

LOOKING AT THE WORLD THROUGH
THE FRAME OF ART

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of
The School of Continuing Studies
and of
The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Liberal Studies

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Washington, D.C.
December 3, 2008

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ABSTRACT

Literary art fiction is a relatively modern phenomenon. What began in the nineteenth century with works by authors, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James have flourished in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with hundreds of novels by writers, such as Tracy Chevalier, Susan Vreeland, and A.S. Byatt. These novels provide a rich and diverse glimpse into a created world where the written word is enhanced by visual imagery. Although the genre of literary art fiction is new, the merging of a fictional narrative with works of real or imagined art is as old as the poetic works of Homer.

Chapter 1 examines how a narrative may be enhanced by incorporating artistic imagery: are the images less or more powerful because they are visualized through the mind rather than seen with the eyes? This chapter also addresses the question, does the best art communicate a *presence* that may uncover aspects of transcendence and, if so, how is that *presence* translated through the written word?

Two classical poets, Ovid and Dante, include works of sculpture in their poetic narratives. Ovid writes about the power of Pygmalion who—through artistic virtuosity and love—imbued his creation with life. In *Canto X* of the *Purgatorio*, Dante creates a

sculpted wall of the “Great Humilities” which inspire the penitent proud to cleanse away their sins. Chapter 2 explores the power of the artist/writer to transcend nature and the natural course of events.

Chapter 3 is an original short story that explores the inner realms of human consciousness. There are two voices (two fonts, one italicized) that denote two states of alienation. The italicized voice speaks of a past: an interpretation of Jackson Pollock’s painting, *The Deep*, and how it may be evocative of his condition of “falling.” The other narration is a modern one in which a woman finds herself cut off from her fellow humans and “falling” due to circumstances in today’s world.

Chaos is the theme of Chapter 4 where a woman remembers childhood dreams of the atomic bomb and the events which brought those dreams about. She finds solace in another painting by Pollock, *Lavender Mist*. Through art, she comes to realize that she was not alone in her fears. There were many artists in the late 1940s and early 1950s who created works that reflected the dark realities of living in the early atomic age of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and World War II.

Literary art fiction is an opportunity to encounter a writer’s way of seeing art—perhaps, engendering a desire to know more. The writer creates and shapes the experience of art for the reader, and in so doing she brings art out of the museum and back into a kind of real world scenario; she is in essence returning art to the origins of its creation—the human realm.

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CHAPTER 1

THE FRAME OF ART

A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

The genre of art fiction has evolved along a rich and diverse timeline that includes writers from classical cultures, among whom are Ovid and Dante, as well as the current age, such as A.S. Byatt and Susan Vreeland. The earliest known example in western civilization in which a work of art is incorporated within a work of fiction is found in Book Eighteen of the *Iliad*. The shield of Achilles is a literary depiction of an imagined work of visual art. Homer's narrative evokes an image that is meant to be an actual and concrete artistic representation. Forged by the god Hephaestus at the request of Achilles' mother, Thetis, the shield becomes a cultural icon and symbol of "the Mycenaean civilization that Achilles sets out to defend" as well as the hero himself who is "metaphorically interchangeable . . . and becomes . . . the shield for the whole Greek world."¹

And first Hephaestus makes a great and massive shield,
blazoning well-wrought emblems all across its surface,
raising a rim around it, glittering, triple-ply
with a silver shield-strap run from edge to edge
and five layers of metal to build the shield itself,
and across its vast expanse with all his craft and cunning
the god creates a world of gorgeous immortal work.²

In the preface to his translation of the *Iliad*, Alexander Pope writes that Homer was so gifted in his narrative that he broke the boundaries between the written word and the visual image. Each character in the *Iliad* “has something so singularly his own, that no painter could have distinguished them more by their features, than the poet has by their manners.”³

The study of the relationship between the written word and the visual image also has evolved along a rich timeline. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato explores the concept of love as a kind of divine madness that leads one to uncovering truth. The topic of love leads Socrates and Phaedrus into a discussion of the art of rhetoric, which in turn leads them into a detailed analysis of the written word: nuances of meaning and how particular words evoke particular images in most men, while other words are more individually interpretive. Socrates states that words such as “iron” or “silver” evoke very similar images in most men; while words such as “just” and “good” are more subjective and will create a variety of images. The student of rhetoric, he says, “. . . ought, in the first place, to make a systematic division of words, and get hold of some mark distinguishing the two kinds of words, those namely in the use of which the multitude are bound to fluctuate, and those in which they are not.”⁴

The goal of the rhetorician is to uncover and reveal the true nature of an object or concept and because he is addressing the soul, he must have a keen understanding of what the soul is. He will “describe the soul very precisely, and let us see whether it is single and uniform in nature or, analogously to the body, complex. For to do that is,

we maintain, to show a thing's nature."⁵ Therefore, Plato writes, the written word is like a work of art. It serves as a reminder of that with which the soul is already acquainted. The writer must select his words carefully, because just as a completed work of visual art may be reinterpreted and analyzed by future generations, it remains silent—having said all its creator had to say within its composition. The writer's creation must also stand on its own merit. It must be written in such a way that pierces into the essence of things already known to the soul; there must be no need for further illumination.

You know, Phaedrus, that's the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter's products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence. It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever.⁶

Modern scholars continue to look at the relationship between visual imagery and the written word. In *Portraits in Fiction*, A.S. Byatt is writing for a twenty-first century audience that has what seems to be a renewed and vigorous interest in art. The century opened with works of art selling at record prices and record numbers of people visiting art museums around the world. To accommodate increased attendance, there was and continues to be an architectural and building boom as museums engage in “a sustained growth spurt the likes of which the art world has never seen.”⁷ Institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Institute

of Contemporary Art in Boston, and the Tate Modern in London are among many that have substantially increased gallery space.

Since its expansion in 2004, MoMA has grown to show 50 percent more works in a building almost twice as big, packed one record day with almost double the visitors. Still not big enough: MoMA has now announced plans to grow again, adding all kinds of new galleries in a 60,000 square-foot space in a development next door.⁸

The Tate Modern in London . . . [is] one of the biggest and most popular art museums on the planet. It drew . . . 4 million people last year—in a space planned for half that many. It is so massive no one had imagined it would ever overflow. But the crowds have led to recently announced enlargement plans: A wild new wing, looking like some kind of crystal dropped from outer space, is due to absorb some of those people.⁹

The increased popularity of art and art galleries and museums may have helped to fuel an explosion of created works of art fiction. There is currently available a plethora of “published books ranging from pseudo biographies to historical fiction to art history mysteries.”¹⁰ A writer who is considering the use of a selected work of art or a specific artist to dramatize her narrative has many literary possibilities.

The range of this new genre—from biography to history to mystery to romance—is tempered by the mode in which art as specific works, as representative of an artist, as an object of theft or political scandal, as a biographical statement or historical event, or merely as a prop incorporated into the storyline of a book.¹¹

A story may “rest on the premise of the significance of a work of art and its ability to entrance a viewer to imagine a world from a painted image.”¹²

In *Portraits*, Byatt explores one segment of the genre. She writes about painted portraits, written portraits, and the blending of the two. A painted portrait, she writes,

is: “. . . an artist’s record, construction, of a physical presence, with a skin of colour, a layer of strokes of the brush, or the point, or the pencil, on a flat surface. A painting exists outside of time and records the time of its making.”¹³

A portrait in a novel is somewhat interpretive; it is a narrative of “invisible things—thought processes, attractions, repulsions, subtle or violent changes in whole lives, or groups of lives.”¹⁴ Although written descriptions may be very precise, each reader will evoke her own specifically nuanced imagery. Byatt states that written images are powerful because they are unseen. “Even the description in visual language of a face or body may depend on being unseen for its force.”¹⁵ Byatt also sees writers as analogous to painters; they, too, engage in a kind of rendering in order to bring life to narration and fictional characters. Quoting Henry James, Byatt writes: “It is here that the novelist competes with his brother the painter in *his* attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meanings, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle.”¹⁶

Byatt cites many examples of writers who have successfully created literary fiction that have incorporated actual works of art. In *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf creates a fictional biography by incorporating the genre of portraiture, which allows her to explore human relationship and passion, and play with the concept of time. In the story, Orlando is repeatedly renewed through mirrored ancestral portraits; he/she actually moves through time. This movement alludes to the timeless quality of actual works of art that move through time virtually unchanged, thus merging an older culture

with an eternally youthful one. There is an implication in this story that as future generations view artistic works from previous eras, the interconnectedness of human consciousness will be experienced.

Virginia Woolf . . . used past portraits in *Orlando*, her fictional portrait, devised as a mock biography, of Vita Sackville-West. The Knole portraits of Vita's Sackville ancestors were used to make up Orlando's first few hundred years as a young man.¹⁷

Transporting a work of portraiture from an earlier age for inclusion in a literary work of a later age may also serve as a harsh reminder of the temporal aspect of human existence. Byatt explores the paradox of portraiture as “representing both life, death and life-in-death, a kind of false eternity”¹⁸ in the *The Wings of the Dove* by Henry James. Milly Theale, a character in the book who knows that she is ill and dying, is shown a portrait of a beautiful woman by the Renaissance artist, Agnolo Bronzino. An admirer and art enthusiast tells her that she resembles the woman in the portrait (another version of the portrait as mirror). When confronted with the painting, she sees life in the beautiful and youthful face in the portrait, but she also sees death—the death of the woman who sat for the portrait and her own impending death. Milly “considers the paradoxical timelessness and deadness of portraits:”¹⁹

. . . she found herself, for the first moment, looking at the mysterious portrait through tears. Perhaps it was her tears that made it just then so strange and fair—as wonderful as he had said: the face of a young woman, all splendidly drawn, down to the hands, and splendidly dressed; a face almost livid in hue, yet handsome in sadness and crowned with a mass of hair, rolled back and high, that must, before fading with time, have had a family resemblance to her own. The lady in question, at all events, with her slightly Michael-angesque sadness, her eyes of other days, her full lips,

her long neck, her recorded jewels, her brocaded and wasted reds, was a very great personage—only unaccompanied by a joy. And she was dead, dead, dead.²⁰

Byatt writes that literary portraits broaden human imagination. She suggests that each reader creates her own visual representation of what is present on the page and in so doing, becomes a creator herself. “Readers will see as many Manets, as many Watts, as many imaginary photographs as there are readers, all connected, all different.”²¹ Writing of her own novel, *Possession*, she states:

Visual images are stronger than verbal half-images, and a good novel exploits the richness of the imprecision, of the hinted. Painting . . . is a materialist art, about the material world. The novel, however it aspires to the specificity of Zola’s naturalism, works inside the head.²²

What is it about the visual image that is so compelling to the human eye and the human heart and psyche? In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes that seeing precedes words. The book—the outgrowth of a BBC series of the same name—is primarily of visual images with a minimalistic text. It is a wide-ranging discussion of the many ways of seeing and a commentary on Berger’s hierarchy of the visual over the written word, with alternating chapters of text with imagery and imagery without text.

Chapters two, four, and six are entirely pictorial, with no text whatsoever. The,

. . . purely pictorial essays (on ways of seeing women and on various contradictory aspects of the tradition of the oil painting) are intended to raise as many questions as the verbal essays. Sometimes in the pictorial essays no information at all is given about the images reproduced because it seemed . . . that such information might distract from the points being made.²³

In many cases, Berger writes, more precisely in areas where words are inadequate, visual imagery allows for a deeper experience of the numinous. Berger writes of the impossibility of finding an effective combination of words to describe a beautiful, yet common, event like the setting sun. There is always a gap, something that is missing when trying to express the true nature of this kind of event.

It is seeing that establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we *see* the sun set. We *know* that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight.²⁴

In our twenty-first century world, we are surrounded by visual imagery of all kinds—whether we intend to experience those images by visiting an art gallery or museum or are going about the routines of our daily lives—and the “way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe.”²⁵ Our emotions and temperament influence how we see: “When in love, the sight of the beloved has a completeness which no words and no embrace can match.”²⁶ The era in which we are living and our cultural conditioning influence how we see: “In the Middle Ages when men believed in the physical existence of Hell the sight of fire must have meant something different from what it means today.”²⁷ When viewing human-made images, a viewer may feel an awareness of the artist behind the work, creating a kind of camaraderie with the artist and a link to the culture in which he lived. This link may be subtle and viewed through an individual’s own particular way of seeing.

An image is a sight which has been recreated or reproduced. It is an appearance, or a set of appearances, which has been detached from the place and time in which it first made its appearance and preserved – for a few moments or a few centuries. Every image embodies a way of seeing. Even a photograph. For photographs are not, as is often assumed, a mechanical record. Every time we look at a photograph, we are aware, however slightly, of the photographer selecting that sight from an infinity of other possible sights. This is true even in the most casual family snapshot. The photographer’s way of seeing is reflected in his choice of subject. The painter’s way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on the canvas or paper. Yet, although every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing.²⁸

Artistic images from the past, Berger writes, are “a direct testimony about the world which surrounded other people at other times,” and because of this, images are “more precise and richer than literature.” The “more imaginative the work the more profoundly it allows us to share in the artist’s experience of the visible.” However, as works of art move forward with the passing of the ages, the way people experience them “is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions”—many of which are no “longer in accord with the world as it is.” According to Berger, many writers and interpreters of artists and/or artistic works have anointed them with a kind of reverence for the past, which obscures and mystifies history, and in so doing skews and obscures the relationship between the past and the present. This, in turn, may cause a work of art to seem unnecessarily remote and alienating to viewers.²⁹

The visual arts have always existed within a certain preserve; originally this preserve was magical or sacred. But it was also physical: it was the place, the cave, the building, in which, or for which, the work was made. The experience of art, which at first was the experience of ritual, was set apart

from the rest of life – precisely in order to be able to exercise power over it. Later the preserve of art became a social one . . . set apart and isolated.³⁰

There is another aspect when viewing images from the past, which forces a kind of estrangement by over-familiarity, or too much seeing. In the current age, duplication and reproduction of artistic works—primarily housed in museums and galleries—and the presence of their reproduced images in publications and throughout the general culture (for example, to promote products or ideas) may have rendered those images as familiar and commonplace as everyday language.

