

PART II:

CIVILIZATION AND THE ARTS

VISUAL INTELLIGENCE IN PAINTING¹

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1. Introduction

Philosophers have long agreed that thinking is expressed in the use of language, that we “think in the medium of words.”² It is also true, however, that we think in the medium of pictures, and it is likely that these two ways of thinking are interrelated; certainly, we could not think in pictures if we did not have words, and perhaps we could not use words, in principle, unless we were also engaged in some sort of picturing, at least in our imagination. An ideographic language like Chinese would give greater support to the latter possibility than would our phonetically based form of writing.

Philosophically, words and pictures can be used to illuminate one another and to shed light on what it is to think. In both words and pictures, we deal with compositions, and in both cases the compositions are, to use a phrase of Michael Oakeshott, “exhibitions of intelligence.”³ There is a difference between the two that we notice immediately: spoken words are fleeting and pictures are durable; words and pictures differ in their temporality. They also differ in other ways that are philosophically important. Let us explore these differences.

¹ This essay has also appeared in the *Review of Metaphysics*. Reprinted with permission.

² The phrase is from David Braine, *The Human Person: Animal and Spirit* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), p. xxii.

³ See Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 15: “Thus the movement of a human eyelid is a categorially ambiguous identity; it may be a wink or a blink, a wink which is an exhibition of intelligence, a subscription to a ‘practice’ and has a reason, and a blink which is a component of a ‘process’ to be understood in terms of a ‘law’ or a ‘cause’.” See also p. 32.

2. Words and their structure

We begin with spoken words and we ask what it means to think in the medium of speech.⁴ When we speak, we present things as articulated into wholes and parts, and we do so for ourselves and for others. The paradigmatic form of speech is found in conversation, whether between two people or among many, whether in private or in public. The focus of speech is not the speech itself but the things that are spoken about. Thoughtful speech is like a magic wand that we wave over things. As we wave the wand, the parts and wholes of things become disclosed: their identity, their features, their relationships, their essentials and their accidentals, in a word, their intelligibility, all come to light, for ourselves and for our interlocutors.

However, we do not articulate just the *things* that we present. While we explicate things, we also conjugate the words we speak. The speech that we declare is itself segmented into its own kinds of parts and wholes. That is, we continually assemble and reassemble the wand itself as well as the things we wave it over. We display things by structuring our speech. Our listeners are intent on the things we talk about, but they must also be aware, marginally, of the words we speak. The eye is caught by the thing and the ear is caught by the sound, but the mind is shaped by both: we attend to what is seen as we listen to what is said.

Speech is articulated on two levels. First, on the higher level, each sentence and each argument is made up of lexicon and grammar, of content and syntax. Second, on the lower level, each word is internally made up of phonemes, of vowels and consonants. The phonemic structure inside a word establishes each word as a word, and these words are conjoined in grammatical and lexical sequences. When all this happens on the side of speech, parts of the world come to light. The artful combinatorics in words and sentences lets the articulation of things take place, and such exhibition occurs whether we speak of things in their presence or their absence. Human reason can articulate on all these levels; it keeps all of these dimensions in mind, and all of

⁴In the next six paragraphs, I use, with additions and revisions, some material that I have published in "Language, the Human Person, and Christian Faith," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 76 (2003): 29-30.

them are significant: human intelligence composes words out of phonemes and statements out of words, and simultaneously it displays things in their parts and wholes. We charge our words with so much intelligence that things themselves begin to appear in the light that the words give off. The person who accomplishes this, furthermore, does so for himself and for others. All discourse is in principle a matter of conversational reciprocity. Thinking in the medium of words is inherently intersubjective and so is human reason.

The most conspicuous and most tangible feature of our verbal articulation is the way in which phrases are embedded into one another. This is the work of syntax; it makes it possible for us to segment our speech, and also to segment our displays, into parts that are not just concatenated sequentially one after the other, but parts that are stacked within one another, in the fashion of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls.⁵ Because of this syntactic embedding, speeches of unlimited complexity and exquisite intricacy become possible: think of the multilayered “boxing” that takes place in a novel or a scholarly book. It is specifically the syntactic element in speech that raises our verbalization into rational discourse. Syntax provides the rational form for the more material contents of what we say, and the syntax works not only in individual statements but also in long arguments, not only in particular judgments but also in extended reasoning. Speech is governed not only by predicate but also by propositional logic. We should not focus so much on the simple judgment that we forget the larger conversation in which each judgment is embedded.

Syntax, furthermore, should not be taken just by itself. Syntax has to be related to the phonemic structure within each word, and within each word it is specifically the consonants that function in a manner

⁵ I have found the work of the American linguist Derek Bickerton to be very helpful in regard to syntax as constitutive of human speech. See his *Language and Species* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), and *Language and Human Behavior* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995). His work belongs to the tradition initiated by Noam Chomsky with *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957) and *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1965). The relation of these notions of syntax to Husserl’s doctrine on categorial intentions and categorial intuitions calls for investigation.

analogous to syntax. Consonants are like the syntax within words. Consonants clip and trim the words we speak, and we have to be socialized into them, just as we have to be socialized into syntax and judgment. Consonants order the more elementary vowel sounds of speech. The vowels require far less instruction. We come into the world crying and no one has to teach us how, nor do we need to be taught the wails and whimpers and giggles that make up the basis for other vowel sounds. Vowels by themselves would be unlettered; it is the consonants that make the sounds rational. This phonemic structuring of words, moreover, does not come to pass apart from the higher, syntactic structuring; rather, the consonantal shaping of sound occurs under the teleology of syntactic patterning. Consonants are introduced under the downward pressure of syntax. We shape sounds into words *because* we want to combine words into phrases and discourse (and we combine words into phrases *because* we want to display things).

