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# Speaking for pictures: the rhetoric of art criticism

JAMES A. W. HEFFERNAN

It has long been a commonplace that pictures say more than words: that a picture is not only worth a thousand words, but also speaks to everyone. While Abstract Expressionism has shaken this old assumption, it has nonetheless proved remarkably tenacious. In late seventeenth-century England, John Dryden declared that painting speaks 'the tongue of ev'ry land.'<sup>1</sup> In the late twentieth century, a poster published by the International Photography Council says that 'the world speaks in 1994 languages, but sees in only one: Photography, the universal language.' It should not be a surprise that professional photographers *want* us to consider their language universal, but most readers of the poster probably do not even realise that it makes a claim — let alone wondering if the claim is true. For pictures can sometimes ambush the mind, circumventing our logic and verbal defenses. Part of what makes pictorial language seem universal is its seemingly privileged access to the viewer's heart or soul. Quintilian, the celebrated teacher of rhetoric in ancient Rome, affirmed: 'A picture, though a silent work, may penetrate the feelings so deeply that it sometimes surpasses the very force of speaking.'<sup>2</sup> Seventeen centuries later, Quintilian's point was cited and amplified by the English clergyman Robert Anthony Bromley. In the course of his history of the arts, Bromley compared the cartoons of Raphael — the paintings he made on paper (*cartone*) for the Sistine Chapel tapestries to be copied by tapestry weavers — with the scriptural passages they depict:

Let any man read any of those subjects in the sacred book, and then take a view of the carton [*sic*]. Let him turn over the divine page ever so often, and as often return to the carton: he will assuredly carry back from the picture not only nobler and more enlarged conceptions of the greatest part of those subjects than the sacred writer has left upon him, but nobler and more enlarged conceptions newly increasing at every view. These effects are not produced, because the sacred writers were defective, but because they were writers, and because words can never convey such ideas as may be brought to flow from such a pencil [i.e. paintbrush] as Raphael's.<sup>3</sup>

I quote this passage from an obscure historian of art not because it bears any great weight of authority but because it conveniently exemplifies the highest possible claim that can be made for the eloquence of painting: even the inspired words of Scripture can 'never' match

the expressiveness of pictures wrought by artists such as Raphael. Such a claim inevitably provokes resistance, and Quintilian — whose authority indirectly sponsors it — would probably be the first to disavow it. He granted that a picture might 'sometimes' speak more forcefully than words, but he condemned the practice of using a picture of a crime to rouse the feelings of a judge. 'For the pleader who prefers a voiceless (*mutam*) picture to speak for him in place of his own eloquence must be singularly incompetent.'<sup>4</sup>

The difference between Raphael and the ancient Roman precursor of the police photographer must be respected, but regardless of the artist, Quintilian would never allow a 'voiceless' art to usurp or supplant the art of rhetoric, to speak for the orator himself.<sup>5</sup> Quintilian's word for pictorial art is *tacens*, silent. Recalling Simonides' definition of painting as 'mute poetry' (*poiesin sioposan*), Quintilian's word suggests that painting cannot even speak for itself, much less for the victim of a crime or for anyone else. Art history springs from this conviction. As W. J. T. Mitchell observes,

The 'otherness' of visual representation from the standpoint of textuality may be anything from a professional competition (the *paragone* of poet and painter) to a relation of political, disciplinary, or cultural domination in which the 'self' is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject, while the 'other' is projected as a passive, seen, and (usually) silent object. Insofar as art history is a verbal representation of visual representation, it is an elevation of ekphrasis to a disciplinary principle. Like the masses, the colonized, the powerless and voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse.<sup>6</sup>

The history of art cannot be told without *ekphrasis*, the verbal representation of visual representation. When Leon Battista Alberti in *De Pictura* (1435–6) explains Timanthes' *Immolation of Iphigenia* and Apelles' *Calumny*, or when Franciscus Junius treats the paintings of Apelles and Parrhasius in his *Painting of the Ancients* (1638), they are both writing of works they never saw — except in ancient descriptions of them. Words are the only form in which most ancient painting survives. And in spite of the old adage, even works of art that have survived in their original form remain silent. Since they cannot speak for themselves, art history and art criticism must speak for them.

To speak for a work of art is first of all to speak on its behalf — to praise or defend it. This is what Alberti and Junius aim to do for ancient paintings, and it remains a leading motive for both the art critic and art historian. Traditionally they salute verisimilitude. Writing in the sixteenth century of Parmigianino's *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1525), Giorgio Vasari commends its 'wonderful realism.'<sup>7</sup> Two centuries later, reporting on the Salon of 1759, Diderot says that he asks nothing more than 'to be happy and to admire' (d'être heureux et d'admirer) the pictures, and in the work of Chardin he sees 'always nature and truth.'<sup>8</sup> In the nineteenth century, William Hazlitt calls Bartolomé Murillo's *Spanish Beggar Boys* a 'triumph' of realistic depiction, and Charles Baudelaire finds Eugene Delacroix's *Last Words of Marcus Aurelius* 'one of the most complete examples of what genius can achieve in painting.'<sup>9</sup> Encomia like these may seem closer to art criticism — the assessment of individual works — than to art history, the story of their genesis, reception and relationships.<sup>10</sup> Yet evaluation thoroughly informs both. By the very act of treating a work — or body of work — as a link in a developmental chain or a moment in an art historical narrative of 'development, filiation, evolution, descent, progress, regress,' the art historian ranks the work and proclaims its importance.<sup>11</sup>

The urge to praise works of art, however, goes hand in hand with the equally powerful urge to vie with them, to re-enact the competitive move that art itself makes in recreating the visible world. As Bernard Vouilloux has recently observed in connection with Denis Diderot, the act of describing a picture is at once self-effacing and self-assertive. In Diderot's art criticism, writes Vouilloux, descriptive words putatively 'efface themselves behind the mental images they excite' and description presents itself as nothing more than the 'verbal double of the picture,' but the originality of a critical voice nonetheless makes itself heard as master of the pictorial image.<sup>12</sup> Diderot exemplifies this kind of mastery, as Bernadette Fort has recently shown. Describing Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *Coresus and Callirhoe* (1765) for readers who could see it only in his words, he remarks that several of its faces express fright. But in repeatedly ending a succession of clauses with *effroi*, he aims to rival Fragonard: to generate for his readers a rhetorical effect matching if not surpassing in its cumulative impact the visual display of terrified looks.<sup>13</sup>

In our own time, such rhetorically vivid description of pictures might seem both overwrought and dated. Michael Baxandall argues that the discourse of art criticism has been fundamentally changed by the ever-growing availability of reproductions — from engravings in the eighteenth century to colored slides and photographs, and now digitized pictures in the twentieth. Reproductions seem to make description redundant. Instead of recreating in words

the appearance of a picture that readers cannot see, as Diderot did for the privileged subscribers to his reports on the Salons, the modern critic need only point to the picture made visible in reproduction, and articulate the meaning of what all can see. Yet description has hardly disappeared from art criticism. It continues to play a crucial part in grounding the critic's interpretation of a picture by determining how we see it. Commenting on Francisco de Goya's *Third of May*, for instance, Robert Hughes writes that the blood depicted on the ground 'is a dark alizarin crimson put on thick and then scraped back with a palette knife, so that its sinking into the grain of the canvas mimics the drying of blood itself.'<sup>14</sup> Moving beyond traditional description — an account of what the picture shows — Hughes explains how the paint was applied to produce a particular effect that in turn mimics the drying of blood. In identifying the texture of the pigment as well as the objects it represents, Hughes describes what reproductions seldom show and at the same time lays the groundwork for his claim that the picture is 'tragically expressive.'

As Hughes' comment demonstrates, speaking for pictures means not only praising them and emulating their impact in words but also interpreting them. It is here that art criticism does its most distinctive and essential work, the work that above all justifies its existence. Art criticism speaks for pictures because pictures cannot interpret themselves. Even metapictures — self-referential pictures *about* pictures such as Diego Velazquez's *Las Meninas* (c. 1656) — cannot explain what they mean; they can only present themselves to be viewed, understood and explained, to be seen, read and interpreted.<sup>15</sup> I have elsewhere argued that pictures demand to be read as much as to be viewed, to be construed in ways analogous to — but by no means identical with — the process of construing a verbal text.<sup>16</sup> Interpretation differs from construing as speaking differs from hearing. Construing is the private and silent prelude to the public act of interpretation, of expressing in words what is inferred from the study of a picture, sculpture or text.<sup>17</sup>

Ideally, the interpreter of a painting activates its own voice, makes it speak for itself. Steinberg says art historical interpretation aims 'to make visible what had not previously been apparent' so 'that the picture seems to confess itself and the interpreter disappears.'<sup>18</sup> Yet the very act of imputing a voice to a picture is not only subjective and fetishistic but also is rhetorical — a figure of speech (in every sense) that art historians typically find irresistible.<sup>19</sup> Even if we suspend our disbelief in the articulateness of pictures, anyone who reads Vasari or Diderot or Steinberg knows that the interpreter never disappears, that his or her voice is audible in whatever may be said about a work of art. As a public act and a performing art, interpretation presents its language to us for scrutiny. Whether or not it

assumes the putatively disinterested form of art history, art criticism — verbal commentary on particular works of art — is always interpretive, and may itself be construed and interpreted.

To scrutinize the language of art criticism is to see that it typically circles around what pictures show. Not many words in English (or any other language known to me) directly refer to the shapes and colors in a painting (round, straight, green, etc.). For this reason, as Baxandall notes, most art criticism deploys three kinds of indirect language. *Comparison words* identify what the painted shapes resemble in appearance or effect; *cause words* suggest the causes of processes that generate the picture and its effect; and *effect words* specify the effect of the painting on the beholder.<sup>20</sup> Baxandall's comparison words include not just explicitly comparative terms, such as 'cloud-like' applied to a patch of white, but any terms 'referring to the colours and patterns on the picture surface *as if* they were the things they are representing'<sup>21</sup>: the tree in the foreground, the bridge in the middle distance, the fortress in the background, etc. Presumably comparison words also include anything said about the meaning of a represented object, though words about meaning can easily become words about cause or effect: the fortress signifies power (meaning); the fortress seems to intimidate the viewer (effect); the artist's placement of the fortress makes it dominate the picture (cause).

