

The Representative Arts as a Source of Truth

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Several of Mondrian's relatives were painters or draughtsmen. One can be reasonably confident that they took their work seriously, with Netherlands conscientiousness. Such a measure of seriousness was far from satisfying Mondrian. None of them, he complained, 'would have agreed to sacrifice anything at all for art'. Surely, one naturally objects, conscientiousness inevitably entails a degree of sacrifice — the sacrifice of easy ways out and quick returns. In Mondrian's eyes, however, nothing short of a *total* devotion, excluding all other loves, could do justice to what art demands and deserves. It was not, indeed, 'anything at all' but *everything*, as the constriction of his own life amply illustrated, which ought to be sacrificed for art's sake.

Over the last century and more, critics have taught us to regard such absolutism, and the mode of life which it is used to justify, as entirely normal. As Jack Tanner puts it in *Man and Superman*: 'The true artist will let his wife starve, his children go barefoot, his mother drudge for his living at seventy, sooner than work at anything but his art'. In our Romanticist-inspired hagiographies, our modern equivalents of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, the artist must not only suffer but be a source of suffering, confirming his genius by a life lived in exile, actual or spiritual, by his total indifference to the responsibilities inherent in everyday human attachments. 'Ce monstre inhumain, c'est moi-même'.

One might be reminded of the desert anchorites. Indeed, in his pioneer study of the symbolist movement in literature, Arthur Symons made just this comparison: 'The artist', he wrote, 'has no more part in society than a monk in domestic life: he cannot be judged by its rules, he can be neither praised nor blamed for his acceptance or rejection of its conventions'.¹ But the anchorites, or

¹ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London, 1899), p. 1.

so they believed, were obeying divine injunctions. Without agreeing, we can still find their ruthlessness intelligible in relation to the end of which they were in search, as we might find intelligible the ruthlessness of a convinced revolutionary, convinced that by his actions he will save humanity. What is there about art — the painting, in Mondrian's manner, of coloured rectangles, the shaping of stone, the ordering of notes, the telling of stories — which could possibly justify such sacrifices, such ruthlessness?

To this question there are many possible answers. Art, it might be said and has indeed been said, is of the first consequence as a source of truth, a manifestation of beauty, a spiritual expression, a moralising force, a symbol of social cohesion, a focus for revolution, a free creation, a formal achievement. And there is an alternative reply of a distinctly hostile order, that *nothing* justifies the present reputation of the arts, that we have been the victims of a vast confidence-trick, persuaded into converting what is at best a beguiling entertainment with ritualistic overtones into a secular religion.² If, on the present occasion, I set most of these suggestions aside, it is not as worthless. I hope, indeed, to consider them elsewhere, in some detail. But for the moment, let us concentrate all our attention on the first reply — that the arts can be a source of truth. This is an important answer, not only because it has been so commonly proposed, but because we are already accustomed to believe that in the search for truth men and women can rightly sacrifice themselves and rightly demand sacrifices from others. Not, of course, in respect to each and every quest for truth. With no greater resource than a telephone directory, I could spend my life discovering truths — truths about, let us say, the percentage of persons whose names contain half as many letters as the name of the street in which they live. I should properly be thought mad to sacrifice wife and child to such investigations or to demand public subsidy for them.

² On this theme, see Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Washington, 1974).

That the truths of art are not thus trivial but, on the contrary, of fundamental importance has often been asserted. Shelley notoriously tried to persuade us that poetry 'comprehends all science' and is that 'to which all science must be referred'.³ In a cool hour, however, who can possibly believe this, can bring himself to believe either that the theory of relativity forms part of poetry or that Einstein should have referred it to an eisteddfod of bards for their approval? Yet such rhetorical extravagances cannot be set aside as a nineteenth-century romantic excess. Here is a recent specimen: 'Through art man can discover the fundamental forms and processes of our universe and give them new energy and function.'⁴ Once again, the objection is so obvious that one feels ashamed, as if breaking a butterfly on the wheel, to insist upon it. In search of knowledge about 'the fundamental forms and processes of the universe' we should surely turn to science, not to the arts, and in order to give them 'new energy and function'— so far as that is consistent with the conservation of energy — to technology.

At the opposite extreme from Shelley, there are those, now quite numerous, who would cut all connection between art and truth. 'Truth and songs', Baudelaire once wrote, 'have nothing to do with one another'.⁵ The artist, we have often been told in the same spirit, is in essence a creator, a world-maker, with the omnipotence and omniscience, in his own world, of a deity. His works, on this view, refer to nothing beyond themselves. In so far as they have any reference at all, it is to themselves as art. So a typical nineteen-sixties proclamation demands from painters the creation of 'a pure, abstract, non-objective, timeless, spaceless,

³ See 'A Defence of Poetry' in *Selected Poetry, Prose and Letters* (London, 1951), p. 1049.

⁴ D'Arcy Hayman, Introduction to *The Arts and Man* (Paris, 1969), p. 2.

⁵ 'Gautier, sa vie et son oeuvre' in *L'Art Romantique, Oeuvres Complètes*, Y.-G. Le Dantec, ed., vol. I (Paris, 1954), p. 1030.

changeless, relationless, disinterested painting — an object that is self-conscious . . . , ideal, transcendent, aware of nothing but Art'.⁶

Aristotle defined God in a precisely parallel fashion: abstract, timeless, relationless, conscious of nothing but himself. It is certainly a surprise to learn that a *painting* shares its metaphysical qualities with God. More surprisingly still, not only painting but poetry, the novel, ballet, film have all been defined in a comparable manner, as referring to nothing beside themselves as art-forms. If this be so, we cannot hope to justify the seriousness of the arts in terms of the truths to which they introduce us; if art makes us aware of nothing but itself we cannot without circularity base its seriousness on what it conveys, which would then be nothing but that very art the seriousness of which is in question.

I shall be trying to force a path between these two extremes, neither claiming for the arts those virtues which properly belong, in my judgment, only to history, science, and philosophy, nor yet wholly divorcing the seriousness of the arts — or at least of the representative arts — from their capacity for telling us something about ourselves and the world of which we form part.

Why am I confining my attention to the representative arts? There is, of course, a certain sense in which any of the arts can be a source of truth. Indeed, anything whatsoever, any human action, any social institution, any physical process can be a source of truths, in so far as by considering it, reflecting on it, we can arrive at truths which would otherwise have been inaccessible. Of architecture it has been argued that 'it can give us knowledge about the possibilities of certain materials' or 'an understanding of the expectations and needs of a society'.⁷ So it can, but a collapsing architectural calamity as readily as the Sydney Opera House or King's College Chapel. That it can generate such truths has no bearing whatsoever on the artistic quality of a building.

⁶ Cited in Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art*; the date is 1961, the source not given.

⁷ D. L. Gotshalk, *Art and the Social Order*, 2d ed. (New York, 1962), p. 151.

It would be absurd to praise a building because it ‘gives us knowledge’ about how badly exposed concrete weathers or what poor taste millionaires sometimes possess or how corrupt some building inspectors are.

In no more direct manner, I believe, does truth attach either to buildings or to musical compositions. I do not need to be told, I am fully aware, that music and architecture are often described in a way which suggests that they can directly convey truths. So a building, as much as a novel, may be praised as ‘honest’, a musical passage or an architectural decoration, as much as a sentence, condemned as ‘meaningless’. One often hears talk, too, of the language of music, the language of architecture — even of their syntactics, their semantics, or their semiology. And a language, one normally supposes, can convey truths and falsities. Did time and space permit, I should specifically dispute the implication of such ways of talking that architecture and music are truth-claimants.⁸ As matters stand, however, I must be content, except for a passing reference or two, dogmatically to exclude music and architecture from my purview; the representative arts will cause us trouble enough.

