

The Social Space of Interpretation*

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I

I see no way of saying anything useful about the nature of an interpretation of an artwork without characterizing what an artwork is, and I have no confidence in the explanatory power of essential definitions of “things” like works of art as opposed, say, to Euclidean triangles. I’m persuaded that a productive answer proceeds, rather, along the lines of what may be called the “genre” conception of art: that’s to say, wherever we introduce the concept “art” or “artwork” or “work of art” in the company of providing more or less uncontested actual specimens of particular genres of art (possibly, then, as well, of what, more comprehensively but similarly, may be collected as exemplars of the “fine arts” as a whole), all of which belong to a reasonably well-entrenched social practice or form of historied discourse.

A “genre,” as I understand the term, cannot be introduced as a merely abstract category – the “Euclidean chiliagon,” for instance, or the “mermaid” – regarding which we may then inquire whether there are or are not actual specimens to be had: genre-specified things belong to an open and alterable category, in a way that is both essential and provisional (within an actual practice) but not in the way of satisfying some prior, abstractly proposed, relatively discrete conditions or criteria. On the contrary, the addition of a debatable specimen (as of extant Greek tragedy or baroque painting) often means modifying our tolerance for hitherto unmarked attributes and their interpolated weight in strengthening and loosening our sense of the transiently circumscribed membership of an

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open family of acknowledged instances. Genre counts as a kind of sittlich sorting of “things” already collected in an established inquiry. Hence, the genre-strategy provides a practical and easy way of outflanking (if we wish) the misguided quarrel set off so brilliantly by Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain, displayed in 1917, debated during a good part of the rest of the century but particularly in the 50s and 60s, which baffled (or at least exhausted) a great many enthusiasts of the arts – artists, philosophers, critics, ordinary folk: notably, figures like Joseph Beuys, Joseph Kosuth, Clement Greenberg, Arthur Danto, George Dickie, Andy Warhol, Thierry de Duve (de Duve 1996), but probably not Duchamp himself. In any event, the genre-strategy belongs to an already operative sittlich practice that need not concede that it is put at mortal risk by asking, seemingly seriously, whether “anything” can be a work of art or “anyone” an artist.

It’s also worth noting that genre-attributions characteristically depend on a distinctive kind of expertise or familiarity regarding uncontested exemplars, so that informally and variably identified resemblances, often loosely or analogically construed, may justify ascriptions of variable fit with respect to the salience of different features among exemplars that may exert different weights in different contexts of comparison affecting judgment, subject always to the addition or subtraction of the membership of a given set of acceptable specimens. It’s simply contrary to the spirit of genre-attribution to ask for a definition of its changeless essence.

These are not easily managed distinctions, but the reason has less to do with understanding art than with understanding what it is to be the kind of creature a human self or person is, who communicates and thinks linguistically and on occasion makes a painting or a sculpture or takes the time to examine such things serving thus. That’s to say, to understand what we mean by “an artwork” and its “interpretation” is to understand the sense in which we ourselves are transformed into functionally apt beings (selves or persons) by acquiring (normally in childhood), and mastering, the language and culture (and interests, of course) of one or another enabling society – in which the practices of making and interpreting artworks arise thereupon in socially entrenched, historically labile ways. There is no other way to proceed, though what we do is always open to revision. Certainly the question whether Fountain is or is not an artwork is not (in any normal sense) a question decided by the antecedent logic of definition (Margolis 2010).¹ It’s a substantive question,

¹ I revisit the definitional question in my (2010). This is an abbreviated version of a longer piece, cut for constraints of length.

internal to a continuing practice, that can be supported and opposed for pertinent reasons (often improvised for the purpose) that cannot then claim to be a matter of plain discovery.

Once this is made clear, the threatening question about the objective demarcation of a genre proves entirely benign: we turn, then, easily enough to explore (genre-wise) the sense in which happenings or a blank canvas or a canvas painted white or a readymade or a pile of cartons specifically designed to hold a number of brillo boxes or even copies of such boxes or copies signed “Not Andy Warhol” or a tie hand-painted by Picasso or innumerable many other such things or gestures (not necessarily impolite, of course) may be deemed to be or yield an artwork, without producing the paradoxes that a figure like Clement Greenberg once feared might throw the entire New York artworld into a sort of conceptual disorder he himself worked (futilely) to save it from (Greenberg 1995, ch. 18), but which someone else (Arthur Danto, say) positively relished as a puzzle (at least in part, I conjecture, because it challenged Greenberg so frontally), which he (Danto) then, quite gymnastically, began to build his own theory of art upon (Danto 1996). The all-inclusive category “work of art” is noticeably vaguer than our genre-generated concepts – parasitic, really.

I think there’s much less here than meets the eye. Because so-called conceptual art – which, one way or another, ever since Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics first appeared, commit the arts to representing the evolving discovery of art’s own essence – commits us (as a nagging byproduct) to answering the definitional question again and again, with every new turn of art history. In retrospect, now, it seems inevitable that Fountain and Brillo Box should have prompted more and more strenuous and banal conceptual trickery to test just how fleet we really are at recovering our verbal equilibrium with each would-be innovation. It rarely happens, however, that what usually passes for conceptual art sustains a cultivated study of any of its perceptually salient properties (if indeed it has any). Here it’s worth reporting that at least one gutsy American philosopher of art was candid enough to admit in print how much he was enchanted by the gleaming porcelain of Duchamp’s urinal; even Danto confesses (2009, ch. 3) to responding favorably to the innocent verve of the original enthusiasm of the legend on commercial brillo boxes (and the efficient cartons in which they were packed) – respectfully preserved, thank goodness, by Andy Warhol and Mike Bidlo (Andina 2011, ch. 3).