As that example shows, the walls between Baxandall's three categories are by no means impermeable. But his tripartite formula does two important things. First, by positing a class of 'effect words' or 'ego words,' as Baxandall also calls them,<sup>22</sup> it highlights the role played by the beholder, who is of course also the interpreter. Second, by identifying both cause words and effect words, it allows the narrative structure to be seen at work in almost all art criticism, which — as Baxandall says — implicitly treats the work of art as 'something with a history of making by a painter and a reality of reception by beholders.'<sup>23</sup>

To see the durability of this formula, we need only recall that the oldest account of a work of art in Western literature — Homer's description of the Shield of Achilles in the eighteenth book of the *Iliad* — includes an extensive history of its making. When the history of making is complemented by the story of reception, we can also see the potentiality for dramatic antagonism. If art criticism tells a story of creation and reception, it is a story in which the receiver or beholder plays a dominant role — whether or not 'ego words' permeate the critic's language.<sup>24</sup> As verbal storyteller, he or she constructs a work of syntagmatic, linear progression that fundamentally reconstructs the haphazard, desultory way in which a painting is viewed.<sup>25</sup>

To show how the rhetoric of this storytelling impulse is manifested in art criticism ranging from ancient times to

our own, I will examine the work of five major critics: Philostratus, Vasari, Diderot, Meyer Schapiro and Leo Steinberg. My aim is not to sketch a history of art criticism or tell the story of its 'progress' but rather to demonstrate that its language is always rhetorical, that its ostensibly descriptive moves are always interpretive, that it seeks to regulate what we see, that its pictorial 'facts' as well as its stories are designed by an interpreter who is cast as the verbal representative of visual art. Neither the advent of reproductions nor the rise of abstract art fundamentally alters the language of art criticism. While reproductions constitute a rival form of representation and a visual test of the interpreter's words, the critic aims precisely to make us see the picture — whether original or reproduced — through a verbal frame. Even when abstract art threatens to silence the critic by detonating the representational ground of visual art, the very absence of recognizable forms excites the critic's rhetorical powers and prompts new ways of telling stories about what pictures represent, new ways of verbally representing what they visually 'say.' From Philostratus to Steinberg, as will be shown, the act of speaking for pictures is above all a rhetorical performance.<sup>26</sup>

#### PHILOSTRATUS: THE ART CRITIC AS NARCISSUS

To read the *Imagines* of Philostratus is to see that art criticism originates from literature and the study of rhetoric. Born in Greece about 190 CE, Philostratus was a sophist and teacher of rhetoric who could draw from an already rich ekphrastic tradition in Greek literature: from work such as Homer's account of Achilles' shield and Lucian's description of Apelles' *Calumny*. Descriptions of art in Greek literature included imaginary as well as actual works (like the *Calumny*). This may partly explain why Philostratus makes no special effort to authenticate the existence of the paintings he describes — apart from claiming to have seen them in a luxurious seaside villa outside Naples. Philostratus avoids art history. Though he studied (he says) under Aristodemus of Caria, who had written the lives of some ancient masters, Philostratus decides

not to deal with painters nor yet with their lives; rather we propose to describe examples of paintings in the form of addresses which we have composed for the young, that by this means they may learn to interpret paintings and to appreciate what is esteemed in them.<sup>27</sup>

What Philostratus offers sounds very much like a course in art appreciation. But it derives from the *progymnasmata* or preliminary exercises given in Greek schools of rhetoric during the early centuries CE. Though *ekphrasis* was technically a rhetorical exercise in description, Philostratus' carefully composed 'addresses' exemplify interpretation, more

specifically the rhetoric of interpretation, which is emphatically verbal. In the fiction of the frame story that introduces these addresses, Philostratus says that he saw the paintings while lodging in a villa, where he was asked to interpret them by the 10-year-old son of his host. It is to this unnamed boy that Philostratus speaks, though the young men of Naples who had come out to hear this noted orator are allowed to listen. The frame story also indicates that the paintings Philostratus talks about are plainly visible to his audience. He is therefore wholly free to focus on the task of interpreting them.

Typically, Philostratus interprets a painting by turning it into a narrative: not the story of its making, as in Homer's account of Achilles' shield and most art criticism that comes later, but the story suggested by its shapes, which are identified with the figures they represent. Sometimes he generates the story by explicit inference. In a painting of the Bosphorus, for instance, he says that the figure of Eros stretching out his hand from a rocky promontory symbolizes a story of suicidal lovers.<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere he finds the whole story of Hermes' childhood depicted 'in the painting' (*en te graphe*) of him. According to Philostratus, the painting not only shows Hermes in swaddling clothes driving Apollo's cattle into a cleft of the earth; it also indicates that he was born on the crest of Olympus, that the Horae swaddled and cared for him there, and that when they turned to help his mother Maia, he slipped out of his swaddling clothes and walked down the mountain.<sup>29</sup> Philostratus says nothing of how these episodes are composed in a single painting, for he never mentions composition at all, let alone discussing the agency behind it. Yet in his own way he aims both to convert the painting into a narrative and also to make the work 'confess itself' — in Steinberg's phrase — through the inferred speech of its characters. From the expression on the face of Apollo confronting Maia, says Philostratus, 'he looks as though he were about to say to Maia, "Your son whom you bore yesterday wrongs me; for the cattle in which I delight he has thrust into the earth . . ."'<sup>30</sup> Philostratus hears in paintings sounds as well as voices: shouting women, the echoing music of shepherds' pipes, the shouting of fishermen filling their net.<sup>31</sup> Yet these are crudely literal ways of making pictures speak. To see how Philostratus constructs the meaning of a picture without breaking its silence, consider his commentary on a painting of Narcissus standing over a pool.

Philostratus treats this painting as a metapicture, a painting about painting. In so doing, he anticipates Alberti, who later calls Narcissus 'the inventor of painting,'<sup>32</sup> and who asks, 'What else can you call painting but a similar embracing with art of what is presented on the surface of the water . . .?'<sup>33</sup> Philostratus likewise begins by reading the reflected image of the youth as a painting within a painting. 'The pool paints Narcissus,' he writes, 'and

the painting represents both the pool and the whole story of Narcissus.'<sup>34</sup> But unlike Alberti, Philostratus does not consider Narcissus a painter. On the contrary, he sharply distinguishes Narcissus from the painter and — just as importantly — from the viewer of the painting that represents him.

Philostratus first praises the verisimilitude of the painting in traditional terms: a bee shown settling on flowers looks so realistic that we cannot tell 'whether a real bee has been deceived by the painted flowers or whether we are to be deceived into thinking that a painted bee is real.'<sup>35</sup> Leaving this question open — perhaps only a risky fingering of the bee could decisively settle it — he continues:

As for you, . . . Narcissus, it is no painting that has deceived you, nor are you engrossed in a thing of pigments or wax; but you do not realize that the water represents you exactly as you are when you gaze upon it, nor do you see through the artifice of the pool, though to do so you have only to nod your head or change your expression or slightly move your hand, instead of standing in the same attitude; but acting as though you had met a companion, you wait for some move on his part. Do you then expect the pool to enter into conversation with you? Nay, this youth does not hear anything we say, but he is immersed, eyes and ears alike, in the water and we must interpret the painting for ourselves.<sup>36</sup>

Philostratus treats the painting as a study in illusion. For him Narcissus could hardly be the inventor of painting because he does not even know how to look at a painting, or in this case at a visible metaphor for painting: a reflected image. Just as the bee (if real) mistakes painted flowers for real ones, Narcissus mistakes the natural 'artifice' of his reflected image for another person, and instead of moving his head or body to view this picture-like image from various angles, he waits — transfixed — for the other to move.

Baxandall defines 'effect words' in art criticism as 'substantially passive.'<sup>37</sup> But in viewing the painting of Narcissus, Philostratus does not simply receive its illusionistic effects. He assumes a position of dominance and judges those effects. He sees only too clearly how Narcissus is deceived.<sup>38</sup> Almost contemptuously, he asks of the gazing figure, 'Do you then expect the pool to enter into conversation with you?' Yet this very question destabilizes Philostratus' critical stance. By asking it, he reveals that he himself has already entered into conversation with the painted figure. Earlier, speaking of the bee deceived by the painted flowers, he admitted that he — or more precisely 'we,' he and his listeners — might have been deceived by a realistically painted bee. So the viewer's implied claim to intellectual superiority rests only on the shaky ground of his consciousness that he — not the bee — may be deceived. And while he knows that the painted figure of Narcissus is deceived, his certainty rests

on the assumption that such a figure is *capable* of being deceived, and likewise of hearing the statements and the question addressed by the viewer. The question is 'rhetorical' in the conventional sense that it presupposes its answer, and the speaker clearly sees that 'this youth does not hear anything we say.' Yet to interpret the painting, Philostratus must embrace the illusion that he *can* converse with it — can make it 'seem to confess itself,' in Steinberg's words. If 'we must interpret the painting for ourselves,' we must also, paradoxically, enlist the help of our painted companion.