At the outset there are distinctions to be made. The concept of truth is a highly equivocal one.⁹ There are uses of it, current in critical writings, which I shall not be exploring, since they seem to me to rest on obvious muddles. Suppose we begin, rather, from the logician’s favourite, propositional truth, the sort of truth which attaches to statements, is denied by ‘false’, and is conserved in such processes as valid inference and contraposition.

Do paintings and sculptures, when they are representational, assert such truths? I think not. That, indeed, is one reason why,

⁸ In large part, I should concur with what Roger Scruton says on these matters in *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London, 1979). On music see, for example, John Blacking, *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle, 1973). In his *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, 1968) Nelson Goodman has ingeniously argued to the contrary. But at great cost.

⁹ In his *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (Chapel Hill, 1946) John Hospers has thoroughly explored this particular ambiguity.

in the propagandist nineteen-sixties, many painters wrote sentences on their works, tacked proclamations alongside their paintings, provided the viewer with catalogues reminiscent of the more literary kind of musical programme notes. They felt frustrated by what cannot be done in painting and had too little faith in what *can* be done. I do not, in general, assert something merely by handing you a photograph — as I *am* asserting if I add: ‘That is a picture of my aunt’ or ‘Look, the Tower of Pisa *does* lean’. What the picture does is to show you something. And to show is not the same thing as to assert, even although showing can sometimes serve as a substitute for asserting. If somebody asks the question: ‘Does the Tower of Pisa really lean?’, it may only be necessary, by way of response, to show the questioner a photograph. He may, looking at that photograph, learn a great deal more than he could have learnt from our simple ‘Yes’. But that is not to suggest, quite the contrary, that the photograph says exactly what ‘Yes’ says, although in a pictorial form.¹⁰

Undoubtedly, however, pictures *can* be used to assert, as in a hieroglyphic language. Then why cannot a painting assert? Let us compare two paintings, one of Jesus suffering on the cross, the other of him as totally calm. Describing the first painting we can certainly say, truly, that ‘it depicts Jesus as suffering’ or even ‘in that painting Jesus is suffering’. But can we also say truly that the second of these paintings asserts, and the first denies, that Jesus, as the son of God, was unable to suffer?

It would be more accurate to say — and this accords with the usage of a great many critics — that the second painting *illustrates* the doctrine that Jesus did not suffer, just as the murals on a mediaeval church illustrated the teachings of the priest. We might criticize the second painter for depicting Jesus thus, on the ground that it will *mislead* those who look at the painting. ‘That’s false;

¹⁰ For a closer argument on this theme see E. Daitz, ‘The Picture Theory of Meaning’, *Mind* (April 1953), pp. 184–201, and M. C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics* (New York, 1958), ch. 8.

Jesus did suffer' would, however, be a quite inappropriate reaction. If, in contrast, we can properly react to a sentence in hieroglyphics with 'that's false', this is not in virtue of the fact that the hieroglyphs are pictures but because they function as parts of sentences, sentences constructed in accordance with syntactical rules. We can, in principle, translate the hieroglyphic language, without loss, into a word-language. But 'Jesus did not suffer on the cross' is not a *translation* of the painting, any more than 'thinking is hard work' is a translation of *Le Penseur*. It would be totally absurd, in either case, to ask for the contrapositive of the work of art, as it would not be absurd to ask for the contrapositive of the alleged translation.

Art-historians, to be sure, sometimes speak of an engraving as a 'translation' of a painting or of a gesture in a neo-classical painting as 'translated' from a Pompeian wall-painting. But although this conforms well enough with etymology in so far as something is 'carried across', the only real analogy in such instances is with a musical transcription: not a linguistic translation. What is preserved is *form*, whereas in a translation from Japanese into English, let us say, what is preserved is the sense. (In more closely allied languages, of course, a translation may try to preserve *both* form and sense.)

So far, then, I have been cutting art loose from truth, at least from propositional truth. The seriousness of architecture, or music, or painting, I have suggested, does not at all depend on its *telling* us something. That it cannot do. But what about literary works, including under this head such mixed arts as opera, acted drama, films? These certainly contain sentences which are in conventional statement form. Here, if anywhere in the arts, we can expect to encounter propositional truths.

Plato fought against the view, widely prevalent in his society, that poetry could be a source of knowledge. But in the nineteenth century Robert Browning was discussed by philosophers as if he were one of them and 'as Shakespeare says' lent an adventitious aid

to many a dubious statement, even when what followed was a quotation from Polonius. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* is a memorial to this practice.

The reaction when it came was predictably violent. One already finds it in Flaubert's dream of a novel which would be simply style — 'a book about nothing, without external attachments' — for all that the *Madame Bovary* he was then writing was to be widely denounced as 'false' or praised as 'true', for all that he also tells us that he wanted to produce novels so real that we would no longer notice that they were written in language.¹¹ Baudelaire was by no means unique in claiming for poetry that 'elle n'a pas la vérité pour objet, elle n'a qu'Elle-même'.¹² Indeed, the post-Romantic emphasis on the autonomous existence of the literary work, summed up in Archibald MacLeish's notorious

A poem should not mean
But be¹³

seems to make such a conclusion inevitable. If its sentences have no meaning, a poem can certainly not present us with truths.

But do not these lines themselves 'mean' and derive any importance they may have from that very fact? Suppose, altering nothing but the spelling, we substitute:

A poem should not mien
But bee.

Then the whole point of the poem vanishes. Yet nothing has been lost, at least from the poem as spoken, except the meaning of its words. Poetry which aspires to the condition of music, which attempts, in MacLeish's phrase, to be 'wordless/as the flight of

¹¹ The quotation is from Flaubert's letter to Louise Colet of January 16, 1852.

¹² Baudelaire, 'Gautier, sa vie et son oeuvre' in *L'Art Romantique, Oeuvres Complètes* p. 1030.

¹³ Archibald MacLeish, 'Ars Poetica,' in *Collected Poems* (Cambridge, 1952), pp. 40–41.

birds', is bent on suicide. A poem, we can happily agree, should not be regarded *as a means* but that is far from identical with saying that it *should not mean*. Confusion on this point has been a potent source of obfuscation. The meaning of a poem is not an external end which the poem is designed to produce, as it might be designed to arouse patriotic feelings. Only in so far as its language has a meaning does the poem exist.

Yet some critics, as we have already suggested, would go much further than MacLeish, cutting all connection between literature and truth by destroying both meaning, in its referential sense, and reality. Immersed in French structuralism or post-structuralism, critics of this persuasion are to be found arguing from such premises as that 'no meaning pre-exists language' and 'language creates meaning as it goes along', to such conclusions as that 'to write is to produce meaning, and not *reproduce* a pre-existing meaning', and then finally, and more boldly still, that 'to create fiction is, in fact, a way to abolish reality, and especially to abolish the notion that reality is truth'.¹⁴

The confusions in this, as in so much recent critical argument — if 'argument' is the right word — are so manifold as almost to defy comment, at least in any reasonable confine. Its author begins, to be sure, from unexceptionable premises. Since the 'meaning' which interests us in the present context is the meaning of linguistic expressions, it is scarcely news that such meaning does not 'pre-exist' language. Since, too, new linguistic expressions are regularly introduced into languages, one can freely admit, if this is all that is intended, that 'language creates meaning as it goes along'. But the antithesis which follows is a false one. For to write is, in the only intelligible interpretation of these phrases, *both* to 'produce' and to 'reproduce' meaning. Let us assume that no one before MacLeish had ever written or said:

¹⁵ Raymond Federman, ed., *Surfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow* (Chicago, 1975), p. 8, quoted in the course of the highly relevant discussion in Gerald Graff, *Literature against Itself* (Chicago, 1979), p. 171.