I’m afraid I have other fish to fry. I find that, although I’ve enjoyed the story of Duchamp’s naughty gesture and endlessly inventive additional gestures more often than I would have believed possible, the plea-

sure was always triggered more easily by a verbal reminder than by any expert glance back to the tired urinal itself – or the Brillo Box for that matter. Nevertheless, the torrent of debate and quarrel that each of these “icons” prompted (may I call them that?) now counts (may count, if you please) as a sort of free-wheeling interpretation of the event or original “utterance” of the “thing” itself. And that may well be worth the bother. Though I must admit I personally would not wish this last sort of engagement to deflect or override our access to the endangered charm of coming to understand even a small piece (say) of Paul Klee’s painter’s whimsy, or Vermeer’s lovely self-effacement in the presence of quiet beauty, or the tortured joy of Van Gogh’s visual fits, or a thousand other such moments I would not wish to be deprived of.

The idea of interpreting paintings (in this sense of interpretation) need not disqualify the chatty conversations involving the other. Both may be admitted to the same continuum of interpretation, although they usually move in opposite directions. Here I agree with Hegel, if I read him aright: the fine arts tend to be “uttered” in sensorily manifested ways, so that their distinctive complexity, their significance or import, which is inseparable from their perceivable features, draws us to the interpretation of precisely those features; whereas conceptual art (of whatever variety) tends to favor a certain detached and loose playfulness focused on whatever we care to make of its distinctly abstract (often linguistically specified) “ideas,” which, in the limit, need not rely on any sensorily accessible objects at all.

Hegel viewed the fine arts as aspiring to philosophy, but he makes no provision for “conceptual art” in our contemporary sense; whereas our interpretive practices can no longer disallow such inventions – so many of which are so hopelessly ephemeral, remembered only in lists of such possibilities. Consider, for example, the following random list of so-called “Happenings” – whether merely notional or somehow indexed in the world – which (never quite believably) once absorbed the attention (in the fifties and sixties) of one Allen Kaprow (among a crowd of others), a former Professor of Visual Arts at the University of California, an essayist of some interest on conceptual art and, if Happenings are indeed art, then also an artist in his own right:

Three steps forward and two to the right [Kaprow begins]
 Purple banners dropped from above
 Circular saw roaring
 Matches slowly lit and blown out
 Face in a mirror
 Now go to room five... (Kaprow 2003, p. xxvii)

By the eighties, Kaprow had reclassified (and reinterpreted) his “Happenings” as “utterings” of what he has come to call “Un-art” (somewhere between Art and Life, as he says), on the way to defeating the dictum (now including his own early enthusiasm for Happenings) to the effect that “art was anything.” “It’s fairly well known,” he confides, in “Art Which Can’t be Art” (1986), “that for the last thirty years my main work as an artist has been located in activities and contexts that don’t suggest art in any way. Brushing my teeth, for example, in the morning when I’m barely awake; watching in the mirror the rhythm of my elbow moving up and down... (Kaprow 2009, p. 219)” Imagine. At its most extreme, you realize, conceptual art behaves rather like a fecundity virus among rabbits.

I offer two small adjustments, therefore, to put us on the right track. For one, painting and literature are very different kinds of art: it’s easier to grasp Hegel’s conception, moving from painting to literature than the other way around; although the mastery of language is presupposed by the visual arts (or music) in essentially the same way as literature (one fundamental way at least, among others that need not be similarly shared). There’s a clue there to interpretation’s nature that I shall touch on again. Secondly, in accord with the complaint I began with, I more than suggest that the central burden of interpretation in the arts is centripetal in intent rather than centrifugal, as it tends to be in conceptual art. The point to bear in mind is that I’ve said nothing yet about the practice of interpretation. But what I mean to emphasize is that, in general (or at least according to my preferences), the interpretation of an artwork presupposes, paradigmatically, that artworks are well-formed “things” of familiar genres and that their interpretation is directed to explicating the distinctive unity or coherence of their (normally) sensorily manifested structures and structurally linked features, which, for familiar reasons, invite the effort. Well, we are that kind of creature.

I mean, by “centripetal,” that interpretation tends to adopt an “internalist” stance, commits its best work to making explicit the ordered structure of the inhering properties of a given artwork; whereas the interpretation of conceptual art favors an “externalist” or “centrifugal” stance involving a much looser associative sort of conversation or blather (since there is no other option to pursue) that might be pleased to end with pondering, quite independently and for its own sake, the sad or happy condition of mankind, the possibility of God’s existence, the upshot of some crazy zeal set off by a technologically advanced world. In neither sort of art, however, can we claim any uniquely determinate principle of correctly “ordered structures” of what we interpret.

Let me say for the moment that there are grave limitations awaiting both temptations: artworks, though “objects” for interpretive purposes, are not mere material things and cannot always count on interpretation proper as an easy form of realist description; but they are more nearly akin to the specimens of the physical world than is conceptual art, supposing (as they do) a definite scruple in favor of interpretive objectivity, which the usual reflections on conceptual art need never bother with. It’s the instant wit of a bare “idea” played off against the faked preciousness of honoring the grand treasures of the first, that fires the appeal of conceptual art. But our interest in one or another instance of conceptual art tends to dwindle alarmingly fast, I regard that as a clinical symptom of a failure of judgment. I remember, very fondly, attending one of John Cage’s concerts, for the first time. Cage (you’ve surely heard) sat poised as if to begin to play the piano before him; he sat for a precisely determined number of minutes without striking a single note, and then rose to signal that the piece had ended. No doubt there was a lesson to be had about sound and silence in music, and possibly more; but whatever might have been its chance significance might just as well have been explored in the company of buttered toast and slippers.

Centripetal interpretation requires as strenuous and fine-tuned a commitment to referential and predicative niceties as any discourse about the real world – it belongs to the real world. But centrifugal interpretation does not. It tends (if we may speak of interpretation at all) to be transported by the provocation of a mere “idea.” Occasionally – and this is worth noting – the two sorts of art are rewardingly mingled in ingenious ways: perhaps, already, in *Las Meninas*, viewed in terms of the puzzles of perspective, both first- and second-order; or, not uninterestingly, in Borges’s overly exploited conception of Pierre Menard’s extraordinary feat, addressed not so much to the puzzle of the identity of a would-be novel that resembles another too closely as to disputes about determining the right boundaries of the meaning of a novel’s actual text. (I’d say there are no upper limits to the propriety of interpretation and the “minimal” ones are “essentially contested.”)

