

# Toward a Phenomenology of Painting and Literature

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## I

In one of his stunning classroom lectures, Meyer Schapiro, I remember very clearly, allowed his prepared text to wander a little, to dwell on an aside rather longer than the occasion seemed to warrant. The thought that took his fancy then has haunted me agreeably from time to time over more than fifty years. It has, it seems, been gathering strength in a completely unforced way. Quite recently, it came back once again to center stage, as I sat through a small but thoughtful film about—of all things—young women from Colombia driven by poverty to serve as heroin mules traveling between New York and Bogata. What struck me was that the film in general, that is, cinema, permits us, actually enables us, to examine human faces carefully in a way that is almost never possible “in life”; although, of course, skilled movie-goers (all of us) know exactly how to bridge the barrier between life and art, without actually erasing the difference. Here we live in imagination’s limbo, without penalty.<sup>1</sup> It became clear to me, quite suddenly, that the “moral function” of the film—the educative lesson of all the arts, I may as well say—is to provide a simple device by means of which we may consider at will, more thoughtfully than otherwise, the infinitely varied aspects of the human condition, and that, learning from this, we learn to do so effectively “in life” as well. We tend to collect an informal but considerable catalogue of remembered scenarios spanning life, imagination, and fiction in rather an easy way—bits and pieces, really—that lend some charm and force to ordinary reflections about whatever absorbs us.

What struck me was that the mature film actually “prepares” us for the close perception of life (as well as art) and “prepares” the “worlds” of life and art for the kind of episodic discovery I have just noted. The association with Schapiro, then, goes this way: Schapiro took a bit of time away from his planned discussion—of what I imagine was a choice phase of French painting after Manet—in order to make an oblique but perfectly relevant observation about the paintings in the Lascaux caves. He stopped to share with his class a piece of wonderment focused on the fact that some of the figures in the caves were apparently produced by painting over previously painted figures. He remarked that what *we* call painting always involves our perception of a “prepared” surface (a piece of canvas, say, a ceiling, a sheet of paper) linking in that perception a distinctly restricted empirical and an ampler phenomenological datum, where the first (I suggest) may be abstracted from within the space of the second. Certainly, the second could

never be inferred from the prior evidence of the first: that would return us with a vengeance to pre-Kantian, Cartesian paradoxes. (The same problem arises in a different way in the analysis of our understanding language. I will come back to this shortly.)

To return to Schapiro's example: the thought centered on the second datum signifies the distinctive "intentionality" of paintings, which is, of course, matched in various local ways in all the arts. Schapiro himself kept to the bare facts of the matter. I have no reason to believe he would approve of what I have added, though I think it could and would bear up under challenge. The point remains: after Hegel's critique of Kant, empirical or empiricist restrictions on perception in some strict, evidentiary sense—in accord, for instance, with a physiological theory of how the sense organs actually work—must themselves be dependent on some prior, phenomenologically generous perceptual reporting, if we are not to fall back to pre-Kantian difficulties.<sup>2</sup> We need not choose this option, however, merely to accommodate Schapiro's very pretty point—or, for that matter, the use to which I have put it—but it is true that the distinctive features of *perceiving* art as art would be more than difficult to explain if we did not take advantage of the conceptual resources made possible by that decisive revolution in modern philosophy effected in the innovations introduced by Kant and Hegel.<sup>3</sup>

I realized (while viewing the film) that a literary text also "prepares" us, and the world it discloses, in a matched but very different way. The line between fiction and reality mercifully dissolves in the space of phenomenological perception and perceptual imagination "prepared" by our grasp of the "prepared surface" of a painting that is already a (phenomenologically appropriate) transform of a mere painted canvas or (even) a further transform of a stretch of words, already a cultural transform of mere sound, through which an imaginable world (*not* yet an imaginary or real world) is (thereby) made accessible. We learn in this way the trained practice of how to understand and imagine art's intentional worlds. We prepare ourselves, or are automatically inducted into the use of the skills in question by clues of a sort quite close to what Schapiro has identified. (You must keep in mind the marvel of hearing speech spontaneously, whenever philosophers insist, as many do nowadays, that you only hear sounds to which you somehow attach meanings.) Of course, part of Schapiro's instruction has to do with the remarkable way the flood of new kinds of painting released by Manet's example focuses on the endlessly varied significance of the prepared surface itself.

