which it suffused the real world. As Wollheim says, it was really a matter of psychological *projection*. Projection is after all the only basis for seeing meaning in a landscape that is inherently meaningless; where else does meaning originate but in minds? Koerner, citing "the Lutheran notion of *deus absconditas*, God hidden from the fallen world," notes that German Christians in the nineteenth century had little feeling for the medieval view of nature as God's book.[19]

---

18 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 138 [emphasis added].

19 He also notes the attitude of a contemporary critic of Friedrich: "In Ramdohr's semiotics, landscape simply cannot be allegorical, since the presence of allegory can only be signalled, its message only conveyed, by objects or events out of keeping with the natural order." Koerner, *Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (1990), 125, 147.

Now we have the hermeneutic problem. That explanation of the meaning of Friedrich's work, however, poses a difficulty for the interpreter. Friedrich constituted the meaning of his work by *reading* it in the same way he read nature. The meaning of that work is dependent upon a specific manner of reading, which in turn belongs to a specific Pietist subjectivity. Friedrich's inner vision is distinctive and individual. We face an obstacle understanding works of art configured by an inner vision that we do not already share. But that an artist has a distinctive inner vision, something not shared, is precisely the point Friedrich emphasized in the aphorism Wollheim cited, which was critical of the works of other artists. For Friedrich, *singularity of inner vision* was the greatest measure of what it meant to be an artist:

> Thus [the artist] Mr. N.N. did not see anything that anybody else who is not blind does not also see, and of the artist you certainly expect that he should see more.[20]

Artists are those human beings gifted with an inner constitution that their audience does not possess. We can observe, however, that if this conception of art is taken over to explain the meaning of Friedrich's 'empty' landscapes (figure 32), it puts considerable strain on both conceptions of perspective discussed in § 66. It undermines the weaker version in explicitly stating that artist and audience do not share an outlook, and it burdens the stronger version in sending us to a frame of mind we have very little access to.

It is Wollheim's view, however, that *art is the means by which an inner vision of this sort* — a psyche, an outlook, a world-view that brings meaning with it — is passed between human beings, there being no other, simpler way to define and transmit it. His view is that this very obstacle, the problem of an unshared repertoire, is *part* of the artist's problematic. The artist cannot presuppose a like psyche, and cannot count, moreover, on the viewer having *any access whatever* to his or her outlook. An artist such as Friedrich will fail, therefore, if he sloughs off onto the spectator the task of constituting the right frame of mind. If he is going to have any success, part of his task as an artist will be to inscribe his frame of mind into the work, and make it felt. Indeed, the concrete case of Friedrich shows up in all its poverty the glibness of talk about 'reconstructing the artist's viewpoint': why should we imagine that an outlook on the world could be picked up, as *a mere auxiliary to interpreting*, where the whole *purpose* of art according to artists such as Friedrich has to do with the transfer, the communication, the teaching, the inspiration in others of precisely such an outlook. How can an artist build an inner way of seeing, a

---

20 Friedrich, in *From the Classicists to the Impressionists*, Documentary History of Art, III, ed. E.G. Holt (Garden City 1966), 84.

cognitive perspective, into a material picture? How especially when (as in Friedrich's case) it cannot phenomenally transform the image?

68 THE INSCRIBED PERSPECTIVE

Art has resources even beyond form and symbol. There are other 'devices' that one can introduce into a painting that compel a response, and sometimes they are the crucial thing, our point of entry to understanding. Wollheim says, and is surely right, that there is such a feature in quite a number of the paintings and drawings made by Friedrich. There is something in many of Friedrich's landscapes that is distinctive of his approach to landscape and, as Wollheim demonstrates, that sets off Friedrich's work from the Dutch landscape tradition it continues and with which it shares many notable features. But "there is this profound difference: that Friedrich's landscapes contain a spectator of the scene internal to them; the landscapes of van Goyen and Koninck do not."[21] What is meant by this? An "internal spectator" is a spectator that one does not see in the picture but *whose presence one is aware of* at the *threshold* of the picture's space. This is not a figure painted into the landscape (as in the staffage of most landscapes) but a spectator who we intuit is standing just short of the picture space — more or less, that is to say, where we stand (though, indeed, we are not standing on the grass or the rock, as this person is). We are aware, in other words, that the view the landscape presents is a view *seen through the eyes of a person who stands in it,* but who is unseen. How can we be made aware of someone of whom we see no trace? It is not as impossible as it sounds, providing the artist pays attention to the right things.

We can see this in *Evening*, the work we have already looked at (figure 32). Friedrich 'painted this figure in' by making various subtle deviations from the landscape genre that he came out of, one of which is the fact that the ground a pace or two in front of this spectator is painted in the foreground of the pictures, whereas in most landscapes it is cut out if not even denied altogether (as in those Dutch landscapes painted as bird's-eye views). The spectator is implied because the spectator's position in relation to the view is part of the image. In many of Friedrich's works the internal spectator is implied still more directly; one of the strongest indications of the presence of this figure comes through what Wollheim calls "the most distinctive image in his work."

---

21 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 132.

> This is the famous *Rückenfigur*, or the figure seen from the back, who stands just within the represented part of the pictorial space: such as we see in the *Cliffs of Rügen* or *Two Men by the Sea at Moonrise*.[22]

These are spectators who are visible in the picture, such as the small figures we see from behind in the middle of *Evening*, and not the 'internal spectator' that Wollheim is discussing (some one person whose view takes in the entire scene, these figures included), but they are related: the watching people we see from behind sometimes suggest another set of eyes, watching, like them, and watching what they are; they are a kind of echo. "This figure [the *Rückenfigur*], or these figures, for they often come in pairs or triples, stand in some highly intimate relationship to the spectator in the picture. They are not he, but they have been cloned from him ...."[23] That these *Rückenfiguren* (a calculated departure from the tradition of the landscape genre) imply the 'internal spectator' is of course no accident; they are *devices*, employed because they have this effect. Because I am not interested in cataloguing, it is of no importance to establish whether they are formal or symbolic devices — I think they are neither. What *is* of interest is the reason for which Wollheim discusses them: the effect these devices have, the purpose for which they are employed.

The special significance of Friedrich's work, Wollheim claims, is grasped when we are led by the way Friedrich has painted (when we are influenced by these devices) to intuit the presence of the internal spectator, for to become aware of this figure is to feel this person's closeness to us: to recognize that our eyes are, in effect, *the same as theirs*. To be aware that the view we are seeing is *the vision of a person in the landscape* — this specific awareness of seeing through that person's eyes — gives us a special relation to that figure: it is "an invitation to identify with the spectator in the picture."[24] Friedrich's manner of painting was a way of setting up precisely this experience, one in which we begin to identify with this unknown and unseeable person. And it is in this provocation to identify that Wollheim finds Friedrich's solution to the problem of the communicated mind. By identifying, we are pushed to find that 'inner vision' or particular frame of mind within which the forms of the work have the meaning they were painted to have.[25] To take up the invitation of the painting's structure is to engage in an act of imaginative identification, and in this identification with the internal spectator we are led imaginatively to adopt a psyche that is not ours.

---

[22] Ibid., 166. Two other examples are *Moonrise over the Sea* and *The Stages of Life*, interesting because of the figure turned toward us and beckoning, even if not beckoning to us. Reproduced in Vaughan et al., *Caspar David Friedrich* (1972), 31, 42, and cover.

[23] Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 168.

[24] Ibid., 166.

[25] What specifically is involved in this activity of imagining is very clearly detailed by Wollheim, Ibid., 103—04, 129—30.

The crucial element for Wollheim is who we recognize this person that we identify with to be, for according to the model it is only a particular psyche that will allow us to see this landscape with the meaning the artist gave it. The internal spectator *has* a psyche; he or she is not, as Wollheim makes clear, "a mere disembodied eye."[26] Moreover, it is a particular psyche, and it is not a matter of indifference whose we take it to be. For instance, it cannot be ours: the internal spectator is employed precisely as a distancing device from our own way of seeing.[27] His or her identity is controlled by the artist, for this is the artist's solution to the problem of delivering the perspective. Friedrich inscribed the appropriate viewpoint in his work by a device that limits our identification of that spectator, drawing us to look at the landscape through the eyes of a specific sort of person who Friedrich identifies, a person with a specific "repertoire".[28] How, Wollheim asks, does Friedrich assign that repertoire, a collection of perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, memories, dispositions?[29] His answer is by the Christian symbols that can be found in many, but not all, of Friedrich's works: ships and ruins, ivy and evergreens, anchors and crosses — symbols of mortality, eternity, hope.[30] These are the clues that tell us — not alone, but "with the aid of whatever background information we may happen to need" — that the landscape we look at in *Evening* (where there are no symbols) is a landscape seen through the eyes of an internal spectator who we are to identify as "the nature-artist of early-nineteenth-century Pietism." In other words, the psyche belongs to Friedrich, or someone like him.

In summary, the whole process is this: in the structure of the work, the artist implies the internal spectator, and in his oeuvre, he gives us the material by which to identify that spectator; we, certainly with some necessary further information about Pietism or Christianity, can imaginatively articulate that psyche, that understanding of the world; and thus — this is the goal — we can look at the forms of the work *in* the correct perspective, see as if with their minds. Through that knowledge we can "reconstruct" that sort of person's visual experience and see the landscape of *Evening* the way it is seen by a certain Christian consciousness that looks from the standpoint of faith. What this process

---

26 Ibid., 130; also 138.

27 Ibid., 185.

28 "First, then, the artist determines the identity of the spectator in the picture. ... Secondly, the artist, having fixed the identity of the spectator in the picture, will go on to assign him a repertoire. He will assign him dispositions that will generate and constrain his outer life and his inner life" Ibid., 104. The obvious comparison to be made is with poetry, where sometimes you are pushed to answer Who is speaking? and hunt for the clues the poet has purposefully given.

29 Ibid., 138.

30 This is "the material from which we can reconstruct the repertoire of the internal spectator in Friedrich's work." Wollheim argues the recourse to these symbols in an intentional or essentialist way: "Friedrich's paintings were not intended to be seen separately. They essentially form a series." Ibid., 139, 168.

gives us is the meaning of this work, a meaning that happens to go (as Friedrich believed art must) beyond the visible to the invisible: imagining this scene observed by the projecting consciousness of the Pietist, we are finally given the capacity to see the divinity within it.[31] Wollheim's account tells us how, led by the artist, we are able to fulfil the demand of recovering the state of mind that furnishes the perspective in which the work of art has the meaning it truly has. The meaning of the work is thus not open; it is because of the importance of a specific meaning, a specific reading, that the artist builds strategies of reading into the structure of a work. This is especially the case, Wollheim suggests, when a work of art aims to do more than depict; the task of the artist, Friedrich believed, was precisely to present the outer world as seen by the spiritual eye, to pass on a way of seeing that is not visual and yet affects the visible.

Friedrich's landscapes are works, therefore, that reinforce the model, for they emphasize the constitutive function of the artist's psyche, and the necessity of a shared perspective if the meaning is to be grasped. Moreover, it can be noted that Wollheim's account specifically accommodates the revisions to the model of chapter seven, according to which the artist communicates not by investing forms with meaning but by exploiting the meaning they visibly have. Meaning, as Wollheim has explained, derives from a state of mind that is in constant and intimate touch with the developing work. The artist knows the presence of that meaning in the work because he encounters it there as a spectator. And while Friedrich reads the work's forms, just as he reads nature, in a subjectively Christian perspective, he has purposefully employed material devices that can be read (on the basis of shared ways of seeing) to set up the terms of an experience that is the equivalent of his own. The internal spectator is a strategy on the part of the artist, built into the work itself, to direct our reconstruction of the repertoire.[32] For the work's meaning to be understood by others depends upon the psyches of spectators imaginatively taking on the content of the artist's own mind, a content that cannot be painted into any picture. Here the code model would necessarily fail, for there are no signs by which Friedrich could paint a way of seeing into his paintings. Such a meaning could conceivably be painted at all only by pointing (by certain pictorial devices) to the subjective context, outside painting, from which that perspective could be filled in. Wollheim's account, therefore, offers a version of the model that avoids presupposing a universally shared perspective without leaving us to reconfigure the repertoire by means of loose and superficial guesswork.

---

31 Ibid., 133, 138—40.

32 "The function of the spectator in the picture is that he allows the spectator of the picture a distinctive access to the content of the picture." Ibid., 129.

69 CAPTURING A PERSPECTIVE

Friedrich's internal spectator, we are told, was designed to lead us to adopt a specific perspective in viewing his work. The nature of that perspective he identified for us in the obvious Christian symbolism of his other paintings. If Friedrich is telling us to imagine a Pietist frame of mind, as Wollheim suggests, of course we have not only to identify it but also to reconstruct it. Every perspective is defined by a repertoire, a cognitive background able to influence what meaning we read in an image. Friedrich's works point to the outlook of Pietism, but we still have to fill in the repertoire of a Romantic Pietist. Does that collection of symbols — a feature that in Friedrich's work plays a recessive role[33] — have the power to supply that repertoire, deliver the mind with which the devout Pietist looks at the world?

What do these slight and scant signs (a cross in the mountains, a cathedral in the forest) lead us to picture as the Romantic Pietist outlook? We recognize the symbolism of evergreens and eternity, and the motifs of crosses and cathedrals, as broadly Christian, yet they do not demarcate any distinctive outlook we might call Pietist, about which we continue to know nothing. In the end, on that basis, we picture the internal spectator as someone who looks at the world with a merely Christian outlook. Other writers dealing with the religious content of Friedrich's work have found it difficult, on these cues, to fill this content in. Koerner writes, "the subject of landscape, what Friedrich's canvases are finally about, remains always only *almost* visible. ... The artist fashions his works again as altars but must leave out the gods."

> What are Friedrich's canvases the experience of? The answer provided by the artist's own writings and subsequent literature about his art, is that his landscapes mediate a religious experience. Friedrich empties his canvas in order to imagine, through an invocation of the void, an infinite, unrepresentable God. The precise nature of this divinity, as well as the rites and culture that might serve it, remain open questions, yet the religious intention in Friedrich's art is unmistakable.[34]

---

[33] In fact they don't operate very well as symbols, according to our understanding of them (§ 32); they are often virtually signs. There is no doubt that there are works in which these elements — ships sailing out to sea, ivy and evergreen — were read by Friedrich with a metaphorical significance, but it is a highly significant fact about Friedrich's work that this symbolic aspect is so emphatically unmarked. There are in most works no indicators (such as giving the symbol an unnatural prominence) that these common elements of the landscape are anything more than the ordinary world we know; in fact the especial ordinariness of so many of Friedrich's landscapes is one of the most remarkable things about them. One can hardly fail to think, trying to understand him at all as a symbolic painter, that his approach to symbolism is extraordinarily chancy. To take one example at random, consider the *Landscape with Windmills* (Vaughan et al., *Caspar David Friedrich* [1972], bottom 78) against the meaning it is supposed to convey (text on 79). Having acknowledged this, it is quite important to add that in most of his works not even these symbols can be found. Of course this is why it is so important for Wollheim to repeat that Friedrich's work must be seen as a whole, or in series, where the symbols *in those works that have them* determine the symbolic reading of all. Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 140, 168.

[34] Koerner, *Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (1990), 16, 20.

In fact Wollheim has offered us the usual means by which strangers to Pietism are expected to recapture a Pietist perspective. It is the basic method of the model: we collect our cognitive stock from research. If information is presupposed, we have to get it for ourselves, and do what we must to get it. Perhaps reconstruction is inadequate only where our distance from the viewpoint at issue is not compensated for by sufficient effort; we must undertake the labour of understanding what Pietism is (examining sources, one of which might be Goethe's "Confessions of a Fair Saint"[35]). There are many works of scholarship (such as Wind's account of Ficino's philosophy) whose purpose is to bring to the modern interpreter the required depth of knowledge. The precise nature of what we are in search of here — the specific consciousness with which a Pietist looked at nature — raises, however, a significant question.

Is a repertoire understood as what is recoverable from a body of information the thing we are looking for? Is our mind as altered by taking on a few facts about Pietism capable of configuring a manner of seeing the world (those things that defined, for instance, Friedrich's outlook). A repertoire became important precisely because of its role in an actual human experience, which (as Wollheim rightly claims) must be accepted for all that it truly is; if we are to understand the meaning of art as psychological, we cannot expect that we will even approximate that meaning by imposing a comically limited conception of what the mind holds. Because the theory precisely states that only the right kind of subjectivity — the legitimate mind — has the capacity to understand the work, we must be extremely careful about sudden lapses of standard. Any argument, at this point, that we must not expect after all to have an experience such as the artist had must be regarded as striking a critical blow at the theory. For if we are giving up on that experience, are we giving up on understanding; and if we are not giving up on understanding — if we can understand, but in a lesser way, according to our capacities — then what was the purpose of the model's talk about the origin and definition of meaning in an original constitutive experience? Of one thing, precisely in this case involving a religious view — we can be sure: a religious outlook, a Pietist way of seeing, is not even approximated in the recovery of lost facts. A religious viewpoint is not even sketched by information. What must someone who is not Christian (who possibly rejects religion altogether) think the Christian perspective amounts to? And here I am talking merely of what *kind* of outlook we picture such a view to be; the question of whether we ourselves accept the view we picture is a question apart.

---

35 Book VI of *Wilhelm Meister*.

But for the same reason — that we are aiming at the re-experience of an actual experience — that question too has a bearing on the method. Even if we are able to picture a Christian outlook (that is, to do better than a reduction to dogmas) the thing that we imagine will not be the outlook of a devout Christian such as Friedrich — unless we are one, and share that consciousness both in content and belief. If that is not the case, our repertoire is lacking in the very thing the Christian claims defines the view; faith is not merely 'one of' the components of a religious attitude. Research into Pietism is nevertheless the way theorists argue the legitimate mind is assumed, and it is on such a basis that we are supposed to flesh out the repertoire into the vital thing it evidently was for Friedrich. Precisely in view of the enterprise, it is worth asking whether my imaginary adoption of a perspective different from my own (one, indeed, that might run directly counter to my beliefs) provides the way of seeing we are looking for.

The natural limitation of our own minds, on which very basis reconstruction was found necessary, is not so easily outstripped; it is a constraint upon both the constitution and the flexibility of our minds. Consider, in the case of our understanding of Friedrich, the following passage from a German novel written only six years after Friedrich's death:

> Time has for a long time outgrown the former tendency. Those famous landscapes of an earlier time appear to us only as the trifles of a dejected Hyperborean; since we wish for nothing of nature as it is, but only a grand historical style, which, as the Munich and Düsseldorf schools demonstrated, brings to mind through noble monuments of national battles the landscape quality even of such things as important world events. The exhausted Christian-religious references hold no further attraction for us.[36]

"Exhausted Christian-religious references" is a nod in Friedrich's direction. Whatever may explain it, this writer's frame of mind seems anathema to Friedrich's work, to which he is referring. He had caught the indication that these scenes are to be looked at from a Pietist perspective, but it is plain that there is a long way to go from that recognition to the meaning of the works. Did this spectator lack information? He was a German contemporary. Did he not make the effort? Indeed he may not have; he apparently felt deeply about that business of seeing "nature as it is." If we have come to think that the artist cannot presuppose that his dispositions will be widely shared, what should we think about the ease with which the content of his mind can be taken on by different minds?

It is really an important thing (precisely given the concern of modern theory for the individual reality of the work) to respect the difference of difference. Our situation as interpreters is not merely our duty to submit to the logical requirements of theories; it

---

36 From a novel, *Der Pantheist*, by Theodor Schwarz, published in Leipzig in 1846. Cited in Börsch-Supan and Jähnig, *Caspar David Friedrich* (1973), 138.

entails that we take stock of the particularity of the work's own context, which in this case involves a distinct frame of mind. What do we know of Friedrich's world-view? Indeed, what do we know of anyone's? We are concerned here evidently with some the subtlest elements of human life, yet all we know of the 'cognitive constitution' of living people with whom we have daily contact is a distant, general understanding that amounts to little. No one has any genuine access to all those forms of cognitive content — beliefs, but also experience, memories, desires — that influence what meaning a person can see in any particular thing or against which any appearance becomes significant. We do not, in that respect, know even the 'contents' of our own minds. We talk of the mind of an artist reconstructed essentially from scraps, and are willing to pick up almost anything to rebuild a true and respectful understanding of a work of art. But the reality of the work, understood as the model defines it, will not be revealed by random leaps of reconstruction. The conception of the legitimate mind and its repertoire is entirely focused on the problem of realizing the conditions for the possibility of understanding. What those conditions must be is entirely established by the model of meaning we have set before us. It has become increasingly clear that this model imposes a conception of understanding whose conditions, when we examine them with any care, are extremely difficult to realize.

70 UNDERSTANDING

When someone tells us of an event that affected them, they tell us how it moved them, but mostly they just tell us what happened. They communicate their experience, or so we say, when they tell us the story. As an example, consider Salinger's "Franny" — the story, virtually, of a single conversation between Franny Glass and her boyfriend Lane. The two are reunited for a college game, and sit down for lunch. Lane does a lot of talking, in response to which Franny is edgily, erratically, critical, even despite herself. She reflects herself as she launches, finally, into an explanation of the significance to her of a book she has been carrying around, the story of a Russian mystic's desire to learn to "pray incessantly." Undoubtedly, it is one of the key books of her life, and it is Lane's utter failure to understand what she is saying that pushes her over into the crisis that is the entire focus of the accompanying story, "Zooey."

We don't often know very much at all about the cast of mind in which another person has encountered an event that they narrate to us because it is important to them (an event that in "Franny" was an encounter with a book). The values they hold that might be relevant to their experiencing of the experience, what it is that 'framed' the experience for

them, in what light it took place — we know little or nothing about such things, and we do not need to know to accomplish something that we call, at least, understanding. Franny does not say much *about* the significance or the meaning to her of the book (though she conveys its importance in the intensity and relentlessness with which she talks about it); she merely relates what the Russian pilgrim was trying to achieve. Lane does not understand her, but not because he does not know Franny's religious views (he knows no more about them than we do), or because he does not notice that she is keen on the book; he simply does not listen to what she is saying. He doesn't pay attention to the particular things she is telling him, and what he does hear her say he does not reflect on but reacts to in a way that rather bluntly ignores the passion with which Franny is talking. If we listen carefully to the specific things people tell us, in the manner in which they relate them, and look then for *any* way of making sense of what is thereby presented to us, we often achieve that condition we call, at least, understanding. Lane needed to listen to what Franny said; to fit that into her 'cognitive framework', to find something in her background that can accommodate what she is saying would have accomplished nothing. In fact doing that, I am certain, would have pushed Franny over just as effectively as his inattention.

The model, of course, would have us set that sort of 'understanding' in quotation marks. It is not clear, given our model of what meaning depends on, whether what we get in that process is the same mental content, therefore *is* understanding. But continued insistence upon the credibility of the model would be somewhat obtuse, given the difficulties it has issued in. It makes sense to face at least the possibility that understanding is not, actually, a matter of inferring psychological contents, and not a 'stepped' process (involving an initially constructed conception of the other person's perspective and a reading of their story from within that perspective). Typically, what we do to understand involves attending to the story and receiving the sense, so far as we can see it. We try to hear the story told the way it is told, and we work rather freely with the content of our own minds, directed by the material and what its issues are about. We may have a sense of how differently such an event would feel against our own values, and to that extent we do not indulge in them, but hold those judgements back from our attempt to understand. (Lane couldn't keep his liberal eyebrows from rising.) But we do that not so much from suspicion of an incompatibility of perspectives (that these things are not what our friend feels or thinks) but because our beliefs *could not make sense of something in the story*. In Franny's case, Lane's rationalism cannot make any sense of her *intense* fascination with the idea of incessant prayer, and because it blocked him from making sense of that intensity, it would have served him to suspend his resistance. We tend to think, in other words, that what we call 'communication' takes place in ordinary circumstances when we

do not 'take on' the psyche by which the utterer framed his or her own expression, but do our utmost to make a place in our minds for just *what* is said. And we don't tend to think of all those moments of unmethodical sense-making as failures, mere approximations of communication, or mere hypothetical possibilities of understanding that remain to be validated.

We may be tempted to take this as evidence by which to re-establish the looser cognitive view, that people essentially hold the same cognitive capacity, but it is hard to see how that can survive one close look at what anyone's 'repertoire' includes. The real significance of the example is to show that communication is something we are more familiar with *outside* theoretical analyses positing restrictive cognitive conditions, and I would like us for the moment not to rush back and replace it there. We ought now to look at the notion of the artist's perspective, the 'legitimate mind', in connection with an actual work of art, and it will be instructive to choose a work by the artist we have been discussing. To make most use of the discussion we have just been through, I should like to consider one in which the internal spectator and the 'Rückenfigur' are both present: it is a picture Friedrich painted in 1818—19, called *On the Sailboat* (figure 33).

Here we see a warm and calm evening scene, two figures seated on the foredeck of a boat: a man in green and a woman in an orange-red dress, muted but distinct points of colour in an envelope of intense golden twilight. They look ahead, their faces both turned into the distance toward which their ship glides, over dark water — and faintly we can see what they are watching, for the faint blue shapes of buildings, churches, and a great cathedral with two spires are strung out on a hazy near-distant shore that is misted in the evening atmosphere. The presence — the proximity — in the picture's foreground of a thick mast and an unusually large and striking expanse of cool slate-blue canvas, seen close to, curtains off the space in which the two figures sit: there is a sense of being separated and apart from the pair, who hold hands as they watch, as if unaware that they are being observed. The effect of the sail, moreover, makes us feel that we are close to it, on the ship ourselves: the sail hides from the couple a figure whose eyes, in effect, we share.[37] But we are not, I believe, provoked to think at all about our relation to or difference from that figure. Whether we imagine *ourselves* there on the sailboat or imagine ourselves occupying *someone else's* vision hardly matters, for in both cases our attention is really caught up by what we are seeing, by the fact that we watch the couple; we watch them holding hands

[37] In the drawing from which Friedrich worked the mast and sail seem distant from the observer; in the painting (they are the only apparent departures from that study) Friedrich at least doubled the thickness of the mast and enlarged the area of the sail. The study is reproduced as fig. 34 in Rewald, *Romantic Vision of Friedrich* (1990).

and looking toward the approaching coast, which we look to provoked by their interest in it, for we are headed toward it just as they are.

Here we have the two devices that Wollheim has so carefully discussed. Does it make real sense here to think of the two figures we see as present in order to imply the internal spectator? And is that spectator meant to encourage us to imagine a distinct (Pietist) frame of mind? And are we to build up that psyche on the basis of the symbolism of Friedrich's more obviously symbolic paintings? These, I believe, are ideas generated by theory, ideas churned up by a problematic that belief in the model wants resolved. And they are ideas that overlook what is more obvious, since what is more obvious does not support our theoretical model of the work's meaning and what constitutes it. I believe there is a thing these two figures do more naturally and immediately, without invoking any mind at all; the crucial elements are here to be *seen*. Friedrich insisted that for the artist an inner vision (a way of thinking, believing, feeling) is necessary, but also that it must *inform* the outer vision, for he believed that for the spectator it is the outer vision, *the image influenced and shaped* by the artist's inner eye, that must convey the inner view, for the spectator does not possess it. In another aphorism from the same collection Friedrich enjoined artists with these words:

> Close your bodily eye, so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye. Then bring to the light of day that which you have seen in the darkness so that it may react upon others from the outside inwards.[38]

It is ironic that Friedrich should be subjected to the conception of the legitimate perspective, for Friedrich himself did not believe that his works communicated that inner vision he spoke of by any means but his image; there was no predefined psyche against which they hold their meaning. They hold their meaning if the artist succeeds in shaping the work so that it conveys it, *for* the spectator. And Friedrich did not believe that the ladies and gentlemen who strolled into the Dresden Academy, where he exhibited, either had his inner vision already or were shortly going to be acquiring it through an effort of imagination. The whole achievement of the artist, for him, was to give people *through an image* a spiritual sense, in relation to the world, that they did not likely possess, and to do so by means of art. What Friedrich has done by the specific means of the internal spectator is to make a place for us to occupy in his pictures, to put us into the scene. The internal spectator marks a position — a vacant but intimate place in the landscape — that we are drawn to think of, in a simple and natural way, as our own place, a place from which we

38 Vaughan et al., *Caspar David Friedrich* (1972), 103.

can look upon the scene Friedrich has painted as close to us. It is an injunction to see this pictured world, as the artist has painted it, as *our* world, *not* as someone else's.

Is this what happens in the painting we are looking at? It seems especially so in this work: the place marked for us is a place on this boat, which in some way unclear to us we share with these two. (What *is* our relation to them? I think we don't wonder about that, for we are already making use of the accident that we are here.) Not only do we share this boat with them, we look out on the same scene as they with much the same fascination and anticipation. We are thus made at home in this world, and at the same time made to share the fascination it holds for these two with whom we share it. The suggestion of the internal spectator marks a space that demands to be filled with a human mind, but that is all: it has no power to prescribe anything about what sort of mind that must be, other than human. The work simply draws us into the stance of the internal spectator, so that it is our human person, our thoughts, feelings, and dispositions that fill it. The vacuum of the internal spectator in Friedrich's paintings is an invitation to occupy, and it continues to exert that power. That is also the implication of the *Rückenfiguren* so peculiar to Friedrich's work, whose effect a writer recently described in comparison with some recent photographs.

> It is a curious, indeed a strange device, that has me observe a figure that, in turn, is observing. My gaze wants to follow a gaze that I do not see, but that I can envision and imagine. It is a device that almost enables me to put myself in the other's place, become that other, slip into another's skin, use my imagination, let the fiction take off, inhabit the *hors-champ*.[39]

These figures are just the ordinary people of Friedrich's day (can we tell which is Christian, which not?). They sit or stand always not far away, doing just what we are doing, standing and staring into the landscape (even if *we* do it in a gallery). The fact of seeing them silently looking, almost spellbound, is especially seductive: more than what is in their minds, we want to know what catches their attention, and because we cannot ask, we must simply look. In *On the Sailboat,* our eyes move the slight distance from this intimate pair to the faint silhouettes beyond them swathed in this dull and glowing evening light. We are thus drawn to think about the place to which the boat seems headed: a rather strange and wonderful place, for it seems a city of churches, although at this distance it remains still quite indistinct. Simply because the image brings these things together in our minds, we wonder too, quite naturally — they are the elements of greatest interest here — also about the relation between the couple and the place. We catch the sense from their quiet absorption that perhaps they have never been there before.

---

39 A comment on Friedrich's man looking down into the mist. Richard Baillargeon, "Reflecting upon this Landscape: The Imagery of Raymonde April" in *Frame of Mind: Viewpoints on Photography in Contemporary Canadian Art* (Banff 1993), 102.

Our natural attempts to penetrate the air of mystery in this picture do not fail, unless we do not have this habit, to explore "correspondances,"[40] for this is quite simply a natural way for human beings to contemplate an image. In our minds we explore the possibilities, and I begin with this one because it is one that I found went far. It has recently been remarked of this painting how in the past "the distant harbour [has been seen] as 'the beyond'."[41] The suggestion was that (following the sign conception of language) we recover the historical code of its meaning as a sign, or (following the psychological view of language) that we reconstruct the artist's perspective by historical inference. But neither of those elaborations is called for in support of this reading, simply because the distant harbour *is* the beyond, literally speaking, as anyone can see. Being aboard a boat looking out on one's destination, which is lit up in a hazy and unfamiliar light, and shrouded in an air of expectation that we pick up from these two people whose eyes are fixed on it — the scene has the power in itself to make us wonder, muse, about the destination. And one of our thoughts is simply *that:* it is the thing ahead, the unknown place, the unreached distance. The ethereal, mist-shrouded town with its skyline of spires, to which the couple both look and toward which the sailboat advances, is the distant destination they are moving towards. And in that light another analogy springs to mind, an analogy with the sailboat: "nous sommes embarqués," words that have always struck me (like many) as a powerful image of the condition of human life. We have set off: the voyage has begun: there is no turning back, and no standing still: we are being carried every moment, brought every moment closer to the terminus of our voyage.

Is this to say that, through our intelligent supposition of Friedrich's beliefs, the meaning of this picture is the Christian 'beyond' — the skyline a metaphor of heaven, and the sailboat a metaphor of Christian life (moving toward its beautiful destination)? The rule of objectivity, clarified by the communication model, compels us to develop our interpretation through a reconstructed perspective such as this. In light of that method, an interpretation of this sort becomes instantly viable, because it fits our image of Christian thought. The analogy, taken in that way, satisfies the rule of objectivity. But it is important not to give up our simpler understanding of the way the picture invites us, the spectator with a 'repertoire' (feelings, beliefs, convictions) of his or her own, to feel present in it. And something that can never be forgotten in looking at Friedrich's work is the thing that

---

40 As in Baudelaire's poem of that name, from *Les Fleurs du mal* :

> La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
> Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
> L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
> Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

41 Rewald, *Romantic Vision of Friedrich* (1990), 50.

we were struck by in this and other works: their sobriety, their plainness, their simple 'realness'. This is an evening at sunset. It is even less than that, for we do not even see the sunset: just a brown boat, a couple, dark water, a very faint and sketchy shoreline, and a warm sky with hazy clouds. Nothing here is unreal. If the city seems a little too celestial, that is only because we are not used to seeing towns with quite so many churches. But this town is not fantastic or improbable: its buildings are the ones familiar to Friedrich from a trip he made in 1818. (They are "a poetic amalgam of the spires and buildings of Dresden, Greifswald, and Stralsund," some of which he sketched on a trip made in the year he began this painting.[42]) Once the analogy of the city as the 'beyond' is provoked, merely by looking at this presentation of that literal condition (a man and a woman travelling, looking out on their destination), its link with reality remains central. *We see how that idea of the beyond explicitly fits this simple event from life.* That is an especially interesting result, for it is as if Friedrich has asked that we reflect upon the phenomenon itself: that we think of how a certain activity in our own lives in the world (travelling and looking, an event which this painting invites us to share here and make our own) is analogous to that perhaps too-familiar talk about our spiritual destiny, talk of the 'direction of our lives'. That is, Friedrich has enjoined us to reflect upon the general possibility that *things in the world* picture to us our spiritual condition, while leading us to explore the specific implications of the mundane event we see.

If we think about why a scene or an image of that scene (as here) should have such power, we become aware that it brings together a set of relations. And it is suddenly clear how this painting constitutes a powerfully simple emblem of a certain relation, one that is perhaps more complex than we might at first think: the man and the woman, who take each other's hand, look into the distance toward their destination; they do not look at each other, but joined together look toward that distant vista. It is a relation of man and woman joined but oriented not toward each other but toward some destination to which both are heading. The painting presents to us, in the material of the *world,* that evocative relation. It does on what evidence? Simply on the evidence of looking at the forms of the painting, reading them (seeing what they are and feeling what they do), and thinking about what is put before our eyes, led by the work's emphases and manipulations. And what of the role of subjectivity? Getting ahead with this (the business of looking) has required a certain familiarity with the appearance of things, and an ability to take the clues of form (to read closeness and distance, to look most at what is emphasized, and so on). It has also involved a certain familiarity with life, in two senses that are worth distinguishing. The

---

42 Ibid., 48.

familiarity that allows us to conclude that what we see is a real, possible, in-the-world event (not something that could only be fabricated in a story or a painting), and the familiarity that provoked our awareness of the analogy, that suggested how much this situation is *like life itself,* the knowledge that makes us think, at the very least, how life is like a journey by water (the point of departure behind us, the ineluctable influence of wind and sea, the distant but visible terminus we approach).

Is this content, this manner of thinking, legitimate? That is the question addressed by the rule of objectivity, and its concretization through the conception of art as communicative action. There is *no indication,* so far as we have gone on the prompting of our own understanding, that we are imposing a content of mind that (again by our own understanding) we could attribute to the 'speaker', who is Friedrich, nor is there any indication that he would not have thought such things. No question about Friedrich's perspective has figured in this process at all. We might, at this point, care to assess these perceptions, and make a series of judgements to decide which of the thoughts we have raised we could historically and rationally attribute to a Pietist, or a Christian, or a person like Friedrich. But I am not pursuing the method. The process of what I have done is something more like the effort of understanding sketched at the opening of this section, in which a person listening to a narrative is mostly concerned just to make sense of the details. And it is important to recall that I did not come upon the image of the beyond by trying to find a sense that I believed Christian, a content of the legitimate mind more than ours; had I done that I would certainly have talked of "heaven", which I have so far not mentioned, but which the stereotype tells us all Christians believe in. My own interest in the 'story', my desire to make sense of it, has not tempted me to do that. It is worth the effort to pause and examine how, following the model instead, we could benefit from this reading. The model's conception of the legitimate mind positively compels us to understand the beyond in this work as the Christian afterlife.

71 THE PARADOX OF EMPATHY

The psychological model of communication requires that we attempt to reconstitute the cognitive background of an original experience constitutive of the work's meaning; that involves what has been called a "reconstruction of the repertoire." Once that has been accomplished (through the research Wollheim's account called for in § 69), reading, which is our attempt to envision Friedrich's perspective, becomes a process of *informed empathy:* that is, something built on a foundation of Christian knowledge and brought to life by an

imaginative effort to see his work in terms not actually ours. It would be perfectly *fitting*, therefore, to read the city in Friedrich's picture as a representation of the Christian heaven. Assuming for the moment that we are among that group of free-thinking non-Christians (which is perhaps statistically likely), interpreting will therefore involve advancing an understanding of the painting in terms of concepts that we not only do not already share, but that name things we do not believe in. To understand the work for itself (in respect of its originary psychological meaning) therefore has the consequence that it cannot mean much to us except as an *illustration* of that view. Our empathic experience is not going to be an experience of belief, but an experience rather more like entertaining a belief; what it will give us is a sense of Friedrich's world-view, but it has nothing to say to *us*, directly, about life, as it does to the Christian.[43]

Accepting the approach of the model will therefore *guarantee* that we will reconstitute a work that is *less* than what it originally was in *two* distinct senses. First, it will have an historically legitimate meaning but it will not be *meaningful;* despite the fact that Friedrich experienced it as meaningful, not historical — historically, he experienced it as meaningful. The whole motivation of the painting's creation was undoubtedly an experience of meaning in a deep sense. Second, we will not have recovered even the *substance* of the experience that configures the work's actual meaning (as the model understands it): far from recovering that experience with its original depth, we do not even have the kind of experience that Friedrich had. Our experience is not an experience that *we* have; it is a second-hand, a 'used' experience, in which we are picturing someone who is not us (the artist or the believer) addressed by a certain kind of meaning. But to *recover,* to *have* that experience was the very purpose of invoking repertoire and the idea of the Christian afterlife in the first place. The experience that *we* have, with the concept of heaven, *cannot be* the constitutive experience that produces the work's meaning, either in content or in quality. Now it is indeed hard to see how a result like this can be counted 'understanding'. That moral objective for which the theory of interpretation was outlined and a conception of the work developed is now looking rather high-minded and ethereal. The model is paradoxical: *the imposition of the legitimate mind undermines its purpose.* If on the other hand, forgetting the impulse to think our way into understanding, we simply look for a sense of the 'beyond' that means something to us, we *will* happen to give the work a meaningfulness such as it originally had for Friedrich. We end up actually closer to the artist's experience, since we have an experience like it in at least one crucial respect. Of

---

43 Theorists are *insistent* about the necessity of not believing in the foreign view. Forster criticizes too complete an adoption of perspective: "Instead of seeing through the mystifications that the work may reproduce, the interpreter makes himself another quasi-believer of the very ideology he is setting out to analyze." Forster, "Critical History of Art" (1972), 467.

course by our model we still do not have the right meaning, for we are replacing the legitimate mind with our own.[44]

In my sketch above (§ 69) of understanding a person recounting an event, I mentioned the occasional need to suspend our own values when we sensed they were incompatible with what the person was saying. While that may appear to be the same kind of empathic suspension in which we set aside our own conception of what the city in this painting means (replacing it with the Christian conception we attribute to Friedrich), it is actually not the same thing at all. For if you recall, in the sketch our understanding listener made no attempt to analyze the story-teller's mind. That suspension was called for only in a specific instance, a kind of impasse when by drawing upon our own values and conceptions *we cannot make sense of or accommodate something in the story.* In Lane's case, suspension of his judgement that prayer belongs to the category of uninteresting things was called for, because from behind that judgement Franny's utter *fascination* with the idea of prayer — apparent in her whole manner of talking about the book — could not be registered. It could not be taken into account. If in that case we imposed our own rationalism, something in the story's telling would have to be ignored. Our interpretation of Friedrich's picture, however, did not give rise to any such problem. On the contrary, we did a lot with the picture's stuff thereby. We do need to make something of the city on the horizon, which the scene gives importance to. And perhaps we should pay still more attention to what else is in the work, for that would only be to allow the painting to function as art and "act upon us from the outside inward."

As we have noted, there is something much more in evidence in this picture than its horizon; without making anything of it, we have noticed how strong an image Friedrich's painting presents of a relationship involving a man, a woman, and their destination. It is fascinating, in light of this, to know a certain fact, though we do not need it to pursue the suggestion of the relation in the image itself (it will not distract us from working from the outside).

> The forty-four-year-old Friedrich, seemingly a confirmed bachelor, married in January 1818. His friends were astounded. The following summer, Friedrich took his bride, Caroline, to Greifswald to present her to his family. From there, Friedrich and his brother Christian, together with their wives, continued along the Baltic coast, visiting Wolgast, Stralsund, and the island of Rügen. Upon returning to Dresden, Friedrich evoked the voyage in this painting....

---

[44] Shiff offers a rare acknowledgement of this problem, though suggesting that we can genuinely shift our belief: "The root of the problem is in our own identification with the object we investigate. Close identification seems to make us understand things better, yet become subject to the blindness of the moment we seek to illuminate, whereas psychological distance from our object may render the account of it shallow." Shiff, "Art History and the Nineteenth Century" (1988), 38.

As the writers go on to say,

> the couple holding hands in the bow of the boat might thus be seen as a double portrait of the artist with his wife, Caroline (though not a literal one, since Friedrich did not have long hair).[45]

It is not, indeed, much of a portrait, since we see so very little of who these people are. In fact it is just a representation of them as *Mann und Frau,* a portrait of their *relationship*. The isolation of the pair in this painting suggests this of its own accord. This is a 'couple': the man and the woman are together by choice; it is they who take each other's hand, they whom they have chosen to make their journey with. But though they are by no means distant from each other — they keep hold of each other, and their tenderness toward the other is part of what this gentle atmosphere suggests (as if the evening light pictures them as they are) — their attention is *not focused upon each other*. It is focused on the 'beyond' that we have been discussing; both fix their eyes upon the same thing.

Again, the voice of analogy suggests that this painting is a portrait of a marriage: it is an image that presents a marriage as a union through the 'course' of life, but a union focused upon something that lies beyond both husband and wife.[46] The relation we noticed pictures the man and the woman united in their awareness of this something beyond them, a shared destination to which both are turned. Again, the analogy of the journey leads us to see that destination as the terminus to which their lives are moving: it is, in that simple sense, their destiny. But it is also pictured here as something beautiful, something that captivates: it is something that focuses the partners, something more sustaining than each other. The painting thus gives us an image suggestive of a thing that has the power to guide a marriage, a source of meaning that lies outside the partners themselves. This is what the painting *shows* us; it is not a way of reading based upon a reconstructed perspective. It does not show us, indeed, that there *is* such a thing in life, but the beyond as we see it *here* is such a thing. The painting, in other words, has led us to contemplate this, and in that free-moving (but image-directed) process of reflection we have formed a more substantial conception of the 'beyond' than any derived from ragged stereotypes.

Our interpretation, to this point, overcomes one aspect of the paradox, for it finds a sense in the painting that has meaning. We are reminded that a union between a man and a woman is not merely an arrangement, two people coming together, and we are driven to think of what beyond them can unite them and sustain that union. The suggestion of the painting — for in fact there is one — is that it is the direction of their lives, that their lives

---

45 Rewald, *Romantic Vision of Friedrich* (1990), 48.

46 It is interesting to note that Nicholas and Alexandra bought this painting out of Friedrich's studio on their first trip to Germany three years after they were married. Ibid., 50.

are turned toward the same thing. The work conveys a reality that we recognize as reality: it presents a human relationship; it raises an analogy with the condition of life; and it also suggests a truth (in the idea of lives oriented by the same purpose) that (whether we accept it or not) rings substantially true enough to give us pause — it suggests something that *may* be true. Our interpretation is built up out of the presentation of the work (as chapter seven argued it must), but also (as we understood in part II) upon truth to our understanding of reality. In that respect, in respect of its meaningfulness, the work stands *in the same relation to our mind as to the artist's*. It is not second-hand experience. We enter into it because it can be found to tell us about the world, and engages with our own thought and feeling.

Koerner's discussion of Friedrich is remarkably insightful in this respect. He begins quoting a contemporary's comment upon Friedrich's work; "Christian August Semler describes the unique capacity Friedrich's canvases have to *mean* in many ways." As Semler wrote,

> Among the numerous types of allegorical images there exists one kind of image ... in which an artist does not attempt to express a specific sequence of thoughts, but rather puts together a few symbols of some quite comprehensive ideas which, in their relation to one another, intimate only something very general. Beyond this every viewer is *left to think through these relations according to his own individual direction and feeling*. In such ambiguous [*vieldeutigen:* lit., of manifold meaning] allegories, it is very possible that the artist himself interprets his work differently than many beholders; but this does not at all detract from the value of the image ....[47]

Koerner comments upon this, remarking that "it is in this context that we can understand Novalis's famous statement: 'The true reader must be an extension of the author.'" But he does *not* mean what the communication model understands by that; to be an extension of the author is to read the work with the same genuineness as the artist. As we have seen in the paradox of empathy, reconstruction mimics the artist's mind but fails to achieve *anything like* a real or genuine meaning, a meaning that has meaning. It is an axiom of the model: a work of art, presumably, is meaningful for the artist who creates it. Only a response in terms of the only sense of reality there is, one's own, has hope of achieving real meaning; only then can the parallel of real experience that the model aims at become possible.

> For the process performed on the work by the critic is the same as that performed upon the world by the artist. Both are fundamentally acts of reflection: the art work as reflection of the experiencing subject in the landscape he experiences; criticism as reflection of the viewer within

---

47 Christian August Semler; cited by Koerner, *Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (1990), 62 [emphasis added].

> the work of art. Within this hall of mirrors, a viewer can no longer judge works of art from a distanced or objective position, for he himself will be fashioning art.[48]

It is partial to the influence of the theory to say that our own thought and feeling is merely 'projected' upon the work. The work's own explicit qualities resist the imposition of anything that does not suit it; we only need to suspend (as when we understand someone talking) those thoughts of ours that repel the work. The articulated work draws this reading from us, just as it is the detail of a story we are told that helps us to understand it. We have been concerned in this chapter over the problem of how we must read an image structured in its meaning by a mind that is not ours. The solution is that we not begin with a theory of communication that leaves us nothing by which to make the experience of art a real experience, as it was for the artist. We do not introduce the problem of the compatibility of minds. This leaves us in a weak position beside the rules of content, but the real, substantial, immediate question is not how to satisfy a theory; it is whether there is anything at all that makes art meaningful that we can count as understanding.

72 THE COMMUNICATION MODEL RECONSIDERED

We have a hermeneutic model of art as fundamentally a form of communicative action, which perhaps requires revision. The revisions, however, that alter the three elements most in need of fixing — the role the model assigns to a transfer of meaning, the role it assigns to the appearance of the work, and the conditions of understanding — leave the model in a state in which it no longer serves its purpose. Let's make those revisions.

> The creation of a work of art does not involve a process of *transfer of some cognitive content,* in which something is moved from the artist's mind into the marks. That is something similar to the view Wollheim dismisses as the old-fashioned 'contagion theory' of meaning, by which a work of art takes on the emotion in which it was made;[49] but there is not even a more sophisticated kind of transfer. The act of meaning is not an act of putting meaning into a sign. It involves

---

48 Koerner, *Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (1990), 62—63.

49 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 44.

several less mysterious things,[50] and it is actually the production of an image in which a meaning that serves the artist's purpose can be read.

It is able to do this by virtue of its *appearance* (its forms, symbols, and other devices), which has the power to suggest meaning. The artist relates to the work as the creator of this appearance, and also as its reader. But the artist does not relate to the work as the master of its voice. The *autonomy of the image* — that forms and symbols themselves have the capacity to evoke meaning[51] — is the very power that the artist draws upon to produce a form that is able (if properly shaped) to serve his or her purpose. Things have meaning: it is a fact about life.

Merely to understand this much has a rather powerful effect upon the model. The artist is both the master and the servant of the image, but in the same way that the parent is master and servant of the child. The parent is master of the child in creating the child, in controlling some of what the child will do, and in getting the child to do the parent's bidding. But it is a limited and ultimately illusory kind of mastery, because the child can only be controlled to a certain extent, and will do the parent's bidding only when he consents; ultimately the child has his own will, and the parent that does not recognize the child's own identity, does not acknowledge its absolute sway over any purpose of the parent, will become irrelevant to the child if not also destructive of him. The child has his own voice. The artist has a task for the work to do, but it fulfils that task through its own voice. The autonomy of that voice is precisely what the artist respectfully relies upon to carry her message. But the potential of that voice is not exhausted by any service it has the power to render. Its potential may well be limited, but it is not limited by the artist's plans or the artist's readings; it is limited by what it is able to do. The model's careful deduction of the conditions of understanding are either to no purpose, or of no relevance to the theory of interpretation:

---

50 A sense, at least, of the meaning one wishes to produce;a desire to realize it; a procedure that involves producing or choosing forms and responding to the meaning they have; and an act of recognition that *the* (or *a*) meaning that one wishes is evoked by the work's material.

51 We are inclined to say that, "by itself alone, no symbol either means or has meaning but is merely a sound or an imprint on a physical object." But that a specific tear-shaped eye makes the eye cry more emphatically; or that what lies on a shoreline that we sail towards arouses a consciousness of the 'beyond'; or that a particular visible relationship (a man and woman, who have embarked on a voyage together, holding each other's hand but turned toward that distance) brings to our minds the thought of a man and a woman joined to each other but directed by something outside them, to which each is turned) — that we see these things is not to see anything added to the images we see, or imprinted on the forms of the work. Things, as we experience them, *have* meaning: that is how they strike us.

> The work before the interpreter is no less itself than before the artist: it means what can be read there. Reading is all, at the decisive moment, the artist did, and the artist did so because that is how the meaning of the work is to be found. The *conditions of understanding* are the conditions of a reading that deals with what is there.

There is no way to draw a limit of *essential* meaning without going back on our recognition of the autonomy of the form. The model is supposed to give a concrete definition to the rules of content, marking the limit of what our interpretation can include. But the substance of our interpretation must be drawn from within the context of the artist's intention only if we can make intention (something that is in fact *responsive* to the work) *all* that the work contains. It cannot be. There is no reason to say that it is. The claim that at a certain moment the artist looks at a painting and sees in it a meaning fully defined and constituted there is not to say that that reading is exhaustive, and is even less a reason for saying that the meaning of the forms themselves is limited. All that these facts do is establish guidelines for a possible way of reading. But it is because method is interested in exclusion that the false conclusions are drawn.

The influence on modern thought of the paradigm of objectivity is hard to overestimate, and it is the main reason why mistaken and even damaging conclusions are drawn about such matters as the meaning of art. Accordingly, understanding works of art is impossible — that is, one's efforts to understand will have no cognitive claim whatever — unless the process of interpretation is oriented to the object, and protected from subjectivity. That, by itself, means that a line is to be drawn between legitimate and illegitimate interpretations. The logical categories of interpretations are clear; only we need the line, the translation of the theory to particular cases. The modern mind, focused on interpretation, is looking for an objective/subjective principle of exclusion. The communicative nature of works of art is important precisely because it appears to deliver that. Because the theorist is looking for a principle of exclusion, he finds one in a series of ambiguous and even misleading circumstances, capable of misinterpretation. The merely apparent conclusions could be avoided, but those conclusions are the ones that deliver the standard.

> Merely on a logical basis, the fact that there are certain "mental phenomena with *causal power*"[52] does not tell us about any limit to the meaning of the work caused, nor does it advertise any necessary condition of seeing that meaning.

---

52 Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (1984), 19.