It’s probably true, as Arthur Danto regularly emphasizes, that contemporary work in the visual arts often (or usually) conveys a philosophically reflexive signal about itself – which may then be matched in the other arts. I would be willing to acknowledge that something of the sort already appears in Velásquez’s painting. (Wherever it obtains, it enhances the centripetal’s complexity.) But then, of course, it would signify that Kant has misled us grievously about the purposiveness of art and its conceptual

“content.” Nevertheless, I don’t believe that that would draw us closer to the end of art or to the end of art history, or to a reading of Hegel as prophesying either; and I certainly don’t think it signifies that artworks are what they are only or primarily in virtue of the force of an “externalist” theory centered on their perceptually indiscernible features. Unless you mean that even color counts as color only as a result of a theory that features considerations that are not about color but about conceptions of color, or that the perception of objects (including artworks) is rightly so characterized only where we understand perception itself, as nearly as possible, in terms of a theory of sense data or ocular stimulations à la W.V. Quine. My point, rather, is that if you agree to acknowledge artworks at all, then you must also acknowledge a suitably ample sense of perception and of the interpretation of what we are able to perceive, and of what actually belongs to the encultured world we invent and continually add to (and transform and complexify). Which is to say: the proprieties of interpretation are inextricably linked to our conception of the interpretable nature of the “things” we are prepared to examine in this regard. (We are at home in a familiar practice: Danto (1964).)

II

Description and interpretation in the arts are, I would say, phenomenologically informed rather than restricted to mere phenomenal features, in a sense closer to Hegel’s usage (or to Charles Peirce’s) than to Husserl’s, at least where Husserl is hopelessly obsessed with the pure transcendental experience of the Transcendental Ego, which Husserl actually believes must be effectively present at every level of phenomenological play – that is, must contribute, transcendently, to our pertinent perception or experience of artworks. (Husserl requires much too much apriorist baggage. The idea’s utterly implausible, even though it casts an impressive spell.) In any case, I recommend relying instead on the more temperate examples of phenomenological analysis offered by figures like Meyer Schapiro, Leo Steinberg, and Erwin Panofsky, in spite of their very different ways of proceeding. But however we resolve this sort of quarrel, I see no reason to think we need ever exceed a completely naturalistic phenomenology; and, in fact, I see no advantage in encouraging so-called empiricists to deny the continuity of their own accounts of perception and experience and the phenomenologist’s. I would say the same about hermeneutics, if (pace Heidegger and Gadamer) we might abandon the intrusive privilege of

Heidegger's "ontology of Dasein." By such measures, we would, I suppose, abandon every form of transcendentalism and approach, ever so plausibly, the simple virtues of the leanest forms of pragmatism. In any case, I think it impossible, not merely in the philosophy of art but in philosophy at large, to give up (as we must) all cognitive privilege and not require (then) a presuppositionless form of phenomenology – that is, modes of perception and thought subject to known and unknown prejudice but not to any unearned authority (Margolis 2012).²

Here, I must add at once that it's unimportant that the regulative notion just mentioned cannot be expected to yield an essential definition of either art or interpretation; or, better, that an "essential" definition need not be literally true, exceptionlessly or in terms of strictly determinate necessary and sufficient conditions. I also concede that what I offer here as a touchstone must be substantially adjusted if it is to include the literary arts as well as a tolerance for conceptual art; but that is as it should be. In any case, nothing is lost where definition and practice are acknowledged to be inherently informal: accommodation of the drift of history (and its changing exemplars) is itself a form of rigor that fits the flux of things – particularly, the flux of historied culture. Our theories and definitions must be flexible enough to follow every shift in cultural fashion. All this falls on the right side of the inquiry.

Nevertheless, I've offered no more than the bare beginnings of a theory: not an unimportant start, but a start far enough removed from the most decisive directives wanted, that I feel obliged to promise something more. I have, however, already secured an explicit and useful connection between two lines of inquiry that must be joined: I mean, in holding that an artwork is, effectively, an "utterance" – an action or the posit or product of a form of agency – possible only among enlanguaged and encultured selves; hence, I've made provision for a capacity for making artworks, that is itself formed by the same societal processes by which human primates (I mean the infant members of Homo sapiens) are themselves artifactually first transformed into functional selves. So there is no alternative to the socially shared conditions in accord with which art is produced and interpreted: the conditions implicated are the same that account for the formation of selves and for their mastery of language and enlanguaged culture – a fortiori, for the very agency of art, that is, the production and interpretation of art, the powers by which we transform

² I take the characterization of phenomenological inquiry to be of great importance and explore it in terms of similarities in Hegel and Peirce, in my (2012).

material things and make them, like speech, the second-natured bearers of thought and feeling. But that does not mean that there are any “rules” for constructing or interpreting artworks correctly: nothing more, perhaps, than our sense of sharing a form of life.

Now, what does all this mean with respect to the question before us? It means that we must proceed, philosophically, by continually narrowing the effective circle of conceptual distinctions regarding the nature of artworks and the conditions of interpretive rigor, so that we come as close to actual practice as possible. I must say, I don’t believe it is possible to capture the free play of interpretation any more than we can muster the rules of artistic production. The reason for caution here is simply that rigor of the pertinent sort is characteristically not discovered but heuristically (and laggardly) proposed, subject to the swerve of history and historied interests; history itself tends to favor the proliferation of diverse taste and forms of creativity in accord with the emergence of increasingly powerful technologies and a tolerance for idiosyncrasy. Merely to speak is already to transform material sound into ordered strings of words: ultimately, to be drawn to comprehending whatever belongs to our constructed, hybrid, enlanguaged world for which, coordinately second-natured, we are already made apt for understanding. Minimally, viewed thus, interpretation is no more than our second nature’s fluent understanding of second-natured things.