That lesson could never have been presented, *perceptually*, in the "empirical" or "empiricist" way—built up, say, bottom-up, by way of a theory of how the eye functions; it requires a phenomenologically pertinent

transformation of our ocular gifts that could report, among other things, that we actually *see* the way French painting develops after Manet. A merely “empirical” account, hobbled in the manner suggested, would require some extraordinarily complex *inferential* connection between what we “really” see and what, say, is true about particular paintings—so as to match the fluencies of phenomenological reporting. There is no way to escape the dangling implausibility (and conceptual inadequacy) of such a maneuver.<sup>4</sup> But I could see as well that what I have called the moral function of literature was itself embedded (as in watching a film or reading a novel) in the phenomenology of experiencing the then-“apparent” world of the story. Here I am deliberately extending the apt rigor of Hegel’s phenomenology (utterly opposed, I may say, to Husserl’s retrograde alternative), in order to range over all the different forms of perception and perceptual imagination “penetrated,” conceptually and culturally, in accord with the appropriately trained practices of reading, listening, and viewing which belong to the perception and understanding of artworks.

These are difficult but hardly fanciful concessions, though they may seem extraneous. For, certainly, it is an essential skill of human societies to hear and understand speech. That is the phenomenological example *par excellence*. We absolutely need a model of *perceptual* experience that can acknowledge the direct grasp of the ordinary complexities of speech. I claim there is no way to describe or explain this skill in terms derived from any induction from mere sounds or from any rule-like or law-like supervenience.<sup>5</sup> The only option that makes sense demands that we admit a *sui generis* form of evolution and, because of that, the transformation of prelinguistic forms of animal communication that have gradually evolved into a proto-language and proto-culture, which thereupon is able to produce, reflexively, further cultural resources that can no longer be traced in a causally legible way to the bare transition mentioned.

I claim that merely to acknowledge that we hear and understand speech directly, entails a *sui generis* form of emergence or transformation from a precultural form of existence to a culturally endowed competence that ushers in human powers that appear nowhere else in the world. This holds for the species *Homo sapiens* and for every individual member of that species transformed into a person or self by acquiring a language. As I say, the reason this is so is simply that our cultural powers cannot be described or explained in terms confined to the things of the subcultural world. Furthermore, if this is true (as I believe it is), then the transformation *is* “metaphysically” significant, that is, we ourselves become drastically second-natured by becoming enlanguaged and encultured—capable, for instance, of reflecting on our experience and reporting our thoughts, which are among the unique marks of human selves. It is in this elementary sense that

Schapiro's remark about the prepared surface of paintings takes hold: the recognition of such a surface makes sense only in an encultured world; that recognition is, we may suppose, a characteristic sign of our being trained phenomenologically to *see* paintings as paintings.

This thesis may seem extraneous, but it is surely not—because hearing and understanding true language is the very paradigm of the entire phenomenology of cultural life and art. We learn to see the world, the world we speak about, as spontaneously enlanguaged structures. That is to say, the “prepared surface” of a span of language (*never* a strict covariant correlation between sound and sense) reveals (to apt speakers) “the real world” in very much the same way poetry reveals an imaginable world—a world to be understood and imagined—and for the same reasons. You would be right to favor, here, once again, the sense in which human perception and understanding are culturally formed, transformed, and “penetrated” by language and by whatever our acquiring language makes possible, for instance, the phenomenological turn beyond that part of the bare incipience of painting on which Schapiro dwells. (Of course, the Lascaux caves remain a deep mystery.) But the entire argument confirms the grand advantage of treating perceptual experience (and perceptual imagination) primarily in phenomenological terms, if we are ever to make sense of “seeing a painting” or “understanding a novel.”

There are many different notions of “perception” vying for a favorable inning here. They come together in a deeper way through the strategic suggestion that the phenomenological perception and experience of artworks are triggered and made possible by our enculturating practices’ “preparing” the space—and preparing us to discern the space—in which the worlds *they* disclose can be perceived to be thus disclosed. Of course, if that is true then the theories of the perception of painting advanced so commandingly by Arthur Danto and Richard Wollheim are seriously mistaken. A painting is not a painted canvas: it is, like intelligible speech (which is our paradigm), the spontaneously transformed, culturally significant artifact that now presents (to those among us who have learned to “see”) a perceivable and perceptually imaginable world that answers to our normal phenomenological training and skills. I say “normal” because we all acquire the remarkable skill *to hear speech directly* (not mere sounds) and to understand directly what we hear. I say we do the same in viewing a painting and in reading a poem, although there are other differences yet to be fathomed. Nevertheless, the prepared surface of a painting is the prepared surface of an encultured (or metaphysical) transform of what might otherwise be construed as the surface of a mere “painted canvas.” (The latter is indeed Jerrold Levinson’s deficient formula.<sup>6</sup>) Nothing, of course, is put at risk by merely introducing the term “metaphysical” here; the “metaphysical” is nothing but a way of labeling a