A poem should not mean/But be'. Then he has composed a sentence which has a meaning no sentence previously had. So far he has 'created meaning'. But he has done this only by making use of linguistic expressions which *already* have a meaning in English and by combining them in ways which the English language permits. Otherwise his poem would have been gibberish. As for the final claim that to create fiction is *in fact* to abolish reality — whatever 'in fact' might mean now that truth and reality have been swept aside — one can only gasp at the attempt to derive so remarkable a conclusion from the unremarkable premise that the writer uses new expressions or conjoins them in a new way. The Romantic conception of the artist as a god made flesh reaches its apotheosis in the notion that by a stroke of his pen the novelist abolishes reality.

I may be castigated for paying so much attention to a critic, Raymond Federman, who is notorious rather than famous. However unfortunately, he differs from many another only in his succinctness. Reacting against the view that language is, or ought to be, a diaphanous veil, such structuralist or post-structuralist critics have converted it into a lead sheet, which nothing can penetrate, a system of signs which can mean nothing but other signs. They have completely ignored Anglo-American semantics, based on Tarski, with its emphasis on the close relationship between truth and meaning, in favour of an odd sort of linguistic phenomenalism, within which there is no room for the distinction between truth and falsity.

The attractiveness of such an epistemology to literary critics is understandable. Language is, after all, their great love. Furthermore, they can appeal to this theory of signs to settle qualms which have troubled them since Plato — qualms about their relationship to science — without having to invoke Shelley's implausible intellectual imperialism. Art surrenders all claims to tell us what the world is like, but in the process denies to science the right to make such claims. There are other advantages, too. Like science, or so

the argument runs, the artist comments not on reality but on the codes and conventions of his predecessors. The critic, for his part, comments on this comment. Since such conventions are as clearly exhibited in a routine detective story as in *Crime and Punishment*, in a sentimental novelette as in *Anna Karenina*, the critic can avoid the task of evaluation, with the uncomfortable accusations evaluation now brings in its train of elitism, racialism, authoritarianism, and male chauvinism. If he is a university teacher he need no longer trouble his students by forcing upon their attention the great masters; his students can continue to restrict their reading to science fiction and thrillers. In such countries as Poland, where formalism flourishes, the critic can safely study authors who would otherwise be forbidden; if Dostoevsky says nothing about the world, then *a fortiori* he says nothing reactionary.

Dostoevsky would not have been amused. Neither are such of us who feel when we read, let us say, a structuralist analysis of Baudelaire's *Les Chats*, that if this is all literature has to offer, there is not the slightest reason for our concerning ourselves with it, as we felt in the school-room when we were subjected to the pedantic analyses of poetry once common there. Yet one cannot wholly dismiss the structuralist case; one does not have to be the wilder sort of structuralist to question whether the sentences of a literary work convey truths, or are meant to do so. Consider the opening sentence of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* in its English translation, 'For a long time I used to go to bed early'. True or false? In this context, the question, at least on its most natural interpretation, is out of order, as it would not be if this were the first sentence in an autobiography. (His parents' diaries, we might in principle then argue, show that Proust never went to bed early.) It is quite out of order, for the same reason, to say that Proust, or the narrator, is lying or make-believing or pretending that he once went to bed early, although we might properly say that Proust is make-believing that there is a certain person whose characteristics and history this sentence begins to unfold.

Not that the sentence is wholly 'closed towards the world'. To understand it, we rely on our everyday experience of what it is like to go to bed early; without that experience it would be as if the sentence were in its original French and we knew no French. But to understand it is one thing, to assign it a truth-value quite another. Were this sentence wholly typical it would be absurd to look to literature for true propositions, except in so far as, like 'I sometimes used to go to bed early', they are true or false of *the narrator* or of some character he puts before us — as Lady Macbeth's 'a little water clears us of this deed' turns out to be false. And we could scarcely base the seriousness of literature, so far as it rests on its value as a truth-source, on the fact that it contains sentences which are true of its fictional characters. For why should such truths be of any consequence? They are as characteristic of the trashiest thriller as they are of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Compare, however, a later sentence from Proust's novel: 'The process which had begun in her . . . was the great and general renunciation which old age makes in preparation for death, the chrysalis stage of life, which may be observed wherever life has been unduly prolonged; even in old lovers who have lived for one another with the utmost intensity of passion . . . who, after a certain year, cease to make the necessary journey, or even to cross the street to see one another, cease to correspond, and know well that they will communicate no more in this world'.

Like the sentence I previously quoted — 'I used to go to bed early' — this sentence contains an indexical word, in this case 'her', which refers to a fictional character. But what follows is the general statement that *all of us* will, if we live beyond a certain age, no longer communicate with those we have loved. We can judge this statement true or false, in a quite straightforward sense, true or false not of fictional characters but of human beings.

Even if this be so, the truth of such statements, it might still be replied, has no bearing on the value of the work which incorporates them. Indeed, if the seriousness of literature does in any

way depend on the importance of the truths it contains, then, it has not uncommonly been argued, we should be bound to rate its seriousness very low indeed. This is a third option we have so far not considered, that although literature can convey truths, they are of a wholly trivial character. In this spirit, George Boas once laid it down that ‘the ideas in poetry are usually stale and often false and no one older than sixteen would find it worthwhile to read poetry for what it says’¹⁵ There is something in Boas’s severe judgement, however, to give us pause. Why should anyone *under* sixteen find it worthwhile to read poetry for what it says? They have no more need of stale and false ideas than have people over sixteen. There must be some reason why writers are so often praised for their wisdom, even although they do not have the credentials of scientists. Perhaps we can say of literature what Wittgenstein says of philosophy, that it consists in ‘assembling reminders for a certain purpose’. That might explain why the truths literature conveys can be, in a certain sense, obvious and yet the conveying of them can nevertheless be important. Keats certainly tells us that poetry ‘should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance’¹⁶ And in our own century, Robert Frost took a not dissimilar view: ‘In literature it is our business to give people the thing that will make them say ‘Oh, yes, I know what you mean.’ It is never to tell them something they don’t know, but something they know and hadn’t thought of saying’¹⁷ We no longer keep a skull on our desk, as a reminder of death. Yet — and by no means only until we are sixteen — we still need vividly to be reminded of the great commonplaces, not only ‘birth, copulation and death’ but that, let us say, matters rarely turn out as we had expected them to do, that freedom can never be taken for granted, that loyalties can conflict. T. S. Eliot was certainly not ashamed to tell us once more, if

¹⁵ George Boas, *Philosophy and Poetry* (Norton, Mass., 1932).

¹⁶ Letter to John Taylor, February 27, 1818.

¹⁷ In *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, J. Scully, ed. (London, 1966), pp. 50–51

very differently, that these things are so, as in that passage from *Gerontion* which begins: 'History has many cunning passages'.

