Linear Perspective and the Renaissance Lyric

KIMBERLY JOHNSON

IN HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION OF "THE NEW LYRIC STUDIES" in the January 2008 issue of *PMLA*, Jonathan Culler recognizes that the dominance of narrative in literary studies has led to a general reliance on interpretive models that are not precisely suited to the reading experiences offered by lyric poetry. Noting that criticism has reacted against the Romantic notion of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth 744) by seeking to make poetic texts correspond, in both their dramatic development and their documentation of emotional or subjective experience, with novels, Culler observes that the expectations that readers bring to the poetic text have come to include "the fictional representation of a speaker character, whose novelistic situation the reader is asked to reconstruct by asking, what would lead someone to speak thus and to feel thus?" ("Why Lyric?" 201). In other words, the critical affinity for literary narratives has accustomed readers to approaching a lyric poem as if it offers a kind of personal narrative with line breaks, a transparent if artful account of a speaker's inner life—as if, in John Stuart Mill's famous description, lyric were not heard but "*over*heard," as "feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind" (95).

Culler directs our attention to the ways in which lyric resists being understood in narrative terms—indeed, he uses "nonnarrative poetry" as a synonym for *lyric* throughout his essay, and he defines the modal position occupied by lyric as emphasizing what narrative does not: "rhythm and sound patterning," "intertextual relations" (202), "hyperbolic" and "extravagant" speech acts, the "material dimensions" of language—its "forms, shapes, and rhythms of dis-

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course." Lyric is properly, argues Culler, "a rhetorical transaction" rather than a chronicle of subjective events or feelings, and as such it demands an interpretive method distinct from that required by narrative (205). Although lyric certainly does present to our awareness a set of language strategies that operate in resistance to narrative and disrupt the communication of content, Culler's insistence on lyric's "difference from narrative" (202), while it recognizes a crucial distinction between the nonsemantic and semantic features of a poem, places lyric on one side of an interpretive binary; such partitioning may prevent us from appreciating that it is the mutual charge of this binary's opposed terms that catalyzes lyric's rhetorical transaction. In this essay, I argue that the tension between narrative and nonnarrative values produces the experience of reading lyric, an experience that asserts to the awareness, at the same time, both the drama of some kind of change (whether explicitly offered as a "narrative" or not) and a suite of sensory devices, including sonic effects and visual cues, that cannot be said to make semantic sense (though they certainly impress themselves upon the apprehension as patterns). The operation of sound is simultaneous to, but distinct from, that of denotative sense; the readerly demands of form are distinct from those of content. As readers of poetry, we may "attend to the patterning of non-sense," remarks Mutlu Konuk Blasing, or we may attend to the semantic and "make sense, but we cannot do both at once, and poetic language will not allow us to ignore either system" (14).

To develop a fuller sense of the ways in which competing systems of signification—broadly, form and content—present themselves in productive tension in lyric, it may be useful to examine an analogous tension between form and content in the visual art of the period following the development of linear perspective. Linear perspective in painting and lyric in the European vernacular can fairly be said to have sprung up together, and their historical coincidence suggests shared assumptions about the operation of the aesthetic and its relation to the religious and moral narratives that had long provided the content for much literary and visual art. Early modern poets seem particularly sensitive to the affinities between the rhetorical transactions of perspective and those of lyric, to the ways in which semantic content is complicated by the structural dimensions of the aesthetic. Their alertness to the disruptions and sleights of perspectival art finds expression in both the content and the form—sites of semantic meaning and meaninglessness, respectively—of the Renaissance lyric.

Scholars of early modern art and literature have maintained nearly as vigorous a fascination with the affinities between the "sister arts" of painting and poetry as did the Renaissance humanists who helped to diffuse the developing discourse about visual and verbal cultures across Europe and into England. Horace's venerable analogy *ut pictura poesis*—"as in painting, so in poetry" (line 361)—has given rise to a robust critical tradition examining the ways that the visual and literary arts have informed each other.[1] But much of that voluminous scholarship bears out Culler's observation by seeking to account for the influences of visual art on the narrative content or the descriptive strategies of literary texts; in such instances, the aesthetic features of the literary text are often subordinated to its symbolic investments. In tracing continuities between the lyric and visual art, I do not seek to revisit familiar claims about the ways in which poetry aspires to a pictorial descriptive practice or arises from an ekphrastic impulse, nor will I concern myself with reading the aesthetic sign—either verbal or visual—as a metaphor for an abstract principle or an emotional occasion.[2] Rather, this essay addresses linear perspective and lyric poetry as analogous rhetorical technologies that set content and form in tension with each other, presenting

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competing significative values simultaneously, with the result that the work of art must be encountered not as a transparent window onto a narrative (content) nor as a set of denarrativized obstructions (form) but rather as a mechanism that modulates between the two.

The Rhetoric of Perspective

In the second book of his wildly influential 1435 treatise *Della pittura* (*On Painting*; completed in a more technical Latin version, *De pictura*, four years later), the humanist scholar Leon Battista Alberti describes an ingenious method for making a picture using the principles of geometrically determined linear perspective. He advises the construction of a transparent rectangular frame gridded with a network of strings, through whose lattice the painter might map the visual world into compositional segments. Alberti refers to this grid as the *velum*, a Latin term signifying a fabric veil or woven covering, and he trumpets its virtues thus:

> Nihil accomodatius inveniri posse existimo quam id velum quod ipse inter familiares meos sum solitus appellare incisionem, cuius ego usum nunc primum adinveni. Id istiusmodi est: velum filo tenuissimo et rare textum quovis colore pertinctum filis grossioribus in parallelas portiones quadras quot libeat distinctum telarioque distentum. Quod quidem inter corpus repraesentandum atque oculum constituo, ut per veli raritates pyramis visiva penetret. Habit enim haec veli intercisio profecto commoda in se non pauca, primo quod easdem semper immotas superficies referat. . . . [H]oc idem velum maximum ad perficiendam picturam adiumentum praestat, quandoquidem rem ipsam prominetem et rotundam in istac plaintie veli conscriptam et depictam videas. (66, 68)

