the changing profession

Looking: Literature's Other

MARY ANN CAWS

Understanding, seeing. Describing a flower: relative poetry more or less paper flower. Seeing.

—Tristan Tzara, "Note on Art" (1917)

SO MUCH IS CHANCE, ESPECIALLY WHAT YOU SEE OR DON'T. TOM WOLFE'S HILARIOUS SPOOF IN *THE PAINTED WORD* SERVES as a caution about our desire for sudden revelation:

> All these years I, like so many others, had stood in front of a thousand, two thousand, God-knows-how-many thousand Pollocks, de Koonings, Newmans, Nolands, Rothkos, Rauschenbergs, Judds, Johnses, Olitskis, Louises, Stills, Franz Klines, Frankenthalers, Kellys, and Frank Stellas, now squinting, now popping the eye sockets open, now drawing back, now moving closer—waiting, waiting, forever waiting for . . . *it* . . . for *it* to come into focus, namely, the visual reward (for so much effort) which must be there, which everyone (*tout le monde*) knew to be there. . . .
>
> (4; first two ellipses in orig.)

Arthur Danto's meditation, in his "Works of Art and Mere Real Things," on a square of red paint and its various possible readings serves as a warning about multiple interpretations. This painting might be a story of the Egyptians and the Red Sea, after the Israelites crossed over. Or, then, a work by a Danish portraitist, labeled "Kierkegaard's Mood." Or, then, one by a politically active painter, "Red Square." Or by a disciple of Henri Matisse, "Red Table Cloth"—in this one, the paint would be more thickly applied. In my view, the most appropriate state we can muster is what the surrealists called "availability" (*disponibilité*)—openness to whatever might, of a sudden, happen in our understanding to achieve a *presentness of perception*, even as we note the clear risk of boundary crossings between the arts.

One of the major reasons to continue these venturings, with all their problems fully in sight, is a particular energizing of our faculties they may provoke. My own experience upon an encounter with one of Robert Motherwell's *Open*s exemplified this for me (fig. 1). My writing and its style felt

MARY ANN CAWS, Distinguished Professor of English, French, and Comparative Literature at the Graduate Center, City University of New York, is the author, most recently, of *Picasso's Weeping Woman: The Life and Art of Dora Maar* (Bulfinch, 2000), *Virginia Woolf: Overlook Illustrated Lives* (Overlook, 2002), *Marcel Proust: Overlook Illustrated Lives* (Overlook, 2003), *Robert Motherwell with Pen and Brush* (Reaktion, 2003), and *To the Boathouse: A Memoir* (U of Alabama P, 2004). She is also the editor and a cotranslator of *The Yale Book of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* (Yale UP, 2004) and *Surrealism* (Phaidon, 2004). Forthcoming are *Pablo Picasso* (Critical Lives [Reaktion]), *Henry James: Overlook Illustrated Lives* (Overlook), and *Extraordinary Women* (Palgrave).

© 2004 BY THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

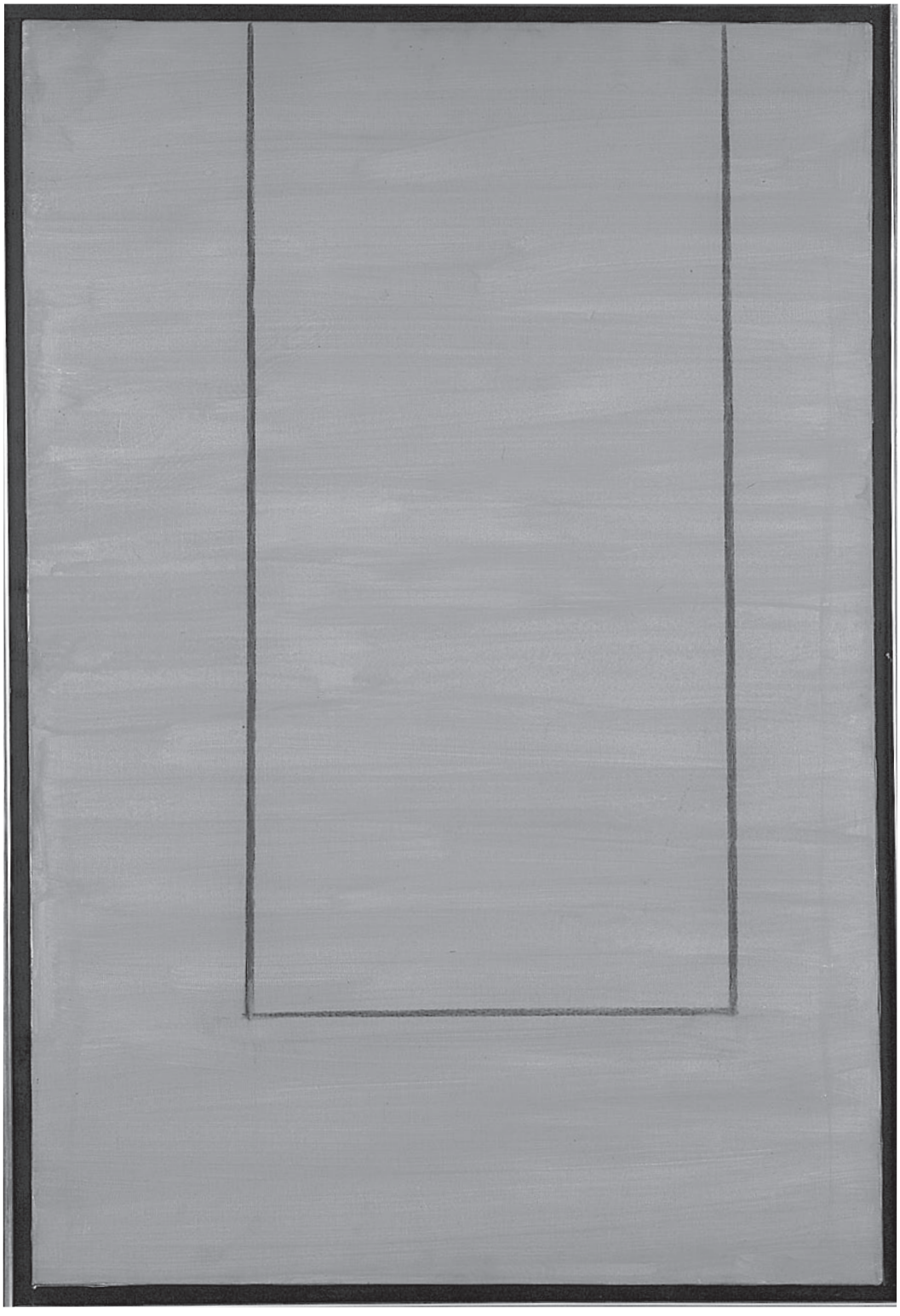


FIG. 1

Robert Motherwell, *Open Study #4*, 1968, acrylic on canvas, 36″ × 24″ (91.4 × 60.1 cm). © 2003 Dedalus Foundation, Inc. / Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the shock instantly. The way his canvases propped up against each other in his studio had suggested to him first a French window/door and then a window opening out instead from the top frame and beyond it—such a possibility portrayed by such simple lines—conveyed to me a freedom of visionary thinking hitherto unimaginable: "Seeing by seeing," Ludwig Wittgenstein proclaims (77e).

Perhaps we are no longer obsessed by size as it relates to gender. In the time of the abstract expressionists, Bigger seemed not only Better but also related to maleness. I well remember Motherwell longing for "a whole wall to paint on," even as his *Open*s were already leading to a larger point of view.