There are two distinct concerns here that intersect but also proceed in very different ways. In accord with one, we need to supplement the preliminary distinctions (linking art and its interpretation), already introduced, by additional distinctions of a narrower and more determinate compass, in order to bring us as close as possible to the specific practices of critical or elucidative or productive or ampliative interpretation; and then, as we approach our target in this way, we must deliberately change course and proceed by carefully selected local examples: concrete, actual, particular, strategically instructive specimens. Because, here, we must grasp the historied drift of the diversity of art and, thus, the deep provisionality of apt and inapt interpretations. But that’s because artworks are themselves the unlikely objects that they are – things we alone understand that nevertheless baffle every effort to define their legible unity by explicit rules.

Here, then, first, are some further preliminaries meant to fit the preliminaries already tendered. You cannot fail to see that they risk bordering on the vacuous, which means we’re very close to the limit of instructive generality:

- (i) we must begin in the middle of our usual practices – presuppositionlessly and in a sittlich way (to speak with a very modest Hegel, if you allow such a start);
- (ii) to advance an interpretive strategy apt for a particular artwork, or, alternatively, to characterize specimen artworks as suited to an entrenched strategy, requires a measure of adequation of each to the other – really, a tolerance for guesses about the organizing form or unity of each particular work (and, therefore, much flexibility and good will in our guesses);
- (iii) artworks are acknowledged to be inherently interpretable; although the attributes and structures we ascribe them, in virtue of which they submit to interpretation, are determinably such rather than strictly determinate (along phenomenological as opposed to merely phenomenalist lines), which requires a thorough distinction between material and linguistically or semiotically qualified cultural properties (what I call “Intentional” properties – a term of art written with a capital “I”: broadly speaking, culturally constituted, verbal or merely “lingual” (nonverbal but linguistically conditioned) meanings or meaningful structures, however discerned or imputed);
- (iv) interpretation is at the very least a sittlich practice addressed to Intentional elements and structures (both verbal and nonverbal), entitled, for that reason, to a measure of objective standing, in assigning meaning, import, signification and the like to artworks (and other cultural artifacts: speech, history, action, tradition), ultimately grounded in the shared life of a viable human society;
- (v) whatever functions Intentionally – selves or persons (subjects or agents) and what they produce or create or bring about are or have histories; are socially constructed or constituted; are subject to historic change; are inherently interpretable, by way of canvassing the import of their enabling cultures or other congenial cultures (hence, in constructivist ways); and are suitably thus “uttered” only by socially formed selves – individually, aggregatively, or when construed heuristically in collective ways as the utterances of anonymous selves, or figuratively, as by natural forces (l’art trouvé); and
- (vi) there is no unique or essential definition of “artwork” adequate to the entire history of art viewed in accord with items (i)-(v) and none is needed in orienting interpretation successfully – unless for special purposes (hence, compatibly with every self-consistent form of pluralism, relativism, historicism, incommensurabilism, or sittlich ouverture).

Count this a summary of the main lines of a valid philosophy of art and interpretation. The obvious lesson here is that interpretive objectivity cannot ensure any exclusively adequate bivalence in sorting and assessing judgments in accord with any run of pertinent factors: for example, the consensual determinability (not determinacy) of Intentional attributions; the historical drift and diversity of linguistic, semiotic, hermeneutic, and “lingual” (Ricoeur 1981) practices;³ the informal and approximative nature of *sittlich* conformity of any kind; the dependence of would-be rules of judgment and practice on what Kant rather wisely (though problematically, construed in terms of the third *Critique*) acknowledges as “mother wit;” the immense diversity of taste, understanding, originality, and executive interests in the pursuit of culturally significant inquiries; the effective rejection of privileged or foundational sources of cognitive assurance regarding both theoretical and practical findings; the possibilities of critical rigor in spite of our resisting any determinate fixity regarding the “upper” and “least” boundaries of the Intentional import of artworks and other interpretable cultural things; and our willingness to accommodate the validity of patently incompatible interpretations, without adopting completely anarchic practices.

I must add in the briefest way a word about my use of “Intentionality.” It does not quite correspond to either Franz Brentano’s or Edmund Husserl’s use of the “intentional,” though it can, where wanted, absorb both the psychological and the so-called subjective (but non-psychological) uses of “intentional.” The term is meant to capture the entire range of attributions of meaning or significance that apply to whatever belongs to the enlanguaged cultural world of human selves. Thus: since artworks feature paintings, sculptures, novels, architecture and the like, the Intentional applies to *public* things that are never merely psychologically or subjectively qualified, though their being real – objectively accessible – in any sense worth admitting, presupposes the apt perceptual agency of skilled and experienced selves. Beyond that, the most important distinction associated with the “Intentional” is meant to capture the artifactual but real emergence of a distinct but never separable world of complex,

³ By “lingual,” I mean the nonverbal aspects of successful verbal communication as well as the dependence of nonverbal forms of cultural communication and expression on the mastery of language, without actually being verbal (as in the ballet) – *a fortiori*, the presence of a functional self. I’ve pirated the term from the English translation of Paul Ricoeur’s “langagier” (though undoubtedly not its originally intended meaning, which Ricoeur uses to render the sense of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutic use of “Sprachlichkeit”). The piracy seems very natural in English. See Ricoeur, (1981).

hybrid, artifactual “things,” indissolubly incarnate or embodied in material things, possessing a run of sui generis attributes (also called “Intentional”) remarkable for being manifested as “meanings,” as subject to historical change, inherently interpretable, and, normally, only determinably qualified (Margolis 1995). Count this the briefest possible sketch of a proposed metaphysics of culture. To admit the actuality of selves and artworks and the effective interpretation of the second by the first is, I would say, to defeat reductionism hands down.

I should add at once, however, that when I speak of the “meanings” or “Intentional import” of an artwork as “determinable” rather than “determinate” I am speaking of a distinctive (and puzzling) property of artworks (as well as of uttered speech). By interpretation, we give determinacy to a particular work’s meaning, though it remains open to further such determination. “Indeterminacy” signals, rather, interpretive failure remarked in some methodologically pertinent regard (for a variety of possible reasons). As we now understand the arts, to speak of a work that simply lacks meaning or semiotic import tout court is (in my view) a contradiction in terms. This is a more general claim than the familiar one that holds that all art manifests “intentionality” or “aboutness” in Brentano’s or Husserl’s sense. (I take the latter thesis to be false or merely vacuously self-referential.)