What modern means of reproduction have done is to destroy the authority of art and to remove it – or, rather, to remove its images which they reproduce – from any preserve. For the first time ever, images of art have become ephemeral, ubiquitous, insubstantial, available, valueless, free. They surround us in the same way as a language surrounds us. They have entered the mainstream of life over which they no longer, in themselves, have power.³¹

There are, however, many religious scholars and art historians who believe that even though works of art have become abundant and familiar, they still have the power to convey not only a visual connection to the past, but something of what lies beyond or beneath the actual content or structure of the image presented. When we are standing before an original work of art, for the first time or for one of many times, what occurs? Are we in some way expecting to encounter a *presence*, and if so, what is that *presence*? Although a work of art may remind a viewer of the temporal nature of human existence, it may also allude to the transcendent or non-temporal.

For we move—each—in two worlds: the inward of our own awareness, and an outward of participation in the history of our time and place. The

scientist and historian serve the latter: the world, that is to say, of things “out there,” where people are interchangeable and language serves to communicate information and commands. Creative artists, on the other hand, are mankind’s wakeners to recollection: summoners of our outward mind to conscious contact with ourselves, not as participants in this or that morsel of history, but as spirit, in the consciousness of being. Their task, therefore, is to communicate directly from one inward world to another, in such a way that an actual shock of experience will have been rendered: not a mere statement for the information or persuasion of a brain, but an effective communication across the void of space and time from one center of consciousness to another.³²

Many scholars have contemplated the idea of *presence* in artistic works. Paul Tillich calls it ultimate reality: “something lasting in the flux of transitoriness and finitude.” Everything “that has being is an expression, however preliminary and transitory it may be, of being-itself.” These are philosophical terms, he writes, “. . . but the attitude in which they are originally conceived is universally known. It is the awareness of the deceptive character of the surface of everything we encounter which drives one to discover what is below the surface.”³³

It is in the nature of artists, writers, and scholars to try to communicate aspects of their encounter with what lies beneath the surface of things. For Tillich, there are three ways in which humans have attempted to express that encounter: philosophy, traditional religion, and art. For art, style is an important element and merging style with religious symbology expresses “in a direct way the fundamental relation of man to ultimate reality, and these expressions shine through the artistic images and can be seen in them.”³⁴

If art expresses reality in images and religion expresses ultimate reality in symbols then religious art expresses religious symbols in artistic images (as philosophical concepts). The religious content, namely a particular and direct relation of man to ultimate reality, is first expressed in a religious symbol, and secondly, in the expression of this symbol in artistic images.³⁵

Expression is always an “expression for someone who can receive it . . . for whom it is a manifestation of something hidden. . . .”³⁶ However, religious art is not reserved only for the learned and high-cultural. Much primitive art has an inherent sacramental quality, Tillich writes. He calls it *numinous* realism, a “*realism* that depicts ordinary things, ordinary persons, ordinary events” in a way that “makes them strange, mysterious, [and] laden with ambiguous power.”³⁷ “In the history of religion, almost everything in the encountered world has become a bearer of the holy, a sacramental reality. Not even the lowest and ugliest is excluded from the quality of holiness.”³⁸

Primordial and ancient peoples participated in this fusion of art and ritual to encounter an incarnation of one or many of their spirits or gods. Theirs was an active and deliberate act. In his book, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response*, David Freedberg cites examples of the Nupe people of Nigeria and the ancient Greeks.

The Nupe people created a non-anthropomorphic cylindrical mask that was made of white cloth and wide enough to hold a man. The mask was connected to a twelve foot pole and a designated performer—an initiated member of the society—got inside and “it moved forward at varying speeds, ‘occasionally jumping and running, or inclining the pole this way and that, lifting and lowering it, and making the cloth tube

swing and sway.”³⁹ This living sculpture was used in initiation rituals and to drive away people suspected of being witches. The Nupe people believed that the mask was the embodiment of its spiritual ancestor, *ndako gboya*—not a representation of the spirit but an incarnation of the spirit. “The image, once properly prepared, set up, adorned, and decorated, becomes the locus of the spirit. It becomes what it was taken to represent.”⁴⁰ The,

. . . mask—like so many of the masks used in ritual ceremonies in non-Western cultures—is quite literally animated. Spirit, it may be argued, thus passes into material object only through the mediation of some live performer. But whatever the technicalities of mediation, the fact remains that responses to the mask are predicated on the very conflation of sign and signified . . . and effectiveness in all cases depends on just this conflation. But again the matter is apparently not quite so simple. The image seems to acquire its effectiveness only following some act of consecration or another, which invests the “mere” materiality of the mask or image with powers not attributable to the material itself.⁴¹

The ancient Greeks worshiped black meteoric stones, known as *baitulias*, that fell from heaven and were, therefore, unformed by human hands. The *baitulia* was anointed and smeared with olive oil, which enlivened the spirit within the stone. The Greeks also worshiped archaic wooden images called *bretas*. They imbued the *bretas* with supernatural power by weaving stories around them. One such story of Hera on Samos elucidates the power residing in the image representing the goddess.⁴² The image,

. . . was stolen one day by Tyrrhenian pirates. Unfortunately, their ship refused to move; so the pirates made an offering to the image and abandoned it on the seashore. When the Carians of Samos found it there, they believed that it had run away of its own accord, “automatically”. . . In

order to prevent it from doing so again, they chained it to a tree trunk . . . before finally returning it to be fixed on its pedestal in the temple.⁴³

Painted icons of Christ, Mary, and the Saints, or other Biblical themes imaged in paintings and sculpture are found within the tradition of western Christianity. (“In Eastern Orthodoxy, icons were understood to be windows to the meaning of the event being depicted, not as realistic renderings of persons, places, or events.”⁴⁴) An individual gazing at the created work may be reminded or reacquainted with what she has learned those images signify. When viewing images, such as, the Virgin, the Crucifixion, the Annunciation, or the Assumption, a viewer may undergo a mental transition away from the concrete image to that which the image symbolizes and points toward. Freedberg explores how an individual may encounter an image of the Virgin, how she may suspend notions of temporality, and see the image not as a dead representation but one that is actually present.

Perhaps it will be suggested that a strong or ingrown belief in the powers of the Virgin easily inclines the believer to see her present, disencumbered of everything that makes her dead representation. Perhaps the suggestion will run that one cannot believe that the Virgin is in the picture—or *is* the picture—unless one believes, to begin with, in the Virgin. Then, wanting her to be there, to exist (because of the love we bear her), we willingly concentrate on the image, and what is represented on it becomes present again. She is, quite literally, re-presented. The slip from representation to presentation is crucial.⁴⁵

There is another tradition in which the individual focuses on a created image but rather than be reminded of the meaning of the image, the individual transcends meaning in favor of experience. By linking the gaze to the image that which is *present*

is no longer experienced intellectually but exists outside of the temporal/spatial continuum. That tradition is the long history in western civilization of “image-assisted” meditation, where for “hundreds of years” people “used real images for directly affective purposes.”⁴⁶ Image-assisted meditation, Freedberg writes, was practiced centuries ago by people who had the leisure time for contemplation, and they turned it “into something useful, therapeutic, elevating, consoling, and terrifying.”⁴⁷ The goal of the meditation was to bring the individual into a “state of empathy” with what the image represented, for example, images of Christ and the Virgin.

It is predicated on the view that since our minds are labile, meditation profitably begins in concentration. By concentrating on physical images, the natural inclination of the mind to wander is kept in check, and we ascend with increasing intensity to the spiritual and emotional essence of that which is represented in material form before our eyes—our external eyes and not the eyes of the mind.

In most cases we deal with forms of ascent, from the material to the mental, and then to the spiritual; from the gross circumscribed object to that which is uncircumscribable.⁴⁸

There is another way of meditating where one does not focus on an actual created image; the meditator concentrates on images that have been memorized. In this tradition, the meditator forms a kinship with the painter and becomes an image-maker/creator within his own interior space. In the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola meditation is on a “parallel with actual image making.”⁴⁹ The “importance of the Ignatian method,” Freedberg writes, “lies in its unremitting emphasis on making every possible focus of meditation—even invisible things and

abstract notions—palpably pictorial.”⁵⁰ The creative experience is taken a step further when the meditator forms a direct kinship with Christ.

He who meditates must depict mental scenes in the same way the painter depicts real ones. And then this parallel is taken one stage further. The meditator imitates Christ (for example) just as the painter does his model; and he does so precisely because Christ is made Man, like ourselves . . . the mystery of the Incarnation has clear implications for what by its very nature transcends the realm of the everyday, the accessible, and what is capable of being represented by gross materiality.⁵¹

Presence in figurative images—whether actual works or creations in the mind through meditation—has a directness that may not be true of non-figurative and/or non-intentionally religious works. Is *presence* limited to directly religious imagery or can there be *presence* in works of art that do not depict religious themes—that are completely void of the pictorial? Can there be a “quest for the unrecognizable sacred?”⁵²

Mircea Eliade writes that from the time when Nietzsche declared the “death of God” it has become impossible for an artist to express “a religious experience in traditional religious language.”⁵³ However, he states, although artists can no longer use traditional religious themes and imagery to invoke sacredness in artistic works, it does not mean that it is absent.

It is evident that, for more than a century, the West has not been creating a “religious art” in the traditional sense of the term, that is to say, an art reflecting “classic” religious conceptions. In other words, artists are no longer willing to worship “idols”; they are no longer interested in traditional religious imagery and symbolism.

This is not to say that the “sacred” has completely disappeared in modern art. But it has become *unrecognizable*; it is camouflaged in forms, purposes and meanings which are apparently “profane.” The sacred is not *obvious*, as it was for example in the art of the Middle Ages. One does not recognize it *immediately* and *easily*, because it is no longer expressed in a conventional religious language.⁵⁴

Eliade writes that modern humanity may have forgotten “religion, but the sacred survives, buried in his unconscious.”⁵⁵ The artist may not specifically set out to depict the sacred but by his very nature and his own quest for knowing, he digs deeply into his unconscious and in so doing brings forth images that uncover “ultimate structures”—at times creating a link to the artist’s, and all of humankind’s, primordial past.

Without telling us, perhaps without knowing it, the artist penetrates—at times dangerously—into the depths of the world and his own psyche. From cubism to tachism, we are witnessing a desperate effort on the part of the artist to free himself of the “surface” of things and to penetrate into matter in order to lay bare its ultimate structures. To abolish form and volume, to descend into the interior of substance while revealing its secret or larval modalities—these are not, according to the artist operations undertaken for the purpose of some sort of objective knowledge; they are ventures provoked by his desire to grasp the deepest meaning of his plastic universe.

In certain instances, the artist’s approach to his material recovers and recapitulates a religiosity of an extremely archaic variety that disappeared from the Western world thousands of years ago. Such, for example, is Brancusi’s attitude towards stone, an attitude comparable to the solicitude, the fear, and the veneration addressed by a neolithic man towards certain stones that constituted hierophanies—that is to say, that revealed simultaneously the sacred and ultimate, irreducible reality.⁵⁶

This kinship with primordial peoples transcends the long-held western scientific view of matter as objective to that of matter as vessels of sacred *presences*.

The contemporary artist seems to be going beyond his objectivizing scientific perspective. Nothing could convince Brancusi that a rock was only a fragment of inert matter; like his Carpathian ancestors, like all neolithic men, he sensed a presence in the rock, a power, an “intention” that one can only call “sacred.”⁵⁷

Modern art movements also reveal that kinship with primordial and primitive artists. “Abstract Expressionism was America’s . . . great spiritual movement as it expressed itself in art. It aimed to transcend the visible and reach the visionary, to make the unseeable seen, to paint the unpaintable and the so-far unpainted.”⁵⁸ Abstract Expressionist painters sought to go beyond the surface to uncover “the authentic, to paint the forces of the unconscious and at the same time . . . give full presence to the nature of paint. . . .”⁵⁹ The absence of mythic symbols—or the literal death of mythology (perhaps due to the existential realities of the post-war twentieth century)—required them to find a new way of artistic expression. They were living and creating in a fragmented world. In a letter to the *New York Times* in 1943, Marc Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote of a kinship with the “art of primitive man.”

If we profess kinship to the art of primitive man, it is because the feelings they expressed have a particular pertinence today. In times of violence, personal predilections for niceties of color and form seem irrelevant. All primitive expression reveals the constant awareness of powerful forces, the immediate presence of terror and fear, a recognition of the brutality of the natural world as well as the insecurities of life. That these feelings are being experienced by many people throughout the world today is an unfortunate fact and to us an art that glosses over or evades these feelings is superficial and meaningless.⁶⁰

While engaged in the creative process, the Abstract Expressionist painter sought to open his senses in the hope of breaking through to an encounter with his unconscious.

His artistic creation was then the subjective result of that encounter—a work of art that would “communicate emotion, not story.” Art “which could bypass the control of the conscious mind and tap into this realm would have the potential to communicate directly with the viewer’s . . . unconscious.”⁶¹ Rothko writes of the importance of something as abstract as light when an artist moves out of the field of traditional mythic symbolism.