And by this time, of course, women creators like Joan Mitchell, Eva Hesse, Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, and Carolee Schneemann were recognized, in the world of lit crit as in that of art crit.[1] The turn away from the high and large drama of the New York school painters of the 1950s led to the understatement of minimalism, to the flat, nontextured paint surfaces and nonillusionist space of, for instance, Agnes Martin's penciled grids (Chadwick 331).[2]

In any case, for the free-spirited, format is not determining. Today Hedda Sterne, the only woman among the original Irascibles—a group protesting again the backward-looking Metropolitan Museum of Art, as they saw it in 1950—continues as one of the free spirits. Exulting in the new space, dazzled by the new world upon her arrival in New York from Romania in 1941, she found herself a newborn painter. The *New York, New York* works of 1943–44 shout of the here and now. The windows in those paintings, seen right out the painter's back door from the kitchen, have the same unchallengeable reality as the majestic height and strangely energetic calm of her *Backyard Tree* (fig. 2), a predecessor of her smaller and no less powerful renderings of trees done in 1994 and later. About the trees' growing down as well as up, she refers to Simone Weil—they take their nourishment from the sun. Each seems to form *conduit*, as Paul Klee would have said: this is just what Hedda Sterne finds herself to be.



FIG. 2
Hedda Sterne, *Backyard Tree*, 1968, oil on canvas, 88″ × 26″ (223.5 × 66.0 cm).

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Receiving and leading toward: her paintings of highways or roads of 1957 lead to the limitless horizons of the Vertical/Horizontal series. The greatest of her works, in my view, stretches the epic length of a long wall and could have extended without limit, beyond that horizon where space bends (fig. 3). It is about reflection, in which refracting crystalline prisms compose a translucent shimmer both lyric and architectural, leading up and down in pyramids, angling off, receding and advancing in triangles, and endlessly going on. The construction connotes many things at once: among others, a forest, a cathedral, and a house of marvels and both the Star of David and a Christian star, all branching, like the trees, into light.

Expansiveness and sparseness are the two qualities I would most readily ascribe to Hedda Sterne and all her studies of roads and reflections, which quietly compose a lesson in *free seeing*. Here the stretch is up to the observer looking on and in.

The Poetic Turn

The increasing emphasis on the materiality of artwork might lead us to a renewed attention to the bodily intuitions and senses often found in the observations about art by poets. On leaving the Metropolitan Museum, the poet Mark Doty found his mind filled with the light from one tiny canvas: *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*, by Jan Davidsz de Heem. It was exhibited in a glass case in the museum, "so that one bends and looks down into its bronzy, autumnal atmosphere." He describes a collective experience:

> [W]e are all walking in the light of a wedge of lemon, four oysters, a half-glass of wine, a cluster of green grapes with a few curling leaves still attached to their stem. This light is enough to reveal us as we are, bound together, in the warmth and good light of habitation, in the good and fleshly aliveness of us. . . . As if, added to the fragrance evoked by the sharp pulp of the lemon, and the acidic wine, and the salty marsh-scent of the oysters, were some fragrance the light itself carried.

The painting asserts how pleasure, aesthetic and bodily, is "to be represented, framed, set apart; that pleasure is to be honored. That the world is a dialogue between degrees of transparency . . . reflectivity" (4–5). Doty's reflection sets itself—or, then, we set it—in dialogue with Hedda Sterne's translucency and reflection, as with Jonathan Miller's *On Reflection*.

Among the modern writers we think of as special conveyors of visual experience, Henry James, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf seem prime examples of the kind of subtle art looking that can make our own writing about looking more vivid. One of the best-known cases is James's construction in *The Ambassadors* of an impressionist scene in which Madeleine de Vionnet comes down a stream with Chad toward the observing Strether—the focus is as clear and bright as the bowl of strawberries at the lunch by the window. To see through Strether's eyes is to understand in what ways the Jamesian observer is at once passive and comprehending—but it is always as if

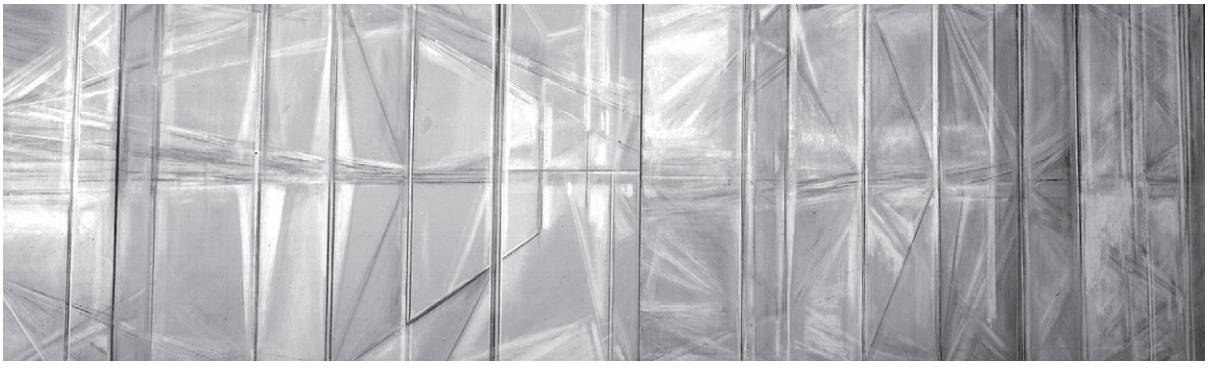


FIG. 3
Hedda Sterne, *Reflection*, 1987, oil pastel on canvas, 50″ × 160″ (127.0 × 406.4 cm).

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

we, the readers, were to grasp the scene and, with it, the situation before the in-text observer, who is or is not reliable. Reading James, as many have said, makes you feel intelligent, even as you know perfectly well you are being co-opted into thinking so by the crafty author. The delight is, in most cases, enhanced by our conscious memory of the impressionist paintings we have most loved and seen most frequently. It is like looking at a Monet we haven't seen before, but what we have seen and what we recognize open our observing eyes to the scene, verbal as well as visual.

A year later, in *The Wings of the Dove*, Milly Theale contemplates, in the Uffizi Gallery, a Bronzino—not, interestingly, an actual one but one sufficiently familiar for us to see exactly what she sees: the lady in the red dress before her, so sad, so sad, causes her eyes to fill with tears. This is not just the simple, if totally understandable, self-indulgence of a romantic heroine full of pity at her own fate, for the intelligence of art and the history of aesthetic creation cooperate in telling the tale—and, in so doing, appeal to our own observing faculties. We see what we have so often seen, in that museum or another and in reproductions of Bronzino: the figure's finger often in a half-closed book, the heavy fabric of the clothing—here the full red imagined by Milly, and by us. The fact that it is not a real Bronzino but one that depends on our imagination and connoisseurship, as we see through Milly's eyes, only heightens our sense of participation in the view and magnifies the pity of it all. As in the Greek theater, our imaginative participation opens up the text to a catharsis. But for me the turning point in visual-verbal imagining is *The Golden Bowl*, with its illusion of clarity and its real crack, the bowl so self-containing. . . .

What, says the reader, could be more wonderful than the way Proust looks, throughout *À la recherche du temps perdu*, at works of art through the narrator's eyes, or how, from a painting in Vittore Carpaccio's Saint Ursula series—the one with the greeting of the ambassadors—the designer Mariano Fortuny might have borrowed the pattern on the cloak of one of the Compagnons de Calza for his own material, so that Marcel can throw the cloak around the shoulders of his Albertine? Such references seem to lend to the reading the kind of "thick description" that Clifford Geertz analyzed—bringing art to text, and the text to life.

As for Woolf, the character of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* is posited on and revolves about this (woman) painter's construction of her work. As she moves the salt and pepper shakers at dinner, thinking through the positions of the figures in her canvas-to-be, shuffling the possibilities in her mind, we create that canvas with her. And then the many-leveled framing play in *The Waves* is downright exciting to the observant reader of frames, edges, and structures.

Those moments from James, Proust, and Woolf exemplify the summons of the visual by the verbal in the early twentieth century. Going on from there, it has increasingly seemed to me that a glance at even a few of the many possible elements related to the look can yield vitalizing comparisons.