particularly important distinction regarding what "there is" or "exists" in the world, and implicates no cognitive privilege, necessity, or universality of any kind. It counts only against untenable efforts to reduce "one kind of thing" to another.

Everything so far remarked provides a ground for the analysis of what we should mean by speaking of the "objective" interpretation of a painting or poem. I have tried to answer the objectivity question elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Here I am interested more in the surprising conditions under which the question arises at all—and under which it can be satisfactorily answered. As I hope will become clear, there are some unexpected difficulties in attempting to fix (for interpretive purposes) the discernible meaning and significant structure of paintings and poems that cannot fail to affect in the deepest way our theory of interpretive objectivity. (This is in fact the key to my retelling of Schapiro's insight.) But it means that the question of objective interpretation depends on a larger theory of human nature itself and on the complex relationship between physical nature and human culture (implicated in the very existence of artworks and selves) in such a way as to affect our answer to the interpretation question quite profoundly. That may come as a surprise.

## II

The difference between paintings and poems in the respect I still need to make explicit should help us understand why there are two foci of attention to be considered in drawing up a theory of the nature of artworks apt for answering the interpretation question. One features the fact, already broached, that what, from *an empirical* point of view, might be said—in accord (say) with descriptions favoring the physical—to be a mere "painted canvas" is, from a phenomenological viewpoint, informed by our way of understanding and perceiving the arts, must already be metaphysically transformed into a painting. This is a dense doctrine.

Let it be said, however, that the transformation of a physical *material* into a cultural artifact that thereby acquires "meanings," "meaningful structures," or "intentional content" of the kind artworks regularly exhibit occurs all the time: Michelangelo takes hammer and chisel to a block of marble and, lo, in time, the *Pietà* emerges, discernible as such to human selves who have been instructed about how to *see* the resultant *Pietà*. The transformation is not a piece of magic, any more than the uttering of physical sounds "counts" as (is transformed into) speech. This way of speaking obliges us to work out an analysis of the relationship between physical objects and artworks ana-logous to that between the members of *Homo sapiens* and encultured selves.

For my present purpose, it is enough to note: (1) that artworks possess properties mere physical objects do not and (literally) cannot possess (for example, expressive and representational properties); (2) that such properties can, though discernible (directly perceived in painting, directly understood or imagined in poetry), be discerned only in suitably trained ways that account for what is thus perceived and imagined; (3) that the objectivity of "intentional" ascriptions and interpretations requires a critical choice among alternative such attributions (perceived, imagined, or understood) which are fitted to those practices, traditions, modes of production and criticism that answer to the trained capacities in question; and (4) the kind of objective judgments that are possible here are such only as can be adequated to the nature of the objects and properties we acknowledge.

The second focus of attention concerns a decisive difference and similarity between paintings and literary pieces. We ordinarily say we view—and actually see—paintings, in the sense in which we see the "worlds" they disclose. Not everyone is prepared to speak this way, I should add, though I myself have never heard of a plausible way of speaking of paintings that did not concede that we *see* paintings in the sense intended. But we *do not see* poems or novels in that way, even if we see a written text or even if, as with *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, we see the BBC dramatization of the book. We *read* the story (we may, of course, hear it being read aloud, which is also not pertinently analogous to seeing a painting). The differences are not entirely easy to spell out. But certainly the literary arts presuppose the existence and use of an antecedently well-formed natural language possessing a complex, entirely abstract structure of semantic and syntactic elements indissolubly embedded (in use) in some extremely variable array of sounds or marks, which, only in the phenomenological space in which the first can be discerned can then be (that is, the sounds and marks be) at all reliably linked to the other.