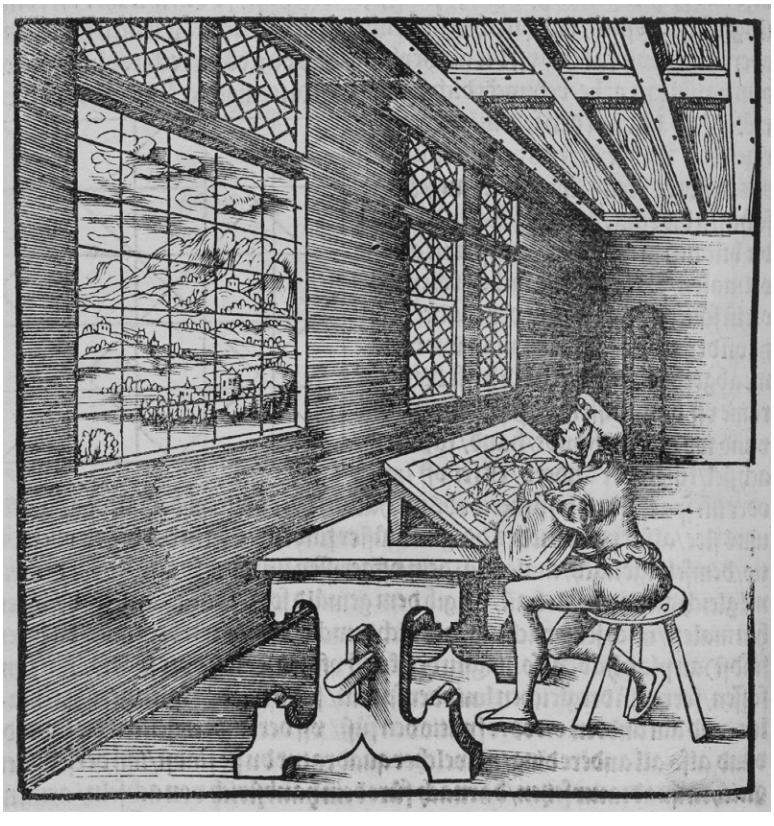


FIG. 1
Alberti's window; Hieronymus Rodler; *Eyn schön nützlich Büchlin und Underweisung der Kunst des Messens*, Cyriacus Jacob zum Bart, 1546, sig. H2v. Photo courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

> I believe nothing more serviceable can be found than the veil, which among my friends I call the intersection, and whose use I was the first to discover. It is like this: a veil loosely woven of fine thread, dyed whatever color you please, divided by thicker threads into as many parallel square sections as you like, and stretched on a frame. I set this up between the eye and the object to be represented, so that the visual pyramid passes through the loose weave of the veil. This intersection of the veil has many advantages, first of all because it always presents the same surfaces consistently. . . . This veil allows the greatest assistance in executing your picture, since you can see any object that is in relief and round [three-dimensional] recorded on the flat surface of the veil. (67, 69)[3]

Much ink has been spilled in the intervening centuries upon Alberti's "window" (fig. 1) and its contribution to the development of Renaissance linear perspective (*perspectiva*

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artificialis). The method described by Alberti applies principles of Euclidean optics—which understood the field of vision to have the shape of a pyramid or cone and constructed a geometry of sight to calculate the relations between the angle of vision and the distance and height of objects—to painting. Alberti instructs the painter to begin by laying out a checkerboard-patterned floor whose orthogonal lines converge toward a "centric point" and by this means to create the illusion of depth. The surface of the painting is imagined to be a "window" through which the scene may be observed, corresponding to the framed space of his compositional device. The act of painting becomes thereby a process of recording the objects of sight in their relative depths and scales.

Yet for all its celebrated innovation in rationalizing the act of looking *through* the frame to what lies beyond, Alberti's text is strikingly attentive to the *velum* itself. Indeed, in this passage, whatever view might be available through the "window" retreats in Alberti's elaboration quite literally behind the stuff of the grid itself, whose texture and color and distribution and pattern are meticulously noted. Alberti's window may have aspired to open onto new and ever more realistically painted vistas, but his veil continually interposes itself as an intermediary between the deep world and its artificial representation on an aesthetic surface—as it does in Albrecht Dürer's etching of a painter using Alberti's method (fig. 2), in which the device occupies the physical (if not quite the perspectival) center of the painting.

A century later, Giorgio Vasari would meditate on the significance of the *velum* to Alberti's perspectival method, singling out that fabric grid as "uno strumento . . . tutte cose capricciose, utili all'arte e belle affatto" ("an instrument . . . all very ingenious, of great value to art and fine indeed" [3.286; my trans.])—though admittedly Vasari has little enough admiration for Alberti as an artist. Alberti's *velum* introduces into the act of perspectival representation an apparatus of mediation and makes that mediation crucial to the experience of perception. Clark Hulse has described the effects of Alberti's invention as the "textualization" of art, in which the process and mechanism of perspectival representation assert themselves as a physical artifact between the sign and the signified, drawing attention to the substance of mediation (74). The *velum* becomes a kind of material emblem for perspective itself—a code that simultaneously promotes and thwarts the idea of depth, its textuality woven from its mediating function.[4]

The textualizing effects of Alberti's veil linger into twentieth- and twenty-first-century debates about the "meaning" of perspective in visual art. The tension between perspective's gestures toward the realistic representation of depth, in which "the picture plane becomes a window through which we

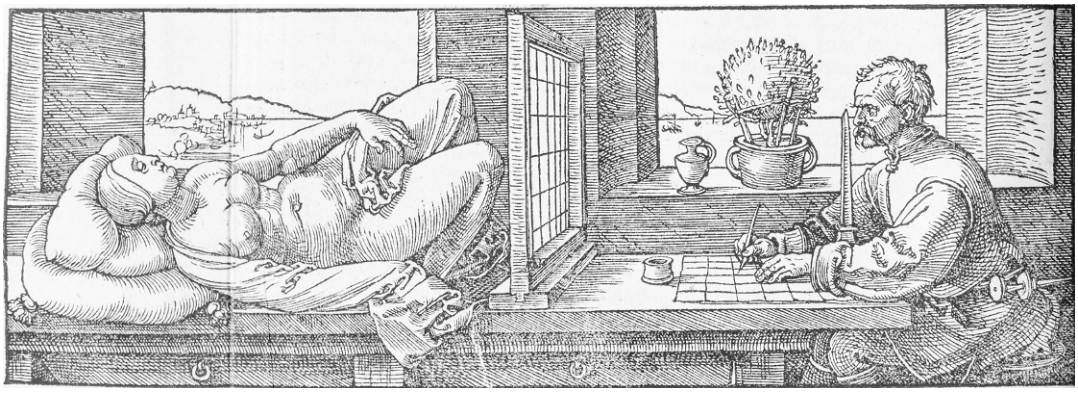


Fig. 2
Albrecht Dürer; draughtsman making a perspective drawing of a reclining woman; *Unterweysung der Messung*; 2nd ed., Nuremberg, c. 1538, sig. D3v. Photo courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.

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look into the imaginary world," and its technical and "meaningless" schematic application of geometry has sparked spirited conversation among art historians since Erwin Panofsky's landmark study *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (Gombrich, *"Meditations"* 10).[5] Panofsky famously argued that linear perspective not merely represents math in action but also symbolizes a "psychophysiological" approach to space, a construction intended to point up the difference between "the actual subjective optical impression" we have when we look at the world and the representation of "reality" in art. The "intended purpose" of linear perspective, Panofsky claims, is the graphic realization of a particular kind of space that is alien to any visual experience of the world—an artificial space that is homogeneous, fixed, isotropic, objective, and ultimately modern in its rationality (30). Panofsky calls perspective a "symbolic form" not because it symbolizes some idea or view that is extrinsic to the picture but because it organizes perception by "represent[ing] a number of objects together with a part of the space around them in such a way that the conception of the material picture support is completely supplanted by the conception of a transparent plane through which we believe we are looking into an imaginary space" (77n5). For Panofsky, perspective foregrounds the conditions by which it achieves spatial unity, transferring interpretive attention to the painting's material expression, its ostentatious "objectification" of subjective perception (66). In other words, and perhaps counterintuitively, the success of the illusion of depth offered by linear perspective is predicated on the irreducibly aesthetic and self-conscious "formal assessment of the representational surface" (55).