This is the sort of thing that must be said in a way which escapes sententiousness, which is fresh and vivid and alive, if the protective barrier — the barrier of platitude, of euphemism, of evasion — we like to put between ourselves and such terrible commonplaces is to be broken down. For the commonplace, it should be observed, is not only something we might overlook out of familiarity. If we have not thought of saying what the poet says this is not because, at least in the case of any poet of consequence, it is too trivial to be worth saying. We *want* to overlook what Poe called 'the half-formed, the reluctant, or the unexpressed fancies of mankind' or Melville those things which are 'so terrifically true that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them'¹⁸ There are such all-but-mad utterances, as Melville says, in *King Lear* or, at a somewhat more obvious level, in the poetry of Dean Swift. Literature compels us to face them; it forces our attention through its own force, essential if the commonplace is not to collapse into a platitude.

The preference, over the last century and a half, for the personal rather than the abstract mode does not substantially affect the issue. The poet's 'I' often functions as a thinly-disguised universal quantifier. Consider that poem by Borges which ends:

This summer I complete my fiftieth year:
Death reduces me incessantly

and begins :

There is a line of Verlaine I shall not
recall again.¹⁹

Such a paraphrase as: 'When men reach the age of fifty, their memory begins to fail and their powers are reduced' would be a

¹⁸ Herman Melville, 'Hawthorne and his *Mosses*', in Edmund Wilson, ed., *The Shock of Recognition* (London, 1956), p. 193.

¹⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Limits,' trans. by Anthony Kerrigan from Borges' *Personal Anthology*. A. Kerrigan, ed. (London, 1968), p. 51.

mere platitude. Borges' *concreteness* is essential to his reminding — as so often in G. E. Moore and Wittgenstein and Plato, and as it is in the passage from Proust quoted above. It jolts us, as the familiar generalisation does not. A platitude is a commonplace expressed in a commonplace way — 'we all have to get old sometime'. Paraphrasing poetry into prose is absurd just because the force vanishes. Poets, to be sure, do not in such instances *discover* truths, in the way in which scientists do. Rather they *uncover* truths, they compel us to encounter unveiled what is normally veiled. Their rhetoric is a way of making us listen.²⁰

Reminding, however, is not the sole business of the writer anymore than, Wittgenstein to the contrary notwithstanding, it is the sole business of the philosopher. What about the situation when the writer's statements are *not* commonplace? Shaw is a case in point, a case amongst many. Modern critics tend to pass him over; he does not suit their style of analysis. Yet Shaw holds the stage, as few dramatists do, even if every successful revival is greeted by the critics with an astonished 'Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' Surely one cannot entirely separate Shaw's importance as a comic dramatist from the fact that his characters say things that are intellectually illuminating, the truth of which is worth our serious consideration. This is so even if, what must be admitted, his comedies will not be serious *works of art*, as distinct from social documents, Shaw will not be a dramatist as distinct from a pamphleteer, unless what is said forwards the action of the play. It must, to use a fashionable phrase, form part of the 'intellectual physiognomy' of Shaw's characters. But from the premise: 'A comedy is not a good work of art unless what is said furthers the action of the play' the conclusion does not follow that the nature of what is said is irrelevant.

20 Similar points are made by R. W. Beardsmore in 'Learning from a Novel', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures: Philosophy and the Arts* (London, 1973), pp. 35–36, and by the poet-critic A. D. Hope in 'Platitude and Poetry', *The Cave and the Spring*, 2d ed. (Sydney, 1974).

Notice, too, the phrase ‘intellectually illuminating’. It is not essential that we must accept the writer’s statements as being actually true before we can take them to contribute to the value of his work. As has often been pointed out, in an attempt absolutely to separate the value of literary works from the truth of the statements they contain, one does not have to be an Epicurean to admire Lucretius or a Thomist to be an admirer of Dante. But equally, one does not have to be an Epicurean to admire Epicurus or a Thomist to admire Aquinas. It is enough that what they say, were it true, would be *importantly* true. So we can allow that the seriousness of art, like the seriousness of philosophy, does not wholly depend on the actual truth of what is said, while still insisting that it can sometimes depend on what is said being, as it were, a leading candidate for truth. The film version of *The Brothers Karamazov*, by omitting its intellectual debates, emphasised how much they count for in that novel, as they count in Blake, in Mann, in Peacock.

To return to my earlier observations, there is an aesthetic essentialism at large which argues thus: if the factor X is neither necessary nor sufficient for the goodness of works of art in general, then in no case can it contribute to the value of a particular work of art. So, in the present instance, since there are good literary works in which nothing is said which is theoretically interesting — indeed, it may be part of their point that this is so — and bad literary works, such as Shaw’s novel *The Unsocial Socialist*, in which the characters make intellectually interesting observations, it follows, on the essentialist view, that the intellectual interest of Undershaft’s speeches in *Major Barbara* can have no bearing on the merit of that play. But an everyday analogy will make plain the invalidity of this argument. One can be happy without having intellectual interests; one can have intellectual interests without being happy. But in many cases intellectual interests contribute to a person’s happiness. If we praise *Così fan tutte* for its elegance we are not in that process denigrating *Boris Godounov*; we can

admire a painting by Pollock without having to conclude that it is irrelevant to a Constable that it shows us something about the English countryside. We might agree that a painting is of no artistic value unless it orders shapes and colours, unless it is composed, but are not therefore compelled to conclude that nothing can be relevant to the value of a painting except its arrangement of shapes or colours. The quest for a pure art, pure poetry, pure film, pure ballet is a form of fanaticism, a quest for 'the one thing needful'. It culminates in the emptiness of minimalist painting, poetry which says nothing, cinema in which we are called upon to admire the passage of undeveloped film-stock through a projector.

Such considerations are particularly important if what is in question is that mythical entity 'the essence of the arts'. Denying that music asserts truths, but maintaining that literature can do so and that this is sometimes one reason for taking a particular literary work seriously, I might be taken to be asserting that music is not a serious art, that, as many of the non-musical secretly believe or openly maintain, it is at best a pleasing entertainment. I am not saying anything of the sort, but only that the seriousness of music does not flow from a capacity to assert. Equally, I shall now go on to suggest, this is not always the ground on which the seriousness of works of literature rests, even when their truth has something to do with their seriousness.

When Engels tells us that he learnt more from Balzac than from all the economists, historians, and statisticians put together, his reference is not to what Balzac specifically tells us about Parisian life — although there is so much of this — but to what emerges, is shown through, the stories Balzac relates, perhaps even in a manner which contradicts what he tells us, somewhat as the photograph we pass over to somebody with the remark 'I have five beautiful children' can show that what we are saying is false. Remarkable though it is that in *The Age of Capital*, written in the nineteen-seventies, the economic historian E. J. Hobsbawm should still recommend Zola's Rougon-Macquart novels as the

best guide to the rise of the bourgeoisie in the mid-nineteenth century, one should not conclude that these novels are in fact a work of history. As history, Zola's *Germinal* is clearly false — the events he describes could not have occurred, all of them, at the same date. It does not follow that Hobsbawm is wrong, that truth can in no sense be ascribed to that novel. Although 'Paris', unlike 'Coketown', is the name of a real city this does not demonstrate that Engels must have learnt more from his reading of Balzac than Marx did from his reading of Dickens. Nor is it just that Balzac and Zola 'give us truths' in the manner in which a work of architecture 'gives us truths' about the strength of buildings. Any novel, as I said, can do this. The novels of Balzac and Zola 'give us truths' in a manner in which a sentimental novelette from the same period does not, even though both their novels and the novelette can be used as historical evidence about, let us say, the taste of their time.