The dimension of vowels in words is more associated with emotion, and the structure of consonants is more associated with reason. Vowels are especially involved with feeling, with our biological and sensory appreciation of what is going on and what is happening to us. The emotive dimension of vowels comes to the fore in singing, but human singing requires the clipping and cutting of consonants if it is to become thoughtful melody and not just humming and cooing, if it is to become a song that exhibits intelligence.⁶ Consonants introduce the rigor and determination of reason into the melody of vowels.

Vowels are the work of the lungs and vocal chords, consonants the work of teeth, tongue, and lips, with some help from the throat. Forming consonants is more under human control. It is also the more visible performance and it makes speech seem like eating in reverse. Maritain has said that the human body is the most beautiful thing in the world and that the human face is naturally sacred.⁷ The face

⁶ I once attended a master class given, in public, by Elly Ameling at the University of Maryland, and one of the things that impressed me most was the accuracy and force with which this wonderful soprano registered the consonants in her singing. She emphasized the importance of such precision in what she told the students.

⁷ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian Books, 1954), p. 152.

certainly has a cadence of its own, and this is due partly to the consonant-work of the lower face and partly to the expressiveness of the eyes. Its natural design is “finished” by the life the person has lived; a baby’s face does not yet show what one has done or what one can be expected to say.⁸

Human rationality is also expressed in laughter, which also requires the demarcation of consonants to be what it is. Laughter is made up of vowel sounds segmented into short bursts by simple consonants, as in ho-ho-ho, or ha-ha, or, in a more discreet manner, tee-hee. A plain, drawn-out vowel sound is not constituted as laughter and it does not express an intelligent appreciation, because it contains no consonants. It expresses anxiety or pain rather than rational amusement.

There is a still deeper level of linguistic structure, one that underlies both the grammatical patterns in sentences and the sound patterns in words. It is the level of prosody, the rhythms and beats that are proper to a language. In fact, the unborn child in the mother’s womb is already sensitive to this aspect of the mother’s voice, which reaches the child by being filtered through the amniotic fluid. Two writers on children’s language, Kyra Karmiloff and Annette Karmiloff-Smith, observe that this form of speaking and listening, between the mother and the child in the womb, “blurs phonetic information but leaves intact the rhythmic properties of speech.” They say that the baby “is learning to recognize the melody and rhythms of language,” that is, the intonation contours and the stress patterns that constitute the particularities of both its mother’s voice and the sounds that will become its native tongue.⁹ Thus the unborn child already has some experience of language and, therefore, “the newborn comes into the world prepared to pay special

⁸ I am grateful to Kevin White for much of the material in this paragraph, as well as for many other remarks and suggestions that I have used in this paper. On the distinguished status of the human face: it is now often said that the human brain is the most complicated thing in the universe. It would be interesting to ask whether the brain or the face should enjoy the greater prestige.

⁹ Kyra Karmiloff and Annette Karmiloff-Smith, *Pathways to Language. From Fetus to Adolescent* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 43.

attention to human speech and specifically to his mother's voice."¹⁰ The child becomes familiar with his mother's tongue and his mother tongue even before he is born.

The rhythmic dimension of speech, the cadence of language, cushions the grammar and morphology that will take shape within it. For example, the child, as he grows, begins to express the rhythm and prosody of sentences and questions before actually stating and asking things: "By the end of the first year, the baby's babbling rises and falls in intonation to mimic questions and statements."¹¹ The prosodic level of speech also comes into play, with great sophistication, in poetry, singing, and music. Think of how music enhances the emotional meaning of words, how it expresses the human response to what is being presented in the song, and how it does so by engaging the dimensions of both vowels and rhythms.

We have distinguished three levels of human speech: the sentential and argumentative level, made up of vocabulary and grammar, or lexicon and syntax; the phonemic level, made up of vowels and consonants; and the deep prosodic level, made up of rhythms and beats.¹² Let us now explore parallels to these three levels in painting.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 2.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 151.

¹² The syntax in language makes it possible for us to go beyond stating things in speech; it permits us also to appropriate what we are saying. We do so when we use the first-person pronoun in what I would want to call a "declarative" manner, as opposed to a merely "informational" usage. We can say not only, "It is raining," but also, "I know it is raining." When Nietzsche says that "only the spirit of music allows us to understand why we feel joy at the destruction of the individual," he wishes to reduce speech to the rhythms that underlie both syntax and phonemes, a reduction that also removes any declarative expression of myself as speaker. See *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, translated by Ronald Speirs, edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 80.

3. Pictures and their structure

In speech, the highest and most tangible level we have described is that of words and grammar, that of syntactic structure in sentences and arguments. We begin with this more visible level.