Detail, Focus, Point

The detail that punctures our attention, like Roland Barthes's *punctum* in his *Camera Lucida*, opposed to the general *studium* of the photograph, holds us as viewers, like a haiku, says Barthes. It does not develop into something but causes us to enter into the spectacle, being what can't be named, Barthes says in *Le texte et l'image*: "Ce que je peux nommer ne peut réellement me poindre" 'What I can name can't really puncture me' (118; my trans.). Its nameless penetrating power—like Cupid's arrow or those aimed at Saint Sebastian—entails the notion of risk in the choice of detail and in the return gaze (Elkins; Schor; Arasse). Look answers look; detail accumulates; meanings and interpretations transfer. To point at a detail verbally or visually is to signal its distinctive "thisness" (like John Duns Scotus's *haecceitas*), the particularity that makes up Gerard Manley Hopkins's "inscape" (xx, 119, 124).

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press



FIG. 4
Édouard Manet, *Young Lady in 1866* (*Woman with a Parrot*), 1866, oil on canvas, 72 7/8″ × 50 5/8″ (185.1 × 128.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Erwin Davis, 1889 (89.21.3). Photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mieke Bal points out how Édouard Manet's *Young Lady in 1866* (*Woman with a Parrot* [1866; fig. 4]) answers Gustave Courbet's *Woman with a Parrot* (1866; fig. 5). Bal focuses on the bit of orange peel at the lower right of Manet's canvas and how it reflects on both the inside and the outside of the fruit. In Courbet the parrot bites the naked woman's hand, whereas in Manet it is safely on its perch. But, asks Bal, what if it had already gone down to nibble on the orange peel (*Exposures* 105–07)? No perch guarantees stability in painting, clearly, for there is always the moment before. Furthermore, since the model for Manet's painting is—yet again!—Victorine Meurent, we may well find our thoughts focusing on his *Olympia*, with the same model, from the ribbon on whose neck Michel Leiris so brilliantly hung his book-length thoughts in *Le ruban au cou d'Olympia*.[3]

To point at the detail or the generalized *punctum* is already a charged movement: it does not have to be eroticized or invasive, but it may well be. A privileged example of the pointing gesture's erotic play is the sculptor Bernini's portrayal of Saint Teresa's pain and delight as she is smitten by that smiling Cupid who knows (we know too) what he is doing: it even figures on the cover of Jacques Lacan's *Écrits*.[4] Don't stop, she says, more or less (fig. 6). A poem by Richard Crashaw about that wounding sends us straight back to Gerhard Seghers's painting on the same subject, and when Susan Stewart starts in on Saint Teresa's foot, in her recent *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (190), I feel afresh in a community of not just readers but also viewers (Caws, *Eye* 42–44).

A favorite device stresses the gesture itself, like Stéphane Mallarmé's angel pointing silently in his "Sainte" or the finger, signed "A. Klang," in Marcel Duchamp's *Tu m'*, a work gesturing back to the many pointings in Dada and surrealism, including the *Dada Manifestos* of Tristan Tzara and the drawings of the



FIG. 5
Gustave Courbet, *Woman with a Parrot*, 1866, oil on canvas, 51″ × 77″ (129.5 × 195.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, H.O. Havemeyer Collection, Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929 (29.100.57). Photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press



FIG. 6
Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647–52, polychromed marble, gilt, bronze, yellow glass, fresco, and stucco. Cornaro Chapel, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome. Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

surrealist Robert Desnos and on implicitly to Duchamp's own *Etant donnés*, with its nude woman splayed open and holding up a lamp (Caws, *Art* 86–102). In our viewer's mind, we extend this to various Renaissance and baroque Annunciation scenarios, where the angel points to Mary. In a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, "Annunciation to Mary," the last line is separated from the rest, as if doing its own pointing, by extension of the imagination, at the virgin, its own emphatically phallic gesture, efficacious toward the virgin birth, after all the onlookers have vanished from the scene, the room, and the poem:

> Dann sang der Engel seine Melodie.
>
> It was then the angel sang his melody.
> (Caws, *Eye* 117–18)

The erotic charge of this line is, in my view, both terrifying and unequaled.[5]

Framing

More complex comparisons hold us, such as that between Wallace Stevens and Tintoretto—"Peter Quince at the Clavier" and *Susanna and the Elders*, where the poem plays on echoes of ocular rape and the sound of the viol, an instrument whose name suggests *violate* or the French *viol*. Hearing is a counterpart of the looking I am concentrating on.

One of the more notable (and often noted) cases is that of W. H. Auden and William Carlos Williams and the painting by Pieter Brueghel the Elder they wrote poems about. Brueghel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* sets up the relative unimportance of the boy's fate against, on one hand, the daily work of the farmer plowing and, on the other, the elegant luxury ship as it goes its splendid way, contrasting the immense mythic catastrophe and the uncaring universe (fig. 7). Williams does it in "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by inserting the boy's fate into a series



FIG. 7
Pieter Brueghel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, c. 1558, oil on canvas, mounted on wood, 28 7/8″ × 44 1/8″ (73.5 × 112 cm). Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of gerundives, from "ploughing" to "drowning," where we hear just what we see: a making ordinary of the fearful event. It is, like any human occurrence, just another moment swallowed up in nature, like the farmer's work, necessary to the ongoingness of the world. As Wendy Steiner says of Williams's work on Breughel, "There is a 'special' place which poems, as all works of art, must occupy. . . . [I]t is quite definitely the same as that where bricks or colored threads are handled" (72).

Auden distances the event in "Musée des Beaux Arts" by initially generalizing about the wisdom of great old creators (the Old Masters) concerning the wide range of human tragedy and its smallness by comparison with the rest of the world and then, even more, by locating and so limiting the event within a canvas, by a painter, in a museum. The two very different kinds of framing—in the case of Williams, interior to the grammar of the poem and, in the case of Auden, architectural and exterior to the painting and the poem—illustrate the use of what we think of as art techniques to consider textualities.

Take all the analyses of framing in our adjoining fields, starting with Meyer Schapiro's seminal study of framing (*Theory* 1–32) and going on to Jacques Derrida's analysis of the parergon, in his *The Truth in Painting*, and his debate with John Searle in *Limited Inc* over what is and is not a part of the text. David Sylvester is a good guide to the modern forms of perceptual framing. He points out, for example, how Pierre Bonnard relates forms not to the vertical and horizontal straight lines at the limits of the picture but to lines in the middle (107). A table, for having breakfast or arranging one's toilet, may give an interior focus to the work. Barnett Newman's rigorous idiom, with a dividing and joining line (the "zip") up or across the center of his paintings, gives his work a tactile value, so intense "in the presence of its verticals" that he joins the great Romantic tradition of sublime landscape. Newman said of his painting that it should above all provide the viewers with a "sense of place," an awareness of themselves and the fact of being right there. But it also, says Sylvester, "sanctifies our separateness" (325–27).