This is what Philostratus does in the rest of his commentary — with a curious combination of confident inference and hesitant speculation. The spear held by the painted figure shows that he has 'just returned from the hunt', and he is said to be 'panting'.<sup>39</sup> But not everything about the figure speaks to the viewer clearly:

Whether the panting of his breast remains from his hunting or is already the panting of love I do not know. The eye, surely, is that of a man deeply in love, for its natural brightness and intensity are softened by a longing that settles upon it, and he perhaps thinks that he is loved in return, since the reflection gazes at him in just the way that he looks at it. . . . The youth stands over the youth who stands in the water, or rather who gazes intently at him and seems to be athirst for his beauty.<sup>40</sup>

Sliding from assertion to tentative inference, from 'surely' to 'perhaps' and 'seems,' Philostratus hears and transmits as much as he can of the painting's confession. He not only tells the story it implies (a youth just returned from the hunt stands entranced by his own reflection in a pool), but also he articulates the feelings signified by the silent figure, and in so doing he inevitably imputes to it a conscious, sentient life. So the Narcissus wrought by this commentary is considerably more than the deceived 'Other' exposed as such by the knowing, sophisticated Self of the viewer. Though not the inventor of painting, he is — if anything — a figure for the interpretation of it. Like Narcissus, art critics gaze on a still and silent image to which they impute an independent life and from which they seek to solicit a voice, to hear a confession. But no matter how attentively they listen, the voice is inevitably theirs, a product of their own reflections.

**VASARI AND THE BIRTH OF ART HISTORY**  
Vasari's chief difference from Philostratus is signalled by the titles of their respective works. Beyond the fact that his *Lives of the Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1551) appeared some thirteen centuries after the *Imagines*, Vasari foregrounds precisely what Philostratus neglects: the lives of the painters. If Philostratus is the father of art criticism, or one of its fathers, Vasari is the father of art history, and the history he writes is essentially the history of

families. 'Vasari's concept of the artist's own family,' writes Paul Barolsky,

is closely tied to his vision of the noble families, who make up the commune, who are the patrons of artists. No less is it informed by the ideals of biblical families and by the ecclesiastical metaphors of family. If Vasari's vision of the commune, linking 'chiesa' and 'stato,' is informed by the ideals of family, what Dante calls the 'umana famiglia,' his view of artists, as part of this community, is similarly inspired by such familial ideals. The genealogies of noble Florentine houses, modelled on the patriarchy of the Hebrew Bible, are an important model for Vasari's very concept of art history — which is a genealogy of artists both real and imaginary. These families of artists are part of the larger family of the Florentine state.<sup>41</sup>

Familial stories — genealogies of artists and art — frame Vasari's descriptions of paintings. In telling such stories, Vasari sustains the tradition of *ekphrasis*, and specifically recalls Philostratus' habit of turning pictures into narratives. To Philostratus' story of the action represented *in* each painting Vasari adds the story of the painting itself, implicitly or explicitly placing it in the life of the artist or the evolution of Renaissance art as a whole.<sup>42</sup> But as Barolsky notes, Vasari's familial stories are literary as much as historical, freely mixing fiction with fact.<sup>43</sup> Vasari tells us, for instance, that Raphael's 'good and loving' father, Giovanni de' Santi, personally placed the boy with Pietro Perugino because he knew that he himself could not teach his son much about painting. Perugino thus appears as a surrogate father, the father of Raphael's art.<sup>44</sup> It does not matter that Raphael's father actually died several years before the artist joined Perugino. Regardless of this inconvenient fact, Vasari's story creates a familial context for his account of pictures such as Raphael's youthful *Entombment* (1507), painted for Atalanta Baglione in 1507 and now in the Borghese Gallery of Rome:

This divine picture represents Christ carried to burial, so finely done that it seems freshly executed. In composing this work Raphael imagined the grief of loving relations in carrying to burial the body of their dearest, the one on whom all the welfare, honour, and advantage of the entire family depended. Our Lady is fainting, and the heads of the figures in weeping are most graceful, especially that of St. John, who hangs his head and clasps his hands in a manner that would move the hardest to pity. Those who consider the diligence, tenderness, art and grace of this painting may well marvel, for it excites astonishment by the expressions of the figures, the beauty of the draperies, and the extreme excellence of every particular.<sup>45</sup>

Mary (Our Lady) is the only figure linked familiarly to the corpse in this picture, but Vasari reads it as the story of a family tragedy. For Vasari, reading the picture means reading the mind of the artist. While Philostratus hears the silent confession of the figure *in* a painting, Vasari

claims to know what the artist himself imagined as he painted: the grief with which members of a family see the head of it borne to the tomb.<sup>46</sup> Mindful perhaps of Alberti, Vasari finds this feeling expressed or confessed through the posture of the figures: Mary's sinking body, the weeping heads, the bent head and clasped hands of John.<sup>47</sup> Wrought with 'art and grace,' these figures stir in the beholder — for whom Vasari speaks quite as much as for the artist and painting — two distinct feelings: pity from even 'the hardest' and astonished admiration for 'the extreme excellence of every particular.'

This final point separates Vasari from Philostratus. While Philostratus salutes the illusionistic realism of paintings, he makes no explicit reference to the painter's virtuosity; as Svetlana Alpers says, he 'assumes technical ability.'<sup>48</sup> Vasari, who aims to tell the story of artists as well as of paintings, divides his focus between effect and cause, between the emotive impact of the figures and the virtuosity revealed in Raphael's depiction of them, between the painfulness of the subject-matter and the beauty of the forms used to express it.

To read Vasari's description in light of an actual painting — something we do not have for any *ekphrasis* of Philostratus — is also to see which details he finds significant. The clasped hands of St John in the *Entombment* are barely visible just beside his head, but they help Vasari make the Albertian point that Raphael's figures express their souls through their bodies and thus move the beholder. Curiously enough, while noting the inconspicuous hands of John, Vasari overlooks the plainly visible hand clutching the cloth under Christ's knees in the very center of the picture. He also says nothing about the composition of the picture, which is dominated by a wedge of diagonals converging at the sunken waist of Christ and supported by two legs standing beneath his sinking body like columns — one bent with strain. Here as elsewhere in his commentaries, Vasari reads the painting not as a linear or geometrical structure but as the centerpiece of two stories: a story of familial mourning that excites our pity, and a story of artistic creation that astounds us. Binding these stories together is the art-historical triumph of art over death as genius passes from Perugino to Raphael, from surrogate father to artistic son. Vasari thus draws from the painting the story that he wants it to tell.

#### DIDEROT: ART CRITICISM AS FICTION

A still more powerful narrative impulse drives the art criticism of Diderot, who brings to the study of art the talents of a novelist and playwright as well as the insatiable curiosity of an encyclopedist. Besides flaunting his passion for pictures and sometimes treating painted scenes as three-dimensional sites, Diderot gives the beholder a major role in the story generated from the painting. In his criticism the story of a picture typically usurps the technical

attractions of color, composition and line, which hardly affect him so much as the purely emotive appeal of the painter's subject-matter.<sup>49</sup> Of his commentaries on the Salon of 1767 he declares: 'I extol or censure in accordance with my own feelings'.<sup>50</sup> Sometimes he dissolves the pictorial medium altogether, treating the painted scene as a place to be entered on foot. Writing of Jean-Baptiste Leprince's *Russian Pastoral* in the Salon of 1765, he imagines joining the figures, listening to their music and then walking back with the old man to his cabin.<sup>51</sup>

Yet for all his eagerness to pierce the picture plane, Diderot is hardly indifferent to pictorial technique. Starting to write of seven landscapes by Joseph Vernet that he has seen in the Salon of 1767, he decides instead to explore a mountainous region with a native of it. In doing so, he seems to be forsaking art for nature — until we learn that he recognizes in nature exactly what Vernet has painted.<sup>52</sup> He thus uses nature to return to art. His account of the pictures becomes at once the story of a rural tour and of a conversation with the native *cicerone* in which he argues that nature is surpassed by Vernet's art.<sup>53</sup>

Conversation permeates Diderot's art criticism. While Philostratus tries to speak with a painted Narcissus, Diderot's art criticism springs from at least two kinds of conversation: the actual discussions he held with artists and various other people attending the public Salons at the Louvre, and the silent dialogue that he has conducted with the paintings.<sup>54</sup> The conversational origin of Diderot's art criticism is repeated in the conversational form of his reviews, which are variously addressed to fictive companions, to figures in the paintings, and to his readers, the privileged few subscribers to Melchior Grimm's *Correspondance Litteraire*. Diderot's way of speaking for pictures, then, is to make them part of a conversation in which he plays the dominant role. Consider what he says of Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *Young Girl Crying Over her Dead Bird* in the Salon of 1765:

What a pretty elegy! What a pretty poem! . . . A delicious painting, the most attractive and perhaps the most interesting in the Salon. She faces us, her head rests on her left hand. The dead bird lies on top of the cage, its head hanging down, its wings limp, its feet in the air. How natural her pose! How beautiful her head! How elegantly her hair is arranged! How expressive her face! Her pain is profound, she feels the full brunt of her misfortune, she's consumed by it. What a pretty catafalque the cage makes! How graceful is the garland of greenery that winds around it! Oh, what a beautiful hand! . . . Note the truthful detailing of these fingers, and these dimples, and this softness, and the reddish cast resulting from the pressure of the head against these delicate fingers, and the charm of it all. One would approach this hand to kiss it, if one didn't respect this child and her suffering. Everything about her enchants, including the fall of her clothing; how beautifully the shawl is draped! How light and supple it is! When one first

perceives this painting, one says: Delicious! If one pauses before it or comes back to it, one cries out: Delicious! Delicious! Soon one is surprised to find oneself conversing with this child and consoling her.<sup>55</sup>

To read this passage in light of Baxandall's formula is to see that Diderot highlights effect words, skimps on cause words (such as the vigorous handling that he mentions later),<sup>56</sup> and makes room for 'comparison words' — in this case words identifying the objects represented as well as describing how they are arranged. Diderot knows that Grimm's subscribers can see this picture only through his words. So even while calling it 'delicious,' he enables his readers to visualize the girl's head resting on her left hand and the dead bird lying on its back atop the garlanded cage, which thus becomes a catafalque.<sup>57</sup>