> The fact that we *lose information from the past*, and with it lose the meaning of things, or the fact that such *knowledge once belonged to the artist*, does not tell us there is a specific cognitive stock against which the work of art is itself. The fact that inside an historical world (such as that of Ficino) particular works of art come to life, recovering a sense they once clearly had, does not give us a general rule either, telling us that every work, as itself, has a capacity to mean only or essentially or primarily in such a world. That we may *need* to recover certain information to make any sense at all of some particular work does not actually give us any general indication of what cognitive capacities must be acquired for understanding to be possible.
>
> It has been claimed that "linguistic communication *essentially involves acts*." No doubt that is so. Communication does. Art is action, and what it communicates (in that it does) it communicates through actions of making and of reading, but that does not tell us what the conditions of meaning are. Works execute such a function by virtue of the meaningfulness of their forms; the power of those forms is not restricted by any action but the actions that make them appear as they do. That art is action is not therefore a sufficient characterization of its identity; it is too narrow. But there is no point in developing a broader characterization of art (in terms of the power to mean, the inherent meaningfulness-for-people of visible reality), because such a definition would not satisfy the method. It would not deliver a limit stiff enough to serve the basic dichotomy, which is the only purpose for which an identification is required.

The pressure behind these errors of exaggeration is the need to support a claim about what meaning a work does and does not possess. By identifying art essentially as action, we claim to perform art the service of directing hermeneutics toward its real meaning, away from meanings it does not possess. But of course we have not, and what we have done is something extremely destructive.

We have artificially established the limit of its voice, for our analysis illegitimates interpretations of the same quality as those that we took as our paradigm, the interpretations of artists. What is the loss? The power of the work to mean, which is the *basis* of the artist's reading, is rendered null. For we are not to read, but rather to reconfigure the finished reading of somebody else. And the problem with that is that the work of art, which is essentially a mouthpiece of reality, has nothing to tell us but historical data. The

work of art, we say, "exists essentially within the triad of artist, work, and reader. Such an assumption must be the starting point of any critical effort." If the work exists "essentially" within this triad, then a critical interpretation must begin there; yet methodical thought intends also that it remain there. It may appear to us that nothing is left out of this triad, but it is notable that there is no mention of the world in which artist, work, and reader exist; the world does not figure among "the elements involved in arriving at the meaning" of a work. The reason for that is that the work is seen to exist — as it does not for the artist — and to exist fully, as a psychological event. Yet by virtue of the artist's means — imagery — we realize "how little the subjectivity of the act of meaning suffices to denote the object of understanding."[53]

53 Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics" (1964), 102; Gadamer, "Foundations of the Twentieth Century" (1962), 122.

P A R T F O U R

ART AS CULTURAL

The task of criticism is to distinguish and to characterize the mechanisms of production of those effects we notice and are moved by. But first we must set aside those effects and meanings which we ourselves have caused and produced, for in describing those we do no more than reproduce our culture — and ourselves as its clients. This is to say that an adequate reading of a work of art will need to be reflexive as well as descriptive — or reflexive in order to be descriptive.

Charles Harrison (1991)

The Western may say that Kali was an objectification of the Indian mind, making a Divinity of the Power of Death. An Eastern may reply that She is the Samketa (symbol) which is the effect of a Spiritual Power on the Indian mind. I do not pause to consider these matters here.

The question before us is, what does this imagery mean now, and what has it meant for centuries past to the initiate in Her symbolism?

John Woodroffe (1922)

9

THE CULTURAL MODEL

73 DETERMINATION OF THE OBJECT, iii

Modern interpretation is theory-directed. Is there a form of interpretation that is not? It would be hard to picture any even minimally plausible form of interpretation about which we could offer no theoretical clarification, or that had no investment in arguable concepts, but a hermeneutics directed by theory involves something beyond both. The thinking outlined in chapter one shows exactly what: the major contrast with theory-guided interpretation is undisciplined interpretation, an interpretation guided by no "controlling principles," sensitivity to the pitfalls of interpretation — of which the principal form modern thought recognizes is subjectivity, projection, the failure to distinguish interpreter and 'other', the work of art. After almost two hundred years of development, modern interpretation has advanced beyond the basic awareness and answered the primary question; it has identified what specific features of that other must be respected if that invitation to misunderstanding is to be avoided. The general answer to that question, which tells the interpreter what in principle to do and to avoid doing, is the basic 'method' of modern interpretation (outlined in part I). The material answer, which tells the interpreter what *specifically to pursue,* follows from clarifying the nature of the thing we are interpreting, the object of interpretation.

There is not necessarily only one answer to this question; modern thought delivers three, three specific conceptions of the work that serve as the boundary markers within

which what counts as legitimate interpretation is regarded to take place. We have looked at two of them. First the view that what interpretation demands is defined by recognizing that *the work of art is an expression in a human language:* the interpreter must approach the work as a construct built of signs whose meaning is fixed within conventional sign systems (part II). Alternatively, or in alignment with that view, *the work of art is the expression of the meaning of its artist:* the interpreter approaches the work recognizing that the meaning it holds has been imparted to it in a psychological action (part III). It is obvious that these are not exclusive conceptions, but they are not always linked; specific interpretations appear to lean upon one or the other according to what can be seen in the work at issue (the signs in a work by Veronese, for instance). The third cognitive pillar of modern hermeneutics is that understanding must be contextual: the interpreter's approach to interpretation must be oriented by the fact that *the work carries a meaning relative to the culture to which it belongs, a meaning relative to the world from which it arose.* We have seen the conception of context arise in the treatment of both the others (with the context of an historical language and with the context of the work's production by an individual). But those conceptions may now appear as lesser forms of a contextual model that goes beyond them. It is perhaps not difficult to see how the rigidity of the code model of meaning and the psychological emphasis of the communication model make them perhaps unsuitable as general models of the meaning of art. Possibly they fit recessive cases in a broader view: the meaning of art is principally contextual, in some cases or respects fixed by a sign system, in some cases or respects fixed by psychology. The earlier conceptions cannot, however, be so easily recuperated; they have real deficiencies.

We might be prepared to abandon the notions of artistic codes and meaning as psychologically transferred; in that case modern theory will reform itself around the remaining conception. Every cognitive condition of interpretation that can be imposed on the basis of the first two conceptions can be established through the third alone. Indeed, it is more plausible to suggest that the conception of sign system and communication are inadequate expressions of the real nature of art; the semantic content of art devolves not so much from systems or acts but from a cultural world, a time and a place. In fact, that promises even to counter weaknesses encountered in the other models. The meaning of the work goes deeper than the language of codes, and is essentially broader than what an individual reads there. This is the substance of the observation that "images apparently occupy a curious position somewhere between the statements of language, which are

intended to convey a meaning, and the things of nature, to which we can only give a meaning."[1]

Cultures are a more genuine identification of semantic context, that background against which meaning is configured. Despite the talk we have examined so far, it is perhaps this conception above all that needs attention, for it is perhaps this view that a revised hermeneutic might choose to lay stress on.

74 THE MEANING OF HISTORICITY

A work of art cannot be understood solely in terms of the context of a language or an individual reading. A work of art is rooted "in a whole matrix of assumptions, values, and usages."[2] Interpretation is called for precisely when

> the intended audience is unaware of some assumptions, conventions, or conditions relating to the circumstances surrounding that text or work of art. In pointing to these assumptions, conventions, and surrounding conditions, the interpreter supplies at least partially what a given audience found lacking in order to understand a text or work of art.[3]

Our understanding of what that context is does not have to be built upon a conception of the work as action, upon a reconstruction of the artist's reading. "As soon as a work of art is released by its creator, it exists only in and for history."[4] Its meaning cannot be linked solely to an individual and momentary psyche, and even to the extent that it can, as we have seen, that action belongs to a setting against which the work and its forms and symbols have meaning for the artist. The work must be understood as a product, an artefact, but one whose meaning is constituted against that background. The semantic context must be seen more broadly than in terms of artist's intent, fulfilled or otherwise, for the artist is only part of a situation, a setting, a world.

That world is, necessarily, an historical world, and it is important to look closely at what that means. The world that provides the background against which artefacts possess their meaning, the human world, is a fundamentally conceptual or mental one: it is a world of thought, of belief, of specific knowledge and experience, of a conceptual world-picture. We are highly sensitive, moreover, to the fact that worlds of this nature are impermanent, inherently temporal, and we express that awareness of the deep temporality of human

---

1 Gombrich, "Aims and Limits of Iconology" (1972), 2.
2 Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 80.
3 Stern, "On Interpreting" (1980), 124—25.
4 Sedlmayr, "Problem der Zeit" (1958), 170.

worlds in the concept of *historicity*.[5] Historicity is essentially the 'historicity of consciousness'. The human mind is constantly subject to change, on account changing experience, the passing of ideas, the change of habits and the corresponding loss of familiarity, the gradual transformation of conceptions, the weakening and strengthening of values, an alienation from the old. Human life as a whole is not static, and time alters consciousness: the human conception of the world undergoes transformation. Works of art, of course, are caught in this condition, and the materiality of the work of art (even though subject to its own form of decay) is perhaps a more *durable* reality: the objective materiality of works of art frequently survives the conceptual world against which they held their sense.

> Human works ... are subject to change and decay not only in a material but also in a mental sense. Even if their existence continues they are in constant danger of losing their meaning. Their reality is symbolic, not physical; and such reality never ceases to require interpretation and reinterpretation.[6]

Every creation that has its life in relation to that world of inner life dies as it outlives that consciousness, as it endures into new ages while its consciousness disappears with time. "Mind now is not what mind was in, say, the fifteenth century."[7] When the living tide recedes for good, every stranded creature dies, becomes a mere thing; it ceases to be itself.

History is change, and change in fact gives life to art. In "the birth, multiplication, combination, dissolution, and re-synthesis of images," art is intrinsically historical.[8] But that history that art feeds from to take on its meaning exists around the work as a specific temporal setting. And though the work has benefitted from the history of thought and sensibility, when consciousness moves on works of art are stranded. They are ultimately harmed by the change, because they *belong to* a time. "Central to the identity of works of art" is "their historical location" — "where in the historical order it originated, and with which other works it could be situated in the historical complex to which it belonged."[9] The significance of setting is an insight finally established in the nineteenth-century. Hegel spoke of art as belonging "to its own time, its own people, its own environment," as depending "upon particular historical and other ideas and purposes."[10] It was an insight

---

5 Zeri, for instance, illustrates this depth with a comment on the gulf that is visible in merely twenty years of taste in clothes. Zeri, *The Art of Reading Paintings* (1987), 30—31.

6 Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man;* cited by Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 192.

7 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 14. Panofsky spoke of modern history's awareness of its "intellectual distance" from the past. Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 188.

8 Argan, "Ideology and Iconology" (1975), 297.

9 Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), xi.

10 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 14.

finally developed by the Vienna school, who unfolded the implications of the essential historicity of art,

> the idea of art as a historical phenomenon in its essence. According to that art exists within the context of the history of art. Art [as a whole] is an ever changing phenomenon. [And second,] art historical investigation is regarded as the only proper approach to art as a consequence of the historical nature of art.[11]

This fact must be taken into account in our approach to all objects that survive from the past, but especially those whose very purpose was to *mean*. Interpretation is thus the process of rescuing them from that demise; the task of rescue is framed by the problematic of historicity:

> The humanities ... are not faced by the task of arresting what otherwise would slip away [halting deterioration, one of the tasks of the 'conservator'], but of enlivening what otherwise would remain dead. Instead of dealing with temporal phenomena, and causing time to stop [as do the sciences], they penetrate into a region where time has stopped of its own accord, and try to reactivate it.[12]

Though a history is conceivable that were not in constant transformation — indeed we think there have been long and essentially changeless eras of human life — our conception of human history on the whole regards historicity to be the norm. Not only do we not think the way the Hellenistic Greek thought, we no longer think as did our parents; even the fifties, sixties, and seventies have all become 'retro', 'eras' of the past. Certainly there are numerous degrees of continuity, and one of the basic forms of modern academic labour has long been to show continuity where we think there has been only change. But the reverse approach has never been more vital, and we no longer regard deep continuity over three generations as highly probable. Accordingly, the longer the distance between the era of the work and the present of the interpreter, the less we expect these worlds to share. Duration and change are inseparable.

Thus we think of the passage of history as, in that sense, the passage of worlds, for a world (humanly speaking) is nothing but a world-picture. In fact, we can picture history as something more or less like a necklace of pearls, a long strand of time on which each pearl represents that view of the world that is established at a particular moment; history is a string of worlds, each of which is intelligible to itself but distant and more or less divided, conceptually remote, from the others. In one obvious way that image is false, and fits a more simplistic phase of historiography than ours, one dividing history up into a fixed number of segments (such as the history of western art segmented into the classical, dark

---

11 Bakos, "Art Historical Process" (1983), 117.

12 Panofsky, "A Humanistic Discipline" (1940), 24.

ages, middle ages, renaissance, baroque, ...). Human history is more complex than this, for at any moment of chronological time there is more than one world-view — in that respect, history is more like a many-stranded necklace, each cord representing time, each pearl representing a world-view, with worlds that are parallel as far from each other as worlds that are separated in time. But even that image is too simple, for some worlds reach further back into time, retain more of the past, than others they are contemporary with, and contemporaneous worlds often share large parts of each other. The necklace image cannot adequately represent the complexity, but if we shift the task of the analogy from doing justice to the state of history (picturing all contexts, which is not close to our purpose) to picturing the nature of an individual context (which is our purpose), the necklace image is helpful. As Panofsky noted, the "cosmos of culture ... is a spatio-temporal structure. The year 1400 means something different in Venice from what it means in Florence, to say nothing of Augsburg, or Russia, or Constantinople."[13] Every work was made in a time, and belongs to a time; and when we think of such a work, situated as it was somewhere along the strand of time, we know there was a world that surrounded it — we picture it at the centre of a 'sphere' composed of beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, values, traditions, conventions, all these things linked to the content of the work. We picture the context of any individual work in which we are interested as a kind of sphere located somewhere on a strand of time with its own definite composition.

Each world in this picture is *the* world of all that was formed of it; each such context is the proper *home* of the works produced there. A humanly made work of art is understood as something that has a home in a specific sense, something that "belongs to a world that endorses it with its significance."[14] A home is a source of identity. When we attempt to understand an artefact we talk of "the community that gave it meaning."[15] All human creations are given their significance by their situation inside or within such a place of origin. Our cognitive interest in art is a concern "to try to understand and explain it in the light of its own historical premises."[16] We recognize "the importance of cultural belongingness."[17] Human works do not merely come from their world but *belong* to it. Thus we speak of interpreting works of art in "their proper context." A work's context is not just an origin, but something that invests the work with a meaning. A context is "that 'because of' which the reference [X means Y] holds"; "X refers to Y in respect of

---

13 Ibid., 7.
14 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 148.
15 From a CBC Radio documentary which tells the story of an Amerindian drum, 1993.
16 Antal, "On the Method of Art-history" (1973), 185.
17 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 60.

something and because of something."[18] The criticism levelled by two historians at Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh concerns Heidegger's inadequate grasp of the nature of the work of art in precisely this respect. Heidegger

> is indifferent to the precise social and historical circumstances in which it was produced ..., crucial to any consideration of the work's meaning. The social context is crucial because every work of art is a partial statement which cannot contain within its frame all the information needed for its comprehension.[19]

As Gombrich too observes, "it is precisely by not understanding the institutional and social framework that people can distort creative art."[20] That historical world of ideas, beliefs, and traditions is an immaterial *part* of the work that in effect surrounds it, when the work is itself, as a kind of cloud. When seen in a foreign setting, in a context that is not its own, the material work is not in fact itself. We can diagram this conception. What determines whether we understand the work, see the object (**o**) in a truly cognitive way, is whether the consciousness with which we view it, and the determinants of that consciousness (∘), belong to the world of the work or do not, belonging rather to the world that determines us, the identity of the subject (S).

> We also need to be self-conscious about our own position as spectators of art. We are not 'blank tablets' either, of course, and we bring to art our own preconceptions and knowledge, and these may be different from those of historical spectators. Contexts for viewing change.[21]

In the second diagram the work is dislocated — in actuality, only partially present, partially extant. That is the fundamental significance of the rules of content.

Understanding

Not-understanding

18 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 33—34.
19 Walker, "Art History Versus Philosophy" (1980), 16.
20 Gombrich, "Conversation with E.H. Gombrich" (1974), 56.
21 Fer, *Modernity and Modernism* (1993), 31.

Theorists who have been taken to identify the real properties of a work of art with those features that can "be 'read off' from a work" have been criticized as offering a false theory of the work's identity.[22] It is false "to suggest that those features that we cannot just read off from a work without a knowledge of its provenance are not *really* features of that work." That contextual features "are not really features of the works" is a rejected view.[23]

> The work of art does indeed have a relative autonomy and may survive long after the epoch in which it was made, nevertheless every work of art is a *historical* product and is, therefore, marked by the era of which it was a part. Of course, as time passes the work changes, society changes; even so, something of its historicity remains embedded in its very fabric.[24]

The features of the work itself are determined in its own context. Human creations exist within an atmosphere of their own, and we know them as they are when they are replaced within that atmosphere.

> The intellectual repatriation of works of art is one of the most important tasks of historical investigation. We must remove the false impression that a work of art is a mere picture, an impression we have when works of art are isolated in "collections," and we must return them aesthetically to their true home. Studies in art history during the past few decades have given us many new insights by taking this route.[25]

A context is therefore not merely a semantic device, an interpreter's tool; the idea of belongingness emphasizes that the context is *a constitutive part of the thing itself.* For whom does an artist paint? Sometimes, as we noted in part III, for no one but themselves. But exhibiting or displaying finished works is not an afterthought or a vulgar necessity of survival, and even artists indifferent to that produce works against the 'backdrop' of a culture. That time and place is the context in and for which the work is delivered *for* interpretation, whether there are actual contemporary spectators or not. Everything is constitutively bound to its place on the continuum. Because of it we need a form of "interpretation constrained by the limits of historical possibility."[26] Because a work belongs to a context, its meaning cannot be determined in just any setting.

---

22 As an example, the remark that "knowledge of the purpose and time of a work is of secondary importance to understanding, because it is outside the work, and is in this sense not objective." Mannings, "Panofsky and Interpretation" (1973), 160. This author apparently wishes to devalue historical understanding, but avoids judging its exact importance.

23 Lyas, "Intentional Fallacy Revisited" (1983), 293, 296.

24 Walker, "Art History Versus Philosophy" (1980), 17.

25 Gadamer, "Problematic Character of Aesthetic Consciousness" (1958), 34. Also Forster: "The radical isolation of artifacts from their socio-historical context ... hinders critical understanding." Forster, "Critical History of Art" (1972), 463.

26 Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), xii.

Since every human thing actually belongs to a world, within which it is truly intelligible, each trace of the past that survives in the present suffers two negative conditions. When a thing belongs to an ephemeral world it inevitably suffers *anachronism*, dislocation in the world of a later culture; by consequence, it suffers *alienness*, strangeness and incomprehensibility — the past is continually "becoming foreign to us."[27] Anachronism is the cause of alienness, and both are symptoms of natural historicity; our conception of historicity prepares us for the unavoidable alienness of temporal culture. Thus "the new distanced attitude that historical consciousness takes to tradition" in the nineteenth century, in which every vestige of past culture is now regarded as "estranged from its original meaning."[28] That condition is an illness; as we saw above, it effects a kind of death, for outside its own world the work is not full of meaning and spiritually alive: alienness is precisely that condition of being other-than and therefore less-than itself. A thing of the past seen in the present now appears within a world conceptually foreign to its own, and in the perspective of *this* world, distanced and isolated from its own atmosphere, it suffers a loss of its identity. Thus "the anachronistic results of determinedly ahistorical formalist criticism."[29] The principal problem with formalism is the lack of objectivity hidden beneath an apparent concern for the objective; it presents works in terms that have nothing to do with the world from which they arose.

> The dialogue we enter into with the past confronts us with a fundamentally different situation from our own — we will say a 'foreign' situation — and consequently it demands an interpretative approach. The human sciences [thus] use an interpretative method.[30]

Alienness is the effect that time, which makes us mortal, exacts on the acts and products of mortal creatures. For the work to be understood requires that it be resituated in its own cognitive framework (to lose its anachronism) and be seen for its own sense (to lose its alienness). Thus "historical criticism," which is concerned with "the recovery of the past."[31] What reveals the conditions of this possibility is the historical consciousness.

---

27 McFee, "Historicity of Art" (1980), 309.
28 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 58, 147.
29 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 5.
30 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 10.
31 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 1.

75 THE POWER OF THE HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

It is our picture of historicity, of the perpetual change of human consciousness, therefore, that explains the relevance of the conception of context. To be aware of and sensitive to historicity in this way is what we call possessing an *historical consciousness*, which involves a basic understanding of time, the human world, and the conditions of human meaning. The historical consciousness has two aspects, positive and negative, that it is important to distinguish. First, there is a gap between subject and object. Awareness of the fact of historicity and the negative effect of change compels us to face the *inevitable inadequacy of our own natural understanding:* we belong to a different world, and possess a different consciousness from the one that defined the world of the work. There is a difference between "the here and now, the there and then."[32] In fact there is an "historical gulf between the *Weltanschauungen* of interpreted and interpreter."[33]

> What the observer may have is a perspective — precisely that perspective being one of the things that bars him from the native's internal stance.[34]

But we are aware at the same time that our limitation is the consequence of a loss, the loss of a consciousness, for meaning exists in a subjective dimension.

> The analysis of a document consists in a mental search.... It is not an objective method which yields knowledge of real objects [observable]; it is only a subjective method which aims at detecting those abstract elements which compose our impressions. From the very nature of its materials [materials existing only for the deciphering mind] history is necessarily a subjective science. ... The facts, as they exist in the historian's mind, are necessarily subjective.... But subjective is not a synonym of unreal.[35]

This subjective dimension of meaning is something positive, because a lost *consciousness* is potentially *retrievable*. Consciousness is an alterable envelope. If we can alter our minds in the required ways (by picking up lost knowledge, as in previous chapters, and by assuming the attitudes and values of the past) the distance can potentially be closed. "Meaning is relative (though not wholly so) to a point of view."[36] There remains the possibility of adopting a point of view within that world, in so far as this world was constituted precisely of attitudes. The work's

---

32 Wimsatt, "A Fallacy Revisited" (1968).
33 Davey, "Nietzsche's Aesthetics" (1986), 331.
34 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 109.
35 C.V. Langlois and C. Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History* (1897; repr. New York 1926), 215—19.
36 Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 38.

> true presence awaits one who is willing and able to encounter it. As a created work the work of art has passed and it participates in all manner of ways in this transitoriness. To have a genuine effect, it must regain "true presence," must be recreated again in a spirit.[37]

> The humanist, dealing as he does with human actions and creations, has to engage in a mental process of a synthetic and subjective character: he has mentally to re-enact the actions and to re-create the creations. It is in fact by this process that the real objects of the humanities come into being.[38]

For it was against a world of consciousness that art once held its meaning, and thoughts and beliefs can be entertained again. The study, the research that we undertake into the background of works of art is our means of closing the gap.

> Through their perception interpreters add nothing to the work of art — at least, they should not — but rather they take something away from it. They remove the dross of alienation and restore the work again to its original lustre.[39]

The possibility of that recovery is opened up to us by the insights of the historical consciousness.

It is the plague of anachronism and alienation to which all things of the human world, things that breathe the atmosphere of time, are prone that calls for the correctives that historical research makes possible. While the effect of the natural historicity of consciousness distorts the work by the influence of an anachronistic world-view, the historical consciousness corrects the distortion to the extent that it can recover the past context and bring it into the present in the mind of the interpreter. That this is a real possibility follows from two propitious facts: that the context, the world, in which cultural artefacts live is mental, conceptual, a world-view; and that the source of the distortion (as distinct from the cause, which is the fact of historicity itself) is simply us. The subjective dimension of a work's existence (as noted by Schleiermacher and many others) is a source of both weakness and strength. It is our outlook that distorts, but our outlook is something malleable; the correction to be made is a correction in us. Our own outlook, of which we cannot easily become explicitly aware,[40] must be displaced.

> In an effort to close the historical gap between the work and himself, the art historian sacrifices the enormous critical advantage of his hindsight and of his knowledge of history.[41]

---

37 Sedlmayr, "Problem der Zeit" (1958), 170.

38 Panofsky, "A Humanistic Discipline" (1940), 14; Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 191.

39 Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 186.

40 "A culture or work of art within whose value-system one is oneself plunged, of which one has an inside perspective, and whose most vital aspects can hardly be brought into explicit consciousness and rationally examined, simply because they are pervasive, forming an unspoken background for conscious activities and opinions." Nodelman, "Structural Analysis" (1970), 81.

41 Forster, "Critical History of Art" (1972), 467.

> It is often enough to situate a work of art in this way in its original place and set it in its proper 'light,' to make qualities understood that one previously could not understand, or to prove an interpretation untenable.[42]

What must be altered is the content that feeds our eye and influences our sight, and as the stuff that forms the 'world' of the world-view is the content of the mind, that alteration can be made through a change in awareness. It is this that is the basis of the 'presumption'

> that one is able to overcome the fact that the historical observer is tied to time and place. This is precisely the claim of historical consciousness, namely, to have a truly historical standpoint to everything. It sees this as its culminating achievement. Hence it is concerned to develop the 'historical sense,' in order to transcend the prejudices of one's own time.[43]

It is possible through the facility of mind to pass, in a certain way, *between* worlds. For to the extent that the stuff of worlds is internal, to recover them is merely to recollect them into mind: everything thought can in principle be thought again. Situating the work is not something done to the work, but something done to the consciousness of the interpreter. It is the subject that must be resituated, in effect, within a substantially different set of ideas, concerns, beliefs.

> We cannot immediately comprehend contents of the culture of the Bushman; perhaps we cannot even see its social organization as such. For both we must carry out extensive studies. We will have to undertake similar studies if we are again to decipher the contents of our own culture. We no longer understand the contents of our own past culture; we must decode it; we must re-acquire cultural knowledge, familiarity with literary sources and with the sources of themes and representations.[44]

The modern subject (**S**) lives within the setting of the conceptual world of his or her own present, but to understand the work the subject must make a shift and address the work from within that conceptual world to which the work (**O**) belongs. As interpreters we must move our subjectivity, our consciousness, across a bridge built by investigation and research, between worlds, and reform our thoughts in the other world. "The act of understanding provides the bridge for reaching the spiritual self of the Other."[45]

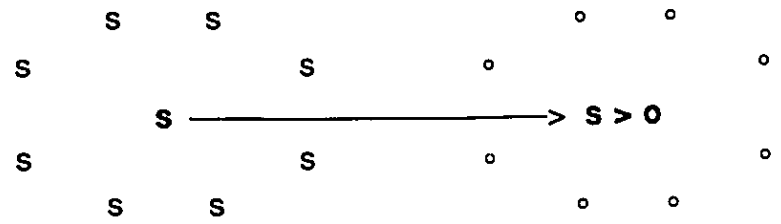
---

42 Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 99.

43 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 204.

44 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 60—61.

45 Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics* (1980), 9.



This is the significance of historical reconstruction: the foreign remnants of the past "can only be understood historically, i.e., by going back to the past's way of looking at things."[46] That painstaking recovery of world to which the work belongs strips away the disfiguration and restores the true appearance of historical creation. Bätschmann speaks of a form of rescue he calls "the anamnesis of meaning."[47] When the process is successful, Sedlmayr notes, then

> can the work reattain its full life and its true presence *in every age* in a spirit that is interested in and capable of the disclosure of the living work of art, just as if no time had passed. And only if in a given age it achieves its true presence can it be grasped as an historical event and be understood.[48]

The key to understanding is the home of a thing, the world that still "endorses" it with its meaning. The 'illuminating context' is an *already historical one,* something that was once already formed; our business is to rediscover it. The actual *work* of the historical consciousness, therefore, is the conceptual rebuilding of the lost world within which the artefact can once again appear as itself.[49] The historical consciousness is thus a kind of thinking essential to concretizing the rules of content in which the theory of interpretation is rooted, for we now understand more clearly *in what* the objectivity of the work and the subjectivity of the viewer consists. We are now equipped with the detail by which to fulfil the cognitive demands of the theory.

---

46 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 244.

47 "[Thus] iconography and iconology, like structural analysis and other acts of understanding, respond to the experience of the historical distance between us and works of art with the anamnesis of meaning ...." Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 80.

48 Sedlmayr, "Problem der Zeit" (1958), 164.

49 Thus the stature of historical studies; as Danto remarks, art history has not been "something that provides interesting but largely external facts about works already fully accessible without knowledge of those facts." Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), xi. And thus the problem with ahistorical hermeneutics: "Not only does Heidegger ignore the evidence supplied by other works by van Gogh he rejects in toto the discipline of art history as a means of experiencing works of art." Walker, "Art History Versus Philosophy" (1980), 17.

The historical consciousness is insight into the basic reality of cultural artefacts: into the conditions of their meaning and the corresponding effects of time, and into the implicit possibilities of overcoming those effects. The *historical perspective* is the way we look at a thing when the historical work is done, and the consciousness of the interpreter has been appropriately altered, effectively shifted. Perspective as discussed in chapter six (capturing the artist's viewpoint) is only a species of this, the difference being that the historical perspective is defined not according to an individual psyche or an actual psychological event, but as positions within or belonging to a world or world-view. Accordingly, the meaning the work contains is more centrally fixed — determined and limited — not by the individual and his or her realized goals, but by the cultural domain to which the forms, symbols, problems, and other cognitive or semantic determinants of the process of creation actually belong. As in fact was concluded in part III, the artist effectively *borrows* these for the purpose of communication. What does the artist borrow them from, but a world? The conception of context advanced on this model understands that background as more than a periphery. Historical research is not merely the bias of a discipline spawned from the discipline of historiography; it is our means of achieving the appropriate living perspective — which, it now appears, may amount to a range of historical perspectives, the views of more than one person. The 'world' of the work is a category of understanding recognizing that the meaning of a work of art is not inherently what its maker read in it and only, in a merely contingent way, what anyone else in the culture may have read. It gives pre-eminence not to an act, but to an act precisely within a society; the work 'means' — in the sense that brings us closest to 'the work itself' — what it could be read to mean (in a legitimate rather than merely arbitrary way)[50] by *any sector* of the society. To subject the work of art "to higher understanding ... we must resituate the document in the matrix of sociological and cultural values from which it arose."[51]

It is obvious, finally, that only here do we have the opportunity to introduce ideological meaning, as a genuinely cognitive matter: that is, to treat as central to our understanding of the work a kind of meaning that the artist may indeed never have actually read in his creations, and a meaning unconscious enough to involve no recourse to codes. "Works of art are signs of political power,"[52] and not only through being commissioned to

---

50 An interpretation in the past (whether by artist or spectator) that ignored the work's detail, for instance, was not even then an interpretation *of* the work, and it does not bring us closer to the work to reconstruct such readings. The rules of form, in other words, are constitutive conditions of *real* meaning; they do not provide a merely historiographic definition of interpretation.

51 Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 39—40.

52 Summers' characterization of a central tenet of Ginzburg. Summers, "Painting in Political Context" (1986).

symbolize that power. "Contextualization," in this sense, can focus "on the levels of understanding that were engaged in the contemporary viewer's recognition" of imagery, and "through access to the climate of thought surrounding the work or the governing ideology of its time, reference can be taken as being made to an informing concept or idea that is not given visible presence in the work," a manner of reading that can unfold "ideological patterns of implication" latent within an entire artistic tradition.[53] "Attention to the impact and reception of works of art help come to grips with the artistic mediations of social values."[54] Historical research is the recollection, the recovery into our own consciousness, of crucial aspects of the mind or minds a specific world holds within it. "There are many practical reasons why the study of art is primarily historical in its concerns."[55]

What must be altered is the content that influences our sight, our "cognitive stock", which is material that can be acquired by knowledge of the past. What kind of content is this? It is certainly something mental, and involves at least knowing things. But as our exploration of the artist's perspective has already shown (§ 67), it may involve substantially more, and it might well be worth giving attention to the difference and the variety among the kinds of thing that make up a perspective. Though we must reacquire it *by means of* historical knowledge, the forms of consciousness we are looking for will likely contain more than knowledge: it included things known in that world (a),[56] which is to say, primarily, things believed (b) and also matters of commitment (c); it included also things felt (d), sensitivities (e),[57] desires (f), memories (g), ... To assume a perspective means joining one's eye to all those sorts of thing that, in reality, affect an eye — or to as much as is accessible. The eye that sees the object (**o**) for the meaning that is its own voice is one 'formed' by the content of the world to which the work belongs — it is an eye implied by the content of that world. There is an exceptionally memorable way to diagram a perspective, in which the experience of seeing the work (**o**) is influenced by just such reconstructed contents, just such a repertoire:

---

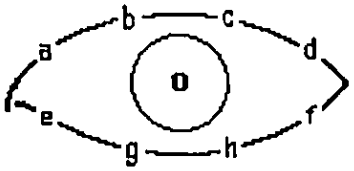
53 "Equally, ... *resonances* of subject matter and *suggestive* qualities of presentation may be regarded ... as the carriers of sociopolitical implications and psychologically charged nuances corresponding to developing forms of consciousness of the time." Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 14, 23—24 [emphasis added].

54 Forster, "Critical History of Art" (1972), 469.

55 Alpers and Alpers, "Ut Pictura Noesis?" (1972), 439.

56 "For Valéry this is not a seeing with the eyes but rather with the dictionary: 'Most people perceive the world much more frequently with the understanding than with the eyes. Instead of coloured spaces they assimilate concepts.'" Valéry, "Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci," *Oeuvres* 1960, 29; Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 23.

57 "The ability to appreciate the products of the arts is not common to all men even in principle. It is a perceptual *skill* which arises from a special ability often restricted in its ambit and always needing to be cultivated and trained. Without the cultivation of the appropriate skill the kinds of interpretation embodied in the fine arts remain a closed book." Osborne, "Interpretation in Science and in Art" (1986), 14.



Reshaping our consciousness in this way is adopting the historical *viewpoint*, and the view of the work that makes possible is the historical *perspective*.[58] The work seen in the historical perspective, to the extent that its repertoire is achievable, is the work seen for what it is, the nearest approach to understanding that is possible.

We now see how the historical perspective has come up repeatedly in the discussions already undertaken, though without the more fundamental arguments with which it appears here. It arose first in our practical discussion of the rules (chapter 1), as required background of the rules of form, for what was uncovered is that, as mental constructs connected to naturally fluid images, basic concepts like adequacy, simplicity, and coherence are influenced by other components of thought; their fluidity must be reduced if misreadings are to be avoided. What we now appreciate is that these rules must be applied as they would have applied then, for what is coherent to a Neoplatonist is not what is coherent to one who does not understand Neoplatonism. Practically speaking, this means the formal rules must be applied as they appear *in the historical perspective*. The rules of form are given the particular shape they must have only in an historical reconstruction of the context. The historical perspective arose also in the discussion of the sign (§§ 26, 27), for the recovery of the code, and research into texts, is precisely the recovery of special knowledge. But the interpretation of a work of art cannot be reduced to an assembly of signs and a codified matrix of meanings: there is a living background both to individual expressions and the languages those expressions belong to, and it is against and with reference to this background that the languages themselves (whether codified or not) hold their meaning. The historical perspective arose again in examining the model communicative action: to the extent that a work of art has communicative potential, there is an original, a temporally bound, consciousness by which its meaning is fixed (§ 54). The idea of the 'legitimate mind' is precisely the argument of the historical viewpoint, only one that identifies that viewpoint with the content of a specific mind, the artist's. But the artist

58 The work "belongs to the context but 'qua interpreted' also to the perspective." Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 47.

relies upon the context of a time and place to make communication possible, whether by means of painted symbols or painted forms.

The cultural model, moreover, does not involve any specifically causal theory of meaning. It understands meaning as something the work possesses not by virtue of an act, but by virtue of a specific situation — one that is as historically finite as the act itself was understood to be, but that is far broader in its semantic potential. We are interested in a way of reading the work that makes sense of it in its world; we are interested in tendencies of thought that influenced ways of looking at works, tendencies as linked to the work's world as the work is itself.

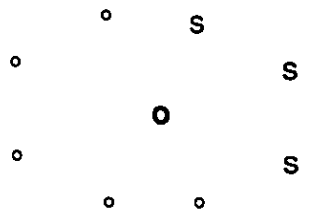
While it appears that in the course of these investigations there has been a certain erosion of the concept of the historical perspective, until we have looked at the facts addressed by the historical consciousness (the undeniability of historicity, the nature of the context, the effectiveness of recovery, and the actual relevance of historical knowledge) this appearance will not appear worthy of true attention. We have to look far more closely at the reality of the historical perspective, at both its theoretical and actual efficacy. It remains arguable that the historical perspective (the effective recovery of the consciousness of the past) was in fact the solution to all the repeated cultural problems raised in the discussions of the previous two parts: it is that consciousness that contains familiarity with the details by which symbols figure, and it contains also the cultural thought contents against which a communicating artist reads forms for the meaning they are to convey.

77 THE SUBSTANCE OF PERSPECTIVES

There are several questions raised, however, by this conception of historical understanding. What is the work's context? What is the constitution of a world, and what was the constitution of this work's world? The range of content that can be found in the minds of people at any given moment of history is undoubtedly broad — it is advisable to notice the complexity of our own minds; spectators in the past could not have been less complex. The more we are able to recover the knowledge and the belief prevalent in a time, the more we know of how a time saw. Is there actually such a thing as how a time saw? This idea is less convincing than it used to be; with the development of scholarship, our conception of the historical perspective has become more complex. Times know what their people know, and their people know and believe many different things. History is no longer regarded as the development of discrete and unified cultures, and in any place at any moment of time we do not find a homogenized world in which people share the same consciousness and see

works of art in the same way. Theorists have lately begun to speak of the myth of the unified audience.[59]

There are two questions here. Since we no longer assume the existence of a fixed or unified perspective for each work, belonging as it does to a rich world, How do we identify a work's context? To which historical perspectives does a work *belong?* [60] And further, within an identified perspective, What exactly *are* the beliefs, the feelings, etc., that configure that viewpoint? Within that perspective, what is the range of cognitive conditions that shape the eye we are trying to recover, how much of the psyche is involved? How much must we recapture to make understanding possible: that is, to move from misunderstanding (the application of a subjective and anachronistic repertoire), and beyond impaired understanding, to a genuine if partial understanding?



Partial understanding or impaired understanding?

There is, therefore, a fundamental *substantive* problem with regard to the recovery of perspective, which thus has its *qualitative* and *quantitative* aspects. Where the qualitative problem is the determination of the specific contents of mind that form a context, the objective thought contents (°) that belong with a work (to which perspective does the work belong), the quantitative problem is to determine how much of that framework understanding requires. In part III, the communication model answered the qualitative

---

59 Elkins, "Art History Without Theory" (1988), 362. "The relevance and legitimacy of questions can also vary fundamentally even for a group of contemporaneous questioners examining the same event." Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 207.

60 Does a work belong, for instance, to the context of the Reformation? The communication model provides an answer through the artist's knowledge. Ackerman notes how contextual interpretations tend to link "the work of art with the occurrences in its environment that for some arbitrary reason appear to be the most significant. But when we start from the genesis of the work we observe that the artist's experiences are selective .... An artist may not be aware of, or interested in, many aspects of his environment, or he may get his stimulus from exotic or eccentric sources. We cannot affirm *a priori* that Titian was affected by the Reformation ...." Ackerman "Art History and the Problems of Criticism" (1960), 265—66. What is it that determines the "proper context" on the cultural model?

problem, identifying the perspective with the artist's; many theorists are not satisfied with such a limitation. The quantitative problem posed a problem there as well, as we saw in § 67. As the theory makes clear, these questions are answered by the rule of objectivity, which requires that we see the work for what it is, but without a determination of the object the rule of objectivity does not resolve it. The historical consciousness gives that rule purchase by clarifying where, in general, the material is to be discovered: in the time and place of the work's creation. But to explain where, broadly, the material is to come from is not to explain how the context that defines the work's meaning is to be identified, and how broadly the appropriate interpretation reaches through contents of mind. The qualitative problem has been referred to as "disclosure of the context": the interpreter must establish the appropriate objective context, and failure to do so will involve the interpreter in a perspective that does not belong to the world of the work — "the fallacy of the misplaced perspective."[61]

Probably the most accepted solution to the qualitative problem is one briefly touched on in the previous section. In formulation at least, it is very broad, and it involves both halves of the method: *any* perspective developed out of material drawn from the work's time and place, in a general way, *that is also* capable of satisfying the rules of form is one that constitutes the work's world. Viewpoints unable to deal with obvious elements of the picture, or that cannot formulate a coherent reading, would be discounted as perspectives in which the work is not truly constituted. In practice, this solution tends to give prominence to the perspectives of the artist, the commissioner, the intended audience (such as a religious community or a specific social class), but it is also broad enough to include readings by groups excluded by the politics of production, provided only that the formal conditions of interpretation are respected. Such a solution in fact goes a long way toward including the revisionist forms of contemporary interpretation concerned with the meaning of works of art to marginalized groups. A single culture contains many minds, but the consciousness we seek to recapture will come from particular places in this culture. An instance of the familiar response to the qualitative problem is suggested in the following remarks by Edgar Wind, prefatory to his study of Renaissance art:

> The chief aim of this book will be to elucidate a number of great Renaissance works of art, ... The question to what extent any Renaissance painter, even one so renowned for his intellect as Botticelli or Raphael, would have cared to master a philosophical system is perhaps less awkward to answer than it might seem: for we must not confuse our own labour in reconstructing their knowledge with their relatively effortless way of acquiring some of it by oral instruction.

---

61 An expression for subjective interpretation on the contextual model. Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 50—51.

Wind is thinking specifically of "the Renaissance painter," and asks "by what method can his knowledge now be reconstructed historically?"

> We must make up for [our ignorance of Renaissance thought] through reading and inference. ... Its reward, in the study of Renaissance mysteries, is that it may help to remove the veil of obscurity which not only distance in time (although in itself sufficient for that purpose) but a deliberate obliqueness in the use of metaphor has spread over some of the greatest Renaissance paintings. They were designed for initiates, hence they require an initiation.[62]

As does the model of action, Wind identifies the perspective with the work's production, but he departs from that model in not focusing on the constitutive experience of the artist. We are not looking for what an entire age or culture knew, but neither are we looking for what only one person knew; the work is identified (though perhaps it is only a partial identification) with its audience, a special circle within the culture, formed of artist, patrons, and as many other initiates as possessed a familiarity with certain ideas.[63] Cultural interpretation is interpretation

> that tries to read past works of literature in the way in which they were read when they were new. ... The attempt to read past works of literature as they were read when they were new assumes that when they were new they were read in one way rather than another (or in some ways rather than others).[64]

We treat the work of art "as something with a history of making by a painter" but also as something with "a reality of reception by beholders."[65] Often there is a principal audience, which we can identify through research and study into the circumstances of the work's origin,[66] and again we have an important methodical principle: we recover the missing context from the outside, by uncovering the circumstance in which the work was formed, and we fill it in on the basis of whatever traces of that way of looking are left to us.

This does not, we notice, give much of an answer to the quantitative problem, however: with how much of the soul, in the given case, did the eye we are hoping to recapture engage? How much of or what levels of the minds of Botticelli, Ficino, and

---

62 Wind, "History and Science" (1936), 21—22. An ambiguity about what theorists mean by "disclosure of the context" is brought out through Wind's remarks. In one sense, the expression applies to the business of identifying the context of the work itself, something I have called the qualitative problem, but it can also suggest the difficulty of actually reconstructing that context once identified, which is part of the significance of Wind's discussion of Renaissance books.

63 Thus "our attempts to recover the historical climate in which the ready-mades [of Duchamp] were originally conceived and received." "The context of original production and use must be one of several frames of reference through which knowledge is critically received." Charlotte Townsend-Gault in *Sight Lines* (Montréal 1994), 148, 151.

64 Jackson, *Meaning of Texts* (1989), 3, 11.

65 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 7.

66 "Cultures do not impose uniform cognitive and reflective equipment on individuals. People differ in occupational experiences, for example. ... But cultures ... facilitate certain kinds of cognitive development in large classes of their members." Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 107.

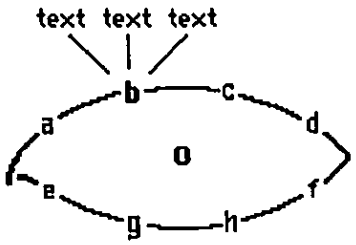
Pierfrancesco de' Medici were addressed by Botticelli's paintings? What range of consciousness actually influenced how that work was seen and understood? For what we are looking to recover is the real historical perspective, the work as it is *constituted* by an eye joined with as much of a person as truly gave the work meaning. In this connection one might suggest that Wind offers a presumptuous answer: the only thing relevant to our understanding is matters of belief, and of a specifically philosophical-religious, *intellectual* sort. The greater part of the reaction against Panofskian iconology has to do with this.[67] Which would be to say that the eye of Botticelli or the eye of Ficino was an eye engaged principally (or in so far as it *kept to the point*) with the intellectual content of a theory of life. That, however, would I think be an unfair assessment of Wind's approach in particular. Wind responded with the realism of an historian, for the lesson of the historical consciousness is that time involves loss. An interpreter informed by the historical consciousness is a person of two special sensitivities: a sensitivity to the reality of the *past* (with an utter disinterest in our fantasies about it), and a sensitivity to the *limits* of those remnants that can still lead us to know it. The eyes, the minds, the souls that saw have disintegrated and gone the way of all flesh, but the objectivations of mind, the *things* that have captured mind (such as the "books" Wind mentions), have not all disappeared. Our situation is limited: we have the traces, and that is all. We have everything that was successfully ejected into a more enduring vessel than we are, and so it happens that there are more records of belief than of such things as feelings or desires. The quantitative problem is effectively solved for us. Our understanding will be limited to the richness and depth the historical evidence allows. After so much time, we are in no position to fully reconstitute the eye that saw, which was (being human and of the complexity we know is human) likely to be an eye engaged with many things — not merely beliefs, and beliefs of a merely intellectual sort, but beliefs of other kinds, plus feelings, experiences, memories, hopes, ... What of these can we now expect to recover? Wind's solution does not presume a narrow answer, and neither does it ignore the problem: it offers an appropriately resigned answer, for though in principle what was once thought and felt might be thought and felt again, in practice our knowledge of that experience is limited by the *evidence of mind* that remains. We are compelled to reconstruct the mind, and to do so we are thrown back largely upon texts.

The historical consciousness offers hope of understanding, but compels us to define understanding not merely logically but practically. If the work *is* essentially as it was

---

67 And in a way it is a criticism of the code model itself. The sign system model *works* on the basis of clearly coded meanings, which essentially implies the kind of meaning fixable in language, which thus implies a primarily conceptual form of reading. The code model is in this respect, some would say, inherently inadequate: it is an unreflective foreclosure on the qualitative question.

configured in a richly endowed eye, we cannot now see it fully as it is. If only a little of what endowed that eye has survived, then our goal is to recapture only the eye as configured through that narrow link with the soul. We only aim at "as complete an understanding as possible of the artistic achievement of mankind."[68] By recovering only a piece of the historical context, we realize only a part of the historical perspective. The eye as it was, the entire eye and the full perspective, remain hidden from us. The qualitative problem is not answered, but effectively resolved by what is humanly possible: the historical perspective will likely be the recovery of a narrowed perspective, that view of the work that can be recaptured through the evidence that remains:



This is in one sense a disturbing and even unsettling conclusion, because it throws a shadow upon theory's conception of the goal of the entire undertaking. For in a sense, we have just accepted failure: we cannot see the work of art as the theory demands we see it, fully as itself. The cultural work is the work as it was configured by an eye that we cannot fully recapture. But specialists are not dissatisfied with the position in which they are left, for the reason that the perspective we are able to realize does not present the work as it is *not*. To know less than everything about a person is not to fail to know them. In fact there is even a positive aspect to this limitation.

In being compelled, by historicity, to accept a reduced perspective upon a work, we are led to make a distinction among aspects of the work's reality — aspects, again, as views from a limited position. The *Primavera* as it is seen from the position of Neoplatonic philosophy, in its factual Neoplatonic context, presents an aspect of the work's being — less, indeed, than would be experienced by a Neoplatonist, by whom these propositions of Neoplatonism were believed (truths about the world, and thus matters of some emotion), but a true aspect of the work nonetheless. For that understanding explains the work, removing in a cognitively legitimate way the puzzles of its visible content. Limitation

68 Bialostocki, "Iconography and Iconology" (1963), 781.

compels a greater subtlety; it compels us to recognize a kind of continuum of knowing and not knowing. Knowing the work utterly is an ideal achievement; the near pole, not knowing the work at all — seeing it from a viewpoint that in no way corresponds to its own context (the diagram of not understanding) — is an all too common condition. We have more, however, than this alternative; practically speaking, what we want is to pass along this continuum *at least beyond a certain point,* beyond the point that divides not-seeing from seeing. That point is marked by a method that establishes the conditions of cognitivity, which clarifies that what specifically we must avoid is the subjective context that deforms the work. We distance ourselves from subjectivity by collecting as much as we can from the historical setting. Beyond our understanding of the work as semantically bound to context, the rules of subjectivity, objectivity, and form are our principles of discrimination. Hence the quantitative problem (which asks how much of a repertoire must be recovered for real understanding) is solved: there are reconstructions of perspective that reveal more or less of the work's reality, depending upon how much of the original repertoire of an interpretation they are able to recapture.

78 DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The value of the contextual model's notion of understanding is apparent in another way, for it brings a deeper resolution than we have seen to the frequent appearance of conflict that crops up in hermeneutics. There are different perspectives, perspectives not necessarily of greater or lesser insight, but that give on to a different aspect of the work — for instance, Lightbown's perspective on the *Primavera,* which was established on the basis of dating and corresponding research into the likely occasion of the work's production, a marriage. Between a wedding picture or a Neoplatonic lesson, the *Primavera* had only one cause, one circumstance of origin. If it was painted, as Lightbown's documents appear to suggest, for a marriage, the 'marriage perspective' upon the *Primavera* might be taken as deeper and more revealing of its nature than the Neoplatonic perspective — but only in a sense that is finally narrow, for the purpose for which a work was created is not, by a long stretch, its cultural significance.

Wind's response to the substantive problem of the context situated the work in a perspective not specifically narrowed to the beliefs of any one person or a reading in respect of any specific purpose. It was a perspective, even should the work have been produced for the marriage, that existed in the culture of Renaissance Florence. Far from being a deficiency in the conception of historical perspective, the inclusiveness of this model's

understanding enables us to take account of the probable fact that Ficino's own reading of the work, or that of any member of his circle, might well have ignored that marriage setting; it might have involved a different perspective without running afoul of any of the rules of interpretation, which govern legitimate interpretation at any time.[69] According to the method outlined in chapter one, the two interpretations both stand, as indeed they probably coexisted in what we regard as the world of the work. It is perhaps, then, this model of meaning that explains what had appeared in chapter two as a deficiency of the method; perhaps there was finally no need for the rules to discriminate one from the other. The complexity of human worlds *is* such, after all, that in 1482 (when the twenty-year-old Medici married) that circle of Florentine humanists to which the work was introduced may well have been quite diverse: there were, in the world of the work itself, many perspectives, and perhaps many capable of understanding the work. Pierfrancesco (who perhaps commissioned the painting) may by then have become disinterested in the finer points of his Neoplatonic upbringing, and proportionately more interested in the sensual possibilities of marriage. Botticelli (who painted many other symbolic images) might have remained more faithful to those Christian ideals, though very likely not so close as Ficino, who was priest and philosopher both. One difficulty with the communication conception of art discussed in part III is that we are not always sure who (between artist and commissioner) is communicating to whom, and thus are somewhat unsure whose psyche our interpretation ought to be limited by, whose decided its meaning. The more broadly contextual approach outlined here leaves this open: the world of the work is the world of those able to interpret it, limited by the rules of form, historical interpreters who brought to the work *the viewpoints of their own psyches*. The *Primavera* could well have been read in one way by Pierfrancesco (Lightbown's reading), another way by Ficino (Wind's reading), and still another way by Botticelli (imagining a psyche in which certain of these images had a personal, perhaps biographical, resonance).[70] Each of these interpretations would thus present an historical *aspect* of the work: an individual perspective arising from a different viewpoint actually present in the work's world. As theorists often suggest, it may be part of a work's success that a picture has the power to suggest this sort of richness of meaning, that the picture in its own time makes possible more than one successful (legitimate) interpretation. As Schelling remarked in 1800,

---

[69] Our examination of Wind's interpretation *according to* the rules (§ 19) demonstrated its considerable strengths.

[70] Kemp notes seven things "judged to be salient factors in the immediate historical context of the work of art," three of these being the relation of the subject to *the patron's mind*, to *the putative iconographer*, and to *the artist's mind*. Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 212.