To comprehend such facts as these, we shall have to make a shift to non-propositional truth-usages. There are many such usages. Consider, for example, a 'true copy'. The statements in a 'true copy' need not be propositionally true. If, indeed, they are true, when the original is false, then the copy is — not false but — 'defective' or 'inaccurate'.

A 'true lawyer', to take another case, need not always tell the truth; his opposite is neither a false, nor a counterfeit, nor a defective, nor an inaccurate, but an *uncharacteristic* lawyer. Contrast, too, a person's 'true circumstances' or 'the true facts of the case', with his *pretended* circumstances or the *alleged* facts. In order to conceal the true circumstances, the true facts, a person need not lie; it may be enough for a woman to assume a French accent in order to 'deny her origins', or a man to wear an expensive suit to conceal his true situation. When Polonius exhorts Laertes to be 'true to himself', this does not mean, simply or principally, that he is to tell the truth; rather, he is to be loyal to his principles. If he is, then he will not be 'false', i.e., 'disloyal', to any man. Perhaps

the 'truth' applicable to works of art lies somewhere concealed in this jungle of usages.

It is a sufficiently familiar doctrine, certainly, that plastic and literary works ought to be a 'true copy' of reality. (One could scarcely say as much of architecture or music.) There are, however, obvious objections to such a view. We can grant that a 'true copy' need not be in all respects identical with the original which it copies; a typewritten document can be a true copy of a handwritten original. But one cannot make a 'true copy' except from an original, and in the case of most works of art there is no original in the required sense. Furthermore, even when there is an original, the gap between the most realistic painting and the scene it depicts, between brush strokes and human flesh, let us say, is so great that to speak of the painting as *copying* what it depicts is to attenuate the conception of 'a copy' beyond endurance. A painting cannot copy reality in anything like the sense in which a painter can copy a painting, sometimes with such skill that we find it hard to determine which is the copy and which the original. Abstract artists sometimes write as if they were unique in 'creating a new object' when they paint. They are not; a Renoir is a new object just as much as is a Stella. Every painting, by its very nature, is a new object. The painting can, in Gombrich's terminology, 'match' what it depicts; reproducing what it depicts is quite another matter. The same is true of literature. In a play, to be sure, an actress is a human being representing a human being, and she may, in a very straightforward sense, reproduce some gesture she has seen. But, even then, she cannot copy Ophelia's gestures.

With such facts in mind, it has become customary to substitute for the notion of copying, or imitation, that of representation — a broader, considerably more flexible, concept. A member of the Legislature represents his constituents, Uncle Sam represents the United States, the Union Jack represents Great Britain, a kangaroo Australia. Works of art of any sort *can* represent — so Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* represents a thunder-storm — but it is not merely

arbitrary for us to concentrate our attention on the traditional 'representative arts'. The representative capacity of music and of architecture is of much more limited significance.²¹

How do matters now stand with 'truth'? That attaches to what is represented rather than to the representation. A member of the Legislature may accurately represent, or may quite fail to represent, the *true* feelings of his electorate. He may represent those feelings by saying what they are, but this is relatively rare. More often, he represents them by supporting particular policies; this may involve him in making inaccurate, even lying, assertions. If what he says is true this is *accidental* to his representing the true feelings of his electors. Uncle Sam may symbolise, satisfactorily or unsatisfactorily, the *true* character of the United States; we can argue that a kangaroo does not represent the *true* Australia; literary works, paintings, may accurately depict, or fail to depict, the *true* circumstances, the *true* facts of the case. 'Truth', Dreiser once wrote in this spirit, 'is what is; and the seeing of what is, the realisation of truth'.²²

There is some inconvenience for philosophers in supposing that 'truth' can be a predicate both of circumstances and of statements. But certainly this is a quite idiomatic use. ('Visit the Soviet Union and see the truth for yourself'.) Of course, there cannot be 'false circumstances' or 'false facts of the case'. This is only to say that 'false' is not, in every context, the opposite of 'true'; sometimes, as I have already suggested, the opposite of 'true' is 'alleged', or 'pretended', or 'supposed'.

To the view that art in some manner — or, indeed, in any of a great variety of manners — can represent things as they truly are, one might raise, however, a great many familiar objections. One of them would run thus: science has made it plain that things are

²¹ On music, see J. O. Urmsen, 'Representation in Music', in *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures*, vol. 6 (London, 1973), pp. 132-46.

²² Theodore Dreiser, 'True Art Speaks Plainly', *Booklover's Magazine* (February 1903), reprinted in G. L. Becker, ed., *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton, N. J., 1963), p. 155.

in reality not at all like what is depicted by the painter and the novelist. For the poet, the painter, is concerned only with the world of sensory appearances, not with the underlying reality. Schiller admitted as much. Art's concern, he freely granted, is with 'appearances' (*Schein*), which the artist loves just for their own sake. An honest artist, so Schiller tells us, will expressly renounce any claim to be representing reality.²³

Constructivist sculptors, rebelling against this view, sometimes call themselves 'realists' precisely because, in their purely geometrical works, they suppose themselves to be concerned with the real underlying shapes of things in abstraction from their 'mere appearances'. They are still working in the spirit which informed the Futurist Boccioni, writing in 1913. 'It is necessary to proclaim loudly', he wrote, 'that in the intersection of the planes of a book and the angles of a table, in the frame of a window, there is more truth than in all the tangle of muscles, the breasts and thighs of heroes and Venuses which enrapture the incredible stupidity of contemporary sculptors'.²⁴ But if we take seriously the hypothesis on which I have been working — that physics tells us how things 'really are' — then the solid cube is as much 'an appearance' as shifting light; the notion that shape and volume are 'real' whereas colour is mere appearance cannot survive, as Kandinsky recognised, the electronic theory of matter. If abstract sculpture can show us the underlying shapes of things, in so doing it has no greater or lesser claim to be 'realistic' than a Rodin or a Maillol. Cezanne, rebelling against impressionism, sought to penetrate nature by painting geometrical forms, assuming, in the Cartesian manner, that only the spirit of geometry can reveal the true nature of things, as when a French gardener cuts trees into cones or pyramids. But even although, in diurnal terms, the shape of Mt. St.-Victoire survives many a change in colour, its solid shape

²³ Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Wilkinson and Willoughby, eds. (London, 1967), Letter Twenty-Six.

²⁴ This essay is most conveniently read in R. L. Herbert, ed., *Modern Artist on Art* (New Jersey, 1964), p. 56.

is not for that reason 'more real' than the colours which play upon it. That Mt. St.-Victoire looks so-and-so in certain lights, at certain seasons, is as permanent a fact as that it has a certain shape; neither is permanent *sub specie aeternitatis*, but that is not the point at issue. The impressionists showed us something about the world, Cezanne something different, a chocolate-box painting nothing. Cezanne and Monet could not have shown us the same things at the same time in the same painting, any more than Canaletto and Turner could have combined to show us the real Venice.

Wordsworth, in the same spirit as the preceding argument, accepts Schiller's view that art is about appearances without abating poetry's claim to be a source of truth. Poetry's 'appropriate business', he tells us, 'is to treat of things not as they *are*, but as they *appear*; not as they exist in themselves, but as they *seem* to exist to the *senses*, and to the *passions*'.²⁵ And in thus proceeding he is not abating his claim to be engaged in a 'business as permanent as pure science'. Ruskin said much the same thing of painting, that 'it does not represent things *falsely* but as they appear to human beings'.²⁶ The representative arts, it would then seem, operate at a phenomenological level: science shows us what things really are; poetry how they really appear. A difficulty then arises. Surely, one naturally objects, we already know, without the artist's help, how things appear to us, how they feel to us, how we feel about things. Indeed, in the philosophical tradition, such appearances, such feelings, are often taken to be the paradigm instances of the immediately, and indubitably, perceived. So, it might be concluded, what is shown by poetry, if not always what is said, is something already obvious. At best, the poet reminds us.