But Diderot stresses above all the effect of the picture on the beholder. Vasari, as noted, says that Raphael's superlatively graceful depiction of grieving figures in the *Entombment* stirs both admiration and pity. Diderot makes a comparable claim for Greuze's *Young Girl*. While the beauty and disposition of its forms gives him (or the depersonalized 'one') a 'delicious' pleasure, the 'pain' expressed by the girl's face is so profound that the beholder feels moved to console her. But Diderot knows that the death of a bird cannot plausibly justify anything like the pain induced by the death of Christ. To redeem the picture from sentimentality, he reconstructs the story of the pain it represents. Dismissing its title, he claims to elicit the true meaning of the picture from the painted girl herself, who is not so much consoled as made to confess by the critic as interrogator, as grand inquisitor. From her 'melancholy air' and the way her lowered eyes somehow manage to 'look at [him],' Diderot constructs a melancholy narrative: a young man comes during her mother's absence, makes promises, then reluctantly leaves; the mother scolds her for her self-absorption, then consoles her; the bird dies from the girl's neglect and the girl wonders if this prefigures the death of her love affair.<sup>58</sup> In short, as Diderot insists to an evidently skeptical friend, the young girl grieves not for a bird but for 'something else, I tell you' — a lover.<sup>59</sup> This erotic tale woven by Diderot rivals the childish story ostensibly told by the painting, which perfectly exemplifies what Michael Fried calls 'absorption' because the girl is wholly oblivious of the beholder, utterly preoccupied with her grief.<sup>60</sup> When Diderot says to the painted girl, 'How you look at me!,' he imagines her silently admitting the truth of his story. But in fact he misrepresents her to readers who can know her only through his words. For the painting shows her left eye wholly cupped by her left hand and her barely open right one looking straight down at the bird.<sup>61</sup>

Diderot speaks for a painted girl whose expression and pose seem to tell all we need to know about her grief and yet also hide what he considers the true source of it. In

speaking for the picture, Diderot dictates what it is said to confess. He thus narrows the gap between 'cause words' and 'effect words.' Because the painting strikes him as both 'delicious' and poignant (two effects), it moves him to raise questions that precipitate the very look depicted: 'You lower your eyes, you don't answer.' Diderot thus aligns his beholding with the causes of the girl's melancholy. Though he later makes causal inferences about what the artist did — 'The striped handkerchief is loose, light, beautifully transparent, everything's handled with vigor, without compromising the details'<sup>62</sup> — he chiefly aims to wrest or extort his own truth from the girl's expression. Its voiceless female figure is doubly dominated by male subjects: first by the young man who threatens the girl with abandonment, and then by the inquisitorial viewer bent on extracting her confession. In the conversation he conducts with the girl as well as with his skeptical friend, Diderot makes himself the voice of the painting. More boldly inventive than Vasari, whose commentary on Raphael's *Entombment* largely follows the Biblical story it signifies, Diderot determines the story told by Greuze's *Young Girl*.

#### MEYER SCHAPIRO AND THE 'FACTS' OF ART HISTORY

In turning from Diderot to Meyer Schapiro, we enter the domain of twentieth-century art history as a fully professional and largely specialized academic enterprise. While Diderot brings to art criticism the passion of the amateur (in the root sense of *amator*, lover), Meyer Schapiro was a professional art historian. While Diderot tells how paintings and sculptures affect him on their first exhibition, Schapiro concentrates — for the most part — on works already canonized, works ranging from Romanesque sculpture to early twentieth-century art. To individual pictures, therefore, Schapiro brings a knowledge of the artist's life and cultural milieu as well as of art historical scholarship — the history of periods, the genealogy of styles.

Schapiro's critical method has a genealogy of its own. When he reads paintings in light of the artist's life and historical period, Schapiro recalls Vasari. Yet when he construes and explains the meaning of a particular work, when he strives to make it speak, he follows Diderot. He also follows Diderot in scrutinizing various sources, both verbal and visual, for the contextual light they shed on a work. For Diderot not only studied paintings but also gathered opinions about them from those who attended the Salon exhibitions. Of course, scholarly research differs from collecting comments at a public exhibition, from interviewing — so to speak — the man on the street. But if Schapiro studied the life of an artist through the printed as well as visual record, Diderot personally interviewed some of the living artists whose work he represented in



words. Even the conversational format in which he typically writes about art anticipates the modern art-historical practice of injecting one's own voice into a scholarly debate, or intervening in the debate to challenge an existing interpretation. Finally, Schapiro follows Diderot in claiming privileged access to the works of art he professes to explicate. Like Diderot, he presents his own voice as the authentic voice of the painting, the voice in which it confesses itself.

Consider Schapiro's commentary on Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes*, painted in July–September 1886 and now in the Van Gogh Museum.<sup>63</sup> Schapiro takes up this painting chiefly to overturn what has been written of it by Martin Heidegger, who construes it as the painting of shoes belonging to a peasant woman and symbolizing the story of her whole life:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stands forth. In the stiffly solid heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field, swept by a raw wind. On the leather there lies the dampness and saturation of the soil. Under the soles there slides the loneliness of the field-path as the evening declines. . . . This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety about the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the advent of birth and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the *earth* and it is protected in the *world* of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment rises to its resting-in-self.<sup>64</sup>

All of this, Heidegger proclaims, is revealed or 'told' by the painting, which discloses 'what the equipment, the pair of peasant's shoes, *is* in truth.'<sup>65</sup>

Like Diderot, Heidegger presents his own voice as that of the painting, which in this case speaks a language unmistakably Heideggerian. The shoes cannot speak; the peasant woman who allegedly wore them is 'wordless'; the painting is silent. Only Heidegger can speak for them all, and for the truth uncovered by the painting we are asked to take his ventriloquized word.

Schapiro demurs. First of all he contends that Heidegger's comment could apply just as well to a real pair of shoes as to a painting of them. In other words, he complains that Heidegger wholly identifies the painting with what it represents. Second, against Heidegger's existential truth Schapiro posits a would-be biographical fact. We cannot say, writes Schapiro, 'that a painting of shoes by van Gogh expresses the being or essence of a peasant woman's shoes and her relation to nature and work. They are the shoes of the artist, by that time [summer 1886] a man of the town and city.'<sup>66</sup> This would-be statement of fact ('They *are* the shoes of the artist') actually blends fact and interpretation. Van Gogh was indeed living in Paris

when he painted this picture, but nothing about the picture identifies it as urban; if anything, the shoes in this picture look more rural than the quite different *Pair of Old Shoes* that van Gogh painted in August 1888, when he had left Paris for the country soil of Arles.<sup>67</sup> Still more problematic is the claim that the shoes depicted in the earlier work 'are those of the artist.' Though he faults Heidegger for treating painted shoes as if they were real, Schapiro assumes — in the words of Jacques Derrida — that 'painted shoes can belong really and really be restituted to a real, identifiable, and nameable subject.'<sup>68</sup> Even if they could be, the only evidence Schapiro cites to show that van Gogh's 1886 *Pair of Shoes* depicts his own shoes is Paul Gauguin's recollection about a painting van Gogh made *two years later*, when he was back in Arles. According to Gauguin, van Gogh in 1888 made from 'a pair of big hob-nailed shoes' in his studio 'a remarkable still life painting' which Schapiro cannot identify with any certainty.<sup>69</sup>

On close inspection, then, Schapiro's statement of fact becomes only a statement of possibility. Nothing of Schapiro's verbal or visual evidence securely ties *A Pair of Shoes* to the feet of the artist. Yet on the gossamer thread of this tie Schapiro hangs his autobiographical reading of the picture. The shoes, he says,

are things that have touched [van Gogh] deeply, . . . things inseparable from his body and memorable to his reacting self-awareness. . . . In isolating his own old, worn shoes on a canvas, he turns them to the spectator; he makes of them a piece from a self-portrait, that part of the costume with which we tread the earth and in which we locate strains of movement, fatigue, pressure, heaviness — the burden of the erect body in its contact with the ground. They mark our inescapable position on the earth. To 'be in someone's shoes' is to be in his predicament or his station in life. For an artist to isolate his worn shoes as the subject of a picture is for him to convey a concern with the fatalities of his social being. Not only the shoes as an instrument of use, . . . but the shoes as 'a portion of the self' (in Hamsun's words) are van Gogh's revealing theme.<sup>70</sup>

Schapiro uses cause words to define the work of the artist: isolating the shoes on the canvas and turning them toward us. In thus observing what the artist does, Schapiro clearly moves beyond Heidegger's referential identification of painted shoes with real ones. But otherwise Schapiro offers no more than a variation on a Heideggerian theme. Once again the shoes are said to tell the particular story of a strained and anxious life as well as the universal story of 'our inescapable position.' When Schapiro claims that van Gogh 'makes of [the shoes] a piece from a self-portrait,' he slides from causation to speculation, prompting us to wonder what stylistic features of this picture link it to van Gogh's actual self-portraits, which never show his legs, let alone his shoes. Does *A Pair of*

*Shoes* evoke self-portraiture any more than it exemplifies still life, which is what van Gogh chiefly painted in the summer of 1886?<sup>71</sup> He painted no self-portraits in this period. But to compare the laces of the painted shoes with the bending and twisting stems in a picture such as *Jug with Red and White Carnations*, dating from the summer of 1886, is to see that the laces might almost be tendrils reaching for light and air: the one at left snaking across the toe of the shoe, the pair at right jerking and undulating and finally blooming into a c-curl below.<sup>72</sup>

But Schapiro sees only self-portraiture here. In a brief follow-up essay on *A Pair of Shoes*, he writes:

