

No Problem

LET ME HOIST UP AN epigraph, which I mean to wave brightly over everything I shall go on to say, from Ludwig Wittgenstein (no surprise, to anyone familiar with my writing): “The light shed by work is a beautiful light, but it only shines with real beauty if it is illuminated by yet another light.”¹ Let me repeat it, the thought is so foreign to our usual assumptions: “The light shed by work is a beautiful light, but it only shines with real beauty if it is illuminated by yet another light.” I will proceed by making several somewhat general points, which I will try to back up with examples mainly from my own work.

The first point is this: I stand strongly opposed to the idea that there is some special problem—some problem of a theoretical or systematic nature—involved in describing works of (so-called) visual art. This means, to cite a famous text, that I find myself in disagreement with the views put forward in Michael Baxandall’s well-known essay “The Language of Art History” (1991), where he raises a number of problems of a general nature, the most important of which is the lack of fit, as he understands it, between the “linearity” of language and the non-“linearity” of pictures.² In contrast to language, he writes, “a picture . . . or rather our perception of it, has no such inherent progression to withstand the sequence of language applied to it” (notice the metaphors of this: “to withstand”—as if some kind of struggle is going on, with language as the aggressor; “the sequence of language applied to it”—as if slapped or thrust onto the picture’s surface; no suggestion here that a picture might welcome the right language, as if having waited for it nearly forever: think of my epigraph). Baxandall continues in the same vein: “An extended description of a painting is committed by the structure of language to be a progressive violation of the pattern of perceiving a painting. We do not see linearly. We perceive a picture by a temporal sequence of scanning, but within the first second or so of this scanning we have an impression of the whole—that it is a Mother and Child sitting in a hall, say, or a sort of geometricized guitar on a table” (459–60). We then observe greater and greater detail, including relationships among elements, but whatever our

ABSTRACT This essay is a reflection on the supposed difficulties of “description” in the writing of art history and art criticism. REPRESENTATIONS 135. Summer 2016 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 140–49. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/rep.2016.135.9.140.

progress of seeing and noticing is like, “It is not comparable in regularity and control with progress through a piece of language” (460). Superior art writers (he mentions Giorgio Vasari and Charles Baudelaire) find ways to deal with this mismatch, Baxandall concedes. But in his view there remains a basic disparity between the circumstances of the literary critic on the one hand and an art historian or art critic on the other, for the simple reason that a literary text and our reception of it “have a robust syntagmatic progression of their own which the linear sequence of an exposition cannot harm” (460). Again, the imagery is that of a struggle, in which sequences of words seek to impose themselves damagingly on—more strongly, to violate—an artifact that by virtue of its inherent nature does its best to resist them. Indeed, Baxandall refers in these pages to “the basic absurdity of verbalizing about pictures” (461), as if the very project of seeking to do so were somehow under a cloud. (I find this a bit too British-commonsensual; why should verbalizing about pictures be thought of as more absurd than verbalizing about human relationships or, indeed, any other serious topic?)

To deal properly with Baxandall’s claims would require a full-length lecture or essay. Briefly, though, I think there is nothing positive to be said for his view, which amounts to a somewhat bizarre kind of formalism or even literalism—I would even say, to an inverted form of G. E. Lessing’s argument in his *Laocoön* (1766), a work of the highest theoretical and critical brilliance. For Lessing, you will remember, there should be a match between the temporal character of the signs in a work of art and the subject matter of that art in order for the latter to operate with maximum effectiveness (roughly, with maximum intensity): thus, the sequential nature of verbal signs calls for sequential subject matter, namely, actions (as in *The Iliad*); while the nonsequential nature of pictorial signs (of painting, under which term he also includes sculpture) calls for nonsequential subject matter, namely, nature as in landscape or still life or something of the sort. (Of course, Lessing immediately is faced with the problem of how to accommodate centuries of distinguished history painting, which he brilliantly does, or sort of does, by means of the theoretical makeshift of the “pregnant moment.” A topic for another occasion.) Put slightly differently, Lessing’s *Laocoön* marks the birth, or proto-birth, of the modern doctrine of medium-specificity (proto-birth because there was as yet no concept of a medium as such). And this is to say that Baxandall’s account of the language of art criticism amounts to its own version of medium specificity—keyed, in this case, not to the making of art but to writing about it. And having to do not with subject matter but with the allegedly disparate intrinsic natures of linguistic and pictorial artifacts and the critic’s experience of the two.