And in this endeavor light is the binder, for by its means he can not only make the appearances that stimulate him to participate in a general category of visual observation, but he can find within that category the means to symbolize his feelings about these appearances. For light makes it possible to substitute for the directness of the mythologist’s sensuality a new factor that we can call *emotionality*.⁶²

A spectator once referred to a roomful of Rothko’s work as “Doorways to hell.” Others have called them “walls of light,” and still others have said they are iconic and mood-evoking. Elaine de Kooning writes that Rothko’s paintings are “reduced to about as close to nothing as a painting can be and still exist,” and they “have a remarkable range of expression in mood.”⁶³ For Rothko, emotion and mood replaced mythological imagery. The artist, he said, “must enlarge the implications of his impression in the world of appearance. He must enlarge them until they enter the relevance of the human world of sensuality.”⁶⁴

I exclude no emotion from being actual and therefore pertinent . . . I take the liberty to play on any string of my existence. I might, as an artist be lyrical, grim, maudlin, humorous, tragic. I allow myself all possible latitude. Everything is grist for the mill.⁶⁵

Rothko's rectangular works are usually rendered in two or three colors with tonal variations within color fields. Inside the rectangular structure of the canvases are inner rectangles stacked vertically. Many of these works are from the spectrum of warm colors—reds, oranges, and yellows—often with a field of luminous white floating above or as the under-paint on which the other colors are arranged—affecting an atmosphere of light glowing from beneath. The “whites which Rothko had made into a material thing, having the weight and value of color, were to serve as metaphors for the passing beyond the thing, but they were also the thing.”⁶⁶

There are often horizontal lines either painted in or implied in the space separating the inner rectangles. All of the borders are hazy, and the color from one shape merges into the color of the borders around it so that the boundaries are loose and unfixed—creating a kind of shimmer or inner radiance. The paintings evoke a sense of evanescence or suggest that they are floating in a misty otherworldly environment that transcends gravity.

They float . . . but in an equilibrium established by near-horizontal balances, and in the apparitional bar—Rothko's familiar reflex to invoke other worlds. The *aura* . . . makes its appearance. Boldly he announces his ambiguities. In what he called his “multiform” paintings, reds are moving both inward and to the surface without visible boundaries, and they are nimbused with a pinkish glow, or sent floating behind a rough rectangle of blue. Shapes that are deliberately divested of boundaries, or are pale specters of rectangles, are posited in order to speak of verticality, or of the masking of space by means of light.⁶⁷

Some art historians have stated that the contemplative power of Rothko's huge paintings (some over nine feet tall) are reminiscent of the pictorial tradition of

Byzantine iconography. The paintings sit “quietly on the walls, calm, simple, glowing objects of contemplation possessed of the emotional power and impassive authority for the authentic icon.”⁶⁸

The darkness of the chapel paintings marks a powerful watershed in Rothko’s thinking. In painting them, he stretched himself—both physically and mentally—to the limit. In this ensemble he posed for himself questions (how to coerce the spectator while insisting on his/her freedom?) and issues (when does faith end and the void begin?) that typically superimposed formal ingenuities and philosophical yearnings. In doing so, he chose a future that he followed almost to the end. From the twilight of the Rothko Chapel, viewers emerge with different readings of their emotions. But all seem to have a sense of an important transaction, a communication—or communion—that has placed them in touch with large verities.⁶⁹

Rothko called his paintings *presences*. They hang in silent homage to one human’s ability to transcend the boundaries of individual consciousness and to take his place among the great artists of the past who painted or sculpted sacred images that continue to be alive today with meaning and *presence*. His imagery is of a kind that does not overtly illustrate meaning—passing over the pictorial in favor of a kind of pure cognition of the senses. Standing before one of Rothko’s darker paintings a viewer might sense that plum, or purple, is the color of twilight—that subtle mixture of color and light just prior to the death of the sun. On rare summer evenings, as the sun is setting, the sky may be cast (or even seemingly painted) in multi-shades of purple. Dark purple is also the color of dusk—when the sun is below the horizon, but it is not yet completely dark. The subtle luminosity of plum or dark purple could then be symbolic of that space that is neither dark nor light—a break in the temporal—a portal

or threshold through which one's spirit might enter. Rothko's re-imagined and re-presented non-imagery is a subtle return to one of the most constant and enduring of mythic symbols. His non-figural images may act as a mode of linking consciousness to consciousness and from there into the radiance of the non-temporal inner realms.

Thus at the threshold of the passage from time to eternity, which is in fact the plane of reference of the metaphors of myth . . . is to lose oneself, together with the world, in transcendence, following to the end the metaphysical connotations of the icons of devotion, disengaging altogether from their psychological hold, to the loss of the psyche itself; . . . For, as threshold figures, these are of the two worlds at once: temporal in the human appeal of their pictured denotations, while by connotation opening to eternity.⁷⁰

Is it possible for a work of art to maintain its link with the eternal when it becomes part of a fictional narrative and when its power is no longer directly visual but is in a way subsumed by language? Can *presence* translate from the actual to the described? Good literary art fiction is the blending of the temporal and the non-temporal. "Language unfolds in temporal succession; images reside in a realm of timeless spatiality and simultaneity."⁷¹ When a created work of art, an artist, or an imaginary work of art is wedded to a fictional narrative that narrative is enhanced with what may be called an additional prop, where the writer evokes two ways of seeing: the imaginative and the figurative. A story is a product of the writer's imagination and the narrative may suggest images to the reader, but they are subjective and not fixed. A narrative that incorporates an aspect of a real or imagined work of art and/or details of an artist's life adds an objective element to the narration. The writer "notionally

climbs into the painting and takes an extended walk through the scene”⁷² and in a way frames that experience for the reader. By framing that encounter, the writer calls up four moments in time: the time and culture in which the work of art was created; the time and culture in which the narrative is set; and the time and culture in which the author writes the story and the reader encounters the story.

“If we are to speak of painting, if we are to give speech to its mute language through the translation of description, we must make use of figures of speech that animate the figures of painting.”⁷³ It falls on the writer to bring the work to life, to include or withhold information, and to decide what and how much description and interpretation she will include insofar as it is necessary for the content of her story. A writer may select a work of art that is from a past era, thereby, transporting a reader into a world of the past. There may be gaps in what is known about the artist and his life, and that part of the story may be a compilation of actual biography, culture, and history with fictional interpretations of what is missing and unknown of the artist and how he fit into his culture.

Girl with a Pearl Earring by Tracy Chevalier is a fictional account of two years in the life of the girl in a portrait of the same name by Johannes Vermeer. Griet, is sent from her home to work as a maid for the Vermeer family after her father is blinded and can no longer provide income for his family. Chevalier’s story is primarily Griet’s first person narrative of her two years in the Vermeer household—what it was like to be a sixteen-year-old girl in seventeenth century Delft culture at a time that offered little in

the way of kindness and mercy for one of her class. It is also a story of a girl who, as a Protestant, was deprived of the beauty and presence of created imagery. With the rise of Calvinism in the late sixteenth century, the two main churches of Delft and its convents and monasteries were stripped of all “idolatrous imagery.”

Both the Old Church and the New Church were stripped of what was left of their “pagan” decoration. Clear-glass windows, which let in enough light for the faithful to follow the divine service in their prayer books, were set in the spaces that had once been adorned with grandiose compositions of colored glass. Ecclesiastic patronage for works of art virtually ceased. Henceforth, the painters and the other members of the Guild of St. Luke relied almost exclusively on a private clientele.⁷⁴

Chevalier’s approach to her story is to incorporate facts actually known about Vermeer and Delft culture and to weave those facts into a story about the *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. Chevalier explores the theme of art as an instrument of mental arrest, where an individual gives over “the whole force of [her] spirit to the act of perceiving.”⁷⁵ As a young and seemingly illiterate sixteen-year-old girl, Griet is caught by the power of visual images and the mysterious techniques of their creator.

The reader comes to know a rather silent Vermeer whose passion is painting. Little is known of his life, particularly his early life and what inspired him to become an artist. Chevalier’s use of his silence is an effective method for maintaining a kind of artistic mystery by not inventing a false persona for him. It is through Griet’s voice that Vermeer’s paintings are brought to life. The reader, as the recipient of Griet’s narrative also may become infected with the same sense of awe that has infected

Griet—an experience that for her is so compelling it transcends temporal concerns of class, culture, and issues of personal safety.

One of Griet's tasks was to clean Vermeer's studio. Cleaning his studio for the first time, she sensed that she was entering a space that was unlike any that she had ever known, and it became for her a kind of temporary sanctuary. She was captivated by all of the various aspects of painting: the partially completed painting upon the easel; the order in which background items and props were placed upon a table or wall; the color and shape of garments and jewelry adorning the sitter; how light filtered through the windows; and most of all, paint itself. As she became more comfortable within the space, she began to contemplate the created image on the easel—becoming a witness to its gradually changing contours.

Griet was allowed to visit her family on Sundays and her parents, particularly her blind father, were eager to hear news about Vermeer, his household, and his paintings. Griet is in a way functioning as a student of art, and she passes on what she has seen and learned to her father—and to the readers of the novel. On one visit home, Griet's father asks her to describe the painting that Vermeer was currently working on.

“Now, Griet,” he said, “tell me about your new master. You hardly said a word about him.”

“I haven't seen much of him,” I replied truthfully. “He is either in his studio, where no one is to disturb him, or he is out.”

“Taking care of Guild business, I expect, But you have been in his studio—you told us about the cleaning and the measurements, but nothing about the painting he is working on. Describe it to me.”

“I don't know if I can in such a way that you will be able to see it.”

“Try. I have little to think of now except for memories. It will give me pleasure to imagine a painting by a master, even if my mind creates only a poor imitation.”

So I tried to describe the woman tying pearls around her neck, her hands suspended, gazing at herself in the mirror, the light from the window bathing her face and her yellow mantle, the dark foreground that separated her from us.

My father listened intently, but his own face was not illuminated until I said, “The light on the back wall is so warm that looking at it feels the way the sun feels on your face.”

He nodded and smiled, pleased now that he understood.

“This is what you like best about your new life,” he said presently. “Being in the studio.”

The only thing, I thought, but did not say.⁷⁶

On another visit home and after Griet described a painting to her father, her mother was disturbed by the effect that the paintings were having on her. She sensed that Griet was displaying an anti-Protestant intensity towards the created image. She accused Griet of describing the paintings in religious terms and in response to the discomfort she felt, Griet’s mother said that Vermeer’s paintings were not good for the soul.

“What do you mean, Mother?” I asked . . .

“There is something dangerous about your description of his paintings,” she explained. “From the way you talk they could be of religious scenes.”⁷⁷

Stung by her mother’s words Griet asks Vermeer if his paintings are Catholic paintings. Chevalier creates a conversation between the two in which Griet tells Vermeer that although she has never been inside of a Catholic church, she thinks what she sees in his paintings would be very much like the images inside the church. Griet is trying to sort out her response to the paintings in light of her culture’s prejudice

against idolatrous imagery and its narrow definition of what God is. Her response to the content of Vermeer's paintings has unsettled her. "Even though they are not scenes from the Bible, or the Virgin and Child, or the Crucifixion,"⁷⁸ there is some compelling aspect that she equates with religion or a religious experience and within her Protestant culture that is dangerous. Vermeer tells Griet that painting does not have to be thought of as idolatrous; images of ordinary things celebrate God.

"There is a difference between Catholic and Protestant attitudes to painting," he explained as he worked, "but it is not necessarily as great as you may think. Paintings may serve a spiritual purpose for Catholics, but remember too that Protestants see God everywhere, in everything. By painting everyday things—tables and chairs, bowls and pitchers, soldiers and maids—are they not celebrating God's creation as well?"

I wished my mother could hear him. He would have made even her understand.⁷⁹

Vermeer is portrayed as an already famous painter and a respected member of the Guild of St. Luke. Griet and her father had respect and reverence for his work even before Griet entered his service. In another conversation, Griet's father reminds her that Vermeer is the artist who painted a picture that hung in the Town Hall, a painting where the "the sky took up so much of the painting, and the sunlight"⁸⁰ was cast upon the buildings. Griet remembers that she "had stood at that very spot many times and never seen Delft the way the painter had."⁸¹

Girl with a Pearl Earring is the story of an awakening to the power of the created image, but its credibility rests on the power of words. The inter-twining or intermingling of image and word adds a learning dimension, a factual dimension and,

perhaps, it engenders a desire to know more about Vermeer and his artistic works and to see for oneself the importance that light plays in his paintings. Does it really seem to be a divine expression?

Reading is an interior exercise where images, if they arise, are personal and individualized. Adding a real or imagined work of art to a fictional narrative changes that experience by adding a fixed image that when encountered is less subjective and more tangible. The reader becomes an active spectator who steps into the story with the author; art serves as a common thread around which they encounter the story together. It provides a resting place, a place of stillness and contemplation between two worlds: the world of the concerns of everyday life and the world of the psyche. The writer creates and shapes the experience of art for the reader, and in so doing she brings art out of the museum and back into a kind of real world scenario with people, activities, passions, and experiences from actual life. She is in essence returning art to the origin of its creation—the human realm.