One can describe van Gogh's painting of his shoes as a picture of objects seen and felt by the artist as a significant part of himself — he faces himself like a mirrored image — chosen, isolated, carefully arranged, and addressed to himself. Is there not in that singular artistic conception an aspect of the intimate and personal, a soliloquy, an expression of the pathos of a troubled human condition in the drawing of an ordinarily neat and in fact well-fitted, self-confident, over-protected clothed body? The thickness and heaviness of the impasto pigment substance, the emergence of the dark shoes from shadow into light, the irregular, angular patterns and surprisingly loosened curved laces extending beyond the silhouettes of the shoes, are not all these component features of van Gogh's odd conception of the shoes?<sup>73</sup>

To 'describe' the painting as a self-portrait is of course to interpret it that way. Here again words plausibly identifying the cause or agency behind the painted shoes — 'chosen, isolated, carefully arranged' — give way to speculation masquerading as statement of fact (the picture is 'addressed to himself'). The rhetorical questions that follow then coax us to read or hear the 'singular' style of the painting as 'soliloquy.' The second question says more about what is actually on the canvas — thick impasto, shoes emerging from shadow, angular patterns, curved laces — than Schapiro says anywhere else. But these stylistic features collectively signify oddity of conception, which in turn signifies soliloquy, the artist expressing his own 'deviant and . . . deformed' uniqueness through the picture.<sup>74</sup> Curiously, however, this painted sign of the artist's idiosyncratic self also signifies — for Schapiro — something universal: van Gogh's conception of the shoe 'as a symbol of his lifelong practice of walking, and an ideal of life as a pilgrimage, a perpetual change of experience.'<sup>75</sup>

To compare Schapiro's commentary on *A Pair of Shoes* with Heidegger's account of it is to see the difference between a philosopher and an art historian. Schapiro can challenge Heidegger's reading of the picture because he evidently knows much more of the life and influences that stand behind it as well as of other pictures by van Gogh that may help to explain its style and meaning. But by

themselves, facts gathered by an art historian neither constitute an interpretation nor guarantee its plausibility. When Schapiro claims that the painted shoes are van Gogh's soliloquy, that through them the artist tells the story of his wandering and troubled life, Schapiro may be right, but the gap between the known facts and these autobiographical inferences can only be bridged by a leap of faith — something like the faith required to read van Gogh's *Starry Night* as an evocation of the apocalypse.<sup>76</sup>

In the name of art-historical clarification, Schapiro strives to over-turn Heidegger's story of the painting's existential truth with his own story of its autobiographical truth. Once again a male beholder makes the painting tell a story dominated by men. Rather than depicting the shoes of a woman or signifying the story of her life, this painting must — we are told — depict the shoes of the artist and thus signify the story of his life as recalled by such fellow (male) artists as Gauguin. Schapiro's reading of the picture admits neither indeterminacy nor the life of a woman. In speaking for the painting, he makes it tell the story of a man in a voice exclusively male.

#### LEO STEINBERG AND THE TACITURNITY OF ABSTRACT ART

To this point we have examined the language of four critics writing about a kind of art that could be simply classified as representational. For all their differences, the paintings of Narcissus, of the deposition of Christ, of the young girl weeping over a dead bird and of the pair of shoes all refer to people or material objects that exist, once existed or could conceivably exist in the world outside the painting. Schapiro's whole argument about the van Gogh painting springs from his conviction that it represents an actual piece of the artist's own property, and thus tells something about his life. The notion that a painting represents something tangible outside itself, even if that something can be visited only by an act of imagination, is a large part of what generates the narrative impulse of art criticism. Given the painting of a figure or an object — a young man gazing into a pool, a young girl weeping over a dead bird, a pair of shoes — the critic can tell a story about what the painting shows, or put into words the story signified by its images.

But the story of art criticism itself, which is what I have very selectively sketched, can hardly be told without some reference to Modernism and specifically to abstract art, which begins about 1900. What can the art critic say about abstract art? What sort of story can be told about an art that apparently turns its back on representation, on reference to any object or figure that we might recognize from our experience of the world outside the painting, and that might thus give us something to talk about? Modern art is said to have declared war on language itself. For Rosalind E. Krauss, its taciturnity is exemplified by

its most persistent emblem, the grid. 'Surfacing in pre-War cubist painting and subsequently becoming ever more stringent and manifest, the grid announces, among other things, modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse.'<sup>77</sup>

This sentence encapsulates the paradox of abstract art. In the very act of proclaiming its silence and its will to silence us, Krauss not only displays the full power of her own rhetoric with a resounding triad of parallel phrases ('to literature, to narrative, to discourse'), but also she affirms the eloquence of the would-be taciturn grid, naming only some of the things that it 'announces.'<sup>78</sup> If modern art ever aimed to silence the viewer, it has conspicuously failed. Its very renunciation of what we commonly take to be subject-matter — its refusal to represent anything we can recognize from our experience of the material world — intensifies our compulsion to talk about it, or our need to hear someone else talk about it, or both. What Harold Rosenberg says of Minimalism applies to all abstract art: 'The less there is to see, the more there is to say.'<sup>79</sup> Viewers of modern art thus recall in a way the condition of Diderot's subscribers, who could see the Salon paintings only through his words. Though reproductions as well as frequent exhibitions give all our eyes ready access to the works of modernists such as Piet Mondrian and Jackson Pollock, most of us can hardly see what these works are — what they do, what they 'announce,' what in any sense they represent — without the aid of words. So far from silencing the critic, then, abstract art provokes and demands at least as much commentary as any of its precursors.

Not surprisingly, much of this speech has been devoted to placing abstraction in the history of art, and thus to showing once more how tenaciously storytelling informs our response to painting. If critics cannot tell a story about the objects or figures represented in a work of art, they can at least tell the story of how Modernism won its independence from the art of the past. For Greenberg, modern art is the story of its quest for pictorial purity, its retreat from the illusory depth of the Old Masters to the two-dimensional picture plane, its resolute insistence on 'the ineluctable flatness of the support (i.e. the stretched canvas or panel).'<sup>80</sup> For Alfred H. Barr, whose *Cubism and Abstract Art* (first published 1936) has been called the 'Bible of modern art,' modern art is above all the story of its liberation from figuration.<sup>81</sup> As Mitchell suggests, the diagram that Barr drew to show the evolution of modern art from impressionism to 1936 may be read as 'a quest-romance in which heroic artists search for the holy grail of pure abstraction, smashing the false, illusionistic images of/mere "nature" to find a spiritual essence.'<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Krauss defines the original phase of abstract art as a Hegelian journey to pure Spirit. 'The twentieth century's first wave of pure abstraction,' she writes,

was based on the goal, taken most seriously indeed, to make a work about Nothing. . . . If anything ever drove Mondrian and Malevich, it was Hegelianism and the notion that the vocation of art was defined by its special place in the progress of Spirit. The ambition finally to succeed at painting nothing is fired by the dream of being able to paint Nothing, which is to say, all Being once it has been stripped of every quality that would materialize or limit it in any way. So purified, this Being is identical with Nothing.<sup>83</sup>

This story of the evolution of modern art becomes a little less startling when we recall that for Heidegger, van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes* is a picture of their being, 'of what the equipment, the pair of peasant's shoes, *is* in truth.' If Heidegger can elevate the painting of shoes to a representation of their being, abstract art can make Nothing signify Being itself, and thus demonstrate that it has not discarded subject-matter at all but rather discovered a new subject, or perhaps the ultimate Subject. The abstract painter's 'greatest fear,' says Krauss, 'is that he may be making *mere* abstraction, abstraction uninformed by a subject, contentless abstraction, for which the term — wholly pejorative for everyone from Kandinsky and Mondrian to Pollock and Newman — is *decoration*.'<sup>84</sup> Steinberg likewise argues that 'modern art has not, after all, abandoned the imitation of nature, and . . . in its most powerful expressions, representation is still an essential condition, not an expendable freight.'<sup>85</sup>

What then is the Being or nature or Nature that abstract art represents? Sliding from signifier to signified, we come to what Pollock calls 'energy and motion made visible,' which Krauss elaborates as the dynamic melding of binaries: line and color, contour and field, matter and the incorporeal. 'The subject that then emerges is the provisional unity of the identity of opposites: as line becomes color, contour becomes field, and matter becomes light.'<sup>86</sup> Abstract art thus begets a language of abstraction ranging from Being down to line and color — which may help to guide our vision but still leaves us well above the particularities of visual experience.

How then does an articulate critic respond to a particular work of abstract art — specifically to a specimen of Pollock's Abstract Expressionism? Consider briefly what a young Steinberg writes about Pollock's first retrospective in 1955, when he was studying to become an art historian. Steinberg's review crosses the line between art history and art criticism and implicitly shows it to be what Krauss later called 'a false distinction.'<sup>87</sup> For it was precisely Steinberg's already supple command of art history and the history of Pollock's own work that enabled him to gauge its power, its challenge to art history, and its challenge to art historians who did not then know how to assimilate it.