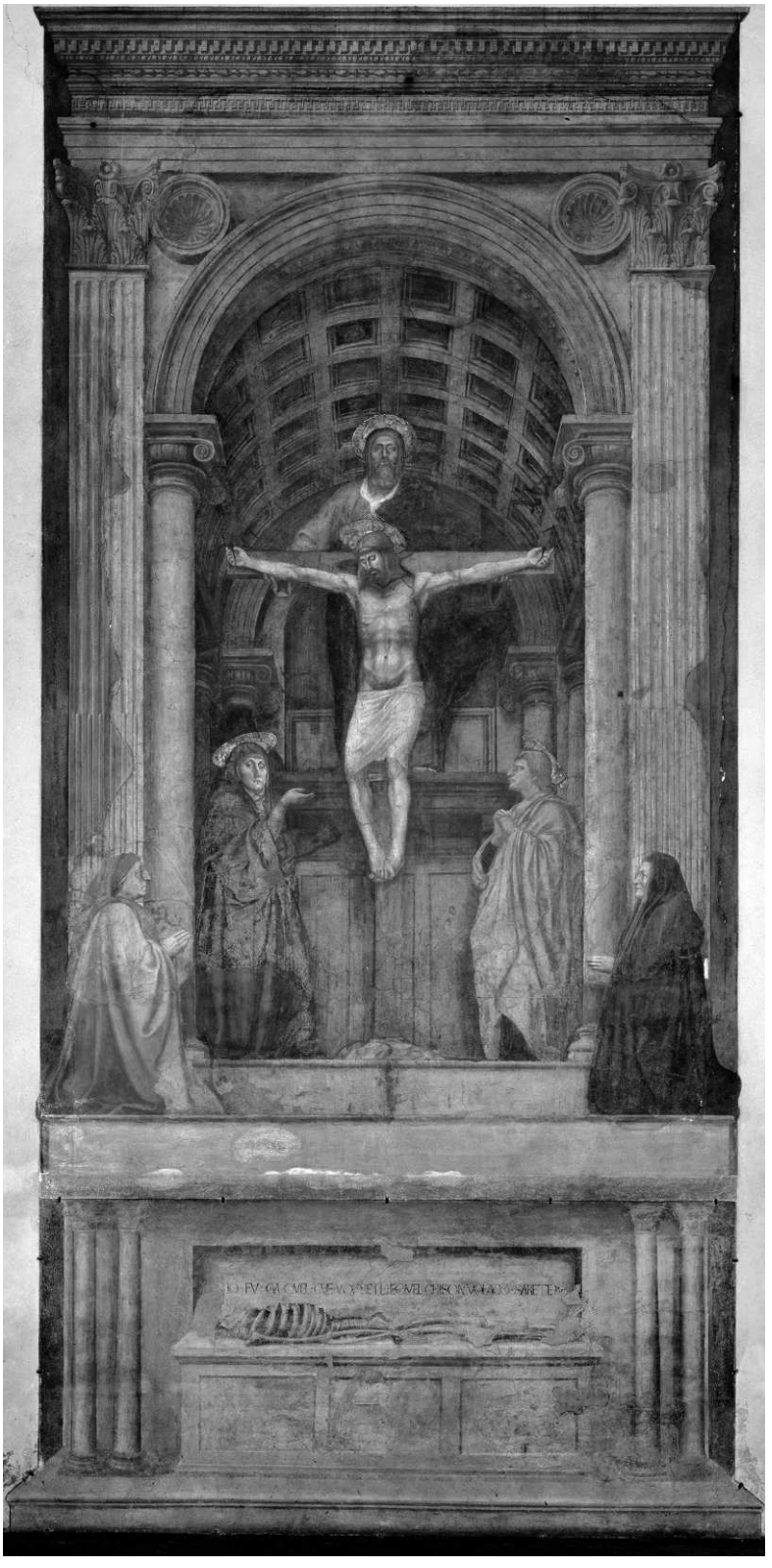
James Elkins reinforces the claim that perspective directs attention to the aesthetic surface when he expands Panofsky's recognition of the inconsistencies of perspectival art—that is, its departures from natural visual perspective.[6] Elkins points out that all perspectival paintings flout the geometric demands of linear perspective: unintentionally or (more provocatively) intentionally, "there is always error" in a painting's perspectival scheme, Elkins declares, and, indeed, "the amount of error is often large and even small discrepancies can block the retrieval of ideal geometry in part or in whole" (224).[7] Elkins's point has implications not only for the art historical practice of "reconstructing" the lines of a perspectival painting to discover the ideal geometry that lies "behind" its image but also for our assessment of the aesthetic effects of perspective (219).[8] As Elkins painstakingly demonstrates, Renaissance paintings exhibit "a number of complicated practices, most of them aimed not at increasing the painter's dominion" over the idealized space of the painting but rather at "portraying specific kinds of objects that as often as not work *against* a sense of unified space" (117). He continues, "In direct opposition to the rules of perspective, the artists cared remarkably little" about making their paintings into transparent optic windows, instead developing "an increasingly intricate repertoire of devices that work against clarity and simplicity" (120).[9] Elkins concentrates on these obstructive discrepancies to demonstrate that they are inseparable from the practice of perspective itself, that perspective necessarily elaborates its own obstructions. In Elkins's assessment, perspective's ostentatiously geometric methods posit a set of oppositions: ideal/real, objective/subjective, surface/depth, figurative/literal, artificial/natural, sign/signified.[10] In so doing, perspective asserts these oppositions as aesthetic conditions intrinsic to the experience of the work of art (37). That is, perspective is at some level *about* its own capacity to foreground these tensions, to promote to the perceiver its paradoxical alternation between polarities.