CHAPTER 2

TWO CLASSICAL CULTURES MEET THROUGH ART

Perdita. *For I have heard it said
There is an art which in their piedness shares
with great creating nature.*

Polixenes. *Say there be;
Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean. So, over that art
Which you say adds to nature, is an art
That nature makes ...*

*This is an art
Which does mend nature, change it rather, but
The art itself is nature.*

Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*

“The peculiarity of sculpture as an art is that it creates a three-dimensional object *in space*. Painting may strive to give, on a two-dimensional plane, the illusion of space, but it is space itself as a perceived quantity that becomes the particular concern of the sculptor.”¹ Sculpture, particularly freestanding sculpture, inhabits the same temporal space as the perceiving individual, and there is a sense of likeness and/or connection. Two-dimensional art forms exist in space; however, they are initially encountered through the eyes. The visual then impacts upon the senses and the mind. Although sculpture, too, is encountered through the eyes, there is an intuitive dimension that is familiar to the human psyche in a primordial way. Immanuel Kant writes that space is a pure form of sensible intuition serving as *a priori* knowledge.²

Space is nothing but the form of all appearances of outer sense. It is the subjective condition of sensibility, under which alone outer intuition is possible for us. Since, then, the receptivity of the subject, its capacity to be

affected by objects, must necessarily precede all intuitions of these objects, it can readily be understood how the form of all appearances can be given prior to all actual perceptions, and so exist in the mind *a priori*, and how, as pure intuition, in which all objects must be determined, it can contain, prior to all experience, principles which determine the relations of these objects.³

A work of sculpture evokes another of the senses that brings the viewer into a kind of harmony with the creator; it may arouse the desire to touch. If the individual cannot actually touch a piece of sculpture, he or she can imagine how it might feel to the touch. “For the sculptor, tactile values are not an illusion to be created on a two-dimensional plane; they constitute a reality to be conveyed directly, as existent mass. Sculpture is an art of palpation—an art that gives satisfaction in the touching and handling of objects.”⁴ As a sculptor works within his particular medium—stone, marble, wood, clay, or other raw un-worked material, by either taking away or adding to—his hands move over the work, touching it, feeling it, and smoothing it. Touch is an essential aspect of his creative process. One could say that he caresses raw material into being.

Ovid's Pygmalion

Pygmalion is one of the many myths of transformation and change in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. There is cosmological change; the sudden change brought about by human interaction with a god; the changing relationships between the gods, humans, and animals; and historical change. Metamorphosis operates on many levels: it is the foundational structure of the poem, the instrument of first causes, and the process that illuminates time's movement. In the opening *Proem*, Ovid announces to the reader:

My mind leads me to speak now of forms changed
into new bodies: O gods above, inspire
this undertaking . . .
and guide my poem in its epic sweep
from the world's beginning to the present day.⁵

Metamorphosis began with the creation of the world, the “emergence of [the] universe from primeval chaos . . . the passage of the human race through the changes from Golden through Silver and Bronze ages to the Age of Iron,”⁶ and ended with an ordered Roman society and the apotheosis of Julius Caesar, who was deified not “by way of his own remarkable success in war and peace,” nor his triumphant battles or service to his country, but “rather by his offspring,”⁷ Augustus.

Ovid wrote for a culture that was undergoing transformation. After Rome conquered the Greek East in the second century B.C., Roman society had become strongly influenced by Hellenistic culture. When the Republic collapsed after “civil war, first between Julius Caesar and Pompey, then between Octavian and Marc Antony,”⁸ society was in turmoil. “In the turbulent upheaval of several generations not only was the Republic lost, but to a great extent Rome’s cultural identity.”⁹ As Augustus gained power and solidified control over Rome in 31 B.C., he sought to recreate a culture worthy of imperial status, and he strove to ensure that Roman tradition would triumph.

He dammed up the flood of Hellenistic influence, and opened every gate which would admit the Roman genius and its accumulated experience. He rebuilt temples, he restored standards in morals and conduct, he set a new fashion of work and devotion to duty. He left his mark on every branch of administration; his praise encouraged poets and historians to spread abroad

the old Roman ideals and pride in them . . . He called himself *Princeps* or 'first citizen', and *Pater Patriae*, 'father of his country.'¹⁰

Art and architecture were the foundation for Augustus' program to heal Roman society. "The principal themes were renewal of religion and custom, *virtus*, and the honor of the Roman people."¹¹ His program was centered on the rebirth of the visual image; Augustus led and the citizenry followed.

Never before had a new ruler implemented such a far-reaching cultural program, so effectively embodied in visual imagery; and it has seldom happened since. A completely new pictorial vocabulary was created in the course of the next twenty years. This meant a change not only in political imagery in the narrow sense, but in the whole outward appearance of the city of Rome, in interior decoration and furniture, even in clothing. It is astonishing how every kind of visual communication came to reflect the new order, how every theme and slogan became interwoven . . . much happened as if of its own accord.¹²

Augustus' accent on religious revival set in motion a vast restoration of ruined temples and a "program of temple building, carried out over a period of forty years."¹³ Renovated and newly built temples created areas for other art forms: ornamentation for building façades and interior spaces, reliefs, and sculpture. Honorary statues of Augustus were erected all over Rome along with statues of Apollo, Mercury, Diana, Vulcan, Minerva, Venus, and other gods. These statues not only adorned temples but became associated with secular festivals as well. The accent on sculpture was less a celebration of individual artistic achievement than a reflection of the glory of the Augustan Republic.

After ten years of religious and moral renewal, the festivals and sacrifices, buildings and images, now visible everywhere in Rome, began to take

effect. Confidence in the ability of the restored Republic to stand firm and faith in its leader grew apace.¹⁴

The *Metamorphoses* is the mythological and literary embodiment of that transformation. Its basic structure is Greek—Ovid wrote in the style of Homer. In the first thirteen books, Ovid calls upon the pantheon of Greek gods, renaming them and retelling their stories with his own distinctly Roman accent and interpretation. In Book Fourteen the focus moves to Troy, Aeneas, and Aeneas' journey to Italy for the founding of Rome—calling up Virgil's *Aeneid* as the turning point away from the Greek and toward the Roman. The unity that holds the entire poem together is the skill with which Ovid's poetic virtuosity enlivens the continuous and multi-layered theme of metamorphosis. He created a work of literature that was reflective of Augustus' dream of transforming Roman culture from one of chaos and upheaval to one of relative peace and prosperity. His storyline unfolds from a mythological past influenced by the Greeks, through the founding of Rome, to the Augustan present.

Pygmalion follows the story of the Propoetides women. "Pygmalion, who out of stone creates a living woman, is juxtaposed with the Propoetides, women who become stone: one is the inversion of the other."¹⁵ The Propoetides women refused to acknowledge the divinity of Venus, so she punished them by turning them into prostitutes: making "them the first, it is said, to sell their bodies."¹⁶ Living as prostitutes the Propoetides women lost their sense of innocence and shame and as their natures hardened, so began a hardening of the skin:

. . . as their shame ceased, and they lost the power of blushing,
they turned into stones—a very small difference really.¹⁷

Harshness of character is equated with the hardness of stone. In this story, stone is the outcome of a hardened and unvirtuous nature.

Pygmalion is portrayed as a pious, solitary, and virtuous man. (Perhaps this is one of Ovid's wicked parodies;¹⁸ a commentary on Augustus' strong accent on morality as the basis for the cultural renewal of Roman society.) On the other hand, he judged the Propoetides women as living "lives of sordid indecency" and disappointed in

. . . the numerous defects
of character Nature had given the female spirit,
stayed as a bachelor, having no female companion.¹⁹

Instead of the companionship of a human woman, Pygmalion created a woman made of ivory, more beautiful than any living woman, pristine and incorruptible.

Upon completing his sculpture, Pygmalion "promptly conceived a passion for his own creation"²⁰—falling deeply in love with it. He would lovingly gaze upon his statue burning with love and desire for "what was in likeness a body."²¹ Confused, not knowing for certain if his sculpture was indeed a statue or living flesh, he would often stretch

. . . forth a hand to touch his creation,
attempting to settle the issue: *was* it a body,
or was it—this he would not yet concede—a mere statue?²²

What is a reader to make of a story where it is suggested that a completed work of art can be so compelling to its creator that it transcends the boundaries of logic and reality? What is Ovid saying about the artist and his creation?

Throughout the entire poem the consequence of metamorphosis is a “kind of art . . . metamorphosis results in a form—a bird, a tree, a stone—which share the essential properties of a work of art.”²³ One way to interpret the poem is to look at it as a study of whether or not a work of art may transcend nature. That question is thoroughly explored in *Pygmalion*. The artist creates a sculpture that is so beautiful it has the appearance of nature but then transcends the natural course of existence when it is literally brought to life through human desire. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid is in a sense bringing life to the Augustan dream with his own powers of transformation—transforming words, ideas, and images into a living epic that was not only relevant for his time, but for all time since.

Pygmalion’s story is found in *Book Ten: The Songs of Orpheus*. Orpheus is often characterized as the son of Apollo and the muse, Calliope. He is the embodiment of artistic expression at its finest and most enthralling; his music tames nature and moves the Furies to weeping. He is the “lover who harrowed hell to win back his beloved . . . the minstrel whose sweet music enchanted all nature” and priest whose name “is regularly linked in antiquity with mystery religion and special illumination, with initiation into knowledge of the secret workings of the universe.”²⁴ Ovid would have

assumed that his audience was familiar with not only Greek versions of the Orpheus myth but also the versions of Horace and Virgil.

Orpheus and Pygmalion are both men deeply altered by love. Each for his own reason has rejected women—Orpheus after his second loss of Eurydice and Pygmalion because of his pious nature. Both men are given the power to regenerate or create life. When Orpheus plays his sweet music to gain the release of Eurydice from Hades, his music is so beautiful and rhapsodic he could not be denied his request.

Then for the first time ever, overcome
by the effects of song, the Furies wept,
nor could Persephone reject his prayer,
nor he who rules the underworld deny him.²⁵

A key element in Book Ten is the power of art to transcend nonexistence—to overcome the death of Eurydice and the un-aliveness of Pygmalion's sculpture.

Ovid portrays Pygmalion as a man overtaken by desire and lust, but it is possible to view his passion as a kind of confused disorientation brought about by the beauty of art. By placing his story within the larger context of the book of Orpheus, Ovid is calling the reader's attention not only to the beauty of art but to the artist—and the artist behind the artist. Ovid is the real artist behind Pygmalion, Orpheus, and all the other characters and events in the poem; it is his skill that brings them to life. He has elevated the artist, whether musician, sculptor, or poet to the highest realm—that which is beyond logic and rationality. Pygmalion is an important element of the *Metamorphoses* because “here by double argument the poet demonstrates most vividly

the power of the artist and his art.”²⁶ Ovid made him the “exemplar of the artist’s power,”²⁷ and “only one artist may be held to rank above Pygmalion, and that is . . . Ovid himself.”²⁸ At the end of the *Metamorphoses* Ovid writes:

My work is finished now: no wrath of Jove
nor sword nor fire nor futurity
is capable of laying waste to it.
Let that day come then, when it wishes to,
which only has my body in its power,
and put an end to my uncertain years;
no matter, for in spirit I will be
borne up to soar beyond the distant stars,
immortal in the name I leave behind;
wherever Roman governance extends
over the subject nations of the world,
my words will be upon the people’s lips,
and if there is truth in poets’ prophesies,
then in my fame forever I will live.²⁹

There are many ways to interpret Pygmalion’s uncontrolled and overzealous attentions to his statue. One interpretation may be to view them as a kind of ritual. His statue was more beautiful than any living woman and linked to Venus by association; therefore, she can be linked to the notion of divinity. In many ancient and primeval cultures, sculpted images representing deities were ritually *brought to life*. Freedberg writes: “When we survey the history of images, we survey the history of consecration.”³⁰ The rites of consecration transform the way an image is perceived. Consecration rites include: anointing, washing, sprinkling of holy water, arraying with fine linen, and occasionally, adorning.³¹ In ancient Egypt, Babylonia, Sumer, and Assyria, consecration rites were,

. . . both a rite of completion and of inauguration; it marks, essentially, the transition from inanimate manmade object to one imbued with life . . . It transforms the manmade image into a sacred one, and invites the divinity to reside in it.³²

There is another act of consecration beyond anointing and adornment, which involves the opening, or activating, of the eyes. Freedberg writes of the Theravada Buddhists of Ceylon whose “eye-ceremony” is the last stage of bringing a statue to life. The statue is not accorded respect until the eyes are painted in;

. . . the most striking illustration of the relation between consecration and animation is provided by the rites which involve the opening of the eyes. The best and most fully documented example may well be the *netra pinkama* (“eye-ceremony”) of the Theravada Buddhists of Ceylon, where the eyes of the all but completed statue of Buddha are at last painted in, the very act by which it is brought to life.³³

The last stage in the transformation of the Pygmalion’s statue to a living woman was when she “opened her eyes to the sunlight, and at the same time, first looked on her lover and heaven!”³⁴

It is one of the most dramatic of these many instances from the Chinese painters to Pygmalion where the finishing touches on an image are somehow believed to bring it to life; it makes plain the importance of the eyes in this respect; and it trenchantly illustrates the possibility of contagion, the ultimate consequence of the power that results from the investiture of an image with life.³⁵

It is true that Venus played a role in bringing Pygmalion’s sculpture to life. He visited her altar and prayed for her assistance; however, the statue was not infused with warmth until he began to caress her. Venus’ role was to open the passageway to

heaven, which allowed for the possibility of a transformation. However, life was brought about by the human touch of the artist.

Pygmalion stood by and offered this fainthearted prayer:
'If you in heaven are able to give us whatever
we ask for, then I would like as my wife—' and not daring
to say, '—my ivory maiden,' said '—one like my statue!
Since golden Venus was present there at her altar,
she knew what he wanted to ask for, and as a good omen,
three times the flames soared and leapt right up to the heavens.'³⁶

Joseph Campbell writes that mythology is the song of the universe. It is written in and for the local—Ovid was writing for the Roman people and Augustus—but even though mythology speaks to the local, it has aspects of universality. Through the inclusion of symbol and metaphor mythology may uncover universal aspects of existence—what it means not only to be a human being in Rome during Ovid's time, but what it means to be a human being outside of any particular setting and beyond any temporal inflection, opening human consciousness to aspects of being itself.

