



An Aesthetics of Insight¹

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1 Introduction

The late Arthur Danto claimed that through a special act of identification, “an artwork becomes a metaphor for life, and life is transfigured” (Danto 1981: 172). This chapter is an attempt to take Danto’s idea seriously, though I pursue it in a way that is in keeping with the spirit but not the letter of his theory. The kind of identification that Danto has in mind is largely character-based, such as when one sees, “oneself as Anna Karenina, Isabelle Archer, or Elizabeth Bennett” (Danto, *ibid.*). My interest is in a broader act of identification, one that on first hearing sounds implausible. What I will explore here is how a work itself, as a formal object that organizes a sense of its subject matter, can function as the primary vehicle of metaphoric identification and,

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ultimately, of that grander achievement Danto mentions: a transfiguration of “life.” This transfiguration is not, of course, of the thing but our apprehension of it: the world is not changed so much as are our possibilities for cognizing it. Approaching matters this way not only helps us to understand the formal and aesthetic significance of the kinds of insight art is apt to yield; it answers a much more fundamental question, one that is often ignored by, but clearly essential to, many standing accounts of art’s ability to contribute to understanding. If we are to stage intelligibly the philosophical question of how art can offer forms of worldly insight, we must first explain how a work, especially of the fictional sort I shall focus on here, can so much as come to be *about* the world. We implicitly acknowledge the existence of a basic link between work and world when we issue claims on behalf of the moral, political, psychological (and so on) significance of art: whenever we speak in a way that casts an artwork as bearing a form of aboutness that places “life” within its reflective purview. As I will argue, this link is usually best seen as figurative and the form of aboutness it establishes metaphorical, and this reveals a sensible strategy for grounding many of our more particular theoretical commitments concerning the cultural and cognitive values of art.

To complicate matters, I ask one more question. How can the kind of insight this link makes possible be properly critical? That is, how can it help us to understand the political and moral aspirations of art that wishes not merely to show “life” but to stand in judgement of it or even reconstitute our understanding of it? Art of this sort tends to trade in images that are condemnatory, fraught, and disruptive, and they often accomplish their particular critical effect by calling on us to see our world in a wholly unflattering light. “Beauty” is might seem an awkward term for describing the aesthetic dimension of this, and my essay will therefore take a liberal approach to the topic of this volume. But even if it does not engage the theory of beauty to explain how artworks, as metaphors for life, provide a lens through which to see the world, it does result in a view that should speak directly to the interests of the philosopher of beauty. Ultimately, an approach such as the one I outline here is one way of doing justice to an old and appealing

idea: part of the particular value of art is that it aestheticizes perception, thought, feeling, offering us a sense of what it means to look at the world as though art. It would be unwise to say that the world is therefore seen as beautiful art, since this might well conflict with the exact point of many artworks with critical aspirations. Nonetheless, in conclusion I will briefly suggest that the artwork-as-metaphor model I defend opens up an interesting possibility for thinking about the relationship between art, beauty, and the world beyond the work.

2 The Obscure Object of Understanding

I'll begin by situating my argument in a debate on which these matters clearly bear: artistic cognitivism.² This will take a moment, since part of the peculiar challenge of this debate is that of seeing whether there is even a problem at all (there is). Despite what its label suggests, the question that animates this debate isn't a narrowly or purely epistemic one, for instance the mere question of whether works of art yield what philosophers would be inclined to call knowledge or whether poems at times can offer up justified true beliefs. The debate is, or should be, the more philosophically capacious one of documenting the variety of ways in which artworks frame the world as an object of understanding, generate meanings which place what Danto calls "life" under its scope, or come to be about "reality" such that art, like various other of our central cultural practices, can be seen as in part a struggle to make sense of it. Why should it be a problem to assert any of this?

It is important to see what the problem is not and which kinds of solution will not do. Note immediately that merely showing that

² The debate goes by a number of names. It is common to call it the problem aesthetic cognitivism (or literary cognitivism, etc., depending on the kind of art one is exploring), and until recently it was often referred to simply as a defense of the humanistic value of art. I follow Walden (2015) in describing it as the problem of artistic cognitivism because, as I pursue it here, it is essentially a question about whether artistic modes of production make possible the offering of certain forms of insight and understanding: do specific kinds of art (the writing of a novel, a lyric, etc.) carry with them specific kinds of cognitive affordance?

we can find reflected in the form or content of a work of art “information” of an historical, philosophical, or political nature will not provide an answer to the philosophical question that makes this debate worthy of consideration. A proper problem reveals itself only when we insist that the insight we ascribe to a work must be internal to its artistic project, tethered in some manner to a point it struggles to articulate: to something we can reasonably claim that *it* asks us to see.³ It will take some time to bring to clarity just what this means, but it is clear enough what it excludes: all those popular theories that explore the cognitively, morally, and affectively salutary effects of engaging with art but which entirely fail to show that any actual artwork aims at producing such effects.⁴ There is no harm in championing art’s ability to improve our capacity for empathy, cultivate virtuous habits of perception, aid us in discerning the complexity of moral predicament, get us to consider subject positions alien to our own, and so on. The point is that claims of this sort only become philosophically and aesthetically interesting if the insight we claim to have taken from a work can in some manner be shown to be present in the work of art; otherwise the work cannot quite be said to have an insight to share: it cannot be said to *offer* an object of understanding. As such, it is unclear what problem our “solution” resolves, and we appear to be engaged in the nearly limitless quest

³ There is the problem of whether a cognitivist must be a singularist and/or realist about literary meaning. The idea is that if we wish to say that an artwork yields an insight, our position will remain ungrounded until we can also demonstrate that these insights actually inhere in works such that we can get away with claiming, crudely put, “*it* shows us *this*.” Discussing this matter satisfactorily would require another essay. For two studies that take this problem seriously, see Nannicelli (2017) and Thomson-Jones (2012).