As perspective stages its own unreadability through its simultaneous assertion of mutually subverting terms, it displaces

FIG. 3
Masaccio (Maso di San Giovanni [1401–28]), *Trinita*, 1427? Santa Maria Novella, Florence. Photo courtesy of Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

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the narrative that would seem to inform its content in favor of an increasing focus on the relations among aesthetic objects. Masaccio's *Trinity* (fig. 3) provides an instructive instance of this problem, in part because it is recognized as the earliest work of art to exemplify the principles of linear perspective. The barrel vault in the painting's background draws the praise of Vasari, who reports that its foreshortenings and diminishments are executed so flawlessly that "che pare che sia bucato quel muro" ("there seems to be a hole in the wall" [3: 126; my trans.]). Against the illusion of depth created by the monumental arch, Masaccio paints a set of figures: a prominent depiction of Christ on the cross with God the Father standing behind him and an image of the Holy Spirit as a dove between them. On either side of the cross's base kneel Mary and John the Beloved, the traditional mourners at the Crucifixion, who are flanked by the figures of two donors kneeling piously beyond the framed architecture of the Crucifixion scene. In his rendering of this familiar devotional topos, Masaccio fuses the hieratic narrative organization of medieval painting to the new rules of linear perspective, in which the importance of an object of perception is determined by its position relative to that of other objects within the painting's geometric space. Thus God the Father, who would predominate in a hieratic composition, retreats in both position and size, his diminishment mandated by his placement farthest back in the pictorial space.



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Mary and John and the two donors appear unusually large at the forefront of the painting—a potential irreverence that Masaccio seems to have attempted to solve by lowering their positions to preserve their inferior status relative to deity. The traditional iconographic scheme, which by positioning and size would have emphasized deity, is complicated here by a nonnarrative scheme with its own organizational logic, a logic at odds with the picture's narrative content. The subversiveness of this arrangement, which subjects divinity to human-scale mutabilities like foreshortening and diminishment, is compounded in *Trinity* by the relative dimensions of the figures. As Judith V. Field's on-site measurements have revealed, the height of God the Father in Masaccio's painting translates to approximately five feet one inch, significantly shorter than all the human figures in the fresco, who are approximately five feet nine inches tall (*Invention* 43–61). Moreover, the figures of God the Father and Christ appear from a viewpoint slightly higher and more frontal than the one that governs the curved vault of the ceiling, undermining the strict perspectival geometry that would seem to inform the organization of the painting's space and suggesting instead a more iconic rendering. In other words, the viewpoint that would seem to authorize the painting's anti-iconographic, nonnarrative relations among objects countermands, rather than reinforces, the fresco's illusion of depth.[11]

My goal is not to jump into the art historical fray over the ideal viewer's precise distance from *Trinity*, nor to trace out visual rays in order to demonstrate the discrepancies in the fresco's orthogonals, nor even to provide a reading of the painting that reconciles these discrepancies into some devotional argument,[12] but rather to acknowledge that linear perspective in Masaccio's painting confronts the viewer with competing significative systems in which the hieratic and the optical, the narrative and the aesthetic, stand as unreconciled interpretive modes.

We observe this same dynamic, in which competing systems of signification are asserted simultaneously, in Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation of Christ* (fig. 4), a painting that has been described "not as *an* example of correct perspective, but as *the* example" (Field, *Piero della Francesca* 174). Piero's fastidious orthogonals render a mathematically precise sense of space and depth, and they attract the eye—by means of geometry, math, and light—to the architectural embellishments: the ornately drawn ceiling panels above the flagellation, the capitals upon the fluted columns, the balustrades beyond the bright doorway at the left of the painting.[13] In the foreground of this virtuosic construction of space are three figures, enlarged by their proximity to the picture plane and conspicuous in vivid colors. The identity of these figures is unknown, but they are prominent relative to the recessed event of Christ's flagellation. The titular occasion of the painting is further diminished by its position in the perspectival scheme, whose vanishing point leads the eye not to the figure of Christ but into the architecture itself. The detail that in the hieratic program of medieval art would have dominated the painting's center (the dramatic event of the flagellation) is deemphasized by the aesthetic conditions of the painting. Enacting a dialectic between the pictorial and the iconographic, Piero's painting disentangles the narrative "meaning" of the painting from its textuality, presenting a seductive but referentially bewildering excess of signs that compete "meaninglessly" with the biblical narrative, disrupting the hieratic program of the painting even as they advertise the incommensurability of aesthetic sign and narrative signified.

As perspective extricates images from their storytelling function, it pits the narrative depth of the visual field against the aesthetic surface of the painting, disrupting the *istoria* (roughly, the story or narrative)[14] that Alberti had insisted, despite his giddy fascination with the *velum*, constituted the "mean-

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Fig. 4
Piero della Francesca (c. 1420–92), *Flagellation of Christ*, 1455–60. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino. Photo courtesy of Scala / Art Resource, NY.

ingful" subject matter of the painting (80–81, 102–03). Instead of offering a clear and unobstructed vista of a narrative *istoria*, perspective directs attention toward "meaningless" techniques and toward the relations among pictorial objects. This shift, which Martin Jay has described as the "denarrativization" of art (61), prompts us to consider perspective not as a flourish of style or a technical tool but rather as a rhetoric—a discursive field—for staging incommensurabilities. This textualizing effect of perspective leads Hanneke Grootenboer to adapt Paul de Man's theories of rhetoric in her examination of early modern Dutch still-life paintings. Channeling de Man, Grootenboer notes that "[p]erspective produces a visual text that allows for different, mutually exclusive readings and greatly complicates the correlation between pictorial sign and meaning. . . . [W]e cannot 'read' a painting without being confronted by contrasting literal and figurative points of view" (13). Grootenboer argues that perspectival art visually instantiates de Man's "allegory of reading" by offering, in de Man's words, "incompatible, mutually self-destructive points of view" that introduce "an insurmountable obstacle in the way of any reading or understanding" (qtd. in Grootenboer 13).[15] Perspective is thus an "instrument of fissure" between form and content, a mechanism that does not invite interpretation—to which its "meaningless" forms do not yield—but rather enacts perception (Grootenboer 151).

The move into perspectival visual art, then, represents the displacement of a paradigm that privileges narrative content and that displays, in the words of one art historian, "a marked intolerance of any claim on behalf of the image to independent life" (Bryson, *Word* 1). The new paradigm manifested in perspectival art, by contrast, is characterized by readerly resistance, significative paradox, and obstruction, an interpretive

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arrest in which the signs of a painting are made "to point [to], and at the same time to be overwhelmed by," aesthetic dexterities (Cook 18; see also 16–17). These effects follow at least in part from the objective liberation of signs from their mandate to signify beyond themselves, to point transparently beyond the work of art.[16] In the absence of a one-to-one correspondence between signs and referential meanings, the rhetorical act itself becomes the object of attention, enacting the process of modulation between incommensurabilities as a kind of aesthetic presence.[17]

Recognizing that perspective constitutes a rhetoric that performs tensions between textual polarities allows us to appreciate a striking continuity between the visual art and the literary art of the high Renaissance that has been largely overlooked by scholars of either field. For the effects and strategies of perspectival art offer intriguing analogs to the effects and strategies of the literary mode whose efflorescence in the various vernaculars of Europe coincide historically with the rise of perspective: lyric poetry. To be sure, the period witnesses the development throughout Western Europe of a rich variety of expressions in both the literary and visual arts, each responsive to a distinct set of regional, religious, and cultural concerns;[18] nevertheless, lyric's consistent fascination with artifice and form bespeaks the broad diffusion of an aesthetic discourse that acknowledges the tension between formal technique and narrative content. The English sonnet, which refers to continental aesthetic concerns both thematically and lexically, offers a provocative point of entry into an examination of the strategies by which the competing significative systems of the lyric repeat the interpretive challenges of perspectival art.