Once we train our attention—a useful concept, as in Frank Kermode's *Forms of Attention*—so we notice interior frames in paintings, as in texts, we tend to become aware of some ex-

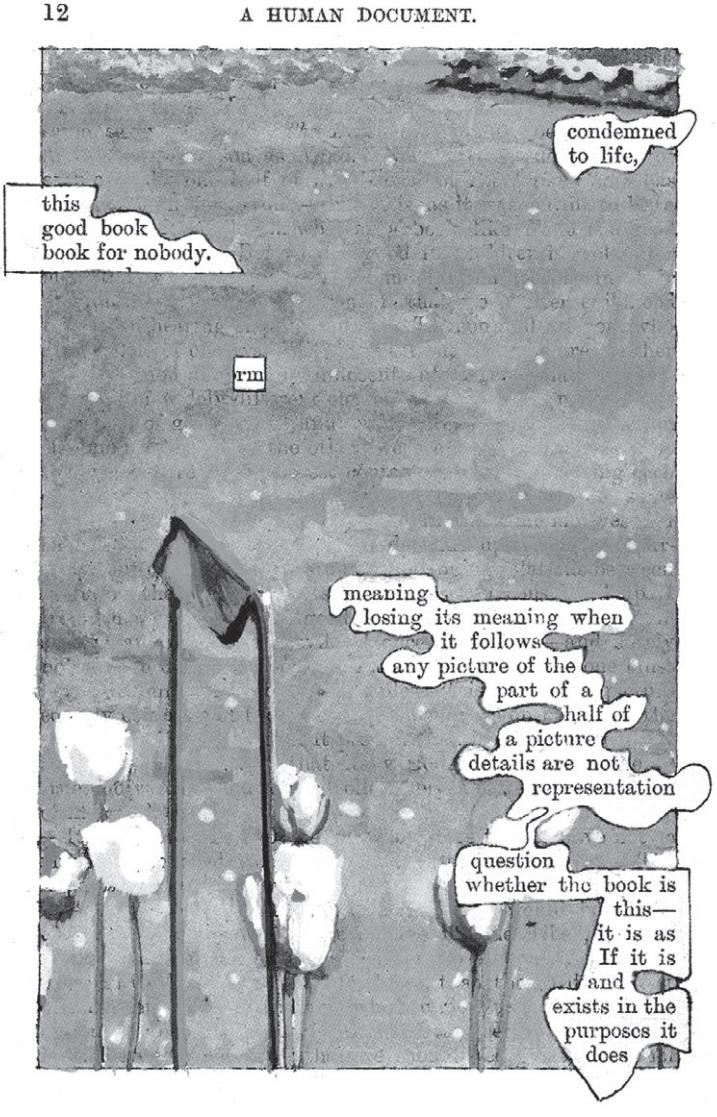
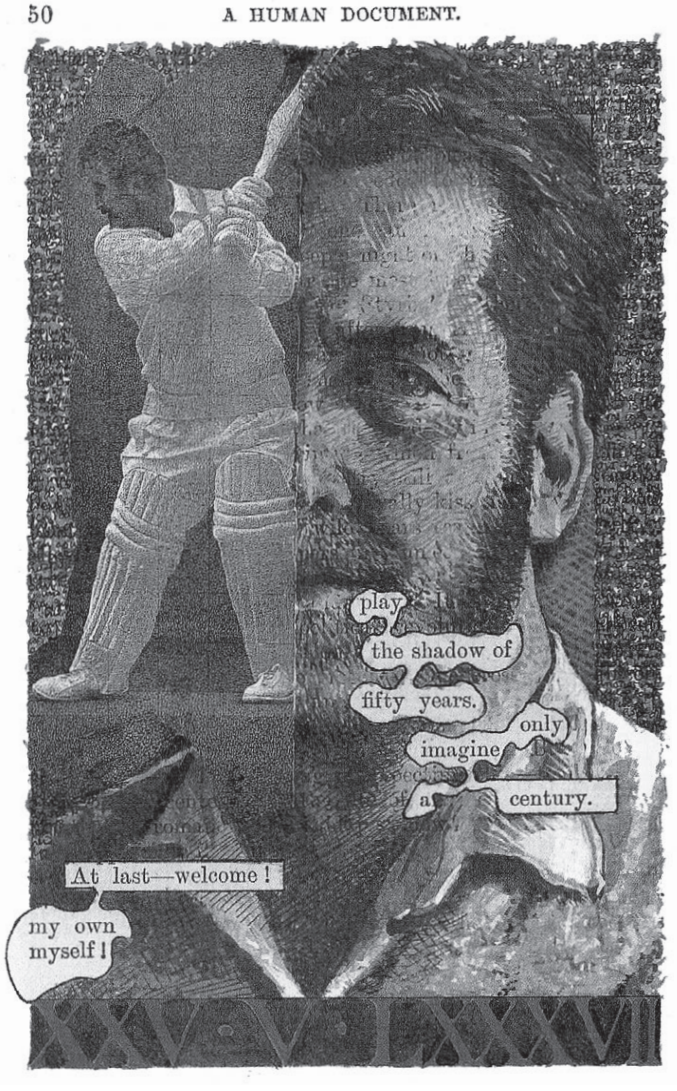


FIG. 8
Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Thames, 1997) 12, 50.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

traordinary complex constructions. Take a small work by Édouard Vuillard, that master of interiors, found in the National Gallery's collection of "small French paintings." Unexcitingly entitled *Vase of Flowers on a Mantelpiece* (1900), it contains at least nine interior frames, complete or partial, including an unattached vertical line on the left, leading from a heap of flowered material humped like a sofa part; the heavy black lines of a chimney; the gold frame of a mirror behind the mantel (on which sits, yes, the little vase of flowers); and in the mirror five canvases reflected, in their own frames. Yet we might easily not notice: we have to learn to look.



Interference, Superposition

We delight in the *interference*, in a positive sense, between letter and image—from religious paintings, where divine words are written on banners held by angels, to more recent constructions like Tom Phillips's *Humument* (fig. 8), *The Mechanism of Meaning*, by Arakawa and Madeline Gins (fig. 9), and many others. Pierre Alechinsky superposes his drawings over Erik Satie's musical scores and writes the titles backward to call attention to their paradoxes. Each of these works brings multiple layers of meaning to bear, building up layers of reading. Things, letters, shapes, ideas, feelings pile up, intensify the reading/viewing experience, its parts inseparable.

Those accumulations intensify our reading and seeing. The shawl scenes in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (100) may well take us right back to Proust's haunting by the design of the Fortuny cloak and by Albertine wrapped in it. In turn, this cloak may haunt our reading of his mother's throwing a shawl over his shoulders in Saint Mark's Church in Venice, and of another Carpaccio painting, of the arrival of the ambassadors, in which she will always be, in the corner, waiting and turned toward him—and so toward us.

Critical interpretations build on the original source in like manner: Martin Heidegger's reading of Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* (fig. 10), followed by Schapiro's (*Theory* 135–52) and Derrida's readings, gives that painting an extraordinary weight, as do Erwin Panofsky's and Louis Marin's of Nicolas Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* (fig. 11)—both the origin and the rethinkings continue to illuminate our looking and relookings. These are our Jamesian *revisions.*