> So it is with every true work of art in that every one of them is susceptible of infinite interpretation as though it contained an infinity of purposes, while yet one is never able to say whether this infinity has lain within the artist himself, or resides only in the work of art.[71]

Two possible notions of the object of interpretation are compatible with our model: it can be regarded as being fully revealed in a finite number of perspectives, or regarded as being "inexhaustible," "open to infinitely many interpretations."[72]

In this way the world of the work has become large enough to contain different viewpoints that were a part of it, viewpoints capable of responding to the work's detail. Later interpreters can assume these different perspectives to the extent that we can reconstitute them. The vaguely uncertain implications of the claim that we understand the work in different ways are resolved.

Thus we now have partial perspectives of two different orders: that part of a repertoire that can be recovered according to the historical remains, and that particular viewpoint (even if we could recapture it whole) as only a part of the work's world, limited by the 'position' we have taken in that world. The concept of the 'world of the work' is thus the work's maximal context, the sum of all those specific historical perspectives to which it was potentially connected. It is an heuristic concept valuable in clarifying what understanding must involve, but it is not necessarily what we aim to recover.

> On the one hand, every text belongs to the whole of the author's works and then to the literary genre from which it originates. On the other hand, if we wish to grasp the text in the authenticity of its unique meaning, then we must see it as a manifestation of a creative moment and replace it within the whole spiritual context of the author.[73]

Thus interpreters "wish to know all about that individual artist and as much as possible about his historic context"; they want to know "the system of contexts of which [the work] is a part."[74] In each of those perspectives the work takes on a somewhat different meaning, seen through the differing contents of those viewpoints. We tend rather to be comfortable with our limitations and choices: Danto comments, "It may very well be that the endlessness of [the] textual interpretation [of art] derives from the endlessness of scientific perspectives under which a work may be viewed."[75] But these are not competing interpretations. This conception of historical context thus has the capacity to clarify the

---

71 Schelling, *System*, 1800; cited in Stephen Watson, "Aesthetics and the Foundation of Interpretation," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XLIV (winter 1986), 133.

72 Carr, "Interpretation and Self-evidence" (1979), 139.

73 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 40.

74 Wimsatt notes as examples "his other poems, his essays, letters, and diaries," etc.; as we have seen, such things belong to a context in that they had the power to influence the artist's perception of the work, or the perception of any spectator who knew of them. Wimsatt, "A Fallacy Revisited" (1968), 194.

75 Danto, *Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986), 45.

problem of artificial competition that has dogged theories of interpretation. It is in this way that we can say "they mutually complete, rather than contradict each other." Our interpretations "may be conceived as component aspects of an organic totality, providing together our most comprehensive perspective on the interpretation of art."[76] That we interpret works of art in a variety of ways is due to particular interests,[77] and it is clear now that these differences of interest may all be cognitive. As Betti comments, "Every phenomenon presents a number of aspects, i.e. it is meaningful from various perspectives and every interpreter chooses the kind of inquiry that will yield the information he is interested in."[78] This model allows us to avoid imposing bogus oppositions; a theory that understands the work as a cultural entity, its context as a cultural world, is not required to develop criteria (which we recall did not appear among the rules) by which to decide whether Lightbown's or Wind's interpretation is correct.

The picture is just complex enough to be worth capturing in a diagram, which presents the compatibility of perspectives and various kinds of partiality. The *work* is situated at the centre of radiating perspectives. The *world of the work* is the sum of specific human perspectives to which the work bears an implicit historical relation (for instance, the perspectives of Pierfrancesco, Botticelli, Ficino, and even others who may not actually have known Botticelli's work, but who nonetheless existed)[79] and that are capable of satisfying the formal criteria of interpretation — each such perspective being represented by a Greek letter. Moreover, each of these perspectives must be constituted from the evidence that is available, and thus may be narrowed even further to certain particular aspects of mind (represented by the Roman letters). Wind's interpretation may thus be understood as a view doubly narrowed: it represents Ficino's Neoplatonic perspective (β), seen solely from the point of view of its intellectual content (b). But because such perspectives serve both the rules of form and content, according to this model's determination of how a work of art means, that limitation is not a fault; it is a necessity. As Abell notes, "The limitations that may be ascribed to them are those not of insignificance or error but of partiality."[80] The partiality of Wind's/Ficino's interpretation can be seen at a glance in the diagram as the view of Botticelli's painting (o) in the specific perspective drawn from extant documents configuring the partial repertoire (b), a repertoire, such as we can recover it, that defines the

---

76 Abell, "Toward a Unified Field" (1957), 735.

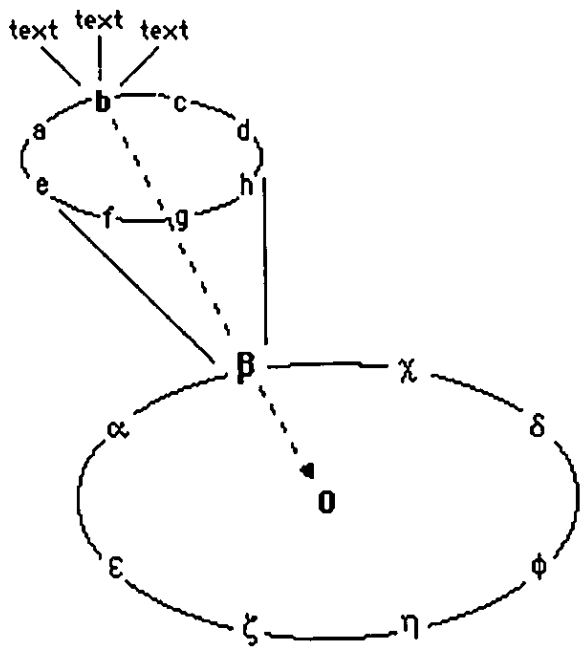
77 Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 137.

78 Betti, "Hermeneutics as General Methodology," (1962), 65.

79 One can perfectly well imagine an interpretation that may never have been made (perhaps because the work was purposefully hidden from its contemporaries) as providing an important aspect of a work's historical and actual meaning.

80 Abell, "Toward a Unified Field" (1957), 728.

outlook of Ficino (β) — in other words, the interpretative trajectory bβo, which is a perspective that we, as modern interpreters, can recreate.



"Interest in the meaning of a text might easily be a matter of its contextual significance. Moreover, what this significance will be depends on what frames of reference or systems of relations the text can be set in."[81] We can now see what counts as a frame of reference, and what freedom one has. There are many possible different interpretations that do not challenge others and yet that can be countered as meanings of the work itself, as the work itself is understood according to the cultural model.

(This account also makes it easier to notice unsuspected differences among what we loosely call kinds of interpretation, for we cannot build into this diagram an 'interpretation' of the *Primavera* in terms of the artist's social position, or in terms of the history of marriage, for in a certain sense these are not interpretations of the work, but uses to which interpretations might be put. While the interest of such interpretations might be understanding, it is understanding of another order. The diagram clarifies the difference between interpretation, aimed specifically at an understanding of the *work*, and other forms of research, involving the work.[82] Sedlmayr notes that "one can also consider and

81 Stout, "Meaning of a Text" (1982), 3.

82 An interpretation of the work in terms of the cultural institution of marriage would not fit into the diagram of historical interpretation as, say, an interpretation in perspective *dc*. For that is the perspective of a modern historian, not a perspective inscribed within the work's world at all: what such an interpreter would do is to focus

investigate works of art from other points of view than that of interpretation," and distinguishes interpreting from such things as "deriving" and "explaining" a work of art.[83] Since "understanding goes beyond understanding the meaning of something,"[84] these other approaches certainly do constitute understanding the work, but in a somewhat less intimate way than ours: we are interested in the work for itself, not in the work as an instance or representative of anything.[85] The key issue is whether anything in the painting must be left out. A stylistic interpretation of a painting is not a perspective, in our sense, because it is only concerned with the work's 'meaning' at the level of style, and thus would have to ignore many semantic aspects of the work's presentation: it could not, in other words, satisfy under any condition the rule of adequacy. It is certainly true that the assumption that "there is only one thing that constitutes understanding any work of art" creates confusion,[86] but that confusion can be resolved only by marking differences. The schema of contextual interpretation diagrams a more intimate and a more primary form of understanding than many approaches to art with which we are familiar, and to which it is not really parallel.)

---

upon Lightbown's interpretation (which presented the perspective of Pierfrancesco de' Medici and indeed any contemporary who looked at the work through a Renaissance awareness of marriage). Such an interpreter would thus be taking a modern perspective upon Lightbown's interpretation, whereas genuine interpretation involves taking a perspective on the detail of the work. In our diagram the *o* at the centre is the physical work, while in the diagram of what a social historian does it is the work as already interpreted in one or more of these perhaps historical ways. Thus a Marxist interpretation is also a second-order interpretation, an (ideological) interpretation built upon a first-order interpretation of the work. Some theorists find such interpretations ironic, but there is only a contradiction if the differences between types of interpretation are not clearly seen. "Ironically, the practice of Marxist art history entails focusing not upon the intrinsic meaning of works of art, but rather, their meaning (or the meaning of our studying them) within its own substantive ideological context." Pontynen, "Theory and Practice of Art History" (1986), 476.

To give another example, an interpretation in the context of artistic *development* provides us with some understanding of the work, but in terms of an interest in history more than an interest in the work itself. Such an interpretation can select among various surrounding conditions (and see the work against the development of an *oeuvre*, or against the development of a school, an epochal style, a regional or national art. The 'meaning' of the work may in each case be quite different (the work may represent a nadir in the development of the artist's style and a high point in the development of a school style), but these are not different (and therefore equal) interpretations to be situated in the diagram.

83 "One can consider the same work of art ... as something that has come to be and grasp it in an approximate way from its historical precedents; for this task and the methods for accomplishing it we can use the term 'derivation' (etymological analysis).... 'Interpreting,' 'deriving,' 'explaining' are thus different manners of 'comprehending' works of art. Certainly, I can 'understand' each one of these (an interpretation, a derivation, and also an explanation) according to effective factors. Nevertheless it is something different to understand an interpretation, compared to a genetic derivation or a 'explanation'." Sedlmayr, "Interpretieren von Werken" (1965), 182—83.

84 Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 132, 142.

85 One type of understanding involves seeing the work "against various backgrounds," it against "other works of art, and most probably ... other phenomena." There is a contrast between "establishing knowledge of the work itself (... elements within the work or ... the conditions and background and background as a result of which the work came about)" and "'taking' the work in one way rather than another, ... 'placing' it in a context continuous with both other art and other phenomena." Ibid., 138.

86 Ibid., 133.

Even at this more primary level, however, the immensity of the task of a complete understanding is instantly apparent, granting that it is not altogether clear what it means to understand "the work as a whole."[87] Formerly, it may have seemed the only understanding that would satisfy the theory would involve seeing the object in all the appropriate personal perspectives (α to o) each fully formed of all the relevant contents of soul (a to z). Suffice it to say that no work has ever been or ever will be 'understood' so well, which is indication enough that that is not what the method truly prescribes. What in fact we want, according to the evidence of the discipline's history, is primarily *at least one* legitimate interpretation that explains the work: that is, one interpretation among all the legitimate contextual interpretations possible that removes our puzzlement before it. Interpreters commonly move on to other works when they have done this. We are looking for at least one successful interpretation that satisfies the rules of content, by being formed somewhere within the above diagram (where each Greek letter marks some position within a temporal/cultural world to which the work belongs), and that also satisfies the rules of form (as they are affected by the perspective adopted). Very often that is all we wish for of the hermeneutics of art. When we go further, and reinterpret a work, it is commonly because we happen to be specifically interested in perspective β rather than perspective φ: on the basis of a special interest in, say, theories of love, or the original functions of art. This is no longer a despairing picture; it was never despairing so long as we were willing to accept the limitations of life, but now that the picture allows some degree of richness it is not even especially resigned.

What this conception of the work of art achieves is, once again, a clarification of what the project of understanding involves. The broadly cultural conception of the work's context marks the conditions within which the rules of content can be operated. The procedure of interpretation is the following. In principle, understanding must be based on a shift from the subjective perspective to at least one perspective that belongs to the work's own world, to the extent that we can recover it. *Less* than that is not understanding. The material of our understanding — our interpretative repertoire — must come from the past world. Our first practical step must therefore be to determine the outline of that world, to disclose a perspective truly revealing of the work, a perspective whose repertoire we can recover. We do this by research. We will find what remains of the configuring eye, which

---

87 Two possibilities suggested by Jones are to know "all that there was to know about the work, in the sense of its causal genesis, methods of execution, the intentions within it, and so on," something more realizable than the second: to discover "all possible phenomenal descriptions [interpretations of the work] that observers might give in different contexts." Ibid., 141.

constitutes the work's meaning, in what we can recover of Florence, in the remaining facts that reveal the intellectual stratum of Florentine philosophy, or that culture's understanding of marriage. The meaning of the work itself will be approached only by an interpretation of this sort. We do this in order to rescue the work from the oblivion of time, to restore its real identity, even if only in part.

> The desire arises in the person of our time ... to save true works of art from false presence and from dumbness, to help them to realize their true presence and to permit others to take part in this.[88]

It follows from this model, however, that no particular understanding of a work dictates categorical limits of the work's meaning. The facets of consciousness surrounding a work belong to its own world, and they are precisely as numerous as that world supported. The limit that we recognize is the limit of the model itself; what the work means is what its own context can tell us it means. The more we come to know of its world, the more we may come to know it.

88 Sedlmayr, "Problem der Zeit" (1958), 177.

10

HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

80 TYPES OF CONTEXT

Now that we are familiar with the basic structure of contexts, the human perspectives they imply and their constitution, it is possible to look with more understanding at some of the varied kinds of context that historians recover in attempting to restore to works their meanings and give works of art their own "presence." In our survey of interpretations of the *Primavera* we looked in a general way at the context of a *system of belief* — a religion or a philosophy, or both, which is the only way we could characterize Wind's or Panofsky's interpretations. Situating the work within the framework of Ficinian theory, elaborated in the city and the age of the *Primavera*' s origin, happens to produce a highly illuminating representation of a theory of love, the complexity of which we have already had a taste of. As an explanation of meaning, the contextual model can permit what action theory could not: Wind's Ficinian interpretation can be taken seriously as an *aspect* of the work's meaning even if that was not the meaning Botticelli painted it to have. The narrowest purpose of a painting is irrelevant to our understanding of the work as a cultural entity, for we can guess with confidence (given Wind's articulation) that the work would certainly have held such a meaning in Ficino's eyes. That the picture can be read for such a meaning, successfully, according to the rules, is sufficient vindication of the legitimacy of such an interpretation: the work *has* this capacity to constitute such a meaning for a member of its audience such as Ficino. That it has the capacity to mean other things as well hardly

diminishes or compromises its identity. Here we need only to recall the basic structure of contextual understanding, which explains that the work, as a cultural entity, can be said to possess a meaning that it is seen to have when set in a perspective that is contemporary with it — providing simply that such an interpretation does not fail the rules. It does not fail the rules of content, because its context is historical; it should not also fail the rules of form.

Another sort of context is *ideology*. This is somewhat analogous to the type we have just noted, for an ideology is also more or less of a framework of belief. But for a work to be understood ideologically is generally taken to involve seeing it as it appears in the perspective of fundamental but less explicit values. Those values may well be rooted in religion or philosophy, but again they may not be. They may be the kind of values or beliefs held generally by members of a society or a class, or, perhaps, a sex (or an image thereof), and that are linked to that status. It does not really matter how we ought properly to characterize it; my interest here is simply to indicate that an ideological interpretation engages a perspective and a repertoire of beliefs; it is an examination of the work from a position that existed within the world to which the work belongs. It presents the meaning of a work of art as it appears according to the kinds of belief (concerning class, morals, sexual identity, and so on) that ideologies are formed of. Whether such an interpretation can be made of any given work will depend, again, upon how successfully it can be made, according to the rules of form.[1]

Another sort of context is the context of *personal history*, or the context of *psychology*, depending upon what states of mind we take into account, and how deep within the psyche we travel in constituting the repertoire. Is this not the same thing as encountered in part III? We assume here a perspective of the artist, again as reconstructed from sufficient evidence, but here we are not looking for the "occasional mind". Psychology here refers to something broader than what it did in chapter six: there it had to do with a mental event (the artist's reading) that defined the meaning of the work; here it is the entire background of the artist's psychology, involving attitudes that the artist may not consciously have held. We might, for instance, look at an artist's sensitivities to or fears of women, something which may never have become conscious to him and yet that may have completely formed his manner of reading images of women. Whether images of women in

---

[1] For instance, an ideological interpretation that ignored most of a work's imagery, focusing upon one feature, would not be an interpretation of the work, whose method we are exploring here. We are interested in understanding the work more deeply, in seeing what its meaning is. Thus there is a difference between an ideological observation about a work's content, and the characterization of the work as having an ideological significance, in a fuller way. Such an interpretation would also satisfy the rules of content, for it is made on the basis of an historical reconstruction of an ideological view we find present in the work's world. But if the reconstructed ideology should have no capacity to respond, adequately, to the work's material, the effort will not succeed. It will be disqualified by the rules, which distinguish it as a failed interpretation, one that fails to give us a very deep understanding of the work.

his own works were specifically caused or formed by that disposition is a more 'scientific' conclusion than we need to draw, for the issue of causality has no bearing on meaning in this model. The disposition was there, close to the work, and constitutive of interpretations the artist may have made subsequent to the work. The communication model reverences one specific reading merely for having a causal role, though it is offered with equal formal support as other readings the artist gives on other occasions — in some cases, perhaps even less formal support. It is reasonable to see manners of reading that are possible, readings that actually occur, as a genuine meaning of the work. Meaning is determined in a context. We achieve a genuine understanding of the work because we look at it within the world it belongs to.

The object of this chapter is to explore instances of cultural interpretation, to examine one work of art in each of these two types of context, ideology and psychology. The aim remains the same as before: to gain a closer or finer understanding of what it actually means to do what the theory tells us we do and ought to do — in this case, what we do in adopting a contextual viewpoint. I am particularly concerned to examine two aspects of the model in detail. One of these is the qualitative problem of "disclosure of the context," how we locate a context, ascertain a perspective *in* the work's world, for that is the crux of this conception's satisfaction of the rule of objectivity. The other aspect is how the repertoire of the reconstructed perspective actually influences and directs the experience of reading and understanding, for as the theory explains, only if it is a mind from the work's world that takes control here (not the mind of the subject) will the rules of content be respected, and genuine understanding achieved.

81 IDEOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY: AN INTERPRETATION

I should like first to consider a work by Edvard Munch. Munch's *Vampire* presents a motif first drawn in a sketchbook of 1890, which reappeared in 1893 as the subject of a painting in oil (Konstmuseum, Göteborg; figure 34); two years later in 1895 Munch translated it to lithograph, which he reprinted numerous times in different ways.[2] It is one of the prints that we shall examine (figure 35). Our first indication of how to proceed in identifying a context comes simply from looking at this work, informed as we have to be. What is it that

---

[2] The print is made from a woodblock and two stones; the stone with the drawing dates from 1895, and the second stone and the block were apparently made in 1902. Los Angeles, *Edvard Munch* (1969), 101; Heller, *Munch — Life and Work* (1985). 129. Another source notes the appearance of a pastel of the subject c. 1893 (Munch-Museet, Oslo; no. OKK 122 B).

discloses its context? First, we can locate the world of the work in a broad way by familiarity with the work's style, or with simple factual information about the artist, or by knowledge of the work's origin, each of which situates the print in the context of late nineteenth-century Europe. Having done that, knowledge of European culture of that date reveals an instantly obvious parallel between both the print's title and imagery, on the one hand, and an artistic subject that was popular in that place and time. At least one context that assists us in understanding the meaning of Munch's *Vampire* surely must be the setting of that specifically fin-de-siècle subject, the predacious *femme fatale*, of which the female vampire was a popular type. It is a theme whose misogynistic overtones are not easily overlooked today. The context of what is at first an artistic theme therefore broadens, to include what can only be called an ideological component. Merely situating the print in the context of the tradition of its imagery is not interpretation in itself; it offers us relevant background.[3] Interpreting requires that we read the work, and register the value implications of the imagery itself, implications that we have reason to believe were registered by spectators in the work's world (primarily men, but certainly, also women), and implications that we may have reason to believe were deeply felt by the artist.

We know numerous representations of the theme; indeed, the image is found widely in literature as well. Munch was one artist of stature who devoted himself to it — and it is hardly an exaggeration to put it that way, for he produced many versions of the *femme fatale* image. As Heller notes, interpreting the painted version of this image (figure 34) with a supercilious reference to Munch's own description,

> In the painting what began — in Munch's words — as "simply a woman kissing a man on the nape of his neck" becomes an image of demonic, oppressive eroticism and sexual antagonism.[4]

What distinguishes the subject of the *femme fatale* as vampire is that it articulates a dynamic of male-female relations, one in which one sex is presented as preying upon the other. Rosenblum remarks upon "Munch's candid disclosure in his works that men and women are the helpless pawns of emotional and sexual forces," adding that Munch's attitudes are

> indebted to prevailing nineteenth-century views of the conflict of the sexes. Like his friend the Swedish playwright (and painter) Strindberg and like so many of his artist-contemporaries, from Toorop and Delville to Beardsley and von Stuck, Munch was obsessed with the concept of the *femme fatale*, whom he reincarnated in multiple guises: a modern Eve, a blood-sucking vampire, a flamelike bacchante, an archetypal murderess ..., a demonic temptress disguised as a consoling Madonna.

---

3 Understanding a work of art as belonging to an iconographic tradition is not really understanding, because it does not involve reading the work's imagery. It amounts only to an identification of imagery.

4 Heller, *Munch — Life and Work* (1985), 129.

In consequence. Rosenblum notes "a recent historical about-face" in our understanding of Munch; there has been a shift from our view earlier in this century of Munch as "a pioneer of ... modern emotional experience," an artist ahead of his time in psychological insight. Today "he is emerging more clearly as an artist deeply rooted in nineteenth-century experience;" we now feel the need "to locate Munch more firmly within the context of his compatriots."[5] That context will give us an especially crucial understanding of the work.

In addition to that social context, it is highly interesting to know something about Munch's life. People do not have views simply because the views are around; they acquire certain ones, and there are reasons for their openness to them. The fact of the work's subject matter has already situated the print in the context of an attitude attributable to an era; that attitude might well suggest an exploration of the facts of the artist's life, and they are provocative. Indeed, there is a remarkable sort of alignment between that ideological component of the theme of vampire and Munch's apparent anxiety in relations with women. Heller documents Munch's relationship with Tulla Larsen, his almost fiancée, who he met around 1898. Short of recounting all of the known details, we can cite from two letters that say a great deal about Munch's general disposition.

> And then there is your face filled with desire, and that is what frightens me. That is the sphinx's annihilating countenance, and that is where I see woman's most dangerous characteristics.
>
> Once you understand me, you will understand how impossible it was, the way you were with me, and how it would slowly kill me were my loneliness taken away from me. Then you will understand that the marriage which still may come to pass must be the kind that I indicated. We must live as brother and sister.[6]

Heller comments, Munch "would not submit to her sexual desires since that would destroy his artistic creativity. This was his great anxiety; her refusal to agree with him aroused in him feelings that can only be described as panic, a phobia of unprecedented intensity in his phobia-filled life." As Munch himself noted in a manuscript, "Her happiness was dependent on my destruction." In the final event of their relationship (the details of which remain unclear), "the ring finger of Munch's left hand lost two joints" to a pistol shot.[7] It is hard to think of the symbolism of that mishap as truly accidental.

In light of these facts, it scarcely seems important that the title *Vampire* was not in fact Munch's (it was attached to the painting by Munch's novelist friend Stanislaw Przybyszewski, and in any case, Munch himself used it in exhibitions after 1893). As

---

5 Rosenblum, "Munch: Changing Contexts" (1978), 3—4.

6 Letter to Tulla, c. 1900; draft letter to Tulla, c. November 1899. Heller, *Munch — Life and Work* (1985), 166, 171.

7 Heller, *Munch — Life and Work* (1985), 167, 175, 180.

Lieberman has noted of the print, "the power of sex [is] menacing in the *Vampire*."[8] We see, therefore, an unmistakable compatibility between the cultural attitude behind the theme of vampire and Munch's own psychology. Many of his works present men as victims of women (as in a drypoint of 1905 showing a woman plucking a man's eye out of his severed head).[9] In this way, the work's subject matter suggests two allied directions of interpretation: it situates the print in the context of an ideological attitude widespread throughout European culture, and situates it also in the context of an individual psychology in which women (apparently through their sexuality) posed a deep threat to at least one man's inner existence. Along both avenues, the woman in the work is revealed as a predator who feeds herself by draining the man of his vitality: woman is the destructive negation of man.

In the case of Munch's *Vampire*, therefore, the meaningfulness of two distinct sorts of historical context (social and biographical) is easy to demonstrate; developing an interpretation through them is a satisfaction of the rule of objectivity, concretized through the cultural model. It is a matter of some interest how these contexts were revealed, to eventually serve interpretation. It is not usually — and I think this is quite clear in this case — that we were pursuing or already devoted to any particular 'approach' adopted prior to encountering the work (cultural notions, whether in general or concerning sexuality in particular, or some psychological angle). 'Approach' — one of the key terms in the lexicon of scholarship — happens to be a particularly unfortunate choice in this respect, for it seems to suggest prior commitment to a type of context. What we most often do first is to look at the work — to look for something suggestive of a context. The work typically directs our choice. The image 'fits' the *femme fatale* genre, although we require familiarity with it to see that. The image also fits (if we happen to know of it) an image of women suggested both by events in Munch's own life and by certain explicit revelations of his views of women. The order of exposure matters very little; what matters is that the more one knows of these things, the further our reconstruction of that aspect of Munch's frame of mind is carried from mere hypothesis.[10] We can notice further that though these two interpretations are not unrelated in their content, they are not dependent on one another. We do not make one interpretation on the basis of the other. The subject matter of the image

---

8 Lieberman, "Munch as Printmaker" (1969), xiii.

9 Heller, *Munch — Life and Work* (1985), repr. 183.

10 One might, to be sure, form a suspicion about its meaning merely on looking at the image (or some other in Munch's oeuvre), but the experience of one image cannot adequately reveal anything so complex as either a psyche or the broader beliefs of a culture; the character of a psyche or a culture is not revealed by a single thing, even if (once revealed) it might be successfully represented by one thing.

itself, which presents a specific form of relation between men and women, suggests each of these possibilities independently.

Munch's lithograph is therefore interpretable in these contexts according to the directives of the method. Having been derived from two contexts clearly situated in the world of this work, the content of the interpretations (each on its own) has been objectively and not subjectively developed. By reconstructing and adopting first the perspective of a specific turn-of-the-century conception of women (an attitude not peculiar to that time but here expressed in a manner that is distinctive of it) we are able to understand the work as an ideological creation; this recourse gives us a deep understanding of the image that the work presents. With *Vampire* our interpretation has taken place in full rapport with our knowledge of the theme of *femme fatale*, something we had already known of; that familiarity instantly enabled us to see this image in light of a widespread social conception of the de facto roles of man and woman. Reconstructing, in addition, the perspective of a specific person (once again with reference to a conception of women), we can again interpret the work in an ideological context, but this time the 'ideology' of a specific person, revealed through a specific life history. Again, we are afforded a deep understanding of the work, but now an understanding whose overtones or feeling is quite different. Two contexts, close-lying aspects of one work: compatible perspectives, and even mutually illuminating interpretations.

Though I will not take the time to demonstrate it, both interpretations satisfy also the rules of form; there are no deficiencies with regard to any of the necessary formal conditions (adequacy, simplicity, coherence, explanatory power), and the compatibility of the two interpretations is notable. Following the method, concretized by our model, which clarifies the work's semantic potential, we have legitimated these interpretations: demonstrated that they can be taken as interpretations revelatory of the meaning of the work. Though it certainly has other aspects of meaning, understood as a representation of a certain conception of the relation between man and woman (an imbalanced and antagonistic relation), Munch's print can be regarded as substantially interpreted. We might understand the print further, adopt other historical perspectives, but it is important to notice that with this interpretation the mystery of its meaning has been penetrated. As I have remarked, scholarship is largely driven not by the objective of exhaustive understanding but by mystery, by the desire to overcome the feeling of distance that encounters with art commonly inspire. Once we have achieved an understanding of the work that removes that distance, within the constraints imposed by a theory oriented to the work, we have a cognitive representation of this work of art.

But is the satisfaction of these conditions of method really an adequate basis for deciding the meaning of Munch's print? Is there any deficiency in the *result* of such a method?[11] On much the same basis we can uncover another interpretation that is not only different from but that appears actually historically incompatible with this one. When one looks at the lithograph with other information — further information that is not (unlike Lightbown's dating of the *Primavera*) contradictory of the facts our interpretations have been based on — the work takes on a meaning that does not fit these, and yet that arose by the same standards.

82 RELATIVE MEANINGS

The subject that Munch drew in this lithograph in 1895 he had drawn for the first time in 1890, and it is evident from Munch's notebooks that, like many other of his works, it is a subject that had its basis in specific events in his relations with women. The notebook entry reads:

> He sat with his arm around her body. Her head was so near to him. It seemed so remarkable to have her eyes, her mouth, her breasts so near to him....
>
> And he laid his head between her breasts. He felt her blood stream through her veins. He listened to the beat of her heart. He buried his face in her lap. She lowered her head down over him and he felt two warm, burning lips on his neck. A shudder passed through his body, a shudder of voluptuousness. And he pressed her convulsively to him.[12]

If one looks at the print (figure 35) in light of this account of the experience that was, in a sense, its origin — the origin, certainly, of its image — one is compelled to see it somewhat differently than we have. What happens in the picture? "Simply," to use the words Munch used to describe the work some forty years later, "a woman kissing a man on the nape of his neck."[13] That, of course, is the merely external description of what happens in the scene, which would not likely have been worth drawing, painting, and printing were

---

11 Consider in this connection a remark by Shiff: "To begin with more knowledge of the historical moment than of the particular work can also result in a *mirroring* — we find in the work exactly what we already knew of the context. Meaning is hard to avoid because it is the most convenient mechanism of explanation: the unknown is simply illuminated in terms of the known." Such an approach, then, is "unproductive"; the result is a "subversion of historical analysis by the terms of its own operation." Shiff, "Art History and the Nineteenth Century" (1988), 28, 38 [emphasis added].

12 The manuscript is in the archives of the Munch Museum, Oslo (OKK T 2771). Heller, *Munch — Life and Work* (1985), 129. A somewhat different translation of this passage is given by Schneede, *Munch: Early Masterpieces* (1978), opposite pl. 19.

13 In a draft of a letter to Jens Thiis, written c. 1932. Heller, *Munch — Life and Work* (1985), 233 n. 68.

it confined to that; the actual experience of 'a woman' (in this event, certainly not any woman) 'kissing a man on the nape of his neck' amounts to something.

When we look more carefully at the print, we become aware that what Munch has drawn is the utter submission of the man to a woman whose kiss is so much more than 'simply a kiss'. The tenderness of this gesture from a creature whose blood and heartbeat are so deeply significant to him has overwhelmed the man. Munch has painted the helplessness of the one in the thrall of the other, the abandonment of the self to the other — and he has painted, with it, the corresponding terror. The terror of one's utter vulnerability, one's utter defenselessness; the terror of having let one's heart go, having loosed the restraint that normally and for good reason imprisons it — of knowing that, with or without one's will, it is being loosed as the lips press. An interpretation offered of the painting of this subject (figure 34), of which the print is a *close* rendering, discusses the interpretation previously developed (§ 81) in a way that holds equally well for the lithograph, so close in nature are the two renderings:

> The title itself seems to explain this painting. A figure sucking blood from someone else; the man is the victim, the woman drawing her dominating power from him at his cost. The motif recurs in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, Strindberg's *Confession of a Fool*, and Przybyszewski's *De profundis*. But sketches made for this painting and the picture itself raise some doubts. Although the strong clutch of the woman's arm is constricting and arouses anxiety, the man is seeking protection and refuge; his left hand, roughly sketched, is not repulsing but holding on. Her hair falling over his head is an erotic symbol; it envelops him like a network of veins, holding him prisoner but at the same time unifying them. Thus the painting portrays the yearning for union and the fear of the destructive power of love. ... In fact, the painting was originally titled *Love and Pain*. It was called *Vampire* only after Przybyszewski's interpretation of 1894, in which he mistakenly [though by no means accidentally] placed it in the vampire topos, which was so popular at the end of the nineteenth century.[14]

The image in the print shows us all these things, with slight but not insignificant differences: the woman's hand is held more loosely; the man's on her back is more clear; the tendrils of her hair are more distinct; the darkness is darker. We see the man's helplessness — a posture, even, of supplication. The woman's looming, enveloping presence: her giant shadow, which fills the room; and the tresses that fall over him, enveloping and winding him in her. There is a sense, in this image, of tenderness (the woman's touch appears light), and of power and weakness (the dominance and inferiority are plain). It is a power and a weakness not the effects of games of control, but the *lot*, the destiny, of the lover and the loved. And there is a sense of fear (in the cowering posture of the man, and the menacing quality of the woman's form, the harsh blood-red colour of her hair, the bones obvious in her fingers). It is the fear provoked by the threat to the self that

---

[14] Schneede, *Munch: Early Masterpieces* (1988), opposite pl. 19.

love brings on, *whether love truly poses such a threat or not.* All of these things are visible together in the one image.

The meaning that we have now read in the work has been uncovered in the same way as before. We looked at the print within an historical context, this time with a mind sensitive to a passage from Munch's own hand — that is, we have looked at it once again with a recourse to its world. What context is this and how might it be related to the others? As we have observed, and there is no reason to change our view, a man who would fuel the notion of the *femme fatale* might indeed be a man who personally feared women, who may have been unable to see them except as eventually threatening. But a man who came to see women as a threat might, indeed, be a man who knew the totality of love, a man who experienced the overwhelming stature of the other. For that experience, as it has just been described, does not involve any particular neurosis, weakness of mind, or ideological disposition. In respect of our model, however, we run into a difficulty over this reading, which must be cleared up. The model reveals that cultural meanings are perspectival aspects of the meaning of a work, and on the face of it, it appears we have found another aspect of this work, have added on another dimension of the work's meaning. But we have not; we have found a conflicting version of one of the aspects we had already thought established: the work in the perspective of Munch's psychology. We cannot, at least easily, imagine that we have a new but contradictory dimension of meaning from Munch's point of view.

One of these interpretations identifies the woman as a predator, feeding off the victimized man's submission; in the other interpretation the woman is the object of devotion, and while her consequent stature inspires a quantity of fear she is *not* the man's adversary. The dynamic between man and woman in the two readings, the roles each is assigned, are totally different. We are faced, then, with two incompatible interpretations, each of which is contextually justified and fully supported by the rules. Can we say, simply, that the work means both? If we do, we place some strain on our understanding of the historical reality of a perspective; surely from Munch's viewpoint it is one or the other. And that we cannot yet eliminate one appears to raise trouble for the method the model unfolds, for on legitimate evidence it delivers two distinct and incompatible dispositions on Munch's part: one that attaches no blame, and recognizes the dependency of love; another that sets woman and man in the roles of predator and victim. Given this conflict or surplus of interpretations, one strategy is a chronological argument. We might feel inclined to dismiss the third interpretation as historically anachronistic, since based on events predating the print by a couple of years, concluding that this is indeed an image of the femme fatale. One might argue that the sketch and its connection with the diary are temporally remote

from the print, and the title Munch accepted is evidence enough.[15] But it is a peculiar argument with rather dissatisfying implications: it would be strange to say that the print does not mean what the painting (which presents virtually the same image) does mean. On a chronological basis, one might equally propose the opposite argument: that the facts of Munch's subsequent behaviour, and in connection with it the subsequent ends to which he wanted this image put, are irrelevant; the true historical conditions that define the context within which this work *means* are the facts of the original encounter that spurred him to draw. Then again there is another form of argument, which looks at evidence. Given the orientation of the model toward a real cultural context, perhaps we have a question about Munch's beliefs that historical inquiry must decide; if we think of these as two hypotheses about an historical situation, one might well be eliminated by further research. We might find this provocation to return to the conception of the work as action; the solution would be to determine which of these dispositions was 'effective in the production of' the work.[16] These recourses are all arguable, but I confess to losing interest in interpretation as it floats into regions of decision like this. I have no interest in trying to think up a way by which one might draw the line either here or there. If we are not struck by the degeneration of what began as a sincere attempt to understand a work of art — a degeneration into finessing *real* psychological conditions, or into a hunt for *the actual* limitation — we might ask whether it is simply realistic. For it is actually dogmatic to suppose that the tendency of Munch's mind would be one way or the other; minds are not 'defined' in that kind of way. They flicker, and it becomes absurd to posit some effective moment at which a certain state determines what a work that is quite external to it means. There may be no disposition 'out there', historically speaking, to go in search of. So there is also a psychological argument, by which the conflict is removed: perhaps, rather, Munch held both attitudes; the need to

---

15 To decide just the significance of Munch's acceptance of the title, however, is difficult in itself. Eggum notes the following: "The motif [of the painting and print] was first exhibited under the title *Love and Pain*, while the title *Vampire* was inspired by Stanislaw Przybyszewski. Munch adopted the title until, as a reaction to accusations of being too literary, he asserted [many years later — ed.] that the motif merely represented a woman kissing a man on the neck." Eggum, *Edvard Munch* (1984), 42.

16 It is worth recalling that logic, however, as further argument against it, for it is easy to see how impossible it is to answer such a question. In this case, we cannot seem to rely on the work, for the appearance of the image itself is ambivalent — it can be shifted according to which tendency we take; it has the power to evoke both meanings. (Indeed, it is not even clear which action to turn to: the creation of the image, in the drawing, or the creation of the print itself.) At the time the print was first made in 1895, we do not know what Munch was thinking or feeling; the diary entry suggests that the benign disposition was productive of the notebook image that he turned to then, while the paranoiac disposition may have lain behind his willingness to present the work with the title suggested by Przybyszewski in 1894. If Przybyszewski "mistakenly placed it in the vampire topos," Munch was his full accomplice. The weakness of basing interpretations upon states of mind is that states of mind typically leave behind them even less evidence than the works we want them to clarify. Which moment is the real one for the purposes of establishing meaning? Which of Munch's dispositions was, at the crucial moment, effective?

eliminate one of these readings stems only from too simplistic a view of the mind, for sometimes people believe contradictory things. Let us, for the moment, take that path.

It is possible to make the horror of women we read in Munch's image (according to two contexts, of culture and individual psychology) compatible with the vulnerability and adoration that we can also read here (according to a third context, likewise connected to biography). We can read here Munch's confusion about women. Extrapolating from what evidence we have of his notions, we might well be inclined to see Munch as a man who misunderstood women. In fact we can virtually *see* this misunderstanding in the very work we are discussing, which presents us with a double view of a woman; we can imagine that Munch misapprehended the natural submission and vulnerability of the experience of love, mistook it as evidence of a predacious quality he was perhaps inclined to believe in and feared deeply. For there is no question that it is a mistake to translate a sense of the dangers of the submission love can compel into a demonic image of an entire sex; that is a gross misunderstanding of experience. Yet, we know, people make this mistake, one of the many errors that are human. There is evidence for 'projecting' this misreading onto Munch. And that tells us something about the meaning of a work read according to an historical perspective.

Effectively, *the meaning of the work is relativized.* What we have discovered about the meaning of this work of art is this: it portrays a double view of love, and a misreading of vulnerability as the threat of a sex. What is the meaning of this historical print? We can say, in a perfectly unproblematic way, that it is the threat of women. It is a psychological or ideological meaning. Munch might have wished to portray his vision for the welfare of other men, but the image of a woman bending over a man can only mean what he took it to mean for a mind such as his. We are not saying that women are such a threat, for we are talking about a perspective: for a psyche without faith in love, that is what it means. This is the basic dynamic of contextual interpretation: it understands the meaning of art as *holding* relative to a standpoint.[17] In a mind in the sway of its delusion, the meaning of the print is the woman as femme fatale. Indeed, we recognize that to interpret the work in this way is to see it as the image of an error. It is an entirely natural component of our way of reading that we now take the meaning of the work to be a distortion of the truth; the work pictures a deluded sense of reality.

The contextual model itself clarifies what this conflict of interpretations was about. We are interested in real historical perspectives, and in effect we have found two incompatible perspectives that Munch genuinely occupied. In terms of what we know of

---

17 "No aesthetic objects are revelatory of reality in general, apart from being symptoms of personality or culture." Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (1958), 380, 391.

one disposition (Munch's capacity to love), one sees meaning of one sort in the work; in terms of what we know of another (his own hermeneutic pathology), we uncover a different meaning. The meaning of the work is *objectively relative* to different minds that belonged to its world (just as with Botticelli); that they belong to one person poses no problem for this model. Just as what Ficino brought to the interpretation of the *Primavera* may have differed from what its patron brought, so Munch at two different moments of his life — indeed, even at different moments in the production of this image — brought different states of mind, each defining perspective within which this multi-valent image took on a meaning in a distinct way. This is, indeed, is relativity of meaning, but the critical point is that it does not leave room for subjectivity; it does not fall afoul of the rules of content that are devoted to guiding us to the work itself. We are safely limited by our identification of the work (as cultural entity) to developing interpretations whose content belongs to the real world to which the work belongs. And we are limited further to excluding every perspective unable to deal with the material of the work. There is only as much relativity as the rules permit, and the rules exclude modern, anachronistic projections. According to the perspective that we entertain, it is possible to claim that the work means both things. But that is not the really interesting thing we have discovered. The interesting thing is not just that the work means this *or* that, depending upon the viewpoint taken; it is that it means both things, it is their peculiar closeness, and the way Munch slid between these readings. Probing into ways of reading, and our psychological way of dealing with the incompatibility of interpretations that arose, has given us a really substantial kind of meaning.

83 THE CONTEXT OF CONTENT

We have an acceptable and successful recourse, logically unassailable in relation to the method, to the problem of a possible conflict of interpretations. We have a work that means several things, in accordance with distinct historical viewpoints: in one view, it means something relative to certain prevailing social attitudes; in another — and in a way that is quite affecting, in face of the image — with reference to a certain tendency of mind it means a certain kind of slippage between an original experience that may have been quite benign and a delusional misreading of reality. The question that arises is whether by following the method in this way we can really do justice to what Munch's work, *as* an historical entity, has accomplished. Looking at *what* Munch has drawn in the print — the ostensible focus of our interpretation — reminds us that there is more at issue in understanding than a theory,

legitimacy, and matters of evidence. One further consideration has to do (as previously in this study) with the nature of the image; another concerns what we might call the quality of our relation to the work. Consider first the image.

If we were to think about *the most salient fact* of the excursus we have made with Munch's picture, it is that the one image we are trying to understand has supported two divergent and conflicting interpretations. Indeed, the presence of that conflict was finally the most impressive reading we came out with. And if we were to return to the work, we might be inclined to see this as a distinguishing feature of this particular image: its *ambiguity*. A distinguishing quality is precisely the kind of thing an interpretation ought to pay attention to. What in the print is (quoting Munch) "simply a woman kissing a man on the nape of his neck" is without the slightest change an image of predatory domination and willess powerlessness. The image has hermeneutic possibilities, what I have called a fluidity of meaning; in a specific but somewhat different sense than we have been using the term, the work has *aspects*[18] (as in Wittgenstein's duck/rabbit drawing): once one has been able to see the ways of reading, the image holds a certain volatility. And in this case (unlike duck versus rabbit) there is an uncomfortable tension between *these particular* possibilities (woman as adored/woman as predator). This is a fact of this image, and the question is what we do with it, what we do now. Following the model, we look at the world of the work, at Munch's mind; we find that tension in Munch's disposition to misread his own experiences. But the tension of this image is a fact that also raises a question about *life*, a question that the model is not only disinterested in, but that it sets outside the legitimate business of understanding.

If we allow ourselves (having come so far as to recognize the ambiguity of this image) merely to think about it, we will see that Munch's picture presents the ambiguity of a situation in life: as we have noted, the vulnerability of loving. What that means — and looking at the work focuses the mind to see this — is that loving has an *ambivalent potential:* one loves positively but helplessly, and is at the mercy of the other. If on the prompting of this image we bring the situation pictured here simply to life, we are faced with the duality, the uncertain potentiality, of a specific human experience. We are given an answer, in effect, to the question, What does it mean to place oneself, in helpless adoration, in the arms of another? It is a matter of contemplating through an image the meaning of human experience — the meaning of a kiss such as this, and the phenomenon of loving that is submission to the beloved. *The work gives us the occasion to situate ourselves in relation*

---

18 There is a difference between this sense of aspect and that involved in the contextual model, which is that this sense is not specifically based upon the added conceptions of viewpoint and perspective; we merely mean to note the phenomenon, that the image has two distinct kinds of significance.

to reality, to grasp the truth of what is pictured, which is the ambivalent potential of love. We are provoked to reflect upon the conditions in which the positive becomes the negative, and on the distance or lack of distance between them. Our encounter with the image in this work offers us the occasion to embark on that reflection; if we let the image direct our attention, it positively invites it. Free of the crisis love provokes when it breaks (however rarely) into our own lives, we are given here an opportunity to think about these things, and perhaps we are pushed a little further in our views. We are not compelled to accept any particular message: we may stick with what we already think, but the ambivalence of the image leads us to weigh that once again in the face of something, pictured here, we may not have considered.

It is a form of reflection, and it is one with a bearing on the meaning of our lives, because we are driven to love whether we have understood the thing or not. To be driven to love, not knowing its potential — not taking the right attitude, fearing what should not be feared, or reading one's own weakness as the other's threat — is a path of destitution. It is a form of reflection that is offered by virtually nothing but art. But how we choose to think about the meaning of a work of art determines whether it is or is not possible, for the theory argues, at its fundamental level, that my own or any other one person's 'use' of the work is of no interest in the attempt to determine its meaning.[19] But in fact we are not talking here about a use at all. We are suggesting that the model's approach to the content of the work is deficient, because at a critical moment it imposes a theory-based definition. The approaches taken above to the interpretation of this work do not accept, receive, and address *the situation that Munch himself has drawn.* They addressed the work (according to a conception of the work) and the content (defined as a relative content), but in so doing they did not address what either Munch or the work presents. Munch is 'talking about' an event that is real: the realm of what is pictured is not *this* picture *in* a prescribed context. We can respond to a real thing only by looking at it as we know it or believe it to be — that is, by registering it in the context of reality, where every real thing also stands in an implicit relation to us.

Love is not one of the remoter realities; it has a stature, a significance, a value of a sort for almost everyone, which comes from the context of their lives. The context for registering what Munch's historical work is about is not, therefore, Munch's psyche (in whatever form we may convince ourselves to picture it), or a certain strain of masculine fin-de-siècle culture: it is life. And my only access to life (which I fully recognize to be an

---

19 "A work of art *as* a work of art cannot be used at all." Morstein, "Understanding Works of Art" (1975), 355. If we are to appreciate a work as a thing "valuable in itself" it is inadequate to relate a work of art "to various preoccupations in life, to make use of it for some ulterior purpose." Pepita Haezrahi, *The Contemplative Activity* (1954), 25, 35—36; cited and supported by Osborne, *Art of Appreciation* (1970), 26, 28—33.

actual *limitation* of my understanding) is my own understanding of what life is and ought to be. It is a deficient response to the way the work is offered either to relativize its meaning: to picture the context of the mind that Munch's testimony and biography gives us sketchy insight into, and to see the work as picturing the tension created in a mind by different mental dispositions. To take such a stance is to reject the fact that what Munch has drawn, by the evidence of the image and our own ability to read it, is itself, as a fact of the world, the ambiguous potential of loving. If we are able to conclude — with reference to variably disclosed contexts — that the work means the threat that women pose for a man, or means the fear of submission, or means either or both in respect of a specific mind, *we do not accept the framework, the context, of the work's own content,* which is life, and which involves us and our understanding of love. We, ourselves, and by Munch's historical image, were in 1895 and are in 1994 confronted with the ambiguity of love. The work does this even as a cultural creation; the issue of what it means is not a methodical matter even if we are *interested in* the work as an historical creation, for Munch's work invokes reality, and in the same way as it did when it was new.

If I am interested in the work as a phenomenon of Munch's world (more exactly, of the world as Munch understood it), the context in which its meaning is to be resolved is another man's psyche, such as I can presume to know it. But that is not the work's context — the work qua representational image, which is a role it has logically prior to fulfilling any specific purpose. The relation (through the basic level of representation) of image to world establishes a broader sense of context than any advanced in the contextual model. The work simply pictures a phenomenon of the world, and that world is precisely the context in which Munch's expression was offered. Indeed, there is no way that we can look at this imagery as 'belonging to a mind'. The imagery itself bears its own link to the reality of love. The full context of the work is the world, which it is our continual duty to understand for ourselves.

84 THE ISSUE OF RESPONSE

In addition to not receiving the image that is offered, the other weakness of the contextual approach concerns the quality of our relation with the work. It is a problem we have encountered once before (§ 46). This may appear a more subtle consideration, but after the foregoing it will not be difficult to see what it amounts to; we might equally well think of it as the quality of our response. To understand the meaning of the work relative to another mind has a very profound effect that, strangely, scholarship totally overlooks. If we begin

with a fairly common appreciation of what it means to understand, to look for a contextual meaning is to adopt an attitude toward the work that is *incompatible with understanding;* it is, in fact, to stand outside that situation in which understanding can occur.

Habermas has discussed this issue in connection with the problem of people understanding each other. Understanding what someone says to us depends (it is a necessary condition) upon our taking the right attitude toward them and what they say. Habermas refers us to a discussion by Hans Skjervheim, who distinguished two differing attitudes, one of which effectively blocks real understanding. A person who "observes something in the world or makes a statement about something in the world" — that thing might be an event, or a story one has been told — "adopts an objectivating attitude"; by contrast, one who truly hears what is said "enters into an intersubjective *relation*" with the speaker, and "adopts a non-objectivating, or as we would now say, a performative attitude."[20] Both are options in our approach to others. Skjervheim pointed to

> the fundamental ambiguity of the human situation: that the other is there both as an object for me and as another subject with me. This dualism crops up in one of the major means of intercourse with the other — the spoken word. We may treat the words that the other utters as sounds merely; or if we understand their meaning we may *still treat them as facts, registering the fact that he says what he says.* Or we may treat what he says as a *knowledge claim,* in which case we are not concerned with what he says as a fact of his biography only, but as something which can be true or false. In both the first cases the other is an object for me, although in different ways, while in the latter he is *a fellow-subject who concerns me as one on an equal footing with myself, in that we are both concerned with our common world.*[21]

Habermas comments upon the crucial point:

> Skjervheim draws our attention here to the interesting fact that the performative attitude of a first person in relation to a second means at the same time an orientation to validity claims. In this attitude ego cannot treat a truth claim raised by alter as something that appears in the objective world; ego encounters this claim *frontally;* he has to take it seriously, to react to it with a "yes" or a "no" (or to leave to one side, as not yet decided, the question of whether the claim rightly stands). Ego has to grasp the utterance of alter as symbolically embodied knowledge.[22]

"Knowledge" is perhaps not the best word, for what is being explained is that ego does not confront merely the content, as believed by someone, but the reality of the content — in that sense we might rather say, 'symbolically embodied reality' or 'claims about reality'. This is not hard to understand. When you tell me something you believe, you are talking about the world, not your belief. Were I to treat it as belief, to respond to your sincere attempt to tell me about reality by saying, 'so, that is how things appear to you, to someone like you,' I

---

20 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), I, 111.

21 Skjervheim, "Objectivism and the Study of Man" (1974), 266 [emphasis added, chiefly]; cited in Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), 112—13.

22 Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981), I, 113.

would not respond to you, because I would not have understood what you were saying. It may appear that the ground here has shifted from the issue of understanding to that of social graces: it has not. A response of that kind is not just a lapse of courtesy, I have not even grasped the nature of your remark.[23] In fact you are not addressing me autobiographically, not registering a view; you are speaking to me *about* the world. To listen to you requires that I attend seriously not merely to the *material substance* of what you say — like a frustrating equivocator — it means also *to take seriously the assertion that delivers that content:* you are telling me how something *is*.