The life of a mythology derives from the vitality of its symbols as metaphors delivering, not simply the idea, but a sense of actual participation in such a realization of transcendence, infinity, and abundance . . . the first and most essential service of a mythology is this one, of opening the mind and heart to the utter wonder of all being. And the second service, then, is cosmological: of representing the universe and whole spectacle of nature, both as known to the mind and as beheld by the eye, as an epiphany of such kind that when lightning flashes, or a setting sun ignites the sky, or a deer is seen standing alerted, the exclamation "Ah!" may be uttered as a recognition of divinity.³⁷

"It is the artist who brings the images of mythology to manifestation, and without images (whether mental or visual) there is no mythology."³⁸ Orpheus, a symbol of the

artist as the revealer of mystery, sings out the story of Pygmalion. It is through music as sound—that ethereal medium that exists in a realm of space that is non-visual and not susceptible to physical form, and in a way transcendent within itself—that Ovid tells the story of Pygmalion. He is calling upon the numinous to bring forth his portrait of an artist—one who creates a work of art that is so glorious it defies nature.

Ovid created a work of sculpture with words that only can be imagined—pictured and perceived through the mind. There have been many painters and sculptors who have created their own versions of what Pygmalion’s statue may have looked like, but Ovid’s image was created and brought to life with words. The image that he called up was written in such a way that it *was* brought to life: you can sense the beauty of Pygmalion’s statue, his yearning, and his joy.

Amazed, he rejoices, then doubts, then fears he’s mistaken,
while again and again he touches on what he has prayed for.
She is alive!³⁹

The *a priori* knowledge that allows an intuitive relationship to exist between a work of sculpture and an individual viewer who share *space* may be present in an encounter with words. In consort, the poet, his words, and the images he creates pierce through the temporal inflection directly into the invisible spaces where human consciousness resides. The artist (Ovid/Pygmalion) and the mystic (Orpheus) share a reality. “It is of their own inmost truth brought to consciousness: by the mystic, in direct confrontation, and by the artist, through reflection in the masterworks of his art”⁴⁰

Ovid was boastful but he was correct; his work has lived throughout the centuries and even beyond the areas of “Roman governance” he imagined. Ovid discourses on the poet’s skill in another story in the *Metamorphoses*, Arachne’s tale, where he employs weaving as a metaphor for skillfully creating poetic narrative. The art of the weaver and the art of the poet are intertwined. Ovid was a powerful literary figure for many writers who came after him. Other poets, such as the Latin poets of the fourth and sixth centuries, Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare all contributed to Ovid’s longevity (and his evolution into modern times) by weaving their own narratives, retelling Ovid’s stories within the context of their own created works—made possible by the ease with which Ovid’s pagan writings were adaptable to Christian themes. However, Ovid’s themes are universal themes that go beyond the pagan or the Christian. The *Metamorphoses* was a treasure trove for painters and sculptors; Ovid was an important figure for artists and writers in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. His poetry is born of a very human consciousness, important to and for his own culture but also alive with those aspects of the human condition that easily move from century to century, out of one culture and into another, to be brought to life again and again.

For poetry was written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down . . . the world seems always waiting for its poet.⁴¹

Purgatory, Canto X

It is an easy leap from Ovid's Roman *Metamorphoses* to Dante's pre-Renaissance *Divine Comedy*. The most obvious link is that other great Roman poet, Virgil, who "guides Dante through Hell and accompanies him through Purgatory."⁴² As a scholar, Dante studied Latin and "Latin translations, from the *Timaeus* of Plato, Cicero, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Statius and Lucan through St. Augustine and the great mystics."⁴³ He selected Virgil as his guide because Virgil was not only "the fount of splendour" and "light of all poets,"⁴⁴ he was the "symbol of Human Reason."⁴⁵ In Dante's High Middle Ages, Virgil was "looked upon as having been the unconscious prophet of Christianity and also (in popular tradition) a great 'White Magician,' whose natural virtue gave him power among the dead."⁴⁶ Virgil lived in the pre-Christian era, and he was viewed as a man who did not benefit from the grace of a universal monotheistic god. Yet, he was,

... the best that man can become in his own strength without the especial grace of God. He is the best of human philosophy, the best of human morality; he is also poetry and art, the best of human feeling and imagination. Virgil, as the image of these things, cannot himself enter Heaven or bring anyone else there (art and morality and philosophy cannot be made into substitutes for religion), but he can (and they can), under the direction of the Heavenly Wisdom, be used to awaken the soul to a realization of its own sinfulness, and can thereafter accompany and assist it towards that state of natural perfection in which it is again open to receive the immediate operation of Divine Grace.⁴⁷

Dante's quest was to find a way back into humanity and/or to broaden his humanity to its deepest and most noble aspect. Part of that endeavor was to shrug off despair and

find his way past the leopard (of addiction), the lion (of violence), and the wolf (of devouring). For this, Dante needed a companion with greater courage than he possessed and, in addition, he makes it clear to whom he looked for inspiration for the entire poetic narrative.

Canst thou be Virgil? thou that fount of splendor
Whence poured so wide a stream of lordly speech?
Said I, and bowed by awe-struck head in wonder;

O honour and light of poets all and each,
Now let my great love stead me – the bent brow
And long hours pondering all thy book can teach!

Thou art my master, and my author thou,
From thee alone I learned the singing strain,
The noble style, that does me honour now.⁴⁸

Dante and Virgil were both men in search of a promised land. Virgil's young Aeneas—son of Venus and Anchises—was searching for (and eventually conquered) the land that was to become the foundation of ancient Rome and its people. The *Aeneid* is a mythology of the hero quest, which begins at the conclusion of Homer's *Iliad* where Troy had been decimated by the Greeks and ends with the disquieting and sacrificial death of Turnus—Aeneas' last impediment to victory over Latium.

I sing of arms and of a man: his fate
had made him fugitive; he was the first
to journey from the coasts of Troy as far
as Italy and the Lavinian shores.
Across the lands and waters he was battered
beneath the violence of High Ones, for
the savage Juno's unforgetting anger;
and many sufferings were his in war—
until he brought a city into being

and carried in his gods to Latium;
from this have come the Latin race, the lords
of Alba, and the ramparts of high Rome.⁴⁹

Dante—also on a hero quest—was searching for another kind of promised land, an interior landscape that when engaged would lead him out of the mid-life condition of psychological darkness. The *Comedy* is a Christian allegory and “Dante built his narrative on the framework of the medieval theories of life after death, but it is first and foremost the story of his own journey in this life from the ‘dark wood’ of his lost innocence, where he wanders in blindness and near despair, to the clear vision of the heavenly rose. . . .”⁵⁰ Dante begins his search for a way out of that lost-ness in the opening stanzas as he steps into the forest in fear only to be greeted with hope—the morning light—which is enough to send him on his way.

Midway this way of life we're bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

Ay me! how hard to speak of it – that rude
And rough and stubborn forest! the mere breath
Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood;

It is so bitter, it goes nigh to death;
Yet there I gained such good, that, to convey
The tale, I'll write what else I found therewith.

How I got into it I cannot say,
Because I was so heavy and full of sleep
When first I stumbled from the narrow way;

But when at last I stood beneath a steep
Hill's side, which closed that valley's wandering maze
Whose dread had pierced me to the heart-root deep,

Then I looked up, and saw the morning rays
Mantle its shoulder from the planet bright
Which guides men's feet aright on all their ways;⁵¹

A second link to the ancient past is the continuing tradition of art and literature as it moved unbroken from Classical Greece and Rome, through the Middle Ages. Early Italian writers, such as, Lorenzo Ghiberti and Giorgio Vasari “thought that classical art was overthrown at the beginning of the Christian era, and that it did not revive until it served as the foundation of the Renaissance style.”⁵² However, that may not entirely have been the case. Just as Ovid's themes were easily adaptable to Christian expression in a variety of contexts, the same is true of other poets and artists. Erwin Panofsky writes:

In thinking as they did the early writers were both right and wrong. They were wrong in so far as there had not been a complete break of tradition during the Middle Ages. Classical conceptions, literary, philosophical, scientific and artistic, had survived throughout the centuries, particularly after they had been deliberately revived under Charlemagne and his followers. The early writers were, however, right in so far as the general attitude towards antiquity was fundamentally changed when the Renaissance movement set in.

The Middle Ages were by no means blind to the visual values of classical art, and they were deeply interested in the intellectual and poetic values of classical literature. But it is significant that, just at the height of the mediaeval period (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries), classical *motifs* were not used for the representation of classical *themes* while, conversely, classical *themes* were not expressed by classical *motifs*.⁵³

The *Comedy* was completed in 1321 during the High Middle Ages when a new humanism was about to be born. The design and construction of the great Gothic

cathedrals that spread throughout France, England, and Germany provided inspiration for many artists, “... northern Gothic artists were beginning to return for inspiration not to their immediate predecessors but to Classical art.”⁵⁴ Although at this time, Italy was primarily still rooted in the Byzantine tradition, artists, such as, Cimabue, Giotto, and the sculptor, Nicola Pisano, began to look to Classical motifs for inspiration—which included a more realistic portrayal of the human form.⁵⁵

Nicola Pisano (1220/1225 – 1284?) and his son Giovanni (1245/1250 – 1314) have been described as the creators of modern sculpture. Nicola’s first major work was a marble pulpit for the baptistery in Pisa completed in 1260, clearly influenced by the Roman sarcophagi the sculptor could see around him in Pisa. By crowding in his figures and filling the scene with lively detail Nicola recaptured much of the vitality and realism of late Roman art. . . .⁵⁶

Sculptured imagery and the stone from which sculpture is created is an important theme in *Canto X*. When Virgil and Dante leave Ante-Purgatory and have climbed the steep cleft, which lands them upon the first cornice, they see that the face of the opposite cliff “is adorned with sculptured examples of the Great Humilities.”⁵⁷ The reliefs are carved into pristine white marble and of such great beauty that to Dante they surpass the skills of the Greek sculptor, Polycletus. They are, indeed, so compelling that they may be thought to have been created by God and—like Pygmalion’s statue—surpass the beauty of nature itself.

Now, while we stood up there, and ere we went
One step, I saw how that rock-bastion
Which, rising sheer, showed no means of ascent,

Was pure white marble, and had carved thereon
Sculptures so rare, that Polyclète – nay, more –
Nature might blush there, being so outdone.⁵⁸

.....

The image of the great humilities
Still held me thrilled – a sight beyond compare
And, for the Craftsman’s sake, beyond all price.⁵⁹

The first cornice is where the penitent proud purge the sin of pride by carrying large, heavy stones upon their backs. When alive, they held their heads up high with pride; in Purgatory they are so bent over by the weight of the stones that their heads are just barely above the ground. They cannot see the beautiful bas reliefs rising high above the pathway of the cornice nor much other than the path directly in front of them. When Dante first sees them moving as a group, they seem to be a creeping and indistinguishable moving mass.

Master, I faltered, that which creeps so slow
This way – it does not look to me like men;
It’s like – my sight’s at fault – I just don’t know.

And he to me: Their heavy load of pain
So bows them down that I was doubtful quite
Myself at first and could not see them plain.

Look hard, and disentangle with thy sight
What walks beneath those stones; they are clear to thee.⁶⁰

It would be a reasonable assumption that the heavy stones carried on the backs of the penitent proud are from the same material as the sculptured cliffs. Their primitive roughness is in direct opposition to the beautiful and complex sculpted narrative above. The rawness and sheer heaviness of the stones may be interpreted symbolically as the

condition of the souls of the penitent proud. They have arrived in a raw, corrupted, and contaminated state and enter Purgatory in need of a transformation.

What does Dante intend by envisioning sculpture that is so beautiful it could have been created by Polycletus—one of the greatest sculptors of the ancient world—and yet it can only be viewed by the inhabitants of the first cornice as they enter and exit? Why does it seem that the role of the artistic encounter is reversed, and art itself appears to be the viewer of the events below rather than the viewed?

“It has been said that, where aesthetics and artistic production are concerned, the Classical world turned its gaze on nature but the Medievals turned their gaze on the Classical world; that medieval culture was based, not on a phenomenology of reality, but on a phenomenology of a cultural tradition.”⁶¹ However, writes Umberto Eco, the medievals went beyond the limitations of inheritance to possess a spontaneity, a “sensibility capable of fresh and vivid responses to the natural world, including its aesthetic qualities.”⁶² This fresh response included an intelligible perception of divinity. Beauty in the Middle Ages was “the beauty of moral harmony and of metaphysical splendor.”⁶³ It was Christian in that there was an awareness of the “seductiveness of worldly pleasures,”⁶⁴ and the challenge was to balance the “two psychological states:”—the tension between “the call of earthbound pleasure and the striving after the supernatural.”⁶⁵

Monks, priests, theologians, and religious philosophers engaged in a deep and lengthy dialogue on art, aesthetics, and beauty and one focus of their discussions was

how “overluxuriant art in church decoration”⁶⁶ would be perceived by medieval church-goers. Would it distract the worshiper from prayer and lead him or her away from piety and into a state of secular rapture, or could beautiful depictions of saints and liturgical settings be an aid to prayer and devotion?

Upon entering through Peter’s Gate and climbing the “steep and narrow zigzag cleft in the rock which leads to the First Cornice,”⁶⁷ Dante and Virgil—and all those souls who enter to do penance—stand facing the sculptured wall of the Great Humilities. The magnitude of the visual, which is come upon unexpectedly, is powerful and may serve to invoke a sense of awe, a feeling of arrest. For the penitent proud, the impact of this kind of sudden and unexpected encounter with a powerful visual—that is not only beautiful but large in scope—may penetrate directly into the heart, to break down the first layer of pride and wash over the psyche, to be remembered and meditated upon when the heavy burden of raw stone is placed upon the back and carried until all pride has been cleansed.

Kant writes about the contemplative role of fine art. It is only fine art if it engenders an encounter that results not only in a pleasant sensation but also induces a state of reflection in the mind.