In fact, considerations of subject matter often seem crucially to the point (indeed, *pace* Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg, and all too many

art historians who would never dream that they too are “formalists,” subject matter is inseparable from considerations of form—another topic for a future occasion). Take, for example, Jacques-Louis David’s *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), a painting most of us have stood in front of and some of us, anyway Tom Crow and myself, have written about at length. Does it make any sense, dealing with a work of this degree of narrative complexity and diagrammatic clarity, not to mention what we know of the circumstances and context of its production (including the context of contemporary art criticism), to imagine that language that seeks to come to grips with what it gives us to see—for example, the four men (three sons, one father) swept up in a single action, as if they were synchronously, or the palpable division between the groups of the men and the women, or the self-evidently dramatic character of the composition as a whole—is at some kind of ontological disadvantage because language as such is sequential and the painting and our experience of it is not? Indeed, does it make any sense to imagine that language, because it is sequential, is bound to violate David’s singularly robust canvas in any way? (There’s a further point, which I will mention but again leave undeveloped for reasons of time: to seek to understand the “meaning” of a work of art—any work of art, in any medium, indeed any statement at all—is invariably to seek to understand the *intentions* of the maker or writer or speaker. And it would seem *prima facie* implausible to imagine that there could be any mismatch whatsoever between the sequentiality of language and the nature of an intention, which by definition occurs and devolves in time.)³

Or consider a very different painting, Morris Louis’s transcendent *Alpha Pi* (1960–61). In my early writing about Louis, I stressed the extent to which the strongest Unfurleds, such as this one, made a positive point of a certain holism and instantaneousness—effects that placed them, though I had no reason to note this then, at the farthest pole from sequentiality as such. For example, I noted how the close juxtaposition of the banked rivulets of pure acrylic color made it literally impossible to “compare” the rivulets with one another, to take in the two oppositely inclined banks other than in their entirety within the strong gestalt of the enclosing rectangle. But of course it was only by virtue of a feat of sustained description that the case for such a reading could be made, which is to say that my own (almost ecstatic) sense of the matter was that I was seizing upon an opportunity to capture in words the unique qualities of the best Unfurleds (no one having tried to do this before me) rather than struggling against the odds in an imperfect medium to come to terms with the paintings’ inherent resistance to discourse. To quote just a bit of what I wrote in 1967: “The slight but reiterated undulations of the banked rivulets of color are experienced as a kind of *billowing*, not just of the rivulets, and not of the entire canvas exactly—the latter is not

seen as other than taut and flat (indeed, that the canvas is not just flat but stretched taut becomes meaningful in a new way)—but of the breadth and depth of everything, or of the nothing, the blank canvas opens onto. It is as though in the Unfurleds tautness and flatness themselves billow in a wind whose source and nature remain wholly mysterious. This is, I want to claim, the vision of the Unfurleds, one which, for all its metaphysical reach and power, Louis achieved on the strength of, only within, his ongoing involvement with canvas and its various properties and qualities.” Such an account—a small excerpt from a longer passage—may or may not strike you as compelling. But if it does not, the reason for its failure to do so owes nothing to any basic disparity between the nonsequentiality of paintings and the sequentiality of verbal language. And if it does, well, my point is proved. I will break off here; obviously my aim is not to demean Baxandall, one of the genuinely creative figures in the modern history of what we like to call (but why?) our discipline. But I think it would be a mistake—to say the least—to follow him in his theorizings on this topic.

Let me make another general point: I’m not entirely happy with the notion of “description” as an organizing term. (Even less with “ekphrasis” as a term relevant to what we do when we are not studying classical ekphrasis.) Not that I have another term with which to replace it. But “description” has too neutral or detached or perhaps generic a ring for my tastes—as if one problem with our field is that there isn’t enough (good) description around, so that we should encourage younger art historians to give it a try—that sort of thing. A long time ago Svetlana Alpers, in her essay “Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation” (*New Literary History*, 1976), used the striking phrase “motive for looking,” and I think a slight retooling of the phrase—say, “motive for describing”—is very much to the point here. Let me give an example of what I mean from my own work. Toward the end of working on *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), I realized that I wanted—in fact needed—to discuss David’s first major history painting, *Belisarius Receiving Alms* (1781), in the context both of Denis Diderot’s brief engagement with it in his *Salon of 1781* (his last) and of the larger argument of my book. Very quickly I realized that I wanted to direct attention to certain particular features of the painting: first, that Belisarius is seated against one of the bases of a triumphal arch that the viewer understands to be at ninety degrees to the picture plane (facing left, in other words); second, that the point is driven home by the fact that the words “DATE OBOLUM BELISARIO” are engraved on an equivalent face of a marble block at Belisarius’s side (indeed the inscription would seem to be there precisely in order to thematize that particular face of the block or, say, that axis of the composition—that relation to the picture plane); third, that the ordering of the paving stones in