To take an objectivating attitude toward someone is to assume an attitude of superiority to them; it is not to accord them the stature of having anything to say that could dent my picture of the truth. The same conditions apply to our encounter with a work of art. The method of the cultural model is a logic of objectivation. If we are to conclude, through our conception of historical context, that the meaning of Munch's *Vampire* has to do with a conception of women as predators, or with the menace of sexual desire, tells us nothing about the world that we have not already seen and seen beyond, for we think of these as obviously narrow conceptions. In those cases, our own knowledge is simply more advanced than the content of the work. To accept the dynamic of genuine understanding requires us to allow the image *the possibility* of having something to say. That means seeking an interpretation that not only matches historical evidence, but that is meaningful directly for us. To pursue an interpretation meaningful for us is not a matter of self indulgence; it is to avoid a stance in which what we believe about the world and what the work presents are artificially insulated from one another. And the issue is merely to allow the possibility; if the work in the end has nothing to say, there is nothing to be done about it; we finish with the judgement that the work has a meaning that does not affect us. With the relativization of the cultural model, we virtually always begin with that view. It is important to be *disinclined* to take that avenue, because only in that way can we preserve an interest in discovering a meaning that makes sense at all the levels of meaning. Because the very image addresses reality, we are interested in what that relation is. And this, in fact, is what that component of explanatory power that we called a *meaningful* meaning comes to. A relation to reality involves meaning that is meaningful not only for people with specific dispositions — indeed, with dispositions, as we often picture them, to be wrong.

The conclusion to draw is that meaning of Munch's image cannot be limited to historical knowledge. If we receive the experience the work itself offers us — an

---

[23] I let someone down *because* I don't listen; the element of understanding is the basis of the ethical element. It is within my power to choose my stance, and to take someone's words as mere statements, and not as remarks with a bearing on the matter — to strip off their inherent reference to the world and the spirit in which they were offered — is something that true dialogue obliges we not do.

experience of ambivalence — it has to be addressed, by a part of us that does not respond merely to what has been, but that regards the ambivalence that the work presents as a condition of *reality*. Resolving meaning requires more than an assessment of historical information. It requires that we think about the reality that was certainly Munch's object in drawing and painting. Merely relativizing contradictory interpretations suspends this reference to the world. What we are saying fits the schema of levels of meaning discussed in § 46. We could respond to this work at the level of identification alone, and suspend our interpretation there; we could simply *identify* the action of this image, noting its inherent ambiguous quality. But if one intends to understand the work, halting interpretation at the level of identification is dismissive. We must respond to the work as it was offered, which means not suspending interpretation. To move into the level of *content* means, as it meant with Veronese and Rembrandt, Picasso and Friedrich, that we cannot put off the question of truth that the work raises — a question that at this level has nothing to do with historical veracity. Once we reach the level of content every issue of truth to historical fact has been exhausted; from that point we have no support upon which to lean.

85 IDEOLOGY AND CRITIQUE: AN INTERPRETATION

What is the significance of the historical context and how should it influence our interpretations? Exploring this further, I should like to consider another and somewhat different case of the context of ideology or social belief. This one is offered by Manet's *Olympia,* which hangs in some splendour in the Musée d'Orsay (figure 36). I choose it because, from the setting given to the painting in the Musée and from the reverence the work now draws, one can form no sense of the significance *Olympia* once had, historically — a significance that, indeed, one would wish not merely to associate with but to identify with the painting's 'genuine' meaning.

The effect of Manet's painting when first exhibited in 1865, two years after it was painted, has been well treated by other writers.[24] In less than a month of opening, to restore some calm the salon directors had it moved and hung so high it could hardly be seen. Knowing about that response gives this painting a significance that it does not have when we merely step up to it, as so many do, in the museum, situating the material of the image within the world as we understand it. And that initial reception, given our view of the painting, is actually quite puzzling. It is not easy to appreciate why a work such as this

24 Clark, "Olympia's Choice" (1984), 80—98; Cachin, *Manet* (1983), 174—76, 181.

could have won such an extraordinarily unwelcoming reception. Pushed as we may be to learn more about its circumstance, we can discover two things that it is crucial to know (if we are to understand that reception) that we could not have picked up merely by looking at the painting without historical knowledge — two things that must come from study of the work's original context. One of them is who Olympia is: "*Olympia* is a picture of a prostitute: various signs declare that unequivocally."[25] The other is the tradition within which she is portrayed, a tradition of the female nude whose high points are marked roughly by Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, the *Rokeby Venus* of Velázquez, Goya's *Naked Maja*, and *La grande Odalisque* of Ingres. Putting the two together goes a long way toward explaining the critics' response, as Cachin explains.

> A classic masterpiece, peer of the finest nudes in the history of art, ... And at the same time a painting undeniably modern, in its handling and its spirit of polemic and irony .... Beyond this, the importance accorded to the bouquet and its bearer, as essential to the subject as the nude figure, clarifies the enigma of Manet's thought: *Olympia* is first and foremost grand painting, and it was meant as such. It was, moreover, precisely this inverted hierarchy of values that was resented by the critics of the time.[26]

A modern prostitute painted in a tradition of high art, raised to the level of the models of Titian and Velázquez and presented to the eye of the Parisian public: it was a combined affront by art to artistic and moral values. *Olympia* was not so much painted *in* this tradition — assuming many of its defining characteristics — as painted with and against it. Cachin says more in answer to our question:

> Why this uproar? Because this was a realistic nude and a contemporary scene. *Olympia* was a highly personalized nude, an assemblage of qualities, both good and bad, and not, as was taught at the École des Beaux-Arts in the tradition of Ingres, an idealized image of perfection gleaned from various models. Victorine [Manet's model] was a bit short in the leg, small and narrow in the chest; her foot was anything but aristocratic; and her square face with pointed chin, her cold and challenging regard, did not express tenderness, timidity, shyness, or wantonness — the traditionally obligatory feminine expressions. She presents herself without shame, without mythological or allegorical excuse.[27]

It was not only the conjunction of low life and high art, it was this particular woman as well. The cool gaze of the model, and her pert posture, countered the fantasy of the tradition of the nude, its invitation to dream; the aesthetic imperfections of the woman's body countered its feminine ideal; and the reticent brush-work countered its sumptuousness, making scant concession to the technical objectives by which the masters gave their work value. Enough was taken from the high-art tradition to vault this model into

---

25 Clark, "*Olympia* in 1865" (1980), 23; Clark, "Olympia's Choice" (1984), 85—86.
26 Cachin, *Manet* (1983), 175.
27 Ibid., 179.

the company of the Titians, but at the same time the numerous digressions from the genre made this same association an uncomfortable one. *Olympia* was a challenge to ideology; it was ideological critique.

Unless we know these three things — know who Olympia is, are familiar with the genre upon which the painting draws, and are aware as a result of the ways it challenges the expectations of those who were knowledgeable of that genre — the significance of the painting is surely missed. The contrast, as I have said, between the initial response and the response *Olympia* receives today could hardly be greater. Of course we are always ready to believe that a great work eventually receives its public, but it is doubtful that that is the case here, for if this scandal-provoking quality is central to the work's meaning, this seems rather more the case of a work that has *lost* its public — an event that, strange to say, appears to have taken place as long ago as 1907, fifty years after the painting was painted.

> The other day ..., at the Louvre, we came across Manet's *Olympia*. Nobody is astonished by it any more. It looks like something by Ingres! And yet heaven knows I've broken many a lance for this painting which I don't entirely like, though assuredly it's by *someone*.[28]

Is *Olympia* in the context of today even a shadow of itself, without our restitution of the ideological context of Paris society within which it once provoked battles? And is its significance in precisely that historical context not what we would call its real meaning, on the model of the context?

It appears obvious with Manet's *Olympia* how much the historical context is the context of the work's true meaning — how much historical meaning is the only sort that seems to do the work justice. The historical meaning is in this case (put in a most general way) *Olympia as affront*, a meaning that we miss entirely without historical knowledge. But before we can consider the question of the work's true meaning answered, we shall have to look in a little more detail at what that meaning is. For in a way, the critics' *rejection* of a painting is a strange sort of indication of what any work might mean; surely that response is only an aspect of the work's meaning, and in a sense perhaps not its meaning at all — for how much do the baffled critics represent its ideal audience? One might well say that the painting met with almost universal incomprehension: "What the critics saw," one scholar writes, was "how far it departed from conventional ways of representing the nude, and that departure proved difficult to make sense of."[29]

---

28 Words Proust gave to Oriane de Guermantes in *À la recherche du temps perdu;* cited by Cachin, *Manet, 1832—1883* (1983), 174.

29 Fer, *Modernity and Modernism* (1993), 23. Clark discusses the proposal that "*Olympia* failed to signify in 1865." "*Olympia* in 1865" (1980), 25.

The affront of *Olympia* is the result of how the painting appears: how it was painted, what it includes, what traditions it borrows from. How it looks is plainly the most substantial of the things that guide its interpretation, and what the painting means has to do especially with this. What does it present to us? At the centre, an undressed but adorned woman reclined in this particular posture (neither relaxed nor quite tensed), who turns this particular gaze upon us (a frank gaze but not a cold one, a gaze with a trace of spirit). The challenge the picture gives us is to see, and to think of, a woman such as the woman we observe here, presented in this setting (which we identify as the type of setting we have seen in Titian, Goya, Velázquez): we are *challenged*, in other words, to see *this* woman as a subject of high art. A modern woman — a woman from the boulevard or the street, such as one might see every day, such indeed as one might know. An ordinarily attractive woman who is without shame in her nakedness — in fact, who demonstrates a remarkable ease in being on display, and perhaps some confidence in the power of her body, and the status she commands as the object of attention. A woman of uncertain morals — a woman who appears, actually, to live off that power. What other sort of woman in 1863 was so much at ease with this form of display?

Despite Clark's remark, the critics were in a way more understanding of the work than we, who pass comfortably by, because the critics *registered that challenge*. Making themselves secure behind the barrage of their ridicule, comfortable in the knowledge that there were few who would accept it, they threw the challenge back. They judged the work a failure, its meaning limited: there is little sense to find here because there is *no* way in which to see such a woman as a figure equal to those with which Manet expressly compared her, the women till then adored and etherealized in the works of the Masters. To make such an association is to mock both beauty and taste. The critics did not so much fail to understand the work — fail, that is, to notice the details, to read the attitude and expression, to register its tradition — as fail to find, in the meaning those elements plainly had, any *acceptable coherence*. Since there is no sensible way to combine this woman and that tradition, Manet produced a work without coherent meaning.[30] Its only meaning is to travesty the values of the tradition of female nude. In the reconstructed perspective of the Paris public (such as we can recover it from exhibition notices), the meaning of *Olympia* is thus this empty and discordant contradiction of the values of a genre.

By the contextual model, we are prepared to set that reading aside as only one of the work's aspects of meaning. But it is likely that that was an aspect that Manet intended, a

---

30 The hermeneutic rule of coherence indeed likely derives its legitimacy from a criterion of good art. As critics have maintained, we cannot simply presuppose that all works of art have a coherent meaning, and it is likely that our hermeneutic virtues have been established in reflection of the qualities the works of art most worth interpreting have been deemed to possess.

meaning that he himself saw, just as it is certain that Duchamp saw the absurdity and travesty of adding the moustache and the gross "L.H.O.O.Q." to the *Mona Lisa*. Manet likely conceived and executed *Olympia* as a kind of explosive conflation of modern life and the high-art tradition. But while there does not appear to be any 'positive' aspect to Duchamp's "corrected readymade," the case of *Olympia* suggests a further and quite different sort of meaning. Indeed, Manet himself disclaimed the intent to shock. A publication in 1872 had charged that in *Olympia* Manet "was clearly resolved to startle, and to fire off a revolver right next to the sightseer's ear." Manet responded bluntly,

> How foolish must one be to say I'm trying to fire pistol shots.... I render, as simply as can be, the things I see. Take *Olympia*, could anything be plainer? There are hard parts, I'm told. They were there. I saw them. I put down what I saw.[31]

Two such different aspects of the work are easily explained by a supposed distance between the values (and other psychic contents) that define the mind of an artist such as Manet and that of Paris critics (representatives of a broader, more conservative segment of the city's populace). We have sketched, then, at least the general outlines of two interpretations of *Olympia*, in a sense opposed and yet also comparable — exactly speaking, in agreement up to a point. Specifically, to the level of 'identification', for there is every indication that the same identification of *who* this woman is and *what* tradition the work borrows from (and the readings of various details of posture, expression, and so on) was made by both, for the most part. The critics likely read certain details a little more pointedly than Manet ("the hand, which is flexed in a sort of shameless contraction.")[32] We do not suspect that that is how Manet saw them. We have here a trace of a difference in values (we shall say) that marks Manet's viewpoint as different from that of the critics, and that forms the basis of two aspects of the work's historical meaning.

The two aspects of *Oiympia*'s meaning share that common core, for in essence the painting does not so much present a concrete meaning — this, I think, is the truth that Clark's remark picks up on — as present a challenge of meaning, the *challenge of finding meaning in this conflation of modern life and high art.* Through his play with the genre Manet raises for the spectator the very question of how we are to think of her, the meaningfulness of such a conflation. And that hermeneutic challenge is not registered at all in the interpretation of a modern spectator who is simply impressed by Manet. In recognizing that challenge, the critics understood the work better than we do. The historical

---

31 Cachin, *Manet* (1983), 182.

32 A critic in *Le Grand journal* ; cited by Clark, "Olympia's Choice" (1984), 94; see also Clark, "*Olympia* in 1865" (1980), 25.

model is borne out, for it is only the context of the work's world that gives the painting its polemical meaning, which is surely an inalienable part of its substance.

86 THE MEANING OF A CHALLENGE

In the case of Manet's *Olympia,* a familiarity with the tradition of the nude is thus a *necessary* condition of understanding the work. But if interpreting through the historical context is a necessary condition of understanding, we do not yet know *how large a role* in establishing the work's meaning historical knowledge plays. According to the theory, the object is to develop an interpretation within the limits of the work's world, and the usual image the theory and its models raise (as in the bridge diagram in § 75) is of a total divestiture of anachronistic subjectivity. The work's meaning must be reconstituted entirely within an historical perspective. The core meaning of Manet's picture raises a question about this.

The picture's challenge was to see the woman depicted in the painting in a setting in which viewers had been accustomed to seeing a more far-removed, luxuriant, and ideal looking creature. As we know, understanding the work involves reading what is in it, something that Manet has ensured raises a challenge, and we will unfold the meaning of the painting only by facing it. As appreciating who the woman is is crucial to that problem, we ought to look at her carefully. Critics understood her as a prostitute, and interpreters have expended considerable energy determining whether this was a slur, an exaggerated and dismissive reading, or something actually unmistakable in nineteenth-century Paris, and thus a significance Manet was aware of and put there to be read. The conclusion is that

> to Manet's contemporaries, ... the setting was perfectly explicit, as it is not for us today. ... Here is a woman for sale, spiced with the exotic fragrance of the harem and the Second Empire brothel.[33]

That research is fairly impressive, but I find it may contribute less to how we see the work than the attention it has been given would suggest — that is, it may play a lesser role than what we can already see. The woman may be a prostitute; she is definitely a woman at ease with her charms, willing to put herself on display, and lies calmly looking the viewer in the eye. She is given gifts — whether gifts of love or of payment, they are gifts of admiration. She has the appearance, certainly, of being sexually available (as the whole setting, her several adornments, and her posture all appear to present her sexuality). And in such a

---

33 Cachin, *Manet* (1983), 179.

setting, the hand that so matter-of-factly covers her sex (a hand that disturbed some of the critics rather deeply) does nothing whatever to hide it. Though Olympia may be a prostitute, surely what matters in a picture of a prostitute is what we can see. It would seem we ought to give most of our attention to the direct implications of the image, and it appears important to recognize that there is nothing particularly whorish going on here: a woman puts her body coolly on display. It is what there is to see, in any case, that made the critics suppose she was a "girl of the night,"[34] for the only sort of woman they could picture in this attitude was someone who sells her body. She evidently made them nervous.

Her dubious morality, of course, is highly interesting vis à vis the tradition Manet has painted her in, for by raising doubts about her morals Manet has given the viewer no chance whatever to think in the way the genre of the nude normally induces us to think of her, as an ideal woman. Manet's woman is ordinary, and perhaps even common. The most fair judgement we can make, attending to what is not disputable, is that she is, simply, an ordinary modern woman. Her modernity, indeed, is mostly what is emphasized by the decisively new feature, the flat and almost uninteresting way that Manet has painted her flesh (a prominent effect of the painting noted by critics such as Théophile Gautier, who complained of the "more or less broad streaks of monochrome")[35] — Manet's resistance to presenting her as an occasion for the virtuosic displays the Masters had indulged in. It is her contemporaneity, her ordinariness — the empty, matter-of-fact gaze, the way she has simply thrown herself down on the bed, without Titian's grace or Ingres's evocative languidness — that is most important here, because it is that that jars with the genre. Indeed, much moreso than her profession, since the tradition of the nude had largely *been* a tradition of the portraiture of courtesans. A Venetian courtesan was a rare and remote creature of somewhat ideal glory, but a Parisian mistress was banal, the kind of woman one might pass in the road.

Filling that genre with an ordinary woman no doubt poses a challenge, but a challenge to what, exactly? To nothing less than an established understanding of what is beautiful, a quality that artistic tradition had made remote and unreal. What is challenged is the idea — the dogma — that the beauty to which high art kneels, and has traditionally knelt, is the beauty of women who exist in an aesthetic realm, the beauty of ideal women whose glances are poetic, who luxuriate in remote and unmodern splendour, and who (whatever their business might be) maintain perfection outside the moral order. What was challenged was a conception of art, involving a conception of women and of beauty, that many artists of Manet's time (artists like Rossetti and Burne-Jones, in England, are perfect

34 Clark, "*Olympia* in 1865" (1980), 23.
35 Gautier 1865; cited by Cachin, *Manet* (1983), 181.

examples) were busy devoting their labours to.[36] It is now becoming apparent how complex a challenge this was — if we think about it, one that only an image could make so economically — for it moves against a conception of beauty, a conception of women, and a conception of art and its meaning all at once.

At the same time we must be careful not to be misled, as is all too easy, by this language we are compelled to use in describing the work's significance. We say that Manet has challenged an idea of beauty, an idea of women, an idea of art, by contradicting conventions of a certain type of image (where Parisian or European culture could not link the atmosphere of high art and the women of real life, Manet *did*). It is important to take care especially on account of the desire of many theorists to rest the issue of the work's meaning here. We know all we need to know: the meaning of the work *is* its challenge. There is no need to respond to that challenge, for to do that would be to draw out the work's significance. But it would be a mistake to say that challenge, in that way, is the meaning of *Olympia;* it is the kind of mistake I have discussed in different ways in parts II and III. *Olympia* regarded as a mere challenge is likened to a *contradiction* of the prevailing order (an ideology of taste, beauty, propriety). But a contradiction is a kind of *statement,* and art does not aspire to state — or to the extent that it does, fails to do something that cannot be done fully and completely by a few easily assembled words. Art aspires toward a kind of power that sentences do not possess. Anything can be stated, easily, and effectlessly. It is difficult, on the other hand, to conceive certain things, and art sometimes has the capacity to show us what we cannot imagine to be true. To make something *evident* to us is to do more than state it; it makes something happen, and the effect of that event goes well beyond mere contradiction. It is certainly true that Manet offers a challenge to an order of appropriateness, but his work does more than merely 'challenge'; it is not merely 'critique'.

Olympia has made it possible for us to look at a modern, contemporary woman *as* a subject of high art. The painting offers us an opportunity, that is, *to see* whether there is compatibility between high art and the women of real life. It offers an opportunity to *see* an ordinary and modern woman as as powerful a creature as the idols of Ingres, an opportunity to break down the distance we have imagined exists between the paintings of the Louvre and the chambers of Paris apartments. *The work does not state that there is such a compatibility* — if that were its meaning all the difficulty of interpreting would return, for

---

36 It is interesting to note, however, that while the ideal woman of the William Morris circle was a girl who was the daughter of a stable groom, the images made of her repeatedly presented her as a kind of seraphic, other-worldly being. Indeed, it is no accident that the features of the "weirdly beautiful" Jane Burden, by contrast with those of Victorine Meurent, are quite unusual, of the sort termed 'exotic'. Gay Daly, *Pre-Raphaelites In Love* (London 1989), 75—76.

how are we to discover such a statement in the work? In fact the painting aims to do more, for having the capacity merely to assert that compatibility would not make it possible for us to *have the experience* of looking upon real and ordinary women with the ethos of Titian and Velázquez. Manet has not only raised a question about the ideals of woman and of beauty associated with the nude tradition, he has engineered an experience in which the exclusivity of that category can be put to the test. The work invites us to picture a modern woman, who Manet has painted, as possessing the power, the stature, the wonder of the kind of woman artists such as Titian, Giorgione, and Ingres painted in their palace pictures and *concerts champêtres,* which we visit the Louvre to see. Perhaps, properly speaking, the painting does not itself question, but rather gives us an experience on the basis of which to question the gap that exists between our lives and the world of art.

Beyond mere criticism, that confrontation the work actually arranges. The meaning of the work as challenge has to do, therefore, with a *kind of encounter,* whose outcome cannot be anticipated. That being so, we must accept that its meaning is not reducible to any mere answer to such a question, or to any forecast result. For surely we miss the point then. The outcome of this encounter is dependent upon the capacity of the spectator to do something they have perhaps never done, which involves, at the very start, opening themselves to the experience of the challenge. The tenor of some of the critics' responses suggests that such a thing — merely *allowing themselves* to see how Manet's juxtaposition reads — was an impossibility: they refused, on moral grounds, even to entertain the chance that a whore could fit the tradition. One's reading, as we have suggested before, follows upon all the inner determinants of the outcome of looking, which undoubtedly include even such things (which somehow we did not anticipate) as will, breadth of mind, moral fears and impediments, and a certain fearlessness before the unexpected. What does *Olympia* mean? The work may indeed show us the existence of a different order of beauty than our commerce with art and its institutions had accustomed us to. But to say that so bluntly — to say that its meaning simply is the overthrow of a limitation — is to privilege the perspective in which that outcome follows (singling out some specific capacities, proposing them as qualities we ought all to share). That is empty stipulation. The meaning of the work, in so far as we can encapsulate it, in so far as we can speak simply of *its* meaning, is not what it contains as a content but what it *does. And what it does is to raise an issue about life, to engineer an encounter.*

97 THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

The work, and its meaning, is essentially a question, but one of a peculiar kind. The work not only raises, with some specificity, an issue for us to resolve; its presence is what makes possible our answer. More than merely a challenge, it is also the material of an experience that is an answer to that challenge. We do not all respond to that challenge in the same way. And that is because the issue, in the case of *Olympia,* is an issue about life — about beauty, art, the experiences of our own lives (those we have had and those we may suddenly be enabled to have). As Zola explained of *Olympia,* Manet offers a "truth" by presenting us with

> a contemporary girl, the sort of girl we meet every day on the pavements, with their shoulders wrapped in a flimsy, faded woolen shawl.[37]

In view of this it would be somewhat nearsighted to say that the challenge Manet raised, and that Paris critics were affronted by, was — according to the historical perspective — the association of Parisian women circa 1860 and the world of Titian or the halls of the Louvre, for the exact challenge was the association of artistic beauty and living, unexceptional, *contemporary* women. Understanding the work involves confronting this question, and if we were to pose it in the nearsighted, relativized way we could not. Far from being something historically finite, the context in which *Olympia* carries its meaning — the meaning of a question and an answer — is *the context of present life.* That is how Manet posed it.

All questions about life are necessarily questions about life as it is, and as we are therefore to understand it. The proper context for any such answer is not the past, nor the present, nor the future in exclusion of the others; there is no specific temporal frame of answer. No question about life can be answered strictly according to the material or the opinions of some past context: indeed, in this case the question cannot even properly be *posed* in such a context. Here, merely to establish what question the work asks (and so hear what the work is saying), we have found that we must loop back through some former context and see the work in the light of certain historical facts (the nature of an artistic genre, its past veneration, an ideology of art, morality, and beauty). But what that, in the end, accomplished was to uncover the work's specific question: the compatibility of a *modern woman* and that tradition of beauty. The question is about contemporary women, and the idea of contemporaneity never changes: a woman of the present is a woman of the present. If, however, we bring back from the past also our *answer* to that question,

---

37 Fer, *Modernity and Modernism* (1993), 28—29.

identifying with it the meaning of the work, we do two highly significant things: we present the work's meaning as merely the content of a statement and not a challenge (which is a *distortion* of its meaning), and we refuse to accept the claim on our experience implicit in the question we have pretended to hear (which is a *rejection* of its meaning). It is hard to imagine how we could present such a procedure as understanding. To impose an exclusive historical limit upon our understanding of a work of art is to deny that a work raises any question of life at all, and that is in effect to silence it, for if it ever did ask something, it does not now.

The context of the answer to the kind of question *Olympia* raises, which is indeed the meaning of the work, cannot be the past. Did we say, for instance, that the context that defines the meaning of this painting is Manet's experience (the psyche/ethos/ideal with which he painted), the answer is already given and the painting is changed back from challenge to statement: 'modern women belong to the world of Titian.' For that is no challenge at all, and it achieves nothing, except to add another sentence to the waste heaps of historical data and lofty statements. The only way in which to hear the question the painting asks of us is to understand 'modern' as 'modern' and to look at the work in that way, going wherever it and our specific capacities take us. Obviously, to see Olympia as a modern woman is not so easy for us as it was for Manet's contemporaries; in fact it is difficult twice over, in a rather ironic way: once because Olympia does not look quite contemporary any longer, but again because she has slipped in the direction of Ingres — she has become high art, as Proust told us in 1907, part of the genre she challenged. But neither misfortune is decisive and truly nullifies the opportunity she affords us; because against them stands the painting Manet has made. It is remarkable how quickly one can mentally strip away the thick atmosphere of a museum and the accretions of time simply by standing still and looking. It is surprising how easily we close the temporal distance between us and Olympia by looking — at the expression of her face, for instance, which is startlingly fresh, or at her *feet,* her wrinkled ankle, and the muscle in her leg. These things strip away the idea we had of distance.[38]

In the end, our answer is this. The historical context is valuable — here even *necessary* —for us to understand the nature of the work's meaning. For were we unfamiliar with the tradition from which Manet borrowed, and unfamiliar with who Olympia is (seeing her modernity requires some historical awareness of her stylistic difference), we should not have been able to recognize the work as a challenge, and it is hard to see how an

---

38 Just as when sometimes we look at the face of a foreign person and feel a strangeness, until we notice certain familiar expressions — at which point the strange things that initially held us back become actually hard to see and no longer pose any obstacle whatever.

interpretation that did not could be taken as any adequate understanding. The historical context was necessary to developing that level of our interpretation — valuable, that is, at the level of identification (Olympia as an ordinary modern woman occupying the place of art's highest nudes). But the kind of challenge thereby identified is not the work's meaning: it is, in a sense, only the indication of the experience that constitutes the work's meaning. The meaning of the work, if we wish to go beyond mere pointers — and as the desire to understand demands — is the substance of that precise experience. That experience is a meaning made possible by entering the historical context, but it is not a meaning that the historical context provides, and it is not a meaning that can be had if we remain there. Any 'interpretation' that is wholly configured within historical limits *positively defies the kind of meaning historical insight shows this work to have.* Manet's *Olympia* reveals once again the paradox of the idea of historical understanding. At the level of *identification* (of genre and woman), the work gains a significance that it cannot have when we situate the material of the image within the world simply as we understand it. But at the level of its *content,* the work has a significance that is intelligible *only* when we situate the image within the world as we understand it. If we situate it, at that level, within the historical world, we nullify its historical meaning. The context in which the meaning of Manet's painting can be determined is historical, but not only historical, and ultimately also our own. The context is the context of life — not life *for* anyone but life itself; the world of the work is finally, simply, the world.

88 THE REVISED CULTURAL MODEL

What has been learned from these cases about interpretation understood as the reconstruction of perspectives? Three things in particular.

> We have a somewhat more exact appreciation of the *precise role of historical knowledge.* With both works historical research either brought things to light that either clarified an aspect of the work's meaning (the "vampire topos" and the predatory reading, a diary entry and the benign reading), things effectively visible in the image without that knowledge, or revealed an aspect not visible at all (the tradition of the nude plus the response of critics, which revealed challenge of Manet). That is what historical knowledge did do; what it did not do was replace our repertoire, rewrite the terms of our encounter with the work on an historical basis.

> For there was no *historical* way to receive the reference made by these works to the reality of love or the contemporaneity of a challenge.

We have also uncovered two things that will influence how we locate a context, how we ascertain a perspective *in* the work's world.

> We have identified what is actually a simple exaggeration in the model's conception of *world*. The model pictures a world of the past, which we must locate and unfold in order to read the work correctly. That, however, is an exaggerated reduction of what we did. The work could not be understood even as what it was if that world was pictured as split off from our own, totally unlike it. It was only by reading the Munch in relation to how love appears today that the image came to hold its subtlety and power. The pearl necklace picture must be false; we cannot even recover the work if we think of our world and the work's as, a priori, different.
>
> This tells us something about the *repertoire* appropriate to interpreting; we cannot picture it quite the way the model inclines to. The model begins with a clear-cut distinction between the modern and the historical mind. We have to loosen that division; we have to loosen it, and recognize the compatibility of belief, the relevance of past belief to present and present belief to past, merely in order to grasp the historical phenomenon as it was. For the original and deep encounter with both the Manet and the Munch was a confrontation with claims about reality, and not a representation of someone's belief.

11

CULTURAL CONTEXTS

89 DIFFERENCE

Perhaps by considering two works from European culture, from only a century or so ago, we have not posed the problem of the work's true context in as tough a manner as we should. We can intensify the issue by strengthening the problematic of interpretation, and we can do that by increasing the distance between the worlds of the work and the interpreter. This problem is usually discussed as a problem of historical distance, but time is not the only cause of a gap. For it is actually not time but its usual *effect* that causes the trouble: that effect is the *difference* between worlds, the fact that the outlook of surviving cultures has changed from outlooks of the past. And difference results from causes other than time. Wherever we are provoked to understand a work that is not historically (or not just historically) but culturally removed, our situation vis à vis that work is analogous: we stand in a different world from that of the work. We can understand the alienness created by historicity as anachronic, but that is not the most precise explanation: it is the difference that time causes that explains it. Thus the alienness of other cultures that are unlike ours, though they may well co-exist (those parallel strands of worlds). Distance is the difference between worlds, and it is this that we understand poses the hermeneutic problem.

Though the problem of understanding appears compounded by a distance along two different axes, the solution is the same: to acquire, by knowledge, the appropriate perspective, different from our own. The success of understanding is limited here only by the obstacles that obstruct our passage from the world that we occupy to the one to which the work belonged (our passage from the strand that represents the history of *our* culture onto the strand that represents the history of the *work's* culture, from our world to the work's). The aim in making this shift is to end (as in the bridge diagram) with one's own mind surrounded by the context that is the work's, the context within which the work is given back its own identity; it is to rescue the work from its subjective loss of identity — from an artificial impenetrability, and likewise from any *false intelligibility* actually foreign to it. All of the works I have so far discussed are European, and belong to a tradition with which we may be (in some way we are not aware of) natively familiar. But an adequate examination of the conception of context will require considering a work not from European culture, a work from a home at so great a distance from our world that the problems of understanding become formidable, and the hermeneutic role of context unmistakable (figure 37). This painting, unlike those I have examined so far, comes from a world to which most of us are not bound even by any thread, that thread of continuity that is a common tradition. Here, then, our progress is not going to be favoured by any possible unacknowledged traces inherited from the originating world from which we imagine ourselves cut off. Surely, my own frame of mind contains no hidden receptivity to this work. Progress here will have to be deliberate, and wholly driven by method.

90 RELIGION

This painting that we shall attempt to interpret is a miniature on paper about which little appears to be known. It is painted in a style that links it with miniatures produced in Kangra, in the north of India, at the close of the eighteenth century. If that comparison holds, it is likely to have been part of a book, from which (like so many Indian miniatures) it is now separated. We are told in the few places we might come across such an image — I saw the painting first as a reproduction in a book called *The Tantric Way* [1]— that it is an image of the goddess Kali. That is an identification that can be made through the close correspondence of various aspects of this image (though not all of them) with various texts

---

1 Mookerjee and Khanna, *The Tantric Way: Art, Science, Ritual* (1977).

in the Hindu sacred literature. That identification need not be made by means of texts, however; if you ask native Indians (as I did), whose familiarity with the gods is *not* primarily through texts, they will identify Kali without trouble. In India, I imagine, you learn 'This is Kali' in the temple or at festivals probably at a fairly young age — she is the kind of image that arouses tremendous curiosity and is not easily erased from the mind. Kali becomes familiar to Indians, therefore, by belonging to a living tradition, a tradition that is, indeed, recorded in and also based on texts. We may think it in some way hermeneutically important to establish which came first (tradition or text?) but I am not sure that it *is* important: at some point in the history of Indian culture, Kali was pictured this way. It could well have been verbally or in writing rather than in an image, merely because figurative thinking has always had more practitioners than art, but it does not much matter. If we want (as we do) to do more than identify the subject, if we want in fact to understand the image — to learn not only the name of this goddess but the meaning of her appearance — the detail we need is not going to be easy for *us* to find *except* in texts, and it is this that makes them important here.

As the theory of interpretation tells us, in order to understand this image we are going to have to return the picture to its own context, and the facts of its origin tell us that this is the context of Hinduism. It is plain that we have no 'natural' resources in *this* case, and guessing what goes on in this picture is profoundly dissatisfying. We are confronted with a baffling, even disturbing, image that arouses a deep curiosity, a desire, if not almost a kind of anxiety, to know what the image means ... to know, even, how such things can *have* a meaning. What we are looking for is not, I think, just an answer. We are anxious for something that can be accepted, for the distress and the curiosity that is truly provoked by this image is deep, and deep, I think, because it arouses the intuition that there is no meaning in this image that is tolerable. Our discomfort stems from an intuition that such an image could only hold a repellent meaning, something that goes quite against our minds — stems from a dread of 'dismeaning', to give this condition a name.[2] The image is disturbing because we sense it is an encounter with minds not merely different from but antithetical to

---

2 Though we are not usually required to differentiate, 'meaninglessness' actually means different things that ought to be separated here. There are things meaningless because their meaning is not yet known (as cryptic remarks and puzzling images in their unsolved state). And there are things that in their most revealed and interpreted condition have no meaning, in a somewhat different sense: things that are absurd or empty or add up to nothing (such, as people often say, is the nature of death, and there are instances in art, as in certain works of Dada). One might make a mistake about something, and put it in the wrong class (in effect, attribute its meaningless to the wrong condition), but the two classes are distinct. There is also a kind of meaninglessness, or something akin to it, in which a puzzling thing has been given an explanation that cannot be, where a meaning *is* unfolded that is claimed to provide the sense of the phenomenon but that is in some deep way unacceptable. This is not quite meaninglessness — a lack of meaning — because it has been given a meaning; but again it is, as that meaning contravenes what we understand to be the nature of things, the very framework of our sense-making. This is what I have called, rather poorly, 'dismeaning,' and it is an event that is as fearful as the contravention goes deep.

ours. Our natural desire to understand sends us looking, then, not simply for a meaning that explains the image but that makes sense of it, a sense that *is* sense. It is important to admit this natural inclination, but also not to mistake its status. Our desire is to understand the meaning of the work in itself, not to please ourselves: we may well not find the sort of meaning that makes us comfortable. Whatever the outcome, what is wholly clear is that our own repertoire of meaning takes us nowhere; it gives the work not even the most minimal kind of sense. Set within our own context, the work is deeply alien.

So if we are to take a first step, it will be a step out of our context, as the model clarifies, and a step into the Hindu world. It is important to the outcome of what we are attempting that I not presume to do this in a page or two; a difference of worlds that can be bridged in a hurry is a rather poor example of difference. We will have to take the steps one by one; in the service of economy, however, I will recount only those steps that went somewhere. The most directly illuminating thing to which we can turn appears to be a Sanskrit poem of uncertain date[3] written by an unknown author, the *Karpuradi-Stotra* or Hymn to Kali, to which a late commentary was added at around the turn of this century.[4] This text has been described by recent scholars of Hinduism as "a hymn in praise of Kali set in the context of tantric ritual."[5] Various of the hymn's twenty-two verses mention most of the features of Kali that we can see in the painting — almost all of those that already rivet our attention (the "freshly cut human head," as an old scripture expresses it, the bloody sword, the colour of the goddess, her nakedness) but also a few that fail to draw attention to themselves (the shape of her breasts, abdomen, and hips).[6]

Though not every feature of the painting is described in these passages, many of the most striking features are, with only slight discrepancy with the image. Verse four begins, "O Destructress of the sins of the three worlds, auspicious Kalika, who in Thy upper lotus-like left hand holdest a sword; and in the lower left hand a severed head." Verse six begins, "O Devi [goddess] of full breasts, whose throat is adorned with a garland of heads." Verse seven: "O Mother, even a dullard becomes a poet who meditates upon Thee raimented with space [naked], three-eyed, Creatrix of the three worlds, whose waist is beautiful with a girdle made of numbers of dead men's arms, and who on the breast of a corpse, as Thy couch in the cremation ground, enjoyest Mahakala." And verse nineteen, which opens: "O Dark One, wondrous and excelling in every way." There is no longer any doubt for us that

---

3 I have not been able to find a source that gave it a date.

4 The Commentary (c. 1900) is by Vimalananda-Svami and the Notes (c. 1922) are by the editor Sir John Woodroffe.

5 Hawley and Wulff, *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (1986), 387.

6 I use 'fail' rather less strongly than some would, for there is some ambiguity in talk about art as to what it means for a thing to be apparent.

this is an image of Kali, but to know it is not to understand, for these 'attributes' of Kali are not merely items by which she is recognized but qualities, expressions of who Kali is. Even Indian symbolism is symbolic.

The nineteenth-century commentator prefaced his edition of the hymn with a prayer to the goddess in which the meaning of each of these features is briefly but explicitly given — in the form of an explanation apparently intended to satisfy wonder at Kali's appearance (the hymn is essentially a long list of the features of the goddess, each of which is followed by an explanation introduced by "because ..."). I cite this omitting only those parts that do not at all fit our painting, for the match is not perfect:

> May the Maha Devi who is called Kalika,
> Because she is without beginning or end,
> Whose Body is imagined to be blue of colour,
> Because like the blue sky She pervades the World,
> . . . . . .
> Whose hair is dishevelled
> Because though herself changeless She binds infinite numbers of Jivas [living beings] by bonds of Maya, symbolized by her dishevelled hair ...,
> . . . . . .
> ... Her, who being the sole Creatrix, Preserver, and Destructress of infinite millions of Worlds, has on Her Body the mark of the Yoni signifying creation, full and high breasts denoting preservation, and a terrible visage signifying the withdrawal of all things,
> Who is said to have large teeth, and a lolling tongue ...,
> Who is pictured as wearing a garland of severed heads,
> Because she is Sabdabrahman [united with the Great Self] and the heads are the fifty letters [of the Sanskrit alphabet],
> . . . . . .
> Whose upper left hand is depicted as wielding a sword,
> Because she severs the bonds of illusion ...,
> Whose lower left hand is seen to hold a human head,
> Because She grants him Tattvajnana [higher knowledge of reality],
> Who is called Digambari [naked, lit. 'space-clad']
> Because being Brahman She is free from the covering of Maya and unconcerned,
> Who is pictured as having a waist-chain of human hands,
> Because hands are the principal instrument of work [Karma, action] and at the close of a Kalpa all Jivas with their Karmas are merged ...,
> Who is seen standing on the breast of corpse-like Siva,
> Because the Supreme State and ... Mahadevi [the Great Goddess] is Nirguna [without quality] and changeless,
> Who is again said to live in the cremation ground,
> Because when at the end of a Kalpa [era of time] all things in the universe from Brahma to a blade of grass are dissolved in Mahakala [absolute time], She is in and one with that Mahakala, who may be thus compared to a cremation ground, and because at the death of Jivas She exists as the individual Jivatma [soul of a being] in the burning ground,
> . . . . . .
> May She, this Mahadevi, who is Saccidanandarupini [the ultimate state of being] and forgiveness itself, pardon all offenses committed by me in the explanation of this Her Hymn.
> S'ambhu with His five mouths is unable to relate Thy qualities.
> . . . . . .
> O Mother of the World, obeisance.[7]

---

[7] Vimalananda-Svami, *Hymn to Kali* (c. 1900), 278—81.

With these words the image begins to take on at least some depth of meaning; it is no longer totally opaque. We may be tempted even to say that we understand, given the number of elements whose significance we have now had explained. But to say that would be to forget altogether what we are looking for: a sense more intelligible even than this, a sense with explanatory power, the power to remove our undisturbed perplexity. That sense we will recover from the contextual viewpoint, a cognitive sphere within which this work arose or was received. At this point we still stand quite outside that sphere, though now, perhaps, we see vaguely into it. All that we have learned are the associations, and with most of them we can see at least the justice of the link — for instance, the phrase, "Whose upper left hand is depicted as wielding *a sword,* Because she *severs* the bonds of illusion." The reason for linking sword and severance is intelligible, but this is not yet a very satisfactory sort of meaning. We have no real understanding on our own of the conception 'bonds of illusion', of the significance of their severance, or of the shocking and unavoidable connection with death. So far as we have gone, we are likely to say only this: that *for the Hindu* the sword means the severance of illusion that is linked to death.

91 MEANING RELATIVE TO A WORLD

That expression — 'for the Hindu ... means ...' — is, as we have seen, a distinctive phrasing of the perspectival conception of meaning; as the model explains, to understand a work is to see it within its own world, in the atmosphere of that world, which is to say, in the perspective of a resident of its world. It is a phrase often encountered in contextual discussions of the meaning of works of art, yet it is open to misunderstanding. Consider, for instance, the way it appears in connection with Kali: as one author writes, "in seeking to understand the meaning of Kali for Hindus we are well advised to start with hints from the Hindu tradition itself."[8] Does 'the meaning of Kali for Hindus' name a provisional or a final state? Does it imply that Kali cannot, or simply does not, mean anything to us? (That we ourselves cannot enter her context; that no one but Hindus can have access to either the context or the meaning it holds?) Both uses fit the model that this part is devoted to: a work has its own meaning in the context to which it belongs. But I think the phrase is usually used to name a provisional condition, fitting the model's conception of repertoire: understanding is possible wherever our consciousness can be suitably shifted. Sometimes, indeed, there is the suggestion that the context in question is not easily penetrated by

---

8 Kinsley, "Blood and Death Out of Place: Reflections on the Goddess Kali" (1986), 148.

outsiders, the relevant viewpoint not easily adopted by "non-participants" in the culture, but it does not necessarily imply this. There is difficulty in making the transition, and that is a natural consequence of the model's "distinction between *participants'* understanding and *observers'* understanding."

> The participant understands and knows his culture with an immediacy and spontaneity the observer does not share.... He moves with ease and delicacy and creative flexibility within the rules of his culture. His culture, for him, is like the language he has learned, informally, since infancy.... The observer does not have this kind of knowledge of the culture.[9]

But this sort of remark makes no claim about our powers of understanding. And indeed, just so far as we have gone with this work we can reasonably suspect our understanding is not at all inferior to the Hindu's: the sword means severance equally for us all. But we have climbed in the schema only to the level of identification of meaning; we acknowledge there is still a great difference between the *significance* of the meaning of severance for the Hindu and for us. Which is to say, to understand we have to progress further. The significance of all of those symbols that have been explained to us is so far nil. We are coming to recognize how the familiar distinction between meaning and significance in fact differentiates two levels of the work's meaning, the levels of identification and content, and that the meaning of things without their significance is virtually nothing.[10] To understand we need to know what the 'severance of illusion' *is;* for *that* it is (that the sword, figuratively, severs some illusion) is empty knowledge. (We are treading the same ground as was covered in §§ 35, 59, 62, and even 86 — predicative meaning).

The principal implication of this phrasing is its relativity to another subject: 'for the Hindu' means for the Hindu mind generally. This captures that noted difference between the contextual view and the conception of understanding outlined in part III: there is a world of difference between saying 'a mind of a certain composition' and 'the mind of one person' (the artist). And here it is unmistakable that only the former offers us any real hope of understanding: this work is by now so fully cut off from its creator that if we required any knowledge of the artist at all the work could have no further voice. The world of the

---

9 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (1985), 109.

10 Hirsch explains that "'Meaning' refers to the whole verbal meaning of a text, and 'significance' to textual meaning in relation to another context, i.e., another mind, another era, a wider subject matter, an alien system of values, and so on. In other words, 'significance' is textual meaning as related to some context, indeed any context, beyond itself." Hirsch, *Aims of Interpretation* (1976), cited by Rorty, "Texts and Lumps" (1985), n. 12. But it is clear that there is some obscurity here: "verbal meaning" is treated as something revealed in the "context" of the work "itself," but it is not clear what Hirsch takes that to be. Whether we identify it with a language and its rules, a formative reading, or a cultural background one thing is now clear: "verbal meaning" in Hirsch's definition cannot be merely the reference of words; it must include the importance of those particular words, the significance of the work's statements to some person. To exclude it and advocate the recovery of meaning over significance (as Hirsch does) would be to advocate the recovery of a meaningless object.

work is plainly the artist's *own* context, but it makes a great deal of difference how exactly we define it. The work derives its meaning from a world, but how broad is that world? Is it the world in which the creator lived, subjectively: the world that he or she *recognized?* Or is it the world the artist belonged to: a world in which the signs they use are already endorsed with meaning, a world they may know only in part? We are not looking for the meaning of this image for an individual, but take it to have meaning within the Hindu world generally, for a mind shaped by Hinduism.

There is no deep problem, then, in the necessity of this relative understanding of significance or content: that the significance of a thing is always the significance *of* the object *for* a subject, in terms, that is, of a world that to which it belongs. If the meaning of the symbol of the sword and the severed head is deliverance from illusions, in the appropriate subjectivity there must also be a significance to that meaning. Deliverance must have a significance merely to be worth symbolizing. This explanation in terms of death and illusion remains opaque; we must go further than the mere formulae that 'explain' the signs. We have no true understanding unless we move deeper into the schema and seek the content of the work. We are going to have to move, then, as the model explains, from a position outside the Hindu world (from which we still say 'for the Hindu death is severance from illusion') to where we can see not only *that* this is so, but how, why, or in what way it is so, for only that is truly meaningful. As long as we still use that phrase, we know we remain at some distance from the condition of understanding the theory sets. The way that lies open to us may not inspire confidence, but as non-participants we do not have the option of belonging to the world we want to enter. What we have to rely upon to understand a work whose symbolism has been explained by one text is more texts.

92 RECONSTRUCTING THE CONTEXT: AN INTERPRETATION

What I have done, at least, is to read. I began by looking for an explanation of Kali and her symbols, hoping to learn her place in the Hindu pantheon. The most explicit clarification of the image I have yet found I have already cited, a nineteenth-century commentary upon a hymn to the goddess; no discussion fit the work any closer than it. To deal just with that, it was necessary to understand something about the concepts that the *Hymn to Kali* linked with the image (*maya, karma, tattvajnana, moksa*): a next step into the Hindu world. My progress with it was quite unsystematic; what sense I was able to make was not arrived at in any straightforward way, by recourse to any dictionary. Indeed, in the reading I did in two months after first laying eyes on this painting (two months in which I did virtually all

the reading I had ever done concerning Hinduism), it is not a straightforward matter to discriminate between what *did* contribute and what did *not*. The material I examined included quite different kinds of writing. On the one hand, a very slight and scattered reading of scriptural texts and religious poetry (comprised partly of brief citations in the secondary literature); on the other, some mediatory, facilitating, works on Hindu religion (Zaehner, Radhakrishnan, Coomaraswamy)[11]; a few studies on particular aspects of Hinduism on which I focused attention (particularly Saktism and Tantra)[12]; and finally some scholarly works by Western academics, among which figured two studies on Kali.[13] From these fairly diverse sources came several further conceptions that linked the symbolism together, in what seemed an extraordinarily powerful way, a way that bound together virtually the entire image.

The various elements that I drew from these sources were chosen quite freely, on the basis of the sense they gave to the work: *my interpretation collected whatever fit the image with the most powerful sense*. There was really no other standard by which to select it. The meaning the painting came to have, interpreted in that way, I will now attempt to explain. The logic by which I will 'narrate' that meaning does not reflect my progress, the 'phases' by which I came to make some sense of the picture. That was chaotic, and I don't recall the process at all; what I remember is the meaning and its own order. The order of my narration is directed, rather, partly by how the work looks, by the 'logic' of its structure — the picture is largely a *vertical* arrangement of elements, each given prominence in some particular way — and partly by the sense that I came to find in it. I would like to present that sense, so that we can examine it in connection with the issue of this chapter: the recovery of a world.

One of the most striking aspects of the image is the background, a directionless and undifferentiated swirling mass that fills the space in a highly ambiguous way (is it sea, or sky, both, or simply nothing?). That it fills the entire space, excluding even a sense of space ("without beginning or end," as Kali herself was described) and that it is an expanse without differentiation came to seem highly important, for this is the nature, according to the Hindu story of time, of the 'infinite ocean of liquid life-substance' from which all things

---

11 Zaehner, *Hinduism* (1962); Radhakrishnan, *Hindu View of Life* (1926); Coomaraswamy, "What Has India Contributed?" (1915).

12 Mookerjee and Khanna, *Tantric Way* (1977); Ajit Mookerjee, *Tantra Asana: A Way to Self-realization* (1971); Prithvi K. Agrawala, *Mithuna: The Male—Female Symbol in Indian Art and Thought* (1983).

13 David Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* (1975) and "Blood and Death Out of Place: Reflections on the Goddess Kali" (1986).

originated, and into which at the end of every age all things are again dissolved. Like an ocean it stretched through all dimensions as an immense single undifferentiated mass. In the beginning, and at the beginning of every age that has been, is, and will be, the life that we know as life arose from this ocean: from the formless depths of this uniform sea a lotus (*kamala*) grows.[14] The basic principle of the life that this lotus brings is desire, for the appearance of life and the appearance of desire (*Kama*) are one and the same event, as the Vedas record: "Desire first arose at the dawn of creation." Desire is the motive force of life itself — and so, the lotus emerges from the depths bearing the God Kama and his wife Rati in empassioned embrace.

But the life and the world that arises from that all-encompassing sea has a new and distinct quality, which is *difference, differentiation*. Indeed, that is what is captured in the contrast of the two ambiguously connected layers of this image: the undifferentiated background in which no part differs from any other, and the motif laid over it, an assembly of distinct things (lotus, Kama and Rati, Kali, etc.). If we think about this, the view we would have were we floating in the middle of an ocean is virtually without difference, a view quite unlike the one we have wherever we presently happen to be (surrounded by literally countless distinct things): on the one hand a world of one self-same thing, and on the other a world of infinite difference. The connection that exists between desire and difference is the basis of the image (indeed, its 'base' in a rather literal way) and the meaning both: desire *and* difference, in the lower region of the painting, are born at the same moment in the one event. For what difference creates is *the condition of self and other* — the duality of existence, in which there is I and not-I. Desire is desire, in an obvious sense, for not-I, for something that one lacks, that one is not or does not have, for something apart from oneself: the self's desire for what is other than self. Kama and Rati are others to each other. They are "the female and male principles," and male and female are the great symbols of difference (the great symbols of self and other, of distinctness and differentiation) and of desire.[15] Kama and Rati on the lotus are the miracle of differentiated

---

14 "Rising from the depths of water and expanding its petals on the surface, the lotus (*kamala, padma*) is the most beautiful evidence offered to the eye of the self-engendering fertility of the bottom. Through its appearance, it gives proof of the life-supporting power of the all-nourishing abyss. This is why the goddess Lotus (*kamala, padma*) is an appropriate consort or s'akti of Visnu — Visnu being the cosmic water itself, the infinite ocean of that liquid life-substance out of which all the differentiated phenomena and elements of the universe arise, and back into which they again must dissolve. When a life-period of the world-organism has attained its term and is about to be dissolved ..., the moisture is withdrawn, all the forms perish and go dry, and a prodigious conflagration burns them, so that nothing is spared. The fire then is quenched by rains, which produce a flood that covers everything, and thus the universe returns to its state of the beginning: the state of a timeless ocean. Visnu is this cosmic sea." The "radiant lotus of the world" that at the dawn of an age rises out of Visnu "is the goddess Padma, the sakti or divine energy of slumbering Visnu. She is the awakening of his substance, ..., as the miracle of life." Zimmer, "Symbolism of the Lotus" (1960), 165—66.