Fine art . . . is a way of presenting that is purposive on its own and that furthers, even though without a purpose, the culture of our mental powers to facilitate social communication.

The very concept of the universal communicability of a pleasure carries with it the requirement that this pleasure must be a pleasure of reflection rather than one of enjoyment arising from mere sensation. Hence aesthetic

art that is also fine art is one whose standard is the reflective power of judgment, rather than sensation proper.⁶⁸

For the penitent proud, the awesome nature of this first encounter before beginning the task of purging their sins—brought about by the beautiful and sublime aspect of art—may be an initial humbling. The cliff wall is a reminder of the beauty that exists when the soul is purged of an individuality that evokes a kind of self-indulgent separateness, a lifting of oneself above humanity—one’s own humanity by taking on the attributes of God and that of others as well. For Dante, pride is not just the sin of assuming a superior role; it is the “head and root of all sin, both original and actual.”⁶⁹

One way of interpreting the penitent proud is that they are on a pilgrimage. They have been inspired by a vision, and they march along a cleansing path. They are models of how an image can work: it can activate movement towards a purpose or aspiration and then sustain the individual throughout the rigors of attainment. Pilgrimages—popular in the Middle Ages—“illuminate the nature of the mediating role we grant to images in the process of attaining that fulfillment . . . fundamental to every pilgrimage is the element of hope.”⁷⁰ Freedberg writes about the role images play in activating and sustaining pilgrimage. The image is:

... central, that is regarded as effective and treated as if it were perpetually and transcendently capable of remaining so. We travel to the painting or sculpture; we stop at them on the way; we erect new ones; and we take copies and souvenirs away with us. These images work miracles and record them; they mediate between ourselves and the supernatural; and they fix in our minds the recollection of experience. At every stage the image is indispensable . . . No definition of pilgrimage, that vast and disparate

phenomenon, can omit to take all of them into account. They are of its essence; without them it is weak, it fails, or is nothing.⁷¹

One of the many scenes of humility sculpted on the cliff wall is of the Annunciation. It “exhibits (a) Gods humility in stooping to become Man, (b) Mary’s humility in accepting her Divine burden.”⁷² The images are so evocative and realistically rendered, that Dante swears he might hear an *Ave* escape from the angel’s lips.

The angel that to earth came down and bore
The edict of the age-long wept-for peace
Which broke the long ban and unbarred Heaven’s door,

Appeared to us, with such a lively ease
Carved, and so gracious there in act to move,
It seemed not one of your dumb images;

You’d swear an *Ave* from his lips breathed off,
For she was shown there too, who turned the key
To unlock the treasure of the most high love;

And in her mien those words stood plain to see:
Ecce ancilla Dei, stamped by art
Express as any seal on wax could be.⁷³

Another scene upon the cliff wall and an example from the Classical era is of the Roman Emperor Trajan (98-117 A.D.). He is a model of humility because he “won the affection of his people by his simple and laborious life, his love of justice, and his sincere concern for their welfare.”⁷⁴ In no way did he, a very human man in a very powerful position, succumb to the sin of pride. He lived his life in humility and service.

And there in stone was narrated the glory
Of the Great Roman prince, whose virtues wooed
Gregory to conquer Heaven with oratory.⁷⁵

The penitent proud are filled with hope in its most elementary and pristine aspect. They are believers; they have a goal; they know what needs to be done. The rocks they carry on their backs are objects of meditation, pieces of unforged art, rough icons that serve as a reminder of that initial encounter with the images of humility. They may no longer be able to see those images, but they feel them gazing down upon their bent-over postures. As they move along the cornice they recite the Lord's Prayer, not for themselves because they can no longer sin in Purgatory, but for those who have been left behind.

This last prayer is not made for us – we know,
Dear Lord, that it is needless – but for those
Who still remain behind us we pray so.

Even thus, for their and our good speed, arose
Prayer from those souls beneath their burden curled
And going, as in dreams one sometimes goes,

Where the First Cornice its slow length unfurled,
Painfully round, diversely laden thus,
Purging away the tarnish of the world.⁷⁶

The cliffs of sculptured images stand in silent witness to the parade below—
participating in a meditation that is necessary and freely accepted.

The wall of sculpture in Purgatory is, of course, not an actual work of concrete art. Dante may have been inspired by actual works of art, but this work of sculpture is depicted with words. We, the readers, are its intended spectators. Like Ovid, Dante is

the artist who is present behind every event and character in his poetic narrative. He created the art and he wrote the poetry, and in so doing asserted the hierarchy of the written word over the visual image. By describing the Annunciation scene found upon the cliffs of Purgatory, he became “the translator or interpreter of God’s art,” therefore, “turning the image back into the word from which it emanates.”⁷⁷ His reference to the *Ave* is another instance of reversal—translating the “icon into the word.”⁷⁸

Mary evokes the prelapsarian perfection of Eve, but her child will reverse the consequences of Eve’s sin even as her exemplary humility reverses the pride that—as we are shortly reminded—Eve has bequeathed to her children . . . Traditionally, the moment at which Mary conceived Christ—here signified by the angel’s “Ave”—is the moment at which, in the words of John, the Word became Flesh, the *logos* became *sarx*. In the sculpture that represents this moment, the flesh of the living Mary has been turned into white marble . . . Dante’s ekphrasis brings the incarnation full circle. The Word is made flesh, which in turn is made stone, which in turn is made to speak, to become Word again: *Ecce ancilla Dei*, behold the handmaid of God.⁷⁹

Canto X is important to the *Comedy* because it is where hope begins. The souls in Hell are without hope; their torment is unrelenting and enduring. In Purgatory, the atmosphere has changed; the sun is visible, light has returned. The movement back into light and the radiance of the scenes of humility create an environment in which the souls in Purgatory intuit the meaningfulness of their penance—it is a prelude to the luminosity that is to come in Paradise. For the Medieval thinker “light was the source and essence of all visual beauty.”⁸⁰

The objective value of a thing is determined by the degree to which it partakes of light. And in experiencing delight at the sight of luminous objects, we grasp intuitively their ontological dignity within the hierarchy

of beings. The reader will find in Dante's *Paradiso* the greatest poetical exposition of medieval light metaphysics. The poem might be described as a great fugue on the single theme . . . the divine light penetrates the universe according to its dignity.⁸¹

The Divine Comedy has endured throughout the centuries because it is not only a spiritual journey that had particular relevance to Dante's Medieval and Renaissance Italy, it is representative of every human's journey as he or she moves from youth to middle- and old-age. It is the enduring story of what it means to be a *human* being. We all set out in the sunshine of youth to find our way in the world and sometimes find ourselves disoriented and lost in the *dark wood*. Most lives are a combination of success and failure that evoke a response, and we are buoyed by our "Virgils" and frightened by our own versions of Hell. It seems that the farther we go in life, like Dante, the more opportunities we have to go inside ourselves to contemplate our own humanity and if we are lucky, perceive a vision that is less about the material, achieving world and more an illumination that brings understanding and meaning to our own human lives.

The aim of the poet is to state a vision, and no vision of life can be complete which does not include the articulate formulation of life which human minds make . . . It is one of the greatest merits of Dante's poem that the vision is so nearly complete; . . . The poet does not aim to excite—that is not even a test of his success—but to set something down; the state of the reader is merely that reader's particular mode of perceiving what the poet has caught in words. Dante, more than any other poet, has succeeded in dealing with his philosophy, not as a theory (in the modern and not the Greek sense of that word) or as his own comment or reflection, but in terms of something *perceived*.⁸²

CHAPTER 3

FALLING

We must wear out our souls in subtle schemes,
We must dismantle many a scaffolding,
Before we know the creature of our dreams
That fills our hearts with sobs and sorrowing.

Baudelaire, *The Death of Artists*

I am falling.

So was he. I can tell when I look at The Deep painted by Jackson Pollock in 1953, only three years before he died.

My husband is missing. He went to Africa on business. At least I think that's where he went. I don't really know. That was six months ago. He hasn't returned, and I haven't heard a word from him. I haven't notified the police or the State Department. I have been trained over the years not to. He has had many trips like this—only not this long without a word. When he left we were not on good terms. He said, "I want a divorce."

The clouds are parting and the abyss is becoming a real presence. In this painting, it is a beautiful invitation. But, how does one fall into the dark unknown? Is it a physical annihilation of the body, or is it the release of the mind into the shadowy depths that lie beyond fear?

His business was failing. I know he was trying hard to keep it together, but it was slipping into insolvency. So, this trip is different. There are new factors to consider. I

don't know if he ran away, or if something happened to him. I don't know whether to be angry or fearful. So, I split myself in two. Sometimes, I am angry and rage against him. Sometimes, I give in to the fear. It is heavy and weighs me down, and I can hardly get from one day to the next.

Pollock spent an entire life raging—against his family, his wife, the critics, his agents and dealers, friends, fellow artists, and strangers. He longed for fame, but when it came, he was ripped open and dissected, critiqued and criticized. He was called a genius; he was called a sham. On the other side, celebrity was too compelling to resist. Arrogant, out-of-control, and drunk, he would scream out into the night, “I am America’s greatest artist.”

I go over and over in my mind the days before he left searching my memory for clues. One day I imagine he is at the beach somewhere drinking Margueritas. It's supposed to be the image that makes me angry, but it is the one image that keeps me going. My darker imagination fears that he got into his brand new Jaguar and drove it over a cliff. I ask myself over and over, “Is this something he is capable of doing?” All of our years together have not given me the certainty, to know him this well—to know what choice he would have made.

He was a rebel but his façade was full of cracks. He couldn't pull it off. He didn't know how to adopt a rebellious persona that wasn't riddled with gaping wounds.

I am caught in the web of not-knowing. Struggling. If I can bring myself down on one side or the other, I can find peace, but as it is, I go back and forth—the struggle

exhausting me until I think I will give up. But, I don't know what giving up means. There is no release. When I think, "I cannot do this anymore. I cannot make it through another day," it is a pointless thought because another day will come, and I will have no choice. I am caught in time and don't know how to break free.

The final fall was long and destructive. He couldn't paint any more. Instead of moving forward into middle- and old-age, he was making the long circle back to his beginnings—unable to take care of himself, unable to be alone. Needing people, yet driving them away.

I leave the building where I work to go for a walk. I walk three miles every day. My feet are heavy, and my head hangs downward. I see people coming towards me and am ashamed of the way I must look. Pain covered, anger covered. My eyebrows are low from frowning; my hair is too long and my clothes seem a little ragged. In fact, I feel ragged around all my edges. I think to myself, "I don't care. This is the way I am, and the world is going to have to see me suffer." But, I am humiliated to have holes in my façade.

I cross Pennsylvania Avenue and walk down 17th Street towards the Lincoln Memorial. It is hot, and I am beginning to sweat already. I look for little patches of shade. On one corner there are panhandlers asking occupants of stopped cars for change. They ask me for change. I give them what little I have in my pocket. They too are ragged—and dirty with dirty clothes. I am a little uneasy passing them—glad that I have a little change. They are getting hostile from so much rejection.

Paintings that now hang in the Museum of Modern Art, National Gallery of Art, and museums around the world mostly went unsold. They were considered too large; he was encouraged by Betty Parsons to create smaller paintings specifically for sale.

I walk across Constitution Avenue, and the atmosphere begins to change. Free of the crowd and traffic noise, I try to let the world drop away from me—to get a little distance from reality. I walk upon the sidewalk, yet I feel a fraction of an inch above it. I un-anchor myself a little. If I am not too solidly placed upon the earth, maybe I can escape for a while.

I continue to walk down 17th Street until I get to that long stretch of walkway that borders the reflecting pool. I turn right onto the walkway and begin my two turns around the pool. It is warm and slightly humid, but the arch of the trees overhead shades the path and cools the air a little.

Needing a respite, Lee sailed to Europe. Jackson's brothers refused to allow their mother to visit. Without Lee or his mother, he was without an anchor.

There are tourists dressed in shorts, jeans and t-shirts, strung out width-wise, lolling along, unconscious to the paces of the lunch hour walkers and runners. I have learned to recognize those from Wisconsin and Minnesota. They are pale-skinned, and the mid-western accent is more recognizable to me than any other. I wish they would not take up the whole walkway and make it so difficult to get around them. It adds to my anger. It is that little bit of extra anger that makes me want to start screaming. But, I don't. I move onto the grass and walk around them.

Feeling abandoned, he would roar into the driveways of friends and fellow artists in his Model A (the Cadillac had long since been demolished in an accident) demanding to be allowed in. Some would turn out the lights when they heard him coming. There was no tolerance left for his drunken furies.

There is a man ahead—sitting on one of the benches. He is a tall regal African American man dressed in a robe with a turban on his head. I think he too may ask for change, and I walk as far away from him as I can. I have no more change, and I don't want to be too close when I have to ignore his request. But, as I move past him, a young woman is walking up to him with a smile on her face. I feel something odd, a strange sensation, but I keep going.

I near the end of the first stretch. I don't go far enough to walk past the Vietnam Veterans who are selling t-shirts, buttons, and war memorabilia. Off to the right is the Vietnam Memorial. I avoid the wall, too. My husband once told me that he feared his name was on that wall. He would never go to see it. I always intended to check for him, but something kept me away. Now, I am not brave enough, and it may be too late.

He no longer looked like himself; he was bloated and puffed up from too much drinking.

I am getting lost in the not-knowing. I have entered a hollow place. The void has opened up, and I am falling. I am afraid. What will happen to me if I never know what happened to him? I know I am in the world because I see other people, but I am

no longer part of them. I am a human, but no longer part of the human race. I walk to regain some rhythm, to feel the beat of my human heart—to rejoin body, soul and psyche.