In pictures, the analogy to vocabulary and grammar, the analogy to syntactic structure, is the arrangement of images into a larger whole. A painting is one image, just as an argument or a sentence is one statement, but the painting also contains parts, which in turn also are pictures, and the parts are placed by the artist into an ordered whole. These parts are not randomly distributed, no more than are the words in a statement. The painting enjoys a pictorial grammar. Consider two paintings of the Blessed Virgin by Murillo, *The Immaculate Conception* and *The Assumption*. The placement of the cherubs in each of the paintings is obviously significant, expressing the Virgin's innocence, her affinity with the angels, and her superiority over them. Consider the painting of *Napoleon at the Battle of Wagram*, by Horace Vernet. The emperor and his horse are both looking in the same direction, both are tensed and alert, Napoleon is looking through a spyglass and receiving dispatches and is clearly in control. The smoky darkness of the battle in the distance, the wounded officer to the right, the mounted grenadiers and officers in their tall hats—all these elements combine to make a single statement or narrative about the general and the battle. For another image of the same personage, consider the triumphal *Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon and Coronation of the Empress Josephine* by Jacques-Louis David, with the arrangement, expression, and attire of the crowd of people in the image.¹³ All these partial pictures are like so many subordinate clauses in a sentence or so many steps in an argument: they are linked by pictorial grammar into one thought, one complex thing being stated. The location of the subordinate images within the overriding image, the overriding statement, is analogous to the syntactic placement of phrases within phrases in speech. The location of images within images is the syntax of the painting, and it is a structure that the viewer himself has to "pronounce" if he is to take in the image.

¹³ The full title of David's painting is *Consecration of the Emperor Napoleon and Coronation of the Empress Josephine at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris on 2 December 1804*.

In speech, we move downward from syntactic composition to phonemes, to the composition of vowels and consonants within words. Phonemes are deeper than nouns and verbs and other grammatical forms. I would suggest that in picturing, the analogue to vowels is color and the analogue to consonants is line. Here also, color and line are deeper, they are more elementary, than are images and their position. Furthermore, color is related to line much as vowels are related to consonants. Vowels are the fundamental, spontaneous, and emotive component in words, while consonants are more rational and need to be learned. Analogously, color is chthonic and affective, while line, *disegno*, is more rational and determinative. Lines clip, cut, and trim colors just as consonants define vowels. Indeed, it is often possible to convey the meaning of a sentence by writing down the consonants without the vowels, by giving only the instructions for pronunciation. The correlative to this in pictures is the drawing or the sketch, lines encompassing space without color. Shading, I might add, is an interesting intermediate case: it reflects the play of light into the bright and the dark, but it does not differentiate light into the color spectrum. Movies in black and white employ line and shading but no color, and they exhibit no less intelligence for that.

The British art historian Norbert Lynton recognizes the subrational character of color. In a review of an exhibition at the Royal Academy, he writes, "Color is notoriously difficult to engage with intellectually."¹⁴ He quotes John Gage as saying, "[I]n the nineteenth century color was still regarded with suspicion by many critics."¹⁵ The academic tradition considered color an ornament added to *disegno*, subversive if unconstrained by correct draughtsmanship and truth, revealing base animal instincts. To draw out my analogy, sheer color would be like sheer vowels, a wail rather than a word, or, as the poet Allen Ginsburg

¹⁴ Norbert Lynton, "Masters of Color: Derain to Kandinsky. Eighty masterpieces from the Merzbacher Collection," *Times Literary Supplement* (13 September 2002). See also John Gage, *Color and Culture. Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999), Chapter 7, "Disegno versus Colore."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

would have it, a “Howl” without the definition of reason.¹⁶ Ginsburg’s poem, incidentally, despite its title, had to make use of consonants and syntax if it was to be a poem at all, and even the title is more than a howl; the word *howl* frames, and so humanizes, the wolf’s “ow” with two consonants. Something similar happens with *bark*. The affinity of color with vowels is confirmed by Arthur Rimbaud’s *Sonnet des Voyelles*, in which he attributes a particular color to each of the five vowels; the first line of the poem reads, “A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles.”¹⁷

We have claimed that in pictures the syntax of images is analogous to the syntax of phrases in speech, and that color and line are analogous to vowels and consonants. Let us move on to the third and deepest level of language, the prosody or rhythm that underlies both words and sounds. There is something analogous to this in a picture, although it is not obvious what we should name it. We could use the terms applied to language and simply call it the rhythm or the cadence of the painting. The word *cadence* is not inappropriate. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists one of its meanings as, “Harmonious combination of colors,” and it quotes Swinburne, “The cadence of colors is just and noble: witness the red-leaved book . . . on the white cloth, the clear green jug on the table, the dim green bronze of the pitcher.” Adrian Stokes speaks about this rhythm and calls it “movement.” He describes having an experience in which colors entered into unexpected harmony with one another: “[T]he young leaf-greens of intense luminosity and of the right area and disposition...had entered into

¹⁶ Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock both give up on *disegno* as well as representation, but they cannot do away with color. Their work is the opposite of a line drawing. It is interesting to note, however, that Rothko claimed that his work was governed by a metric and not just by color. In a response to a claim that it is the color that dominates in Rothko’s work, John Gage writes, “For the painter himself this was far from being a matter of course, and he told Phillips [Duncan Phillips of the Phillips collection in Washington, D.C.] that ‘not color, but measures were of greatest importance to him.’” “Rothko: Color as Subject,” in *Mark Rothko*, edited by Jeffrey Weiss (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 248.