⁴ It is important to remember that once we make a claim on behalf of a work’s supposed moral or cognitive value, we are then obliged to ask the “interaction” question, that is, to consider whether it contributes at all to the artistic or aesthetic success of a work; if not it would appear to be irrelevant to the work’s status *as a work of art*. But if the moral or cognitive good is not in some sense internal to the work and part of its artistic project, it is unclear how we can even stage this question

to catalogue all the ways in which we can use art in our personal projects of becoming better, smarter, and nicer. This tells us precious little about what works of art *do*, which is ultimately what we are trying to understand here.⁵

If we must locate the object of understanding in the work of art, as a content it strives to articulate and make available to the mind, a proper philosophical problem begins to appear, since it is here that many of our theories of language, mind, and of course art conspire against us. The traditional way of bringing the problem to view would be along these lines. First, think of how language and not literature works. Consider, for instance, the terms much philosophy of language tells us are essential to explaining how language achieves, in the broadest sense possible, “aboutness.” How do thought and speech come to be about something, anything, and, in so doing, cast the world as this way rather than that, in a manner that renders questions of truth and falsity minimally intelligible? Anyone with modest exposure to the philosophy of language knows that the terms that will have a heavy showing in common answers to these questions will be *reference*, *representation*, *meaning*, and *truth*. A particular theory might make a rather big deal of one of these terms and little of another; but in the tradition of 20c analytic philosophy these terms play a very privileged role.

Now consider works of fictional literature, which bring to view the general problem of artistic cognitivism most effectively. In these works we clearly have a kind of reference, representation, truth, and meaning. But the objects these works yield and the content they produce are, well, fictional, and hence the direction of fit seems all wrong for a defense of cognitivism. We have fictional reference, representations of imagined rather than real states of affairs, and these generate meanings that convey information about the boundaries of a fiction world and so yield merely fictional truths. Thus we have aboutness in literary fiction, but it fails to be of the sort that can link its language to the desired thing: the world,

⁵ I develop this line of argument in considerable detail in Gibson (2007), Chapter 1.

the real, or whatever one wishes to call the realm we inhabit but King Lear, Isabelle Archer, and Captain Ahab do not.⁶

We can now recast the problem in plainer terms: the cognitivist appears to be committed to showing that works of fiction articulate truths, but, when the work of art speaks, it apparently speaks of fictions and fictions alone. *Ex hypothesi*, it does not say anything of cognitive consequence.⁷ Few will hear this as stating an irresolvable paradox, for the terms in which the problem is stated are so general that they leave room for the making of more nuanced claims about the language of literature and its cognitive possibilities. But this does provide a serviceable sense of what the problem is and the burdens we assume when setting out to solve it.

Before concluding this discussion, I want to draw attention to what might seem an intuitive and immediate solution to this problem. Surely it cannot be the case that to call an artwork “fictional” or to describe its content as “imaginative” is to cast it as from beginning to end a concatenation of sentences all of which represent purely made-up beings and events. When Melville writes, “Meanwhile Bartleby sat in his hermitage, oblivious to every thing but his own particular business there,”⁸ we have a manifestly fictional utterance, the content of which we are intended, presumably, to imagine rather than to believe. But consider a passage of this sort:

⁶ Note that none of this presupposes realism about the “actual” world we contrast with the imagined worlds of art. One can hear the problem in realist terms, as I prefer; but it will hold for idealists, constructivists, and the like, since, presumably, all will countenance a distinction between fictional, false, and ‘true’ representations, however much they will disagree about what these differences will consist in. Clearly, regardless of one’s broader metaphysical commitments, all will grant that we justifiably assume different cognitive, interpretive, and agential stances towards representations we take to be fictional, false, or true, lest we speak and behave in utterly inexplicable and impractical ways. This is all that is needed to get the problem afoot.

⁷ I here play on Lamarque’s influential wording of the problem. “The particulars presented in a novel are *fictional*, and how can any view, however objective, of *fictional* particulars, give us truth? *Ex hypothesi*, it is not a view of the real world.” Lamarque (1996: 105).

⁸ Melville (1997: 19).

So true it is, and so terrible, too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not. They err who would assert that invariably this is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill. To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it.⁹

While this passage has a functional and aesthetic role in the overall story of *Bartleby the Scrivener* – it would be wrongheaded to read it as an intrusion of philosophical discourse intended to disrupt rather than enliven the work’s narrative discourse – it should be tempting to see if we can treat it as a “genuine”¹⁰ utterance the proper understanding of which requires readers to assume a stance of belief and not, or not merely, make-believe in respect to it.¹¹ If this sounds uncontroversial, be assured that many traditional theories of fiction cannot accommodate it. Over the past ten years figures such as Kathleen Stock, Derek Matravers, David

⁹ *Ibid.*: 30.

¹⁰ By “genuine” utterance I mean nothing more than that the appropriate cognitive stance towards the content is belief (or disbelief). The term “genuine” is rhetorically unfortunate, since it can seem to imply a loss of something (authenticity, seriousness, significance) in utterances that are not granted this status, such as fictional utterances. I do not worry about this here, since my positive argument will show the role of utterances, fictional or otherwise, to be of little importance.

¹¹ Important to this move is the idea that the same content can be an object of both belief and imagination/make-believe. If it is assumed, as it has been, that our basic and guiding cognitive stance toward content in a work of fiction is one of make-believe or “imagining that”, then the believing of the content of these genuine-utterances-in-fiction must be compatible with imagining them, since it is supposed that the latter obtains in respect to all content occurring in a work of fiction. Philosophers such as Friend (2008) and Matravers (2014) have called into question the idea of a basic fictive stance and the ubiquity of imagination in our engagement with fictional works.

Davies, and Stacie Friend¹² have taken this temptation seriously and staged a critique of our received theories of fiction and their habit of subsuming the entirety of a work of fiction in a play of fictional reference or a game of make-believe. Eva-Maria Konrad helpfully calls this a turn to “compositionalist” definitions of fiction, according to which, “the reader is entitled to interpret some of the author’s utterances as factual discourse written with serious, information-imparting intentions” such that, “he is justified in gaining knowledge on the basis of these utterances” (Konrad 2017: 60). It is additionally argued, as one would hope, that these factual-utterances-in-fiction are not on cognitive par with clever statements to be found on coffee mugs or in the pontifications of a bore. Kathleen Stock, for example, enlists work on testimony-based belief to show that genuine utterances in fiction are often no less trustworthy than they are in historical works and thus that fictions can be a, “good source of information about the empirical world” (Stock 2017b: 39).