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

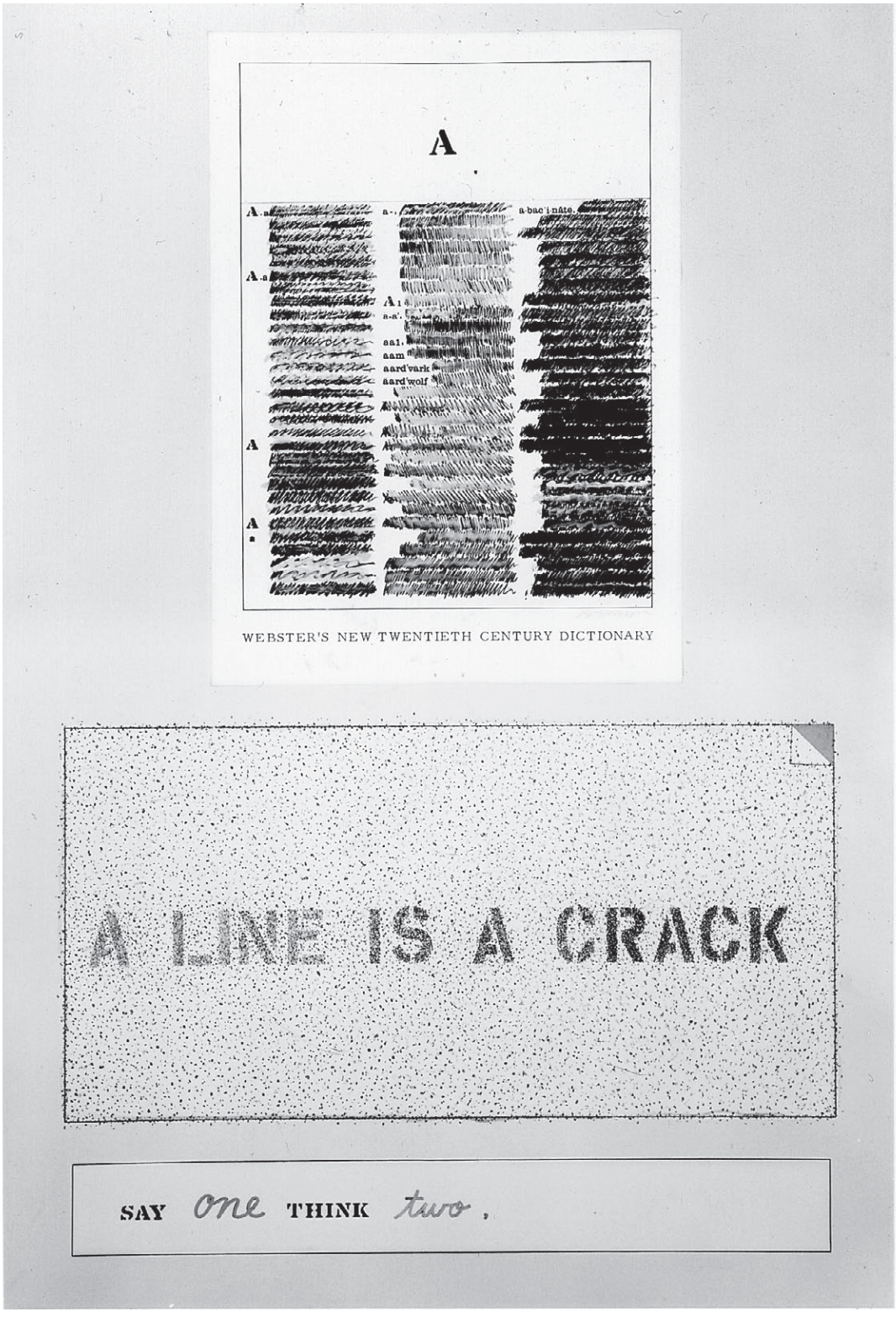


FIG. 9
Arakawa and Madeline Gins, panel 3 of sec. 7, "Splitting of Meaning," from *The Mechanism of Meaning*, 1963–73, acrylic and oil on canvas.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press



FIG. 10
Vincent van Gogh, *A Pair of Shoes*, 1885, oil on canvas, 14¾″ × 17¾″ (37.5 × 45 cm). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Art Resource, NY.

Spacing, Distance, Rhythm

Still lifes can project a communicative power like no other: Bal's analysis of Proust's invocation of Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's *The Skate* is an example of powerful literary-art writing (*Screen* 313–65). The ways the objects in a still life crowd into one another, like the lists in literary texts that have occasioned so much recent interest—enumeration after enumeration, thing after thing—convey a kind of breathlessness at once irritating and impassioning. The excitement provoked by this feeling of too-muchness, too-closeness, can endure the length of the observation or the experience. On the other hand, the spacing of the objects, the distance between one and the next—like the white space of the page Mallarmé experimented with in his *Coup de dés*, like the silent spaces between André du Bouchet's words, making the reader responsible for a singular way of seeing and hearing each word in each poem—provokes no less powerful an emotion. This is the world of objects, the essential stage of still life, in which the modest domestic shapes, their humble everydayness, are regally compensated by their arrangement. We think of Paul Cézanne's *Apples*. Drama is here too.

A prolonged look at Nicolas de Staël's *Still Life with Blue Background*, just a white shelf holding a few elemental objects, or at a setting by Giorgio Morandi of a few bottles may, if we are fortunate in our gaze, develop in us a heightened sensitivity to shape and spacing. Staël said of himself that he was always slow in his work, yet the effect of his "frappe" may strike the viewer as so many high-colored *éclairs*, or flashes.[6] We have to take time to look, as in Norman Bryson's wonderful title for his still life studies, *Looking at the Overlooked*, and

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press



FIG. 11
Nicolas Poussin, *The Shepherds of Arcadia (Et in Arcadia Ego)*, c. 1638–40, oil on canvas, 33½″ × 47⅝″ (85 × 121 cm). Louvre, Paris. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

in Rosemary Lloyd's *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life*.

I am fascinated with the different solutions to the problems of spacing and depth that some contemporary still life painters apply. They might use lighter or darker shapes or outlines behind the foregrounded objects to prolong the objects' effect or use dark or even black backgrounds to deepen them, as did Juan Sánchez Cotán and other masters of the Spanish still life, who could make two or three lemons into a universe, like the lemon invoked in Mark Doty's poetic prose. We know the despairing black of the backgrounds for Francisco de Goya's *Disasters of War* but find it no less remarkable behind his piled-up fish on a plate, their faces gasping, so near ours. We are pulled straight up to the table, with a horror-filled admiration. These things stick in the mind, and in the gullet. Different from Goya and many years later, William Scott takes a mackerel, dabs its skin with sparkles, surrounds it with darkness, and creates a wholly different world, still on a plate.

Suggestion and implication can develop a staging seemingly quiet—in a full absence of noise—but with its own drama. In a contemporary still life drawing by Clive Blackmore (fig.12), the strangely gleaming white spaces—a bottle, a cup, another cup perhaps, but how deftly ambiguous—these unspelled-out elements against a gray-black hatching, have a greater depth than they would if spoken out. Mallarmé speaks of a line in a sonnet "qui s'inscrit pour l'esprit ou sur espace pur" 'that is