the ground plane clearly implies a vanishing point very near the left-hand edge of the composition, which is to say, as far as possible from directly in front of Belisarius; and fourth, that the perspective recession toward the vanishing point shows signs of tremendous strain—that is, the paving stones appear to rise almost vertically instead of receding illusionistically. (David notoriously had trouble with perspective, but is that all that is going on here? Indeed, is that all there is to his having had trouble with perspective generally?) There are other features of the *Belisarius* worth remarking, but these will do for the moment. Now suppose someone not engaged in my particular project—someone for whom absorption, antitheatricity, the Diderotian concept of the *tableau*, and the overarching issue of the relation between painting and beholder was not on his or her agenda—suppose some intelligent and observant person for whom those considerations were a closed book nevertheless noticed all the features I have just cited—what would he or she have made of them? Not very much, I think, which of course may well be why no previous discussion of the *Belisarius* attributed genuine importance to them either individually or collectively. I single out this particular instance because in fact it was the first moment during the writing of *Absorption and Theatricality* when I became conscious of working without the support of one or another critical text (though I did bring to bear a marvelous account by Diderot, in a letter to Sophie Volland, of a famous engraving of a painting then attributed to Anthony Van Dyck's of the same subject). This is to say that my reading of David's *Belisarius* proceeded by virtue of a certain kind of close "description." But my point is that in the absence of the historical and theoretical (the historico-theoretical) framework that by that late stage in my labors was already firmly in place, the individual observations I have just cited almost certainly would have remained meaningless, without further significance.

Something of the sort is true of all my work, art-critical and art-historical—what looks like, and in a sense is, "description" (but I don't like the word) never goes on in an interpretive void. It's also true, though, that seemingly free-form observations can trigger or at least contribute to art-historical discoveries. So, for example, the long essay on Thomas Eakins in my book *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane* (1987) originated in a moment in June 1982 when I stood in front of *The Gross Clinic* (1875) in the marvelous retrospective exhibition of Eakins's art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I suddenly noticed something that until then had escaped me, namely, that the shockingly realistic figure of the famous surgeon Samuel D. Gross standing and holding his shiny, blood-tipped scalpel bore a striking resemblance to that of a painter holding a brush—for example, to the figure of Diego Velázquez in *Las Meninas*, a painting Eakins had seen and admired in Madrid in 1870. One reason I

noticed this, I realized at the time, was that I was already well embarked on my book *Courbet's Realism* (1990), in which both self-portraits and figures standing in for, and in that sense representing, the painter in the act of painting play a crucial role in my analyses. But then I was struck by something else: that while Gross himself held the scalpel as a painter might a brush, there were three other figures who were either using pencils or some other instrument of a pencil-like nature—the assisting doctor probing the patient's open wound, the recording surgeon taking notes, and (hard to see) Eakins himself leaning forward and writing and/or drawing in a small notebook. There was no precedent for this in the work of Gustave Courbet, and I wondered whether I could find other signs or representations or indices of writing or drawing in Eakins's oeuvre (other graphicisms, so to speak); I remember starting to go from painting to painting with this in mind, until after about two hours, in a state of half-crazy excitement, I realized that I had another book, or half a book, to write. So one might say that noticing particular features of *The Gross Clinic* had enormous consequences. But when, shortly after that epiphany, I undertook to give detailed accounts of individual paintings by Eakins, including *The Gross Clinic*, by way of establishing the coexistence, indeed the mutual interpenetration, in his art of two systems or regimes of representation, one keyed to the notionally upright plane of painting, the other, more important one to the notionally horizontal plane of writing/drawing, the results might reasonably be called “descriptive,” but what matters—what gives those accounts their persuasive force, to the extent that they are felt to have such—is their role in advancing an interpretation of, which is to say an argument about, what I had come to understand as the overarching structure of Eakins's enterprise. (The concept of an argument tends to be foreign to the history of art; it shouldn't be. If there is anything we should be teaching student art historians, it is that. Also that their arguments should be, must be, historical in character. Also that historicity comes in various forms, not all of them governed by the norms of the social history of art; this is not a slap at the social history of art, though for a while there it did tend to be just a bit hegemonic in relation to other approaches.) It remains an open question whether the idea of a thematics of writing in Eakins would have occurred to me apart from my familiarity with Derridean deconstruction, which was waiting with open arms when I moved from Harvard to Johns Hopkins in 1975. So even bare noticing has its conditions of possibility. And in the course of thinking through my Eakins essay, a further thought struck me: I realized that the idea of a horizontally oriented plane of inscription perfectly fitted, in a sense explained, the numerous disfigured upturned faces in the stories and novels of the nonpareil American writer Stephen Crane, whose work I had loved and obsessed about for a long time. After dealing with Eakins I went