¹⁷ My thanks to Kevin White for the reference to Rimbaud, as well as for some of the finer points about consonants in the words *howl* and *bark*.

companionship with the red, and with each other...In my opinion every picture that really 'works' possesses in infinite reduplication this kind of relationship, this kind of *movement*."¹⁸ Still another name for this phenomenon can be found in a remark by Jeryldene M. Wood, who writes about a painting by Piero della Francesca and mentions "the *fluency* of Piero's picture as a whole."¹⁹ The remark is especially pertinent, because the rhythm of an image can be presented only when the picture is taken as a whole.

The rhythm of a picture lies not only in the balance of colors, in which, for example, this red patch on the one side picks up something red on the other; it is also the cadence of the images as they make up the whole; it is the visual rhapsody of meanings, colors, and lines. Even the monochromatic, shaded background of a painting, such as the brown backdrop in a Rembrandt portrait or the charcoal grey or burnt and raw umber background in a work by Chardin, enters into this pictorial rhythm. This prosody is harder to distinguish than the more clearly defined images, lines, and colors, but we do sense this rhythm and we know when it is violated, when the colors do not rhyme, or when the lines and images look clumsy or when they unintentionally jar the viewer. A good positive example of such rhythm, one that is almost tangible, can be found in Piet Mondrian's aptly named *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, which captures not only the beat of the music but the tempo of New York City, as would be obvious to anyone who has spent some time there. A sense for such cadence is probably the most unteachable thing in picturing. It underlies and encases both the sensibility and the intelligence in painting.²⁰

¹⁸ Adrian Stokes, *Colour and Form* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1950 [1937]), p. 109; italics original.

¹⁹ Jeryldene M. Wood, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Piero della Francesca*, edited by Jeryldene M. Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 7; my italics.

²⁰ Piero della Francesca wrote a treatise on painting entitled *De Prospectiva Pingendi* (Ravenna: Danilo Montanari, 2000). At the beginning of the work (p. 7) he says, "Painting contains in itself three principal parts, which we say are design (*disegno*), composition (*commensuratio*), and color (*colorare*)." His list encompasses only two of the three dimensions that we have distinguished (composition of images, and color and line). He does not

In speech, rhythm comes into clear prominence in singing, where it underlies both the vowels and the thoughts, and it is more perceptible and measurable because of the temporal nature of speech and song, but cadence is also present in the arrangement of colors, lines, and images. After all, it takes time to be able to “read” a painting. We appreciate a painting properly only when we have lingered over it, when we have seen it many times and have looked at it at different times of day and during different moods of our own. It is especially the rhythm of the painting that needs this kind of repeated, protracted study, and only if the cadences of the picture have been caught (and the noun is plural because there will be many of them) will the significance of the image come to light. Indeed, the rhythm is a kind of repository in which further meanings, further articulations in the painting are kept in store, and it introduces a temporal aspect into the activity of viewing a painting.²¹

I wish to conclude this comparison of pictures and words by using some sentences from Edith Wharton. In her short novel, *False Dawn*, she tells about a man, Lewis Raycie, who in the 1840s bought some old Italian paintings and tried to exhibit them at his home in New York. They were in fact painted by important artists, but no one recognized or appreciated them. Wharton describes the situation by mingling terms that pertain to pictures with terms that pertain to speech. She describes the man’s hopes: “Once let the pictures be seen by educated and intelligent people, and they would speak for themselves especially if he were at hand to interpret them.” But the exhibition was a catastrophic failure: “Even with Lewis as interpreter, the pictures failed to make themselves heard.”²² What does it mean for a picture to “make itself heard”? It means that the image will provoke the viewer into the

mention anything equivalent to cadence, but the reason for this omission may be the fact that the book gives instruction on how to use perspective. Rhythm is too deep in the structure of painting to be teachable.

²¹ An important contrast between speech and painting lies in the fact that speech moves us away from the words to the thing, while pictures bring the thing into themselves. There is, therefore, an interesting “spatial” difference between the two modes of presentation.

²² Edith Wharton, “False Dawn,” in *Old New York* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952 [1924]), pp. 60-61.

syntactic action that lets the composition of images, the patterning of colors and lines, and the cadences of the whole come to light. The viewer will also be able to speak intelligently about the picture, but only as an indication that he has taken in what the picture is, that is, that he has grasped what is identifiable within it.

4. Pictorial intelligence and human happiness

So far my remarks have been rather formal. We have discussed the three linguistic levels of syntax, phonemes, and prosody, and the three pictorial levels of configuration, line and color, and cadence. So far we have not spoken about the content, about what is said or what is depicted, nor have we discussed the kind of intelligence that is needed for such presentation. Let us speak primarily about the intelligence that occurs in depiction. What does it reveal and how does it reveal it?

I wish to claim that picturing deals with human happiness, the *eudaimonia* described in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. We as human beings, by our simple existence, introduce the most dramatic activity in the universe, the activity of choosing the things that either achieve or lose our beatitude. We are the kind of thing that can be, or can fail to be, happy, the kind of thing for whom happiness becomes an issue. We are caught up in this pursuit, and hence we become an issue for ourselves. We never just want to get something done; we always know that we are doing it and that what we do will modify how we will be. We are ineluctably so involved; we can't help it; we do not have a choice in the matter. We can make choices that either achieve or prevent our happiness (it can be achieved in no other way except through our choosing), but we do not have any choice about being the kind of thing that wants and needs to be happy. When philosophy describes the human being as wanting and needing to be happy, it describes an essential necessity, something neither cultural nor optional. We are that kind of part of the universe, that kind of entity, and we install that kind of activity into the world. In an unpublished lecture on Henry James, Francis Slade, echoing and modifying Aristotle, says, "This is what poetry imitates: the action that actualizes or destroys our beatitude."²³ The term *poetry* does not mean just the sonnet, epic, or

²³The lecture was given at St. Francis College on April 22, 2003. I am grateful to Francis Slade for notes of his lecture and permission to quote from them. I

tragedy; it can mean the novel, and it can also mean a depiction. Specifically, it can mean a portrait.