If it is true, as I claimed above, that the cognitivist must show the object of understanding to be in some manner internal to the work of art, in the form of a content it strives to articulate, the compositionalist offers a remarkably literal way of understanding what this demand amounts to and how we can satisfy it. Granted, making a fully wrought case for the compositionalist’s position is a tricky affair, since we have to explain how these fictional and genuine utterances hang together coherently in a work, how appreciation moves seamlessly from one to the other without disrupting attention and immersion, and then specify how readers know which utterances are to be imagined and which are to be believed. For the sake of argument, I will simply grant that compositionalists have sophisticated answers to these questions, and here I will assume the viability of their program. It is hard to

¹² See Stock (2017a and 2017b), Matravers (2014), Davies (2015), and Friend (2008). It is important to note that these philosophers take themselves to be primarily contributing to debates on the nature of fiction and not artistic cognitivism, though the difference between the two debates collapses in the contexts of the issues they explore.

imagine a more elegant solution to the problem of literary cognitivism, if indeed it is a solution.

3 Accretions & Axes

I concluded the last section with crude foreshadowing, but not because I now wish to subject the compositionalist to damning criticism. In a sense, the compositionalist's strategy represents a perfection of the debate on artistic cognitivism, at least of a dominant strand of it. It is that strand, storied and still with us, that tells us that works of fiction are suited to *imply*, *suggest*, *intimate*, *allude to* and otherwise hint at truth-evaluable claims about extra-fictional reality, since unambiguous and express statements of fact are apparently unavailable to artists. We can detect an implicit commitment to such a picture in many attempts to model works of fiction on thought experiments, enthymemes, elaborations of possibilities of experience, statements of hypotheses, and the like.¹³ These approaches tend to accept that the semantic surface of, say, a novel is thoroughly fictional and then go on to find oblique strategies for establishing an *indirect* line of communication between imagined worlds and the real one – “oblique” because the vast majority of literary works do not present themselves *as* thought experiments, enthymemes, or modal

¹³ There is a great variety of ways these positions have been developed, and my brief gloss is obviously insufficient as a criticism. For reasons that will become clear, they are especially open to the line of argument I am developing when they frame the indirect object of cognitive attention as a “propositionally characterizable claim.” (Davies 2016: 380) See Vidmar (2014) for a balanced and novel discussion of the idea that literary works can be read as elaborating hypotheses, if not quite delivering knowledge. Carroll (2002) and Davies (2007) offer influential and careful defenses of the idea that some works of literature can be read as a thought experiment. See Jukka Mikkonen (2013) for a novel defense of the idea that literary works can be modeled on utterances and function as enthymemes. See Gaskin (2013) for a defense of the modal claim that works of fiction can imply statements about the real world by virtue of showing, roughly, the ‘kinds of things people might do’ (“necessarily or for the most part”, in an Aristotelian register).

studies and never confess an interest in being read as such. The compositionalist's intervention, as beautifully simple as it is, is to show that we can open up the semantic surface of literary works to direct lines of communication and thus that we can make manifest what many players in the debate have hitherto assumed must be oblique.

It is clearly a good thing to get our theories of fiction to respect the epistemic nature of literature's, as it were, declarative ambitions, and we can grant that this tradition offers a way of thinking about art's contribution to understanding that should have a role to play in a sensible pluralism about the cognitive value of art. But we must also acknowledge the limitations of this approach, since they are considerable. Consider. The compositionalist can only seem to have perfected this debate on the assumption that literature earns its claim to cognitive significance because it can, in effect, issue *claims* of a certain sort. But we should hope for an account of the cognitive value of art that makes much more generous use of the *matter* of an artwork than we can get if we locate its cognitive value in the discrete utterances we find *here*, in this stretch of factual description, or *there*, or in those lines in which the author chooses to speak however one does when simply conveying information. This tradition, especially in the compositionalist inflection, makes meagre use of all the art in we find in an artwork, as though the regions of purely imagistic, stylistic, sonorous, poetic, imaginative – *aesthetic* and *formal* activity that are not harnessed in episodes of (genuine) utterance making are, from the cognitive point of view, so much fluff. A serious attempt to think about art's way with insight would do well to take it to be a matter of whether all that distinctly artistic *stuff* of art might at times be charged with cognitive significance. We still need to know just what this stuff is, but the immediate point is that we should see whether we can be literalists about the question itself – does *art* bear cognitive value? – and so explore how the whole of the work can in some manner act as a kind of lens, a framing device, through which a distinctive grasp of the world is shaped and given substance.

We would also do well to recall that the mere expression of truth has no intrinsic aesthetic or artistic value, nor even intrinsic

moral, eudaemonistic, or, arguably, epistemic value.¹⁴ It would be idiocy to think that we have a valuable object of insight, certainly an aesthetically valuable one, every time subject and predicate commingle in that mysterious so as to produce propositional content with a positive truth value, in art or in life. Truths can be dull, terrible, silly, well-established, irrelevant, and much more besides. At its worst, the debate can seem to put tremendous effort into showing that works of art can do whatever it is we do when offering literal travel directions or sincerely answering a question about what happened in Cleveland last week. Presumably, the players in the tradition I am critiquing would point out that if we can open the door to genuine utterances, we thereby begin to open the door to truth itself, and it will depend on the work whether the proffered truth is valuable or not. This is a reasonable claim, but it should be desirable to have an account of the sorts of understanding artworks tend to concern themselves with and that they are, as art, most apt to yield. For, as the above worries bring to view, the compositionalist and kindred strategies might very well occlude where the interesting cognitive activity is happening.

Kenneth Walden offers a sense of one crucial possibility these views occlude. He brings to our attention something essential but routinely overlooked in the debate on artistic cognitivism: that the models we provide are insufficiently *critical* to get our theories on the right side of the great many works of art that have more radical epistemic goals than the mere offering of a genuine utterance or true claim can capture. For Walden, it isn't so much that common ways of framing the problem in philosophical aesthetics focus on, to their detriment, utterances but *accretions*:

The function that has received attention is the arts' role in what I will call accretionary changes in moral thought: the acquisition of new moral knowledge, the refinement of moral concepts, and the capacity to apply our moral view to particular situations. A function that has received much less attention is the arts' potential to reconfigure the structure of moral thought – their ability not only to offer new inputs to be schematized by an existing moral framework but to effect a revolution in that framework.