back to Crane and drafted a long essay on him, with no sensation whatever of shifting gears between writing about painting and writing about writing. I then put the Eakins and Crane essays together in a single book, *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane*, and I am now in the process of completing a long book on literary impressionism generally, in which Crane and Conrad are joined by Frank Norris, Ford Madox Ford, W. H. Hudson, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, R. B. Cunningham Graham, and other English-language writers between 1890 and 1914. Which further suggests that the difference between works of literature and of visual art may not be as great as Baxandall imagined.

A few other points before closing: first, what I guess we still have to call “description” (under protest by me) involves feats of writing. Of course that is perfectly obvious. But what is not obvious, and what the term “description” can mask, is that the most impressive achievements in this vein are the work of men and women who understand themselves to be seeking to produce work of writerly as well as “disciplinary” value (a simplification, but you get the point). Whatever else is true of T. J. Clark, he is a writer. Also Leo Steinberg. Also the authors of *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence*. Also Stephen Bann. Also, needless to say, Roger Fry, Adrian Stokes, Clement Greenberg, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Henri Focillon, Sydney J. Freedberg, Lawrence Gowing, Richard Wollheim, Louis Marin, and Michel Foucault in his dazzling albeit problematic essay on *Las Meninas*. Not to mention the late Daniel Arasse, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Carol Armstrong, Joseph Koerner, Edward Snow, and Harry Berger Jr., along with various younger figures whose names I will omit so as not to risk causing offence by inadvertent omission. The question, however, is whether this aspect of those writers’ achievement is appreciated by the “discipline” or, indeed, whether it is even granted a legitimate place in it. Again, issues of pedagogy are important here; are we in the business of training writers on art, not just historians who write about works of art? If not, why not? Notice, too, how many of the names I have just cited have produced works of lasting interest. In fact it would be hard to find a match in the realm of recent literary criticism and scholarship. To be specific: historians of seventeenth-century Dutch art, and not only Dutch ones, will still be infuriated fifty or a hundred years from now when they read Alpers’s unflaggingly argumentative *Art of Describing* (1983); that’s immortality, in our field; how many equivalent works can one cite by contemporary professors of English? In other words, is it possible that there is something about the very enterprise of writing about painting and related arts that opens the door, if only a crack, to lasting achievement? It would be nice to think so.

Second, there is this related point: “descriptive” writing of the kind I am singling out will often involve the first-person presence of the writer in his or her text (think of Clark, Steinberg, Krauss, and myself). And with

this the “discipline” is definitely not comfortable, to its considerable impoverishment—the very notion of “disciplinarity” with its associations of objectivity and impersonality militating against self-expression wherever and whenever the latter rears its head. In this connection, it strikes me that I was probably very lucky (or unlucky: it depends on one’s point of view) to start out intellectual life as a critic of contemporary art (also as a poet, but that is another story, though it may be that the best piece of “description” I’ve ever managed is a poem, “Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe,” in my book *The Next Bend in the Road* [2004]): unlike a proper art historian, an art critic is supposed to put himself or herself on the line, and all the serious ones do. Thus my remarks on Louis’s Unfurleds, from which the excerpt cited earlier was taken, resonate with the almost literally overwhelming experience of coming unexpectedly upon my first painting of that type at the Guggenheim Museum in the fall of 1963, in a memorial exhibition organized by Lawrence Alloway (Louis had died at forty-nine just over a year before). And everything I have written about the contemporary British sculptor Anthony Caro, from an introduction to his show at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1963 to another for the catalog accompanying an exhibition of twelve large recent abstract sculptures in welded steel (his so-called Park Avenue series) held the summer of 2013 at the Gagosian Gallery in London, reflects—no, unequivocally expresses—the conviction that he is a major artist, one of the handful of figures who will eventually be seen as defining our age artistically. (I’m referring to genuine accomplishment, not just “cultural” significance—to speak for a moment in a foreign idiom, call it high modernism.) Now art history is rarely openly evaluative in the way that art criticism generically is, or should be. But passion and conviction have their place there also, and when absent, as in too much art-historical writing they plainly are—what can I say? The absence shows. My initial shock at reading Clark’s first books around 1973 had as much to do with their impassioned tone as with the originality of his scholarship, which was considerable. More recent books by him such as *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006) and *Picasso and Truth* (2013) have a different tone—two different tones, in fact—but ones that are no less personal.