Furthermore, to admit the distinction is to acknowledge as well the deeper but perfectly benign problem of the objectivity of interpretation. For, for one thing, the question of an artwork’s import, like the meaning of verbal utterances, is essentially a public matter, even where we claim to be considering private mental states – intentions, for instance – as psychoanalysis makes clear; for a second, there can be no principled objection to gradations of difficulty in deciding the objective standing of particular attributions of meaning; and, for a third, there may well be specimen works that are so thoroughly conventional or banal that we find it difficult or impossible to interpret them diversely at all. (Paul Ricoeur, if I’m not mistaken, tends to think of polysemy as answering to a finite run of semantically determinate alternative readings of ordinary words from which we must make a pertinent selection.) In any case, that idea fails to capture the feature I’m insisting on: Kafka’s novels, for instance, tend to use a vocabulary that avoids semantic ambiguity and equivocation; may well conform in that sense with what Ricoeur means by polysemy; but their meaning remains, nevertheless, notably determinable rather than determinate, according to my usage. Cast in terms of interpretation’s problematic, the meaning of a novel, for instance, cannot be effectively

constructed (or divined) from any prior determination of the meanings of the discrete words or sentences of the novel's text. The truth is we need a fresh idiom by which to identify any novel's emergent, holist, language-dependent but not merely verbal, determinable but not finally determinate, public but inherently open-ended, meaning.

III

Still, I've omitted the most important ontological factor: namely, the answer to the puzzle regarding the "location" of objective meanings of any kind, and our assured access to such meanings, verbal or nonverbal, in artworks, speech, or anywhere else in the world of human culture. The answer's obvious, I suppose: all the Intentional attributes of "cultural things" are "in" the discursive public space of one encultured world or another, but they have no determinate place in the material sense, except where their "location" is borrowed, as in interpretive contexts, from the location of the parts of particular material things that cultural things are indissolubly embodied in. (Think, for instance, of the sense of a particular line in one of Shakespeare's sonnets or the meaning of the painted gesture linking God and man in Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling.) Where are their meanings to be found?

Meanings are never more than functionally specified and conventionally located. To speak of meanings as objects, perhaps to speak of artworks as well – but if so, then also to speak of selves – is to nominalize a functional distinction. Still, persons, not mere animate creatures, are responsible for debts incurred; and paintings, not just canvases and paint, are bought and sold and prized for their own sake. Since we cannot speak of ourselves as unactual (though, notoriously, a very playful Daniel Dennett has put his friends in a distinctly awkward spot if they take him and his theories seriously (Dennett 1991)), we're effectively obliged to regard the cultural domain as a real world – as real as the physical world and, in any event, in whatever way we take ourselves seriously. It's in this sense that we say we hear a melody, not merely a run of sound (that we then interpret), or hear speech (not merely voiced sound) which we understand spontaneously – where, broadly speaking, we locate speech and melody in the way we locate sound.

Under the circumstances, the stability of our cultural world is remarkably assured. It depends, of course, on our continually reinforced and deepened immersion in our home culture. But I see no way of denying

its reality except vacuously, since, with time, we actually learn to report and share our inner mental life, in a public way, with others similarly made apt; also, then, our commitments, convictions, and creations. In that sense, phenomenologically, we actually experience ourselves as selves! (Hume and Kant have misled us.) The interpretation of artworks depends on that ability: in particular, the production of emergently encultured things, incarnate (though not for that reason alive, not necessarily animate at all) in material things, capable of possessing (and of being perceived as possessing) uttered meanings – hence, surrogate expressions or representations of feelings and the like of a kind otherwise impossible.

I find no paradoxes here to delay us; and I take the entire argument to provide an analogue of the resolution of Wittgenstein’s marvelous puzzle (1954, §621) regarding the difference between “my raising my arm” and “my arm’s rising.” Art, like politics and the interpretation of each, belongs, exclusively, among the things humans are capable of uttering.

This account is meant to be no more than an informal reminder of certain well-remembered but conceptually obscure elements of the human form of life. We ask too much of ourselves if we insist on misplaced precision here. Someone will say that art is a mode of interpreting life and, therefore, that the interpretation of artworks is itself a form of art. Perhaps – or, of course if you wish. But I’ve tried to convey no more than a proper sense of the indicative precision of vague theory about logically vague things, where the precision of explicit generalization fails, without relying too heavily on mere rhetoric. It’s the new maneuver that we need to rely on in approaching the rest of the picture I’ve been sketching. The best I dare claim is to have brought us to the edge of a proper close. The rest of what’s needed is genuinely difficult to formulate. I doubt it can be captured except in the company of one or another exemplary interpretation of a particular artwork: something as arresting, according to my lights, as Roland Barthes’s S/Z or Panofsky’s analysis of Van Eyck’s rendering of Arnolfini’s contract.

I actually heard Panofsky on the portrait of Arnolfini and his bride – I don’t remember exactly where – certainly when I was a graduate student or fledgling instructor in New York City, and I remember how much like a legal brief Panofsky’s demonstration was. The entire account, immensely learned in Panofsky’s way (which has often provoked strong doubts about his connoisseur’s eye), rested largely though not entirely on his reminder of the fact that, in Van Eyck’s time, marriage was indisputably accepted as the only sacrament the laity could effectively con-

summate without the mediation of the clergy: that is, before the palpable scandal of a flood of easy denials that the event had actually taken place – for want of mortal witnesses.

Panofsky treats the painting as a marriage contract, witnessed and recorded by Van Eyck himself, on the strength of a normal reading of the expression “give one’s hand” (to another, as in marriage), that is, the exchange of sincere vows in the sight of God. Panofsky’s noticing that there is no unique vanishing point in the Arnolfini itself (in Brunelleschi’s sense) is a separate matter that requires no more than a careful study of Van Eyck’s represented space (as would be true, for similar reasons, in Giotto’s earlier interiors); but the “reading” of the Arnolfini pointedly confirms that the painting’s iconography must open onto an imagined world (that may, and actually does, sustain a realist reading) that cannot be recovered from the merely phenomenal features (if we may speak thus) of the perceived representation of a man and a woman, now qualified as an uncontested part of the interpreter’s provisional working “text” – which, adequately fleshed out, would in time yield an admissible sense (one, very probably, among others) of the artwork itself (Panofsky 1971). Hence, if the interpretation of a painting can claim any objectivity, artworks, like language and action, must have a remarkable nature.