15 Agrawala, *Mithuna* (1983); Mookerjee, *Tantra Asana* (1971), 76.

life that is the material world — the differentiated life that arose with desire, and that desire also perpetuates.[16]

Hence Kama and Rati are locked in sexual union: they desire what is other than themselves, and their difference draws them together. But their union here is strange and even shocking, because they are united but dead. Rati's head has fallen heavy onto Kama's shoulder; their arms have no longer the power to hold — Rati's hands are particularly disturbing and poignant, lying limp in their dead embrace. The pair are not only dead in an embrace, they are already burning, joined even on the funeral pyre. These facts have a deep bearing upon the meaning that we have already 'understood' Kama and Rati to have. That Kama and Rati are united is not 'merely' expressive of desire, its attainment, the striving beyond self, and the union of self and other.[17] Their union *despite death* is an emblem of ultimate union, which is a final reclosing of the distance separating self and other; the bringing together of difference is an overcoming of the divided condition that is the condition, as we have seen, of life in the world, which is the condition of *duality*. No destruction is depicted, but the cremation we witness anticipates their reduction to ash, suggests a condition of withdrawal back into one state; it is the dissolution of even material difference.[18] In their union they have overcome duality, and duality overcome is eternity, to which Kama and Rati have returned.

The sense of this is made much clearer by this image of Kama and Rati in its connection with certain texts. Duality is the distinctness of individuals (the male, the female: the man Kama, the woman Rati). But even this is not the whole truth, since the two are also *of* the same, as created beings: arisen from the same stuff or source, they are artificially divided in that differentiation that is the very principle of the world's creation. Their difference is their surface identity, something superficial: they arose of the same source, are manifestations of the same desire, and are driven by the same passion to be united with

---

16 The oldest Upanishad, the Brihadaranyaka (c. 6th century B.C.), says this:

> In the beginning this [universe] was the Self alone. ... He took thought and said [to himself]: 'Since nothing exists other than I, of whom or what am I afraid?' And his fear then departed [from him]; for of whom (or what) should he have been afraid? It is of a second that one is afraid. .....
>
> At that time this [world] was undifferentiated. What introduces differentiation is name and form (individuality), so that we can say 'A man has this name; he has this form.' .....
>
> He found no pleasure at all. ... He longed for a second. Now he was the size of a man and woman in close embrace. He split this Self in two: and from this arose husband and wife. Hence we say, 'Oneself is like half a potsherd.'
>
> I.iv.2, 7, 3. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures* (1966).

17 As Woodroffe notes regarding images of Kali, "two corpses are sometimes pictured, the lower being the eternally quiescent Siva, and the upper being the Siva united with Sakti in creation." Woodroffe, *Hymn to Kali* (c. 1922), 303. Siva and Sakti are divided aspects of the one reality: "Reality is unity, an indivisible whole. It is called Siva-Sakti .... Siva and its creative power, Sakti, are eternally conjoined; the one cannot be differentiated from the other, ... It is only in the relative plain that Siva-Sakti are looked upon as separate entities." Mookerjee and Khanna, *Tantric Way* (1977), 15.

18 "Rati and Kama, the female and male principles" depict "transcendence of the phenomenal world and an abolition of all experience of duality." Mookerjee, *Tantra Asana* (1971), 76.

what indeed *appears to be* not them. And so in their *union* with each other, both lose themselves and find themselves: lose that predominant sense of individual self, and merge with a part of self that is *outside* them. The image tells us that their 'union' here is therefore not, actually, a joining of separates (as we would commonly think of it), but rather the recovery of a divided identity.[19] Thus the ritual verse recited in the very ancient Vedic marriage ceremony, in which husband and wife, who each give themselves to and receive the other, understand that they are united — are not merely *together,* but are *both the same.* The Vedic ritual expresses a lovely and playful confusion over whether anything is actually *exchanged* at all:

> Who hath given here to whom?
> Kama hath given to Kama.
> Kama is the giver, Kama is the receiver.
> Kama hath penetrated the Ocean.
> Through the mediation of Kama I accept thee.
> This to thee, O Kama.[20]

To have "penetrated the Ocean" is to have returned to it and to the state of non-duality. But that is to have turned back from the ostensible, *apparent* condition of life in the world, in which we can see only difference and distinctness; it is, in other words, to have broken through the *illusion* of division that natural life in the world forces upon us, the illusion of difference. Now, through the image, we understand what is *maya,* the great illusion. To "break the bonds of" or become "free from" *maya* is to get beyond or 'transcend' the artificial separation in which the visible world makes us believe: it is, actually, to die to that life of distinctness and difference. Death, in fact, is a notion highly affected by which position one takes. When one is not divided from oneself, there is no death to fear : "It is of a second that one is afraid." Kama and Rati are dead, and united; their union will be unaltered by the flames. Thus they appear *at once* different and united: joined and dissolved: sexually linked upon both the lotus of origin and upon the pyre of dissolution, for their origin, their marriage, and their dissolution all demonstrate the *eternal reality of their union through difference* — the union of non-duality despite apparent

---

19 Rati and Kama "remain in a union of oneness, enjoying that supreme bliss which is the highest non-duality." Ibid., 78.

"Mark well, it is not for the love [kama] of a husband that a husband is dearly loved. Rather it is for the love of the Self that a husband is dearly loved. Mark well, it is not for the love of a wife that a wife is dearly loved. Rather it is for the love of the Self that a wife is dearly loved." Br. Upanishad II, iv, 5.

"Just as a man, closely embraced by his loving wife, knows nothing without, nothing within, so does this 'person', closely embraced by the Self that consists of wisdom, know nothing without, nothing within. That is his [true] form in which [all] his desires are fulfilled, in which [Self] alone is his desire, in which he has no desire, no sorrow." Br. Upanishad, IV, iii, 21. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures* (1966)

20 Tandya Brahmana, I. 8. 17; M, 13. This same confusion is a motif in Br. Upanishad, II, iv, 14. Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures* (1966).

duality, the recognition of self in the other and the recognition of oneself as a piece of the great 'Self' (as it is so poignantly expressed in the Upanishads) that includes all.[21] This sub-image of Kama and Rati is in the end an astonishingly articulate emblem of the condition of human life, displaying not only the duality of self and other, and the dynamic of difference and desire, but presenting at the same time the *hidden* fact of non-duality.

But the deaths of Kama and Rati can be understood as something else than the transcendence of duality, something more negative; there is another way to read, according to further details of the image. For the lovers are touched, and in the most literal and horrible way, by gross death — the stream of blood that falls from the bloodied sword and severed head above, pooling on Rati's shoulder and splashing off Kama's arm. That they are on the flaming pyre, physically joined but lifeless, their pleasure vanished, shows also how death terminates desire, that the desire that is the principle of life in the world exists in a context of death — its extinction must be faced. There are therefore two ways of seeing the single image of the dead lovers, two ways that offer us two somewhat different views of death: *death can be feared, or death can be transcended.* This, it appears, is the focal significance of Kali herself. When we understand her, we see that the cause of our fear and the means of our freedom are one and the same. The goddess stands in glory upon the backs of those whose death she will, by one view or the other, make happen, *according to their choice.* We have gone from background to foreground, and now we move from the lower image to the link with Kali herself. Why is she standing on Rati?

It happens that the most startling elements in Kali's image (her raised arms with bloodied sword and severed head) are emblems of a power in her possession whose meaning is in fact ambivalent. There is, certainly, her power to destroy — this is unmistakable, and it is the one thing one is always told about Kali, a goddess "representing the destructive power of time."[22] It is also one of those things that troubles us, for we have difficulty accepting the idea of an object of worship who is the agent of this particular kind of destruction. But we recall that by the sword, also, "she severs the bonds of illusion"; Kali possesses also the power to release from the illusion in which we live. As for her power of destruction, the hymn mentions Kali's "terrible visage signifying the withdrawal of all things."[23] What one invariably reads about Kali in the most available sources is that she is the force of all dissolution, the one who brings ages to an end, burning all and dissolving it again into that undifferentiated ocean of being (that, as the hymn also

---

21 For instance, Br. Upanishad, I, iv, 17.

22 "Kali" in Frédéric, *Dictionnaire de la Civilisation Indienne* (1987).

23 "It is commonly said," Woodroffe notes, "that She destroys but not so. Devata does not destroy. Man does. She takes back what she has put forth." *Hymn to Kali* (c. 1922), 312 n. 1.

explained, is why she "lives in the cremation ground"). And so "the sacrificial sword and the severed head ... are the symbols of dissolution."[24] But the terrors that her image not only displays to us but threatens us with — for that is what, when understood, they do — are strangely ambivalent: they might be feared, but they might also be looked upon with Kali's own peculiar calm. The editor of the *Hymn to Kali* makes the reason for that calm quite clear:

> The [follower of Kali] seeks fearlessness, which is the great gift of the Goddess, who is *Bhayapaha*, "remover of fear." "If thou art remembered in times of difficulty, thou takest away all fear" (Markandeya-Purana). At the same time it is she who fills the ignorant with terror (*Pasuloka-bhayamkari*) — that is, those devoid of the knowledge of non-duality, for "fear comes when there is duality" (Br. Up. I.4.2, Lalita, v. 99).[25]

"The knowledge of non-duality" (as we have seen, the state of things upon which Kali triumphantly stands) is the knowledge that is the penetration of *maya*. That too is explained in the hymn, a second meaning of the sword of dissolution: "[Kali] whose upper ... hand is depicted as wielding a sword, Because she severs the bonds of illusion." In other words, "the sword is knowledge (*Jnana*) by which the bonds of ignorance of the desire-free Sadhaka [follower] are severed."[26] The sword is therefore a dual or ambivalent symbol.

There is thus a corresponding second meaning to the head that she has cut off and perhaps proudly displays. Of course it means what it immediately means to us, death, for Kali brings death, the destruction of the self. But that conception of self, and thus that conception of death, is part of the illusion. The head — the most powerful emblem of self that we possess[27] — is severed because it has now the knowledge that it is *not the mark of self we took it to be*. "[Kali's] left hand is seen to hold a human head, Because She grants him Tattvajnana [higher knowledge of reality]"; "the human head is the seat of Tattvajnana, free of attachment."[28] For to understand the illusion of one's distinctness is to take a certain distance from one's own face, one's own individual life. And it is in that way that "the [follower's] heart itself becomes a cremation ground — pride and selfishness, status and role, name and form are all burnt to ashes."[29] The loss of the head is the surrender of that sense of self (the I), the loss of the illusion of ultimate difference, and it is this that Kali's

---

24 The quoted words are a comment on an image of Chandi or Durga (Mookerjee, *Tantra Asana*, 128). Also, Kali's sword is apparently the "*khadga*, the peculiar heavy sword with the blade curved at the tip ..., used to behead the sacrificial animals." Woodroffe, *Hymn to Kali* (c. 1922), 294 n. 2.

25 Ibid., 294 n. 4.

26 *Hymn to Kali*, 280, and the Commentary, 293.

27 An ordinary association noted by the protagonist of Polanski's film *The Tenant*, who in a moment of drunken insight asks, "What right has my head to call itself me?"

28 *Hymn to Kali*, 280, and the Commentary, 293.

29 Mookerjee, *Tantra Asana* (1971), 62.

action challenges us to see. As Kinsley has remarked, Kali who is death ridicules our lives. She, in both her appearance

> and her dwelling place in the cremation ground clearly mock[s] the ultimate significance of a world grounded in the ego. ... For the pilgrim ... who has torn the veil of *maya* ... is able to focus on the cremation ground as the end of worlds grounded in a grasping ego.[30]

The loss of the world of distinction is not death, but the loss of an illusory life. The knowledge of our true and even present condition (pictured for us by the complex but elegant emblem of Kama and Rati on pyre and lotus) is the non-duality that is *hidden* by duality. For Kama and Rati are different beings joined in a union that is the death of self, having overcome the division that the world drives us to feel. And this *is* the eloquent word spoken by the whole triumphant image of Kali standing on the back of the dead lovers: the whole image rings out the secret that to pierce *this* illusion is to overcome gross death, for "fear of the death of self ... is all death really is."[31] And that this self, which is by definition in opposition to the world, be destroyed is the devoutest wish of those who desire to rid themselves of the cause of their misery — Ramprasad ends one of his songs in address to Kali: "now, O Mother, bring down thy sword."[32]

Kali offers the release by which we do *not* die. Kali stands on the united lovers because she is the means by which their eternal union is possible: penetration of the illusion, loss of self. Kali delivers the blessed stroke by which the illusory duality of the world can be cut away. "The world of 'my' and 'me' is alluring .... For him who sees truly, however, such a world is seen as narrow .... The man who truly sees has torn the veil of *maya*."[33] To penetrate the illusion is not to see the inevitability of the loss of me and mine — that loss is not hidden from us at all — but to understand that there is no self to lose: it is to have this illusory self eliminated now. Kali stands on the back of Kama and Rati for two reasons: because the *dissolution* that she represents is the reality of life, which descends upon even the most alive; and because the *transcendence of death* that she offers *is* the dissolution of duality we picture in the united lovers. Because Kali offers the release by which we do not die, she is our saviouress and preserver; thus what hides her from us hides the truth of our liberation. And now the many details of Kali's appearance have come to have special eloquence, for these four things -- saviouress, preserver, her hiddenness, her truth — are all pictured here. First, her flowing loosened hair, which is *maya*, the

---

30 Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* (1975), 135.
31 Ibid., 119.
32 See *Rama Prasada's Devotional Songs: The Cult of Shakti* (Calcutta 1966), 119; cited by Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* (1975), 120.
33 Ibid., 134.

external layer that we must look through to see her as she is. According to the illusion, we fear her, but her true nature is beautiful (contradicting our first impression, not death but our salvation from death). The beauty of her form, which stands in so shocking a contrast to her action, is thus perfectly fitting, for Kali is beneficent.[34] She is "stripped of the covering of Maya: that is awakened"[35] ("O Thou whose Body is pure *Jnana* [knowledge]," as she is called by one worshipper).[36] For through the knowledge she gives us she sustains us, as a mother sustains her children. Her "full and high breasts," over which a strand of her hair flows, are the sign of her power of sustenance, the sign that despite the illusion we will *not* die.[37] Because she is the *reality* of things ('the way of all flesh', born and swallowed up again) she is also the mother in another sense, one who brings into being: thus, at once, her rounded hips, swelling belly, and virtually exposed vulva. And also her blue colour — "because like the blue sky She pervades the World" — which is her infinite extension as the real state in which things of the world exist.[38]

Kali's is a paradoxical image because death is paradoxical. For death has two aspects: the inevitable reality that is annihilation, and the release from duality that is its opposite. Kali is the way in which to pierce the appearance by which death is terror and demise, a way to the death that is both freedom from terror and eternal preservation. It is in this way, too, that we can find meaning in the scissors and the lotus she holds in her third and fourth hands. Whereas initially they seemed merely two more items in a crowd of symbols, they now appear visibly paired as were the sword and severed head, and they echo the meaning of that pair (for the blossom is indeed the head of the lotus). They are offered for further contemplation of the paradox. The scissors that cut the lotus blossom —

---

34 In the *Hymn to Kali*, "in addition to her terrible aspects (which are insisted upon) there are now hints of another, benign dimension. So, for example, she is no longer described as emaciated or ugly. In the [Hymn] she is young and beautiful (verse 1), she has a gently smiling face (verse 18), ... These positive features are entirely apt, as Kali ... is she who, when boldly approached, frees the *sadhaka* from fear itself. She is here not only the symbol of death but the symbol of triumph over death." Ibid., 113—14.

"Although Kali is sometimes said to be beautiful ... Hindu texts referring to the goddess are nearly unanimous in describing her as terrible in appearance .... Her hair is dishevelled, her eyes red and fierce, she has fangs ..., her lips are often smeared with blood, her breasts are long and pendulous, her stomach is shrunken, and her figure is generally gaunt." Kinsley, "Reflections on the Goddess Kali" (1986), 144. But there is a weakness in the image of the ugly Kali, as a devotional image, which is that her beneficence — the thing that is her deepest truth — is the one thing that goes unrepresented. The image itself does not speak of her positive reality, and so does not facilitate the kind of meditation that is most appropriate.

35 Vimalananda-Svami, *Hymn to Kali* (c. 1900), 308.

36 Her "hair is dishevelled Because ... She binds infinite numbers of [beings] by bonds of Maya, symbolized by her dishevelled hair." Ibid., 278.

37 "Her, who being the sole Creatrix, Preserver, and Destructress of infinite millions of Worlds, has on Her Body the mark of the Yoni signifying creation, full and high breasts denoting preservation." The Commentator of the *Hymn* explains of her breasts that "the milk of these is the food with which She nourishes the world and the drink of immortality with which she liberates Her Sadhakas." Ibid., 279, 299. Woodroffe comments: "her golden girdle supports her waist, which bends under the burden of her breasts, thrice folding the skin below her bosom." *Hymn to Kali*, 300 n. 2.

38 Ibid., 278.

are they the destruction of the lotus, or do they effect an insignificant alteration in the arrangement of material, and truly bring nothing to an end?[39] The cut head and the cut blossom are thus presented as an analogy, so that the meditation upon a flower in a bowl can bring forth for us one of the dilemmas of our existence, which is how to understand our own deaths. It is for the purpose of penetrating that mystery that Kali's image has been worshipped. Her fearsome and horrific appearance, or in other images than this one her "terrible visage signifying the withdrawal of all things," is presented for the devotee to meditate upon in just this way — as did one of Kali's most famous servants, Ramprasad Sen.

> Ramprasad never forgets Kali's demonic, frightening aspects. He does not distort Kali's nature and the truths she reveals; he does not refuse to meditate on her terrifying features. He mentions these repeatedly in his songs but is never put off or repelled by them. Kali may be frightening, the mad, forgetful, negligent mistress of a world spinning out of control, but she is, after all, the Mother of all.

Ramprasad has no fear because he was able to pierce the illusion of death: to understand that the death of a falsely imagined self is the very condition of living as what in truth we are, and to see that that is the undoing of the death we have always dreaded.[40]

Still other features of the image are related to these things. The long necklace of severed heads that hangs to Kali's knees is the unending chain of the wisdom she bestows, which is Kali's power: *Tattvajnana,* the perception of the hidden nature of reality, the knowledge that Kali's sword-stroke severs the bond to self and the fear of death.[41] The third eye opening in the middle of her forehead, its position marked by strokes of yellow paint, is that power of perception. This yellow mark is the *only* thing visible of the face of Kama, echoed nearby by the same mark on Rati's forehead — their ability to see beyond the appearance of duality. The skirt of severed forearms that hangs from Kali's hips is linked in its meaning to her chain of heads. If heads are the means of knowledge, hands are the means of action, and it is only both together that make wisdom. Hence the circle of forearms is the unending chain of acts (*karma*)[42] by which the seeing human being must live in accordance with the knowledge he or she has been given. It is, moreover, a much

---

39 I have found no source that directly discusses this symbolism, and am pursuing here a suggestion that seems to follow rather easily from the surrounding interpretation of the image. The status of such methods will be examined below.

40 Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* (1975), 118.

41 "The loving and protecting Mother, who in a different aspect in the form of Kali is responsible for annihilation. Then she dons a garland of *gyanamala* of human heads to symbolize her wisdom and power. These heads are generally fifty in number representing the fifty letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, which are the outer manifestations of Sabda Brahma or Brahma in the form of Sound." Mookerjee, *Tantra Asana* (1971), 128. Language is also important, of course, as a prime vehicle of wisdom.

42 Karma "in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, ... is the 'Law of acts' by which each action or thought produces 'spiritual' effects ...." "Karma" in Frédéric, *Dictionnaire de la Civilisation Indienne* (1987).

stressed feature of Hinduism that present action is determinant of future life — a connection which offers some suggestion as to why these severed limbs have been made a girdle, hanging low on Kali's hips and not quite hiding her sex. All actions are absorbed in the dissolution that Kali directs, but the effect of all these actions surfaces again with the new generations that the Mother brings forth.[43]

93 DISCLOSURE AND THE RULE OF OBJECTIVITY

I have spoken at length of the meaning of this image because the image is complex, and that complexity appears important. The fact that it has an almost total double meaning is an especially significant detail, since the two meanings of the image face one with two meanings of reality, the apparent and the perhaps true nature. It is the complex schema of interconnections between various elements of the image, and the meanings of those elements (interconnections of numerous logical sorts: creation—nature, self—other, illusion—reality, knowledge—action, past—present—future, cause—effect or goal—means), that carries the sense of the image. Is there anything, now, that we could learn about interpretation and about context from the example of this attempt to understand? In answer to that, one thing we need to ask is whether what I have achieved is, in fact, understanding. Until we have examined the effort I have made in connection with the method, that will remain entirely hypothetical; the theory has that say. It is premature yet to talk of understanding.

What motivated this particular approach? Evidently the rules of content, concretized through the conception of context we are discussing in this chapter. The rationale of my effort, following the theory, was *the recreation of the work's context,* a resituation of the painting *within that world that endorses it with its significance,* for it was that atmosphere that would transform the work from the mute and strange thing I first encountered to what it truly is, that atmosphere that would restore to the work its own voice. The legitimate mind, we now believe, is not the mind of one person, but contents of mind that are dispersed throughout a culture, from which individual minds are formed. What has to be examined now is whether a method as unskilled and unsystematic as mine can be taken to have achieved that. If at all, it would appear to be only by luck.

---

43 "Because hands are the principal instrument of work (Karma)." At the commencement of new eras these Karmas are freed. "Hence the girdle adorning the loins, lower belly, and generative organ of the [great Goddess] capable of producing children, is fashioned of the arms and hands of dead Jivas. For these arms and hands are their principal instruments for the doing of work (Karma)." Vimalananda-Svami, *Hymn to Kali* (c. 1900), 280, 301.

It is perhaps surprising to know, given its centrality, that the idea of the 'world' or the 'context' of a work in expositions of the contextual model — what exactly it comes to — is virtually never given any explicit attention. It is usually evoked, in a fairly general sort of way. Its most restrictive definition was presented in part III: the temporally sliced world-view of the work's creator (the one mind in relation to which a created image had a significance we know truly existed, the one guaranteed-to-exist meaning). The reconstruction of such a thing was not my aim — yet it is conceivable that the path I followed might accidentally have led me there. If it did, it did so by pursuing the recommendations of a different model; for I went in search of Hinduism, not the artist. Was that too broad an objective? How broadly should context be conceived? How far afield throughout Hindu thought, for instance, can we go and still recover the context *of the work?* For the very legitimacy of the contextual argument is that the work has a world — a world with some definition — of its own. And the legitimacy of interpretation is based on disclosing it: we must establish the work's distinct world, first, before beginning to interpret, for only then can we ensure that we have moved out of our context; only then can we be assured that the content of our interpretation is developed in terms of the work, and is actually relevant to it. I have relied, in my own effort to understand this one painting, upon the *loosest possible conception* of that particular world, thus the *weakest limitation:* the world of the work is just 'the Hindu world'. We need to consider the adequacy of that conception, and to make some attempt to provide the definition of world that the theory neglects to offer.

Neither India nor Hinduism is very uniform. The painting we have been looking at was painted around 1800 at Kangra in the Punjab Hills, the Himalayan foothills to the far north of India (Himachal Pradesh). The religious texts that I have used in elaborating an understanding of it are of various dates, origins, and significance in Hinduism generally. Some are image-related, some not. What seems to be the key element of the interpretation — the issue of duality — comes from the early Upanishads (about the sixth century B.C.), and while it might not be controversial to count this as a central doctrine of Hinduism, it happens that Hinduism is commonly presented without any significant reference to the issue.[44] The origin myth, which I read in a general secondary source, perhaps comes from the Vaishnavite Puranas (fourth century A.D.), which though bound up with a theism of Visnu (to whom Kali is not connected in any way) might very well have become more broadly understandable to Hindus of all types. The interpretation developed of Kama and

---

44 For example, 'duality' (or 'dvaita') is not even indexed by Hopkins, *Hindu Religious Tradition* (1971), and Zaehner, *Hinduism* (1962), mentions it on only one page, in connection with the philosophies of Ramanuja and Sankara.

Rati was a mixture of these elements with a touch from the Vedas, which are considerably more ancient (tenth century B.C. or earlier).

The texts concerning Kali specifically are primarily the *Karpuradi-Stotra*, a hymn of unknown date that has been identified as Tantric, with a commentary from the beginning of this century. Tantrism is a distinct form of Hinduism that developed in the fourth to sixth centuries A.D. and flourished thereafter primarily in the west and north of India (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Bengal, and Kashmir);[45] it has apparently now almost totally atrophied in India. To that material I added borrowings from a Bengali mystic who was a contemporary of the artist who painted this picture, though removed by some 1500 kilometres. The basic iconography of Kali appears to have been fixed early in the Agamas and Sastras, whose purpose was precisely that: to standardize the appearance of each of the gods so that "it accurately stated the truth about a god." This was evidently very successful, for "the standardization of forms and symbols was remarkably uniform across sectarian lines, regardless of which god was identified as the Supreme Lord."[46] But of all the images of Kali that I have seen there is none that links Kali and the lotus, or Kali and Kama (identified with each other through the identical crown they each wear). Indeed, this painting is also the only representation I know of the dead Kama and Rati, whose significance I have quite freely linked to the Upanishadic conception of non-duality in duality. The specific symbol of sexual union may be Tantric; most commentators appear to suggest that sexual metaphors have always been anathema to the mainstream of Hinduism. But I have been influenced considerably more by a study of Agrawala that underscores the depth of male—female symbolism in Indian culture.[47] I have bound all of this up, or have been provoked to turn to these sources, by means of a small set of remarks by modern commentators that particularly impressed me: several comments by Radhakrishnan, Coomaraswamy, and Mookerjee that are (undoubtedly) interpretations of the Hindu tradition whose basis I have no capacity whatever to evaluate.

The fact is that this is a wholly unsophisticated mixture of elements drawn from the vast body of Hindu religious writing: a mixture of Upanishadic and Vedic Hinduism, Bengali mysticism, twentieth-century 'apologetics', and esoteric Tantrism. But not, of course, drawn at random, though there is a supremely random element in the range of materials I could turn to (I have gone no further than what I could find in one university and one public library and a few bookstores in one small Canadian city). This, precisely, is

---

45 "Tantra" and "Tantrisme" in Frédéric, *Dictionnaire de la Civilisation Indienne* (1987).

46 Hopkins, *Hindu Religious Tradition* (1971), 113. This view of the stabilization of iconographic practice over so large and culturally diverse a territory as India is disputed by some, e.g. J.N. Banerjea, *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta 1956), 29.

47 Agrawala, *Mithuna* (1983).

what following the rule of objectivity came to: interpretation was restricted to a context to which the work belongs (Hinduism), but a context that just happens to be conceived as extremely broad (Hinduism as reflected in all the above sources). There is one important feature of this procedure, however, that does not suit the theory well at all, for indicating a course of interpretation that runs directly counter to the one we were directed to follow. Instead of a narrowing of the sphere of our interpretation, a closing-in on the precise context within which to interpret the image, the range has been kept extremely broad — in fact, all-inclusive. If we think again of the image of the strand of pearls, we have not *gone* to one historical-cultural world from which the work originated. We have identified an entire tradition, a range of material scattered through many pearls along the strand (Hinduism from the Vedas to Radhakrishnan), and we have selected from that range *whatever appeared to fit*. I am not — I would like this to be clear — suggesting that such a method is correct; in fact I mean to stress this way in which it ignores the theory, and suggest that in doing so this interpretation discredits itself. How can a method such as this be identified with what the method stipulates: the situation of the work within *its own* world? It remains a possibility, however, that there is a reason for that freedom, which the theory has not recognized. We need to examine the matter.

Conceivably, here the theory recommends historical-cultural research. Perhaps, in this random way, I have actually arrived at the precise context of this work. In fact there are two ways that might have happened: either by arriving (by a remarkable kind of accident) at the specific understanding of Hinduism that was alive in Kangra circa 1800 (which for purposes of brevity we'll call 'Kangra Hinduism'), or by arriving there by virtue of the fact that there was no such thing to uncover — no such thing as Kangra Hinduism, because there is *one Hindu world* to which all Hindu texts belong (therefore, not an accident at all). We need to demonstrate one or the other. If we could support our hypothesis about 'Kangra Hinduism' (by some look into Kangra's religious history) or our hypothesis about 'predominant Hinduism' (by an historical demonstration of the essential uniformity of Hinduism), we could legitimate the interpretation on genuinely external grounds. That is the only way that unmethodical, subjective, minimally restrained attempts to find sense (such as mine, here) could in fact have a methodical role to play. In that case, my interpretation remains in suspense. To be more than plausible, we shall have to establish that the context of knowledge that this interpretation draws upon existed in the place and the time of the work. I find it easy to confess I have no capacity for that kind of enquiry; indeed, I consider such questions highly problematic. Unless we are to go back to the communication model, the very conception "time and place of the work" is difficult to turn into something concrete. Practically, what could one hope to determine of Kangra

Hinduism, if that were our proposal? (What records would we expect to find? What is it, exactly, we would look for?) And if we were concerned to show that Hinduism is accepting of all the sources I have relied on, how would we proceed to do that? For one thing, we would fall straight back into the problem we are struggling to settle, for to decide the nature of Hinduism is a supremely interpretative task. We might as well simply accept our interpretation without support as base it on 'facts' as secure as that.

We know that there are divisions within the Hindu world. For instance, the image of the physically united Kama and Rati is not a symbol of mainstream Hinduism; indeed, it is a symbolism with which Hinduism was uncomfortable, and in various ways proscribed.[48] We might, by consequence, look to those streams of Hinduism where sexual symbolism was used, but we ought to take care not to forget what we are pursuing: not the perspective of the artist, but an understanding within the work's world. And the fact remains that, whatever that setting might be taken to be, this sexual symbolism is *interpretable* within Hinduism generally, and there is more than one way to interpret that image within the Hindu religious tradition.[49]

94 DISCLOSURE AND THE RULES OF FORM

The total concession I could make to the rule of objectivity (through this conception of context), is that all the sources I drew upon dealt with Hinduism, though Hinduism by no standard other than what is called Hinduism. From that material the selection was certainly not random; there was a principle of selection, which was simple of necessity: *anything that brought the image to life*. To some extent, for sure, that principle was adequacy, coherence, simplicity, and explanatory power (the necessary formal qualities), but upon closer inspection it was clearly adequacy, coherence, and simplicity not as objectively limited by the appropriate context, but by *whatever* definition of those qualities increased explanatory power, understood in the ways it was in §§ 21 and 48.

Consider adequacy, for instance. I wished to explain everything in the work that seemed to me significant, but obviously I have no cultural knowledge by which to control my identification. The rule of adequacy, directed by the rules of content, requires that I

---

48 "Medieval Tantric cults were originally comparatively secret groups ..., but eventually, apparently through heir erotic excesses, they were suppressed by the Hindu orthodoxy." The famous erotic sculpture on the temples at Khajuraho are likewise not representative of Hindu iconography, and have thus been given Tantric origins. Roy C. Craven, *A Concise History of Indian Art* (New York 1976), 82, 189.

49 This is the point to note the contextual model's solution to semanticity: what elements of a work *have* meaning will be determined by the work's world. But so far as the world of Hinduism goes, nothing in this image is utterly meaningless, and it is meaningful in more than one way.

acquire that competence. Is that what I did, in effect, by restricting my interpretation to the symbols defined in Hindu literature (broadly conceived)? A superficial response would be, Yes, but the correct answer is No, because if that is what counts as a control (a notion *crucial* to the very definition of the rules of content) the theory becomes totally empty. To claim that my course carried out the theory regarding adequacy would be like saying that any material drawn from the entire history of Christianity (from any of the levels of scripture, mysticism, apologetics, esotericism, and academia) will provide an adequate check on what I can count as a Christian symbol in, say, Friedrich's *Cross in the Mountains* (an obviously Christian picture painted at around the time of this Indian work). The whole idea of the theoretical articulation of the rule of adequacy is to discredit such an approach.[50] I did not follow the theoretical definition of adequacy; I simply wanted to understand as much as I could see. In fact, I allowed my own hierarchy of importance among those things. The most disturbing, perplexing, and interesting details *for me* (the severed heads and limbs, the dead lovers, their sexual union, Kali's nakedness) were those I tried hardest to understand. Other details were less important: if I was able to explain them as well, in a way that fit the meaning that was most important, I was very happy to do so (the sea and giant lotus, Kali's hair and blue colour), but the fact that some remained largely or completely meaningless was not important, because it did not diminish my feeling about the meaning I had achieved. And in reality, I did not even restrict my interpretation fully to the Hindu literature; some of these symbols I interpreted freely on my own: with the scissors and the cut lotus, and the crown shared with Kama, I simply followed the promptings of the imagery, moving with the direction of the rest of the work. (Some symbols remain opaque: the significance of the crown in itself, Kali's tongue, her many snakes.) That was my sense of adequacy, which is loose in every place in which the theory requires it be controlled.

As for coherence, I had no prior desire of any specific sort of fit, nor even any requirement that the whole convey a meaning that fit together. I was quite prepared to accept that the figure of Kali, which interested me most, speak of something that was only loosely or peripherally connected to the figures below her — by a kind of logical 'and', which is the absolute loosest form of connection.[51] In fact I expected that outcome. But as I

---

50 Essentially the thesis of an essay by Kemp, who claims this is often what the interpretation of Christian works amounts to. Kemp faults the approach that embarks on a wide and "steady trawl" of "the relevant theological waters": "When the relevant evidence becomes so wide that it cannot be brought to bear in a non-arbitrary [non-objective?] way in formulating an explanation, we may suspect that the [interpreter's] question (and model) is at fault." Kemp, "Use of Evidence" (1984), 212.

51 Logically, the virtue of coherence is destroyed if works of art can be organized on the principle of 'and' (the artistic equivalent of the historical annal). The theory will have to rule on this problem to recuperate the rule of coherence.

understood more about a certain double-aspect conception of union (non-duality in duality, in terms of which Kama and Rati's union in death became more or less intelligible), and then was presented with an ambivalent conception of Kali (cause of gross death and transcendence of death), it became irresistible to *try to* develop a connection between them — but *not* in response to any theoretical directive. I came to imagine that there was something important in itself in such a connection, in the very possibility of a connection. The issue was the quality of meaning arrived at. Indeed, it becomes a question, actually, whether these relations I have seen are attributable to the image, for the link that we can make between these two regions of the image is not very clearly pictured *in* it: Kali simply stands on the couple. But drawing the parallel is irresistible. We are beginning to appreciate, perhaps (as in earlier chapters), that an image means by provoking us to think about what it pictures, and to connect those things in our own minds if a connection is suggested: we are 'meant' to follow the implications and parallels it offers, for ourselves. That, certainly, is what I have done. And by doing it the work has become more meaningful, in a sense that I shall have to explain.

Simplicity has played an even smaller role. The only way in which any conception of simplicity affected the course of interpretation was this: in pursuing the relations of meaning between different parts of the image (which I have just discussed) many possibilities lay open. If the meaning of these relations was not made too complex to grasp, it would have more power, and one is inclined to look for a meaning that is powerful. But the importance of the message tended to want to override simplicity. A simpler interpretation of this painting was *certainly* possible, but simpler interpretations did not push the boundaries of the obvious. It was a complex meaning (with many interconnections) and in fact a paradoxical meaning (with contradictory levels) that held that power, and the meaning of simplicity became — if in this way it still retains any sense — the most elegant way in which to conceive a rather overwhelming complex of ideas.

95 THE INTRACTABLE CONTEXT

We have now answered one of the questions asked in § 93: this interpretation fails the method. We have seen its effective disregard for the rule of objectivity (beyond a trivially inclusive understanding of world) and for *all* the restrictions of the rules of form, excepting explanatory power, and explanatory power understood in a way that fails the rule of subjectivity. The question now is whether to draw the conclusion the method is set up to deliver: to conclude that what amounts to a systematic disregard of the theory is finished, as

an interpretation that permits understanding. The theory tells us that we must understand an image by identifying its context, finding its world, and reading it accordingly. The world chosen for this work was simply Hinduism, by no definition other than what is *called* Hinduism. We have an interpretation with considerable explanatory power. One might thereby be tempted to suggest that, somehow, the world of the work has been found, but actually to do that would make total nonsense of the theory. If we allowed ourselves to locate the world of the work by means of *the best sense we can make of it,* on what basis would that sense be legitimated — for that is what the theory is for? If the context of the work is simply *read back from an acceptable interpretation,* is taken to be *indicated* by an interpretation we find acceptable, then the notion of context plays no role at all in deciding what an acceptable interpretation is. The context, in that case, is a product and not a means of interpretation. What then does the rule of objectivity amount to? The rule says that an acceptable interpretation is one derived from the world of the work; that context cannot be defined by a *satisfying* interpretation (drawn up on the basis of the widest possible notion of world). In short the context plays no role whatever. If we identify the context *of the work* through some sense we have arrived at, as a step toward *making sense of it,* we have an utterly illusory logic.[52]

And before we are ready to claim that we have disclosed the work's context, we ought to notice that this interpretation is not the only one possible. The following two quotations contain the material for a second interpretation of this image that is not compatible with the one developed above, but that (also accepting authorities) is equally fitting of the Hindu context. In brief, it is an interpretation that would read in this image the ineluctability of physical death, the immersion of life in the context of death. It is an interpretation that sees in this work a representation of the Hindu cycle of life and death as the great "cosmic drama," acceptance of which affords us a paradoxical but deep acknowledgement of the fleeting value of human life.

> The stark contrasts and reversals of what one would normally expect to see in this iconographic scenario — the gruesome decapitation, the copulating couple, the cremation ground, all arranged in a quite delicate, harmonious pattern — jolt the viewer into an awareness of the truth that life feeds

---

52 Isn't it acceptable to project a sense and then to use that sense as a means of locating the true context, which can only then play a role in *legitimating* the projected meaning? The issue that is important to the theory is legitimation, and if we look we can see that there are *no legitimating conditions at work* in such an operation. Context becomes a critically vacant construct. For instance, we can take the source material of this plausibly Hindu interpretation (one that makes special sense of the image) as a hint about or a suggestion of the work's true context. But to fulfil the objective of the theory that hint or suggestion must be corroborated, and if we disclose the context on the basis of the cogency of the interpretation, the context is not a corroboration or support of our interpretation but an extension of it. The theory, however, *proposes* the context as a means of validation. The model can propose whatever we like, but its legitimating function becomes a sham. If the object of the method is the legitimation of interpretations, we obviously need to establish the world of the work on other grounds than the interpretation itself.

> on death, is nourished by death, necessitates death, and that the ultimate destiny of sex is to perpetuate more life, which in turn will decay and die in order to feed more life. As arranged in most renditions, the lotus and the copulating couple appear to provide a powerful life force for the goddess, who is standing on the back of the copulating woman.
>
> Kali permits individuals to see their overall roles in the cosmic drama. She invites a wider, more mature, more realistic reflection on where one has come from and where one is going. She allows the individual to see himself or herself as merely one being in an endless series of permutations arising from the ever-recurring cycles of life and death that constitute the inner rhythms of the divine mother. As cycling and recycled energy, as both the creation and the food of the goddess, the individual is permitted to glimpse social roles and identities in perspective, to see them as often confining and as obscuring a clear perception of how things really are and who he or she really is. Kali reveals that ultimately all creatures are her children and also her food and that no social role or identity can remove the individual from this sacrificial give and take. While this truth may appear grim, its realization may be just what is needed to push one over the threshold into the liberating quest for release from bondage to *samsara* [the cycle of rebirth].

Though not offered in interpretation of our picture,[53] these remarks are meant to explicitate a meaning that belongs to and is expressive of the basic outlook of Hinduism. It is surprising how closely they should fit this painting, which we now recognize can be interpreted, alternatively, as illustrating the Hindu doctrine of perpetual rebirth, the eternal cycle of life and death, through Kali's connection with time. Accordingly, this image suggests that the meaning of an individual life lies in its infinitesimal place in the cosmic cycle, and that the meaning of death (the repeated death of the body) lies in its motivation to escape rebirth, to leave the cycle altogether. This interpretation is at odds with the one offered above because there *individual* human life has no importance; far from gaining meaning from its place in a cycle, it is something to be devalued, severed, abandoned (through re-identification with the Self from which it only appears separate). The cycle is nothing but the arbitrary re-distribution of pieces of one Self; individual life is meaningless whatever framework it may be set in. The two views are incompatible also because the conception of death as something fearful (which here fuels the escape from physical rebirth) is exactly what that re-understanding of the self renders powerless. Thus we have two apparently Hindu interpretations of the meaning of life and of death that exclude each other; both belong to the world of Hinduism, at least according to authorities. If what we are looking for is the Hindu context of Kangra 1800, could both of these interpretations derive from it?

---

53 It is a composite interpretation, involving two works whose imagery is highly similar to this painting. The two paragraphs are separate comments upon two different Hindu goddesses. The first is a commentary on typical images of the goddess Chinnamasta, a goddess particularly connected with Tantrism and who, like Kali, is one of the ten Mahavidyas or energies [Parasakti] of Siva. The lotus, the couple in union, the position of the goddess on the woman's back, and the severing of a head are equally part of the image of Chinnamasta, though in that image the couple are alive and the severed head is the goddess's *own*. The second is an explanation of the significance of Kali in her aspect as creator and destroyer. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses* (1986), 173, 130.

We now begin again to appreciate the merits of the communication model, for what it means to reconstruct the communicative context of a work's production is reasonably clear by comparison to this. While there are still formidable problems in defining what that means, at least we can picture firm general outlines. Finding the boundaries of the world of the work, however, is proving impossible. We begin with the notion of the Hindu world; the semantic context of a work such as this is Hinduism. The basis for that beginning is clear; the work is a Hindu icon for several reasons: it is a faithful depiction of a Hindu goddess, it is representative of texts of the Hindu canon, and it articulates meanings that (at least by our judgement) are at home within Hinduism. Moreover, it is entirely reasonable to propose that the work belongs to the Hindu world not only in respect of its home (its original purpose) but in respect of a semantic context broader than that — Hinduism generally — because it is formed of symbols that *have meaning* in Hinduism generally. That we can develop at least two substantial Hindu interpretations of this painting is due to the fact that, whatever its initial purpose, it uses symbols that belong to the Hindu world, symbols that can and will be interpreted by Hindus in the ways we have suggested. As the model explains, it is that that allows artists to communicate, allows expressions within the Hindu tradition to hold an audience for centuries and centuries.

We accept such interpretations because they are developed from that context of the symbols, a fact not diminished by appreciating that so broad a context supports multiple readings. But that is all the objective-historical basis our interpretation can lay claim to; we have been unable to find a more solid ground than that. Have we not yet achieved a legitimate understanding of this work? Certainly we have not, by this approach, understood it fully, since as a Hindu icon its potential for meaning is all that the context of Hinduism can allow (and I have made it plain how superficially I have entered it). But the model explained that understanding the meaning of a painting does not mean unfolding all the interpretations the Hindu scriptures allow; Hindu literature and practice are each, on their own, vast. We look for something less. The meaning determined by the *context of origin,* for sure, but the threadbare quality of such afore-mentioned slogans as "the way in which they were read when they were new" is becoming unmistakable. If we broaden our answer to include more Hindus than the artist, does the context of 'newness' continue to mean anything, for we are talking about people who will read the work according to an exposure to traditions that are not new. Within the Hindu world the most temporally precise meaning is not necessarily even the most primary, or the deepest. Kangra, precisely in belonging to a world, precisely because situated in and identified in relation to the Hindu world, cannot dominate its own tradition and confine the work to some meaning that it has in terms of itself alone, for the 'context of Kangra' has *no* meaning in terms of *itself.*

What the theory is meant to deliver is a legitimate form of understanding. The notion of context has been unable to provide a basis of legitimation more precise than the one pursued here, which was very simple: to develop some form of contextual understanding that possesses explanatory power. That is actually what we do in interpreting, and it is impossible to think of a circumstance when — the factual basis of interpretation being intact, our interest being merely to understand, and to understand not according to any predefined interest — having done so would be regarded as inadequate.

96 THE CONSTELLATION OF CONTEXT

We have been trying to locate the outer limits of the Hindu world, so as to determine the region within which a legitimate interpretation must be developed. We have not found any plausible ways in which to do that, and the interpretations offered of this work did not involve any. What counted as 'context' was determined by the understanding we *achieved.* The context was initially defined with minimal restriction, as Hinduism; our meaning came from anywhere within that sphere that gave us the kind of sense we were seeking. Within such an embracing context, there will be different sets of elements in terms of which a given work can be interpreted and understood. The specific semantic context of the reading I arrived at (from the sources relied on) was not determined methodically in advance; it was configured by two things.

The first is those *specific aspects of the work that I wished explained,* which marked out tiny fragments of the Hindu literature as revealing (fragments mentioning the sea, and Kama and Rati, and severed heads, and duality, ...). As we wander through that embracing context, with that mix of purpose and randomness with which we usually do, it is the startling correspondence that suddenly strikes us — a correspondence between something in the work (which is our companion on this wander) and something in the world we have entered. This is a moment of discovery that makes us look again at the work, and accept or not accept the connection. It is the experience of accepting that picked out (from the embracing context of Hinduism) those elements of context that we identified as *that specific set that illuminates the work,* the *specific* context in the world of the work that we recognize as fixing its meaning. The work, in this interchange, virtually points these features out to us — it focuses us on these aspects as we pass them, by virtue of the evident connection of the imagery.

But more is involved here than the work, for not all actual correspondences are illuminating, and there were many that I consciously passed over (for instance, connections

between the image and *samsara* or the cycle of rebirth, which the second interpretation did make use of). Not every possibility of meaning is equally useful. What marks the difference between mere connections between the work and its world — idle parallels — and those that establish the illuminating context of an interpretation? The correspondences that stood out were those that brought the most illuminating *quality of meaning* — which is to say, there is a standard of 'sense-making' that corresponds to no objective directive. We do not decide to accept some text in the Hindu world as being relevant to our interpretation merely upon factual correspondence with the work; it is necessary for a correspondence to produce something, a meaning with power. There were other ways of understanding the concepts the "Hymn to Kali" linked to Kali's attributes, and other possible ways of drawing together the various regions of the image, but I passed those by just because they did not produce an interpretation as powerful as the one I pursued. ('Power', indeed, is a loose way of talking, but it is not misleading.)

How is that specific context found or finally brought together? Gadamer once spoke of "the specific constellation of the meaning of a work,"[54] which is an expression highly descriptive of the interaction between a work and the context it is led through when an illuminating meaning is discovered. The illuminating context is discovered in an event we might describe as *constellation*, in which two things working together (features of the work and a certain suddenly perceived quality of meaning) isolate particular features in the Hindu world through which we are travelling (seeking an understanding of a work of art). The constellation of context is the *isolation* of a disparate group of elements *through a perceived meaning* — rather as a certain group of stars is isolated in the night sky because of a meaningful pattern we notice they make together. Details of this painting of Kali (on the one hand) and those perceived possibilities of meaning that struck us as most revealing (on the other) set apart certain features of Hindu thought as relevant to the interpretation of the picture. The context is defined by this meaningful isolation of a set of elements in the Hindu world, in terms of which the work is seen to speak. *The work, in an already present experience of its meaning, constellates its own illuminating context.*

It is plain how in the process of making these distinctions our conception of the work's world has been altered. Our interpretation was formed in the context of the world to which the work belongs, but not merely through a correspondence between features of the work and features of that world. The actual procedure was to surround the work with a body of material also belonging to that world and to *constellate* within that body a small portion of that literature, *by arriving* at a particular interpretation that has substance in

---

54 Gadamer, "Problematic Character of Aesthetic Consciousness" (1958), 39.

relation to this work. It is now totally clear, as it had seemed already, that *identifying the specific context* played no role either in arriving at or legitimating the interpretation. In fact, all this supposed procedure of interpretation is is a by-product of understanding. The real work was done by the power of the meaning that certain special correspondences produced.

It is clearer to me than it will be to anyone else that the interpretation I elaborated was not a matter merely of linking work and texts; it was a matter of fairly intense personal commitment — I am sure that is a good way to put it. Not commitment to any prior conclusion about the nature of Hinduism, because I had only the usual, loose North-American impressions about the subject before I was provoked to study an Indian picture. As I previously explained, I did so in order to approach interpretation without any de facto *rapprochement* effected by a shared tradition. I wanted ignorance. But the work chosen was chosen for its imagery, and it became important to me because of its meaning, in the course of its interpretation. My interest in Indian religious thought has a great deal to do with a concern (which I share with many) about the status of the *self* — a concern that my personal history has thrown me with ribbons and bows. I did not choose this image because of any connection with that issue; as I explained, there was no interpretation offered in the book in which I discovered it. The picture came as a complete mystery, and I chose it because of something fascinating about the way it looked: its visual simplicity, and the pneumatic form of Kali (with her statuesque figure and her distant gaze), which was so powerful in this violent setting. But once the various possible significances of the picture's elements began to arise, I was committed to pursuing one in particular. Had that avenue brought me to nothing (not produced an interpretation with illuminating power), I would have abandoned it and it would not have figured in this chapter. But it did not. I pursued it with some passion, and whatever unity can be found in my interpretation, I am sure, is as much testimony to the uncontrollable genius of passion as to objective correspondences. It is that that defined my own standard of 'sense-making'. I ignored many correspondences, as I say, which (by the criteria applied here) would be no less Hindu. I made my own selection of Hindu themes, not on the basis of what combination was most historically plausible (an illusory goal, as has become clear), and not on the basis of which selection made the *best* sense, for there is no standard for the *best* sense — none whatever. Rather on the basis of the sense that said most to me.

Surely it is the formal rules that provide that standard? But we have already demonstrated the subservience of the formal rules to *this* particular pursuit. They have no other definition; there is *no* specific historical context by which to define what standard of adequacy, coherence, and simplicity are to be applied in this case. Certainly adequacy was important, but (as noted) in a way limited by no historical considerations. I had no concern

to determine which items a Hindu would read here; I was interested in understanding the items that attracted me. Though I wanted to understand as much as possible, adequacy was secondary to explanatory power. My interpretation is not *the most adequate to the image* because I did not look for the interpretation that *is* the most adequate to the image. Indeed, I ignored elements rather than suspend my interpretation because I could not explain them (except to explain them in my own way, reading them in terms of the meaning I had uncovered in the rest of the work). Coherence offered no standard of sense, because mine is, again, not the most coherent of interpretations; indeed, it possesses aspects of meaning bordering on incoherence (the idea that Kama and Rati have overcome duality: that Kali has had any role to play in their triumph: that Kali brings death *and* deliverance from death: that by 'killing' one's most familiar self one can become oneself). These things fit together, but they fit together with all the strain of their paradox. And for the same reason it is not the simplest, for an interpretation that truly sought coherence and simplicity as a standard of its meaning would not have risked piling up so *many* paradoxes. I was concerned with an interpretation that held together in some way, and one not so unwieldy it would fall apart, but *these* notions of coherence and simplicity are so gross as to be negligible. To bend the concepts this much makes them useless in structuring a 'standard' of sense. They are less than necessary conditions; such concepts function, rather, like outer limits.[55]

I was not *looking* for an interpretation with any particular formal qualities — the interpretation that is the most coherent or the simplest (there were far simpler ones that gave the image something less important to say) or with the most scope (I had no interest in scope at all). I was interested, really, in the state of the world of which the image speaks — and, in that simple sense, in the truth of the image. Indeed, I avoided the direction of the second interpretation outlined above precisely on *that* basis, for I do not believe for an instant that it gives my life any meaning at all that I am part of some cycle of decay; and it is frankly unacceptable to me that I should think my own death so horrible an event that it could shape my life. Such an interpretation would be coherent nonsense for me; I interpret in the world in which I *live*. I looked, simply, for the *most meaningful* interpretation. Not the most meaningful *adequate*, coherent (etc.), interpretation: rather the most adequate, coherent (etc.), *meaningful* interpretation. Not even the *best* sense that mattered, because I gave up interpreting when I found something that mattered (it would be wrong, as I shall explain, to say, 'when I found what I wanted'). Within a theory that lays all its stress on the identity of the work and criteria, explanatory power often appears to be other than it is.

---

55 Imagine a desert surrounding a city. If you should stray so far as to encounter that desert you know you must turn back, but the encounter with the frontier has nothing to tell you about finding your way in the city. They are not positive guidelines of interpretation but rather of fouls.

In fact there is no such thing as a 'criterion' of meaningfulness. It must be included in the method because without it interpretation would have no anchor; there would be nothing to bring the process of interpreting to a halt. But the 'criterion of explanatory power' is nothing other than a distorted misrepresentation of the fact that interpretation is fundamentally oriented toward what is significant, toward truth about the world. The theory offers no direction in finding such a meaning at all: in fact it obstructs such interpretation.

97 THE CONTEXT OF THE WORLD

The constellated context played no role; it was a simple by-product, and I have discussed it only because the conception of context is the subject of this chapter. I selected Hindu themes compatible with the image, but did so on the basis of no principle of theory other than the broadest understanding of the world of the work. But my conception of the 'world of the work' is fundamentally different from the kind of thing the theory wishes to define. For just as the symbols of this painting have meaning within Hinduism because they are Hindu symbols, the symbols of the painting have meaning within the world — the world, our existence, life itself — because they are images of reality. *They connect with the Hindu world in no more objective way than they connect with the world.* But they can do so only for people who are willing to acknowledge the importance of their own inner concern about the world, who are not intellectually swayed from recognizing that that interest is their meeting point with other cultures.