The Rhetoric of Lyric

Lyric poetry distinguishes itself from other literary modes by the ways in which it, like perspectival art, performs the dynamic interaction between referentiality and textual materiality as a primary communicative objective. Simultaneously asserting to the attention both form and content, both the sign for its own sake and the signified it gestures toward, lyric stages the interaction of incommensurabilities as a drama that presents language as an artifact of encounter. As Blasing puts it, the interplay of distinct operations in lyric—semantic and formal, "transparent" and objective—"foreground[s] the mechanism of the code" (15). What Blasing describes in this formulation is the interruption of narrative content by aesthetic features whose semantic "meaninglessness" directs attention to the textual surface. Blasing's account of the paradoxical strategies of lyric poetry is strikingly similar to theoretical accounts of the operation of linear perspective, each representational mode counterpoising aesthetic "surface" against narrative "depth," sign against signified, object against content. Grootenboer contends that by performing two competing methods of presentation, perspective *presents*—as she writes, it "'monstrates' (in a virtually Catholic sense of the word)"—and she concludes that what perspective monstrates is the act of looking as a form of thinking (163; see also 164, 14).[19] I would like to suggest that perspective, by facilitating the significative independence of aesthetic objects (and demoting narrative from externally imposed organizational principle to one aesthetic technique among many), finds its literary correlative in the lyric. For each art form, staging the interaction of irreconcilable terms becomes its fundamental project, and its fundamental argument is to enact the fraught exchanges between meaningful signifieds and meaningless signs in order to expand the significative instrumentality of the aesthetic.

Philip Sidney registers something of the paradoxical encounter propounded by lyric in his *Apologie for Poetrie*, whose defenses he couches in terms that pull in divergent di-

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rections. On the one hand, Sidney explains, poetry elevates to prominence the "*Idea* or fore-conceite of the work" (C2r), a formulation that implies that poetic techniques and aesthetic devices merely serve as accessories to the subject matter that inspires the poem. But Sidney dispenses with any notion of poetry's fealty to referential transparency when he pronounces the representational independence of the aesthetic artifact of the poem: "Now, for the Poet, he nothing affirmes, and therefore never lyeth" (G4v), he famously declares. Affirming nothing outside itself, poetry is not a mere conduit for content but rather a self-sufficient "profitable invention." Such invention supersedes the authority of what Sidney himself terms "narration," preempting the "*Idea*" that would seem to have been its occasion (H1r). The tension between these two positions is encapsulated in Sidney's famous invocation of Aristotle: "Poesie therefore is an arte of imitation, for so *Aristotle* termeth it in this word *Mimesis*, that is to say a representing, counterfetting, or figuring foorth: to speake metaphorically, a speaking picture" (C2v). In his citation of Aristotle (which he embroiders nearly to the point of subversion), Sidney recognizes that poetry has it both ways: as mimesis, it refers beyond itself, transparently "representing"; as counterfeit, it refuses to refer to anything but itself (G4v–H1r). Within this bidirectional referential framework Sidney situates his "speaking picture" (C2v).

Sidney seems to have had a persistent interest in the tensions between the aesthetic surface of art and its illusion of narrative depth. His travels in Italy had given him the opportunity to become familiar with the methods of Italian painting (Veronese had painted the young esquire's portrait in Venice), and his well-documented facility with the aesthetic preoccupations of Italy and the wider European continent is reflected both in the structures and themes of his creative corpus and in the critical discourse of the *Apologie*.[20] His friend Nicholas Hilliard, the English artist, reflects in his *Treatise concerning the Arte of Limning* on a conversation in which the poet interrogated Hilliard about the technique of representing what Hilliard calls "proportion" in art:

> *Sr Philip Sidny*, that noble and most valiant knight that great scoller, and excellent *Poet*, great lover of all vertu and cuninge, he once Demanded of me the question, whether it weare possibl in one scantling, as in the lenght of six inches of a little or short man, and also of a mighty bige and taulle man in the same scantling, and that one might weel and apparently see which was the taule man, and which the little, the picture being just of one length. (82)

Sidney's inquiry reveals a fascination with the narratively "meaningless" perspectival techniques that focus on the relations between aesthetic objects. It is no surprise that Hilliard's reply draws on his discussion of how perspective well-executed relies on figures "cuningly drawne" (82): perspective works, he explains, "by falshood to expresse truth in very cunning of line" with the intent to "deseave bothe the understanding and the eye" (70). Hilliard contrasts the admirable deceptions of successful perspective with the failed illusions of bad paintings: "there is notwith standinge much faire worke wherin such grosse error is,"—that is, as he explains, "much disproportion and false perspective" (84).[21] Here, Hilliard's objection is not to artifice per se but specifically to "false perspective"—that is, to the poor execution of the artifice of perspective. In contrast to that kind of gross error, true perspective traffics in a cunning surface.

Sidney's sensitivity to aesthetic cunning, and to the ways in which artifice obtrudes upon semantic transparency, defines his treatment of the lyric in the sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella*, which both thematizes the obstructive qualities of the aesthetic and implements a poetics designed to arrest interpretive attention. The same poet who cornered his friend Hilliard into elaborating the technique

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for rendering subjects as relational objects likewise exploits the peculiar capacity of lyric to stage the breach between depth and surface, content and form. In *Astrophel and Stella*, that nonpareil of English sixteenth-century lyric projects, Sidney pays particular attention to the distractions of the aesthetic surface, whose denarrativizing effects establish lyric as a poetic cognate for perspectival art.

Sidney's investment in the strategies and tensions of visual art and their implications for poetry is explicit from the first lines of *Astrophel and Stella*.[22] His initiatory poem establishes the project of the sonnets as essentially aesthetic, deeply concerned with the effects of artifice:

> Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,
> That she (deare she) might take some pleasure of my paine:
> Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,
> Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine;
> I sought fit words, to paint the blackest face of woe,
> Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertaine.
> (lines 1–6)

This opening gesture points up the tension between "truth" and artifice—the latter indicated by the "show" that amplifies the pun on "faine" earlier in the first line. And indeed, throughout its lines the poem balances the "truth" of love, its ostensible narrative, against the construction of an artifice.[23] Astrophel seeks "fit words"—words that are suitable not only to the poems' intent but also, self-referentially, to poetry itself, since *fit* also meant "part or section of a poem or song" ("Fit"). The task for such words, Sidney explains, is to "paint," though his line steadfastly refuses to resolve whether that painting intends to express (or *represent*, to return to Sidney's terms from the *Apologie*) or to fabricate (or *counterfeit*) "the blackest face of woe." These ambiguous togglings between the performance of artifice and the seduction narrative continue as consideration turns to "inventions fine" designed to "entertaine" Stella's "wits," a formulation that allows for the illusion of depth by invoking Stella's mind even as it asserts a surface engagement with an object in the association of "wits" with Stella's physical senses. The sonnet continues in this fashion, obscuring the tale it purports to tell with the ostentation of writing-centered puns and ambiguities and explicitly thematizing the work of making art, until its famous close: "Foole, said My muse to me, looke in thy heart and write" (14). *Look there*, it urges, indicating a depth that would seem to lie "behind" the page like a vanishing point.[24] But even this seeming declaration of allegiances—truth over feigning shows, depth over surface, narrative over object—is undermined by the strong sense that there is no *there* there, that the "truth" of the first line serves primarily to stand in opposition to feigned shows, to enable the paradoxical performance of irreconcilables. In other words, the "truth" of the poem's erotic narrative becomes a term that refers merely to its own position relative to its opposite, an expression of the poem's logic of contraries, a sign without a stable signified.