Interpretation, then – thinking of the Van Eyck as an exemplar – is an informed guess at the semiotic or linguistic or hermeneutic or iconological – or, in my own idiom, Intentional – import of the very painting: the Arnolfini. A painting is not an ideal or notional or mere rhetorical object; it’s an actual object, a culturally emergent “thing” indissolubly incarnate or embodied in material things, themselves artifactually transformed (for the purpose: as by the artist’s brush strokes) into a culturally adequated medium (in a way not unlike the way sound is transformed into speech and primate human infants into speechifying selves or persons). The point is: if we are real, then so is art, action, speech, and history; and nothing in the natural world is real unless it is, or inherently shares in a suitable way, a part of material things. Here, the term, “Intentional,” functions, by grammatical license, either adverbially or adjectively, to signify the work, the effective agency of the collective life of diverse enlanguaged societies of selves, “uttered” by one or another member or aggregate of members of such societies.

In the case of artworks – where representation or expression or semiotic function is perceptually salient – the least we do in fathoming a puzzling painting that we encounter (say) in a museum is, of course, to ex-

amine the painted surface of a prepared canvas as an Intentionally qualified composition suitably informed (as we conjecture) by the artist's mastery of the natural and encultured world he means to draw on in fashioning his "work" (for instance, from the remembered practices of other artists and his own, and from the history and imagination of his own society). To view a painting as a text, I suggest, is to bridge the transformation of a painted canvas into a painting, without yet needing to be quite certain of precisely what, rightly fathomed, constitutes the painting itself.

You may regard that as a minimal "interpretive" step aficionados hardly notice: they speak directly of describing or analyzing the painting in question. But the maneuver is also serviceable where, as it may turn out, our first impressions of the text (whether poem or painting) may be misleading. There, as it dawns on us, the "text" is a contrived working model of the would-be artwork we seek to understand; and, of course, it's in this sense that the work's Intentional unity is determinable rather than determinate: something that may well exhibit "polysemy" (in Ricoeur's sense) or, as in painting, nonverbal ("lingual") forms – but, inevitably, something more (Ricoeur 1981, ch. 6). I take exception, I should add, to Ricoeur's confidence that, in any context of application, the "meaning" of a piece of discourse is characteristically determinate within a determinate range of polysemy: I think that cannot be quite the right model for the interpretation of literature or painting; it doesn't provide well enough for an artwork's inventive openness to interpretation. (I'll come back to this objection in another setting.)

Roughly speaking: this is about as far as we can go by general formulations alone. The rest of what is needed must be provided by carefully selected concrete specimens or prototypes of actual interpretation that show us how things go right or wrong. Let me, therefore, offer, in closing, two brief anecdotes to pinpoint what I think is most important and revealing about a full-blown interpretation. I was fortunate enough to have been present at a stunning exchange of views, regarding their respective ways of working, between Panofsky and Meyer Schapiro, in a symposium at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, many years ago, when both men were in their prime. (I mention the exchange to signal that I'm reporting an actual event!) Somehow, they had agreed to apply their methods to a particular painting of Mondrian's (in the familiar De Stijl manner): I remember that the painting was a rectangular canvas hung in the diamond position, so that it could very naturally have been viewed as a more or less realistic representation of a window prevented (cropped, that is, by the borders of the frame) from presenting the entire closed

form of the supposed window itself. The completed form – its gestalt, so to say, was phenomenologically implied (could be taken to be implied) in the visually articulated abstract form of the actual painting (construed, in my terms, as a working text). The point, which the entire audience could readily see, was that the painting was distinctly impoverished (or rendered nearly inscrutable) if addressed only iconographically (in Panofsky's way); although, as I've already suggested, Panofsky's methods were very naturally suited to the Arnolfini (as would also have been true of Schapiro's methods, though the Van Eyck was not discussed in their exchange). Panofsky, however, must have approved the attempt to compare the effectiveness of his and Schapiro's methods, though he was plainly disadvantaged by the choice of a Mondrian. (Construed along Schapiro's lines, the painting could have been either representational or not – but not, in any obvious way, iconographically promising beyond that bare admission.)

What I wish to emphasize is that one needs to have hit on an apt intuition approaching a unified interpretation that could capture the supposed Intentional unity of the painting in question: both with regard to a choice of method of analysis (which may well be different for different kinds of paintings) and with regard to a unifying hypothesis (if I may call it that) by which to make explicit the actual unity of the work itself. Ideally, the second effort should fall within the terms of a perspicuous choice of the first sort: a match, so to say, between genres of interpretation and genres of artworks, instantiated in viewing the particular work before us. (I shall come back to this constraint in a moment.)

Here, now, I call on another recollection of an extraordinarily instructive encounter. I was once invited (possibly in the 80s) to comment, in the annual meetings of the Modern Language Association (in the United States), on a featured address involving the interpretation of contemporary poetry, to be presented by a formidable scholar, Michael Riffaterre, who had developed a highly specialized method of analysis – not altogether distant from Panofsky's iconological practice, except that Riffaterre featured uncovering traces, both weak and strong, of classical themes originally found in the literary work of figures like Ovid and Virgil and confined to actual literary texts at both ends of the comparison and analysis afforded. Panofsky had done something of the same sort with regard to painting, but he traced the influences he uncovered in a way that was never narrowly restricted to artworks alone.