To be sure, there *are* sensory qualities of speech that affect meaning, but determinate, fine-tuned differences in the merely acoustic qualities of words and sentences have remarkably little bearing (unless dependently) on understanding the meaning of the words and sentences of a poem or novel. Even there, we must read with a sense of a speaking voice's uttering whatever we determine *to be* the words and sentences of a given literary piece—where discerning the act and meaning of so "speaking" must be imagined constrained by what is not primarily sensory at all (linguistic meaning).

You see the delicacy of distinguishing with precision between painting and literature: by and large, we *see* paintings and we *understand* literature. We cannot do either in any narrowly "empirical" or "empiricist" way, because what is discerned here involves meanings and meaningful structures that

cannot be matched in any way with the bare functioning of our sense organs. We must accommodate, within the phenomenological perception of paintings, our theorizing ability to separate, from such perception, whatever we claim answers to the eye's way of functioning. But that already requires a "deformation" of what we initially claim to see in the phenomenologically prepared sense.

In any case, to see a painting entails seeing the world it is said to disclose; *that* cannot be seen in any merely empirical or empiricist way. Think of seeing Judas's betrayal of Jesus in Giotto's Arena fresco. The objective interpretation of the meaning or significance of what is disclosed in paintings is constrained by some consensual understanding of how the painting may be rightly *seen*, and candidate views are likely to be further constrained by what we concede may be "empirically" abstracted from within the bounds of our phenomenological perception.

Furthermore, the "moral function" imputed to paintings is impossible to assign, in any way paralleling literature, unless, as in Giotto's Arena panel, the very structures perceived—the two faces in profile, for instance, said to have been introduced for the first time in Christian art—may rightly incorporate, without contradiction, literary, historical, intentional, and similar allusive ingredients, *as* perceptual. Here we appeal, within a critical practice, to the authority of the Biblical text "implicated" in the painting. In all of this, we see how difficult it is to move with assurance toward any uniquely correct interpretation of an artwork, and we learn just how difficult it is to disallow, in interpreting what we *see* in representational paintings, problematic literary elements that cannot be *seen* in any merely empirical or empiricist way.

Viewed thus, there is bound to be a deep and ineliminable informality in the very idea of the "visual perception" of paintings. This is not to subvert the rigor of art-historical analyses or interpretations of any regularized kind, but rather to get clear about its distinctive way of working. Broadly speaking, the objective standing of the interpretation of particular paintings is normatively keyed to the very practice of phenomenological description and interpretation, regarding which, it is clear, fashions and sensibilities change, diversify, and gradually learn to tolerate departures from contingently entrenched canons. Yet, even so, a compelling case can be made out to the effect that, although logically looser than what is preferred in the experimental sciences, objective interpretation in the arts is neither arbitrary nor committed to any wanton inconsistency, even in tolerating incompatible practices and findings. On the contrary, its own rigor is enhanced by just that sort of amplitude.

In the literary arts, matters take a more radical and problematic form. For one thing, on an argument briefly sketched a moment ago, there simply is no salient sense in which the "perception" of literature rests on any mode

of sensory perception comparable to what obtains in painting and music. Literature has often been viewed, for just this reason, as a dubious sort of fine art. Yet critical interpretation of the kind favored in painting and music is nowhere more widespread, vigorous, diverse, experimental, aware of its own history, attentive to the demands of its own characteristic rigor, than in literature. In any case, associations with the original meaning of the term "aesthetic" carry very little force these days.

It is true, as already remarked, that to *see* the world a painting discloses is to understand the way our practice of viewing paintings rightly informs their perception. Seeing paintings and understanding literature converge to some extent here. For we deliberately loosen the visual sense of "perceive" in order to accommodate what remains closely relevant to our perception of paintings, but cannot easily be said to be separately perceived— wherever visual perception plays the executive role in our phenomenological response to a particular artwork (a painting, here).<sup>8</sup> When, for instance, you see something very similar to the "mysterious" Mona Lisa smile in a number of Leonardo's paintings, you may wonder whether the smile is no more than a vestige of Verrocchio's influence, or something else. When Michelangelo presents Christ in full nude, in the sculpture, *Risen Christ* (Santa Maria sopra Minerva), we cannot tell, although the Incarnationist doctrine was in full swing, whether Michelangelo's decision, which was in accord with presenting Christ "complete in all the parts of a man" and which raised objections at the time, was actually meant to comply with the Incarnationist doctrine itself. That cannot be *seen* phenomenologically, quite apart from the fact that it cannot be seen "empirically" or in any "empiricist" sense either.<sup>9</sup> Here, speculations about the artist's intentions and practice addressed to what *can* be seen are normally permitted to count as ingredient in our phenomenological perception of the sculpture itself. But there is a certain insuperable informality in saying so.