²⁵ William Wordsworth, Essay, Supplementary to the Preface to Lyrical Ballads, in *Poetical Works* (Oxford, 1950), p. 743.

²⁶ Works, vol. XI, pp. 47–48. In finding my way around in Ruskin, I have derived much help from George P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton, N. J.), 1971.

To this objection, there is a classical reply, and a reply I am prepared, in large degree, to defend. We do not normally look at things carefully and, in consequence, we do not know how we would feel about them if we did. The 'true appearance' of things is the appearance they would have if we looked at them carefully; our 'true feelings' are the feelings we would have if we really looked. As Browning's *Fra Lippo Lippi* expresses this commonplace:

We're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have passed
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see.

Note that Browning's central emphasis is on our learning to 'love', with the painter's help, what we did not 'care' to see. The painter is not a moraliser; he does not say to us 'Love this', 'Hate that'. Nevertheless his showing has, in a very broad sense of 'moral', a moral intent. 'My task . . .', Conrad once wrote, 'is by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you *see*'.²⁷ Like Conrad I have emphasised — my present theme being what it is — seeing rather than feeling. Yet even in this context one cannot wholly pass over the fact that the artist has a special interest in our seeing what, in his judgment, we ought to care about; he hopes to show us the world, for that purpose, in a 'fresh light' which is also a 'true light'. He does not equate importance either with theoretical significance or with practical usefulness. Rather, the 'important' is that which we ought to regard with affection or hostility but do not normally 'care to see'.

Why don't we normally look with care? Our normal approach to the world is practical. We see what we need to see for some particular purpose, its function but not its form and colour except in so far as they are a guide to that function. Not only that: there

²⁷ Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*.

is much that we do not wish to see, from which we avert our eyes, whether out of distaste or by convention. Our feelings, too, are often merely conventional; we love and hate what we have been taught to love and hate without examining the objects of our love and hatred at all closely. The representational artist compels us to look, whether he is celebrating the beauty of the world or forcing upon our attention its miseries, its iniquities, its horrors. So much Constable and Goya, Monet and George Grosz have in common, Heine's lyrical verse and the plays of Büchner and Brecht. That is one answer, if only one answer, to those who ask 'Why should I bother with the representative arts when I can look for myself?' Art, like the prospect of hanging, can concentrate the mind wonderfully. And the conventions of art can enable us to look unconventionally, to look at what we would otherwise not dare or care to see, permitting us, without rebuke, to stare. We can say consolingly to ourselves: 'It's only a story, a film, a painting', as we contemplate what we should normally look away from.

As my examples — Monet and Grosz, Heine and Brecht — should sufficiently illustrate, the artist has diverse ways of getting us to look, by telling us a story, by the vividness of his colours, the charm of his rhythms, his mastery over invective or irony, by distortion, perfection, simplification, the use of metaphors or symbols, by his plain, if far from unsophisticated, literalness or his romantic exaggeration, his abstraction or his loving detail. The painter Francis Bacon is not joking when he calls himself 'a reporter'. He is as much a reporter as is *The News of the World*. But he brings out, as that newspaper does not, the vulnerability of human beings, their physical meatiness, without prurience, without compromise. What, borrowing the phrase from Chomsky, we might call the 'surface structure' of the artist's work is never realistic, not even in the most 'naturalistic' of novels, the most 'representative' of paintings. But this is not a defect. To suppose that a neatly rounded plot in a novel demonstrates a lack of realism is quite to misunderstand the character of realism in literature, and

in a manner which leads to the destruction of the novel, the conversion of it into a dossier or a set of fragments deliberately linked only by chance. Only when human relationships, as in sentimental stories, are falsified to fit some convention — say, the ‘happy ending’ — can we rightly complain of a lack of realism, as we can also complain if they are distorted in the interests of a political thesis or a religious allegory. Similarly, it is quite wrong to suppose that a painting can be realistic only if its proportions ‘match’ the relevant proportions of the objects it depicts; Picasso’s *Guernica* can show us what war is like, as much as does Goya. And even Goya ‘unrealistically’ makes use of a frame and poses his figures dramatically.

After a time, a particular way of getting us to look may no longer work. It loses what Robbe-Grillet calls ‘its initial vitality, its force, its violence’, it becomes, in his words, ‘a vulgar recipe, an academic mannerism which its followers respect only out of routine and laziness’. Then a new path to what Robbe-Grillet calls ‘the discovery of reality’ has to be sought.²⁸ Only over years, as the epigoni vanish, does the style regain its force, enable us to see. But the ‘new path’ will always be at once ‘unrealistic’, dependent on particular conventions and, if it succeeds, ‘realistic’ in showing us how things are.

One of the many things we do not normally look at is the feelings of other people, how *they* look at the world, their ‘ideology’, in one sense of that fashionable word. And this, too, the artist tries to show us, as in Antonioni’s film *Red Desert*, where we see the world through the eyes of a deeply depressed woman. Not only that: we see more clearly the darker side of industrial civilisation, and the superficial relationships it engenders, by looking both at it and them through her eyes. A different ideology can help to destroy our familiar ideology, in so far as that is a bar to perception. By showing us what we had not seen, it changes our feelings.

²⁸ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York, 1966), p. 158.

If we were to judge solely by the attitudes of theoreticians, this familiar view of the representative arts, as showing us what we do not see, has had, in recent years, few friends. But there is often a striking gap between the unlicensed metaphysics of the theorist and the actual practice of critics. Here are three examples of critical judgment from recent numbers of the *London* and the *New York Review of Books*, read by chance, not discovered by diligent research. From Wayne Booth, 'he makes one feel that [one] has never looked at anyone before'; from Graham Hough, 'she offers us the satisfaction of seeing one's own hazy observations brought into sharper focus'; from John Richardson, 'Picasso forced himself to look at length at whatever was in front of him as if it had never been looked at by him or anyone else before'.²⁹

In the nineteen-sixties, too, artists describing themselves as 'realists' began to think of themselves as the new vanguard. Consider, for example, Warhol's description of 'Pop art' as an 'involvement with what I think to be the most brazen and threatening characteristics of our culture, things we hate but which are also powerful in their impingement on us'. (Notice the 'we' and the 'us'.) Or, if Warhol be set aside as no more than a successful self-publicist, consider the reinstatement of the photograph as a recognised art-form; the documentary-style novel; the emergence, especially in the United States, of films which set out, above all else, to capture the look and the feel of a period or a place; the directness of reference in so much of the poetry of the nineteen-seventies; art exhibitions in which the human form or the urban landscape is the focal centre — all of these reflect a renewed interest in an art which *pictures* which takes it as its function to represent. Even the more advanced critics, with their customary agility, are changing their tune. 'The New York Abstract Expressionists', so we are now somewhat incredibly informed, 'were

²⁹ The first two quotations are from the *London Review of Books* (June 4, 1980), pp. 17–27. The authors in question are Wright Morris and Lettice Cooper. The second quotation is from the *New York Review of Books* (July 19, 1980), p. 17.

Realists dedicated to grasping experience and getting it into art as it is'.³⁰ Nowadays, the abstract expressionists are compared, where they were once sharply contrasted, with nineteenth-century American landscape painting and nineteenth-century American impressionism.