I took Panofsky to be more historically-minded, therefore; Riffaterre, more structuralist in intent. In any case, Riffaterre, not unlike Panofsky,

selected a poem for illustrative purposes that, very plainly, was entirely unsuited to his interpretive strategy. He chose W. H. Auden's nicely turned Musée des Beaux Arts, in which two men, meandering through a museum gallery – chatting one another up, I would say – linger at a Breughel in which Icarus falls unnoticed (barely visibly) into the sea. Riffaterre musters all of his immense apparatus to bring his references to Icarus into accord with its classical treatment – within the imagined world the poem was thought to disclose. But, of course, the reference to Icarus is no more than a chance bit of irrelevant chatter in a conversation that has its own undisclosed purpose: Riffaterre never motivates his reading in the apparent context of Auden's poem or, for that matter, in the daub that represents Icarus's fall, that might have had some witty use regarding what transpires in the actual conversation. The result is that Riffaterre misreads Auden's piece. There can't be any doubt about that. One also sees that there are no rules to rely on here, only a certain intuitive ability – the gift of judgment, Kant would have said – to grasp the point. Riffaterre never addresses the poem's unity – on any guess as to how that should be construed. We see what's missing, but we have no adequate theory of how poetic unity must be gained. We have only our favorite exemplars and the critical practices that have sprung up among them. And we have the consensual weight of such verdicts – without treating consensus as a democratic criterion.

Let me add, perhaps too briefly, a third example – a final denial of what I understand interpretation to involve – as well as comment on its significance (meant to catch up what I've mooted in the instances just given), a specimen that bowled me over when I first came across it, that has not altogether subsided but has definitely aged and yielded to revision. I mean Roland Barthes's S/Z, which gives a “reading” (if I may call it that), a “scriptible” reading of a “lisible” text (Balzac's Sarrasine), according to Barthes's own account. That is, as Barthes puts his thesis: in the way of a reading that no longer treats the reader as a “consumer” but as a “producer” himself (a writerly reader). I think we must have Barthes's own words before us – near the start of his account (actually, from section ii of S/Z, titled “Interpretation”) – if I'm ever to bring this ramble to a close:

the writerly text [Barthes holds] is not a thing, we would have a hard time finding it in a bookstore... The writerly text is ourselves writing, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized in some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages (trans. Miller 1974, sec. II, p. 5).

But the readerly texts? They are products (and not productions), they make up the enormous mass of our literature... [The] new operation [pertinent to generating writerly texts] is interpretation (in the Nietzschean sense of the word). To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it... This text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one...they are indeterminable (trans. Miller 1974, sec. II., p. 5).

For the plural text, there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic; thus, if one or another of these are sometimes permitted to come forward, it is in proportion (giving this expression its full quantitative value) as we are dealing with incompletely plural texts, texts whose plural is more or less parsimonious (trans. Miller 1974, sec. II., p. 6).⁴

Here you see the sense in which Barthes exceeds the claims of polysemy (a plurality of possible pre-textual meanings in something akin to the dictionary sense of the words of the text, the sense Ricoeur seems to have adopted from Barthes) – which, if I understand him, Ricoeur is also drawn to – by his hermeneutic qualification of phenomenology: in favoring “writerly reading,” we must think rather of the amplitude of something like “plurivalence,” an open multitude of possible imagined worlds subtended by the text of Balzac’s story. The literary work, construed as captured by Barthes’s interpretation of Balzac’s text (Sarrasine) is thereby rendered plural: capable of supporting openendedly many imagined worlds answering to the original text when viewed in a “writerly” way. The numerical identity of the work is settled by reference to the numerical identity of the text; but the valid or defensible writerly interpretations of the text itself confirm the work’s “plurivalence” in the contrived sense I’m providing: that is, the improvisation of various reasonable “pictures” of the imagined “world” of Balzac’s story that a minimal sense of the words of the text might be conceded to support. There seems to be no insuperable aporia here. (I should add that I link Ricoeur’s account of interpretation to Barthes’s treatment of SZ, because Ricoeur explicitly signals Barthes’s importance as a structuralist influence, in laying out his own account. Ricoeur makes concessions in Barthes’s direction wherever he uses the neologisms “polysemy,” “polysemous” in his mature pieces on the eclectic ingredients of an adequate hermeneutics.)

⁴ I’ve taken some minor liberties with punctuation. The published text includes the entire text of Balzac’s Sarrasine as an appendix.

You realize that Barthes's *S/Z* is a writerly interpretation of an indisputably readerly text, *Sarrasine*, and that it fits the specifications just cited. But as far as I can see, what that means is that the account is actually something less and more than an interpretation, in accord with our practices regarding readerly texts; that anything remotely *lisible* cannot be more than "incompletely plural" (in Barthes's own sense) – "moderately plural" (as he says), merely polysemous (pretty well in the sense Ricoeur must have borrowed from Barthes's various accounts); that there literally are no writerly readings (except in accord with the qualification just given); that the referential pertinence of a writerly reading (that is, reference to an imagined world) presupposes and depends on the readerly *reader's* tolerance for same; and *that*, as cited from Barthes (trans. Miller, p. 6), "integrally plural texts" are literally "indeterminable." Literally, then, Barthes's thesis may be a *reductio* of itself. Texts (in my sense) are determinable, not indeterminable – but then, read responsibly, they are open to plural interpretation, hence (also) to imputed, potentially incompatible, determinate interpretations (thus construed) – which, I would say, amounts to relativism. I myself would rather say that Barthes was immensely courageous and that the final inaptness of his proposal points to a no-man's land that has yet to yield a better mapping. Barthes is too extreme in his manifestos – more moderate in his practice. I seize the occasion to assure you that my talk of the interpretively proposed "imagined worlds" of a novel (or a painting) has absolutely nothing to do with Nelson Goodman's badly managed conception of "made worlds" (nominally posited by what he names "ways of worldmaking"). As W.V. Quine (and others) have remarked, Goodman's thesis is addressed to the supposed inadequacy of there being "one world;" whereas the "imagined worlds" I posit are never more than internal to the use of a model of how, perspicuously, to interpret the meaning of a novel or painting. It's enough to note that to be "imagined" in this sense is *not* to be thought to be "real," "irreal," "fictional," "ideal" or anything of the sort, but only essential to one or another attempt to explicate the (Intentional) meaning of the work in question.⁵