We must distinguish between a likeness and a portrait. A likeness is a mere copy of a person; it shows what he looks like. It gives you enough to be able to identify the person. A portrait is more than this; it is a depiction of an essay at beatitude. It presents, poetically, someone's shot at happiness and self-identity. It presents what Aristotle would call a "first substance," an individual entity, an instance of the species man, but it does not present that substance as a mere compound; it presents that entity as an essence, with a necessity and a definition. This definition is individualized (it is a *first* substance), but it is also able to be universal, that is, it can flow back on life, and more specifically it can become identifiable with the persons who view it, the other individuals who are also an issue for themselves, who are also engaged in beatitude.²⁴ The portrait contains a lot of images, a lot of subordinate clauses. It presents the person's face, but also his configuration, his posture, his clothing, and some of his things, those relevant to his way of being. If the portrait is serious and successful, if it is poetic and not a mere likeness, the person depicted in it will look out at us and declare, "This is what I have done and what, consequently, I am. This is what I have done with the chance I was given." The face and the things express a life, a choice and choices for or against beatitude. It is up to the painter to capture this, and to do so by his combinatorics of image within image, lines enclosing colors, and the cadences underlying it all. A mere likeness is a lot less than this; it succeeds if the viewer can

am also grateful to him for telling me about Edmund Waller's poem, which I use at the end of this essay.

²⁴ One might ask whether the association of portraits with an individual's happiness is found especially in art that has been influenced by Christian belief. See Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image. An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, translated by Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 265: "The unrepeatable and continuing individuality of the human subject, the presence of a personal soul within, animates the portrait as it has been practiced in Europe since the Middle Ages." As a further point, we might say that the memory we each have of ourselves is something like a portrait, presenting, in a dramatic way, to ourselves as the exclusive audience, the self-identity we carry with us so long as we live.

simply recognize who the subject is, if he can just *identify* him; a portrait of someone succeeds if it enables the viewer to *understand* him. It does not just show; it portrays. As Sir Joshua Reynolds put it, "It is not the eye, it is the mind which the painter of genius desires to address..."²⁵

Like all works of art, a portrait exercises what Thomas Prufer has called "reflux" on life.²⁶ The image does not just present itself to us; it "flows back" on life and enables us to experience things as articulated wholes. In Hans-Georg Gadamer's phrase, we see the world "with sight schooled by art."²⁷ John Gage expresses this in an elegantly compressed way; he describes harmonious combinations of colors and says, "It is in pictures, or *when we see in terms of pictures*, that these color-relationships take on a coherence."²⁸ We not only see pictures; we also become able to "see in terms of pictures," that is, we learn to experience the world in the terms the image conferred on us, and, when we do so, patterns show up that would not have been visible otherwise. What Gage says about colors is true about human action; life and action become framed into wholes and parts that they would not enjoy without the imprint of drama and picturing. As Slade puts it, "The imitated action flows back over...actual action, and it is by virtue of the reflux of imitated action, which is 'tragic,' that the actual action is seeable as tragic, is displayed as tragic."²⁹ We become able to experience life in the terms the depiction affords us: "This is how art makes us see life. Without the art of tragedy, life could not be experienced as tragic." We come to see

²⁵ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, edited by Robert R. Wark (San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1959), p. 50. See also p. 57, where Reynolds mentions "this exertion of mind, which is the only circumstance that truly ennobles our art."

²⁶ Thomas Prufer, "Providence and Imitation: Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Aristotle's Poetics," in *Recapitulations* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), pp. 18-19.

²⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful, and Other Essays*, edited by Robert Bernasconi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 31. The German reads, "mit durch die Kunst erzogenen Augen."

²⁸ Gage, *Color and Culture*, p. 9; italics added.

²⁹ Slade makes this point in the lecture mentioned above in note #23.

objects and other people in terms of pictures, but more importantly, we also come to “see” ourselves in a more understandable way, as also engaged in the attempt at happiness that is depicted in the portrait. An image conveys not just knowledge about the world but self-knowledge as well; as Slade says, “Art is entangled with life with the aim of untangling life by making it clear to itself.” Everyone, the greatest and the least, needs such imaging to help define himself.