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

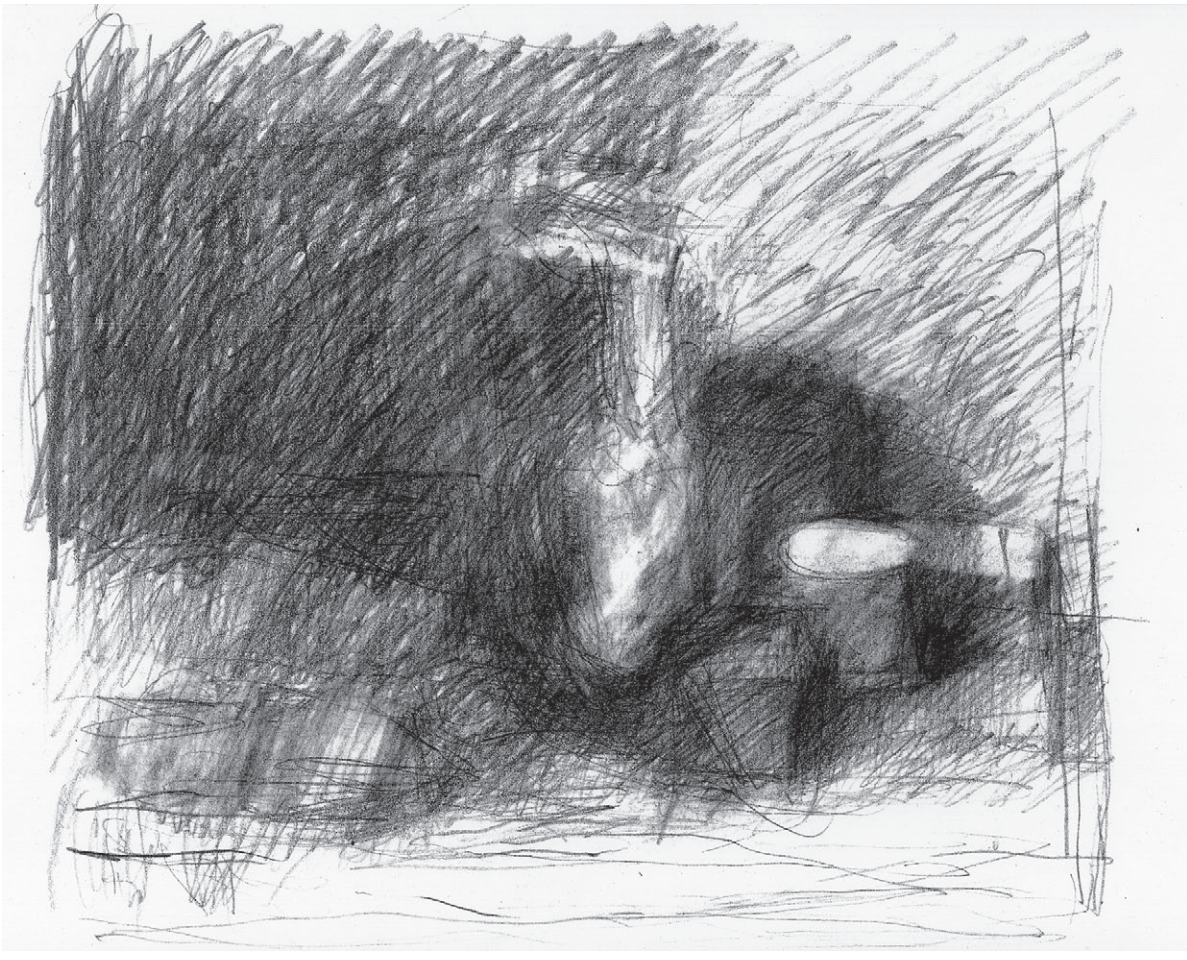


FIG. 12
Clive Blackmore, untitled drawing, 2003.

inscribed for the mind or on pure space' (380; my trans.). As he said of his oddest masterpiece, *Igitur*, the stage is the mind. The acts of still life are a play of the mind and eye: no symbol, no story, no given. How one object touches another or keeps its slight or great distance, in what rhythms we read the grouping, how the lighting falls before, behind, atop, beside, or behind the set—all these are put in play in such work.

In an entirely other vein, gaps and strange spaces between the pictured elements can force us to share the painter's anxiety. In Vanessa Bell's *Studland Beach* (fig. 13), hieratic and heroic figures, their backs turned in a tall isolation and distance from the watching figures behind, project a sense of strangeness and mute loneliness onto the viewer, particularly one remembering Paul Gauguin's Tahitian women (fig. 14), also outlined against the sea in their contrasting sizes, with a presence and feeling of self-composure, yet no less mysterious. And one painting reinforces the sense of another: thus, the feeling of *Studland Beach* increases the haunting discomfort felt in *The Tub* (fig. 15), painted at a time when Bell's beloved, Duncan Grant, was intimately involved with someone else.[7] The presence or absence of whatever kind of contextualizing we as individual observers, readers, and critics believe in or care about will have a crucial impact on the ways in which we read the visual record of the painter's emotion and our own reaction.

Such hard looking may make us more sensitive to, say, the terrible space between the lines in André Breton's *Nadja*, when the narrator is

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Fig. 13
Vanessa Bell, *Studland Beach*, c. 1912, oil on canvas, 30″ × 40″ (76.2 × 101.6 cm). © 1961 Estate of Vanessa Bell; courtesy of Henrietta Garnett. Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY. Photo by John Webb.

informed that the madwoman who loves him was taken to an asylum. The darkness of the gap, the *terribilità* we sense, like the mannerist notion of twisted darkness or Gerard Manley Hopkins's superbly mind-seizing "Terrible Sonnets" ("I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day" [62]), is not unlike the deepening of the canvas Motherwell learned from Matisse's blacks. I would go down in the middle of the night, he said to me once, and change a dark blue to a black, giving my paintings more depth.

Swerves, Force Lines

The interior shapes we find in paintings may mirror (or predict) those in the texts we linger over. So, for example, the S-form swerves of Tintoretto's *Leda and the Swan* (fig. 16) clarify for me the singular twists and plays of chiasmus in English Metaphysicals like Crashaw and baroque poets like Luis de Góngora y Argote, as well as surrealists like Desnos, as explicit in his enthusiasm for Góngora as was Pablo Picasso.

Reading the force lines in a painting—take Rudolf Arnheim's analysis of Tintoretto's *Last Supper*, with the table set at a diagonal, to increase the dramatic shock—can help us overcome our dully linear habits of reading prose narrations, or poetic ones: the kind of revolution against the usual manifested by concrete poets in their long tradition and by visualizing poets such as Guillaume Apollinaire, in his *Calligrams*. The way, for instance, the initial word of a poem can be echoed either in anaphora or at various places throughout, its subsequent reminders in various patterns, creates a stress different from what we might once have imagined, falling into our narrative habits, before our visualizing had a chance to develop its potential.

Some of the most celebrated works of art have occasioned the most debated "elucidations," allied to psychoanalytic interpretation—

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

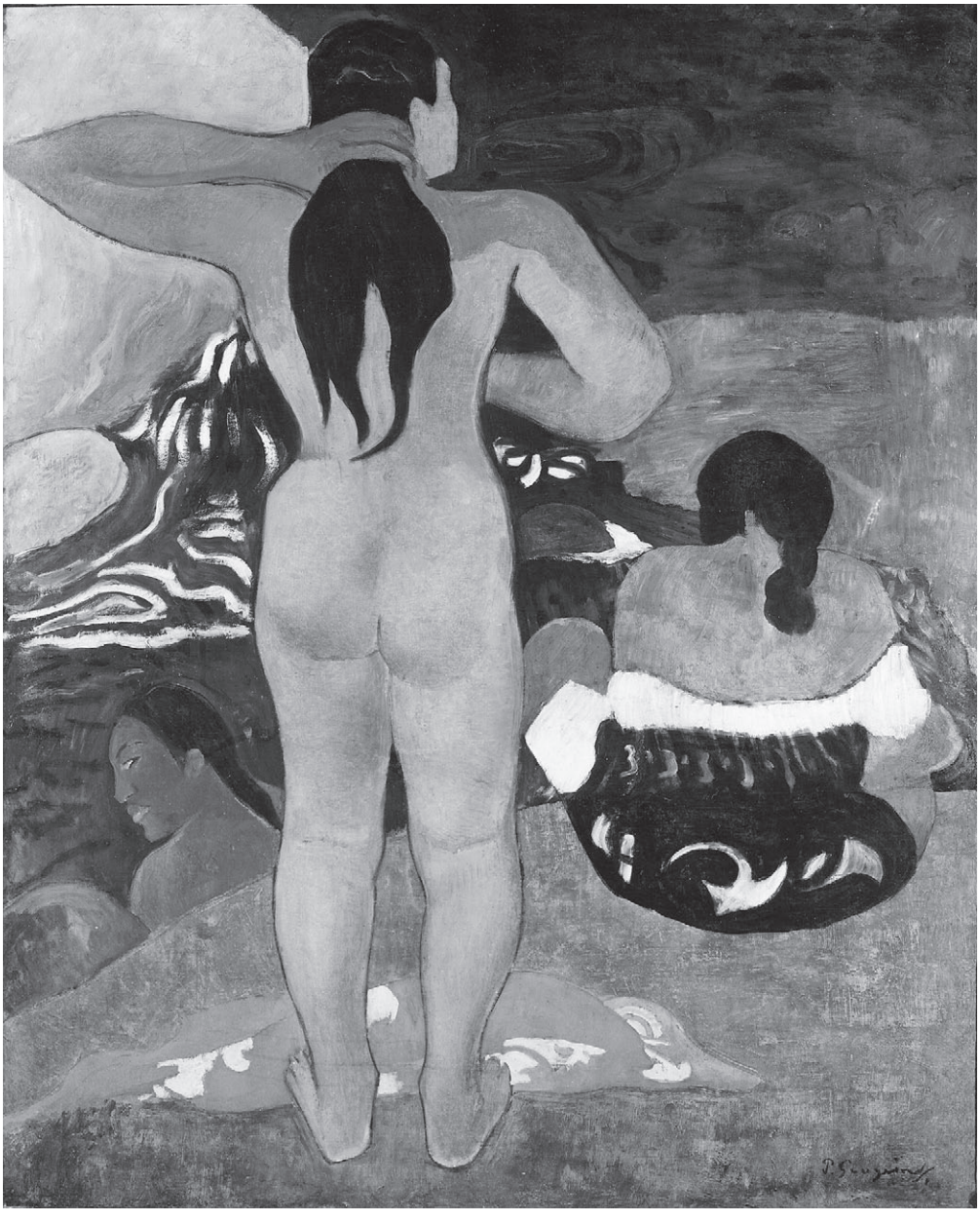


FIG. 14
Paul Gauguin, *Tahitian Women Bathing*, 1892, oil on canvas, 43¼″ × 35¼″ (109.9 × 89.5 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Robert Lehman Collection, 1975 (1975.1.179). Photograph, all rights reserved, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