The obstruction of the "deep" field of narrative by an aesthetic surface likewise defines the argument of the forty-fifth sonnet of the sequence:

> *Stella* oft sees the verie face of wo
> Painted in my beclowded stormie face:
> But cannot skill to pitie my disgrace,
> Not though thereof the cause her selfe she know:
> Yet hearing late a fable, which did show
> Of Lovers never knowne, a grievous case,
> Pitie thereof gate in her breast such place,
> That from that sea deriv'd teares spring did flow.
> Alas, if Fancy drawne by imag'd things,
> Though false, yet with free scope more grace doth breed

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Then servants wracke, where new doubts
honor brings;
Then thinke my deare, that you in mee do reed
Of Lovers ruine some sad Tragedie:
I am not I, pitie the tale of me.

This sonnet would seem to offer true passion in opposition to the romantic "fable" that excites Stella to pity, lamenting that the beloved's breast remains unmoved in the face of her "servants wracke" even though her lachrymal compassion wells up at the fiction of "imag'd things / Though false." But the illusion that the sonnet is a transparent window onto a lover's straits is complicated by the second line's framing of the "verie face of wo" as "Painted," which presents the poem's professions of sentimental verity as an aesthetic artifact oriented toward Stella's interpretive "skill." As the poem proceeds, it capitulates to Stella's preference for artifice, inviting her (and, by extension, the reader) to "reed" the poetic expression of "ruin" as an aesthetic object, a counterfeit sign of tragic love rather than the expression of sincere emotion. But this witty, even comic, response to the problem of Stella's recalcitrance develops into more serious consequentiality in the poem's conclusion, its final gesture reinscribing the irreconcilable terms that the opening sets forth. "I am not I," the last line declares—that is, I am not *an I* but rather an artifice, a lyric projection of selfhood that demands readerly engagement with the competing significative systems of poetic utterance. This pronouncement explicitly pits the "deep" story of romantic frustration against the lyric presence of a fictive speaker, an aesthetic instrument against the "verie face" of sincere expression. The self-consciousness of Astrophel's literariness mandates that we experience him as "Painted," an elaboration of the signifying field of the poem itself, whose deictic gestures point primarily to the stage of pointing. Astrophel becomes, as Sidney puts it in another sonnet, "a praise to praise" (sonnet 35, line 14). The archly poetic self-awareness of the sonnet's argument debilitates the referential urge to identify the persona of the lyric *I* with any fully psychologized extrapoetic figure and denarrativizes the romantic drama of the poem even as it foregrounds the objective play of the poetic surface.

Sidney enacts this dynamic throughout *Astrophel and Stella*, emphasizing the extravagances of artifice even as he directs readerly attention to the status of Astrophel as a literary artifact. In the third poem of the sequence, Astrophel deplores the "daintie wits" who proclaim their loves in art and cry "on the Sisters nine / That bravely maskt, their fancies may be told" (1–2); he likewise dismisses the derivative and ornamented writing of poetic hacks, "*Pindares* Apes," who "flaunt . . . in phrases fine / Enam'ling with pied flowers their thoughts of god" (3–4). These inferior writers he commends to their own trivial labors: "let them in statelier glorie shine, / Ennobling new found Tropes with problemes old: / or with strange similes enrich each line" (5–7). Wittily enacting the very strategies the poem purports to disdain, Sidney transforms Astrophel's complaint in sonnet 3 into a self-conscious assertion of the artifice in which it traffics—his own golden thoughts and fine phrases enriched with "strange similes" and "new found Tropes" until the turn to Stella's face in the closing lines collapses the opposition between art and truth, sign and signified: "How then? Even thus: in *Stellas* face I reed, / What Love and Beautie be, then all my deed / But Copying is, what in her Nature writes" (12–14). The act of writing itself has been associated throughout the poem with artifice, and Nature's own pen is as enameled as the fine phrases of Pindar's apes. Moreover, a concern about the ways in which artifice complicates the romance between Astrophel and Stella—that is, the various ways that semantically "meaningless" forms intrude upon the fulfillment of narrative—animates the entirety of *Astrophel and Stella*. In the second

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sonnet of the sequence, Astrophel muddles the sincerity of his reported misery at having loved against his will, compounding witty figures with poetic skillfulness in order to "paint" himself into romantic satisfaction in terms that reveal the inextricability of his affections from their representation:

> [N]ow like the slave-borne *Muscovite*,
> I call it praise to suffer Tyrannie;
> And now employ the remnant of my wit,
> To make me selfe beleeve, that all is well,
> While with a feeling skill I paint my hell. (10–14)

Likewise, sonnet 28 rejects the figural excesses of "allegories curious frame" (1) and then immediately declares its utterance free from artifice in markedly artificial terms, each metaphor generating the next, from royalty to reigning to reining:

> When I say, *Stella*, I do meane the same
> Princesse of Beautie, for whose only sake,
> The raines of *Love* I love, though never slake,
> And joy therein. . . . (5–8)

Though this sonnet's argument claims to cast its lot with "pure simplicitie" (12), its speaker continues to "[b]reathe out the flames which burne within my heart" (13), filtering romantic feeling through the conspicuous textualities of Love's "reading" (14). These contradictions between content and style emphasize the literariness of the drama the sonnets present, theatricalizing the disturbances of the artificial against the "simplicitie" of narrative. Astrophel registers the simultaneity of these competing significative modes when he laments, "[W]ith wit my wit is mard" (sonnet 34, line 11).