¹⁴ See Hazlett (2013) for skeptical discussion of the intrinsic epistemic and eudaemonistic value of true belief.

[...] Just so we have names, let us call these *change by accretion and change by reconfiguration* Walden (2015: 283f)

The idea here is that artworks often do not earn their claim to cognitive seriousness because they strive, in the cold epistemic manner of a “disinterested knower”, to toss one more truth on the pile of those we already possess. As Kafka says, “A book must be the axe for the frozen sea in us,”¹⁵ and much art, certainly modernist art, prefers to be axe-like. We need a model of artistic cognitivism that can accommodate this. Minimally, the idea here is that the kind of insight that matters is the cause of a certain change in the reader such that one emerges from the aesthetic encounter with a sense of being *differently* oriented toward the presented content. This is, at the very least, simply what a critical insight will yield: a sense that we can think, feel and value *otherwise* in respect to a body of belief, set of presuppositions, or habit of affect. And this introduction of a critical element will itself be the first step on the road to unsettling our sense of the reliability of our inherited frameworks for moral thinking, and our assumption of, for example, the naturalness of our form of life, its institutions, and the standards of judgement at home in them – all of the more concrete changes in mind and world that an effective critical gesture will hope to accomplish. Politically and culturally, this will be part of the general story we tell we when explain how artists intend their works to get us to *confront* our world or to *imagine* forms of moral and social flourishing in excess of those our culture and its established conventions make available to us, as surely many artists wish their works to do. True, a sufficiently radical proposition or utterance might be able to accomplish this. But, if so, they will succeed because of the disrupting, reorienting, or reimagining they provoke, and thus these critical cognitive effects are what we need to understand.

Walden frames this as cognitive revolution by way of “reconfiguration,” according to which, at its most radical, an artwork manages to reorganize, “our conceptual scheme under an entirely new principle” (Walden 2015: 284). This is a tall order, as

¹⁵ Letter from 1904, as quoted in Richter (2010: 5).

Walden realizes. But it is instructive. It brings to our attention the fact that understanding is not just, or even centrally, a matter of acquiring a new propositional attitude but can consist in more pervasive, base-level changes in *perspective*, and this can constitute a revolution in thought in its own way. It implies the provision of new “cognitive grasp,” as Troy Jollimore has it, with the notion of a grasp, “conceived holistically rather than as a set of discrete, atomistic propositions” (Jollimore 2009: 142).¹⁶ As such, it is a change in cognitive orientation, in respect to some specified domain, that can affect in ways small or large how one perceives others, ascribes or denies value to actions, sees significance or senselessness in events, and becomes animated or impassive in the face of certain questions. Now we shouldn’t think of these changes in necessarily redemptive or therapeutic terms, since it is always possible to be changed for the worse (generations of male American college students who have thought themselves liberated by Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*; anyone who found Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* deep). Nonetheless, as an ideal, it marks a core way that art tries to intervene in the reader’s conceptual, evaluative, and affective relationship to the world. Points such as Walden’s act as an important corrective to the habit of putting undue emphasis on narrowly alethic varieties of cognition.¹⁷

¹⁶ Camp has a definition of perspective that works well here. A perspective organizes thoughts, feelings, and perceptions by, “imposing a complex structure of relative prominence on them, so that some features stick out in our minds while others fade into the background, and by making some features especially central to explaining others. A perspective often also imposes certain evaluative attitudes and emotional valences on its constituent features.” (Camp 2009: 111). For a broad and helpful study of perspective and its relationship to literature, see Simecek (2015).

¹⁷ This also gets use closer to putting philosophizing about the cognitive value of art on the right side of literary practice. We can think of literary modernity since romanticism as organized around a sense of how artistic practices – and the forms of the avant-garde that propel them forward – variously figure the modern world itself as a kind of problem, and of art as claiming value for itself in part by virtue of how it presents itself as a solution: as a corrective to, compensation for, or confrontation with

But what these observations identify is an artistic ideal, in the form of one of those “salutary effects” that cannot constitute an answer to the problem itself. We need to know, in a general way, what an artwork itself can offer as an object of attention such that any of these changes in perspectives, grasps, and frameworks can be accomplished. This device or mechanism will presumably be the thing of cognitive value, and not, again, its praiseworthy effects, since it, and obviously not the readerly changes it prompts, will be the thing internal to an artwork that expresses an insight and so furnishes a proper object of understanding.

Walden sees this, and he offers a striking account of this mechanism. His is an account that begins on high, identifying an altogether maximal manner in which an artwork can bear a properly critical form of insight. He offers an analogy with Kuhnian scientific revolutions to explain how artworks can engage in this “reconfiguration” of understanding by both critiquing inherited models of moral thought and advancing new ethical frameworks. Walden makes his case with two examples. One is the Greek Cynics whose satirical performances, “act in a way that

whatever it about modernity that makes it apparently so inhospitable to our basic projects of living well. The desired solution can take many forms, from culturally reactionary to politically radical (Pound or Oppen, for instance). Even art that seems guided by unrevolutionary and apolitical imperatives to encourage enlivened forms of experience and feeling (Wordsworth, Whitman, and the Beats, all in very different ways), heightened modes of aesthetic perception and thought (Stevens, Zukofsky, and perhaps Ashbery), or a sense of the pervasive and irrevocable incoherence of modern life (Kafka or Beckett) can all be seen as representing just different ways of chipping away at Kafka’s frozen sea. All are ways of attempting to change, in effect, something about how we hang together as thinking, feeling, valuing, and perceiving beings. And all are offered as answers to the question of how art can engage in the labor of making us right with the world, whether this rightness be interpreted in social, aesthetic, or moral terms. Even thoroughly pessimistic art such as Kafka’s can offer the promise of rightening one’s orientation to the world, since disillusionment too can imply an achievement of clarity in what Jollimore calls one’s “cognitive grasp.”