As for evaluation, my book *Menzel’s Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (2002) on the German painter-draftsman Adolph Menzel argues from first word to last that he should be considered fully the equal of his glorious French contemporaries, a judgment that no German art historian has ever put forward or, so far as I can tell, actually entertained. (Or anyone else, for that matter.) But it’s the simple truth, and I relished the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make that case in an almost painting-by-painting, drawing-by-drawing campaign of writing that I also understood to

be rigorously historical. In *Menzel's Realism* I try to show, for example, how a seemingly anecdotal item in eighteenth-century dress, Menzel's *Crown Prince Frederick* [the future Frederick the Great] *Pays a Visit to the Painter Pesne on his Scaffold at Rheinsberg* (1861), a small gouache in the Alte Nationalgalerie in Berlin, deserves to be seen as nothing less than a "real allegory" of Menzel's enterprise as a painter, a work that can stand comparison with world-historically famous and of course much larger canvases of roughly the same moment by Courbet and Édouard Manet. Again, I had no sense while doing so that I was forcing language onto an artifact that resisted it—on the contrary, my guiding assumption was that unless someone unpacked in words the fine-grained, light-filled, multizoned, and astonishingly empathic extraordinariness of this peewee masterpiece, its true distinction might go forever unrecognized.

Let me end by invoking Caravaggio's late, possibly his last, canvas, *The Martyrdom of Saint Ursula* (1610). My book *The Moment of Caravaggio* (2010) closes with a brief encounter with this dark, tragic, one might almost say Shakespearean canvas, but my aim in summoning it here from its vault in Naples is not by way of rehearsing my thoughts on the topic. Rather, I want simply to leave us all with a vivid sense of what a high-stakes business it can be even to contemplate coming to grips "descriptively" or otherwise with certain works of art—and yet what choice does one have, when the works in question lie smack in one's path? Or exert their call on one in some other way? High-stakes but far from hopeless, that's my message. And that it is a privilege to live and write in their light.

Notes

The colloquium for which this essay was written, "Art History and the Art of Description," was sponsored by the Mellon Foundation and held at the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University in 2013. The organizer was Jaś Elsner, who asked the speakers to "reflect on their own critical practice as well as to lay out a specific question or set of questions within the general area under discussion." Especially with regard to the first part of his request, I have taken him at his word. I should add that the talk, "Guercino's *Anni Mirabiles*," that I gave at the 2015 "Description Across the Disciplines" symposium, at the Heyman Center for the Humanities at Columbia University, from which this special issue arises, came from a chapter in my book *After Caravaggio*, forthcoming in the summer of 2016 from Yale University Press. With the permission of the symposium organizers, I have therefore substituted the present essay for my contribution to this issue of *Representations*. Throughout the essay I have kept footnotes to a bare minimum, in keeping with its origins as a lecture.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, rev. ed. of the text by Alois Pichler, trans. Peter Winch

- (Malden, MA, 1998), 30e. I have subsequently used this as the epigraph to, and source for, the title of my book *Another Light: Jacques-Louis David to Thomas Demand* (New Haven, 2014).
2. Michael Baxandall, "The Language of Art History," *New Literary History* 10 (Spring 1979): 453–65. Page references to specific citations will be given in parentheses in the text. There is much in Baxandall's essay with which I am in complete agreement, by the way, including his insistence on the validity on the part of an art historian or art critic of seeking to determine an artist's intentions.
 3. Anyone who finds my claim surprising should read Walter Benn Michaels's *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton, 2006) or Stanley Cavell's essay "A Matter of Meaning It," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York, 1969).