Treating *Astrophel and Stella* as a field for disclosing the experiential sympathies between the sister arts of painting and poetry, Sidney's sequence not only exhibits a recurrent thematic fascination with visual art and the ways in which its surfaces complicate the communication of narrative content, it also enacts the very principles its content explores by means of its ostentatiously elaborate aesthetic flourishes. Sidney's work lends itself particularly well to a discussion of this phenomenon because of his overt and repeated recourse to painterly motifs in the sonnets. Further, Sidney demands that his reader consider the operation of aesthetic signs when he makes the consequentiality of those signs intrinsic to the development of his speaker's erotic narrative, and he reinforces those same principles through the poetic strategies that occlude that narrative. But Sidney is by no means the only early modern English poet whose sonnets mandate that the reader's attention alternate between surface and depth. In his discussion of the early modern sonnet, which focuses primarily on William Shakespeare but also includes Sidney in its purview, Joel Fineman traces the ways in which the self-conscious rhetoricity of the Renaissance lyric presents not an increasing sense of "subjectivity"—that is, not an amplification of the poem as a site of individuation, of transparent access to an authorizing selfhood projected through the lyric *I*—but rather an increasing sense of the "*merely literary*" status of the poem's utterance (10), a recognition of artifice and flourish. The lyric's first-person enunciations are set against the flamboyantly aesthetic phenomena of poetics to produce an effect that Fineman calls "reflexive reflection," a field that oscillates between surface and depth. The language of Fineman's argument demonstrates the proximity of Sidney's treatise to Alberti's: designating the two positions in tension within lyric *mimesis* and *metaphor*, Fineman concludes, "Thus, rather famously, mimesis is transparent, or it pictures, or it mirrors, or it reflects that which like a lucid window it presents. Metaphor, in complementary contrast, is opaque, a color, shade or shading whose dazzling, veiling brightness adds a shine or sheen to that which like a lamp it will light up" (10–11).

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For his part, Shakespeare seems well aware of the ways in which the reflexive reflectiveness of the lyric field—the competing yet simultaneous demands of the opaque metaphoric *velum* and the pellucid mimetic window—operates not unlike the field of perspectival art. Shakespeare engages these ideas fairly explicitly in sonnet 24, a poem that inhabits the troubled relation between the aesthetic surface and the subject it communicates.[25]

Mine eye hath play'd the painter and hath steeld,
Thy beauties forme in table of my heart,
My body is the frame wherein 'tis held,
And perspective it is best Painters art.
For through the Painter must you see his skill,
To find where your true Image pictur'd lies,
Which in my bosomes shop is hanging stil,
That hath his windowes glazed with thine eyes:
Now see what good-turnes eyes for eies have done,
Mine eyes have drawne thy shape, and thine for me
Are windowes to my brest, where-through the Sun
Delights to peepe, to gaze therein on thee
Yet eyes this cunning want to grace their art
They draw but what they see, know not the hart.

Fineman points out the familiar courtly conceit of the beloved's image being drawn (or "steeld," or "stelled," with a suggestive echo of Sidney's Stella as both star and icon) upon the speaker's heart,[26] and he also notes the equally commonplace declarations of the closing couplet, which "insist upon the superficiality of visual appearance." But he goes on to recognize that the sonnet disorients in the "abruptness with which these two familiar commonplaces are deployed against each other, so that the suddenly announced 'yet' of the couplet is given as both the inexorable, but also as the inexplicable, conclusion to the idealizing lines that it succeeds" (137). In other words, the conventional claims of the poem's first twelve lines contradict the conventional claims of the poem's final two lines. Fineman's argument identifies this conflict as expressing what he calls the sonnet's "uncertainties" about its aesthetic project and links the poem's obscurity of vision to "the distinctively twisted syntax of the sonnet," which holds its ideals in grammatical indeterminacy and blocks semantic clarity (138). As Stephen Booth points out (though he does not consider the matter in the terms of the present study), the sonnet's use of the word *perspective* enacts this balance of transparency and obscurity: "since a reader is called upon to decide whether *perspective* is used adverbially . . . or as a noun (of which the pronoun *it* [in line 4] is a redundant duplication), the reader is likely to understand the construction both ways" (173). This grammatical ambiguity is amplified by the poem's ambiguous argument about perspective itself: does the poem celebrate perspective as the pinnacle of artistic method for fleshing out as in a deep field a "true Image" of the beloved? Or does it draw attention to the aesthetic surface for its own sake, asserting the painter's "skill" as the self-conscious object of the gaze? Does *perspective* live up to its etymological promise of *looking-through*, operating as a set of transparent "windowes"? Or are those windows "glazed," an opaque "table" on which the image is gaudily "steeld"? The contradictory conventions that Fineman catalogs dramatize the tensions between transparency and objecthood, narrative depth and aesthetic surface, signified and sign that perspective performs.

I have focused in this essay on sonnets by Sidney and Shakespeare because these poems foreground their engagement with the concerns of perspectival art by thematizing, often with striking explicitness, its contradictory imperatives. The poems I have been examining here simultaneously recognize the tensions inherent in a visual art form that pits the semantic meaninglessness of structure against narrative meaning and perform

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those tensions in the lyric field of the sonnet. That both Shakespeare and Sidney seize upon the discourse of visual representation to enact aesthetic interruption in lyric poems suggests an acknowledgment of essential sympathy between the two art forms that extends even to their interpretive challenges. However, the effects I have been describing here are certainly not limited to poems about painting. Indeed, the denarrativizing effects of lyric become more and more pronounced over the course of the mode's flowering in the English sixteenth century, out of which Sidney and Shakespeare develop as mature blooms and propagate beyond their historical moment (if one can be forgiven for drawing out that metaphor so vigorously). The triumph of the lyric in the high Renaissance is also, finally, a triumph of the aesthetic as distinct from the transparentizing demands of story. Lyric's dominance in the Renaissance reflects a wider cultural valorization of the experiential and materializing priorities of the aesthetic, an affirmation of objective, apprehensible elements for their own sake, their meaning unyoked from the obligation to narrative. Lyric's speaking picture reveals that Alberti's *velum* is not accessory to but constitutive of the presence achieved by Alberti's window.

The brief analyses I have offered in this essay begin to illuminate lyric's self-aware grappling with the status and location of meaning and with the presencing function of signs. I hope to suggest the promising avenues of critical reading that might be available with a recognition of the self-conscious rhetoricity of the early modern lyric and of its profound investments in the explicit performance of artifice. Continuing consideration of the cultural forces that inform artistic practice across a variety of disciplines can only enrich our understanding of how developments in science and theology (to name just two fields whose interests obviously intersect with the questions I have been exploring here) contribute to this shift toward denarrativization in the early modern era.[27] As the aesthetic develops into what Jay describes as the "full denarrativization" (51) of twentieth-century abstract art (and its equally denarrativized lyric cognates), we would do well to appreciate the intellectual climate of the Renaissance, whose effects continue to be felt in the aesthetic projects of our poststructural postmodernity.

Notes

I am indebted to Clark Hulse, Bruce Smith, and Rana Choi and to the graduate students and faculty members of the Renaissance Workshop at the University of Chicago for their searching and energetic responses to earlier drafts of this essay. Without the clarifying insight and intellectual generosity of Matthew Ancell, this project would have remained an inkling.