In 1955, Pollock's work still embodied the shock of the new, testing the viewer. Steinberg's review meets this

challenge in three ways. It first recalls the conversation provoked by the paintings, in this case the controversy over whether or not they constitute art. Like Diderot, Steinberg knows full well that the study of new art must begin with the social experience of it, with talking and listening as well as looking, with the struggle to understand — from his fellow artists and from those who know him — the artist himself.<sup>88</sup> This is the beginning of the process by which art enters the academic conversation of art history, wherein quarrelling witnesses to the birth of new art give way to printed commentaries and the learned debates of scholarship, the protocol of quoting, citation and footnotes. Second, Steinberg uses his knowledge of past art not to build a wall against the would-be artlessness of Pollock's work but to weave a thread that may guide him through and to its art. Looking, for instance, at the huge 'drip' paintings of the late 1940s, he is reminded of the labyrinthine decorations in the medieval Books of Kells and Lindisfarne, but only to register the force with which Pollock forsakes deliberate artifice for chance, renounces the kind of workmanship and artifice exemplified by the Celtic manuscripts — as well as by his own earlier work — to express 'something of the barbarism of an ancient epic.'<sup>89</sup> Third, Steinberg freely reveals his subjective experience of Pollock's art and his urge to proclaim as well explain its value. Declining the tone of pure objectivity that typically marks the presentation of art historical 'facts,' his warmblooded language recalls the passion of Diderot even as it displays the analytical rigor of the professional art historian.<sup>90</sup> He does not hesitate to report the facts of his own experience in 'effect' or 'ego' words, to say why he finds Pollock's works 'utterly overwhelming.' They manifest to him 'a mortal struggle between the man and his art,' for 'from first to last the artist tramples on his own facility and spurns the elegance that creeps into a style which he has practised to the point of knowing how.'<sup>91</sup>

Well enough: but can Steinberg say anything more than that Pollock trades artistic virtuosity for something like epic barbarism? Consider his comment on what he calls 'the most hypnotic picture in the show,' *Echo* (1951):

a huge ninety-two inch world of whirling threads of black on white, each tendril seeming to drag with it a film of ground that bends inward and out and shapes itself mysteriously into a molded space. There is a real process here; something is actually happening. Therefore the picture can afford to be as careless of critique as the bad weather is of the objections of a hopeful picknicker. With all my thought-sicklied misgivings about Pollock, this satisfies the surest test I know for a great work of art.<sup>92</sup>

At once descriptive and celebratory, Steinberg's comment leads us into the world of the picture without giving us anything like a complete tour of it — such as art history might judiciously provide after the spadework of first

appraisal has been done. Paramount is the urge to praise that so often animates art criticism, as we have seen, but that is here intensified by the need to overcome the resistance which Pollock's work had provoked, and could be shaken only by a language that might help us to see a particular work such as this. How to capture its 'careless' audacity in words? Not by measuring — yet — the variety of thicknesses in Pollock's swirling lines, or their precise relation to the dots and blots that accompany them. To show that 'something is actually happening' on this canvas, Steinberg simply sketches — in words — an outline of how its 'whirling threads' destabilize and 'mysteriously' recreate the binary opposition between figure and ground.

What happens when Steinberg moves beyond a brief sketch into detailed analysis? Consider what he writes about one of the paintings with which Jasper Johns launched Post-modernism in the late 1950s:

I keep looking at his black-and-white painting called *Shade* [1959]. But for a narrow margin all around, its entire surface is taken up by an actual window shade — the cheap kind; Johns had to fortify it to keep it flat. It's been pulled down as if for the night, and obviously for the last time. Over all the visible surface, shade and ground canvas together, spreads the paint itself, paint unusually atmospheric and permissive of depth. It makes a nocturnal space with bursts in it of white lights that radiate from suspended points, like bursting and falling fireworks misted over.

An abstracted nightscape? You stare at and into a field whose darkness is absolute, whose whites brighten nothing, but make darkness visible, as Milton said of infernal shade.

Or a scene of nightfall: far lights flaring and fading move into focus and out, like rainy lights passed on a road. Are we out inside the night or indoors? A window, with its cheap shade pulled down, is within reach, shutting me out, keeping me in? Look again. On a canvas shade lowered against the outside we are given to see outdoor darkness; like the hollow shade our closed eyes project upon lowered lids. Alberti compared the perspective diaphanes of the Renaissance to open windows. Johns' *Shade* compares the adiapane of his canvas to a window whose shade is down.<sup>93</sup>

As Johns' prototypically post-modern paintings return us to the world of tangible objects — such as flags, targets and shades — that Modernism had renounced, Steinberg's commentary returns us to the world of literature that Modernism had supposedly silenced. Steinberg uses both John Milton and James Joyce to help him say what he sees in this painted shade. 'Darkness visible' describes Hell in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, and in the opening paragraph of Chapter 3 of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus uses 'adiaphane' to mean opacity, 'the limit of the diaphane.'<sup>94</sup> More importantly, Steinberg reactivates most of the rhetorical strategies that have permeated art criticism from Philostratus onward. This passage is driven by a series of narratives. The Homeric story of how Johns made the

painting — by fortifying and flattening the shade on the canvas, then painting over both shade and margin — grounds two other stories about what is represented or signified here. The quotidian tale of a day ending (the shade ‘has been pulled down as if for the night’) becomes the quasi-apocalyptic story of darkness immutable (‘and obviously for the last time’) and then the art-historical narrative of what Johns does with Alberti’s master trope: the open window of Renaissance art, with its sunlit three-dimensional vistas, becomes the impenetably occluded window of modern art, with its resolutely flattened opacity.

But Steinberg’s commentary deconstructs this opacity even while seeming to affirm it. With a series of rhetorical questions, he prompts us first to see the painted shade-on-canvas as an abstracted nightscape, then as the representation of a nightfall with its own depth (‘far lights flaring and fading’) or of a window that cannot help but signify the two worlds it constitutes by separation — inside and outside. Baxandall, we recall, says that any attempt to identify the objects represented by a painting entails comparison words. In telling us that ‘Johns’s *Shade* compares the adiabane of his canvas to a window whose shade is down,’ Steinberg imputes the work of comparison to the painting itself and thus affirms its power to imitate nature, which — as already seen — he considers ‘essential’ to all art.

Like Philostratus and Diderot, Steinberg uses rhetorical questions to make us share his experience of the painting, his insistently interrogative mood, his acts of repeated looking. But unlike his precursors, Steinberg aims his questions at the reader rather than the painting, and from the painting he elicits not a single answer but a variety of them. The painting may represent a nightscape, a nightfall, a window or a screen on which we project outdoor darkness just as we may project shade on our lowered eyelids. Thus the story about lowering a shade becomes a story of closing one’s eyes — just as Dedalus tests the limits of the diaphane when he says to himself, ‘Shut your eyes and see.’<sup>95</sup>

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The painted shade can no more be wholly opaque than the art critic can be wholly transparent, the crystalline window through which the painting glows or the hollow conduit through which it speaks. Whatever it aspires to be, art criticism is inescapably a kind of writing and, as such, it borrows rhetorical strategies from both literary narrative and persuasive discourse. To court our assent, it typically presents the critic’s interpretation as the painting’s soliloquy or confession, so that the painting’s ‘truth’ is a story constructed by the critic and ventriloquistically voiced by the silent work of art. Even Steinberg, who draws a rich polyphony of ‘truths’ from Johns’s *Shade*, ends

by declaring what the painting says, what it compares itself to.

The persistence of narrative and other rhetorical strategies in art criticism ranging from ancient times to our own prompts us to question several assumptions. One is the notion that art criticism has been fundamentally and successively changed by the critic’s access to the lives of artists and then by the advent of reproductions. To compare what Philostratus says in the third century CE about the possibly imaginary *Narcissus* with what Vasari says in the sixteenth century about the actual *Entombment* is to see that the lives of artists come to play a crucial role in what paintings are said to signify, more precisely in the stories they are said to tell. Yet Vasari, like Philostratus, claims to know what the silent painting tells us, whether it be the feelings of a painted figure, the feelings of the artist, or both. Likewise, to compare Vasari with Schapiro is to see how modern technology can enhance the story of an artist’s life, can help the critic explain — with the aid of reproductions — what a group of related pictures tells us about that life. Yet if Schapiro describes pictures as often as Vasari does and almost as often as Diderot, we can hardly say that reproductions obviate the need for description. On the contrary, to describe or identify anything in a picture is to initiate or advance the task of interpreting it, and as we have seen in the work of Schapiro, the very word ‘describe’ can be used to mean ‘interpret’.

If the line between description and interpretation wavers, how strong is the border between art criticism and art history? Except in the work of Philostratus, who says nothing of artists or their lives, art criticism draws on the facts supplied by art history, and the story of art cannot be told without critical reference to meaning and value in particular works. Efforts to banish ‘literary’ art criticism from the domain of art history — to strip away the clothing of ‘rhetoric’ from the body of art historical fact — inevitably founder on the question of just what the facts are. The moment we try to ‘describe’ a work of art or make a statement of ‘fact’ about its meaning, such as ‘they are the shoes of the artist,’ we are interpreting the picture, construing its signs and articulating what they signify. Unless it opts for the mere recitation of names and dates, art history can never escape art criticism, and the art critic cannot escape the rhetorical urge to speak for pictures, to make these silent objects tell the story that he or she scripts for them.

Finally, in spite of its radical departure from what preceded it, abstract art has neither killed this urge nor fundamentally changed the language used to express it. The very absence of depth or recognizable objects in a work of abstract art sharpens the need to talk about its seemingly inscrutable surface, to say (or try to say) what it signifies, to tell stories about its genesis and effect on

the viewer, and then — in Post-modern art — to recognize the return of depth and of familiar forms as objects of representation. In the work of contemporary practitioners such as Steinberg, the language of art criticism has grown more supple, more responsive to multiple meanings, more sensitive to the role that any painting — especially a new one — plays in the unending story of art. But the difference is quantitative more than qualitative. The task of speaking for pictures — of turning their silent images into stories of how they were made, how they affect us, what they ‘say’ to us — remains essentially and enduringly rhetorical.