sometimes a forceful ally of the most impressive writing about art. Van Gogh's last painting, *Wheatfield with Crows* (fig. 17), has been the fulcrum of a particular debate, intensified by the clear anguish of the canvas and by its biographical situation, just before the painter's suicide. This is a focus worth pointing to, for it affords an ongoing conversation that might lend a punctual charge to our own reading and looking.

Roger Shattuck sees the crows as going in two directions, but Schapiro feels they approach us through this long and narrow painting, which covers more ground than one person's eye can embrace, an expanse itself —anguishing. None of the three diverging paths, he says, can reach the horizon; each ends blindly in the wheat field or runs out of the picture:

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

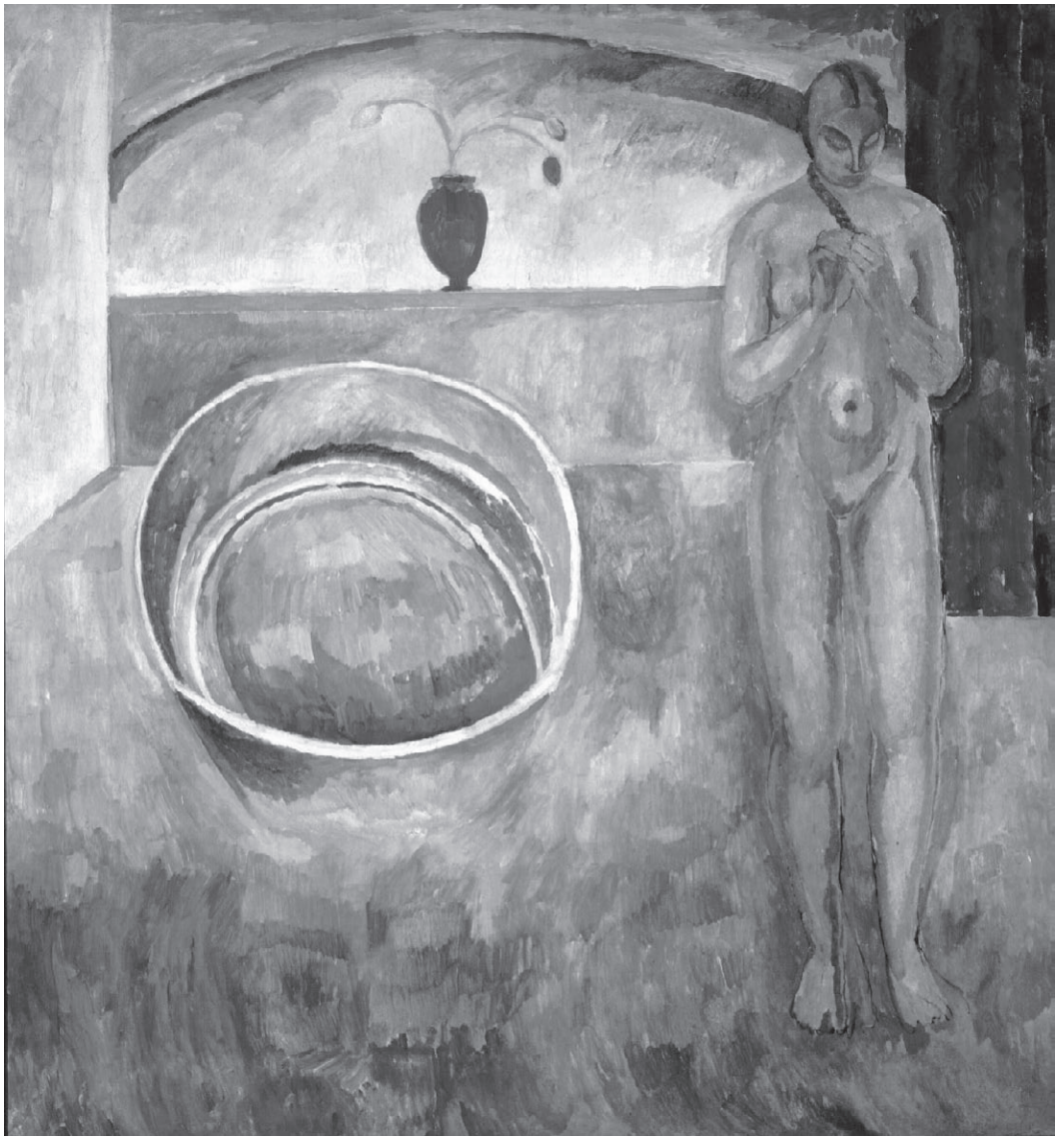


FIG. 15
Vanessa Bell, *The Tub*, 1917, oil and gouache on canvas, 71″ × 65½″ (180.3 × 166.4 cm). © 1961 Estate of Vanessa Bell; courtesy of Henrietta Garnett. Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.

> [T]he uncertainty of Van Gogh is projected here through the uncertainty of movements and orientations. The perspective network of the open field, which he had painted many times before, is now inverted; the lines, like rushing streams, converge towards the foreground from the horizon, as if space had suddenly lost its focus and all things turned aggressively upon the beholder. (*Modern Art* 87)

In other works, like those of Cézanne, Schapiro says, such furrows would lead into the distance, far objects might be brought nearer, and the result might be "an effect of contemplativeness in which desire has been suspended." Van Gogh, however, "hastens the convergence, exaggerating the extremities in space . . . as if driven by anxiety to achieve contact with the world" (88).

In him Schapiro sees—with a poetic gaze that compels our own—no focused movement toward the horizon:

> [T]he great shining sun has broken up into a dark scattered mass without a center . . .

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press



> the black crows . . . advance from the horizon toward the foreground, reversing in their approach the spectator's normal passage to the distance. . . . In their zigzag lines they approximate with increasing evidence the unstable wavy form of the three roads, uniting in one transverse movement the contrary directions of the human paths and the sinister flock.

So Van Gogh's painting betrays his anxiety in the "emotional enlargement" of the crows approaching, even as he cannot move toward the world. "The painter-spectator has become the object, terrified and divided, of the oncoming crows" (89). Here the brilliance of obsessive writing and obsessed vision converge.

Unstable, Unreliable

Such writing is so intense that it intensifies the onlooker's gaze. Unstable forms, like unstable and unreliable narrators, wavy lines of paintings or of stories, have a special hold on us. As Schapiro has the observer take the place of the painter, sharing his obsession, so the force lines of his reading can empower our own.

Associated with all these ways of looking is the ever-changing study of what sight lines are given, supposed, or contradicted for a gaze entering the picture or the text. As we read from left to right—or perhaps from right to left—and diagonally or straight, moving from top to bottom or going up, we work with or against the

FIG. 16
Tintoretto, *Leda and the Swan*, c. 1550–60, oil on canvas, 63¾″ × 85⅞″ (162 × 218 cm). Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Scala / Art Resource, NY.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press



FIG. 17
Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Crows*, 1890, oil on canvas, 19 7/8″ × 40 1/2″ (50.5 × 103 cm). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. Art Resource, NY.

conventions of story line and genre. Where do we start, in texts and paintings? What is the true story line, narrative or visual? What deceptions are there, and how do they work? Unreliable narrators meet unreliable sight lines. Yet again our comfortable habits of reading and viewing, our frequently automatic linear perceptions, are overturned: the story line is different from what it used to be, verbal or visual.