1. I concentrate here on poems in English because it is the language whose subtleties I can most responsibly apprehend; studies that address the aesthetic relation between perspectival art and literature in various continental vernaculars include Atkinson; Eriksen; Jodogne; and Vena. Many works document the pervasive importance of Horace's aphorism to English letters; major studies include Hagstrum; Hulse; and Wellek. Gilman's seminal book *The Curious Perspective* surveys the particular influence of perspectival art on early modern English poetry, delineating the transmission of Italian artworks, art practices, and aesthetic discourse to early modern England (50–66). Gent provides an important caution about England's isolation from continental visual culture, though she confirms that "considerable numbers of copies of perspective treatises and architectural treatises (many of which discuss perspective) can be traced in England at the time" (25).

2. Studies that examine how early modern rhetoric emulates pictorial styles include, among many others, Bender; Meek; and Trevisan. Thorne understands the vanishing point in perspectival art as a figure that underwrites the principle of a singular rhetorical viewpoint.

3. The Latin text of *De pictura* and its English translation appear on facing pages in Cecil Grayson's edition of the work (Alberti). Unless otherwise noted, all Latin and English quotations from this text are taken from this source. I have made some clarifying modifications to Grayson's translation in this passage.

4. Alberti's innovation was not the only method of organizing the visual space of a canvas; however, as Alpers points out, "the Albertian definition of the picture" dominated art historical analysis through the late twentieth century, relegating other methods—such as the descriptive organization

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of seventeenth-century Dutch art that Alpers examines—to a contingent or ancillary role. Alpers's objection to the model of Italian perspectival art is that "[i]t is a narrative art" (xix), distinguished by its focus on the painting's narrative content, or *istoria*. I would counter that viewing perspectival art as achieving window-like narrative "depth" overlooks the textualizing, nonnarrative effects of linear perspective. For the ways in which humanism's rationalization of content (of which linear perspective is one expression) is appropriated by and retheorized in mannerism, see Klein 43–61.

5. Elkins traces the history of criticism that sees perspective alternately as "meaningful" and "meaningless" (1–44). Beyond those I refer to in this essay, major voices in the critical conversation about the meaning of perspective include Ivins; Damisch.

6. In addition to acknowledging that the vanishing point of perspective assumes that the viewer apprehends the painting with an unnatural "single and immobile eye," Panofsky notes that the "more or less pure parallelism of oblique orthogonals" leaves the central space of a painting out of proportion (31). The artist would conceal the disproportional space with "an escutcheon, a festoon, a bit of drapery or some other perspectival fig leaf" (40).

7. For a full exploration of perspectival inconsistency, see Elkins 217–47.

8. Reflecting on Elkins's argument about how linear perspective thwarts geometric coherence, Grootenboer muses that art history's long-standing focus on the presumed transparency of Alberti's window has blinded scholars to the errors of perspective, turning the window figure itself into a fig leaf that conceals discrepancy in the service of an idealized geometric unity (115).

9. Gombrich observes that perspective is practically inseparable from the "problems" it raises and their consequent "impairment of the compositional pattern" (*Heritage* 131, 153n62).

10. Elkin's use of terms that semioticians may be inclined to think of as belonging to their own province has a long precedent: Alberti begins his treatise on painting with the declaration that painting traffics in signs, which he defines as "quicquid in superficie ita insit ut possit oculo conspici" ("anything present on a surface so that it is visible to the eye" [36–37; my trans.]).

11. For commentary on these and other discrepancies, see Edgerton 77–88 and Bryson, *Vision*, esp. 109–10.

12. For examples of these three approaches, see, respectively, Field, *Invention*; Kern; and Janson.

13. Still, Elkins—with a fastidiousness that matches Piero's—inventories several instances of perspectival fudging in the painting (138, 149).

14. Although *istoria*, as Anthony Grafton explains, activates "a range of meanings," that range encompasses both events and narrative accounts of those events (48).

15. I would take issue with Grootenboer—and de Man—in their use of the term *allegory* for the obstructive processes of reading the aesthetic they describe, but this essay affirms their shared conclusion about the peculiar potency of aesthetic objects to draw attention to the act of perception.

16. Jay links this shift to the scientific revolution's developing epistemologies, which reconceived the operation of optical perception; where formerly it had been understood as "reading the world as an intelligible text (the 'book of nature')," now it was understood as "looking at [the world] as an observable but meaningless object" (51).

17. Grootenboer (163) and Cook (18) explain their respective uses of the term *presence* to describe an experiential effect of perspective's contradictions. Alpers's study of Dutch art notes that an aesthetic insistence on "visual presence" is linked to a "curious lack of meaningful depth" (187).

18. Critics who explore the relation between painting and poetry in early modern vernaculars other than English include Amann; Campo; Lee; Mirollo; and Unglaub. Their studies do not consider the disruptive rhetorical dynamic I address here.

19. The "virtually Catholic sense" of Grootenboer's verb *monstrate* refers to the act of exhibiting or drawing attention to an object (e.g., the elements of the Eucharist) for contemplation or veneration. Though he does not use *monstrate* to describe the interpretive dynamic he explores, Netzley arrives at a similar conclusion about lyric poetry: that it draws attention to the act of reading for its own sake.

20. On Sidney's indebtedness to continental literature and philosophy, see Fabry; Kennedy; and Miller. Gent documents Sidney's interest in the methods of Italian painting generally and in Alberti specifically.

21. Hulse details Hilliard's discussion of the strategies he uses to emphasize the material surfaces of his paintings through ornament and *imprese* (115–56).

22. Critics who examine Sidney's engagement with the visual arts—with a focus on his interest in mimesis—include Arnaudo; Heninger. Most critical examinations of Sidney's appropriation of the discourses of visual art center on *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*, whose pages are rich with tapestries, paintings, ornamentally inlaid tables, heraldry, and the genteel discussion thereof. While such investigations (e.g., Kingsley-Smith; Parker) alert readers to Sidney's enduring awareness of the pictorial arts, their focus on Sidney's writings *about* art (that is, on Sidney's *content*) has largely preempted a discussion of the ways in which his aesthetic (that is, *formal*) strategies engage with these same concerns.

23. Braden discusses the sonnet tradition's investment in the literary (as opposed to erotic) ends of lyric seduction, and Vickers describes the sonnet's valorization of the "glossy rhetorical surface" for its own sake (108).

24. Dubrow argues that deixis produces (perhaps illusorily) a stable viewpoint (esp. 32–34); Culler signals the tension between poetic surface and depth when he describes apostrophe as "a device which the poetic subject

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uses to establish with the object a relationship that helps to constitute the subject itself as poetic" (*Theory* 216; see also *Pursuit* 135–54).

25. Mead's examination of this sonnet is especially sensitive to the variety of ways in which it propounds (argumentatively, grammatically, formally) the capacity of artifice to frustrate narrative depth.

26. Booth notes that "stell'd" is the "generally accepted emendation" for the quarto edition's "steeld" and inventories all the modes of art suggested by both terms, including engraving, inscribing with a stylus, and cutting glass with a gem (173).

27. Friedberg, for instance, pursues Alberti's painterly metaphor into its state-of-the-art expressions in the virtual windows of the computer screen.

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