## NOTES

- 1 – ‘To Sir Godfrey Kneller (line 127), in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed. James Kingsley, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958). The point was repeated in the eighteenth century by Samuel Johnson, *Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), II, p. 106, and in the romantic period by — among others — S. T. Coleridge; *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. T. Shawcross (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), II, p. 221.
- 2 – Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* II.iii.67, in *Institutio Oratoria*, trans. H. E. Butler, 4 vols (London: Putnam, 1921), I, p. 281.
- 3 – Robert A. Bromley, *A Philosophical and Critical History of the Fine Arts, Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture*, 2 vols (London, 1793–5), p. 20.
- 4 – Quintilian, VI.i.32, in Butler, *Institutio Oratoria*, I, p. 407.
- 5 – Quintilian would perhaps have taken a grim satisfaction from the acquittal of O. J. Simpson in October 1995. Though police photographs of the two people he was charged with murdering were so gruesome that they could not be shown on television, they failed to speak as effectively as the attorneys for the defense.
- 6 – W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 157. Like me, Mitchell defines ‘ekphrasis’ as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ (p. 152). For more discussion of its meaning and the various ways in which it has been used and defined, see James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 1–4, 191 n. 2.
- 7 – Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* [1550] [hereafter *Lives*], trans. A. B. Hinds, ed. William Gaunt, 4 vols (New York: Dutton, 1963), III, p. 8.
- 8 – Jean Seznec and Jean Adhemar (eds), *Salons*, 2nd edn, 3 vols [hereafter *Salons*] (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975–83), I, p. 63, 66.
- 9 – William Hazlitt, *Complete Works*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1930–4), X, p. 25; Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 37.
- 10 – Baudelaire, it must be noted, had nothing but contempt for art historical genealogies. ‘In the realm of poetry and art, the great discoverers rarely have precursors. Every flowering is spontaneous, individual. Is Sigonorelli really the generator of Michelangelo? Did Perugino contain Raphael? The artist owes nothing to anyone but himself’ (ibid., p. 122).
- 11 – The quoted words are Donald Preziosi’s in ‘The Question of Art History’, *Critical Inquiry* XVIII, (1992), p. 370. ‘In the study of older art forms,’ writes Leo Steinberg, ‘we can insulate our discipline [art history] against subjective judgements only because we enjoy a rich and unrepudiated inheritance of such judgments.’ Leo Steinberg, ‘Objectivity and the Shrinking Self’ [1967], in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 312. In what follows I treat the border between art history and art criticism as highly permeable.
- 12 – Bernard Vouilloux, ‘La Description du Tableau dans les Salons de Diderot: La Figure et Le Nom’, *Poétique: Revue et d’Analyse Littéraire*, XVIII (1988), pp. 28–9; the translation is mine.

- 13 – *Salons*, II, p. 194; Bernadette Fort, ‘Ekphrasis as art criticism: Diderot and Fragonard’s “Coresus and Callirhoe”’, in *Icons—Texts—Iconotexts*, ed. Peter Wagner (Berlin: Gruyter, 1996), pp. 68–9. Fort shows that Diderot’s whole commentary on the spectatorial, theatrical and illusionistic features of this painting rivals its effect in words: ‘Thus all textual strategies unite to reproduce and cue the reader to the typical flickering of awareness and illusion at work in the painting. With this aesthetic, Diderot claims his place as ekphrastic writer next to the producer of pictorial illusion, Fragonard’ (p. 77).
- 14 – Robert Hughes, *Nothing if not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 52.
- 15 – Mitchell has recently argued that ‘metapictures’ provide their own metalanguage, their own ‘second-order discourse that tells — or at least shows us — something about pictures.’ But while he develops this point by aiming to offer ‘faithful descriptions’ of several metapictures, he knows very well that his procedure cannot prove their capacity to speak for themselves ‘without recourse to language, without resorting to ekphrasis.’ And he explicitly declines to claim that his words are ‘free of special knowledge or interpretation or speculation.’ *Picture Theory*, p. 38. His ‘faithful descriptions’ of metapictures are in fact brilliantly interpretive.
- 16 – James A. W. Heffernan, ‘Literacy and picturacy: how do we learn to read pictures?’, unpublished essay.
- 17 – I am drawing on E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), pp. 129–30.
- 18 – Leo Steinberg, *Michelangelo’s Last Paintings* (New York, 1975), p. 6.
- 19 – ‘Art historians,’ writes Mitchell, ‘may “know” that the pictures they study are only material objects that have been marked with colors and shapes, but they frequently talk and act as if pictures had will, consciousness, agency, and desire.’ W. J. T. Mitchell, ‘What do pictures really want’, *October*, LXXVII (Summer 1996), pp. 72–3.
- 20 – Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 6–7; *idem*, ‘The language of art history’, *New Literary History*, X (1979), pp. 457–9.
- 21 – *Ibid.*, *Patterns of Intention*, p. 6 (my emphasis).
- 22 – *Ibid.*, ‘The language of art history’, p. 458.
- 23 – *Ibid.*, *Patterns of Intention*, p. 7.
- 24 – Paradoxically, the creative activity of the beholder is most evident when the critical language highlights not the beholder’s response but the maker’s doing. ‘Where ego-words are formally and often substantially passive,’ says Baxandall, ‘reporting something done by the work of art to the speaker as patient, causal words deal in inferred actions and agents. At the same time, they involve the speaker in the activity of inferring . . .’ ‘The language of art history’, p. 461.
- 25 – ‘We perceive a picture,’ writes Baxandall, ‘by a sequence of scanning. . . . One consequence of this is that no consecutive piece of verbal ostension, linear language, can match the pace and gait of seeing a picture as it can match the pace of a text. The read text is majestically progressive, the perception of a picture a rapid irregular darting about and around on a field’ (ibid., p. 460). One might object that literary critics commonly reconstruct our ‘progressive’ experience of a text by defining its structure in spatial terms; see W. J. T. Mitchell, ‘Spatial form in literature: toward a general theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, VI (1980), pp. 545–6. A further objection is that Baxandall sounds even more rigidly categorical than Gotthold E. Lessing, who finds ‘the consecutive nature of language’ antithetical to ‘the coexistent nature of a body,’ yet admits that the arbitrary signs of language can depict ‘the corporeal whole according to its parts.’ Gotthold E. Lessing, *Laocöon*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 88. In theory, there is no reason why language cannot represent viewing as faithfully as it represents reading — as Baxandall shows when describing the viewing process. What can be said is that if the art critic opts to tell a coherent story about the making, meaning and effect of a work of art, as art criticism typically does, the critic must reconstruct the viewing process.

26 – For more on this topic, see the new book by James Elkins, *Our Beautiful, Dry, and Distant Texts: Art History as Writing* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1998).

27 – Philostratus, *Imagines*, trans. Arthur Fairbanks (London: Heinemann, 1931), p. 5.

28 – *Ibid.*, p. 51.

29 – *Ibid.*, pp. 99–101.

30 – *Ibid.*, p. 103.

31 – *Ibid.*, pp. 49, 53, 57 respectively.

32 – Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer, revd edn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 64.

33 – *Ibid.*

34 – Philostratus, *Imagines*, p. 89. Alberti's epithet for Narcissus ignores what Pliny the Elder wrote about painting centuries earlier: 'there is universal agreement that it began by the outlining of a man's shadow.' Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection*, trans. John F. Healy (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 325. Pliny's theory was depicted by the Scottish genre painter David Allan in the *Origin of Painting* (1773).

35 – Philostratus, *Imagines*, pp. 89–91. Deceptiveness was established as a criterion of verisimilitude at least as early as the fourth century BCE, when — according to Pliny, Zeuxis' painting of grapes deceived birds and Parrhasius' painting of a curtain deceived Zeuxis himself (*ibid.*, p. 330). On the use of animals (including birds) to prove the deceptiveness of painted images, see W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Illusion: looking at animals looking', in *ibid.*, *Picture Theory*, pp. 329–44.

36 – Philostratus, *Imagines*, p. 91.

37 – Baxendall, 'The language of art history', p. 461. Though often grammatically active ('surprising,' 'enchanted'), effect words tell what the picture does to us, making us the passive recipients of its effects.

38 – 'The Self,' writes Mitchell, 'is that which sees, not only the truth in an illusion, but that it is to be seen as an illusion; the Other is the one taken in by the illusion, failing to see it (truly) as an illusion and mistakenly taking it for the reality it (truly) represents.' 'Illusion', in Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 333.

39 – Philostratus, *Imagines*, pp. 89, 91 respectively.

40 – *Ibid.*, pp. 91–3.

41 – Paul Barolsky, *Giotto's Father and the Family of Vasari's Lives* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1992), pp. 10–11.

42 – Svetlana Alpers, 'Ekphrasis and aesthetic attitudes in Vasari's Lives', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxiii (1960), p. 192.

43 – Barolsky, *Giotto's Father*, p. xvi.

44 – *Lives*, II, p. 222.

45 – *Ibid.*, p. 226.

46 – Had Vasari known that Raphael's father died when the boy was 11, he might have written that Raphael 'remembered' this pain and grief. But as soon as he places his son with Perugino, de' Santi disappears from Vasari's narrative of Raphael's life.

47 – Alberti writes: 'The *istoria* [narrative theme of a painting] will move the soul of the beholder when each man painted there clearly shows the movement of his own soul'; *On Painting*, p. 77.

48 – Alpers, 'Ekphrasis and aesthetic attitudes', p. 198.

49 – Salon of 1765, no. 144, in *Diderot on Art*, trans. John Goodman, 2 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), I, p. 125.

50 – *Ibid.*, II, p. 17.

51 – *Ibid.*, I, p. 125.

52 – *Ibid.*, II, pp. 86–8.

53 – When Diderot's *cicerone* dismisses his praise of Vernet by saying that he 'won't abandon nature to run after an image of it,' Diderot says: 'All right, but if you'd spent more time with the artist, perhaps he'd have taught you to see in nature what you don't see now. How many things you'd find there that needed altering! How many of them his art would omit as they spoiled the overall effect and muddled the impression, and how many he'd draw together to double our enchantment!' *Ibid.*, II, pp. 88–9). Likewise, reviewing Philippe-Jacques

DeLouthembourg's *Landscape with Figures and Cattle* in 1763 (no. 154), he commends the artist's management of the light, the trees and the rocks, then invites his friend to lie down with him next to the animals and 'admire the work of the creator' as they listen to the shepherd converse with the peasant woman; *Salons*, I, pp. 225–6. I quote the translation of Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 120. The 'creator' here could be God or the artist.