One day a week, he became a star again at the Cedar Tavern. Crowds gathered to see the artist self-destruct. They slapped him on the back, bought him drinks, and called him “Old Grizzly.” Some were friends; some came for the show, hoping they would witness some outrageous behavior that they later could pass on to friends. He would yell out, “Who’s the greatest artist?” They would answer, “You are.”

I turn left and walk by a large group sitting for a photograph. They line up on the stairs facing the reflecting pool, their backs to the Lincoln Memorial. I don’t want to walk in front of the camera and disturb their setting. There are a few people behind the camera—near the water feeding popcorn to the ducks, and I turn and walk among them.

He took up with a young artist, Ruth Kligman. He brought her home after Lee left for Europe, but it didn’t last. After a couple of weeks, she was no longer the young, beautiful lover, she became what Lee had become, the dreaded female/mother. He humiliated her in front of guests, called her a whore, turned his rage on her, and screamed for her to get out.

I am desperate and have begun to look for signs in the universe that I am going to be all right. I read my horoscope every day looking for words that will give me some

hope to live on—at least for one more day. I now begin each day by telling myself that I have everything I need. I have enough food, a metro card, and gas in my car.

When I get home at night, I sit right next to the telephone answering machine as I listen to the eight to ten messages that are waiting for me, so I can turn the volume down on the creditors wanting a call back from my husband. I have no money to pay them, and wonder if I am going to be responsible if he never returns. I have tried talking to them, but they won't believe that I don't know where he is, and they threaten me with litigation or worse, arrest. Even in my state of confusion, I know they can't arrest me, but I am still afraid.

I turn left again rounding the next corner. There is nothing much happening on this side. Tourists walk towards me; joggers run up and pass me from behind. I am more oblivious on this stretch. I can talk to myself.

He sent flowers to Lee and tried to lure her back from Europe. She was his lifeline, but she was unwilling to cut short her trip to France.

Even though the world has blown apart, I will be okay. One foot in front of the other—that's all it takes. God, why did this happen? But, if I say I didn't see it coming, I would be lying. I was duplicitous. I may have been partly responsible. I may have helped push him over the edge. I was sick of the whole thing—stuck in the misery with him. At some childish level I may have wanted him to just disappear, not knowing what the reality of disappearance would be. Maybe I was used to the comfort of not-knowing. I didn't have to be accountable. All I had to do was go out for dinner

occasionally and let him talk about business. We never talked about ourselves to each other. We lost that a long time ago. I saw him disintegrating, and my attempts to help him were superficial. I kept my distance. I didn't want to be hurt anymore. His self-destruction was slow and painful to watch. I did not let myself think about how it would end.

Ruth brought a friend, Edith Metzger, for a weekend with Jackson. Edith had fled Nazi Germany with her parents. He greets them with grunts of disdain.

I remember the nights he came home crying. Once he said to me, "I don't know if I am dead or alive." And, he meant it. But, the next morning he got up as if he hadn't said those words—as if everything were normal. I went along with his charade.

At the end of this stretch of walkway, I make another turn and walk near the fountain. It has two giant streams of water gushing upward. High into the air the water forms a circle of fine mist before falling back into the pool. The wind blows in my direction, and I close my eyes to feel the water's coolness on my skin. I stand still, waiting to be dissolved—to be taken away with the evaporating mist.

I walk past the fountain and up several small steps to begin my second turn around the pool. I am walking on familiar ground now. I feel less like a lost stranger. I belong on this small stretch of earth. A mile of existence—a world in which to be.

I am thirsty and stop to get a drink at the drinking fountain. The water is slightly warm, but good. I want to slow myself down a little. Alone, I am becoming peaceful.

Some of the misery is dropping away. As people move towards me, I want to look into their faces. I want to see them, and see if they notice I am here.

Jackson, Ruth, and Edith visit Jackson's friends, James and Charlotte Brooks. He was sad and drunk, Charlotte said, and didn't show any feeling for Ruth or for life.

A man is running towards me. He is trim, muscular—around 45 or 50. He has a hard look about him—and an air of rigid self-confidence. I wonder where he works. I think of the buildings in close proximity—perhaps the Old Executive Office Building, or maybe the White House. This city brings out the hardness in some people.

They argued about going out for the evening. Ruth wanted to go to a benefit concert; Jackson balked but eventually acquiesced. Even though Jackson was drunk and tired, the three of them got into his Oldsmobile convertible.

On the trail ahead, some children are feeding the squirrels. They are surprised and delighted that the squirrels are tame and will take food from their hands. Their shiny blond heads and reddish faces turn first toward their parents as if to affirm that, yes, these squirrels really are eating out of their hands, and then for reassurance, “They won't bite me will they, mommy?” Walking past them I look up at the treetops. Sunlight is twinkling off the leaves and the air sparkles a little. I wish I could lift up and be among those sparkles for a little while—just for a little while.

Did he set out to kill himself, that night? He had been roaring down that same road for years, each time it seems looking for a way out. This particular evening the level of alcohol was in equal proportion the level of rage. Annihilation was just around

the next curve where he could free himself from all those women who were needed and yet despised, imaged and painted again and again from Woman, 1930-33 to Portrait and a Dream, 1953.

I approach the African American man again. His is still sitting in the same place, alone with his arm along the back of the bench. Along with his robe and turban, he is wearing sandals, his feet and ankles are bare, and his legs are crossed. In demeanor, he is relaxed, his elongated stature spread comfortably along the bench—a tranquil presence. I see he doesn't have a cup for change. Maybe he is not a panhandler. I don't know. But, he doesn't look exactly normal either. I wonder if I am crazy because I have noticed him so intently—even if from a distance and out of the corner of my eye. I also wonder why I have begun to notice the oddest people.

Have I, myself, crossed over the line of normality; I no longer feel normal. In self-defense, I ask myself, “What is normal, after all?” Many people appear to go about their lives “normally.” They seem to know what they are doing, and they act as if tomorrow will be no different from today. But, I can no longer depend upon tomorrow. I have lost control of my own existence. Circumstances have gotten the upper hand. Inside my head I say, “please god, help me.”

As I near the bench again, for a moment I don't think about being normal or abnormal. There is a gentle force releasing me from caring and at the same time pulling me in the direction of the man whose face is serene and happy. I slow myself a little, while turning my head to the right. I try to glance towards him casually—

without really looking. But, he looks directly into my eyes. He doesn't just glance at me—he looks deeply. I look into his eyes. He nods—just a little tilt of the head up and down. And, he reaches out his right hand with a thumbs-up gesture.

Yes, I am here. He knows. I know he knows. I nod back and keep walking.

The Deep is not a frightening painting. It is actually a beautiful rendering in cream and black by a man who was near the end of his career and at the end of his ability to be in the world. The abyss that is slowly emerging seems to be one that a man could let himself fall into without the dread of what is beyond. It is the release from the despair of living, to that place of the eternal return, a fall back into the starry realms from which our world and human existence was born.

CHAPTER 4

CHAOS IN A NUCLEAR AGE

If in the twilight of memory we should
meet once more, we shall speak again
together and you shall sing to me a deeper
song.

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

I first dreamed of the atom bomb when I was about seven-years-old. The year was 1951, and my younger sister and I had just made the long car trip from Michigan to California. Our parents had collected us from our grandparents—where we lived on and off for most of our childhoods—for their last brief period of togetherness. Our grandparents lived in what was later called the slums of Detroit and my father insisted—between periods of abandonment—that his daughters should not be living in such a dirty place.

He was right, it was a little dirty living so close to the downtown area, but I loved my grandparents and I would have lived anywhere to be with them. And, I didn't really see the dirt. What I saw was the kitchen table where my grandmother and I would drink cups of tea (mine with a lot of milk) and eat buttered crackers. We talked about anything that came into our minds—or most probably, my mind. She was a gentle white-haired grandmother, a tiny bit plump but delicate and petite in her bearing. I was her first granddaughter, and she and I had a natural love for each other.

She was a quiet and steady presence in a life that otherwise lacked harmony and stability.

Her kitchen was one of those old-fashioned high-ceilinged kitchens with tall windows and a lot of space. Within the window sills were a number of plants (probably from long-ago gifts) and the growing vines would trail up and around, becoming entangled with other plants in a mass of green foliage so that you could not tell where one began and the others left off.

My grandfather would join us at the kitchen table in the evenings when he returned from work. He would pull his construction truck into its parking space, walk up the porch steps and into the kitchen smelling of outdoors work: sweat, tar, and smoke. His skin was red and worn like leather, and his eyes crinkled at the corners from squinting all day out in the sun. When he went in to wash himself, I would get his beverage of choice—a bottle of cold beer. He always let me take the first small sip.

He was not a sophisticated man, but he had a quiet strength. Born in rural Kentucky, he liked country food: pork chops, fried potatoes, beans, and biscuits. On Saturday and Sunday mornings, he would cook what he called breakfast. It was really more like brunch: corn muffins, fried meat of one kind or another, potatoes, coffee and often something exotic like fried apples. He taught me how to make corn muffins when I was about ten-years-old. He never ran out of patience with me, and if I dropped an egg on the floor, that was okay. “Get another one out of the fridge,” he would say.

So, when my parents came for us, it was not a happy occasion; we knew what they were about to do. It was not a reunion; it was a taking away. When it was time to go, we said our good-byes, walked down the stairs, and got into the back seat of the car—probably a Buick. In the early fifties, my father liked Buicks; in the late fifties he went for a Jaguar sports model. It was a long drive to California, and our father stopped only once at a hotel. He preferred to speed through the night when there were few other cars on the road, listening to the radio and on occasion, singing to himself.

Lying in the darkness of the back seat, trying to sleep but unable to, I remember hearing the voices from the radio—not the music, not even conversation from the front seat, but what must have been the news of the day. It was just after the Rosenberg trials and even though I don't remember specifics from the radio news reports, I remember a plethora of words swirling around the inside the car, words that were describing something to do with the *atom bomb* and the *electric chair* veiled in a kind of dark foreboding.

The dreams I later had were shrouded in darkness; no mushroom cloud exploding, just darkness with sinister voices around the edges—garbled and indistinguishable. I don't know how darkness and those voices transitioned into a nightmare of the atom bomb, but when I awoke from the dream, I was awash in fear, afraid to open my eyes or move. If I could keep myself from moving, whatever was there in the darkness would not know where to find me. So, I would lie there with the fear, alone in the

dark, until I was brave enough to move my little finger and begin the slow emergence into a consciousness that could tell the difference between dream and reality.

When we arrived in Los Angeles, we moved into a duplex on Riverside Drive. There were many others like it on the block, one-story dwellings that had a kitchen, living room, and two small bedrooms. It was probably painted yellow, but my mother seemed strangely proud to tell people that it was chartreuse. She often liked to make much of small details. I can still see her dressed up in high heels and wearing an apron, cooking dinner and having it ready when my father returned in the evenings. To me, it was oddly surreal as if there was something unnatural about this most ordinary activity. It was uncharacteristic and something I had never before seen her do. She seemed completely unsuited to the role.

The occupants in the other half of the duplex were my father's father and his new young wife, Ann—only two years older than my father. I remember being asked to call her, grandmother, something she found amusing since she was barely into her thirties and looked nothing like a grandmother. Maybe, that's why she agreed to it.

Ann and my grandfather didn't stay long on Riverside Drive before trading up to a house in Pacific Palisades with pool, guesthouse—the works. On weekends, we were taken there to swim. Everyone would gather on the patio talking and laughing—my mother, it seemed, laughing a little too much and talking a little too loudly. She didn't belong; she didn't fit in; even I could see that.

That year we spent Christmas with Ann and my grandfather, and the main attraction was a pink tree with white lights that illuminated the branches so that it appeared to have pink snow, so strange a sight for two little girls from Detroit where there was so much real snow and where no one at that time would ever consider buying an artificial tree—let alone a pink one. I don't remember Christmas dinner, but I do remember all of us gathered in the living room afterwards, my grandfather the focus of conversation. He was not a tall man, in fact, he was rather short, slightly baldish and round, but in that small gathering, he was the star. He had the money and obviously the power. He was not warm towards children, but not harsh either, just generally disinterested.

One day near spring I came home from school and there was an ambulance parked near the curb. I was told not to come in so I waited outside sitting in the grass until either a neighbor came out to get me or perhaps the ambulance left and I was told to come in. I don't remember the rest of that afternoon or evening, but I do remember many years later overhearing my mother tell her sister that my father had been in the bathroom with the door locked, playing Russian Roulette with the gun he carried with him everywhere he went.

Within another couple of months my grandfather was gone from our lives and so was my father. Always following in his father's footsteps, he took up with Ann and soon my mother and I were on a plane back to Detroit. He kept my sister for a while, but she too was returned within a couple of months. (Several years later on summer

visits, I was asked to call Ann, mommy.) My mother was broken-hearted and never got over being cast off by my father, and when she cried, my sister and I both cried with her. We never got used to her tears. It seemed that life had treated her badly and even though she eventually adopted a steely façade, she was never prepared for the many disappointments that occurred throughout her life. In her late sixties she retired to rural Michigan, preferring, it seems, to spend her remaining years alone.

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It is now miles away from 1951. I remember the *atom bomb* dreams but after so many years, most of their intensity is gone. Yet, even though the dreams are gone, those early years left me with areas of chaos in my interior spaces. Chaos isn't always present, but it is easily activated, so I search for balance and equilibrium.

One quiet place of refuge is The National Gallery of Art. Exiting the streets of Washington, D.C. and entering into the high-ceilinged first-floor lobby is like entering a space that exists outside of time. Some of the imagery may be evocative of bad dreams but most is either beautiful or compelling.