I should perhaps add that in emphasising this renewed interest in truth I am not participating in an all-out condemnation of non-representative art. It can be very beautiful, whether as a geometrical vase, an Islamic tile, or a wholly abstract painting. It offers us solace through its very absence of reference. One readily understands why it has replaced the conventional landscape in executive suites, now that a landscape can awaken uncomfortable ecological thoughts. Sometimes, too, it can help us to see what we had never previously looked at, shapes, let us say, on a decaying stucco wall. But there is a great deal that it cannot do; one is not surprised that the Greeks turned away from it. Its modes are limited; it does not permit, let us say, irony; it cannot be satirical, grotesque, tragic.

To go back to my main theme, the language I have so far used can properly arouse qualms. Two questions arise, by no means dissociated. What does all this talk about 'true looks' amount to? And why should we trust the artist when he tells us that this is how we ought to see things?

Many scientifically-minded thinkers — Poincaré and Russell both expressed this view — have argued that art is inevitably superficial, shallow, not even attaining to the highest sort of beauty, let alone truth, just because it remains at the level of sensory perception. But even those who are prepared to maintain that reality attaches only to particles and the forces which link them, or, alternatively, only to some metaphysical absolute, who argue that the world as we ordinarily take it to be is but a passing show, will still want to distinguish, within that passing show,

³⁰ T. B. Hess, reviewing the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Natural Paradise, Painting in America 1800–1935*, in *New York*, October 25, 1976

between illusion and reality. No less to such scientists or metaphysicians than to the rest of us does it matter whether a banknote is genuine or counterfeit, whether what they see in a desert is an oasis or a mirage, whether they are being deceived by propagandists and hypocrites and mountebanks or enlightened by a sage. At this level, then, the representative artist can properly claim that he shows us not merely how things look but how they are in truth, how we would see them if we looked at them more carefully, when we would see as counterfeit the beliefs, the passions, the attitudes which normally pass as genuine, see as mirages the ideals with which men and women try to console themselves. Or alternatively — for art can also be celebratory — we should come to see as genuine what our culture tries to persuade us is a sham, recognise anew the value of love or freedom.

If for physics Madame Bovary is an electronic cloud, she is not, all the same, under an illusion when she takes herself, her lover, her husband to be human beings. Her illusions, and those illusions of ours which through his presentation of her Flaubert helps us to discard, lie elsewhere, not to be dispelled by subsequent scientific discoveries. Something important about human beings can be brought out by stories and films in which they are depicted as machines but what is brought out is not that Hoffmann was wrong to feel deceived when his Olympia turned out to be a mechanical doll. So far Wordsworth is correct. The distinctions to which the artist points are as permanent as human life itself.

The problem persists, however, that the artist shows us how things stand only by offering us a particular look at them, *his* look. Unlike a mathematician he offers us no proofs, unlike a historian he offers no sources except a fictional story, unlike a scientist what he tells us is not subject to rigorous testing, unlike a philosopher he does not argue. Then why trust him?

One common answer is that we should trust the artist because he is sincere.³¹ And certainly to describe somebody as sincere is to

³¹ On sincerity see especially Henri Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity* (New Haven, 1963), and Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge Mass., 1971) .

recommend him, in certain respects, as trustworthy, to say that he will not lie to us about what he believes, likes, admires. But it does not at all follow that we ought to trust him when what is at issue is the *truth* of what he believes or the real nature of those things, persons, institutions which he likes or admires. He can sincerely believe quite absurd doctrines, can sincerely admire only out of ignorance. So his sincerity is not a ground for accepting his work as an accurate depiction.

There is an older doctrine that we should trust the artist because he has an innocent eye. The novelist sometimes proclaims this innocence by taking as his narrator an outsider: a child, an adolescent, even an idiot, or at the very least someone removed from the action, a disinterested observer, depicted as only gradually learning what he is telling us, only gradually coming to see what is happening. But, of course, this innocence is a device and has to be; the artist can see because he is *not* innocent; only the sightless eye is innocent. Balzac, Lawrence, Conrad, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, are far from innocent; they show us so much not in spite of being, but as a result of being, ideologically committed.

So our search for reasons for trusting the artist is still unsuccessful. Can there be something peculiar about what the artist shows us, so that looking through his eyes we cannot doubt? Wordsworth was at one time prepared to say of the poet that he presents us with truths 'not standing upon external testimony, but carried alive into the heart by passion; truth which is its own testimony'.³² Later in life, however, he came to be very conscious of the 'temptation' any such doctrine holds 'for them whose thoughts have been little disciplined by the understanding, and whose feelings revolt from the sway of Reason',³³ a reservation which the subsequent history of Romanticism has more than justified, as when Ionesco lays it down that 'everything we desire,

³² Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads, Poetical Works*, p. 737.

³³ Supplementary Essay, *ibid.*, p. 743 .

everything we dream, is true'.³⁴ Coleridge wrote in the same spirit as Wordsworth: If the check of the senses and the reason were withdrawn [Fancy] would become delirium and [Imagination] mania'.³⁵

In their more manic moods, however, artists have often supposed that they have access to metaphysically guaranteed truths or to the *essence* of things. So Plato is refuted; far from being limited to appearances, the artist is concerned with ideal forms, universals. 'True symbolism', wrote Goethe, 'is where the particular represents the universal, not as a dream or a shadow but as a living momentary revelation of the inscrutable'.³⁶ It is sometimes supposed that the artist presents us with exactly this kind of symbolism.

Abstract artists, seeking to make it plain that they are not mere decorators, have often made such claims, or critics have made them on their behalf. Mondrian, for whom 'the straight line is the line of truth', belongs to the first group, the cubists, with Apollinaire as their 'interpreter', to the second. (Mondrian also argued that geometrical art was purely masculine, that all externality is feminine. Ironically, he was to become a favourite of dress designers.) They have not been content to cut all connections between art and truth, or unashamedly to engage in non-representational painting. Their work *does* represent, they have wanted to say, but represents something which we are not ordinarily capable of perceiving. Their abstract designs, we are to suppose, are metaphysics in disguise, a route to the transcendental.

Schopenhauer performed a similar office for music. 'The composer', he said, 'reveals the inner nature of the world'.³⁷ And

³⁴ *Notes et contre-notes* (Paris, 1962), Preface.

³⁵ S. T. Coleridge, *Table Talk*, June 23, 1834 (London, 1884), p. 291. Compare the chapter on 'good sense' in I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (London, 1934).

³⁶ *Maxims and Reflections*, Maxim 314.

³⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans. by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp (London, 1948), vol. 1, p. 336.

Mallarmé, ever intent on bringing together music and poetry, asked in an extraordinary passage, 'What is the point of the miracle by which a natural occurrence is transposed, by the force of speech, into the all but non-existence of a vibration, unless so that there can emanate from it, without the constraint of a direct or concrete recall, the pure idea?'³⁸ Now we are well beyond the check of reason and senses, fancy has become delirium and imagination mania – 'the sleep of reason produces monsters'.