A portrait is the clearest instance of a visual imitation of “the action that actualizes or destroys our beatitude,” but other forms of painting, such as landscapes and street scenes, can also be related to human conduct. I would like to quote Francis Slade again, this time from a conversation. He and I once went to an exhibition of the paintings of John Singer Sargent. Some of the pictures in the show represented people in various settings: on the bank of a river, in a restaurant, on a street, in an interior. Slade observed that in Sargent’s paintings the settings were always such that people could be at home in them. I replied that Sargent was very different from Edward Hopper in that respect; in Hopper’s paintings, nobody is at home. And Slade responded: “It’s more than that. They aren’t at home “*and they know it.*” Not without reason has Hopper been called “the visual laureate of heartbreak hotel.”³⁰

The point I wish to make is that landscapes, seascapes, and street scenes are presented as backgrounds for the possibility of human choices. They present worlds in which something like us can be. Even in landscapes and seascapes, poetry imitates and intimates action or at least a setting for action, and a setting with a certain quality: as enabling the action, or as hindering, threatening, inviting, absorbing, scorning, or annihilating it. Even Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko express a context for human being. They present a particular setting, or even, by implication, the universe as such, as a place that is or is not habitable, a place where beatitude can or cannot be sought. In extreme instances, they may present a place where it would be laughable to seek happiness, but even then they cannot extinguish our search for it.

³⁰ Peter Campbell, “At Tate Modern,” *London Review of Books* (24 June 2004): p. 33. Slade added the observation that Hopper’s *Nighthawks* was a favorite of Jean-Paul Sartre, and it is obvious why.

Eliminating any context in which beatitude can be sought, while still keeping the search for it alive, is precisely what nihilism is. Among contemporary artists Francis Bacon may be the most vivid example of this combination.

5. Pictorial categoriality

What kind of intelligence is at work when we thoughtfully read a portrait as expressing an attempt at happiness? What sort of categoriality is at work, what kind of categorial intuition takes place? Consider as an analogue the way in which a diagram functions to illustrate and condense a complicated set of events and relationships in the world. Just drawing the right lines in a diagram will present a situation in a simple and easily perceptible way; it will provide a solution to a problem and put a confused, troubled mind to rest. A diagram conjugates a complex situation. Likewise, suppose that we know a certain person, perhaps a famous individual or just a friend who has lived a largely private life, and suppose we see a thoughtful portrait of him. What we see there is something like a few strategic, diagrammatic lines drawn through the shape of that person. The portrait is like a diagram in which not just a mathematical but a moral unity is constituted, and in which more than lines are put into composition. It is a presentation of a whole life in its significant, articulated parts. It provides just the right phantasm for an insight into *this* substance. The artist knew which lines to draw, what colors to choose, what things and features to highlight as the properties of that person. He thereby reveals the substance of that person and the substance of that life, which is, after all, simply the person unfolded. The portrait enfolds what the life unfolds. If the artist succeeds in capturing his subject, if he does depict this particular attempt at beatitude, he achieves a solution and a resolution of the presentational problem he undertook when he began the painting. He has exercised his artistic intelligence, not just in resolving the formal structures of composition, line and color, and rhythm, but in depicting an attempt at happiness, a human being.

The portrait calls for intelligence (*intellectus* or *nous*) and not reasoning (*ratiocinatio* or *sylogismos*). You do not draw inferences when you view the painting. You might carry out inferences when you are studying the painting, when you are decoding the symbols, being

informed about the iconography, and examining the patterns of line and color; but when you see the painting as a whole, you engage not in inference but in articulated identification, in categorial synthesis, in an act of intelligence, an act of understanding. Furthermore, this insight makes an impact on you as the viewer, because of the way art flows back into life, the way in which the form expressed in the depiction shapes our own being and the life we live. We are therefore moved, we rejoice or we are stunned, not because we have solved a puzzle but because we have understood something about the kind of actuality we call happiness. We do not *infer* that the fact depicted in the portrait also applies to us; we grasp the form and its application in a single insight, a kind of “pairing,” to use Husserl’s term.³¹ The intelligence in question encompasses the images and their relationships, the colors and lines, and also the cadences of the portrait, which envelop the picture in a way different from the way the frame encloses it and makes it one. The underlying rhythm is the reservoir for the painting while the frame is the fence that surrounds it.

The frame of a painting isolates the image. The image so detached then flows back on life; it rejoins the world through its reflux, not through its spatial contiguity. Henry James gives a striking illustration of these two themes, the frame of a picture and the merging of a painting with life. In *The Ambassadors*, the protagonist, Lambert Strether, makes an excursion from Paris into the French countryside.³² His outing is described as taking place within “a certain small Lambinet,” a landscape painting that he saw years earlier at a Boston dealer’s, which he could not afford but had never forgotten. The frame is mentioned: “The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines,” and an identification between image and life takes place: “It was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet. Moreover, he was freely walking about in it.” Later, as he lay on the grass and took a nap, he “lost himself anew in Lambinet,” and “He really continued in the picture . . . all the rest of this rambling day.” No matter where he walked, he had “not once overstepped the oblong gilt frame. The frame had drawn itself out for him, as much as you please.”

³¹ On the concept of pairing see Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, translated by Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), p. 51.

³² Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, book 11, chapter 3.

Strether's excursion sets the stage for the novel's central discovery and reversal. Something analogous happens, with a similar play of identities and differences, in *The Wings of the Dove*, when Milly Theall views a portrait of a woman by Agnolo Bronzino and finds herself identified with the personage.³³ This event also involves something of a discovery and reversal, because it immediately precedes the first intimation of Milly's fatal illness.