### III

In literature the relationship is entirely reversed. There *is* no sensory basis (phenomenological or otherwise) on which the description and interpretation of "the world disclosed" might be said to depend; whatever we venture as a fair account of the imagined world of a poem or novel cannot but be projected *from* our understanding of the piece in question. Our imagined world is inseparable from our understanding the piece's meaning. Understanding a particular novel is nothing but understanding how to read that novel appropriately, how to apply our trained mastery of an inclusive practice of reading to the apt reading of the piece before us. This is to say: language is ubiquitous in the human world, for "metaphysical" reasons. We

are not capable of any culturally developed practice at all if we lack the mastery of the natural language in which it is embedded; we are not yet even selves!

The practice of producing and viewing paintings is, logically, less essential to our own "second-natured" nature (as emergent selves) than our linguistic fluencies. There is nothing that is artifactual in the cultural way that is as reliable and secure—or as fundamental to our existence—as our linguistic competence; even the perception of another's character revealed in behavior and facial expression is internal to our linguistic fluency, or to related aptitudes that themselves depend on such fluency. To be able to see, for instance, the unbearable grace of Maria Tallchief's dying swan (in Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*), where words fail, is, however specialized, continuous with our seeing the pathos of ordinary life. It is for such linguistic reasons that, though literature depends directly on our mastery of the paradigmatic fluencies of the life of human selves, it is the imaginable possibilities of the literary worlds literature discloses—which themselves draw on the phenomenology of everyday life and which, in turn, we sometimes view rather like an imagined world (as in assimilating "life" to film, theater, or literature)—that makes literature itself seem perceptual in the strong sense in which painting *is* perceptual. (That is part of the equivocal charm of television news!) It also contributes, of course, to the effectiveness of what I have been calling the moral function of the arts.

But the interpretation of literature has its decidedly uncertain side, since poems and novels are normally taken to be independent, self-contained, somewhat free-floating, seemingly legible artifacts not noticeably "prepared"—apart from what we may infer from interpretive evidence itself—as specifically "literary." Literary pieces simply appear, in this respect, to be "detached" from the "everyday" linguistic fluencies on which they obviously depend. They cannot be entirely detached, of course. But it is not uncommon to find that literary pieces do not present us with anything like a "prepared surface" in the sense Schapiro has remarked.

The explanation may be due to the fact that we ourselves, second-natured as a result of having internalized the language and practices of our society, regard our language and cultural practices as perfectly "natural"—as, in an obvious sense, they are. There is often nothing to separate literary pieces easily from the play of ordinary linguistic practices (factual reports, for example), except perhaps their seeming autonomy. Being artifacts ourselves (more accurately, hybrids, but in any case second-natured), what is most "natural" for us as human selves are the spontaneous fluencies of the enabling conditions of our hybrid existence. There remains a need for devices like the prepared surface that we usually find in painting, although

it is obviously an alluring part of literary strategy to baffle the very perception of the "literary."

Language, then, is inherently artifactual, even where we cannot be sure of the demarcation between its literary and non-literary uses. Our linguistic fluency is "natural" nevertheless—though also culturally emergent and second-natured. Insofar as the linguistic is paradigmatic of the entire cultural world, our grasp of language is paradigmatic of our phenomenological fluency within the range of culture, as among the arts themselves, preeminently in painting and literature. It is impossible to explain our fluencies in terms of any mere "empirical" correlation or convention involving supposedly deeper sources. Ordinary linguistic fluency requires an effective and profound immersion in the practices of a living society; it cannot be approximated, except as a poor simulation, by external or behavioral cues, because of course we cannot rightly understand the fine-grained contexts of relevance and meaning by empirically external means alone. There are no algorithms to be had. (Think of the effective ways of learning an alien language: Chinese would be all but hopeless on behaviorist grounds.)