forcibly focuses attention on ethical possibilities, and ways of doing ethics, that are systematically excluded by their contemporaries” (Walden 2015: 289). The other is Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, whose combining of ecstatic and dissonant musical movements function, “to completely reorient the way we think about the good and the source of our duties” (Walden 2015: 292). While Walden does an excellent job of showing how features of the Cynic’s performances and Wagner’s musical composition exemplify or otherwise enact these morally revolutionary ideas, the examples, one might worry, are cherry-picked. The Cynics were a philosophical school that coopted artistic rather than argumentative resources for participating in the philosophical life of Attic culture, and we have the work of, among others, Diogenes Laërtius that documents, in discursive terms, the Cynic’s views on the legacy of Platonic ethical thought that their performances sought to undermine. And Wagner, of course, wrote copiously, perhaps pathologically, about the philosophical underpinnings of his work, and much of this is marshaled in the kind of criticism that permits us to see *Tristan* as bearing the precision of a Schopenhauerian critique of standing models of ethical thought. For most artworks, we will have no access to such extra-artistic statements of the terms of their revolution, and so likely nothing that will warrant such robust and nuanced ascriptions of critical content to them. Nonetheless, this does give us one sense of what it might for a work to bear a cognitive value that is both deeply critical and constructive in nature.

I won’t belabor my discussion of Walden’s theory, since at this point it is clear that the example he explores, while compelling, will have limited generalizability. This is because much art with radical moral and political aspirations – that is, the kinds of works our theory should enfranchise – will fail to be both semantically and representationally *replete* in a sense required permit a fruitful analogy with scientific revolutions. That is, many works that a theory of criticality should enfranchise will neither describe nor depict a critique of an existing body of knowledge or the deliverance of a new one. In much art that wishes to hold the world up to judgement, we are only given a disquieting and

condemnatory image. Picasso's *Guernica* is an excellent example of this (1937):



The painting, I assume, would not feel more properly or powerfully critical if it had somehow shown us its image of the horror of war *and also* elaborated a new and improved paradigm for ethical thought. In the case of literature, what we are likely to find are representations – *images*, though now linguistic rather than visual – of collapsed forms of social life, such as in Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Kafka's *The Trial*; nonsensical or failed attempts at human communication and engagement, à la Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* or Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; or the supremely abstract vision of the trauma of the holocaust found in Celan's "Todesfuge." In this respect, Walden's theory demands much more revolutionary content than artworks will usually provide. He is right to insist that the philosopher of art needs more aggressive models of how art pursues insight, certainly if they wish to align their theories with the kinds of artistic practice they ought to be able to explain. But if we wish our theory to travel, it should be sufficient to show that the offering of an image and an image alone can ground a work's claim to critical insight. We thus need a broader notion of "reconfiguration" to give content to our account of how art, through its critical power, transforms understanding, since the problem, arguably the hard problem, is that of understanding how an image can prompt a kind of change in how one hangs together as a thinking, feeling, and valuing self.

4 Metaphor & Image

I can now return to the idea with which this essay began: if we can think of artworks as, in Danto's words, "metaphors for life," we can see in a straightforward manner how the work of art itself and not various of its utterances can yield an object of understanding with critical import. The tension at the heart of the debate on artistic cognitivism is that of how we can see reality *in* fictions or feel the world presented to us *in* manifestly imaginary, fantastic, or radically abstract images. And this tension, as we will see, is roughly analogous to the problem at the heart of metaphor. Yet what we frequently find in the theory of metaphor is that this problem is resolved precisely by acknowledging the metaphoricity of an expression, since this, and not some literal statement of fact it implies – a statement of resemblance or similarity, for example – is what yields its distinctive grasp of a subject, that is, of the real thing that is the target of metaphorical framing. This helps us see how to acknowledge a similar fact about much art: that it is by *insisting* on its elements of fictionality, imaginativeness, and status as an aesthetic object that we are best able to explain how it can yield a proper object of understanding. Let me explain.

For the sake of brevity, I will collapse a range of issues in the theory of metaphor into a single problem, which, while obscuring important philosophical questions, helps to stage quickly the point I wish to make. We might describe the problem as the experience of the *impossible aptness* of most successful metaphors, and the hope is that in "impossible" one will hear an echo of the tension just mentioned. When Churchill said that Mussolini is "the merest utensil" or Jean Arp that "art is a fruit that grows in man," we feel, if the metaphors move us, that just as Mussolini and art are pretty much precisely these things, they cannot possibly really, that is, literally, *be* these things. Art and Mussolini both are yet surely cannot be fruit or a utensil. Even metaphors that say something plainly true have the air of impossible aptness. When Margaret Atwood writes that "marriage is not a house or even a tent," she is certainly right, since marriage is truly neither. But it is not the awkward truth of this claim that makes the metaphor successful, which at any rate has nothing to do with its status as a metaphor. It

is the aptness of its act of figuration, roughly, that considering the “un-tentliness” and “unhomeliness” of marriage offers a way of thinking about *what marriage is* (and is not). What these reflections highlight are the dual fields or “twofoldness”¹⁸ of metaphor: the literal field, which often establishes an impossible (or absurdly true) relationship between subject and predicate, and the figurative field, in which the literally false or nonsensical claim – Juliet is *not* the sun; marriage neither is nor is not a tent but another kind of thing entirely – generates a particular perspective on the subject, a cognitive and affective orientation to it that amounts to a way of understanding it.

This is a broad sense of “understanding” and it is compatible with the oft-made point that metaphors are indifferent to questions of truth and falsity: I can inhabit and think with Atwood’s perspective even if I believe that marriage is, metaphorically, more or less quite tent-like. But a good part of what makes a metaphor successful is the experience of its aptness, despite everything, and we acknowledge this aptness in our very willingness to assume its perspective and to think about the subject from the vantage-point. This is, minimally, to say that the perspective is productive, precisely because of how it allows us to see the subject, and this entitles us to speak of understanding, even of a cognitive grasp. It is a form of understanding that compensates for its apparent epistemic modesty with its potential for great aesthetic and affective richness, and this too will play a role in explaining what makes a certain metaphor so productive for thought. This will be important when we return to art.