I have a final point to make about the cadence of a work of art. My understanding of this dimension must be distinguished from the theory that lay behind nonrepresentational painting in the 20th century. The original members of this movement, Kandinsky, Malevich, and to a lesser degree Mondrian, were theosophists.³⁴ They thought that art could express ultimate, quasi-divine powers of the universe. To reach these forces the artists bypassed individual things. The rhythms they were after were cosmic, analogous to the laws of nature that Francis Bacon said were behind the more particular forms of things, the laws of nature into which individual things and species could be resolved. These artists wanted to express not the truth of particular objects or even particular kinds of objects, not things they might imitate, not a nature that they might repeat, but the truth that lay hidden *behind* such particularities and not in them, a truth that only artists could reach and one that they could reveal to others. They wanted something analogous to a song without words. In what was called "supremacist" art, the artist was taken to be a prophet and not just a craftsman. He would share in the creative process of the universe and would be in touch with rhythms that were universal. The artist posits and does not copy; he does not subordinate himself to the way things seem to be. As Alain Besançon says about Malevich, "Ecstasy and mystical knowledge give access to the infinite, to the unreality of the phenomenon..."³⁵ and, "The task of man is to wrest himself from the phenomenon, the

³³ Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove*, chapter 11.

³⁴ See the treatment of these artists by Besançon, *The Forbidden Image*, pp. 321-77. He considers their ideas a modern version of iconoclasm. At the end of his career, however, Kandinsky returned to representation and depicted fanciful biomorphic images.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 366.

figurative, and to sink into the mystery of the universe...But the universe—in other words, God—does not think. Only man thinks, and it is through thought that he will identify with the universe, that is, with God.”³⁶

My treatment of the rhythmic level in speech and in painting would keep us from overshooting the individual object. I would claim that the cadence in question is proper to this individual speech and this individual painting; it is not cosmic or universal. The rhythm underlies these particular lines, colors, and images, and it could not exist without them. The formal causes define the more material elements and make them be what they are. Furthermore, I would observe that not only speech and depiction but individual entities each have their own built-in tempo, their own temporality, as part of their substance.³⁷ All living things have their biological rhythms, their daily and seasonal cycles, as well as their deeper genetic cadences that let them unfold as entities. The expression of genes in a cell needs an internal clock, as the regulatory genes turn the others on and off, and even atoms and molecules have their vibrations and harmonies. Things do not dissolve into cosmic laws; there are forms and finalities; things are differentiated from one another; in a word, there *are* entities and light

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 369-70. I would have to differ with Gadamer's analysis of nonrepresentational art in "Art and Imitation," in *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp. 92-104. He sees it as mimetic, but not in either a Kantian or Aristotelian way; he says that it calls to mind Pythagorean doctrines about mathematical order in the cosmos. Modern art, he says, reflects and imitates this deep-seated pattern, not the forms of things. He claims that such a reduction is necessary because our modern industrial world has marginalized ritual and myth and has "also succeeded in destroying things," so that nothing familiar remains to be imitated or expressed in art (p. 102). What modern art does offer is "a pledge of order" when everything familiar is dissolving (p. 104). I would reply that Gadamer concedes too much to the technological age, and seems, in this passage, to capitulate to it. There still are things that provide a measure and a telos: not only organic entities, but also relationships, situations, and actions that need to be artistically registered for us.

³⁷ See Russell Foster and Leon Kreitzman, *Rhythms of Life. The Biological Clocks that Control the Daily Lives of Every Living Thing* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004).

plays on them. Things are real and they can be imitated. The rhythms of particular things are differentiated from one another. In the case of human beings, the biological time provides a context for a temporality that involves memories, anticipations, and choices, which make up a human life. The end of speech and depiction is to show what things and persons are and how they present themselves, not to dissolve them in view of a deeper truth. Phenomena are not unreal; the cadences in speech and pictures bear witness to the way things are.

6. Christian intelligence in pictures

Christian art, the depiction of Christian things, is also an imitation of the action directed toward beatitude, but the action in question and the beatitude it is involved with take on a different tone. The modification is not just cultural but theological. Christian belief understands itself to transcend cultures even while it finds its place in them. The decisive action for Christian faith is what God has done in the world, the action of Incarnation and Redemption. God's work of Creation provides a background for this redemptive performance, and so the world itself is also depicted differently. The landscape of the world is not just a habitation for men but a place in which the Son of God can dwell and has dwelt. Christian art, therefore, presents and celebrates God's own beatitude, the happiness that is God's own life, which he has presented to us through the Death and Resurrection of Christ. Every Christian painting presents God's glory, his *doxa*, a Greek term that must be taken in its multiple senses of glory, appearance, doctrine, and truth, all of which are present in the compound term *orthodoxy*. Every Christian painting serves to convey the central message of the gospels that is summarized in the line of the *Benedictus*: "to give knowledge of salvation to his people, *ad dandam scientiam salutis plebi eius*."