But let us be clear that the principal uses of ordinary language are grasped by the most apt speakers only in a way that is inherently improvisational, informal, centered in the social forms of consensual tolerance, governed by insistent practical interests. In addition, all of this is context-bound, honed by prolonged immersion in the life of a society, skillfully adjusted through palpable historical drift, and endlessly subject to significant divergences of dialect and idiolect in substantive ways. Given all this, it is indeed a miracle that, despite enormous diversity among the acoustic features of everyday speech, the deep uncertainties and inaccuracies of written language in "representing our thoughts and intentions," and the inherent indeterminacies of reference, predication, meaning, context, intention, and the like, we need not despair in our exertions at mutual understanding. But it does confirm the exceedingly problematic nature of interpretive objectivity and precision.

All the more surprising, therefore, that the literary arts tend to favor little more than the most elementary counterparts of what I have called the "prepared surface" in painting: say, something like the formula "Once upon a time" or the usual conventions for printing a Shakespearean sonnet or representing *terza rima*. In painting, the practice is more instructive, precisely because the interpretation of painting does depend on what is perceptible in the visible way, both empirically and phenomenologically, whereas, as already remarked, the literary arts have only our linguistic *practices* to count on. That makes for a considerable difference in the determinacy and precision of meaning and meaningful structure.

It is for these sorts of reasons that interpretive theories in the literary arts, as distinct from those in painting and music, are as wildly radical and diverse as they often are—or, *per contra*, as conservative, in insisting on a single right interpretation (for every well-formed work) in order to offset the imagined chaos produced by admitting the opposed sort of tolerance. In the philosophy of literature, the “single right interpretation” theory has been advanced both in the “empiricist” spirit (by Monroe Beardsley) and in a broadly phenomenological or hermeneutic spirit (by E. D. Hirsch).<sup>10</sup> Beardsley offers no argument at all to support his claim, and Hirsch pretty well admits the impossibility of producing any uniquely compelling critical account of genres, which he admits he needs (that is, a thoroughly essentialist doctrine), if his own argument is to succeed. It cannot be done, and there is no chaos entailed in the defeat of Hirsch’s dogma.

This is not the occasion to sketch a reasonable account of interpretive objectivity. (I have made the effort frequently enough.) For my present purpose, it is enough to note that the theory of literary interpretation is peculiarly closely tied to the theory of what a literary work is. I do not deny that, rightly understood, this must be true of every theory of interpretation. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that literary theory shows much more scatter and divergence on matters that directly affect our sense of what should count as objective (in the way of interpretation) than is true in those arts that are perceptually grounded in the way I have noted in speaking of painting. For example, I believe I could mention without much labor a good many well-regarded theories of recent vintage that, though very different from one another (and likely to yield very different sorts of critical options in weighing up theories), actually converge quite markedly in treating a literary work as effectively open, in principle, to an almost unlimited variety of distinctly disciplined, robust, evidentially responsible, diverse, historically evolving, often incompatible and incommensurable, though still objectively valid interpretations.

Part of the rationale for any such tolerance undoubtedly depends on admitting the historicity of the cultural world itself—the historicity of thinking, with respect (say) to both the creation of artworks and to their interpretation. That alone would hardly strengthen the intended contrast between literature and painting. It might still count, however, but only when applied, differentially, to specific literary pieces and paintings. Because, as I have been suggesting, the interpretation of literature depends overwhelmingly on our mastery of linguistic *practices* regarding fixing “meanings”—which are already notably abstract and subject to the vagaries collected just a moment ago, whereas this is not quite true in interpreting paintings.

If one insists that the same is true of the “intentional” or significative structures of painting and music (grounded in what may be seen and heard),

I would not oppose the objection—it would actually strengthen my own thesis from another direction. In fact, I support historicism, relativism, and incommensurabilism in the interpretation of all the arts. Still, the argument is more interesting among the literary arts than among those more closely bound to the sensory modalities. Perhaps the reason is this: visual imagination, constrained by verbal meanings, which are themselves already more labile than visual structures, is itself more labile than imagination constrained by visual perception.

Part of the argument rests on the difference between the relationship between verbal meaning and visual imagination (in literature) and between what is visible and what is visually imaginable (in painting). If you think about the contrast in phenomenological terms, then the following seems quite clear: first, that what we imagine as the disclosed world of a literary work is open to considerable diversity—in a way that accords with a fair sense of validity—in just the respect in which the different ways of mounting *Hamlet* may be thought to be imaginatively congruent with the “meaning” of the play. Whereas, second, what we imagine as the disclosed world of a late Rembrandt self-portrait is, in large part, what we already claim to see (phenomenologically) in viewing the portrait. (Music is problematic in a further respect, since music is normally performed in terms of what can be heard phenomenologically and, at the same time, in accord with a relatively determinate and legible score.)