Note that few players in the contemporary debate think that a metaphor’s presumed cognitive content – it’s “meaning” – can be fully precified in a literal statement that preserves the sense and force of the original expression. Indeed, most philosophers will

¹⁸ Camp, borrowing from Wollheim, defines this twofoldness as, “an experiential awareness of both the representing frame and the represented subject, in their distinctness and in their relation to one another, which is akin to the twofold experience we have with paintings, in which we are aware of both the marked surface and the scene we see in it.” (Camp 2016: 342).

agree that translating a metaphor into a literal statement of, say, resemblance is to abandon rather than to explain the distinctive grasp the metaphor offers of its subject. If I describe my friend Marcus as “Seattle without the rain” the metaphor does not, or does not just, invite you to see him as urbane, youthful, laid-back, and shorn of his presumed blemishes. For one, seeing Marcus in *that* manner is certainly not to see him *as* Seattle, and thus the equivalence is lost. One reason for this is that the peculiar grasp a metaphor offers of its subject is composed of, shaped by, and given form *in* the metaphor’s imagistic quality and the precise way it frames or pictures the subject. It is the *Seattle-without-the-raininess* of Marcus and the *mere-utensileness* of Mussolini that the metaphors invite us to see and feel, even if this seeing can put us within cognitive reach of any number of true propositions (Mussolini is not a very good leader, etc.). It may be the case that metaphors work by “transferring” properties from “vehicle” (“tent” or “utensil”) to subject, or by establishing a set of shared characteristics.¹⁹ But while considering the respects in which vehicle and subject have this or that in common may be part of the game, the metaphoric game itself is played only when the vehicle is present and guides our thinking *because of how it frames the subject*. If not, it isn’t functioning as a proper metaphorical vehicle, and we have either a failed or dead metaphor. Dead metaphors, such as *rough* in “I had a rough day”, are those in which the imagistic and framing functions are no longer required for communicative purposes, since a conventional lexical meaning has been attached to the vehicle, which is to say: the vehicle has become a mere word. The point is, “live”, “deep”, or “poetic” metaphors issue an invitation to adopt its perspective and so to see

¹⁹ I borrow the term “vehicle” from standard work on metaphor, and it is important to note that here the term means something much more precise than it does in contemporary philosophy, in which anything that bears or delivers content can be called a vehicle. The traditional view in rhetoric breaks metaphors into two parts, *tenor*, or what I am calling “subject” and *vehicle*, which is the predicate that yields a metaphorical framing (or *figuring*) of the subject. I. A. Richards coined the distinction in 1936 in his *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*.

the world as it wishes to frame it, and this demands that we interact with the vehicle as a device that delivers a kind of image of the subject.²⁰

In this respect, the vehicle of a metaphor is *incurable*, since any significant alteration of it will change the semantic, imagistic, and associative behavior of the metaphor. The vehicle clearly cannot be switched out for a literal description of resemblance. But it also cannot be replaced with another *metaphorical* vehicle, even if this new vehicle suggests virtually the same resemblances and associations. Kafka's claim would have had radically different force had he spoken of a book as a "tomahawk", "twibill" or "chopper" instead of as an "axe." For one, his metaphor would have been comical, or clumsy, and it would have failed to establish the felt sense of the urgency of the novel's critical power that Kafka wished to convey. This failure is in part, of course, an aesthetic failure, since calling a novel a "chooper" simply *sounds* bad: the lowly diction is all wrong for the high-mindedness of the metaphor's intent. These reflections beckon the many debates on the nature of metaphorical meaning and the apparent impossibility of paraphrase, and I cannot engage them here. To grant my point, all one needs to concede is that these substitutions drain Kafka's metaphor of its seriousness, and, to just that extent, they offer a *different* way of understanding its subject, since now silly rather than perspicacious.

These general and much-discussed features of metaphor now presented, we can ask what it means to claim that a work of art *is* a metaphor. Consider Ted Cohen's description of metaphor: "it seems obviously true that a metaphor 'A is B' induces one to think of A as B, and this leads to new thoughts about A" (Cohen 2008: 3). To use Danto's terms to fill out Cohen's schema, the very rough idea is that treating art as metaphor is to think that A indicates "life" and B names "an artwork." Crudely put, we are invited to see the world *as*, e.g., Eliot's *The Waste Land*. That is, "life" is the implicit subject on which a work of art yields, as a metaphor, a perspective that presents a distinctive manner of

²⁰ For excellent studies of the imagistic function of metaphor, see Davies (1982), Moran (1989), Guttenplan (2008), and Carston (2010).

grasping, thinking about, and, ultimately, *cognizing* it. Recall that a metaphor is made to convey an insight by elevating its predicate from the status of a description to that of a vehicle, keeping in mind that in metaphor theory a “vehicle” means a framing device. Treated as a mere description, a metaphor standardly yields only a wildly false or awkwardly true proposition; as a vehicle, it now generates a *perspective* rather than a proposition, and it thus permits us to see its subject in a new light. Likewise with artworks that can function as metaphors. When read in a painfully literalist manner a novel, for instance, can only yield descriptions of fictions. But, when granted status as metaphorical vehicle, it can begin to align with the extra-fictional world in ways, now coming to be *about* it. A link between work and world is thereby established and made cognitively productive.

But caution is required here, since it cannot be true that the relationship between vehicle and subject, in art or ordinary metaphors, is straightforwardly that of seeing *A as B*, since the preposition implies more intimacy between *A* and *B* than is theoretically or aesthetically desirable. Entertaining the imagistic content of “Mussolini is the merest utensil” does not require that we generate an image of Mussolini *as* a utensil, which would produce something cartoonish rather than a proper content, for example a picture of a fork in the fashion of a particular man.²¹ In any metaphoric relationship, we have at least *two* terms functioning as two points of reflective gravity, and it is the felt “‘tension’ or ‘clash’” between them that constitutes the experience of impossible aptness that “releases a metaphoric sense” (Cooper 1986: 59). Thus however much life might seem to be like a Beckett play, life *isn’t* a Beckett play (literally). To claim that we see, without qualification, life *in* art is nearly always to commit what we might call the representational fallacy: a work of art, unless a portrait, is not, literally, a *picture* of extra-fictional reality (and even portraits bear representational problems that prevent us from treating them as literal mirrors on the subject). The analogy with metaphor helps us to assert the distance between art and life

²¹ I discuss this in Gibson (2011) as well as elaborate many of the points made here about metaphor.

without seeing this distance as implying an impassible barrier. “Life” and “an artwork” must, as Danto would insist, enjoy a measure of independence, even when they appear to imitate one another.