What would the Christian faith be without its images? The Creed calls for the complementarity of depiction. How would the manifestation of the Incarnation be sustained without its reflection in pictures? Without images would it not become only a matter of words, and hence a gnostic illumination, a matter of thinking and not action? The iconoclastic heresy takes on deeper meaning when we ask this question, and the inevitability of its condemnation becomes more apparent. In Christian liturgy, the mystery of the sacrament must be

played off against the glorious and brilliant iconostasis, as well as the statues and stained-glass windows. Christian images are not just pedagogical devices; they are witnesses to the truth of the Incarnation and the embodiment of grace. They help distinguish Christian faith from the Jewish and the Muslim by presenting the Incarnation to us in a way that words alone could not do. One might also think of the complex visual beauty of a fine cathedral at Solemn Mass. Catholicism seems to know how to compose very simple images into very complex ones. Not only Jews and Muslims but also some Protestants seem to be in principle people of the word alone, and hence iconoclastic. Picturing seems to be a pagan remnant that Catholicism can incorporate and transform but that the other religions cannot.³⁸

The primary location for Christian images is not the art gallery but the church, monastery, convent, or home. Such pictures are meant to be lived with. In religious imagery, the “lingering examination of the original”³⁹ that every painting demands is carried out, not as a merely intellectual inquiry, but as a prayer, which achieves its focus and intensity because the image makes present, pictorially, God’s glory or its presence in one of the saints. Christian images can present a human being, an essay at happiness, but in this case the beatitude is accomplished not just by deeds but by grace. The image presents God’s grace and glory shining through, but in a way specific to this particular saint, to the Blessed Virgin or St. Peter, to St. Francis Xavier or St. Teresa of Avila. Jan van Eyck and Fra Angelico depict more than people who have no regrets for what they have done with their lives. They depict people who have entered into a kind of happiness different from the kind determined simply by what we do ourselves, and it is also different, in ways that deserve exploration, from the beatitude depicted in images of the Buddha and his attendant Boddhisatvas.

³⁸ This affinity with imaging has been less true of the Catholic liturgy of the past thirty-five years, which is much more verbal and less ritualistic, less visually compositional, than the centuries-old liturgy that preceded it.

³⁹ The phrase is from John Walsh, “Pictures, Tears, Lights, and Seats,” in *Whose Muse? Museums and the Public Trust*, edited by James Cuno (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 79.

Landscapes are also modified in Christian art. Here I would like to quote Besançon again. He writes about French Impressionist painting and says: "One is struck by the well-being (*le bien-être*) that radiates from it, its joyful harmony, its pleasure in contemplating creatures and landscapes, all of which is more in keeping with the Christian spirit than are the troubled and suspicious works of symbolism..."⁴⁰ He admits that people like Cézanne and Monet might have been anticlerical, "*parfaits mangeurs de curés*," but he insists that they were children of a civilization that the Catholic Church had marked by her education,⁴¹ and he also claims that "the great epochs of *Christianisme* are always marked by the flowering of a happy lay culture (*une culture laïque heureuse*)."⁴² Christian art, even as an unconscious inheritance, rejoices in the world as created by God, as a place where beatitude can be attained, where, one believes, the incoherence of life has been resolved by the redemptive Death and Resurrection of the Incarnate Son of God.⁴³

Christian truth is present not only in the iconography of a work of Christian art. It extends to the other levels, from the placement of images to the combination of line and color to the cadences of the picture. All of these bodily elements become ingredient in the truth that is disclosed. They become ingredient not only as elements in the picture, but also as representing elements of the material world, which was created by God in the beginning, was incorporated into his act of Redemption, and will be transformed at the end of time, when it will become obvious what the body and flesh really are. Robert E. Wood has

⁴⁰ Alain Besançon, *La confusion des langues. La crise idéologique de l'Église* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1978), p. 43. See also, *Trois tentations dans l'Église* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1996), p. 28.

⁴¹ Besançon, *La confusion des langues*, p. 44.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴³ Besançon makes similar points in other passages. See *The Forbidden Image*, p. 33: "Plato posits the fundamental theological principle on which all art rests: that the world is good." On page 265: "These points, it seems, can be reduced to one: creation is good." On page 238, he speaks about 17th and 18th century French painting and says, "The reflection of that image [of God] . . . illuminated profane art, provided a sense of well-being, a happiness about being in the world which was also praise of its Creator."

examined Christian art in relation to “the fundamentally incarnate character of Christian religion, rooted in the belief in God’s own incarnation and culminating in the resurrection of the body.”⁴⁴ Christian truth could not have been disclosed without the body, and so Christian intelligence does not escape from the material substrate but incorporates it into its faith. It is not gnostic and therefore eschews iconoclasm of any form, whether Byzantine, Reformed, or Modern. Christian art is essentially representational, and it depicts each thing and person, each *tode ti*, with its own internal necessity, as existing in its own form of being, both created and graced.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Robert E. Wood, *Placing Aesthetics. Reflections on the Philosophic Tradition* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999), p. 327.

⁴⁵As an epilogue to my essay, I comment on Edmund Waller’s poem, *To Vandyck*. It speaks eloquently about the presentational possibilities in a picture and about the effect a portrait has on the viewer. The artist’s skill does not just entertain the viewer but makes him love the thing depicted:

*Rare Artisan, whose pencil moves
Not our delights alone, but loves!
From thy shop of beauty we
Slaves return, that enter'd free.*

People respond not simply to the image but to the thing imaged. In the one case, it is a response to someone unknown:

*The heedless lover does not know
Whose eyes they are that wound him so;
But, confounded with thy art,
Inquires her name that has his heart.*

In the other case, a response to someone once known:

*Another, who did long refrain,
Feels his old wound bleed fresh again
With dear remembrance of that face,
Where now he reads new hope of grace*

The painter’s work is not just an inert likeness or an aesthetic object, but presents the thing itself, in this case the face, with its own causal efficiency:

*Strange! that thy hand should not inspire
The beauty only, but the fire;
Not the form alone, and grace,
But act and power of a face.*