Nevertheless, there remains a reasonably flexible option between the purely notional (operatively intolerable) extremes of readerly and writerly reading (or interpretation) that, in our own time – after acknowledging Barthes's instructive daring – may be salvaged as a tribute to Barthes's

⁵ Compare Goodman (1978). I have no doubt that Goodman's gymnastic contrivance is due to his extreme philosophical economies regarding possibility and actuality.

own lesson. I suggest that Barthes himself points to it and (if I may now add) Paul Ricoeur is himself drawn (problematically) to attempt to reconcile Barthes's best solution with the principal accounts of interpretation he's familiar with. Loosely formulated, all we need is a moderate mixture of the readerly and the writerly: that is, the rejection of a would-be readerly reading that presumes that, ideally, every text possesses a uniquely and univocally determinate meaning, a Husserlian option, let us say, that Ricoeur battles in his effort to qualify phenomenology in accord with the hermeneutic strategies developed by Heidegger and Gadamer, and also against any would-be writerly extreme that presumes that the subjective initiatives of the hermeneutic reader simply and utterly outflank the scientific scruple favored by critics like Dilthey and Freud (who effectively insist on an objective, truth-preserving practice within the inquiries of hermeneutic understanding itself).⁶ Of course, if conceded, that tolerance would extend to all the arts and to much more.

IV

My point is entirely straightforward. If, as I've argued, the interpretation of artworks favors testable intuitions regarding the Intentional unity of particular works (constructed from workable "texts" in the sense already sketched), then – without insisting on any fixed model of unity, without precluding polysemy, without requiring polysemous meaning to be completely and always determinate (though plural), without denying the historied nature of artworks (hence, their endless openness to Intentionally changeable interpretations of their unified import), and without denying the easy compatibility between the sittlich regularities of the art world (and of the enlanguaged human world in general) and the theory of interpretation I've been sketching – I see no problems in the offing affecting consistency or coherence or viability, and no problems regarding the acknowledgement of future innovations. But, although the idea deepens our sense of the social space of art and interpretation, it also begins to show the limitations of any theory overly committed to the Intentional determinacy of art works (or language) and the challenge of a theory of interpretation unwilling to accept any such constraint (trans. Miller 1971, p. 6).⁷

⁶ See, however, Ricoeur (1981, ch. 3).

⁷ Barthes speaks here of "moderately plural (i.e., merely polysemous) texts" which he associates, as Ricoeur does as well, with Louis Hjelmslev's semiology.

Barthes's importance rests with the courage of his exploding the necessity of there being a uniquely correct interpretation of any properly formed piece of literature and with the force of the example he provides (S/Z) of what a writerly reading of a readerly text might actually look like. But these two concerns do not quite yield the same result. Richard Howard, who introduces the English translation of S/Z, correctly remarks that what is writerly in Barthes's analysis of Sarrasine are what he calls Barthes's 93 divagations (collected in an Appendix as the "key" to the interpretation given). The latter entries are not the reading of the text, they are the scattered elements of a would-be writerly analysis of what it is to read a text – to read this particular text. There can be no limit to the infinitude of how we read. In fact, what the reading yields is a readerly-writerly reading of a readerly text – produced in the writerly way. So that what remains unexplained by Barthes is, precisely, the sense in which a literary text can rightly support a plurality of interpretations that, though valid, may not be compatible with one another though they remain compatible with the text itself. Here, Ricoeur, who must have been guided by Barthes's inventively informal structuralism (his quasi-structuralism, we may as well say), signals the possibility that a hermeneutic critique of a phenomenological reading of a text must make room for the openness of interpretation to indeterminately many determinable interpretations of the unified meaning of a given artwork (undoubtedly to include diverse accounts that draw on finite and historically evolving experience).

Ricoeur's concern was to bring something akin to this rereading of Barthes into accord with a proper correction of Husserl's most stringent conception of the phenomenology of meaning – contrasting and systematizing what Husserl calls "subjective and occasional" meanings answering to "chance circumstances of speaking" and "objective and fixed meanings," normally free from all variation, that is, meanings as the "ideal objects" of the "breakthrough" science expounded in Logical Investigations (trans. Findlay 1970, § 2 (Prolegomena), §§ 28-30 (Investigation 1) (the nerve of his opposition to psychologism). Here, Ricoeur is obliged (for his own reasons) to favor Heidegger and Gadamer (both with regard to ideally fixed meanings and to the questionable experience of the "Transcendental Ego") over Husserl's pure phenomenology, but not at the expense (if he had accepted Heidegger unconditionally) of abandoning the scientific rigor of a phenomenology of meaning. He has too much baggage to unload, too many incompatibles to reconcile: the very different contributions of structuralism, empiricism, what he wishes

to salvage in Dilthey, Husserlian phenomenology, Heideggerean and Gadamerian hermeneutics, Frankfurt critical theory, and his own composite doctrine. I've tried to provide a simpler, more intuitive approach to a solution – pragmatist in spirit and detail (I should say) – but congruent in a very natural way with what I take to be the main thrust of Ricoeur's resolution (1981, Ch. 3).⁸ But you surely see that that can't be secured without addressing the nature of the human self and of a society of selves. I take this to be already signaled in Ricoeur's suggestion of a convergence between his own conception and Charles Peirce's regarding the openness of interpretation.

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⁸ Compare, also, in the same volume, his "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding." For a sense of the unacceptable assumptions of Husserl's account of meaning, see Husserl (1970), "Prolegomena to Pure Logic," §§28-29. Ricoeur is caught in the extraordinary complications of Husserl's theory. He has serious doubts about Husserl's Transcendental Ego, the coherence of ideally fixed meanings, the compatibility of phenomenology and hermeneutics, Husserl's inadequate treatment of history (and historicity) and the life-world, and the supporting arguments for the most extreme of Husserl's doctrines. But behind all of these questions, lies the fundamentally problematic relationship between thought (or reason) and language and the unity of all the different levels on which the subjectivity of the human self is encountered. To be frank, I think we must save Ricoeur from himself.

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