Yet what, exactly, does it mean to say that a work *itself* can come to function as a vehicle? Exactly what do we condense into Cohen’s *B* so that we are afforded a new grasp of the bit of life that is *A*? If we do not get the work, in some sense, to function as a vehicle, we have the problem of the compositionalist: just various bits of a work bear a point of worldly contact, and thus we leave theoretically unenfranchised precisely what gives an artwork a claim to being a *work of art*, namely its status as a formal and aesthetic object. Central to my point is that it is not just points of comparison between work and world that give substance to a newly yielded understanding but what is at times called “work-meaning”, as indicating a kind of meaning that affixes to an artwork “taken whole.” This kind of meaning is clearly not sentential or even propositional in nature, and it is likely an aesthetic variety of meaning that has little to do with the concerns of the philosopher of language. It is intended to highlight the fact that we ascribe aesthetic properties, forms of aboutness, and patterns of significance to a work that are *irreducible* to features of its semantic surface or narrative and expressive structure, though clearly the latter play a crucial role in generating work-meaning. When speaking of work-meaning, we are gesturing towards the overall orientation in thought and feeling we attribute to a work, and we hit upon it when we pass from questions of what various of a work’s elements mean and on to those that concern what *the work means*. When we ask these questions, we are not trying to specify a “content” but attempting to bring into relief how the matter of a work gets encapsulated in something like a sense or an image of its subject (alienation, the crisis of culture in modernity, etc.). It is the idea of this overall image that I find important here. This image effectively functions as a perspective: an aspectual mode of comprehending its subject matter that constitutes a distinct way of understanding it.

Talk of the “image” that a *work* generates is itself clearly metaphorical. It cannot be the case that we hold the entirety of a

narrative or lyric in mind when thinking of life as Stevensonian, Dickensian, or Dantesque. There is no possibility of coopting the whole of *The Trial* in the construction of a mental picture of some sort, which at any rate would just invite the problems we saw in trying to imagine, literally, Mussolini *as* a utensil: we would get something like a Pollockesque rendering of John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" or an O'Keefeian depiction of Louise Glück's "Wild Iris", and this is hardly helpful. Literary works are too expansive, too open, too suggestive, and too complex in their parts to derive from them the precision required for yielding a literal image that the mind can entertain. When we speak of literature as imagistic, we are rather signaling the fact novels and poems can hold in place a sense of a "world", that is, an imaginatively, aesthetically, and affectively structured space that gives aesthetic experience its particular object of attention and immersion. In this respect, talk of the imagistic dimension of literary art has more in common with what we mean when we speak of seeing "the shape of a situation" than when we talk about the content of a painting – it is not *that* kind of image that we have in mind here. It is a claim about how an object hangs together, and it gives voice to our sense of its structure and how its various elements conspire to generate a sense of its overall point.²² We have in mind the environment of thought and feeling a work creates, saturated with these but not other aesthetic properties (gloomy, intoxicating, arresting, dark, ebullient), with a sense of human life and social reality as like this rather than like that. It is in this sense that a novel or poem "figures" features of the world or offers an image of "life".

Here an important difference between standard conversational metaphors and artworks-as-metaphors comes to light. The content of the vehicle of a metaphor is often a singular image: a mere utensil, an axe breaking the ice of a frozen sea, or Seattle just with more sunshine. Things get more complicated when we think of properly poetic metaphors, which can be florid and detailed in a way they often are not in everyday communicative contexts.

²² I take the example of understanding the 'shape of a situation' from Jollimore (2009: 139f), who in turn takes it from Jonathan Dancy.

Nonetheless, what gives content to the vehicle in standard cases is a description that yields an image that can *in some manner* be visualized and entertained (and axe; a tent), should one wish.²³ On the art-as-metaphor model, especially in its literary inflection, the content of the vehicle is very different. It is generated by a narrative or an extended expressive act (in the case of non-narrative lyric poetry), surely shot through with many distinct images but not itself, literally, culminating in one. The vehicle here is more articulate, more complexly structured, and more laden with content than are the vehicles of everyday conversational metaphors. It offers appreciation not a pictured content but something akin to a concept that organizes a sense of the mood, feel, import, and shape of a literary narrative or lyric, endowed with an apparent purpose and constructed this way rather than that for an intended effect.

What is important is that all of this allows us to assert that the form of a work, from “base-level perceptual properties to complex structural and organisational principles,” (Todd 2007: 225) will play a role in structuring, in *forming*, the image, in this revised sense, that a work yields, since its form will be the very thing that explains why the vehicle has the shape, sense, and aesthetic character that it does. Recall that the representing term of a metaphor is incorrigible in its framing of the represented subject; the force and sense of a metaphorical expression is inseparable from the vehicle’s mode of presentation. It is the same with the work of art, where form just *is* the mode of presentation of this image. In this respect, form functions as both container and brush: it shapes content, and the manner in which it does so is an act of coloration, imbuing the work with its particular feel and aesthetic quality. Cast as a metaphor of life, the form of a work is that which shapes and colors a determinate image of our world.

²³ This invites debates on the nature of mental images, and I have no intention of engaging them here. For an excellent discussion of the dominant positions in this debate, see Kulvicki (2014: 155–74). I am sympathetic to Kulvicki’s structural account of mental images and suspect that it will work well to explain the nature of metaphorical images.