Conversation

In his *Air Guitar*, Dave Hickey recounts how, after reading Gustave Flaubert's "A Simple Heart," about Felicity and the stuffed parrot she loves, he phones all his friends to urge them to read it, so he can converse about it with them. Many of us did this for Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*.[8] That's an intellectual community of a sort in which we might all participate: a collective conversation with all the urgency of excitement and none of the complexities of competition. The story here is not about parroting, but it can involve, even without the multiple ironies of parroting, our vital interest in repetition and reflection and whatever we converse about.

Such boundary crossing as that between literature and the visual arts may well be illuminated by some detail as simple as a parrot or a lemon. Like the open field of poetics developed in the 1950s, this conjoining of fields can accommodate both our private looking and our public expression of it. Breton begins *Nadja* with a reflection on what haunts us and what we haunt. In *The Shape of a Pocket*, John Berger meditates on how what we always carry about with us defines us. Blaise Pascal had his *memorial*. Cézanne is said to have carried a small photograph of Courbet's *Woman with a Parrot* in his wallet, as Frank O'Hara carried a poem of Pierre Reverdy in his pocket. These are our private holdings, which we may make public if we care to.

Berger's brief essay "Field," in his *About Looking*, takes us into a place that we may recognize as our own and yet shareable. "Shelf of a field, green, within easy reach . . . field that I have always known, I am lying raised up on one elbow wondering whether in any direction I can see beyond where you stop." In this field, you can see the boundaries, but it suffices in itself: "Field contains the events . . . the ground of the events. . . . It is also an event in itself. . . . The field you are standing before appears to have the shape of your life." The shape depends on how we look: "The lawn was the world" (Woolf 288).

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What we are after now is giving ourselves permission to look afresh at looking. I'll end by quoting John Ashbery, who says that the sketches of the poet Henri Michaux and the painters Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey created, for him, a climate of openness: "They gave me *la grande permission*—yes, yes, that's very good—la grande permission" (398). Let's take this permission as holding good for all our present reflection and conversation. "That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking united them" (Woolf 146).

Notes

I want to thank Gerhard Joseph and Christie McDonald for their helpful suggestions about this essay.

[1] Mitchell has come splendidly into her own, thanks to artists like Lynda Benglis and art historians like Linda Nochlin (feminist art writing owes an intense debt to Nochlin). Whitney Chadwick laments the sense in which, in "valorizing stylistic innovation and monumental size, modernist mythologizing leaves little room for modest, stylistically consistent paintings such as those of Gwen John." This places "women artists from Georgia O'Keeffe and Emily Carr to Frida Kahlo and Leonor Fini in an impossible double bind in which femininity and art become self-canceling phrases" (279).

[2] Rosalind Krauss points out the all-importance of the grid, a form in which detail and individuality are lost in allover repetition (*Unconscious* and *Originality*).

[3] See also Eunice Lipton's *Alias Olympia*, about Victorine Meurent and Lipton's search for her history as painter and model.

[4] In *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, Craig Owens discusses the challenge to representation's authority during the long period of modernist abstraction and its consequences in art talk and institutions of power, such as the homegrown self-protective prerogatives he sees as marshaled against the Continental thinking of Foucault and Lacan.

[5] I have written on the Annunciation and Rilke's poem (*Eye* 104–24).

[6] Alain Madeleine-Perdrillat points out, in his elegant *Staël*, that the artist used a boxer's word—"frappe" 'blow' instead of a painter's usual "touche"—to describe the way he painted and the effect he wanted to produce (39).

[7] This was David (Bunny) Garnett, later to be the husband of Bell and Grant's daughter, Angelica. See her *Deceived with Kindness*.

[8] I have my own favorite parrot story, from Hillel Schwartz's *The Culture of the Copy*, in which Schwartz refers to Irene Pepperberg's experiments, related in *The Alex Studies*. Alex, an African gray, has shown that he understands that objects once in his grasp continue to exist out of his sight. When he himself wants to be out of sight, he announces, "I am going to go away," then turns his back. And once, just once, himself in sight, regarding the mirror in his cage, *he* asked a question: "What color?" "Gray," a trainer said. "That's gray; you are a gray parrot." Alex rehearsed the words. "Gray," he said to the face in the mirror. "Gray parrot" (152). Yet another reflection on looking, with a glance at authority and discourse.

Works Cited

Arasse, Daniel. *Le détail: Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*. Paris: Flammarion, 1996.

Arnheim, Rudolf. *Visual Thinking*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1969.

Ashbery, John. *Reported Sightings: Art Chronicles 1958–1987*. New York: Knopf, 1989.

Bal, Mieke. *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

———. *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*. Trans. Anna-Louise Milne. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997.

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Noonday, 1982. Trans. of *La chambre claire: Note sur la photographie*. Paris: Seuil, 1980.

———. *Le texte et l'image*. Paris: Le Pavillon des Arts, 1986.

Berger, John. "Field." *About Looking*. New York: Pantheon, 1973. 192.

———. *The Shape of a Pocket*. New York: Knopf, 2001.

Bryson, Norman. *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990.

Caws, Mary Ann. *The Art of Interference: Stressed Readings in Visual and Verbal Texts*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989.

———. *The Eye in the Text: Essays on Perception, Mannerist to Modern*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973.

Chadwick, Whitney. *Women, Art, and Society*. 3rd ed. London: Thames, 2002.

Danto, Arthur C. "Works of Art and Mere Real Things." *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981. 1–32.

Derrida, Jacques. *Limited Inc*. Trans. Samuel Weber. Ed. Gerald Graff. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1988.

———. *The Truth in Painting*. Trans. Ian McLeod and Geoff Bennington. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997.

Doty, Mark. *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*. Boston: Beacon, 2001.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. New York: Simon, 1996.

Garnett, Angelica. *Deceived with Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood*. London: Chatto, 1984.

Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper, 1968.

Hickey, Dave. *Air Guitar*. Los Angeles: Art Issues, 1997.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *Poems and Prose*. Ed. W. H. Gardner. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953.

Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1993.

———. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge: MIT P, 1985.

Leiris, Michel. *Le ruban au cou d'Olympia*. Cambridge: Schoenhof Foreign, 1989.

Lipton, Eunice. *Alias Olympia: A Woman's Search for Manet's Notorious Model and Her Own Desire*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.

Lloyd, Rosemary. *Shimmering in a Transformed Light: Writing the Still Life*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004.

Madeleine-Perdrillat, Alain. *Staël*. Paris: Hazan, 2003.

Mallarmé, Stéphane. "Le livre, instrument spirituel." *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Paris: Gallimard, 1965.

Miller, Jonathan. *On Reflection*. London: Natl. Gallery, 1998.

Owens, Craig. *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.

Pepperberg, Irene Maxine. *The Alex Studies: Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.

Schapiro, Meyer. *Modern Art: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Selected Papers*. New York: Braziller, 1978.

———. *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*. New York: Braziller, 1994.

Schor, Naomi. *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*. New York: Methuen, 1987.

Schwartz, Hillel. *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*. New York: Zone, 1996.

Shattuck, Roger. *The Innocent Eye: On Modern Literature and the Arts*. New York: Farrar, 1984.

Steiner, Wendy. *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982.

Stewart, Susan. *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2002.

Sylvester, David. *About Modern Art*. 2nd ed. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Zettel*. Ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Trans. Anscombe. Berkeley: U of California P, 1967.

Wolfe, Tom. *The Painted Word*. New York: Bantam, 2000.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. 1927. New York: Harcourt, 1955.

https://doi.org/10.1632/003081204X17860 Published online by Cambridge University Press