To meet other cultures with less is not to meet them at all. The interpretation I offered of the painting examined here was developed on a basis that the rule of subjectivity positively forbids: personal interest — for once the prospect was presented, it was a matter of personal interest for me to pursue every shred of possibility that this image might have something to do with the issues of self, not-self (the other), non-self. I was not, of course, interested merely in the 'topic'; I was interested to explore the specific position that the self is a problematic and in some way *false* conception, that the *other* is not what we think, and that the highest position in life is to be *nobody*, stripped of self. To say that my own life has given me an 'interest' in such a view is a rather alienated way of putting it; when I am truly living, living is a labour of concern, and though I was already able to talk about such things before I came to know this painting, I can assure you that before I came to know it I could not have written even the simple sentence before this one. *My contribution* was a concern, not a content. *The contribution of the work* was a decisive order of elements with possibilities of interpretation, and with the power to constellate a meaning in a context of

thought. *The contribution of the context,* as I was able to conceive it, was a whole chaotic body of thought, of conceptions and levels. The interaction of the three was the interpretation I elaborated. The work was not in control, nor was the context, nor — of this I am sure — was I. It is that unified point of reference, which had a bearing on all of the three, that was the catalyst of the crystallization of meaning that took place in my own attempt to understand. The Hindu texts have a bearing upon this concern; they are about the world. The Hindu image is likewise about the world. And it is the world that I am concerned with when I am worried about the self.

Hinduism is only *a* world: it is not a final context. Indeed, it is not its own context, and it becomes meaningless when its link to the world is hidden or cut. If it, or any constellated set of elements within it, is *treated* as a final context, the goal of understanding is abandoned. For a 'world' such as Hinduism is an historical human approach to grasping the way things are. It gets its only real sense *from* the conditions it stands in relation to. How would it affect understanding if the work in its context were speaking of the world, while I was interested in the work and not the world? *To understand the work itself* requires pursuing its link with reality. If all I finish with is the statement, For the Hindu Kali's long hair is the illusory nature of things, or, For the Hindu the appearance of life is not its actual truth, I have *not* understood because I have not actually listened to the picture, which is speaking about reality, not 'the Hindu'. If I do not accept the claim of the work upon truth, all my efforts of understanding in a religious context are directed at collecting an interpretation for (in Radhakrishnan's lovely phrase) "the museum of world religions," which is a place where culture is safely hived off from any issue of reality, and a place where I can take pride in my hermeneutic acquisitions.

This painting claims there is a deep illusion in the way things are: that may or may not be true, but it is a claim to be weighed as truth whichever is the case. Whatever sense it finally has derives from what is there in reality to be experienced. There is a *single* encompassing context that enfolds the Hindu religion, its texts, its own internal creations, our concerns, and the directions of our own lives. That is the world — the world not merely as we know it but as a stage of experience that may contradict what we 'know'. The legitimate context, the semantic context, the framework within which the work has its own meaning is therefore not narrow but unlimitable.[56] It is reality.

---

56 This is the precise significance of the claim sometimes made, as for instance by Pettersson, that "in poetry the context itself is indeterminate. In poetry, 'context ... forms no fixed frame of reference; it consists of a great number of possible implications'...." This is not merely a remark about implications, but an indication of how we are to understand the real context of any interpretation. Stecker, "Incompatible Interpretations" (1987), 301; citing Pettersson, "Incompatible Interpretations of Literature" (1986), 153.

98 THE CULTURAL MODEL RECONSIDERED

The cultural model offers a particular picture of what understanding involves. Its theoretical insights explain that one's own way of seeing needs to be "adjusted" (Panofsky), which is to say, effectively replaced (our consciousness distorts, but it is malleable); the correction to be made is a correction in the repertoire that feeds our eye and influences how we see and understand; that alteration can be made through a change in knowledge, by which means we bring about a reconstruction of the historical viewpoint, a viewpoint that, adopted by the viewer, has the power to return the work to the present as itself. The key elements of this picture are a determination of the *world of the work*, an *initial identification* of the specific context to which the work belongs, and a re-creative *adoption of the viewpoint* that fits that context. It is a clear picture, and that clarity may now appear more a reflection of the needs of theory than the reality theory is taken to represent, because in fact none of these things is reflected in any of the three interpretations considered.

> Interpreting none of these works began with a *prior disclosure of context*. There was merely a recourse to historical information, which was accepted not for belonging to the right context, but on the basis of the interpretation it made possible. That information was taken up only *if, on the condition that,* it advanced the reading in a direction that deepened it. The task disclosure was to perform — restriction to conditions of the work (service to the rule of objectivity) — was not performed.
>
> The conception of the *world of the work* could not therefore be maintained as an historically exclusive entity, a world of thought exclusive of our own thought. Indeed, it appeared that such a conception of the work's world would destroy our very bond with the content of what the work as an historical phenomenon said.

In each of the interpretations examined, the historical context was not another objective world set apart from our own. The work, even as it originated, always exists within the compass of reality. Gadamer pictured this context as the horizon, which we share:

> When our historical consciousness places itself within historical horizons, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own, but together they constitute the one great horizon ....[57]

---

57 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 271.

Understanding requires that we recognize the reference that the work makes to a reality that is the continuous horizon of all life. To progress beyond merely identifying the meaningful *elements* of a work — categorizing the meaning, naming the general kind of meaning those elements possess — the work's claim upon the world must be recognized. Indeed, it is not really a matter of depth of understanding, of progressing through levels of understanding at all.

To understand Manet's *Olympia* at the level of identification — merely to grasp the nature of the affront it presented — is not a *degree* of understanding; it cannot do the work justice at all. The woman Manet's painting presents (in the tradition it borrows from) constitutes a challenge, and the work's meaning is not even adequately classified, much less experienced, in the statement *that* it presents a challenge. For the meaning of a challenge is only known in facing the challenge (it is not a content except in a relation between the thing that challenges and the one challenged). To recognize that *the painting's meaning lies in a relation* is to recognize that the painting addresses us; to understand it we are required to respond — no understanding comes of stating the fact. And our response, if we make it, cannot be made in any world but the world in which we know, think, and feel something about what the work depicts: a contemporary woman.

The picture of Munch made the same sort of claim, staking out its place within our own view of the world. Understanding the work in terms of outlooks foreign to our minds (the *femme fatale*, or the fear of women), or understanding it relative to experiences that we cannot recreate (different meanings relative to Munch's shifting moods), cannot do justice to what the picture presents: an ambivalent image, whose ambivalence we only *recognize* from life, in our own world. The work makes us aware of a fact of reality, that loving someone has antithetic possibilities; it has resonance with the *truth* of the fact. It is only reasonable to count that *in* the work's historical meaning, for Munch and for Munch's original viewers. This resonance happens only through our own experience of life. If we do not allow the image to picture something in *our* world, we do not see what it pictured in *any*.

Understanding the image of Kali happened to involve a connection with life merely as a means of assembling the very material (from the vast context of Hinduism) in terms of which the image could have a meaning. Understanding it involved pursuing an interest in one meaning suggested by a wander in that world (paradoxes of self and of death), and then drawing from Hinduism whatever gave that meaning reality, and elaborating it to deepen its significance. My own uncertain sense of reality was the very standard by which the interpretation was conducted and the meaning formed: the meaning must fit our world, as powerfully as possible. *Power*, we now see, has only ever meant resonance with reality.

The very image of an historical world sketched by the historical consciousness is distorted. That consciousness attempts to know an artefact "as an historical phenomenon that can be understood solely in terms of its own time," but our response to the cultural model goes deeper than the claim that "understanding will always be more than the mere historical construction of the past." The very effort "to see the past in terms of its own being, not in terms of our contemporary criteria and prejudices, but within its own historical horizon" is confounded, because it has determined in advance that these worlds stand apart from each other. It is precisely through the horizon of our own reality, which cannot be turned away from, that the issues of the past world remain real.

> Understanding of the past ... undoubtedly requires an historical horizon. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by placing ourselves within a historical perspective. Rather, we must already have a horizon in order to be able to place ourselves within a perspective.[58]

The model's conception of historicity cannot allow that to happen.

> If the gulf between the canons of different epochs is real, the argument that the work of art can only be understood in terms that are contemporaneous with it reduces to the subjective declaration that an artwork can only be understood in terms of what the present *thinks* the canons of the past are. But, as Dilthey's hermeneutics exemplifies, what the present thinks the norms of the past are is a projection of the present's immediate concerns upon the past. As this prohibits the possibility of dialogue with a genuinely different *Weltanschauung*, hermeneutic interpretation becomes a circular if not solipsistic form of self-contemplation.[59]

The simple fact that certain knowledge has been lost has been exaggerated; ultimately, there is a dogmatic element to that recognition of the brokenness of history, history seen as a strand of pearls, the past regarded as "what is past."[60] That discontinuity is less total than we think, for we have seen several cases in which it was possible to articulate interpretations with only slight additional information.

> Every text is foreign enough to pose a problem, and yet familiar enough that, in principle, the possibility of deciphering sense out of it is assured, even when all that one knows is the fact that it is a text, that is to say, written spirit.[61]

Elaborating a loss of information into a fundamental gap is a theoretical error. And it brings to light an internal flaw in the cultural model: the model surpasses the communication model in allowing a breadth of contexts, including a temporal breadth (the reading, for instance, of

---

58 "The historical attitude of [mere] imaginative representation is changed into a thinking attitude towards the past, but in thoughtful mediation with contemporary life." Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 150, 258, 269, 271.

59 Davey, "Nietzsche's Aesthetics" (1986), 332.

60 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 257.

61 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 22.

ancient Hindu art by a continuous Hindu tradition); yet that very process *applied to the interpreter* is what it regards as illegitimate reading. The living procedure we deny to ourselves we accept where it appears in the guise of history, when it is displayed by our 'specimens'. The method is chauvinistic.

> Contrary to what we often imagine, time is not a chasm which we bridge over in order to recover the past; in reality, it is the ground which supports the arrival of the past and where the present takes its roots. 'Temporal distance' is not a distance in the sense of a distance to be bridged or overcome. This was the naive prejudice of historicism.[62]

In fact what we see here is a double inconsistency in the model. It not only disallows in the present what it devotes itself to in the past, it has a double standard with regard to historicity. The whole model is based upon a belief in the basic historicity of the human world, yet what is not permitted to change is art itself, in its domain of meaning.[63] The concepts are ultimately bogus; they are really motivated by service to the theory and its project of exclusion. The historical consciousness is not a benign awareness of history; it is a piece of modern philosophy, a fundamentally "new element within" our relation to the past.[64] Our conception of historicity is not merely flawed, but undermining of the goal of recovery. Life that is grasped *as* life is grasped in terms of life.

> The third key element of the model is the *adoption of a viewpoint,* seeing a work once again in its own perspective. This conception of understanding is fictional, for we never even attempt such a thing in reading a work of art.

Because meaning is contextual, and that connection of work and context must be made by a mind, the model postulates the need to recover the way a work appeared from the viewpoint of an historical spectator (whether artist, patron, or general audience). In none of these interpretations was it necessary to imagine another kind of mind. Even when we do bring together what we think of as an original context (Hinduism, or Neoplatonism) we do not try at all to recreate another subjectivity, to stand before the work as some other person. We do not try to look as we imagine Ficino looked, as a believer; we simply look with information that Ficino had.

> To relate, as Schleiermacher and romanticism tells us, to the subjective factors of understanding does not seem at all convincing. When we understand a text we do not put ourselves in the place of

---

62 Ibid., 47.

63 "An entity that exists only by always being something different is temporal in a more radical sense than anything that belongs to history" and its analysts. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 110.

64 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 251.

> the other, and it is not a matter of penetrating the spiritual activities of the author; it is simply a question of grasping the meaning, significance, and aim of what is transmitted to us. ... In one move we find ourselves within the dimension of the aim, already comprehensible in itself, and without so much as a second look at the subjectivity of the partner. The meaning of hermeneutical inquiry is to disclose the miracle of understanding texts or utterances and not the mysterious communication of souls.[65]

> In consequence, the historical/cultural model consistently exaggerates the meaning of our often necessary recourse to historical material. The significance of special knowledge has been distorted by understanding it according to this model and the theory of objectivity. The insufficiency of our knowledge does not require that our own world should be left behind — abandoned for an alternative context to be built from that knowledge. It means simply that *subjectivity needs to be supplemented.* Not replaced or corrected.

It remains true that our own *de facto* context was in each of these cases insufficient to deliver the sense at which we finally arrived. The recourse to information was forced by ordinary puzzlement, not a methodical prescription. It was impossible to reach any understanding of the picture of Kali by relying upon our own capacities of association; only by searching through the Hindu world for identifications of the meaning of the work's elements was it possible to arrive at a sense with any form of adequacy, coherence, or power at all. The same was true of the Manet, for without familiarity with the tradition it used, and without some awareness of the work's reception, we would have failed to recognize what the work is doing. But not all paintings and sculptures are affected equally by historicity and cultural difference, and it is hard to speak in the same way about the Munch. The ability to read Munch's image didn't depend upon special knowledge of any kind.

Material is simply brought in, and when it is the right material, the meaning of the work in question speaks out, into a world that surrounds subject and object alike. When it is necessary, reconstructing an historical setting is indeed part of but is "only a phase in the process of understanding." If the past is to be alive, this phase must be superseded "by our own present horizon of understanding" — in fact this stagework must be rebuilt in full dialogue with what we believe to be true about human life. Of these sources of material the historical consciousness "makes an end of what is only a means."[66] The models conception of 'world' is so highly abstract because it is nothing more than that supplementary

---

65 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 40.

66 Ibid., 270, 273.

knowledge writ large (that these worlds are so often treated as "bodies of knowledge"[67] is only a reflection of that).

The model, in the end, cannot be adjusted, because it is fundamentally paradoxical. This quality has been vastly overlooked. The attempt to reconstruct the past context *within the strictures of the model* is paradoxical, for the past as recovered — a world seen from no human viewpoint, which is to say, with no reference to reality — is not a human past. The paradox is that a procedure devoted to recovering a specifically historical perspective on works of art views those historical phenomena "in a way that they themselves did not intend to be looked at." The pretense is that we have recovered the original view; but of course we do not take on the view as it was held, but take it on "as an historian."[68] The paradox is that "a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as the reconstruction of the original would be no more than the recovery of a dead meaning," because the interpreter's understanding holds that world at a distance from life — from the world in which he believes and lives. This paradox was recognized in the nineteenth century by Hegel and Nietzsche both.

> The dominant Wolfian mode of philology which sought to reconstruct antiquity in *all* its detail promoted the historicist prejudice that works of the past must be grasped within canons of interpretation which are contemporaneous with them (an assumption also to be found in Dilthey's hermeneutics). But if the past is to be understood only within its own terms, given the historical gulf between interpreter and interpreted, the categories of the past will be for the contemporary mind either outmoded or unintelligible. Understanding historical art work will either prove irrelevant or impossible. In this context, what Nietzsche calls "real 'historical' discourse would talk ghostly speech to ghosts."[69]

Theorists thereafter were unable to deal with this problem, and the paradox has been brought back again in this century by Gadamer (whose principal concern has been the effect of historical study upon literature). To place works of art in their "historical context does not produce a living relationship with them" — that relation in which their meaning once arose — "but rather one of mere imaginative representation."[70] A world seen through entertained 'beliefs' does not recover original meaning but creates a meaning from which the spectator is alienated.

---

67 Cunningham names two human types of context: conventions or codes, and bodies of knowledge "whose structures are built on explicitly formulated assumptions known as axioms or postulates or definitions," involving "a greater degree of so-called 'necessity' ... than there is in the conventional sort of context." Cunningham, "Perspective and Context" (1935), 42.

68 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 301.

69 Davey, "Nietzsche's Aesthetics" (1986), 332.

70 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 149.

Imagine a case of real cultural interpretation: Marsilio Ficino coming to see what his acquaintance Botticelli had done. Ficino did not look at the *Primavera* merely with Christian-Neoplatonic knowledge; he believed in God and in the connection to God that love makes through beauty. And he did not look at the painting merely in a 'relation' to his Neoplatonic beliefs: *he* looked, believing, and his experience was certainly the deeper for it. How would Ficino have seen that painting? Not, we know for sure, according to the theory (oriented to understanding the work *for itself*). How Ficino might have seen it isn't as rhetorical a matter as it may seem, for his philosophy is very much the testimony of his two eyes. He wrote about the sight of beauty, saying that one who looks upon a beautiful person

> admires, desires, and is amazed by the splendour of the celestial majesty shining through bodies. ... But that splendour of divinity, shining in the beautiful like a statue of God, compels lovers to marvel, to be afraid, and to worship.[71]

Whether Botticelli's painting pictured this event, or provoked it, or both, we know that Ficino looked at the world and was compelled; he put himself at the mercy of sight and took in its lessons: to marvel, to be afraid, to worship. The world was transformed by the sight of beauty, and in the new world Ficino lived differently — that was certainly some of the experience. To grasp it, Ficino brought his whole understanding of life to the look of things — above all to the grace of the human form, which Botticelli was so masterfully able to present. To the sight of things, a whole understanding of life, a humanly strange mix of Christianity and Platonism, of passion and principles about how we must live. No amount of knowledge of Ficino's system is going to recover that stance, for a viewpoint is not merely a content of mind, nor a merely entertained content of mind, but a position that is occupied by a living being, someone oriented by concerns, someone to whom something matters. Ficino's concern was not understanding — this is what makes him old fashioned, a pre-modern interpreter — but the meaning of the experience that he was having. His concern was not 'the Christian meaning' of that experience, but just 'the meaning', as it appeared to him in the reality he knew as the world.

The reconstruction of Ficino's understanding must necessarily fail. It is clear that we cannot hold beliefs that we do not in reality possess *in the same way* as they were held in the historical setting (we cannot recover *even the narrow cognitive perspective*). For to look at the Botticelli today with the content of Ficino's mind is merely to entertain a conception of God, an idea of Neoplatonic reality. One thing we know that Ficino did not do was to *entertain* his beliefs, his concerns, his dispositions. Making the passage into the

---

71 Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, rev. ed., trans. S. Jayne (Dallas 1985), 52.

work's world *by means of information*, as the model proposes, does not resituate us there. The being that makes that passage is a kind of ghost of a person, an interpreter not oriented toward belief in anything but the success of the transition. That is not the perspective of the mind we are aiming to recover, or the mind we think we attain. It is not even human.

The problem is endemic to the model, which aims from the very beginning at a *relative reading*. We may indeed be inclined to wonder whether "history is not nostalgic, but vital": does a painting "merely represent beliefs once professed by artist or patron, or might those beliefs be shared by the modern viewer or scholar?"[72] But once having suspended the bearing of the work on our world, the contextual model cannot be made vital. All one could do is to pretend to believe what we do not, and theorists have rightly turned their backs on such notions. All we can do is to entertain foreign thoughts that remain foreign. The most we accomplish in that way is not a reliving of that perspective, but an awareness of the 'terms' of that understanding (the *terms* in which a Neoplatonic interpretation, a Hindu interpretation, a neurotic interpretation are made). And in that way the meaning of the work becomes the *representation of an experience* that we do not actually have. But the method here has undermined itself, for the original experience was *not* a representation of a kind of meaning; it was *meaningful*. The project of reconstruction is doomed because it cannot revive the perspective in the way the perspective was held; it is a world revived precisely *without its reality*.

> The model is therefore committed, in actuality, to reviving only a *picture of the meaning* of art. What it actually recovers is a kind of facsimile of an understanding, something that satisfies its theoretical commitment to the historicity of worlds. Because the theory does not make its case, it faces us with a choice: we have to decide which is closer to the work's real identity — a *picture* of a contextual meaningful experience (one that is without meaningfulness), or a meaningful experience of the work (oriented toward reality) whose content is not derived at every point from historical information.
>
> Finally, the distinction between *meaning and significance*, legitimate and illegitimate associations, based in the model's concern for the work's reality effectively suspends the image's own voice, for the imagery itself speaks of the world. By the nature of their visible contents, works of art connect with that reality, and

72 Pontynen, "Theory and Practice of Art History" (1986), 468.

> understanding them involves pursuing that connection. The *context that makes the work intelligible* is the context of the *world.*

"Those who 'understand' a text ... project themselves in an effort of understanding towards a significance."[73] A person's actual relation to the material of the work is ultimately the background for the experience of meaning (our relation to love, in which our vulnerability and risk are of great importance; our understanding of the beauty of art, and its presence or absence in the world we live in; our concern about who we are in relation to others, and to the meaning of death).

> To understand *Oedipus the King* we must be able to understand a symbolic form that articulates the meaning of the terrible, pitiable, great, and noble in human existence. This is possible only if we are able to understand the concern, as well as that which the concern is about, that gets articulated in the work.[74]

Works of art articulate encounters with real things, and theorists have long been compelled to recognize the way in which works of art do address spectators with a meaning of importance to their lives. The relation of that phenomenon to understanding, however, has never been fully resolved, and the two operations are usually left in tension.

> The anamnesis and recovery of meaning is guided by two concerns. One has to do with the object. ... The anamnesis of meaning in understanding seeks to overcome the historical distance by deciphering what was formerly intended or by appending to the works an ahistorical meaning ....
>
> The other concern has to do with us. The deciphering of the originally intended meaning and the construction of an ahistorical meaning both attempt to discover a message that the works address to me as a kind of kerygma, a proclamation. With ... the construction of an ahistorical meaning art history responds to a general need for meaning. With the negation of historical distance and the negation of the experience of modern art production, older art seemed to become the last vestige in which talk of meaning still made sense.[75]

Bätschmann is discussing here the hermeneutic position of explanatory power, which tells us when an interpretation brings the work to life; it is that necessary experience that tells us that our efforts have led us to a meaning.

> We have now come to see that the *explanatory power* of a prospective interpretation is ultimately its strongest and most salient formal quality. And the reason why this concept has been even less amenable to clear explicitation than adequacy or simplicity is that we had all along taken it to be a formal quality (a universal technical criterion of legitimate interpretations). That was the theory's attempt to

---

73 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 25.

74 Hofstdadter, "Significance and Artistic Meaning" (1964), 93.

75 Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 80—81.

> standardize a feature of interpreting that functions in a wholly unstandard way, and in fact is not a criterion at all.

Explanatory power is in fact a bizarre conception once pressed into the role of criterion: it is like Molière's 'soporific quality', the successful isolation of the agent in opium that induces sleep. That a reading has power is not an index of an acceptable reading, a thing that helps to point out the interpretation we are looking for; it is the thing we are looking for, not a basis for acceptance but the very acceptance. It is not an external technical feature, because it is directly connected to the specific meaningfulness of the work — moreso even than the rules of content. Gadamer's expression for explanatory power is "perfect coherence":

> Our understanding is guided by the anticipation of perfect coherence, and this anticipation shows that it possesses a content which is not merely formal. In fact, it is not only the unity of an *immanent* meaning which is presupposed in the concrete operations of understanding: every textual understanding presupposes that it is guided by *transcendent* expectations, expectations whose origins must be looked for in the relation between the intentional object of the text and the *truth*.[76]

And it is not universalizable, because the resonance of an interpretation within reality is necessarily its resonance within an understanding of reality. There is no universally shared understanding of those aspects of reality that these works, in this or in earlier chapters, are concerned with.

---

[76] It is obvious that Gadamer is not speaking about coherence in the formal sense. Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 46.

One cannot approach a symbol unless one is able to awaken in one's own being the spiritual resonances which respond to the symbol not only as sign, but as 'sacrament' and presence. The symbol is an object pointing to a subject. We are summoned to a deeper spiritual awareness, far beyond the level of subject and object.

Thomas Merton, 1968

Great art remains a pointing finger, a material object, tracing the outlines of a constellation, an illusion, in a night sky. Too often, like animals, we look only at the finger.

Thomas Albright, 1980

The hermeneutic phenomenon is basically not a problem of method at all. It is not concerned with a method of understanding, by means of which texts are subjected to scientific investigation like all the objects of experience. It is not concerned primarily with the amassing of ratified knowledge which satisfies the methodological ideal of science — yet it is concerned, here too, with knowledge and with truth. In understanding tradition not only are texts understood, but insights are gained and truths acknowledged. But what kind of insight and what kind of truth?

Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1960

If I must place my trust somewhere, I would invest it in the psyche of sensitive observers who are free of the conventions of understanding. I would have no apprehension about the use they would make of these pictures for the needs of their own spirits. For if there is both need and spirit there is bound to be a real transaction.

Mark Rothko, 1954

Man, who has become lord and victim of his own cognitions.

Edgar Wind, 1936

CONCLUSION

If the interpretations developed in the course of this study were to be rejected by scholarship, as its theory requires, that would be an instructive response. Though not by intention, they invite rejection, and the reason they do so is important. The interpretations of Veronese and Friedrich, of motifs of Picasso, Gowing's reading of Rembrandt, the interpretations of Munch, Manet, and a work from another culture — each of these readings of works of art displays the same theoretical weakness: each breaks the rules designed to exclude subjective intrusions into a process of representing the inalienable meaning of historical-cultural entities. For these interpretations broke the rule of objectivity and did not restrict themselves to material clearly relevant (by the theoretically developed standards) to the entities in question. They drew in numerous ways upon subjective mind, upon bad subjectivity.

> Proposals of meaning were developed by the 'intuitive promptings' of imagery, both symbols and forms;
>
> attention to the work, which includes the decision of semanticity, was not directed or restricted by the rule of objectivity;

Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (1968), 1.
Gadamer, "Introduction," *Truth and Method* (1960), xi.
Rothko, in Katherine Kuh, "Mark Rothko," *Art Institute of Chicago Quarterly* 48 (1954), 68; cited by Dore Ashton, *About Rothko* (New York 1983), 163.
Wind, "History and Science" (1936), 264.

the rules of form were ignored precisely as their objective dimension (without which they lose their edge): no effort whatever was made to determine the relevant forms of these rules in the objective context;

the claim to acceptance of interpretations rested upon explanatory power, which turned out to be the impression a certain sense makes upon *us*, with our particular conceptions of the world;

the meaning of supposedly fixed concepts is secured and defined at the level of content, which is the level of the work's sense in relation to reality;

the context of a work's meaning turned out to be the context of what the work pictures, which is the world (the context of our decisions about beauty, death, marriage, self, ...);

the mere selection of explanatory material (the historical-cultural information necessary to the reading) was directed by judgements concerning the way things are in life (what a certain type of death would look like, or what is problematic in self-identity);

possibilities of reading were favoured relative to profoundly 'personal' conerns.

Before reaching the conclusion that this form of interpretation involves some sort of personal 'approach' one will have to notice that elements of this sort were found (the Botticelli example) in the interpretations of the discipline's practitioners:

the substance of their critique derived from what it is preferential to believe about such things as a philosophy (ultimately a matter beyond all historical decision, an interpretative matter of decision belonging to each individual);

their criteria of form could not even be 'historically' concretized in a way that kept them free of influence by beliefs of a personal sort about the meaning of philosophies.

If on the other hand these interpretations are accepted, theory will have to reconceive what bad subjectivity amounts to, something it has always found amenable to off-the-cuff formulations. But it will not be happy about the result, because the result will not be very protective of the idea of professional hermeneutics. To echo a kind of criticism once made by Wind, the profundity of the distinction between subject and object will disappear, and what remains will appear rather trivial. This only reminds us that the writing on the wall, here, after all we have been through, is not the redesign of these categories. It is how little the subject/object model has to tell us about the *encounter* with (as against the methodical, regulated performance with) works of art. We are faced with a choice.

Modern art history is defined around the theory of objectivity. Not only is what is to be accepted or discounted decided by the rules of content, the rules (through their articulation by different models of art and its meaning) lay down the direction interpretation must take, the steps to execute. For many people this philosophical underwriting — which, I am saying, is the very basis of the discipline's place in the university[1] and is universally operative — is entirely correct: correct not only in the substance of its thought, but in being given the role of rationally protecting the work of art from the activity of interpreting. We have looked at many powerful arguments. But it is not necessary, and not even advisable, to hold that view, for the reasons I have shown. One can always cling to correctness. Theory is a way of holding the railing, but there are many things one will have to give up over there by the railing. (As Nietzsche remarks, "I don't wish to hear anymore of things and questions which do not admit of being tested. That is the limit of my 'sense for truth': for bravery has there lost its right.")[2] The cases we have looked at, which in fact were none too carefully chosen, have at the same time made those reasons appear remarkably insubstantial. Just to have made clear the depth of the discipline's investment in philosophy is important, because issues of philosophy must be freely decided. Every philosophical argument requires an act of faith. Though at one time I believed, for some of the reasons examined here, in the project of the "cognition of art," I no longer do. In fact I regard this specifically modern development as one of the most decisive losses in the history of culture; it has taken something away from us. Putting the philosophy of the discipline on display may make it clear how much a genuine issue of choice we are faced with, in an era when — casting a glance at disciplines — all the deep questions appear to be answered for us. Indeed they are answered, and answered badly.

---

1 "To the extent that science does not restrict itself to studying useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy." Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* (1979), xxiii.

2 Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom*, trans. T. Common (New York 1975), I: 51.

All interpretative disciplines continue to insist upon the need to exclude certain forms of subjective activity. In fact that is a primary conclusion to be drawn, from the material we have looked at, about the discipline of the study of art. Interpretation goes beyond the issues of the theory: it does so in all cases – for the artist as a prototypical reader, for the historical spectator, for the recreative historian, and for us. If it does so (as the theory prevents us from seeing), *what explains the theory's restrictions?* In addition to that, through its identifications (§§ 21, 22, 49, 73) the modern theory of interpretation also narrows certain aspects of its most central material: crucial aspects of symbolism (the illustrated metaphor), of imagery (the richness and role of particularity), of the mind of the artist (commitment and belief), of art (the autonomy of forms), and of historical-cultural contexts (what they include). Its identifications are reductive. *So where do they come from?* Earlier I raised the question of the critical basis of these determinations of the object. The reason why there is no material on that subject is that they came into being not on some foundation of argument but pragmatically, to serve a purpose: and that purpose is to define good interpretation and *legitimate* professional (scientific) interpretation. To do that it needed a concrete means of drawing the subjective/objective line; it needed identifications of its object. Now the raw material for that 'line' is not hard to identify: the negativity and distortion of some types of interpretation is unmistakable. But the existence of bad interpretations does not drive one into the theory. The additional push comes from belief in the category – in the power of thought to divide up natures. A scientific discipline will not seek to control those perversions on a merely ad hoc basis; theory is the unmistakable means; the subject/object paradigm, which is as old as modernity and provides the very categories by which we explain knowledge and the politics of interpretation, is the obvious tool. We have seen several instances in which the method's real distinction is to weed out the subjective, even where there is no clearly objective benefit.

Considered on its own, the theory makes good sense; 'sense' is what theory is good at. But upon inspection it becomes clear that the motivation of the discipline's consequent 'fear of subjectivity'[3] is *equally divided* between rescue of the work of art and preservation of the discipline's scientific reputation, its claim to do better than merely guess at the meaning of things. Its toughness toward the subjective has to do with maintaining a line on one side of which it can exist. Given the importance of a line — a clear line — it is hardly surprising that theory has not given any prominence to the unavoidable separation of good subjectivity and bad. Since Schleiermacher modern theorists have insisted upon the necessity of subjectivity to the possibility of interpretation, and two of the models explicitly

---

3 Rorty observes how critics are "frightened of the appearance of 'subjectivity' which results from the adoption of an untheoretical narrative style." Rorty, "Texts and Lumps" (1985), 2.

draw upon it. But it is simpler to prosecute a broad distinction than a subtle one, and little has hinged on making bad subjectivity a very precise subcategory; it is easier simply to make wholesale exclusions, suspending such things as beliefs (beliefs of a personal rather than a historical sort) and interests (interests of a personal rather than a scientific sort). And in fact it is the category of the personal that 'subjectivity' and science excludes. What the method has really longed for is some way for an interpretation to be *indicated*, externally, in a manner so indifferent to who is interpreting that legitimacy is secured: an objective interpretation, in the sense of one determined by the object — precisely in the sense of a photograph. Jenckner has spoken of the specific origin of the notion of "the objectivity of the mechanically produced image" as a borrowing of science from "the religious veneration of *achieropoietoi*, the 'likeness not made by the hands of man'": hat is, that is *veronicas*, images on cloth such as the Turin shroud and the image St. Veronica received from Christ during the Passion.[4] The special importance of *veronicas* has to do with this kind of objectivity, which really concerns the *proof* that something is true (the name Veronica is "contracted from the Latin *vera-iconica* meaning 'true images'").[5] Subjectivity (unless, as Kant showed us, it is universal and therefore beyond reproach) is understood as the source of all misrepresentation, and if non-universal subjectivity can be shut out the reality of art will be safely manifest. "The philosophical tradition has yearned for a way of approximating the total passivity of the blank. ... It would like us to be machines for cranking out true statements in 'direct' response to the pressures of reality."[6] The dynamic of this encounter is unachievable, but that is the least of its faults. A desire of this sort is a fundamental evasion of the domain of interpretation, which is a region of existence where we are required to hold a position — *without*, in the most common cases, a battery of argument, criteria, and rules by which to legitimate ourselves to others. And in the process, the encounter bound by such rules deprives art of the very air in which it can speak.

As for the first point, I believe it has been shown that interpretations substantial enough to satisfy the theory's concern for reality — interpretations not more vacuous than cultural interpreters produced, than an artist would have held, or that involve a meaning worth making art for — have not kept clear of what the theory calls personal (as a review of the role of subjectivity pointed out in §§ 48, 72 and 98 will show). They have crucially relied on it. To draw the problem as bluntly and clearly as it requires, I have read those works of art in a way that is substantially comparable to the way dreams are read

---

4 Ingrid Jenckner, *Visual Evidence*, exh. cat. (Regina: Dunlop Art Gallery, 1993), 16.

5 E. Cobham Brewer, *A Dictionary of Miracles Imitative, Realistic, and Dogmatic* (Philadelphia 1884, repub. 1966), 318; cited by Jenckner, 16 n.

6 Rorty, "Texts and Lumps" (1985), 4.

(associations were freely made, readings accepted or discarded for truth to life, avenues of reading pursued relative to personal concerns that preoccupy me, in terms of the "problematic" of life, those things I am desperately trying to get settled; and the justice of these manoeuvres is all based, finally, upon the value of the meaning, which is registered, it appears, simply in its power to impress).[7] The comparison of the hermeneutics of art with dream interpretation, however, is no less than horrific for a scientific discipline. And the reason, at root, is that there is no *business* to the interpretation of dreams, no knowledge to be had, for knowledge is something with an inherently universal appeal (it has "the form of an informational commodity"), which is just what a dream interpretation (something that could be sold to only one person) is not.[8] On this model of interpretation there is no professional status to be won; interpretation on that order does not serve the interest of a discipline.

100 THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE

What is wrong with the pursuit? Contemporary theorists like to talk about the pursuit of *interests,* so as to show how different interests are compatible; there are parallel pursuits in interpretation, and they do not encroach upon each other (an interest in the artist's meaning, an interest in the meaning for which a work was made, in culturally limited interpretation, in personal interpretation, and so on). In fact the particular richness of modern interpretation is often identified with the products of these different pursuits, the fruits of an era of both hermeneutic variety and modern tolerance.

> We might need many different *complete* interpretations of a given text to do all the explaining we want to do. This should encourage openness to the possibility that interpretations phrased in terms of Hirschian authorial intentions, Gadamerian talk of effective history, reception-theory à la Jauss, reader-response theory à la Iser, and the rest can sometimes usefully be seen as belonging to compatible explanatory projects geared to resolving different puzzles.[9]

Consider, for instance, Walter Pater's approach to Botticelli. Pater clearly wasn't interested in the meaning that explains the work's existence. He was interested, you might say, in letting these paintings of Botticelli "pose a possibility for ... reflection," in allowing them to

---

7 Roskill comments on "what may be called *projective* readings. Basically in a projective reading, as in the Jungian technique of dream interpretation known as *amplification,* there is an active and reflexively self-justifying use of association to extrapolate on the character of the imagery, considered vis-à-vis the overall impression that it makes and those features of it that register most strikingly." Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 53.

8 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* (1979), 27.

9 Stout, "Relativity of Interpretation" (1986), 111.

touch upon what one might call an issue of "life" (Pater's sense of the dilemma of Christian belief). The quoted words I have borrowed from a philosopher who has attempted to classify the several *kinds* of interest that interpretations serve. The interest just described (and the type of interpretation it distinguishes) he calls *normative* or *edifying;* the three other types outlined are *behavioural* (an interest in understanding the work as a purposeful communicative action), *effectual* (understanding the work, apart from its maker's aims, according to its reception by viewers), and *creative* (the interest of another artist in the work's power to provoke a new form of itself, in another work — Van Gogh's 'interpretation' of Delacroix or Picasso's of Manet).[10] It is a matter of personal choice which form of interpretation one prefers.

Contemporary theorists, in particular, are anxious to escape authoritarianism.[11] A primary benefit of pluralism is to reveal that if interpretations serve different interests, they are judged by different standards. "If we knew in advance what purposes every interpretation, *qua* interpretation, does or should serve, we could say rather easily what makes any interpretation good."[12] So we could find fault with cultural interpretations, for instance (claiming they had no personal relevance), only by a confusion of purposes. A cultural interpretation is not held to such a standard; it could not be faulted except by the criteria of its own cognitive model. As Fritz Saxl explained in 1948, people may indeed be disappointed with art history; they come to it wondering "how to enjoy a work of art, how to make it their spiritual possession, in short, how to enrich their lives," but these are concerns in which the study cannot assist them.[13]

But something remains obscure in that form of argument, and that it is hidden has a supremely political significance. Saxl, for instance, leaves us unsure of the real cause of the disappointment: art history, yes, but because of what art history does, or because of its object, the work of art? Does art itself have the capacity to enrich life? The hermeneutic tolerance of other interests begs an everpresent question, which is the question of what, after all, we understand art to be, what kind of meaning a work of art has. This is not an artificially imposed question. As we have seen both in the theory and the three models of art we have examined, the discipline is highly concerned about what a work of art is and what kind of meaning it has, and it does not hesitate in its own practice to assert that understanding of its object.

---

10 Ibid., 109—13.

11 "Avoid closure and totalization at all cost!" Shiff, "Art History and the Nineteenth Century" (1988), 28.

12 Stout, "Relativity of Interpretation" (1986), 104.

13 Saxl, "Why Art History?" (1948), 347.

> It is anything but unusual, then, for normative and explanatory aims to work in tandem, each informing and constraining the other in the labour of interpretation. The normative aims you hold will influence the explanations you seek. The shape your explanations take will in part determine the normative aims you can reasonably pursue.[14]

Here we have a problem, for it is the role of legitimacy — the substance of the reason in 'what we can reasonably pursue' — that is the real trouble behind the innocuous pursuit of knowledge.

Wherever the discipline's claim to legitimacy is not made part of the discussion, 'tolerance' is an equivocation. What does it mean to say that 'other interests of interpretation are legitimate' when the legitimacy of art historical forms of interpretation is founded on an assessment of the specific identity of a work of art? What does it mean precisely in a world where knowledge is idolized? The real issue is not tolerance, permissibility — Do we expect these pursuits might be stamped out? — but what those other interests are understood to afford us.[15] In fact they can be stamped out more effectively, more efficiently, by categories. If they do not issue in a kind of understanding we count as truly cognitive, truly an understanding *of* the work itself, there is no need to disallow them. They will simply be eliminated from a discipline whose business is to understand, and pushed into the shadows of a society truly concerned to know.

> The discipline ... serves to project or to validate a certain kind of viewing subject: ideally, passive consumers, and, in more contemporary contexts, educated and discerning cryptographers .... At the same time, art history has been a powerful system of investiture of certain professional groups ... with interpretative, semiotic, or exegetical power.[16]

Where the established paradigm permits 'unsophisticated, subjectively impaired' forms of interpretation, one has only a political sort of tolerance — exactly the kind by which society tolerates the eccentric and the abnormal: the behaviour is allowed to go on, but only on the invisible margins, where no one will be touched by it, and where the true image will not be impugned. In the second of the two epigraphs that open parts II to IV, on the three pillars of modern art studies, one can feel the flexing of this discriminatory muscle, which finally holds the power to rule on what kind of meaning a work of art really has and what kind of

---

14 Stout, "Relativity of Interpretation" (1986), 113.

15 The principal "debate" in the modern period concerns cognitivity, and the aim of cognitivity establishes a hierarchy. Alongside a theory of objectivity, different aims stand in a hierarchy. Hirsch, for instance, notes that "an interpreter ... is free to choose his aims, and within the context of those aims and the broad conventions of language, he is free to choose his meanings." Hirsch, "Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics" (1976), 203. But aims are not equivalent, and they are responsive to reality according to their disposition. Stecker comments, "Some aims are such that interpretations with these are true or false. Other aims are such that interpretations with these are neither true nor false. The aims of these interpretations will determine how to evaluate them. This does not mean that one cannot debate about aims. But there is no reason to think that just one aim is legitimate." Stecker, "Incompatible Interpretations" (1987), 302.

16 Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History* (1989), 52.

meaning it does not, what kind concerns those of us who are interested in art and what does not.[17] *If it were merely as a matter of 'interest' that we focus on the historical code, the context of production, or the cultural world, the discipline's substructure of objective argument* — which we have seen a great deal of — *could be dispensed with.* But to dispense with the philosophy and its depending identifications would undo the discipline's triumph over subjectivity, for one can have no plan to *replace* interpretative distortions with interests that are merely *different.*

Hardly a matter of conspiracy, this attitude is rooted in entirely genuine conviction about the integrity of an entity and the cultural preeminence of knowledge. The 'interest' of art history is not merely an interest: it is "a system of protocols for elucidating knowledge,"[18] and that is an endeavour with a specific ethical stature, as theorists continue to remind us. The specific dignity of the profession — indeed, the constitution *of* a profession (as against premodern forms of hidden appropriation) — rests upon that sense of purpose.[19] If this way of thinking of interpretation is optional, then so is scientific hermeneutics, and if scientific hermeneutics is optional, then it is nothing. Of course there is nothing wrong with the pursuit of knowledge. But look at what we are pursuing: if the discipline's forms of interpretation (those forms that are required by its rules) lose the rules that require them, there is no longer any *knowledge* to pursue.[20]

---

17 It is not at all that disciplines want to remove challenges to their authority; they merely want what masquerades as knowledge (what fails the philosophical standards) to be removed from the stage of knowledge. What they fail to recognize is that some of these marginalized claims about art actually contain a legitimate challenge to the *basis* of their authority (their philosophical conception of cognitivity), and in the end the failure to acknowledge that *is*, in effect, a kind of resistance to challenge.

18 Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History* (1989), 78.

19 "Today the view is widely held that nothing can be said about the correctness or incorrectness of an interpretation, and accordingly one must permit a simple plurality of meanings. That can be linked with the view that interpretation cannot be a scientific activity, but at best a subjective expression.... The simple allowing to be of interpretations I consider to be an inadequately reflective standpoint. It is insufficient for art history as a scientific discipline." Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 160.

20 There is a critical difference between two kinds of activity: scientific interpretation (reporting on the meaning of works of art) and research. For me, Botticelli's *'Primavera'* means essentially what Wind said it means; that is the only interpretation of it that matters to me. Wind's remarks in "Some Points of Contact Between History and Science" suggest he might have wished me to think of this as an interpretation with a special stature relative to the painting, and on that account one of particular importance to knowledge. I think it isn't, and, indeed, that it couldn't be; I think it has a special stature in relation to reality (as I know it).

That is not just the only project worth pursuing with art but the only one with sense behind it, and it so happens (as the case of Wind's interpretation proves) that such a project might involve a lot of research, a lot of the kinds of activity art historians are commonly involved with. But the programme is different, the results subject to an entirely different kind of appraisal, and that fact is of vital significance. As Kenneth Clark said of research, "In a way, that's the background of truth." "Conversation with Kenneth Clark" (1973), 14. What is in the background is plainly not the real thing, and the present problem is that foreground and background are reversed.

101 THE KNOWLEDGE GAME

The object of modern hermeneutics is to interpret the work in a way protective of its identity, to discover the meaning of the work, to represent that meaning, even if (according to the two contemporary shibboleths) that representation is partial (everyone agrees that no interpretation is exclusive)[21] and never final (everyone agrees on the "provisional character or necessary incompleteness" of interpretations).[22] The modern interpreter intends to register that meaning as a service to the work: "Though there may be ... no single best way of interpreting a picture as it really is, still some art historian's accounts can be true to the picture as it is."[23] Specifically *cognitive* interpretation is a form of rescue from a loss of identity. This paragraph thus far, which describes in the most basic way the discourse of knowledge, contains an entire philosophy. One of the implications of such philosophy, Kristeva notes, has to do with power:

> There are political implications inherent in the act of interpretation itself, whatever meaning that interpretation bestows. What is the meaning, interest, and benefit of the interpretive position itself, a position from which I wish to give meaning to an enigma?[24]

To be able to represent, to capture, to report on, to find things out about, the meaning of a work, one must recognize that content of knowledge as existing in a capturable condition; provisionality and partiality do not affect that in the least. To assign oneself the task of recovering something from threatened oblivion, one must picture that thing as existing in some state, capable of being grasped in some way, in its proper form. This is a picture not only of a condition *but also of a relationship*. Though such a picture is susceptible of numerous forms of epistemological dressing, it presents a specific kind of relation. As in the story of Perseus and Andromeda, once painted by Max Beckmann (frontispiece). Perseus' goal is the rescue of Andromeda from the serpent she has been left to, which will devour her — think of this situation as involving an entity and a fate (a fate that is a form of destruction, of loss). Andromeda is there, chained to the rock — a being, and one with an identity worth preserving; Perseus will capture her and slay this threat to her being, saving

---

21 The "Peircean idea of unlimited semiosis," that interpretation "is potentially unlimited," has been established for some years. Eco, "Interpretation and History" (1992), 23. Also Duve, "Red, Yellow, and Blue" (1983), 35.

22 Bryson, *Vision and Painting* (1983), xiv. "Today ... few feel that *interpretation* should be closed off or finalized." Shiff, "Art History and the Nineteenth Century" (1988), 27. "The 'facts' about any particular work of art are never finally settled." Jones, "Understanding a Work of Art" (1969), 130, 142. "The important general lesson is that in art history there are no unquestionable data, no *given* upon which every later interpretation must build." Carrier, "Ekphrasis and Interpretation" (1987), 29. "The open-endedness of interpretation arises from the inability to eliminate doubt. No matter how persuasive an interpretation might seem on the available evidence, it is always possible that newly discovered evidence or a new interpretation of the same evidence might overturn it." Grigg, "Flemish Realism and Allegorical Interpretation" (1987), 300.

23 Carrier, "Objectivity in Art-Historical Interpretation" (1989), 344.

24 Julia Kristeva, "Psychoanalysis and the Polis," *Critical Inquiry* IX (September 1982), 78.

her, in effect giving her life. Is this a neutral, benign, and obviously desirable scenario? Such as the desire to know about something, the acquisition of knowledge? That depends on whether it turns out in the way Beckmann painted it.

According to the story, the thing of value is the identity of the victim, an already existing condition that must be preserved. The power, however, belongs to the rescuer, not merely in the benign sense that it is the rescuer's intervention that averts the calamity — the prosecution of the method (the rescue), involving the protection of the object (Andromeda) and the exclusion of deforming subjectivity (serpent) — but specifically in the sense that the object in an event of this description becomes *a thing*. In the terms of this action, it is represented as having an identity that can be taken hold of, secured, in an act of rescue — a dual representation of both thing and rescuer, for the rescuer (that one who neutralizes the threat) becomes the one who preserves identity, that one in terms of which the identity of the work lives again, is introduced to the modern world. As the artist Tim Rollins explains, "Works of art aren't alive. It's how we relate to these objects that lends them life."[25] What kind of life are they lent? This is the crux of the issue: *what a work of art is understood to be is a consequence of that relation on which the preservation of its nature is thought to depend.* The goal of the discourse of knowledge is precisely that: to present the work as it is. Though the work holds the value the discipline holds the power, because the work's effective identity, in the culture, is *subject to* the relation in which *the work is presented as being itself.*

As Preziosi notes, "This binary, subject-object topology serves to reify the phenomenon in question (art), investing it with a pregiven ontological status, an otherness that is and must be autonomous of the analyst-subjects."[26] Is this an important remark? Far more important than we suppose. Where is the problem here? It is difficult for us to see, because our capacity for thought is so deeply formed by the categories of subject and object. The dynamic of representation, of the rescue of identity, may deform the relation in which we actually stand to such a thing as a work of art. The intervention of the scientist forces, at a deeply philosophical level, a fundamental category mistake. That category mistake Beckmann has painted. The work of art is not a thing. Andromeda, too, is not a thing, but the remarkable fact about Beckmann's version of the story is the nature of her treatment. In her rescue she is carried off as a kind of possession. In fact, she is treated in precisely the same way — appears precisely as important to Perseus — as the slain serpent. She should be standing (right-way-up) as an equal to Perseus, but she is not. She is an

---

25 Tim Rollins, Interview by Trevor Fairbrother, *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 161.

26 Preziosi, *Rethinking Art History* (1989), 35.

autonomous being, but her identity to Perseus (undoubtedly the terms on which she has been rescued) continues to serve his purpose. Perhaps the work of art as a piece of canvas or stone is a thing, but an *image* is not. An image is an other, in much the same way as a person (who depicts the world in what they say) is an other.

Of course, as I have said from the very beginning, modern interpretation is *based* in that recognition of work as other. But because hermeneutics was already involved in science, it never understood what it *means* to recognize an other. Modern interpretation uses the means of subject-object philosophy to perform its rescue,[27] and in that turn to thing relations the disposition to an 'other' is destroyed. An other is not an object whose nature is to be captured, registered, represented, published (tentatively and in part); it is always something to which we listen and respond, and this is not a superficial or merely emotive sort of claim. It is a fundamental category distinction, and it is only weakly registered in a culture pervaded by science. The difference between a thing and an other is precisely the difference Buber once marked between the "realm of It" and the "realm of You."

> Whoever says you does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation.
>
> One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity.
>
> The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one's whole being. The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being.
>
> All actual life is encounter.
>
> For the real boundary, albeit one that floats and fluctuates, runs not between experience and non-experience, nor between the given and the not-given, nor between the world of being and the world of value, but across all the regions between You and It: between presence and object.
>
> This, however, is the sublime melancholy of our lot that every You must become an It in our world. However exclusively present it may have been in the direct relationship — as soon as the relationship has run its course or is permeated by *means*, the You becomes an object among objects, possibly the noblest one and yet one of them, assigned its measure and boundary. The actualization of the work involves a loss of actuality.[28]

Knowledge of an object is no longer encounter, nor is it even the representation of encounter. Gadamer is talking about this category mistake when he says that the modern approach to art makes art an object, whereas it is an "ontological event" in which something of the world "becomes meaningfully visible."[29] The image that functions as a symbol, Merton says, "is not an object in which one rests for its own sake." It is "an object pointing

---

27 When Gadamer talks of the dominance of the "scientific epistemological model," he is not talking of naïve positivism but of the basic categories of our talk of knowledge. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 75.

28 Buber, *I and Thou* (1923), 54, 55, 58, 63, 68, 81.

29 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 126—27.

to a subject," as "a reminder that we are summoned to a deeper spiritual awareness, far beyond the level of subject and object."[30] It is the replacement of the relation of dialogue with the thing by the relation of mastery of what the thing is (partial and provisional as that may be).[31] Knowledge of an object is not "having nothing," as Buber says; on the contrary, it is having something for which one will be paid. No one is paid for what they have learned; only for what they can teach. When one says what a thing is, one is no longer addressed by that thing; one has shifted it into the It realm. Art, like Andromeda, may not belong there.