We can now return to the idea of critical insight and say something that is, while hardly as bold as Walden's revolutionary model, nonetheless serviceable as an account of a proper mechanism or device. The idea is obvious at this point. Metaphors offer arguably the clearest example we possess of how we can use language to yield an image with critical force. Consider Rachel Elizabeth Fraser's way of putting matters, and note the inclusion of a term that is central to Walden's account: "metaphors play a distinctive role in language change, and their holistic organizational effects – their ability to systematically reconfigure our thinking – are peculiar" (Fraser 2018: 731). It is the idea that metaphors "reconfigure" thought that shows us how to ground Walden's account in the theory of metaphor instead of on a model of Kuhnian scientific revolution. Metaphors effect these reconfigurations not quite by offering a new paradigm for moral thinking or a radically reconfigured conceptual framework. But they do, in their way, offer a new framework, even a new "paradigm" for thinking about a subject. And their criticality is a product of the "'tension' or 'clash'" between the subject and vehicle, which itself can be a powerful way to unsettle entrenched ways of thinking and feeling about a subject by yielding a perspective orthogonal to them. This felt clash just is, in a very plain sense, the wedge that a critical prompt places between conventional ways of thinking about a subject and a new one that, at its most effective, recasts our sense of its nature and value. In being asked to see the novel as an axe or a man as a mere utensil, we are, minimally, being asked to think of them in a reconstituted manner and to assume an essentially critical stance in respect to them. Thus the art-as-metaphor model allows us to describe in an earthbound manner how the kind of insight a work of art offers functions to orient one *differently* to the world and so to throw a wrench in our standing habits of perception, thought, and feeling.

The criticality of a metaphorical perspective will at times be of negligible value, as it in the metaphor about Marcus and Seattle or in a novel that seems to be perfectly at home in the world just as it is. But some felt degree of anxious, dissonant, or impossible coupling of subject and vehicle is nearly always implied by a metaphor and so by artworks that function as metaphors, and the

significance of the critical insight will largely depend on how an author manipulates this coupling. The point is that the space a metaphor opens up between its subject and an innovative manner of figuring is itself fraught with critical potential. The absurdism, nightmarish geography, unfathomable institutions, and cold frankness of tone and imagery of a work such as Kafka's *The Trial* is an example of a work that clearly makes critically significant use of this space, offering as it does an image of modernity as catastrophe that, while in excess of the truth of the matter, both demands that we consider by just how much and pollutes our sense that the answer will be flattering. The metaphorical image that critically ambitious works like *The Trial* offers us does not result in, as Elisabeth Camp notes, a "general proposition" that expresses a critical content.²⁴ It strives for a broader, more holistic change in our possibilities for cognizing its subject. It is essentially this metaphorical power to imagine a subject otherwise than it is that is the stuff of critical insight, and even of the revolutions they may seem to hope for, regardless of whether they ever actually deliver one. The semantic articulateness and formal complexity of the literary work of art, relative to a simple metaphor, is surely what allows the artist to amply this effect and focus it with much more aesthetic and critical precision and depth. At any rate, it is by virtue of this critical power that find we find principled grounds for specifying *when* the perspective a work opens up is cognitively significant. Our interpretations of artworks, and the great role certain of them have come to play in critical, political, and philosophical discourse, bear witness to what success here looks like.

²⁴ Camp (2016: 344). Camp, like Danto, suggests that we can use artworks as metaphors for life, and I am here indebted to her way of framing the matter. Seeing an artwork as a metaphor, she claims, "involves attending to a fiction or a poem in all of its particularity, and (only) then seeking out matches between it and some real world analogue. [...] In this way, a work-as-metaphor can draw our attention to particularities of the real world, in their particularity and in their difference from the world of the work, without extracting some general but noteworthy proposition that applies to both." (*Ibid.*)

Before concluding this section, it is important to acknowledge that I have made virtually no positive use of two terms that animate most work on artistic cognitivism: truth and knowledge. As presented here, the art-as-metaphor model offers what might be called a “modest cognitivism” in respect to the arts. It finds the stuff of insight in forms of understanding that are perspectival, aspectual, and, especially, rhetorical, as metaphor is itself essentially a rhetorical device. But art itself is all of these things, and essentially so; and, in contrast to utterance-type models, this approach has the happy consequence of letting art be just that while still affirming its power to furnish the reader or viewer with insight. At any rate, this approach can accommodate as much truth and knowledge as our best theory of metaphor can, and that might well turn out to be much more than I have allowed here. But as with metaphors, I suspect that we can find an artwork’s perspective productive as a tool for thought – the grasp it offers of its subject matter apt – without requiring something as strong as *agreement in* its presumed truth, especially since it may well be the case that perspectives and cognitive grasps are not quite the sort of thing that are true. They organize content, well or badly; they likely do not assert something of it, truly or falsely, except, indirectly, that their manner of organization opens up fruitful possibilities for thinking and feeling about it. It is in the middle-ground between merely entertaining and genuinely assenting to an artwork’s metaphorical vision of life that its cognitive value, when such it has, resides. This is what gives the modesty to the cognitivism I have proposed here.

5 Conclusion

The model offered here is in effect an account of how art opens up a particular kind of window on the real, by providing a frame that transfers features of a work onto the aspects of the world that it casts as its subject. Even in the case of the critical images I have explored here, these images are essentially aesthetic, enlisting the matter of an artwork to structure a sense of the “life” that Danto describes as its frequent target. The art-as-metaphor model thus offers a way of making good on the familiar idea that art, as

Nietzsche would insist, creates the conditions for seeing the world not merely aesthetically but artistically: as though fashioned as a work and endowed with the kinds of value, meaning, and even beauty that are essential to, if not all works of art, then our idea of why the practice of art-making matters to humans who must live in a world that is at times disappointing, ugly, senseless, or just entirely too bleh. Since seen as metaphorically endowed with these things, we can respect the critical point that the world in its natural state usually falls short of the mark, and thus this aestheticization of thought, feeling, and perception does not itself amount to the giving of an excuse, telling of a lie, or concealing of a problem. But it does suggest that art creates possibilities for characteristic forms of aesthetic attention to, immersion in, and appreciation of this world, and the cultural, psychological and perhaps evolutionary significance of this are not to be underestimated, not the least because making the world tolerable is one of our principle responsibilities as social and ethical beings. All this brings us in close proximity to the theory of beauty, and, while much more needs to be done to offer an adequate account of the connection, I take the argument offered here to set the stage for a promising avenue of approach.

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