54 – Opening his review of the Salon of 1765, Diderot writes: 'I collected the verdicts of old men and the thoughts of children, the judgments of men of letters, the opinions of sophisticates, and the views of the people. . . . I've questioned [artists] and come to understand fine draughtsmanship and truth to nature; I've grasped the magic of light and shadow, become familiar with color, and developed a feeling for flesh' *Diderot on Art*, I, p. 3.

55 – *Diderot on Art*, I, pp. 97–8.

56 – *Ibid.*, p. 100.

57 – For another example of Diderot's precision in describing a painting, see his comments on Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin's *Attributes of Music* in the Salon of 1765: 'Across the table covered with a reddish carpet, the painter has placed an array of various objects . . . there's a stand with music, in front of this stand an adjustable candle-holder; there's a trumpet and hunting horn, the bell of the trumpet visible above the music stand; there are hautboys, a lute, scattered sheets of music, the neck of a violin with its bow, and upended books'; *ibid.*, pp. 61–2.

58 – *Ibid.*, pp. 98–9.

59 – *Ibid.*, p. 99.

60 – The painting, Fried writes, was designed 'at once to elicit and to resist such attempts at consolation [as Diderot makes], and thereby to make perspicuous the depth and intensity of the young girl's absorption in her grief'; *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 120.

61 – To buttress his argument about the true meaning of the girl's grief, Diderot claims that her 'robust' and 'developed' arm and hand signify a girl of 'eighteen or nineteen' — older than the head, which he considers 'fifteen or sixteen'; *Diderot on Art*, pp. 99–100. If Diderot is right, the relative maturity of the hand and arm could subtly signal a story more mature than that of grief for a bird. But to me the slightly dimpled knuckles, which Diderot elsewhere notes (*ibid.*, p. 97), suggest a younger rather than an older girl.

62 – *Ibid.*, p. 100.

63 – Jan Hulsker, *The Complete Van Gogh* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1980), no. 1124 [hereafter cited as H. Schapiro cites J. B. de la Faille, *Vincent van Gogh* (Paris, 1939), where this picture is numbered 255. Further references to van Gogh's pictures cite both catalogues, e.g. H1124/F255].

64 – Martin Heidegger, 'The origin of the work of art' [1935–6], trans. A. Hofstadter, in *Philosophies of Art and Beauty*, eds Hofstadter and R. Kuhns (New York: Random House, 1964), pp. 662–3.

65 – *Ibid.*, p. 664.

66 – Meyer Shapiro, 'The still life as a personal object — a note on Heidegger and van Gogh' [1968], in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), p. 138.

67 – H469/F461. Citing this along with van Gogh's other pictures of shoes (such as H1234/F332, H1236/F333), Schapiro notes that these pictures differ from van Gogh's paintings of clogs (F63, 64, H1364/F607), which he takes to be peasant footwear (*ibid.*, p. 136). But absent other evidence, there is no reason why any van Gogh painting of shoes — as distinct from clogs — must be a painting of his own shoes. In 'Further notes on Heidegger and Van Gogh' [1994], in *Theory*, Schapiro tries to buttress his argument by suggesting that van Gogh's painting of 'his' shoes may have been suggested by Jean-Francois Millet's drawing of his wooden sabots, reproduced in a book that 'deeply impressed' van Gogh (*ibid.*, p. 145). But if, as Schapiro

notes, the drawing of the sabots signified Millet's 'life-long commitment to the peasant life' (ibid., p. 146), how does Millet's drawing lead van Gogh to represent himself with shoes supposedly coded as urban, the shoes of a man 'of the town and city' (ibid., p. 138)?

68 – Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 313. This assumption, writes Derrida, along with the assumption that shoes must belong to someone in particular and that feet cannot be detached from a body, 'can't stand up to the slightest question' (p. 314).

69 – Shapiro, 'Still life', pp. 140–1, quoting J. de Rotonchamp, *Paul Gauguin 1848–1903*, 2nd edn. (Paris: G. Cres, 1925), p. 33. 'It is not certain,' writes Schapiro, 'which of the paintings with a single pair of shoes Gauguin had seen at Arles. . . . It does not matter' (p. 141). The low-cut shoes depicted in *Pair of Old Shoes* (August 1888), which Schapiro calls 'evidently [van Gogh's] own' (p. 136), are neither big nor hob-nailed nor much like the 'shoes of the artist' allegedly depicted in the 1886 *A Pair of Shoes*.

In a recent essay on this topic, Schapiro quotes testimony that while in Paris, van Gogh once bought a pair of 'fancy' old shoes at the flea market, walked around in them on a rainy afternoon until they were spotted with mud, and then 'copied [them] faithfully'; 'Further notes', p. 145. Even if a single afternoon's walk could make the shoes van Gogh's 'own' as a material sign of himself, these 'fancy' shoes can hardly be the ones depicted in *A Pair of Shoes*.

70 – Shapiro, 'Still life', p. 140, quoting Knut Hamsun, *Hunger*, trans. G. Egerton (New York: Knopf, 1941), p. 27.

71 – Though his paintings of shoes are classified as still life, shoes differ from the kind of objects most commonly identified with the genre: domestic artefacts like plates, jugs, bowls and pitchers. Norman Bryson argues that objects such as these secrete a cultural memory reaching across the centuries and thus help to signify 'an authentically civilized world.' Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 138. It might be fruitful to consider what adjustments this definition might require to accommodate shoes, which are made for individuals rather than familial or social groups and which do not preserve stability of design across centuries.

72 – H1126/F327. Also, the doubled over top of the shoe at left suggests flower petals.

73 – Shapiro, 'Further notes', p. 146). Though Derrida's *Truth in Painting* appeared in 1987, 7 years before Schapiro's second essay on van Gogh's painting, Schapiro makes no reference to Derrida's critique of his first essay.

74 – 'There is then in the work,' Schapiro continues, 'an expression of the self in bringing to view an occasion of feeling that is unique in so far as it is engaged with the deviant and absorbing deformed subject that underlies the unique metaphoric paired shoes'; ibid., p. 147.

75 – As Hulsker notes, this point has become a commonplace in commentaries on *A Pair of Shoes*; *Complete van Gogh*, p. 244.

76 – Quoting a letter in which van Gogh explicitly links the stars to religion, Schapiro writes of this painting: 'There is . . . in the coiling nebula and in the strangely luminous crescent — an anomalous complex of moon and sun and earth-shadow, locked in an eclipse — a possible unconscious reminiscence of the apocalyptic theme of the woman in pain of birth, girded with the sun and moon and crowned with the stars, whose newborn child is threatened by the dragon' (Revelations 12: 1ff.); Meyer Shapiro, *Vincent Van Gogh* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1983), p. 45 (emphasis mine). Here, I believe, the combination of precise description and tentative inference speaks for the painting credibly.

77 – Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Grids' [1978], in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 9; also Clement Greenberg, 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' [1940], in *The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 23–37.

78 – I owe this final point to W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Ut Pictura Theoria: abstract painting and language', in ibid., *Picture Theory*, p. 215.

79 – Harold Rosenberg, 'Defining art', in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 306. A quite literally dramatic demonstration of this point is Yasmina Reza's *Art* (1994), a play in which three Parisian friends talk and argue vehemently about the meaning and value of a painting that one of them has bought for FF 200 000. The painting is a four-by-five canvas painted pure white.

80 – Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist painting' [1965], quoted in Steinberg, *Other Criteria*, p. 67.

81 – The quoted phrase is from Robert Rosenblum, 'Forward', in Alfred H. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, repr. 1986), p. 1.

82 – Mitchell, 'Ut Pictura Theoria', pp. 232–4.

83 – Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Reading Jackson Pollock, abstractly' [1982], in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, p. 237. Krauss, it must be noted, is here reporting on what the modernists sought rather than making her own claim that Modernism marks a progress in the arts. For her skeptical view of such claims, see her witty juxtaposition of Suzi Gablik's *Progress in Art* with the stone-sucking passage in Beckett's *Molloy* and the would-be transcendently intellectual cube structures of Sol LeWitt (ibid., pp. 248–58).

84 – Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Reading Jackson Pollock' [1982], in *Originality*, p. 237.

85 – Leo Steinberg, 'The eye is a part of the mind' [1953, revd 1958], in *Other Criteria*, p. 291.

86 – Krauss, 'Reading Jackson Pollock', p. 239.

87 – Ibid., p. 221.

88 – Mitchell writes of Robert Morris, 'One has to understand the dialogue provoked by the objects *in situ* as part of what the works are.' *Picture Theory*, pp. 249–50.

89 – Leo Steinberg, 'Pollock's first retrospective', in *Other Criteria*, p. 265.

90 – More recently, Steinberg has openly questioned the notion that art historians should keep their own feelings hidden behind a mask of objectivity: 'I admire the art historian who lets the ground of his private involvement show. Though we all hope to reach objectively valid conclusions, this purpose is not served by disguising the subjectivity of interest, method, and personal history which in fact conditions our work.' 'Objectivity and the shrinking self' [1967], in *Other Criteria*, p. 309.

91 – Ibid., p. 265.

92 – Ibid., p. 267.

93 – Leo Steinberg, 'Jasper Johns: the first seven years of his art' [1961], in *Other Criteria*, pp. 44–5.

94 – Steinberg elsewhere writes that '*Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* were the pabulum of my teens'; 'Objectivity', *Other Criteria*, p. 320. He also explicitly cites the opening words of the *Ulysses*' chapter 3: 'Ineluctable Modality of the Visible — young Dedalus' hypnotic phrase'; 'The Eye', *Other Criteria*, p. 293.

95 – In Joseph Strick's film of *Ulysses* (1966), this moment is represented by a complete blackout of the screen — the cinematic counterpart of Johns's *Shade*.