The perception of a painting, thus, is already prepared, phenomenologically, for discerning the visual world that it “discloses” to the trained observer; there is no clear demarcation line between such perception and visual imagination. You must bear in mind that, even in “the real world,” in perceiving a mountain, say, we perceive a three-dimensional mass in spite of the fact that the mountain’s volume extending behind its front surface cannot be “seen” in any restricted, empiricist sense. Here “theory” penetrates perceptual reports in a way that is not unlike the way in which, in speaking of paintings, visual imagination, “intentionally” directed to what is disclosed, penetrates phenomenological perception. (The matter of judging the validity and objectivity of such reports cannot be settled in advance.)

In any case, if you consider literary theorists as diverse as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Roland Barthes, and Mikhail Bakhtin—or if you add others like Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser—you will be struck by the immensely diverse, freewheeling nature of literary theory, obviously centered on the troublesome question of how to discern the objective meaning of literary works, under conditions of pertinent historical change, dialectic and idiolectic diversity, varieties of indeterminacy peculiar to verbal meaning, and the ease of “penetration” of verbal meaning by changing fashions of interpretive

theory (as in George Thomson's Marxist reading of "The Oresteia," for instance, or Harold Bloom's interpretation of *Miss Lonelyhearts*). You cannot concede the admissibility of Barthes's reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, or Bakhtin's reading of the Dostoevskyan "hero," or Gadamer's reflections on Paul Célan's poetry in the light of his doctrine of *Horizontverschmelzung*, or Fish's way of validating his reading of Milton, or Lukacs's discovery of the unmarked subterranean narratives of Walter Scott's novels, if you have no pertinent theory of how the very nature of literature fits your claim.

I am not interested in mounting an argument here about objectivity itself. On the contrary, my thought is that whatever may be persuasive would have to come to terms with such preliminary reflections as I have been providing. It is not all "preliminary," of course. Because the problem of just where we might claim to find "the meaning" of a poem or novel is so extraordinarily difficult—and the conditions of linguistic fluency so forbidding in themselves—that, when we speculate further about how literature produces new forms of linguistic fluency that we cannot possibly understand by consulting the entrenched forms of "everyday use" (to speak with Wittgenstein) or the canonical forms of earlier literature, we realize that our theories must be daring enough for the task. The diversities mentioned, then, are all to the good.

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## Notes

1. I mean to suggest here that the metaphysical difference between fiction and reality does not, as such, come to terms with the continuity in imagination between what is presented in fiction and in history or "real life." To see this is to see that the difference (respecting truth) between any propositional account of fiction and the real world deflects us from a fruitful analysis of "the moral function" of fiction. This counts partly in favor of, and partly against, the line of argument favored in Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); see particularly Ch. 13.

2. Theories of vision that proceed in the way David Marr does, which intend to capture visual perception bottom up, by way of theoretical constraints affecting the way the eye functions, invariably put the cart before the horse. See David Marr, *Vision: A Computational Investigation into the Representation and Processing of Visual Information* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1982).

3. The pertinent conception of phenomenology intended here is effectively sketched for the first time in G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977). It is a theory utterly irreconcilable with Husserl's phenomenology.
4. I take this to mark the decisive clue regarding the deep implausibility of Danto's well-known account of the perception of paintings. See Arthur C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).
5. The "supervenience" of the mental on the physical, and of the "intentional" on the "non-intentional," is the last refuge of reductive materialism. Under the best circumstances, it cannot possibly be shown to be valid. There is, for instance, no supervenientist account of language. See Jaegwon Kim, *Supervenience and Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
6. Levinson follows theorists like Danto and Wollheim here, but he manages to make the error more salient than they do, by his own example. See Jerrold Levinson, "Intention and Interpretation in Literature," *The Pleasures of Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976).
7. See Joseph Margolis, *Interpretation Radical But Not Unruly* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and *What, After All, Is a Work of Art?* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).
8. See Meyer Schapiro, *Words and Pictures: On the Literal and the Symbolic in the Illustration of a Text* (The Hague: Mouton, 1973).
9. I draw the problem from Steinberg's discussion. See Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).
10. See, for instance, Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Possibility of Criticism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970); and E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).