I have learned through art that I was not alone with my fear of the atom bomb. Others struggled as well. Some were artists who created works that reflect, in many and various ways, the dark realities of living in the early atomic age of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and post World War II. One would think these works would be dark and filled with images of despair. Some are, but most are not. American artists of the late 1940s and early 1950s worked in non-traditional ways, with non-traditional materials,

striving to annihilate imagery—moving into the essences beneath matter. A new consciousness emerged that was influenced by Eastern religion, and artists moved beyond the psychology of Sigmund Freud in favor of his protégé Carl Jung. They were called *action-painters* and they created imagery out of a new sensibility—the chaos that was present on the fringes of everyone’s existence.

They called him lawless; they said his paintings were chaotic. Mockingly, they called him, “Jack the Dripper.” Jackson Pollock painted *Lavender Mist* in 1950, two years after he had been tranquilized, mostly sober and had entered into what many call his greatest and most productive period. *Lavender Mist* hangs in the East Wing of the National Gallery and is considered one of his finest atmospheric paintings—at seven-by-ten feet, it also one of his largest. A wash in iridescent shades of lavender grays, pink, blue-greens, and overlaid with thin sprays of silvery gray, white, and black, *Lavender Mist* has been compared to the late water lily paintings of Claude Monet, which many consider to be abstract.

Pollock’s process was chaotic by the standards of his predecessors. He placed his trust in the *accident*, all the while seeming to know exactly what he was doing and most importantly, when to stop. The drip paintings that began in 1947 are lyrical, luminous, and opalescent expressions of balance and rhythm. His work was born from chaos and somehow through his own magic, he was able to show us that it could be transcended.

When I stand before *Lavender Mist*, I do see the chaos that was present in Pollock's interior and my own as well. It swirls and dances all over the canvas—like a kind of visual music. Every minute aspect of it has been experienced and flung out of the self and onto a space where it is transformed. His experience of chaos has become my experience of peace.

Pollock was not completely satisfied with *Lavender Mist*. In one sense it was to him a failure of vision. He had been obsessed with concealing the void, painting layer upon layer, covering the entire canvas. When he hung it in his studio and stepped back to have a look, he did not see a single painting, but several smaller ones. After *Lavender Mist*, his goal was to use less paint and let aspects of the void remain unconcealed. He went on to produce other large paintings in the summer of 1950 and created several works in which the void was visible beneath the swirling streams of paint: *One, Number 32*, and *Autumn Rhythm*, considered his finest painting from this era partly because it was chronicled in a series of photographs by Hans Namuth.

There were two ways that Pollock dispelled his interior chaos: painting and drinking. When he chose drinking, he flung it at the world with abusive language. Untransformed, the chaos remained as memory in the minds of relatives and friends—a stark contrast to the beauty of which he was so capable.

A viewer may look at Pollock's paintings with an eye to his psychological state and interpret them analytically, or a viewer may look upon them as stunning and universal images that illuminate eternal aspects of human existence. Pollock was a very human

man, but he found a way to enter periods where he could rid himself of the despair of his everyday existence and step into realms that press up against the boundaries of time and space. Standing before *Lavender Mist*, I meet Pollock—not the raging destructive Pollock—but the Pollock who was present when these works were born. Later, when I exit the Gallery I am back in today's world, but the link is not dissolved. I carry it with me until I need to make another visit.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Reading literary art fiction is a wonderful opportunity to become acquainted or reacquainted with an artist and/or a work of art. Seeing art through the eyes of a writer—having it recreated with words—may provoke a desire to see the work or know more about the artist. The writer is essentially the “gazer, reporting what he or she sees, variously describing what is there to be seen . . . [and] framing a moment of experience;”¹ the reader is the beneficiary of that gaze. When a writer creates a narrative that incorporates a work of art, she evokes a way of seeing that may encourage a reader to think about art in a new way—in one aspect transforming the reader into a spectator who then may be transported to the place described.² Literary art fiction moves a work of art out of the past and into the reader’s present.

“Images take up space, while spoken or written language takes up time.”³ The writer of literary art fiction transports the spatial aspects of a work of art into the temporal realm of the written word. At the same time, by positioning the narrative within the frame of art, the writer brings an added dimension of spatiality to the work of fiction. A work of art is usually experienced through a visual encounter; however, when engaged in reading art fiction there is the dimension of seeing, or visualizing, it with the mind. This raises many questions for the reader as well as the writer. If it is an actual work of art, the reader may experience it in a new or deeper way; the writer may uncover aspects that she had not before considered. If it is an imaginary work, the

reader's vision of the image will be somewhat individualized; she will in a sense be a co-creator. The writer on the other hand must decide what aspect of art to illuminate, how does it fit into the overall theme of the narrative, what aspects are given prominence, and if the narrative is in any way descriptive of a work of art, how does a writer credibly imitate an imitation?

Of particular interest is the rhetoric of verbal representation: how does a passage of prose . . . cope with an experience primarily spatial at first, and only afterward conceptual in other ways? The question of what is most prominent in a constructed image may itself be so problematic, to begin with; . . . there is the rhetorical problem of how such prominence is to be represented in writing. Firstness? Centrality? The bottom line? What about rhetorical scale—how much prose goes for how much image? How does a prose passage have it that we read a painting: top to bottom? Bottom to top? diagonally? crucial coded clue to obvious sign? picture-plane back into virtual space? And what are its own devices for so having it: does its own narrative guide you through, or across, or up or down or into-and-out-of the picture? How is the interesting problem of the relation, in prose or verse, between narrative and description hereby engaged? And, particularly, what are the resources of narrative and lyric poetry which can complicate and strengthen mimesis?⁴

A writer probably would select an artist or work of art that was of interest to her, a work that she may wish to encounter more deeply, or even to learn more about, fitting it into the narrative in a variety of ways. She could render a fictional account of an artist, such as Vermeer, and how one of his paintings may have come into being, for example, the *Girl with the Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier; or she could create a fictional account of the discovery of a lost painting by a famous artist and its ownership traced back through generations to its creator (again, Vermeer) as in *Girl*

in Hyacinth Blue by Susan Vreeland. Art may exist outside the content of story acting as a silent witness to the events taking place as in *The Matisse Stories* by A.S. Byatt; or art may be the focal point of a story as it is in many mysteries written around the theft and forgery of great works of art.

Literary art fiction is the envoicing of a silent object.⁵ It “speaks not only *about* works of art but also *to* and *for* them.”⁶ The writer creates images that are part of the larger narrative as well as images of the art in question. The challenge for the writer is to create, recreate, or analyze aspects of art and then be able to communicate what she knows in words that will provoke a way of seeing. At the same time she must avoid pedantry, which could turn the work into something of which it is not. She has to be sensitive and convincing that she knows something about the work and at the same time not pull it down too fixedly into the pedagogical. Although, there will be some “blurring of the boundaries”⁷ by bringing it onto the page, the work of art should symbolically remain within the museum walls and the mystery of its creation and radiance must remain unchallenged.

What is at stake is the power of language to describe: the possibility that language might form, shape, trace, mark, represent, portray, or imagine pictures, speak to the sense of sight . . . All description must render things at a distance or through a mist; description is itself the distance or the mist that it resembles, and its reality must always be its fiction. Placed at a remove in a book that figures mediation and absence, description can render a thing or experience only *as it were* not as it is. This is what description is like: it places readers at two removes, with a dream of transport, sight, reality, and presence both promised and denied.⁸

The history of the written word is not nearly as long as that of the image. The earliest recorded cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira date to 15,000 – 10,000 B.C. Homer’s epics date to 900 – 700 B.C. The tradition of merging a work of art—whether real or imagined—with a fictional narrative is a long one and its evolution has been fruitful for artists, writers, and those who partake of their work. Artists have created paintings and sculpture from the poetic imagery of a Homer or an Ovid. Works of poetry have been inspired by images on a Grecian urn or a Roman sarcophagi.

In *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, James A. W. Heffernan discusses not a museum of art but a museum of words. He writes of a chronology that began with Homer and moved through the poetry of Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare, and Spenser. “Works of art,” he writes, “begin to seem transcendently beautiful in the protective enclosure of the newly born public museum, but [they] . . . nonetheless provoke the ravishment of interrogating words,”⁹ Literary art fiction was born out of that ravishment and the best of it may be equally worthy of respect and longevity. The “whole collection of ekphrastic poetry” and literary art fiction may be perceived as a new kind of museum, “a gallery of art constructed by language alone . . . a museum of words.”¹⁰

In the modern era mythological imagery and symbology are no longer informing society and culture. We move through a fast-changing world that has in some ways been stripped of the rituals and images that enlightened and sustained past generations.

We still participate in some inherited rituals, such as, church services and holidays but for the most part, they have been diluted to accommodate the necessities of a fragmented twenty-first century existence. What then are we left with, literature, art? Are these enough to bring meaning and freedom to our own lives?

Joseph Campbell writes that art and literature are the “rendering [of] individual personal experiences,”¹¹ the foundations on which mythology was created. “The artist has an experience first and then seeks the imagery through which to render it.”¹² By merging the imagery of the artist with a fictional narrative, the writer presents the reader with her way of seeing; however, even though the writer frames the encounter, it is not necessarily limited to her particular vision. A reader may be provoked to learn more, activating a desire that could lead to a new way of being in the world. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid writes of the liberating power of art and of Daedalus who is trying to release himself and his son, Icarus, from imprisonment in King Minos’ Crete—a society that for him is a wasteland, foreign, and without meaning. Longing to escape and “return to his own nation,” he “turns his mind to arts unknown, and changed the face of nature”¹³ by sculpting two pairs of wings to fly out of captivity, thereby, setting himself free.

¹James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 11.

²Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 18.558-64.

³Homer, *The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Alexander Pope (New York: John B. Alden, 1883), 33.

⁴Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 509.

⁵*Ibid.*, 516.

⁶*Ibid.*, 521.

⁷Blake Eskin, "The Incredible Growing Art Museum," *ARTnews* (October 2001). Available from http://artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=988; Internet; accessed 22 December 2007.

⁸*Washington Post* (District of Columbia), 7 October 2007).

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, "Angels & Demons and the Emerging Literary Genre of Art Fiction" in *Secrets of Angels & Demons: The Unauthorized Guide to the Bestselling Novel*/edited by Dan Burstein and Arne de Keijzer (New York: Squibnocket/CDS Books, 2004), 381-87.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³A.S. Byatt, *Portraits in Fiction* (London: Vintage, 2002), 1.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1997), 152-53.

²¹Byatt, 92.

²²*Ibid.*, 93.

²³John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 5.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*, 9-10.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 10-11.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 32.

³¹*Ibid.*

³²Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 92-3.

³³Paul Tillich, "Art and Ultimate Reality," in *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred: An Anthology in Religion and Art*, ed. Diane Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Continuum, 2001), 220.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 223.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 233.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 221.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 223.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 31.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 32.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 33.

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, *Encyclopedia of Women in Religious Art* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 184.

⁴⁵Freedberg, 28.

⁴⁶Ibid., 161.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., 161-62.

⁴⁹Ibid., 162.

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⁶⁴Rothko, 34.

⁶⁵de Kooning, 171.

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⁷⁵Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Book III 34; quoted in Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 351.

⁷⁶Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with the Pearl Earring* (Dutton: New York, 2000), 47-8.

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⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 140.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 140-41.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 7.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 8.

CHAPTER 2

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⁴Read, 49.

⁵Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Charles Martin (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 1.1-5.

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⁷ Ibid., 15.923-28.

⁸ Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ R. H. Barro, *The Romans* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 80-2.

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¹² Ibid.

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¹⁴ Ibid., 167.

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¹⁷ Ibid., 10.310-11.

¹⁸ Zanker, 158.

¹⁹ Ovid, 10.312-15.

²⁰ Ibid., 10.319.

²¹ Ibid., 10.323.

²² Ibid., 10.324-26.

²³ Solodow, 203.

²⁴ Emmet Robbins, "Famous Orpheus," in *Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth*, ed. John Warden (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 3.

²⁵ Ovid, 10.60-63.

²⁶ Solodow, 219.

²⁷ Ibid., 216.

²⁸ Ibid., 220.

²⁹ Ovid, 15.1099-1113.

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- ³⁰ Freedberg, 83.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 82.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 84.
- ³⁴ Ovid, 10.367-68.
- ³⁵ Freedberg, 85.
- ³⁶ Ovid, 10.346-52.
- ³⁷ Campbell, *Inner Reaches*, 18.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ³⁹ Ovid, 10.361-63.
- ⁴⁰ Campbell, *Inner Reaches*, 121.
- ⁴¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *The Portable Emerson*, ed., Carl Bode (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 244-45.
- ⁴² Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Hell*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penquin, 1949), 344.
- ⁴³ Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Mentor, 1954), xx.
- ⁴⁴ Dante, *Hell*, 1.79-82.
- ⁴⁵ Dante, *Inferno*, 27.
- ⁴⁶ Dante, *Hell*, 67.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.79-87.
- ⁴⁹ Virgil, *The Aeneid of Virgil*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 1.1-12.
- ⁵⁰ Helen Luke, *Dark Wood to White Rose: Journey and Transformation in Dante's Divine Comedy* (New York: Parabola, 2000), xvii.
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⁵⁴ Lawrence Cunningham and John Reich, *Culture and Values: A Survey of the Humanities* (Fort Worth: Harcourt, 2002), 260.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Purgatory*, trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (London: Penquin, 1955), 143.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 10.28-33.

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⁶⁰ Ibid., 10.112-19.

⁶¹ Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 4.

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⁶³ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 6.

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⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Dante, *Purgatory*, 143.

⁶⁸ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 173.

⁶⁹ Dante, *Purgatory*, 147.

⁷⁰ Freedberg, 99-100.

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⁷² Dante, *Purgatory*, 148.

⁷³ Ibid., 10.34-45.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 383.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 10-73-75.

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CHAPTER 5

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