Each interpretation of the works of art examined in the foregoing pages demonstrated a tension between the I of I-It and the I of I-You. To whatever extent the *means* of encounter dictated by modern theory was pursued, the voice of the work — not the work as identified on various models, but the work as a kind of window on some fragment of the world that it makes present[32] — continually drew the interpreter across and beyond the boundaries of object-relation, continually engaged the subject's deeper self: a person with a concern about reality, a deeper I than the I who reads studies (the I that goes to school, the I that talks about art, the I that lectures). That is what the repeated subjective infringements of the method were: the recognition of the voice, the identity, of a You with the power to reach that level of our being.[33] The continual way that interpretation slipped — from the theory's point of view, degenerated — into discussions about "essences" (simply, what I recognize as the realities of love, marriage, death), discussions of the "embodiment" of real features of the world in their reality (of grief, and of the relation of mother and child), talk of the "truth" (about the ambivalence of loving, the real nature of grace, the true standard of feminine beauty, the true nature of death), was not the stubborn or optional imposition of 'personal interests' but the recognition — breaking through the thing-identity established by the discourse of knowledge — of the power of a certain category of being *to make the world present*. To make it present not inside a piece of information, but in an experience in which I can speak only of reality (and no longer of works of art, historical facts, "social and interpersonal means of communication," "systems of perception," "structures of significance," "culturally encoded systems of meaning," and all of those topics which modern and postmodern science pursue in their determined way).

---

30 Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (1968), 10.

31 It is in this sense that I understand Seerveld's remark that science as a model for art history is a category error. Seerveld, "Promise for Art Historiography" (1987).

32 "I see [the addressed 'You'], radiant in the splendour of the confrontation, far more clearly than all clarity of the experienced world. Not as a thing among the 'internal' things, not as a figment of the 'imagination,' but as what is present." Buber, *I and Thou* (1923), 61.

33 What is expressed in a work of art is always expressed *to* someone, not as a mere 'meaning', a "psychic content," but as an address about something. Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics" (1964), 101; Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 216.

The modern interpretation of art is a game of knowledge — a game actually in four senses. First, in the sense that it is oriented from the beginning towards a goal, an accomplishment. That accomplishment is "the bliss of knowing,"[34] the scholar's satisfaction in having solved a puzzle, having retrieved the lost, having restored the work its voice. In that respect knowledge is a kind of trophy: a thing brought back from the field.

A game also in the sense that its treatment of, its use of, the object creates, brings into existence, a new activity. It creates an occupation: something one must learn how to do, something with its own social necessity, and something that occupies one's attention and time. A game is also that: something invented for the exercise of faculties and the engagement of attention.

The modern interpretation of art is a game also in that there are rules. At its very beginnings in the last century, the study of art was concerned with the issue of its scientific status, involved in "a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status."[35] Theorists for more than a century have fought to find the justification of that claim to professionality — which is to say, to protect its place within the university. The legitimacy of its activities have had to be re-established against every resurgence of the claim that hermeneutics is merely so many forms of subjectivity. The present shift of epistemological argument (from correspondence with reality to "the ability to get agreement by using persuasion rather than force")[36] continues to protect the scientific status of the discipline by changing the nature of that argument. As Carrier asserts, "The truth of an artwriter's claims is measured by their persuasiveness": the issue remains the same.

> Such professionalization implies both that a discipline gives us knowledge and that it has an established place within society. Art history belongs in the university, while astrology does not. Debate about art history interpretations takes place within a framework in which disagreement is meaningful. There is some consensus about how to interpret Manet and Giorgione.[37]

Versus interpretation as a matter of taste, "the determination of a true or most probable meaning in a text has, in contrast, been held to be the reasonable aim and merit of informed reading or philology."[38] The preservation of this special cognitive status — the protection of an occupation, of a system of knowledge, a system of de facto expertise[39] — requires that the non-cognitive be defined and controlled. Roskill warns that "'He who seeks,' freed

---

34 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1986), 21.

35 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* (1979), xxiii.

36 Rorty, "Texts and Lumps" (1985), 11.

37 Carrier, *Artwriting* (1987), 119. It is often a real question in contemporary styles of discourse whether a claim of this sort is offered sincerely or cynically. Since real critique involves taking a position, I assume the former.

38 Steiner, "A New Meaning of Meaning" (1985), 1262.

39 How do we "handle the anarchic nature of value-judgements" in the treatment of art? "We count heads and, in particular, what we take to be qualified and laurelled heads." Steiner, "A New Meaning of Meaning" (1985), 1262.

from the constraints of any controlling principle of search, will by his own ingenuity 'always find something.'"[40]

> The professionalization of art history, which permitted it to become a university subject, depended upon agreement about standards of acceptable argumentation. In any discipline that achieves such a status, a dividing line is set up between experts and laypersons. The doctor and the faithhealer, the ordained priest and the prophet — institutions distinguish them by providing a system of certification. Ruskin and Pater were amateurs, working before art history created its licensing system .... What is excluded from the curriculum is writing like Pater's or Stokes's, which does not provide a model for professionals.[41]

The "controlling principle," the "standards of acceptable argumentation" — the discriminating blade of Beckmann's Perseus (whose duty is to put down the threat to identity) — are the method. Thus the discipline is not merely an occupation, but an occupation governed — both sustained *and* created — by rules. That is the third sense: just as there is no game where there are no fouls, there is no profession where there are no limits. A principle of discrimination is crucial to the existence of art history within the university — that is, to its participation in the modern business of the university, which is to further the economy of knowledge. It is not a merely facetious remark when Danto observes that "the armies of scholarship march on their pocketbooks"[42]: Lyotard observes that "Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange."[43] The deepest level of those rules is the level of subject/object theory. And that is the reason why (like Beckmann's Perseus) modern interpretation is fundamentally as much focused upon, as much interested in, negative subjectivity as in the work of art, for it is negative subjectivity that supplies its limit.

It is only by maintaining its vigilance against subjectivity that it can produce *its* special product. The stature of the saviour is displayed as much by the conquered serpent — as important, in the end, as much the object of his attention — as by the rescued victim. Philosophy is not merely an antecedent basis of activity: it is not so neutral a thing. The discipline's investment in philosophy, and through it the pragmatic unfolding of its arguments of identity (nothing other than its way of identifying the boundaries of interpretation with various kinds of external condition), are components of the perpetual effort to protect the activity. The theorist of art history who has accepted the basic premise

---

40 Roskill, *Interpretation of Pictures* (1989), 14; n. 14.
41 Carrier, *Artwriting* (1987), 118.
42 Danto, "Not So New Art History" (1988), 532.
43 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* (1979), 4.

of the discipline (that we are aiming at a form of representation) is devoted to finding a non-subjective meaning by which to display the special stature of his achievement.

> For the art historian, questions of truth and interpretation can be settled with a reasonable degree of certainty by situating the production and consumption of artistic signs socially and historically. It is this ground which saves the art historian from the philosopher's fantasy world of metaphysical speculation.[44]

Should the philosophy collapse, the boundaries not be found, the way is open to anyone to interpret. As Gadamer has claimed,

> the implicit prerequisite of the historical method ... is that the permanent significance of something can be known objectively only when it belongs within a self-contained context. In other words, when it is dead enough to have only historical interest. Only then does it seem possible to exclude the subjective involvement of the observer.[45]

In respect of this conception of identity, a remark made by Bätschmann (though to a different purpose) is exactly fitting: it is quite possible that "by the elimination of the subject one does not arrive at the thing, but rather at an inferior objectivity" — a debased conception of the object. "A reduced objectivity is not better than an inferior subjectivity, a subject's pure determination to stick to his own meaning."[46] The distortion of the work is merely the first consequence.

102 MODERNITY AND THE VOICE OF THE WORLD

Nineteenth-century thinkers with an interest in the arts bought their way into the shining programme of science, and that is exactly where the project remains today. But they did so at the expense of what a work of art offers, which in 1994 we are *less* equipped to recognize than at any time in history. The single fact that marks modernity as an era of cultural eclipse — a dark period, because while art continues to be produced there is now an agency that effectively *cuts* its link with life, with the true needs art serves[47] — is the

---

44 Walker, "Art History Versus Philosophy" (1980), 23.

45 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 265.

46 In fact Bätschmann is not worried about misapprehending the object, but giving too little place to "reflection on the conditions of the possibility of understanding, seeing, experiencing, and perceiving." Bätschmann, *Kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik* (1984), 114.

47 One of the symptoms of this condition is the development of the modern notion of "culture." For if art is not made for life, it must be made for something else. It serves our need for culture, a kind of spirit-restoring indulgence in fiction, a view established "on the basis of the opposition between reality and art." Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 71. Another symptom (revealed by the kind of things artist's now commonly say about art — "the blue man stands for thought" — ideas that presumably play a role in the conception of their work) is that art is now produced *in the modern image* of art.

massive deformation of the work of art that is the result of that success. For if we accept that what a science offers is (potentially) a rational representation, the products of science are accepted in society as the work brought back to itself. That is the concerted message of the museums that make use of scholarship and of the universities whose substance is knowledge: encounter with the work. It is argued that the museum and the gallery should "try to answer the sorts of questions likely to arise in the minds of gallery visitors." And then a truly crucial observation is made: "In practice these questions are likely to be rather narrow in range, restricted by what visitors have been taught elsewhere to be the proper subject matter of 'art appreciation'."[48]

> The ever more voluminous ephemeral literature of the arts — concert programmes, exhibition catalogues, reviews, popular criticism, and history — is permeated with a tacit if unargued alternative: that in coming to terms with a work of art we must seek either to understand it theoretically or to achieve a correct emotional response to it.[49]

Art historical questions are questions posed to illuminate a work, to facilitate understanding. But when did art historians ask what is illumination? What is understanding? They simply took over the subject-object language that Kant had borrowed from the philosophical tradition and the percept discussions of Newton and Galileo. The result of using this equipment in a business of respect is that, today, the work of art these institutions are designed to serve is a work stripped of all its power to address. And the game produces knowledge inert enough to be as universally saleable as the claims of metallurgy or endocrinology.[50] That a work of art has come even to *resemble* anything like a thing to be known, a thing on which to report, is a cultural scandal; it is the simple disposal of art. The continued force behind that transformation has been the legitimation that accounts for the place of art history in the university.[51]

What we have uncovered in the background of the theory of interpretation is a deep conflict of interest — a conflict that explains the discipline's utter disinterest in the attempts of philosophers since Hegel to escape the modernist paradigm of the power relation (Hegel, Heidegger, Buber, Bultmann, Gadamer). Scholarship, as the theory and Beckmann together show us, is a power relation. It takes the work in hand and tells us what is and is

---

48 Hyde and Smith, review (1987), 110.

49 Osborne, *Art of Appreciation* (1970), 20.

50 The resonance of a claim by Kenneth Clark comes here. "In order to interpret a work of art you have to feel it, you have to be moved by it. If you are not moved by it you cannot interpret it. ... You can interpret a document on the wool trade without being passionately involved in the wool trade. You cannot interpret a work of art without feeling deeply about works of art" — and about works of art precisely in terms of their content, of what is *in them*. "Conversation with Kenneth Clark" (1973), 14.

51 When Clark was once asked his opinion on "the extraordinary growth of art-historical studies" in recent decades, his response was, "Well, I dare say this is an inevitable result of university education." "Conversation with Kenneth Clark" (1973), 14.

not its meaning. Its "account of the other written in the third person" is not a relation of encounter, but a relation of general superiority. In modern hermeneutics "the subjectivity of the author is elided and the object of study spoken for,"[52] despite the fact that in such a relation the object of study is no longer anything but a mere thing, an object, a silenced bit of reality. Beckmann shows us that relation, in its silence, sadness, and parody. Scholarship is concerned with control to a beneficent end, but its relation is wrong; its very programme gives it effective mastery over what the work can say. The foundational proposal of all modern hermeneutics — that what it means to understand depends upon the nature of the object of understanding — requires specifying *what* we are dealing with. Only the I of I-It claims to know its other; the I of the I-You relation refuses to define the boundaries of its alter. We have an answer not only to the question what "model of art is being used?" but also to "Where do their models come from?"[53] From a philosophy of object (power) relations.

> The man who has acquired an I and says I-It assumes a position before things but does not confront them in the current of reciprocity. ... Only now he experiences things as aggregates of qualities. Qualities, to be sure, had remained in his memory after every encounter, as belonging to the remembered You; *but only now things seem to him to be constructed of their qualities.*[54]

But "not all reflection makes what it is directed at into an object."[55] Heidegger, for one, believed that it is not the purview of human activity to "specify being" through conditions; being can only "bring itself to expression" in human life.[56] The human being does not define, but is a receiver of reality: the human being is a place for revelation, not a master of reality. The modern interpretation of art is unaware of the depth of its debt to a modern philosophy that has cost the world a major avenue of its connection with the world. Science has closed down the voice of the world.[57]

Art as *represented* is inherently trivial, a game in the final and pejorative sense, once expressed (fifty years ago, after the debacle of the War) with reference to scholarship by Caumann: "There is too much at stake in the world, right now, for historians of art or historians of anything else to spend their time playing games." It is a supreme measure of the modern faith in 'knowledge' that what was counted as serious was claims with truly

---

52 The quoted remarks are a description of ethnography in a parallel to art. Renée Baert, Introduction, *Territories of Difference* (Banff: Walter Phillips Gallery, 1993), 12.

53 Charlotte Townsend-Gault in *Sightlines* (Montréal 1994), 144.

54 Buber, *I and Thou* (1923), 80, 81 [emphasis added].

55 Gadamer, "Foundations of the Twentieth Century" (1962), 122.

56 Bubner, *Modern German Philosophy* (1981), 25.

57 "The death of symbolism is itself the most eloquent and significant symbol in our modern cultural life," and the symbol, for Merton, is precisely the kind of thing the works we have examined are. Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (1968).

cognitive stature.[58] Art as experienced within a hermeneutics of representation never becomes anything more than the invaluable token with which certain cultural manipulations are played out.[59] But well beyond the playing of all games, however, lies the effort to face the truth of our situation, which persists beneath our diversions, and eventually cuts them all off. In that affair we have precious little assistance; art and religion (in their better forms) are virtually all there is, and these are the modern world's first casualties. In the paradigm of power relations, modern theorists speak of what has been labelled "edifying interpretation" as if it were another method one brings to bear upon the work. But the reluctance in that 'type' of interpretation to be directed by categorical definitions (developed in connection with the foundation of a science and the protection of its interests) constitutes a 'method' that refuses the principal dynamic of method, the control of experience. A hermeneutics of concern cannot control the encounter with a work of art; it can only allow it to take place. The standard confusion about what Gadamer meant by method (surely Gadamer advocates a hermeneutic method)[60] stems from identifying it with a "manner of approach," an identification that is likely wherever one fails to see the dynamic of a kind of approach as a substantive quality of real importance. The difference in encounter Rorty captures, without any thought of Gadamer:

> Unmethodical criticism ... is the result of an encounter with an author, character, plot, stanza, live or archaic torso which has made a difference to the critic's conception of who she is, what she is good for, what she wants to do with herself: an encounter which has rearranged her priorities and purposes.[61]

My aim is not to argue for this sort of experience, but to present the whole picture. I would like to make it possible for us to recognize that such encounters happen (when not controlled by theory) and to show that our decision about the status of such events belongs to a deeper level of reflection than the discipline has told us of. — As Panofsky himself noted, "We are chiefly affected by that which we allow to affect us."[62] The object here is simply to remove the artificial obstacles.

The theory pushes us to argue that we can understand art — attain a sense of the work's meaning that can be counted legitimate understanding — outside a living stance. I

---

58 What Caumann was arguing against was the indulgence in activities that did not lead to "a body of knowledge more or less acceptable to every one." Caumann, "Science of Art History" (1944), 27—28. That ideal is still respected: for instance Carrier, who makes an "appeal to the consensus within the profession," holds such a consensus compatible with thinking that "the institutions of professionalized art history ... provide good ways of getting at the truth about art." Carrier, "Objectivity in Art-Historical Interpretation" (1989), 335.

59 Modern thought turns the experience of art into a "possession of aesthetic culture." Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 88.

60 Gadamer, "A Classical Text" (1981), 328.

61 Rorty, "Texts and Lumps" (1985), 107.

62 Holly, *Panofsky and Art History* (1984), 189.

have given some evidence that by the constraint of the method and its various models not even the discipline's own goal can be met: to recreate the original meaning in a living context, to give the work the respect of an entity. For any 'belief' one might come to entertain in the process of understanding is not entertained as it actually was (as a belief) but rather as a context of information, which sets us in an entirely new, methodical, relation to it. And anything it might have the power to 'say' to us is suspended by the position we have set it in. Unless we belong to the context in question, the work of art (in the very context we are to understand it) becomes *an unacceptable picture held in suspense from our own understanding of reality*. The modern experience of art "includes an alienation from reality." The modern mind dissolves "the connection of the work of art with its world."[63] The theory, however, does not present itself as the means of any qualified or narrow understanding. It presents itself as the theory of *understanding*, as the only (if partial, tentative) way in which to grasp the work as itself. The effect of the method is that understanding from a living perspective is not counted a form of understanding at all. In the modern world the content of art is just alienated 'knowledge'. For respect of the theory accumulates interpretation upon interpretation in which art is seen as it appears in a relativized stance; detachment is constitutive of its experience. The postmodernist approach turns even more intently to relative frameworks because it is only in such a narrow purview that we can carry on the business of stating the facts.[64] To explain meaning produces detachment;[65] art itself comes to mean pictures of points of view. It is a common sort of claim that the purpose of a religious picture, for instance, is "to illustrate, beautifully and expressively, an article of faith, and thereby to heighten devotion." Such a remark is considered a "valid" representation of its meaning.[66] An invalid way of discussing that meaning would be to consider the truth of that image — to ask what, in the world, such a painting is a painting of. The modern mind pretends it could only be a picture of "beliefs that have been held." But if we ask what works of art actually contain (as we pretend to do in an exemplary manner), 'beliefs' make a very peculiar answer. Such images are "not simply an indicative sign conveying information about a religious object, a revelation, a theological truth, a mystery of faith. It is an *embodiment* of that truth, ..."[67] Religious artists and artists of other sorts paint the world; every encounter with the works of art

---

63 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 75—76. As in the following: "The aesthetic attitude of percipience ... may help us to divert attention from the subject represented in a picture to the representation itself so that it becomes 'opaque' instead of transparent and we begin to attend to the work of art rather than the slice of external reality which it mirrors." Osborne, *Art of Appreciation* (1970), 45; 52.

64 Klepac, "Deconstruction in Contemporary Art" (1984), 262.

65 Iser, *Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978), 10.

66 Abrams, "Sociology of Modern Aesthetics" (1985), 23.

67 Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (1968), 12.

examined in the foregoing issued in an experience of reality that was no one's dogma. Perhaps those works misrepresent it; but that is the question the image asks.

The work of art is not the representation of a message. "Art history has begun to discover the problematic character of the very presuppostions with which it begins. For 'art' is not an obvious and unambiguous phenomenon that allows something to be identified as a work of art, but rather a mode of apprehension."[68] The work has meaning by virtue of being an image — just as do all images, even those not made by human beings. The concept of "the work of art" is only of use inside the project of determination, where it is vital, the fulcrum of all the leverage we need.[69] As we have seen throughout, both the rules of content need to be given practical purchase, and they can do so only through an identification of the object of interpretation. Carrier asks, "How do we identify the artwork? How may we choose between conflicting interpretations? What is the relation between an interpretation to the interpreter's goals?"[70] These are linked questions: the purpose of cognitive interpretation establishes standards of cognitivity, and they are rooted in the identification of the work. "We identify an artwork in relation to the artwriting describing that artifact."[71] The discipline is handed this power as if human beings had dominion over reality, but to establish *what a thing is* is surely a *responsible* activity, one that must pay attention to conditions that we do not set. It is one of the capacities of the things we call art to present reality. A painting or a sculpture is merely an image. The communicative triad (artist/work/interpreter) as an expression of the source of meaning is a reduction of the way in which art works. The artist uses the image and the power of the image to mean. As one of this country's great choreographers Jean-Pierre Perrault says of dance, "Ce sont des images — qu'on laisse parler."[72] To claim that such a view is too minimal to serve "the interpreter's goals" works only so long as those goals are determined by a subject-object philosophy, which lays the parameters of identification: through its identification, philosophy "limits the horizon of questions to a formal testing" in terms of criteria "and thereby dislocates the experience of the world that occurs" through art.[73] It is certainly true — one can get no hermeneutic limits out of so broad a characterization.

---

68 Gadamer, "Problematic Character of Aesthetic Consciousness" (1958), 34.

69 To talk about "the work itself" is to distance oneself from the experience of the image, in which something real is manifest. One cannot "abstract from life-references in order to grasp the work as itself. Rather it exists within them." Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 106, 108.

70 Carrier, *Artwriting* (1987), 136.

71 Ibid., 138.

72 The meaning of the image is not instituted; it comes from its "own content"; from its being "a structure with a signifying function of its own." Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 137. It is not the artist who speaks in the work, but the work that speaks for the artist. Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics" (1964), 95—96, 102.

73 Gadamer, "Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics" (1985), 191.

Linking interpretation with truth poses a huge problem for academic and professional life.[74] The postmodern phobia for truth is born of its sensitivity to institutionalized truth, but postmodernism is itself a paradigm of such an institution, in its systematic undermining of encounters with reality whose outcome is the experience of recognition, the recognition "That is the way it is." Gadamer talks about the not always beneficent "enchantment of love" in a poem by Catullus: "Granted that after all this one were to say: 'That's the way it is,' then one would have understood."[75] Rational modernity has virtually rooted these encounters out of cultural experience. The relativization of art — the understanding of art as linguistic, human, cultural expression — was the death blow in culture as a whole of the old relation to art, which has always been the encounter with reality. And the intimacy of the experience of art has always had a special potential for influencing independence of thought. An experience of reality arises in an individual relation to the spectator, who is addressed at a certain level of being. Whether it is that kind of experience that occurs certainly depends upon many things. The person's openness to it is fundamental. But so is the nature of both participants: the physical qualities of the work and the capacities of the spectator. Sedlmayr equates it with a specific affinity,[76] but the conditions are not so accidental and rare. Fundamentally it requires attention, for the work is a specifically formed construction which by virtue of its form presents its content (a man and woman are seen in a certain physical relation, presented in a certain atmosphere highly different between Friedrich and Munch; an undressed woman appears in a specific and familiar setting, with special features of poise and expression; and so on). This is how the comparison that Gadamer has made between art and rhetoric is to be understood. The manner of the presentation of reality in a given picture is comparable, in some sense, to the manner (in selection, stress, sequence, tone, ...) in which a case is presented by an orator. Rhetoric is a way of doing justice to the meaning of the facts; as the Roman theorist Quintilian wrote:

> Oratory fails of its full effect ... if the judge merely feels the facts on which he has to give his decision are being narrated to him, and not displayed in their living truth to the eyes of the mind.[77]

---

74 "Behind this thesis that belief is an inappropriate frame of mind in which to approach literature is the feeling that either there are no beliefs one can legitimately risk affirming, or that the belief-affirming modes of thought and expression have been hopelessly discredited." Graff, *Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (1979), 49.

75 Gadamer, "A Classical Text" (1981), 332.

76 "It is not possible for everyone to truly understand a work of art in this 'existential' manner. One must distinguish between a *genuine* recreation, which arises from an ultimate and deep affinity for particular works which is rooted in the individual person, and a merely *empathetic* recreation, which, though it may be thoroughly adequate, is rooted only in superficial levels of experience." Sedlmayr, "Probleme der Interpretation" (1958), 116.

77 Quintilian, *Instuitutio Oratoria*, trans. Butler (Cambridge 1966), 111, 245.

The work has the power to effect resonance with the truth only if its manner of presentation is truly faithful, by the judgement of the spectator, to the way things are. The usual comparisons made between rhetoric and propaganda do not apply here. "Effective propaganda must always try to influence initially the judgment of the person addressed and to restrict his possibilities of judgement."[78] "In speech there is an art of appearances and an art of true thought — sophistry and dialectic,"[79] and propaganda, faulty rhetoric, and false works of art all fail by Quintilian's standard to display the issue 'in its living truth'. There is usually some omission or distortion that the false work or the propaganda image wishes us to overlook but which, if we are critical in our approach to the work, we will not forget. If the work fails to present the world as we feel it should be seen — the most glaring failure of bad art (those impasto landscapes and cow-eyed children) — it will not have the capacity to effect an experience of the 'existential' sort. Or rather it will, but in the form of an existential rejection that delivers nothing new.

The nature of the experience at issue is not an experience of anyone's beliefs about reality, but an encounter with the world. When we face a work, anticipating meaning is often a presupposition

> that it really transmits to us the *truth*. This confirms that the primordial significance of the idea of understanding is that of 'knowing about something' and that only in a derivative sense does it mean understanding the intentions of another as personal opinions. Thus we come back to the original conditions of every hermeneutics: it must be a shared and comprehensible reference to the 'things in themselves'.[80]

What is at issue here is not the reality of any abstract conceptions of the work or its meaning, but the reality of what the work persuades us to experience. Through the appearance of what it depicts, a painting offers its material as a representation of its subject matter — a representation, but not merely of its form. A representation "belongs to the self-presentation" of its original.[81] If we experience the work in this way, our experience frequently involves reflecting upon, if not also deciding, whether this picture of reality is actual. It is, in so many words, an experience of truth, just as Gadamer has said. Munch's *Vampire* presents to us the ambivalence of loving, whose truth we face. We may indeed reject that conclusion, but doing so is no less of an encounter with reality. Manet's *Olympia* presents to us the plausibility (or implausibility) of a modern woman, a modern woman of

---

78 Gadamer, "Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" (1966), 11.

79 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 354.

80 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 46—47.

81 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 141. "The true symbol does not merely point to something else. It contains in itself a structure which awakens our consciousness to a new awareness of the inner meaning of life and reality itself." Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (1968), 1.

no stature, occupying the position of the Western tradition's highest beauties. We are confronted with an experience in which she does (or does not) carry her place; the truth of certain standards of beauty, certain notions of art, and of who such a woman is, is put to experience. The Indian artist's Kali presents to us a complex image of the self in relation to reality, and a dual conception of death that we may indeed never have considered, never have *encountered.* It would be absurd to suggest that the experience of one painting could decide whether such suggestions about these severe matters are true, but the experience of truth at issue here is not so much a matter of *end results,* deciding *whether,* as it is of *experiencing these suggestions fully against our concern for what they are about.* (A work of art does not necessarily "contribute to knowledge,"[82] and the sense in which it can has nothing to do with information.) This is the substance of Gadamer's distinction between "ratified knowledge" and knowledge of another sort. The cognition that science pursues is a knowledge that we can hand out, but the knowledge art secures is not a quantum: it is a thing that gets into us and changes our direction.

> The purpose of the symbol, if it can be said to have a 'purpose,' is not to increase the quantity of our knowledge and information, but to deepen and enrich the quality of life itself by bringing man into communion with the mysterious sources of vitality and meaning, of creativity, love, and truth, to which he cannot have direct access by means of science and technique.[83]

Theorists have mistaken this suggestion as faith in some predetermined whole in terms of which everything can be understood.[84] But to say that we understand in terms of reality is not to make any claim about the nature or the intersubjective unity of that reality. In the course of a life what is real *never* ceases to be at issue.

> Every experience is a confrontation, because every experience sets something new against something old and in every case it remains open in principle whether the new will prevail, i.e., will truly become experience, or whether the old, accustomed, predictable will be confirmed in the end.[85]

The work provokes its meaning, and those works that have the substance go beyond what we have already known; despite that, "the text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim that it is uttering something true."[86] The experience of encounter is not

---

82 Abell, "Toward a Unified Field" (1957), 735.

83 Merton, "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" (1968). 10.

84 Are we "entitled to infer that there *is* a whole, a totality of language, a context of contexts, an all-encompassing system, within which every provisional part and every provisional whole can be assigned its rightful place? Schleiermacher's answer is that the process is 'infinite', 'unending', and that we can only 'approximate' such a totality. There is none that can be assumed to be in place from the start." Margolis, "Schleiermacher Among the Theorists" (1987), 364.

85 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 6.

86 Ibid., 270.

merely an opportunity to reconfirm one's prior opinions about love, women, the self. To be truly challenged is to be given sufficient cause to hold one's prior views as somewhat less than certain, but that does not mean suspending or removing from consideration what we believe, because in forgetting oneself one still belongs to one's world.[87] The modern conception contains the bizarre form of hubris that the reality of the world, merely because it is the world as we see it, ought to be classed as a personal phenomenon.

> Receptivity is not acquired with an objectivist 'neutrality': it is neither possible, necessary, nor desirable that we put ourselves within brackets. The hermeneutical attitude supposes only that we self-consciously designate *our* opinions and prejudices and qualify them as such, and in so doing strip them of their extreme character. In keeping to this attitude we grant the text the opportunity to appear as an authentically different being and to manifest its own truth, over and against our own preconceived notions.[88]

It is the world that appears in an image, as it is or as it is not. The true image is the voice of the world. And it is the truth spoken that justifies an interpretation, if at such a moment it should still make sense to speak of justification.[89]

I don't foresee any change taking place in our views about art, as a culture. Art is in the position it is — something to be known, to be written and talked about — for good reason, and by its demonstrated tendencies postmodern thought does not appear to have the will to change this.

> From a postmodern perspective, I therefore abandon the search for truth that has characterized the traditional exercise of thinking in the Western world, in order to launch into a search for systems of perceptions and different forms of intelligibility.... The production of cartographies is different from the production of truth because each gaze invents its own meaning and indicates a possibility of understanding the territory. But no final origin or destination is arrived at. The possibilities of expression and representation are unlimited.[90]

The production of legitimate claims; the avoidance of truth claims; control of our own meaning; the entertainment of infinite possibilities. The strongest reason art is where the specialists have put it is that an encounter with truth is open-ended in an uncomfortable way. Contemporary theorists delight in talking about the "necessary incompleteness" of interpretation. All that is meant by this is their willingness to tolerate new interpretations, but the true open-endedness of an encounter (versus scientific results) is a more inherently uneasy thing.

---

87 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 113.
88 Gadamer, "Problem of Historical Consciousness" (1963), 44.
89 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 170.
90 Ivo Mesquita, "Cartographies," *Cartographies*, exh. cat. (Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1993), 23.

> A legitimate subjective response to art is a sense of concern (*Betroffnheit*). Concern is triggered by great works. Concern is not some repressed emotion in the recipient that is brought to the surface by art but a momentary discomfiture, more precisely a tremor (*Erschütterung*), during which he gives himself over to the work. He loses his footing, as it were, discovering that the truth embodied in the aesthetic image has real possibilities. ... To experience the truth or untruth of art is more than a subjective 'lived experience': it signals the breaking-through of objectivity into subjective consciousness. Objectivity mediates aesthetic experience even when the subjective response is at its most intense.[91]

The open-endedness of the encounter with truth involves a whole range of psychic phenomena that daily life labours to escape (for instance, the recognition that one has been pursuing a bankrupt activity, or that one is guilty of things one believed oneself above). Art has the potential to deliver these; that is what true open-endedness means. In scientific hermeneutics as in all science, the scientist is constantly protected; in a true relation with the other one is unprotected. In such a relation one may actually be forced to change — to change what one believes, to see the world differently, to open oneself to and face as a possibility what one has already dismissed as nonsense. Versus "the self-reassurance with which we close ourselves off from the conversation partner."[92]

It is finally the tendency of all human existence to avoid encounter with the truth (because the *implications* of the truth are also open-ended) that has successfully contained the experience of art, which requires a kind of participation that is unlike "the calm distance from which a middle-class educational consciousness takes satisfaction in its educational achievements."[93] Recognizing that interpretation is an event that does not belong in a scientific category would also tend to damage the economy of knowledge. The game we play with art — the commerce of information, the professionalization of hermeneutics — would be vastly diminished in importance beside the example of real encounter; the study of art would be rendered peripheral (which is its true and enduring value) to real interpretation, which would therefore be removed from specialist hands. The issue here is not whether historical information will continue to be valuable, but what project it is required for: science, which it continually justifies, or something that may genuinely choose to ignore it? Above all, what is to be resisted is the subversion through science of art to the stature of diversion, diversion now in a 'scientific' mode. Our grasp of reality has been diminished by the fact that "the primordial experiences that are transmitted through art"[94] have nothing to do with anything we learn about its meaning. Wittgenstein once wrote that

---

91 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1986), 346—47.

92 Gadamer, "Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics" (1985), 188. "The work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience changing the person experiencing it." Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 92.

93 Gadamer, "Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics" (1985), 178.

94 Ibid., 178.

> People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc. to give them pleasure. The idea *that these have something to teach them* — that does not occur to them.[95]

Science and scientific thought have never delivered even a grain of happiness. "In order to live happily, I must be in accord with the world. This is what is called 'to be happy'."[96] A condition of that is knowing how the world is in relation to human beings.[97] The arts in the modern world stand "under the alien control"[98] of a philosophy and an endeavour involved in "knowledge of knowledge," an endeavour that serves nothing — neither interpreter nor work — but a profession. Interpretation demands that one face what one believes, and that would utterly transform the present traffic of detached discussions of the meaning of art. The theory of objectivity is highly reasonable, but it bears a profound weakness, the weakness of favouring a relation to its chosen scientific 'objects' that allows us to master phenomena, and that contradicts a relation we necessarily adopt all the time in the hermeneutic conduct of life. "The primordial dialogue of the human experience of the world is irreducible."[99] Thus when Gadamer asks "Do we need to justify what has always supported us?"[100] he is not expressing a distaste for epistemology, nor is he claiming that the humanities are sane,[101] but stating that the claim of philosophy to have located in its theory the conditions of knowledge, our basic relation to the world we know, is spurious. What belongs, in that way, to "reality itself" philosophy has managed to discredit as "a limiting prejudice."[102]

That the culture will give up a game of knowledge that serves its system well, a business that also blots out the irritating sound of what we prefer not to hear, asks more than my small-scale optimism is prepared for, which is just this: that an individual might drop the psychic burden and the blinders that the philosophical scientists have fit them with, and go out on their own feet with no sense of intellectual shame.

---

95 As evidence of the first claim, see Osborne, *Art of Appreciation* (1970), 3, 19, 31. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. P. Winch (Chicago 1980).

96 Wittgenstein, *Notebooks;* Barrett, "(Ethics and Aesthetics Are One)" (1984), 19.

97 I was in this sense, I believe, that Wittgenstein said "The solution to scientific questions is for me, fundamentally, a matter of indifference; but other questions are not." Barrett, "(Ethics and Aesthetics Are One)" (1984), 22 n. 10.

98 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 303.

99 Gadamer, "Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics" (1985), 178.

100 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), xxiv.

101 "As a thinker I just wanted to propose a better understanding of what we are doing in the humanities," but only when "subordinating both our scientific contribution to the cultural heritage and academic education to a more fundamental project": allowing works of art to "speak to us," in "an understanding that is not a matter of mastering matters by information." Gadamer, "A Model of the Human Sciences" (1980), 78, 83, 85.

102 Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (1960), 245—46.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Substantive literature on the works of art discussed is listed separately below, under Historiographic Works. Texts have been cited throughout with their original dates of appearance (noted here in the margin), a practice followed so as to indicate the temporal scope of the cited positions. Citations from titles listed in other than English have been translated by the author.

THEORETICAL WORKS

ABELL, Walter
1957 "Toward a Unified Field in Critical Studies." In *The Sociology of Art and Literature: A Reader*, ed. M.C. Albrecht, J.H. Barnett, and M. Griff, 724—36. New York: Praeger, 1970.

ABRAMS, M.H.
1985 "Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics." *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.* XXXVIII (March): 8—33.

ACKERMAN, James S.
1958 "On American Scholarship in the Arts." *College Art Journal* XVII:4 (summer): 357—62.

1960 "Art History and the Problems of Criticism." In *The Visual Arts Today*, ed. G. Kepes, 257—67. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University.

ADORNO, T.W.
1986 *Aesthetic Theory*. Ed. G. Adorno, R. Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt. London: Routledge.

ALDRICH, Virgil
1975 "Pictures and Persons — An Analogy." *Review of Metaphysics* XXVIII:4 (June): 599—610.

ALPERS, Svetlana, and Paul ALPERS
1972 "Ut Pictura Noesis? Criticism in Literary Studies and Art History." *New Literary History* III:3 (spring): 437—53.

ANTAL, Frederick
1973 "Remarks on the Method of Art-history." In *Classicism and Romanticism, with Other Studies in Art History*, 175—89. New York: Icon.

ARGAN, Giulio Carlo
1975 "Ideology and Iconology." Trans. R. West. *Critical Inquiry* II:2 (winter): 297—305.

BAKOS, Ján
1983 "The Vienna School's Views of the Structure of the Art Historical Process." In *Wien und die Entwicklung der kunsthistorischen Methode*, 117—22. Vienna: Internationaler Kongress für Kunstgeschichte CIHA.

BAL, Mieke
1991 *Reading 'Rembrandt': Beyond the Word-Image Opposition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University

BALDWIN, Michael, Charles HARRISON, and Mel RAMSDEN
1981 "Art History, Art Criticism, and Explanation." *Art History* IV:4 (December): 432—56.

BARNES, Annette
1983 "Some Remarks about the Obvious." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XLI:3 (spring): 278—88.

BARRETT, C.
1984 "(Ethics and Aesthetics Are One)." In *Aesthetics: Proceedings of the 8th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, I, ed. R. Haller, 17—21. Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky.

BÄTSCHMANN, Oskar
1984 *Einführung in die kunstgeschichtliche Hermeneutik: die Auslegung von Bildern.* Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

BAXANDALL, Michael
1979 "The Language of Art History." *New Literary History* X:3 (spring): 453—65.

1980 *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany.* New Haven: Yale.

1985 *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures.* New Haven: Yale University.

BEARDSLEY, Monroe C.
1958 *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism.* New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World.

1966 "The Limits of Critical Interpretation." In *The Aesthetic Point of View: Selected Essays*, ed. M.J. Wreen and D.J. Callen, 165—87. Ithaca: Cornell, 1982.

BERNSTEIN, Richard J.
1982 "From Hermeneutics to Praxis." In *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. B.R. Wachterhauser, 87—110. Albany: SUNY, 1986.

BETTI, Emilio
1955 "The Epistemological Problem of Understanding As an Aspect of the General Problem of Knowing." Trans. S. Noakes. In *Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects*, ed. Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica, 25—53. Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1984.
Excerpt from Betti's *Teoria generale della interpretazione*

1962 "Hermeneutics as the General Methodology of the Geisteswissenschaften." Trans. J. Bleicher. In *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique*, ed. Josef Bleicher, 51—94. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

BIALOSTOCKI, Jan
1963 "Iconography and Iconology." *Encyclopedia of World Art* VII: 769—86.

BLEICHER, Josef, ed.
1980 *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy, and Critique.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

BRYSON, Norman
1983 *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*. New Haven: Yale University.

1989 Review of Roskill. *Art Bulletin* LXXI:4 (December): 704—07.

BUBER, Martin
1923 *I and Thou*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Scribner's, 1970.

BUBNER, Rüdiger
1981 *Modern German Philosophy*. Trans. E. Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

BÜRGER, Peter
1991 "Aporias of Modern Aesthetics." In *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, ed. A. Benjamin and P. Osborne. London: Institute of Contemporary Arts.

BURKE, Peter
1982 Review of Gombrich, *Ideals and Idols*. *Burlington Magazine* 947 (February): 107.

CARR, David
1979 "Interpretation and Self-evidence." *Analecta Husserliana* IX: 133—47.

CARRIER, David
1983 Review of Podro. *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XLII:1 (fall): 94—96.

1987 *Artwriting*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts.

1987 "Ekphrasis and Interpretation: Two Modes of Art History Writing." *British Journal of Aesthetics* XXVII (winter): 20—31.

1989 "Erwin Panofsky, Leo Steinberg, David Carrier: The Problem of Objectivity in Art-Historical Interpretation." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXVII (fall): 333—47.

CAUMANN, Samuel
1944 "The Science of Art History." *College Art Journal* IV (November): 23—32.

CLARK, Kenneth
1973 "Conversation with Kenneth Clark: The Museum's Duty, the Uses of Art History, the Education of the Eye." *Artnews* LXXII: 8 (October): 13—16.

CUNNINGHAM, G. Watts
1935 "Perspective and Context in the Meaning-Situation." *University of California Publications in Philosophy* XVI (1932—53): 29—53.

DANTO, Arthur C.
1981 *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University.

1985 "Discoveries in Perspective" (review of Holly). *Times Literary Supplement* (2 August): 842.

1986 *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*. New York: Columbia.

1987 "Interruptions in Progress" (review). *Times Literary Supplement* (18—24 September): 1015.

1988 "Old, New, and Not So New Art History." In *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, ed. Philip Alperson, 530—32. New York: Oxford University, 1992.

DAVEY, Nicholas
1986 "Nietzsche's Aesthetics and the Question of Hermeneutic Interpretation." *British Journal of Aesthetics* XXVI:4 (autumn): 328—44.

DAVIES, S.
1982 "Aesthetic Relevance of Authors' and Painters' Intentions." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XLI:1 (fall): 65—76.

DUVE, Thierry de
1983 "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue." *Artforum* XXII:1 (September): 30—37.

ELKINS, James
1988 "Art History Without Theory." *Critical Inquiry* XIV:2 (winter): 254—378.

ECO, Umberto
1992 "Interpretation and History." In *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini, 23—43. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

1992 "Overinterpreting Texts." In *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini, 45—66. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

ERICSSON, Lars O.
1992 "Rhetoric as Textuality." In *Stillstand switches*, ed. H. Lux and P. Ursprung. Zurich: Shedhalle.

FORSTER, Kurt W
1972 "Critical History of Art, or Transfiguration of Values?" *New Literary History* III:3 (spring): 459—70.

FRY, Roger
1933 *Art History as an Academic Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University. Reprint ed. Folcroft Library Editions, 1977.

GADAMER, Hans-Georg
1958 "On the Problematic Character of Aesthetic Consciousness." Trans. E. Kelly. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* IX:1 (winter 1982): 31—40.

1960 *Truth and Method* [Fundamentals of a Philosophical Hermeneutics], 2d ed. [1965]. New York: Crossroad, 1982.

1962 "The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century." In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. D.E. Linge, 107—29. Berkeley: University of California, 1976.

1963 "The Problem of Historical Consciousness." Trans. J.L. Close. *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* V:1 (fall 1975): 1—52.

1964 "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics." In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. D.E. Linge, 95—104. Berkeley: University of California, 1976.

1966 "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem." In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. D.E. Linge, 3—17. Berkeley: University of California, 1976.

1972 "Semantics and Hermeneutics." In *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. D.E. Linge, 82—94. Berkeley: University of California, 1976.

1981 "A Classical Text — A Hermeneutic Challenge." Trans. F. Lawrence. In *Contemporary Literary Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Classical Texts*, ed. S. Kresic, 327—32. Ottawa: University of Ottawa.

1985 "On the Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics." Trans. R.R. Sullivan. In *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, 177—93. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.

GLUECK, Grace
1987 "Clashing Views Reshape Art History." *New York Times* (20 December).

GOMBRICH, E.H.
1948 "Icones Symbolicae: Philosophies of Symbolism and Their Bearing on Art." In *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, II, 2d ed., 123—95. London: Phaidon, 1978.

1957 "Art and Scholarship." *College Art Journal* XVII:4 (summer 1958): 342—56.

1969 *In Search of Cultural History*. Oxford: Phaidon.

1972 "Aims and Limits of Iconology." In *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, II, 2d ed., 1—25. London: Phaidon, 1978.

1973 "Art History and the Social Sciences." In *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and in Art*, 131ff. Oxford: Phaidon, 1979.

1973 "Research in the Humanities: Ideals and Idols." In *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and in Art*, 112—22. Oxford: Phaidon, 1979.

1974 "Conversation with E.H. Gombrich: The Museum's Mission, the Enjoyment of Art, the Problem of Critics." *Artnews* LXXIII: 1 (January): 54—57.

1975 "Reason and Feeling in the Study of Art." In *Ideals and Idols: Essays on Values in History and in Art*, 205—07. Oxford: Phaidon, 1979.

1981 "Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionalism in Pictorial Representation." In *Image and Code*, ed. W. Steiner, 11—42. Ann Arbor: Michigan Studies in the Humanities.

GRAFF, Gerald
1979 *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

GREENHALGH, Michael, and Paul DURO
1992 *Essential Art History*. London.

GRIGG, Robert
1987 "Flemish Realism and Allegorical Interpretation." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XLVI:2 (winter): 299—300.

HABERMAS, Jürgen
1981 *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Trans. T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon.

HAMPSHIRE, Stuart
1964 "Types of Interpretation." In *Art and Philosophy: A Symposium*, ed. S. Hook, 101—08. New York: New York University, 1966.

HARRISON, Andrew
1985 "Bridges in Time" (review of Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*). *Times Literary Supplement* (6 December): 1384.

HARRISON, Charles
1991 "'Seeing' and 'Describing': The Artist's Studio." *Essays on Art and Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

HART, Joan
1982 "Reinterpreting Wölfflin: Neo-Kantianism and Hermeneutics." *Art Journal* XLII:4 (winter): 292—300.

HASENMUELLER, Christine "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art*

1978 *Criticism* XXXVI:3 (spring): 289—301.

HAUSER, Arnold. 1958 *The Philosophy of Art History*. New York: Knopf.

HEGEL, G.W.F. *Aesthetics: Lecures on the Fine Arts*. Trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University, 1975.

HIRSCH, Jr., E.D. 1967 *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University.

1976 "Three Dimensions of Hermeneutics." In *On Literary Intention*, ed. David Newton-de Molina, 194—209, 269. Edinburgh.

HOFSTADTER, Albert 1964 "Significance and Artistic Meaning." In *Art and Philosophy: A Symposium*, ed. S. Hook, 88—100. New York: New York University, 1966.

HOLLY, Michael Ann 1984 *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*. Ithaca: Cornell University.

HYDE, Sarah, and Greg SMITH 1987 Review. *Oxford Art Journal* X:2: 107—11.

ISER, Wolfgang *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. Baltimore: Johns 1978 Hopkins University.

JACKSON, J.R. 1989 *Historical Criticism and the Meaning of Texts*. London: Routledge.

JONES, Peter 1969 "Understanding a Work of Art." *British Journal of Aesthetics* IX:2 (April): 128--44.

JUHL, P.D. 1980 *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literary Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University.

KAUFMANN, Thomas Dacosta 1988 "What is 'New' About the 'New Art History'." In *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*, ed. Philip Alperson, 530—32. New York: Oxford University, 1992.

KEMP, Martin 1984 "Seeing and Signs: E.H. Gombrich in Retrospect." *Art History* VII:2 (June): 228—43.

1984 "The Taking and Use of Evidence; With a Botticellian Case Study." *Art Journal* (fall): 207—15.

KLEINBAUER, Eugene 1982 *Research Guide to the History of Western Art. Sources of Information in the Humanities*, ed. T.P. Slavens, II. Chicago: American Library Assoc.

KLEPAC, Walter 1984 "The Order of Words, the Order of Things: Deconstruction in Contemporary Art." In *Sight Lines: Reading Contemporary Canadian Art*, ed. Jessica Bradley and Lesley Johnstone, 249—73. Montréal: Artextes Editions, 1994.

KUSPIT, Donald "Traditional Art History's Complaint Against the Linguistic Analysis of

1987 Visual Art." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XLV:4 (summer): 345—49.

LEVINSON, J. 1979 "Defining Art Historically." *British Journal of Aesthetics* XIX:3 (summer): 232—50.

LOHNER, Edgar 1968 "The Intrinsic Method: Some Reconsiderations." In *The Disciplines of Criticism*, ed. P. Demetz, T. Greene, and L. Nelson, Jr., 147—72. New Haven: Yale University.

LYAS, Colin 1983 "Anything Goes: The Intentional Fallacy Revisited." *British Journal of Aesthetics* XXIII:4 (autumn): 291—305.

LYOTARD, Jean-François 1979 *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984.

MANNINGS, David 1973 "Panofsky and the Interpretation of Pictures." *British Journal of Aesthetics* XIII:2 (spring): 146—62.

MARGOLIS, Joseph 1985 "How to Theorize about Texts at the Present Time: Deconstruction and Its Victims." In *The Reasons of Art*, ed. P. McCormick, 198—211. Ottawa: University of Ottawa.

1987 "Schleiermacher Among the Theorists of Language and Interpretation." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XLIV:4 (summer): 361—68.

MARIN, Louis 1971 "Comment lire un tableau?" In *Études semiologiques: Écritures. Peintures.* Paris: Klincksieck.

MATTHEWS, Robert J. 1977 "Describing and Interpreting a Work of Art." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXXVI:1 (fall): 5—14.

McCORKEL, Christine 1975 "Sense and Sensibility: An Epistemological Approach to the Philosophy of Art History." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXXIV:1 (fall): 35—50.

McFEE, Graham 1980 "The Historicity of Art." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXXVIII:3 (spring): 307—24.

MERTON, Thomas 1968 "Symbolism: Communication or Communion?" *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 20 (1968): 1—15.

MORSTEIN, Petra Von 1975 "Understanding Works of Art: Universality, Unity, and Uniqueness." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXXIV:1 (fall): 35—50.

MUELLER-VOLLMER, Kurt 1985 "Introduction — Language, Mind, and Artifact: An Outline of Hermeneutic Theory Since the Enlightenment." In *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German Tradition from the Enlightenment to the Present*, ed. K. Mueller-Vollmer, 1—53. New York: Continuum.

NEUMEYER, Alfred 1956 "Art History: Victory Without Trumpet." In *Frontiers of Knowledge in the Study of Man*, ed. L. White, Jr., 178—93. New York: Harper.

NEWTON, Eric "Art and Communication." In *Aesthetics in the Modern World*, ed. H. Osborne,

1960 321—39. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968.

NODELMAN, Sheldon "Structural Analysis in Art and Anthropology." In *Structuralism*, ed. J.Ehrmann,
1970 79—93. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday/Anchor.

NORDENSTAM, Tore *Explanation and Understanding in the History of Art.* Filosofisk Institutts
1978 Stensilserie, no. 43. Bergen: Universitetet i Bergen.

OSBORNE, Harold *The Art of Appreciation.* London: Oxford University.
1970

1986 "Interpretation in Science and in Art." *British Journal of Aesthetics.*
XXVI (winter): 3—15.

PANOFSKY, Erwin "The Concept of Artistic Volition." Trans. K.J. Northcott and J. Snyder.
1920 *Critical Inquiry* VIII:1 (autumn 1981): 17—33.

1939 "Blind Cupid." In *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance*, 95—128. New York: Icon, 1972.

1940 "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline." In *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History*, 1—25. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1955.

1953 "Three Decades of Art History in the United States: Impressions of a Transplanted European." In *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 321—46. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1955.

1955 "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art." In *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, 26—54. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1955.
A later version of this essay than published in the Icon edition.

PASSMORE, John "History of Art and History of Literature: A Commentary." *New Literary*
1972 *History* III:3 (spring): 575—87.

PODRO, Michael *The Critical Historians of Art.* New Haven: Yale University.
1982

1982 Review of Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects. Burlington Magazine* 947 (February): 100—02.

PONTYNEN, Arthur "A *Winter Landscape:* Reflections on the Theory and Practice of Art History."
1986 *Art Bulletin* LXVIII:3 (September): 467—79.

POTTS, Alex "Difficult Meanings" (review of Bryson, *Vision and Painting*).
1987 *Burlington Magazine* CXXIX (January): 29—32.

PREZIOSI, Donald *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science.* New Haven: Yale
1989 University.

PUTTFARKEN, Thomas "Causes and Circumstances" (review of Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of*
1981 *Renaissance Germany, 1475—1525*). *Art History* IV:4 (December): 479—83.

RADFORD, M.A. "Meaning and Significance in Aesthetic Education." *Journal of Aesthetic*

1992 *Education* XXVI:1 (spring 1992): 53—66.

RICOEUR, Paul
1952 "Objectivity and Subjectivity in History." In *History and Truth*, trans. C.A. Kelbley, 21—40. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1965.

RORTY, Richard
1979 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University.

1985 "Texts and Lumps." *New Literary History* XVII:1 (autumn): 1—16.

1992 "The Pragmatist's Process." In *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini, 89—108. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

ROSAND, David
1974 "Art History and Criticism: The Past as Present." *New Literary History* V (spring): 435—45.

ROSKILL, Mark
1989 *The Interpretation of Pictures*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts.

SALERNO, Luigi
1963 "Historiography." *Encyclopedia of World Art* VII: 507—34.

SAXL, Fritz
1948 "Why Art History?" In *Lectures*, I, 345—57. London: Warburg Institute, 1957.

SCHAPIRO, Meyer
1968 "La nature mort comme objet personnel." *Macula* 3/4 (1978): 6—10.

SCHOR, Naomi
1980 "Fiction as Interpretation; Interpretation as Fiction." In *The Reader in the Text*, ed. S.R. Suleiman and I. Crosman. Princeton: Princeton University.

SEDLMAYR, Hans
1958 "Probleme der Interpretation." In *Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, 96—132. Mittenwald: Mäander, 1978.