Literature, one can freely admit, offers us universals, but only in so far as Othello, let us say, puts before us the very accent and bearing of jealousy, puts it before us not only in and through his concrete actions but through his use of language in precisely that denotative, referential way which Mallarmé dismisses as vulgar. To put the point crudely, the universals of art are Aristotelian universals, immersed in particularity, not, as Mondrian and Mallarmé supposed, Platonic forms. Expressionist playwrights and filmmakers have tried to persuade us otherwise. There is a film of Murnau's which purports to be set 'anywhere' and 'everywhere', with personages bearing such names as 'The Boy', 'The Girl'. But the concreteness of art defeats such pseudo-Platonism. Of necessity, the place, the time, the personages, have to be particularised. This does not prevent the personages from being a *boy*, a *girl*, the places a *farm*, a *city*; their particularity does not exclude universalisability. Even when what is depicted is a relationship between two rather exotic beings, a North African Venetian general and the daughter of a Venetian nobleman, a suburban shopkeeper can still recognise his own feelings, his own actions. Not, however, in virtue of a metaphysical foray into a transcendental world of ideal forms but in so far as he recognises them as feelings and actions of a familiar sort.

As Aristotle saw, it is not an objection to literary works, it does not demonstrate that a play must be inferior as a source of

³⁸ Stéphane Mallarmé 'Crise de vers' in *Oeuvres Complètes*, H. Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry, eds. (Paris, 1951), p. 368.

truth to history, if we point out that the events it depicts are imaginary. For what interests us is a certain kind of behaviour, something we can best come to see in the context of a formalised, concentrated, narrative. Although Othello is an imaginary being, his jealousy is not an imaginary kind of jealousy. Neither, unless the play is defective, is Iago's an imaginary kind of envy. Only if we suppose 'jealousy' to be the name of an ideal entity, which we need to contemplate in its pure essence, rather than the name for a complex style of human behaviour shall we find it hard to understand how a play can give us a look at jealousy, while still remaining immersed in the particular.

The attempt to find a transcendental seriousness in art, to Platonise it as the ultimate reply to Plato, has served to justify solemn idiocies, on the part of critics and artists alike. It has *inflated* art, and imposed on the critic the self-defeating function of making plain what particular inscrutability this or that work has as its theme. The effect is to reduce the importance of the work of art as such, as something to listen to, to look at, to read, as an indissoluble union of sensuousness and rational order. On such an interpretation, looking for a meaning *does* involve treating the work of art as a means. One can see this very clearly in a passage Melville quotes from Hawthorne: 'When the artist rises high enough to achieve the beautiful, the symbol by which he makes it perceptible to our mortal senses becomes of little value in his eyes, while his spirit possesses itself in the enjoyment of the reality'.³⁹ Such pronouncements flow from a puritanical undervaluation of sensuousness — sensuousness which is the savor, and the saviour, of both humanity and nature, their guardian against the excesses of the geometrical spirit which, too assiduously employed, can lead, as Plato did not see but helps to show us, only to sterility.

³⁹ Herman Melville, 'Hawthorne and his Mosses', in Edmund Wilson, ed., *The Shock of Recognition*, p. 187.

Art — I should be far from wishing to deny this — can, like a myth, have the sort of fascination which Freud sought, if inadequately, to explore. We do not always know why we are so deeply moved by a particular musical phrase, why a line in a poem haunts us, or a face in a painting, or a play like *Waiting for Godot*, or a film like *Last Year in Marienbad*. Sometimes the effect is not long-lasting: on a second view, we decide that we were ‘taken in’, as we might be taken in by a skilled rhetorician or a charlatan mystery-monger. The critic can help us to see why we were moved, by drawing our attention to the way in which the work echoes an ancient myth or satisfies a familiar aspiration — as indeed a comic-strip can do. All that I am protesting against is the doctrine that what moves us in such circumstances is that light is at last thrown on the Inscrutable, that ‘truth’, in some higher form, is what in such circumstances we are confronting.

I hope that we are beginning to awaken from this particular bad dream of the intellect, that critics will cease attempting to persuade us that without their help *nothing* is clear, that even the simplest serious novel contains level after level of metaphysical significance, that to read any serious novel in the way many of us did as young men and women, without the help of instructions, is to condemn ourselves to eternal incomprehension. This is not, of course, to suggest that there are *never* levels of significance in a work, that *Moby Dick* should be read simply as an adventure story about whale-hunting. But it is to deplore the sort of symbol-hunting which converts, let us say, Joyce’s *Dubliners* into a network of mysteries, the daily habits of an Irish Catholic family into deeply significant esoteric symbols, sherry and biscuits into a communion feast.

To ‘Why trust the artist?’ our only reply can be: ‘Don’t do so, if by trust is meant absolute trust, complete faith. Don’t, in this sense, trust anybody or anything’. Nevertheless, we can *learn* from the artist, we can come with his help to see. In the process, we have to keep our wits about us; he may use his gifts to mislead us,

to deceive us. We need not suppose that this sort of thing only happens in Nazi art or socialist realism; the ideologies of our own artists may be concealed from us, precisely because they are our own. In quantitative terms, by far the greatest percentage of representative works of art — using the phrase ‘works of art’ in its neutral sense, as including what is bad as well as what is good — deceive, conceal, misrepresent. Critics may sometimes help us to see through pseudo-profundities, sentimentalities, to recognise when accents and bearings are falsified to conform to a particular ideology. In the long run, however, we have no defence except our reason and our experience. The artist, it is often said, can enlarge our experience. That is right — he can enlarge it as well as correct it, put it into focus. But it is only in so far as what he says can be cross-identified with our experience that we can judge whether to trust him. We can undertake this cross-identification, as we can tell when a photograph is coming into focus or that what is being enlarged and corrected is indeed our experience, just because the artist’s concern is with what, in a certain sense, we have already seen, already known. We can greet what he shows us with ‘he’s got it right’ even although we have never got it right ourselves. Looking at a work which lies outside our experience — a Japanese film about domestic life, let us say, if we know nothing of Japan — we may have to reserve judgment, just as we might have to do in relation to a novel about prison life in our own society. (Of course we may have other good reasons for admiring such a work — the visual beauty, let us say, of the film.)

To sum up, then, I have suggested that what I called ‘propositional truth’ does have a part to play in literature, even if its role be limited. For the most part, however, truth is in art something which is shown rather than something that is said. Its home is in the representative arts. Truth, I have said rather than argued, does not enter into abstract painting, at least of the purely formalistic kind, into music or architecture. In the representative arts it takes a variety of forms: the work of art can show us that what we like

to pretend to exist does not exist, that what we like to pretend not to exist does exist, or it can show us how it is possible to feel about the world, in ways which we otherwise would not understand, or that there are forms or patterns where we had supposed there to be chaos, chaos where we had supposed there to be order. We are not called upon automatically to believe what the artist tells us, to accept what he shows us as correctly shown, to agree with him about what counts as an illusion. He sees clearly but is not a *clairvoyant*, helps us to see but as having eyes, not an inner light, offers us truths but not theories, not knowledge but grounds for reflection.⁴⁰

Let me, in conclusion, emphasise how modest my enterprise has been. I have touched on but a single aspect of the general problem from which I began — why take art seriously? I have concentrated my attention, solely, on the truth-claims of representative art. Even within these limits, I feel somewhat ashamed to have brought you out, on a Cambridge November night, to listen to this lecture. For what have I said? Nothing more, an unkind but not wholly unjust critic might sum up, than that the representative arts sometimes represent, and that their power to do so has sometimes something to do with their quality as works of art. I console myself only by remembering that, in a Hegel-dominated world, the young Marx thought it necessary to write: ‘Let us assume *man* to be *man*, and his relation to the world to be a human one’. And that the Hungarian freedom-fighters marched behind a banner bearing the device ‘all tyranny is tyranny’. In times of madness, we can retain our sanity only by clinging fast to the obvious.

⁴⁰ Compare Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, trans. by Ben Brewster, pp. 204–5.