1958 "Das Problem der Wahrheit." In *Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, 153—63. Mittenwald: Mäander, 1978.

1958 "Das Problem der Zeit." In *Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, 164—80. Mittenwald: Mäander, 1978.

1958 "Zwei Beispiele zur Interpretation." In *Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, 133—52. Mittenwald: Mäander, 1978.

1965 "Über das Interpretieren von Werken der bildenden Kunst." In *Zur Theorie und Methode der Kunstgeschichte*, 181—97. Mittenwald: Mäander, 1978.

SEERVELD, Calvin
1987 "Promise for Art Historiography." Canadian Society for Aesthetics, c. 1987.

SEZNEC, Jean
1972 "Art and Literature: A Plea for Humility." *New Literary History* III:3 (spring): 569—74.

SHEARMAN, John *Only Connect ... (Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance).*

1988 — A.W. Mellon Lectures in Fine Art, 1988. Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1992.

SHIFF, Richard 1988 — "Art History and the Nineteenth Century: Realism and Resistance." *Art Bulletin* LXVI:1 (March): 25—48.

SKJERVHEIM, Hans 1974 — "Objectivism and the Study of Man." *Inquiry* XVII: 265—302.

SKUBISZEWSKI, Piotr 1973 — "Les deux approches principales en l'histoire de l'art." *Actas del XXIII Congreso Internacional de Historia del Arte*, 607—21. Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1978.

SMITH, Paul 1987 — "Pictures and History: One Man's Truth." *Oxford Art Journal* X:2: 97—105.

SONTAG, Susan 1967 — *Against Interpretation.* New York: Delta.

STECKER, Robert 1987 — "Pettersson on Incompatible Interpretations." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XLVI:2 (winter): 300—02.

STEINER, George 1985 — "Viewpoint: A New Meaning of Meaning." *Times Literary Supplement* (8 November): 1262.

STERN, Laurent 1980 — "On Interpreting." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* XXXIX: 2 (winter): 119—29.

STOUT, Jeffrey 1982 — "What is the Meaning of a Text?" *New Literary History* XIV:1 (autumn): 1—12.

1986 — "The Relativity of Interpretation." *Monist* LXIX:1 (January): 103—18.

SUMMERS, David 1981 — "Conventions in the History of Art." *New Literary History* XIII:1: 103—25.

1982 — "The 'Visual Arts' and the Problem of Art Historical Description." *Art Journal* XLII:4 (winter): 301—10.

1986 — "Painting in Political Context."*Times Literary Supplement* (23 May): 570.

TAGUIEV, Pierre 1979 — "Philosophie et peinture," *Opus International* 72 (spring): 48—57.

VATTIMO, Gianni 1986 — "Hermeneutics and Nihilism: An Apology for Aesthetic Consciousness." In *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice Raymond Wachterhauser, 446—59. Albany: SUNY.

VENTURI, Lionello 1964 — *History of Art Criticism.* Rev. ed, trans. C. Marriott. New York: Dutton.

WALKER, John A. 1980 — "Art History Versus Philosophy: The Enigma of the 'Old Shoes'." *Block* 2: 14—23.

WATNEY, Simon 1984 "Modernist Studies: The Class of '83." *Art History* VII:1 (March): 102-–10.

WEITZ, Morris 1973 "Interpretation and the Visual Arts." *Theoria* XXXIX: 101—12.

WIMSATT, William K. 1968 "Genesis: A Fallacy Revisited." In *The Disciplines of Criticism*, ed. P. Demetz, T. Greene, and L. Nelson, Jr., 193—225. New Haven: Yale University.

WIMSATT, William K., and Monroe C. BEARDSLEY 1945 "The Intentional Fallacy." In *On Literary Intention*, ed. David Newton-de Molina. Edinburgh, 1974. 1—13, 257.

WIND, Edgar 1936 "Some Points of Contact Between History and Science." In *Philosophy and History: Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, ed. R. Klibansky and H.J. Paton, 255—64. New York: Harper, 1963.

WOLLHEIM, Richard 1957 "Sociological Explanation of the Arts: Some Distinctions." In *Proceedings of the Third International Congress on Aesthetics*, Venice. Turin: Rivista di estetica, Istituto di estetica dell'Universita di Torino.

1980 *Art and Its Objects*. 2d ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

1983 "The Material and the Meaningful" (review of Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Regime*). *Times Literary Supplement* (13 May): 477.

1984 *Painting as an Art*. A.W. Mellon Lectures in Fine Art, 1984. Princeton: Princeton University, 1987.

1986 "Fixing the Visual Field" (review of Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art*). *Times Literary Supplement* (28 March): 327.

ZERI, Federico 1987 *Behind the Image: The Art of Reading Paintings*. Trans. N. Rootes. London: Heinemann, 1990.

ZERNER, Henri "Editor's Statement: The Crisis in the Discipline." *Art Journal* XLII:4 1982 (winter): 279.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC WORKS

BOTTICELLI

ETTLINGER, L.D., and Helen ETTLINGER 1976 *Botticelli*. London: Thames and Hudson.

FRANCASTEL, Pierre 1952 "La fête mythologique au quattrocento: expression littéraire et visualisation plastique." *Revue de l'esthétique* V: 276ff.

GOMBRICH, E.H.
1945 "Botticelli's Mythologies: A Study in the Neo-Platonic Symbolism of His Circle." In *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance*, II, 2d ed., 30—81. London: Phaidon, 1978.

LEVEY, Michael
1960 "Botticelli and Nineteenth-century England." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* XXIII: 3—4.

LIGHTBOWN, Ronald
1989 *Sandro Botticelli: Life and Work*. 2d ed. New York.

PANOFSKY, Erwin
1960 *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*. New York: Harper.

STREETER, A.
1907 *Botticelli*. London.

WIND, Edgar
1958 "Botticelli's Primavera." In *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, 100—60. London.

FRIEDRICH

BÖRSCH-SUPAN, Helmut, and Karl Wilhelm JÄHNIG
1973 *Caspar David Friedrich: Gemälde, Druckgraphik und bildmässige Zeichnungen*. Munich.

KOERNER, Joseph Leo
1990 *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University.

REWALD, Sabine, ed.
1990 *The Romantic Vision of Caspar David Friedrich: Paintings and Drawings from the USSR*. Exh. cat., New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

VAUGHAN, William, Helmut BÖRSCH-SUPAN, and Hans Joachim NEIDHARDT
1972 *Caspar David Friedrich, 1774—1840*. Exh. cat., London: Tate Gallery.

WOLLHEIM, Richard
1984 *Painting as an Art*. Princeton: Princeton University, 1987.

ZERNER, Henri, and Charles ROSEN
1984 *Romanticism and Realism: The Myth of Nineteenth Century Art*. New York: Viking.

HELLENISTIC SCULPTURE

BIEBER, Margarete
1955 *The Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age*, 82—83. New York: Columbia University.

BURKERT, Walter
1985 *Greek Religion*. Trans. J. Raffan. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University.

ONIANS, John
1979 *Art and Thought in the Hellenistic Age: The Greek World View, 350—50 B.C.* London: Thames and Hudson.

INDIAN MINIATURE

AGRAWALA, Prithvi K.
1983 *Mithuna: The Male—Female Symbol in Indian Art and Thought.* New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.

COOMARASWAMY, Ananda K.
1915 "What Has India Contributed to Human Welfare?" In *The Dance of Siva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture:* 1—17. New York: Dover, 1985.

FRÉDÉRIC, Louis
1987 *Dictionnaire de la Civilisation Indienne.* Paris: Robert Laffont.

HAWLEY, John Stratton, and Donna Marie WULFF, eds.
1986 *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India.* Boston: Beacon.

HOPKINS, Thomas J.
1971 *The Hindu Religious Tradition.* Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.

KINSLEY, David
1975 *The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krsna.* Berkeley: University of California.

1986 "Blood and Death Out of Place: Reflections on the Goddess Kali." In *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, ed. J.S. Hawley and D.M. Wulff, 144—52. Boston: Beacon.

1986 *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition.* Berkeley: University of California.

MOOKERJEE, Ajit
1971 *Tantra Asana: A Way to Self-realization.* New York: Wittenborn.

1988 *Kali: The Feminine Force.* New York: Destiny.

MOOKERJEE, Ajit, and Madhu KHANNA
1977 *The Tantric Way: Art, Science, Ritual.* London: Thames and Hudson.

RADHAKRISHNAN, Sarvepalli
1926 *The Hindu View of Life.* London: Allen and Unwin, 1956.

VIMALANANDA-SVAMI
c. 1900 Commentary on "Hymn to Kali." In *Hymns to the Goddess and Hymn to Kali*, ed. and tr. Sir J. Woodroffe. Wilmot, Wi.: Lotus Light, 1981.

WOODROFFE, Sir John
1922 *The Garland of Letters: Studies in the Mantra-Sastra.* 8th ed. Pondicherry: Ganesh, 1985.

c. 1922 Notes to "Hymn to Kali." In *Hymns to the Goddess and Hymn to Kali*, ed. and tr. Sir J. Woodroffe. Wilmot, Wi.: Lotus Light, 1981.

ZAEHNER, R.C. 1962 — *Hinduism.* London: Oxford, 1971.

1966 — *Hindu Scriptures.* Trans. R.C. Zaehner. London: Dent.

ZIMMER, Heinrich 1960 — "The Symbolism of the Lotus." In *The Art of Indian Asia,* 2d ed., Bollingen Series XXXIX, I, 158—230. Princeton: Princeton University.

MANET

CACHIN, Françoise 1983 — *Olympia* entry. In *Manet, 1832—1883,* Françoise Cachin and Charles S. Moffett. Exh. cat., New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York: Abrams.

CLARK, T.J. 1980 — "Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of *Olympia* in 1865." *Screen* XXI:1 (spring): 18—41.

1984 — "Olympia's Choice." In *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers,* 79—146. New York: Knopf, 1985.

FER, Briony 1993 — Introduction. *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century.* New Haven: Yale University.

MUNCH

EGGUM, Arne 1984 — *Edvard Munch: Paintings, Sketches, and Studies.* Trans. R. Christophersen. Oslo: J.M. Stenersens.

HELLER, Reinhold 1985 — *Munch — His Life and Work.* Chicago.

LIEBERMAN, William S. 1969 — "Edvard Munch as a Printmaker." In *Edvard Munch: Lithographs, Etchings, Woodcuts.* Exh. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

LOS ANGELES 1969 — *Edvard Munch: Lithographs, Etchings, Woodcuts.* Exh. cat., Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

ROSENBLUM, Robert 1978 — "Edvard Munch: Some Changing Contexts." In *Edvard Munch: Symbols and Images.* Exh. cat., Washington: National Gallery of Art.

SCHNEEDE, Uwe M. 1988 — *Edvard Munch: The Early Masterpieces.* New York: W.W. Norton.

PICASSO

ARNHEIM, Rudolf 1962 — *Picasso's Guernica: The Genesis of a Painting.* Berkeley: University of California.

BLUNT, Anthony
1969 *Picasso's Guernica*. Oxford: Oxford University

CHIPP, Herschel B.
1988 *Picasso's* Guernica: *History, Transformations, Meanings*. Berkeley: University of California.

FISCH, Eberhard
1988 *"Guernica" by Picasso: A Study of the Picture and Its Context*. Trans. J. Hotchkiss. London: Associated University Presses.

NEWTON, Eric
1960 "Art and Communication." In *Aesthetics in the Modern World*, ed. H. Osborne, 321—29. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968.

OPPLER, Ellen, ed.
1988 *Picasso's Guernica*. New York: W.W. Norton.

RUSSELL, Frank D.
1980 *Picasso's Guernica: The Labyrinth of Narrative and Vision*. London: Thames and Hudson.

REMBRANDT

GOWING, Lawrence
1988 "Rembrandt in Bereavement." *Times Literary Supplement* (July 1—7): 732, 741.

SCHWARTZ, Gary
1984 *Rembrandt: His Life, His Paintings*. Harmondsworth: Viking, 1985.

VERONESE

HOPE, Charles
1985 "Veronese and the Venetian Tradition of Allegory." *Proceedings of the British Academy, London* LXXI: 389—428.

REARICK, William R.
1988 *The Art of Paolo Veronese: Veronese, 1528—1588*. Exh. cat., Washington: National Gallery of Art. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

WATSON, Peter
1989 *Wisdom and Strength: The Biography of a Renaissance Masterpiece*. New York: Doubleday.

WIND, Edgar
1958 "Virtue Reconciled with Pleasure." In *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*. London.

ZERI, Federico, and Elizabeth E. GARDNER
1973 *Italian Paintings: A Catalogue of the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Venetian School*, 84—87. New York.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

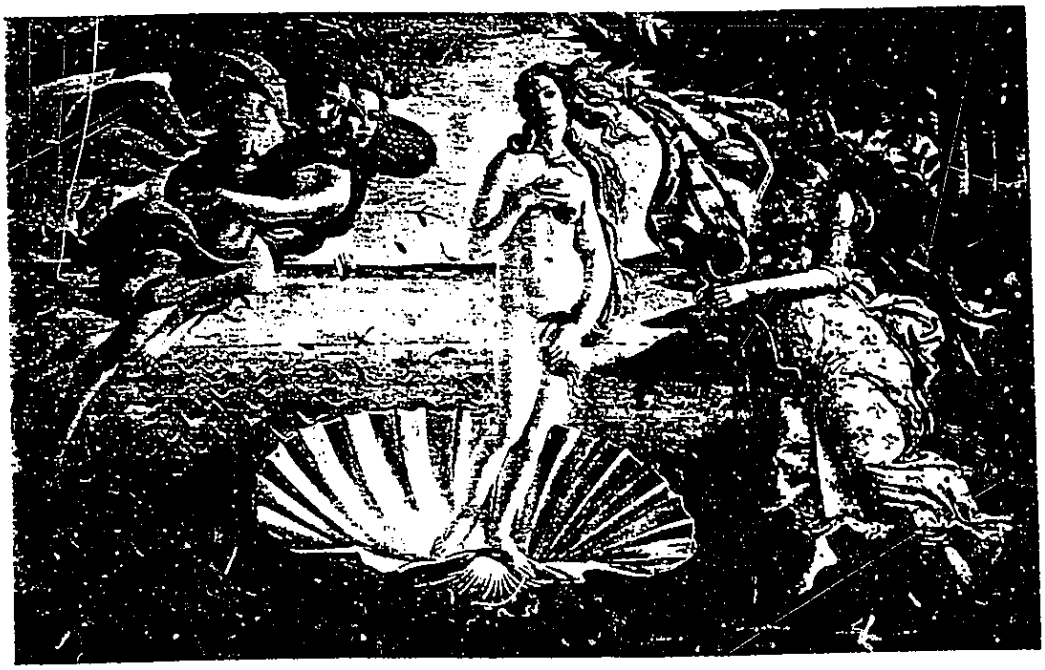


Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12

Figure 13

Figure 14

Figure 15

Figure 16

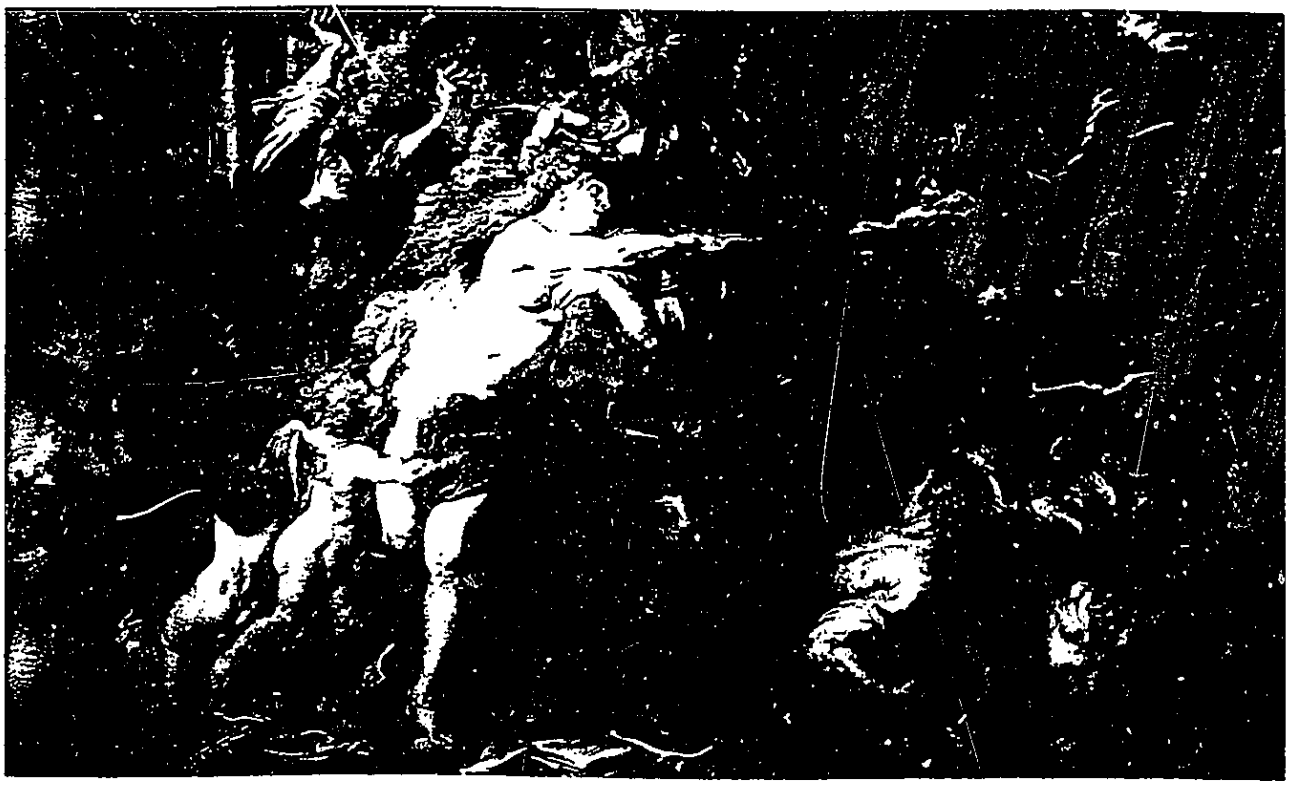


Figure 17

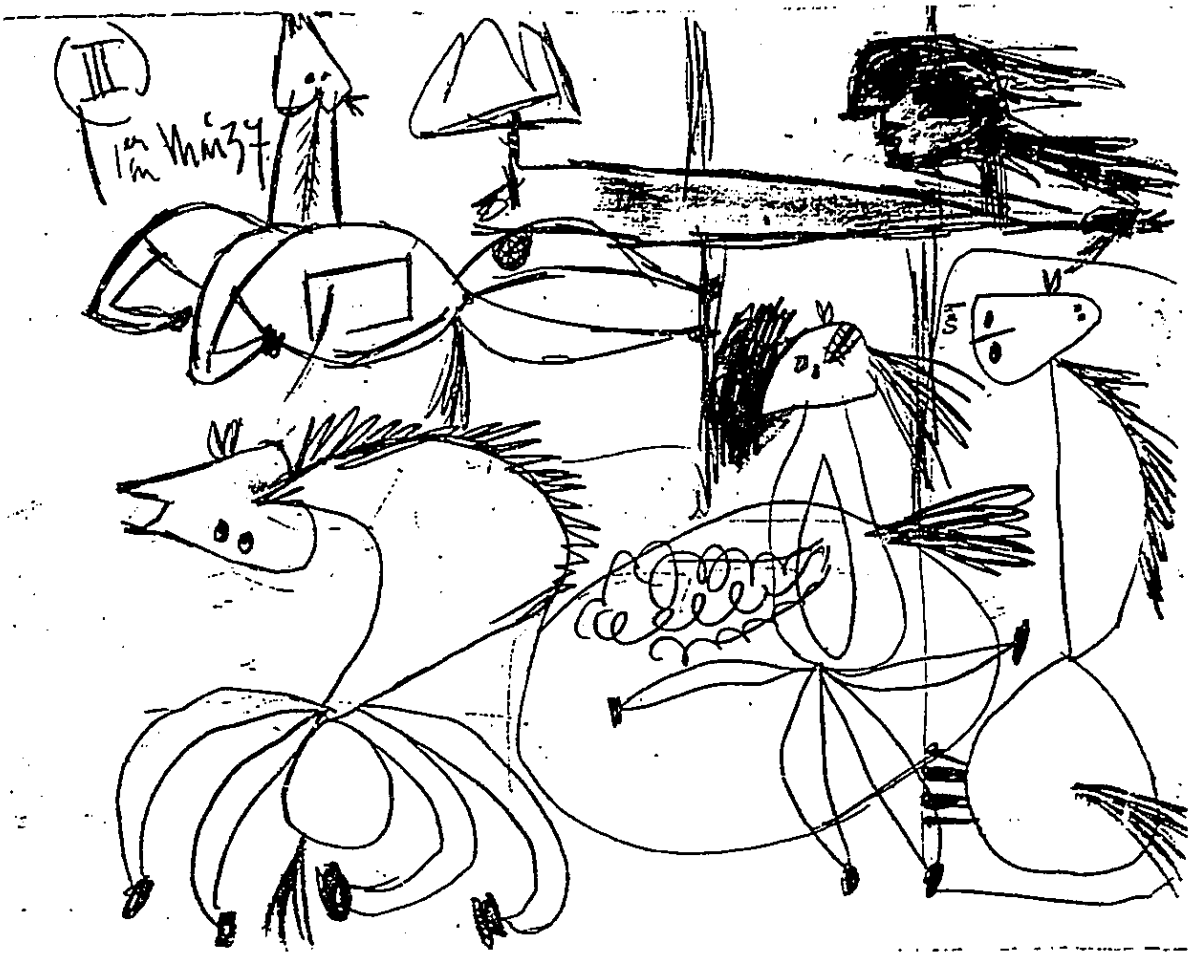


Figure 18

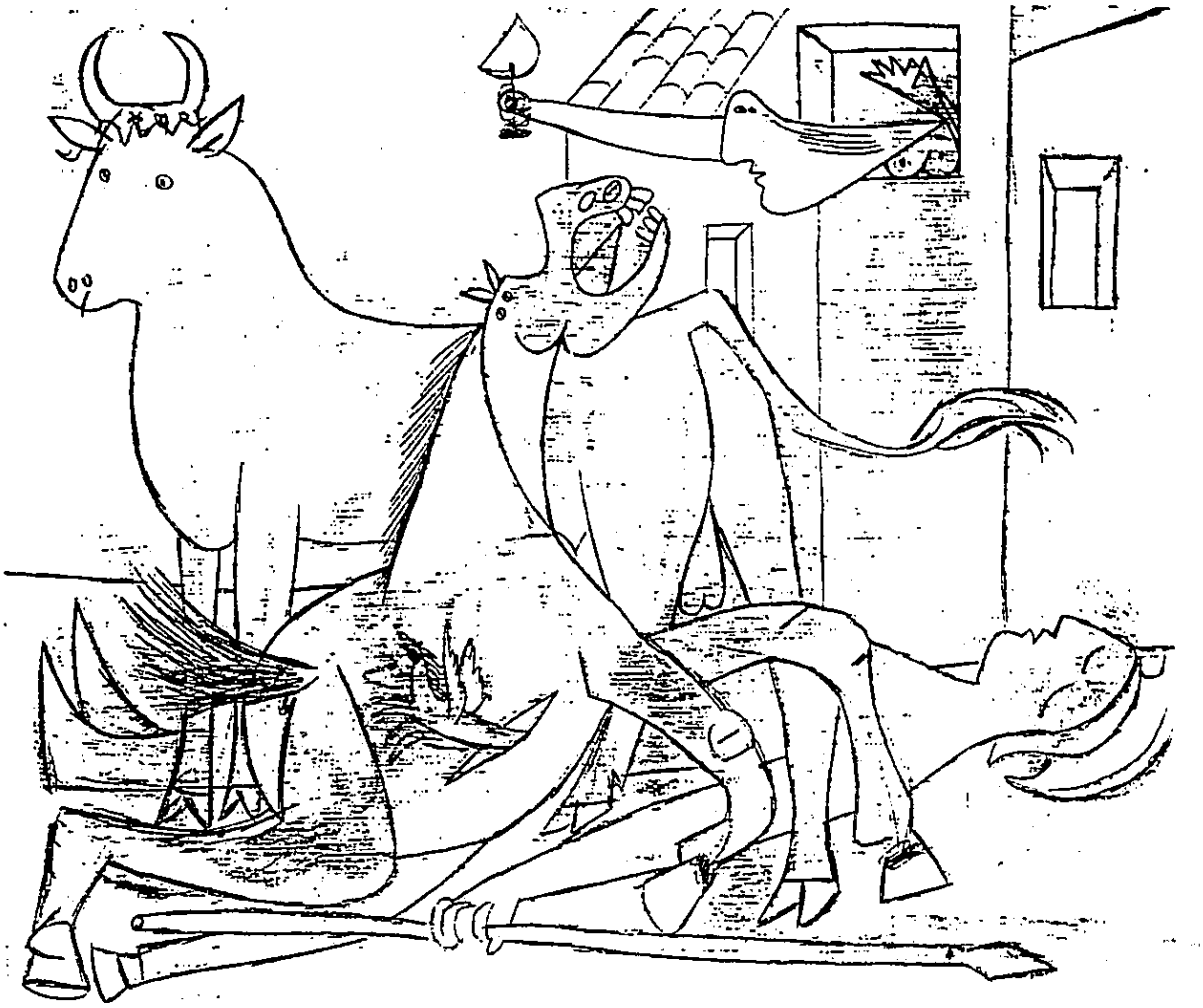


Figure 19

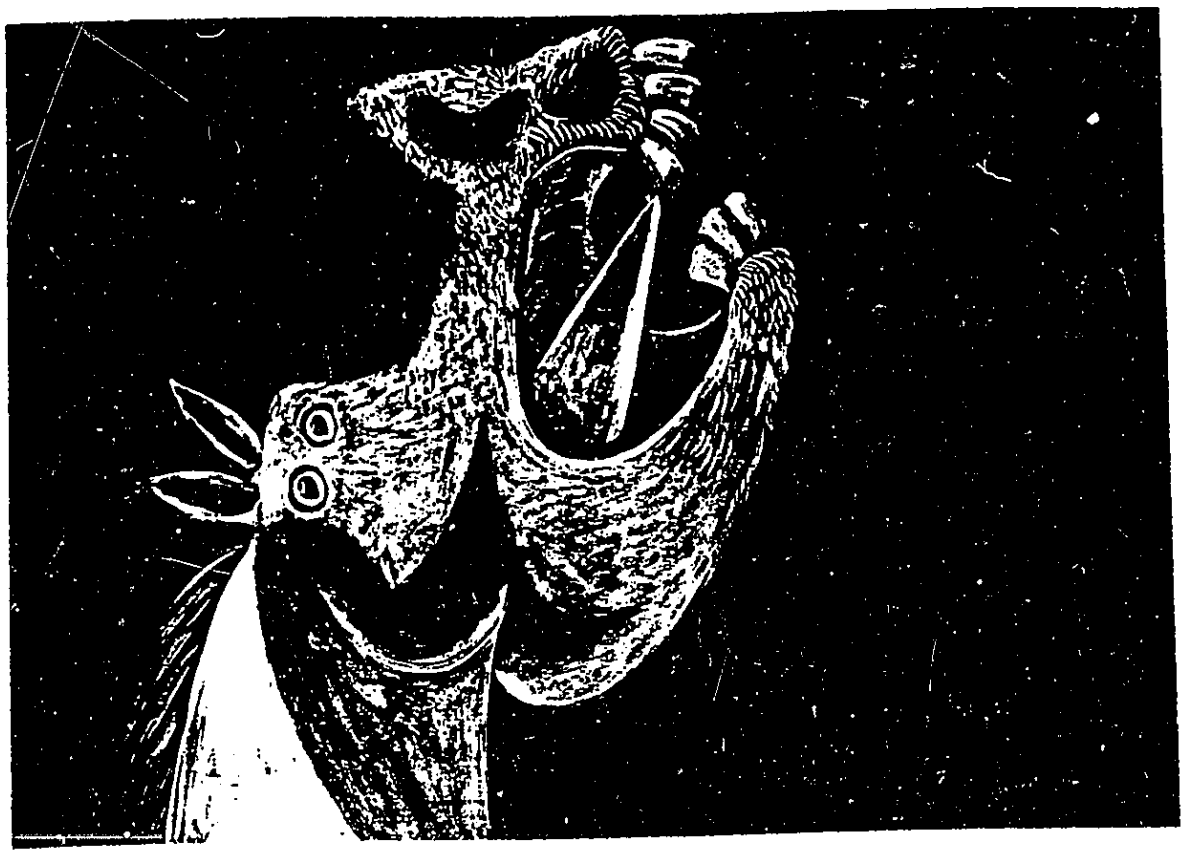


Figure 20

Figure 21

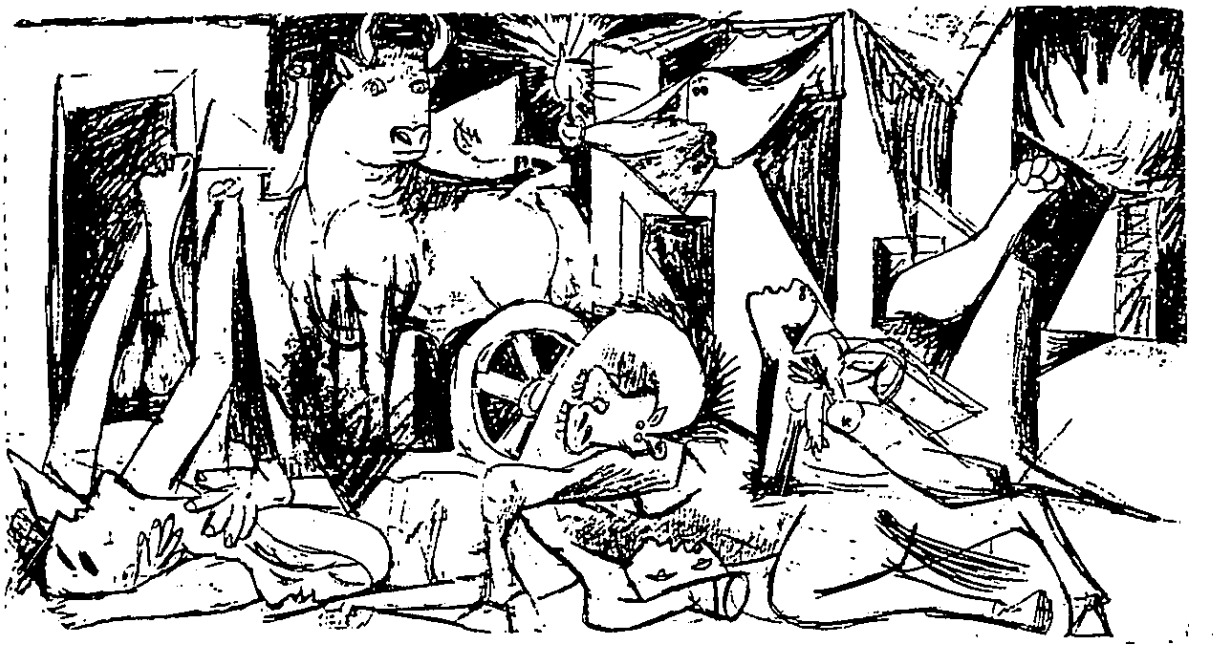


Figure 22

Figure 23

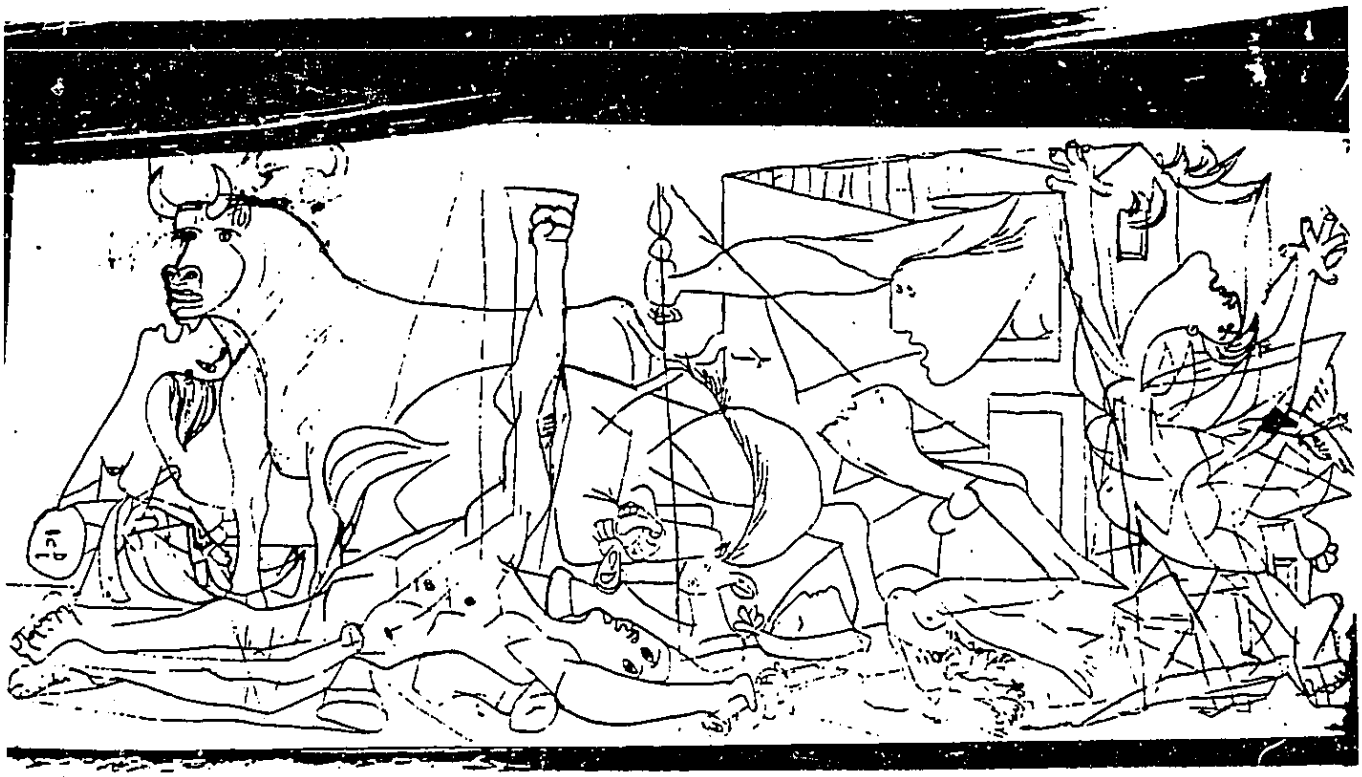


Figure 24

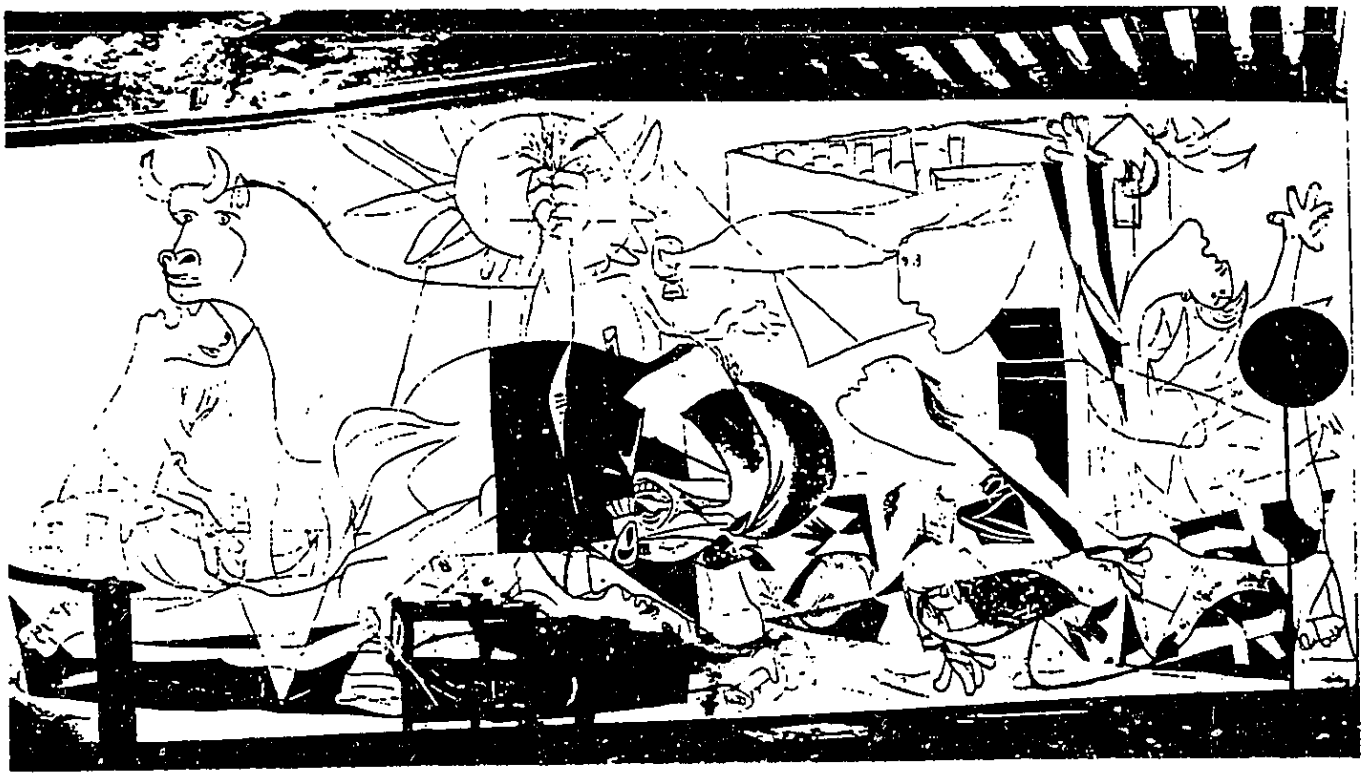


Figure 25

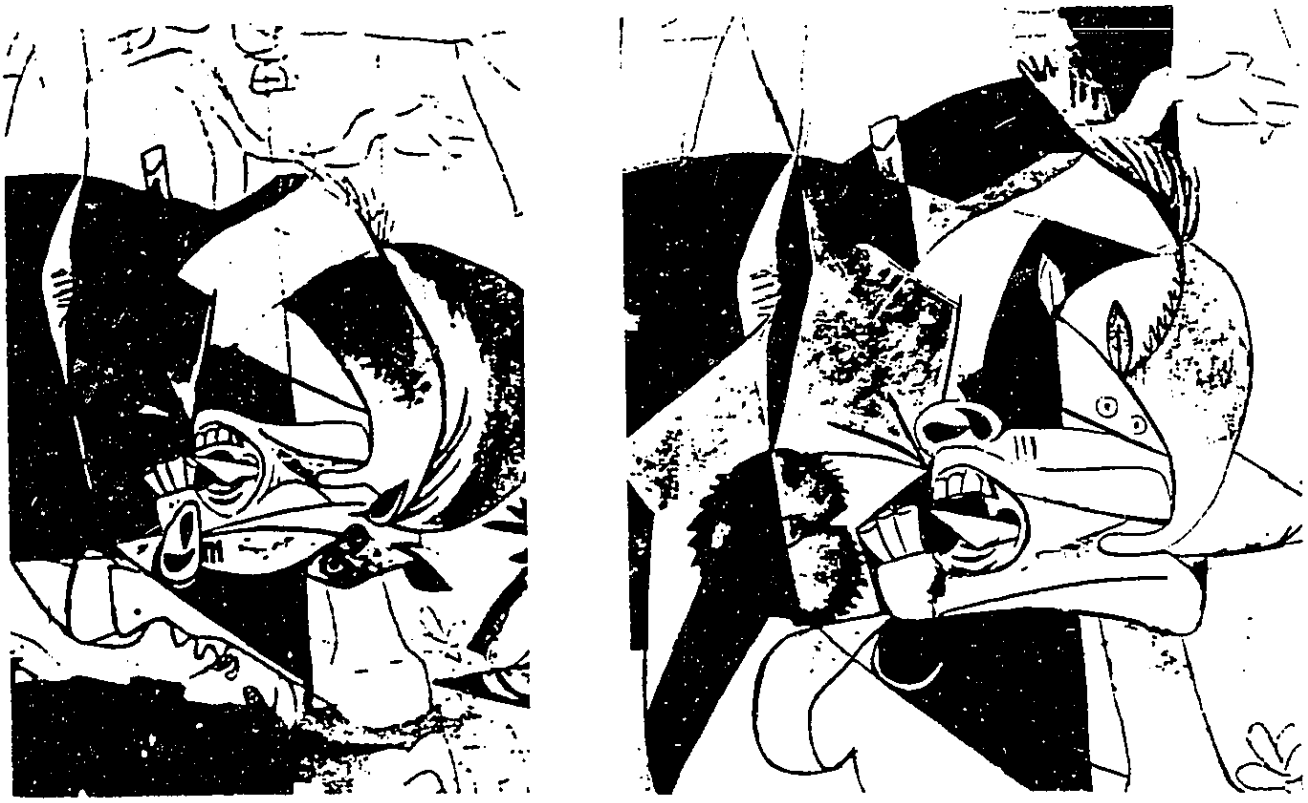


Figure 26

Figure 28

Figure 29

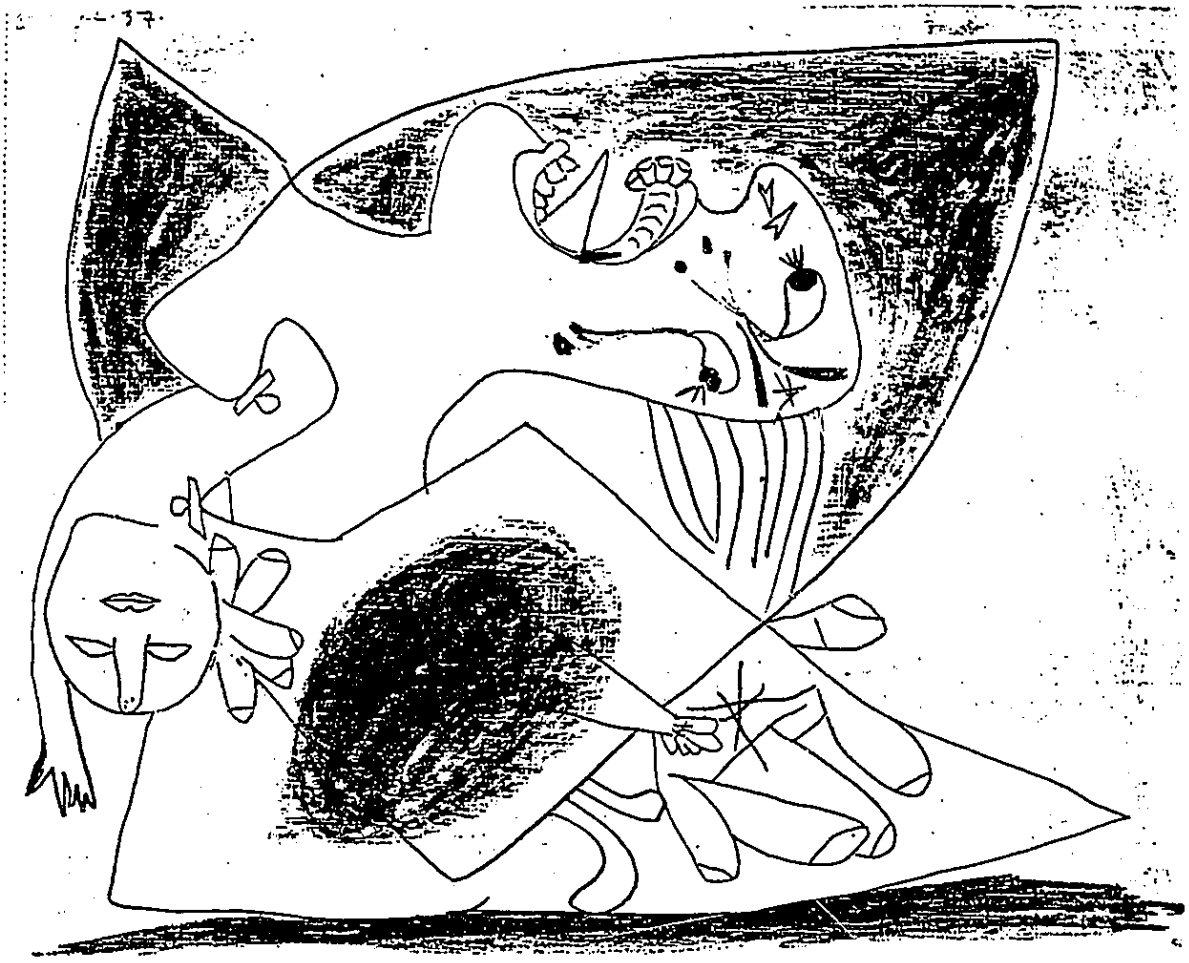


Figure 30

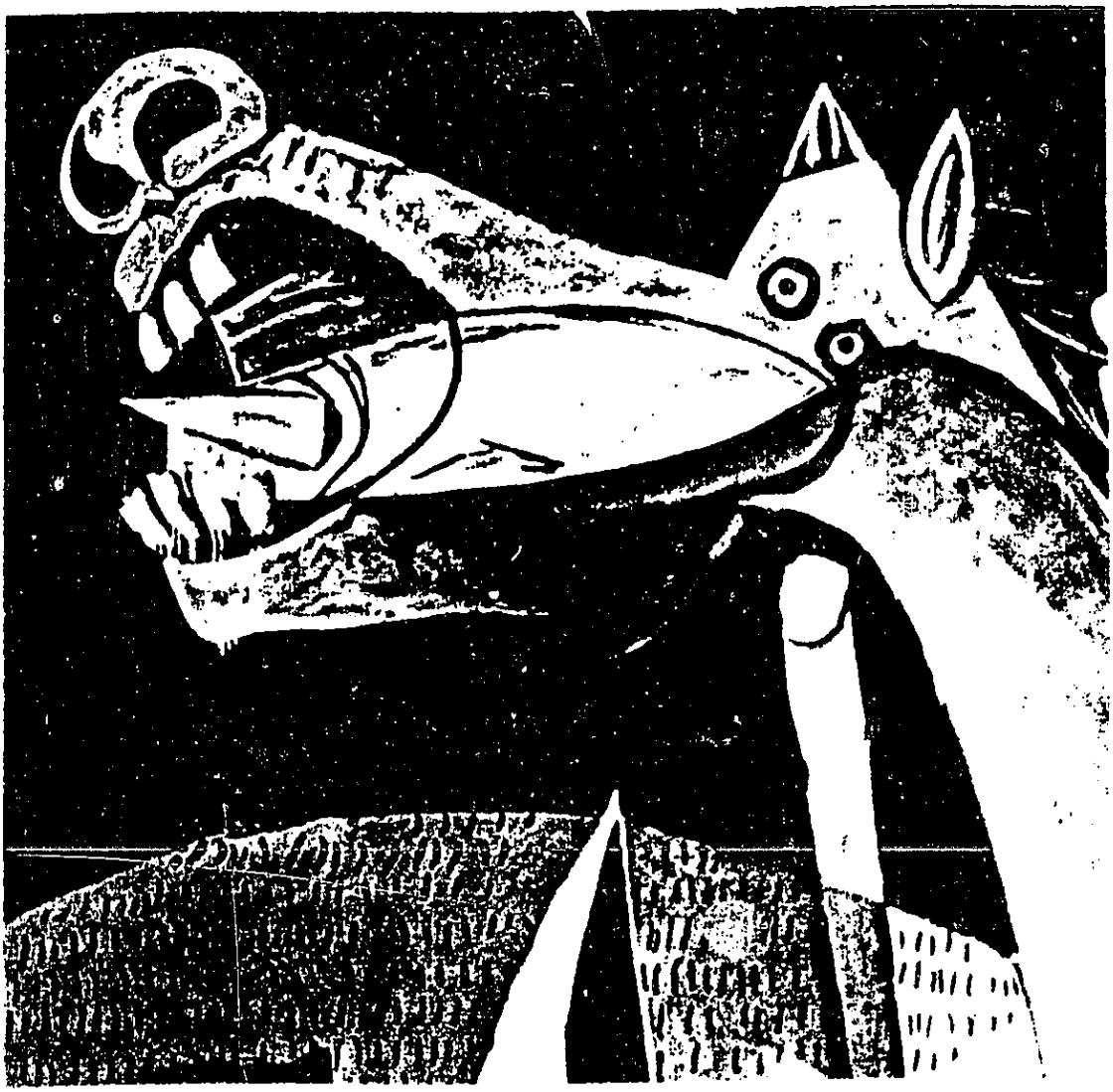


Figure 31

Figure 32

Figure 33

Figure 34

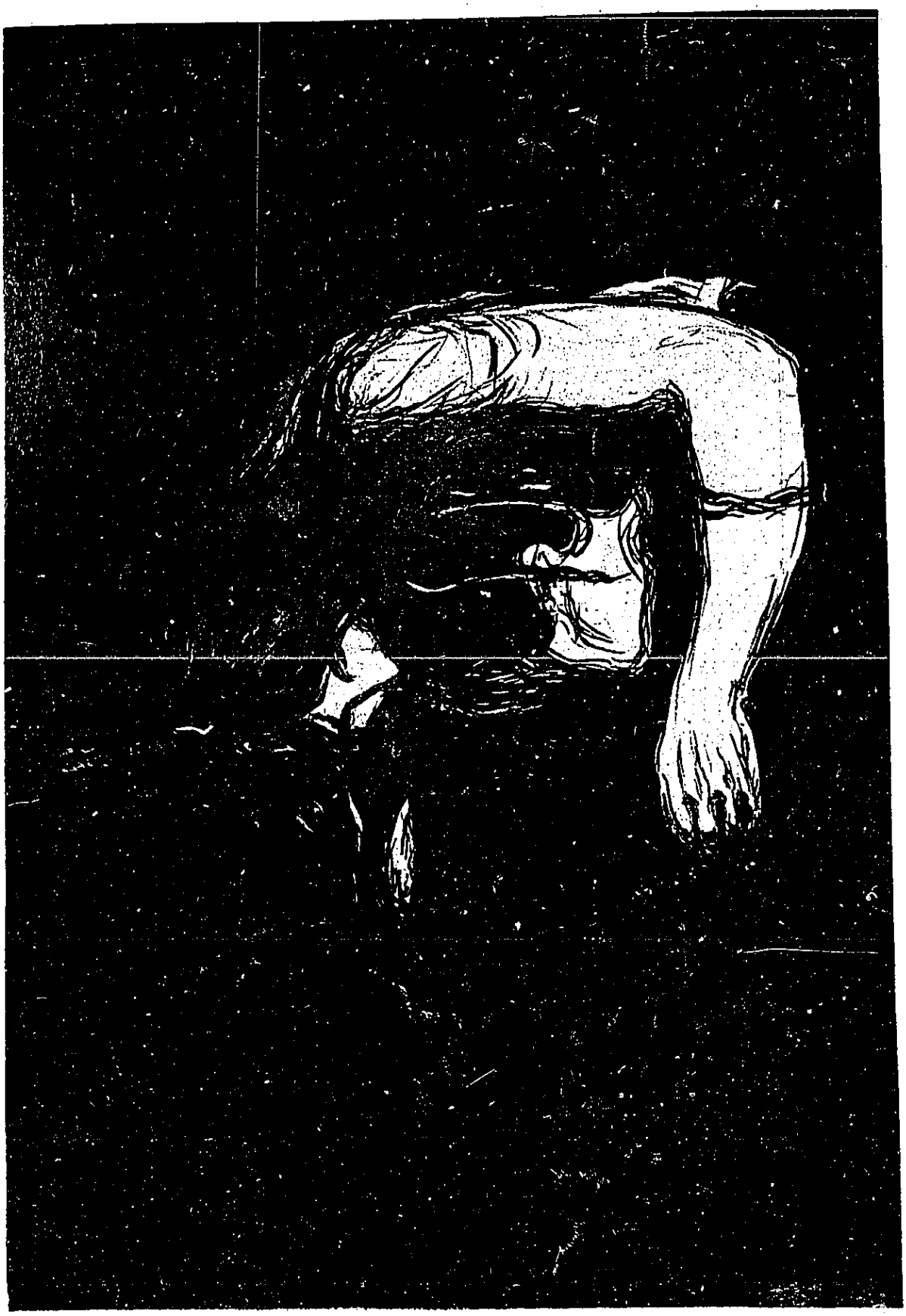


Figure 35

Figure 36

Figure 37