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Problematic Differences: Conflictive Mimesis in Lessing's *Laokoon*

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Abstract Influential recent studies have shown that the binary opposition Lessing attempted to draw in *Laokoon* between painting and poetry is deeply problematic. But the distinction between the two arts tends to collapse not because Lessing was forced to choose between competing or opposed discourses but because *Laokoon's* inquiry into primordial categories of human endeavor necessarily confronted him with the paradoxical character of mimesis. The conclusions to which Lessing's analysis inevitably leads are the products not of the presumptive arbitrariness of the sign or the self-enfolding and self-stultifying nature of representation but of what René Girard has called the "double-bind" of mimesis—the ever-lurking and potentially destabilizing originary identity between the conflictive configuration of mimesis and its mature, elaborated, representational forms.

In the preface to *Laokoon*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing sets out, with admirable directness, this work's principal aim. The "unfounded judgements" and "ill-digested conclusions" of "recent critics," he writes, have produced in poetry "a mania for description and in painting a mania for allegory" (Lessing 1984: 5). After reminding his readers that even the ancients whom these critics cite as authorities recognized that poetry and painting "differed both in the objects imitated as well as in the manner of imitation" (*ibid.*: 2), Lessing proposes to elucidate the "true function[s]" of the two arts. At the outset of this task, however, stands a stumbling block. The differences between the "sister arts" are, in the strict sense of the word,

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paradoxical: that is, painting and poetry are distinct and in some respects mutually exclusive modes of representation, despite the contradictory and apparently commonsensical views of the amateur, philosopher, and critic. In the absence of sustained reflection, all three are led by the “similarity of effect” (ibid.: 1) between painting and poetry to the “natural” conclusion that the differences between the two arts are in the final analysis less important than their shared telos. In short, the tendency of the unreflective viewer to gloss over the intrinsic formal limits of painting and poetry makes the critical task of drawing their proper boundaries deeply problematic.

Several recent studies of *Laokoon*—especially those undertaken from semiotic-structural or deconstructive points of view—have sought to demonstrate the extent to which this inquiry into the problematic difference between painting and poetry is itself problematized by the unacknowledged cultural, psychic, and aesthetic assumptions that Lessing brought to the task. These readings contend that Lessing’s real motivation for writing *Laokoon* was not the disinterested pursuit of theoretical clarity but a kind of representational anxiety, the ultimate effect of which is a blending of the very categories that the theorist had wanted the work to separate once and for all. Thus, writes David Wellbery (1984: 198) “precisely at that point in the *Laocoon* (the sixteenth chapter) where Lessing seems most forcefully to separate painting and poetry, he in fact is bringing the two art forms into the closest possible proximity.” According to Simon Richter (1992: 33), the structuring dichotomy of the two arts that underpins Lessing’s argument is rendered unstable by a “shocking contact” between the eighteenth-century “discourse of aesthetics” and the “intrusive heterogeneous discourse” of Enlightenment science.¹

A potentially destabilizing anxiety does indeed lurk at the heart of *Laokoon*. Attributing this anxiety, however, to the eighteenth century’s “myth of progressive semiosis” (Wellbery 1984: 42) or to the neoclassical critic’s presumptive discomfort with the “corporeality of the body” (Richter 1992: 63) threatens to reduce Lessing’s justly influential text to little more than a symptom of local intellectual or psychic conflict. The thrust of this essay’s argument counters the historically based skepticism which doubts that, in *Laokoon*, Lessing arrived at genuine and lasting in-

1. See also Jacobs 1987, which views Lessing’s needless digression into the controversy over whether Virgil’s description of Laocoon provided the sculptor with his model or vice versa as a veiled enactment of the author’s rivalry with Winckelmann for critical supremacy. Gustafson (1993: 1084) sees Lessing’s quest for certainty about “the borders between the visual arts and literature” as motivated by his need to reject the idea that “both female body and feminine imagination” play anything like a crucial role “in cultural formation.”

sights into the different capabilities and limitations of painting and poetry. Employing René Girard's concept of conflictive mimesis to analyze a central concept of this text—the “pregnant moment” doctrine and its implications—will show how *Laokoon*'s very instabilities are intrinsic to any deep examination of representation as an essentially human activity.

Mimesis is the real focus of *Laokoon*, although we must extend our notion of this all-important term past its conventional limitation in aesthetic theory to matters of “artistic representation.” If the human can be minimally distinguished from the animal by the former's apparently unique possession of the Logos, and if the sign is both a species of and disseminated through imitation, then to look into the essential nature and elements of semiosis is inevitably to ask the fundamental anthropological question: What is humanity? As Eric Gans (1981a: 792) has written, “little” debates that periodically “convulse” fields like literary studies and aesthetic theory—such as that concerning whether texts are capable of referring to an externally existing “real” world, or the precise extent of the resemblance between painting and poetry—are traces of a major, though largely unacknowledged, debate surrounding the essences of culture and language, humanity's defining characteristics. It stands to reason, then, that positing a rigorous theory of how and for what purpose humanity acquired language will help to explain in anthropological terms both why setting the limits of painting and poetry—conceived by Lessing as different configurations of the same uniquely human symbolizing capability—is an inherently problematic undertaking, and why Lessing consistently must consider poetry the superior art form.

1

A theory of language's origin encounters at its outset a stumbling block not dissimilar from that which presents itself to Lessing in the preface to *Laokoon*. Human and animal are demonstrably both alike and distinct, and if the difference between them is the former's ability to use language, where did this ability come from? Do evolved, mature forms of representation and language—the former being the precondition of the latter—continue to bear traces of their origin, which must have been simultaneous with the emergence of the human per se? Questions like these are raised by any genuinely rigorous semiotic theory, which at its limits must touch on what Girard (1987: 91) has described as the problematic difference between an ethological view of humanity, which uncovers “resemblances between animal sociality and human sociality,” and the ethnological conception, which refuses “to resituate human culture in nature.” The widely held be-

lief (in both Lessing's day and our own) that language emerged gradually (that is, unconsciously) from nonsignificant animal communication represses, in Gans's (1990: 2) view, "an attempt to avoid dealing with the problem of man's uniqueness with respect to his animal ancestors."² To explain homo sapiens' acquisition of language "gradualistically on the basis of an earlier form of evolution" ignores the logical necessity that "consciousness must originate all at once—it must originate *consciously*" (Gans 1981a: 798).

Surprisingly, it is in the writings of Girard and Gans—both of whom were trained not as anthropologists but as literary critics—that an alternative to this gradualism has been proposed.³ Both recognize that to define humanity as the animal that possesses language necessitates positing a hypothesis of discontinuity between protohuman and human, that is, a set of hypothetical answers to the questions of how and why language evolved. These hypotheses begin with what Gans (1993: 8) calls Girard's rediscovery of "the critical, inherently conflictive nature of [mimesis], a category of action that had previously been viewed, following Aristotle's *Poetics*, as an unproblematic source of esthetic pleasure." Girard follows Aristotle's (1986: 20) intuition that "the habit of imitating is congenital to human

2. Thomas F. Bertonneau has pointed out how the discussion of language acquisition in Richard Leakey's *The Origin of Humankind* (1994) exemplifies this kind of gradualism. Following Steven Pinker's arguments in *The Language Instinct* (1994), Leakey accepts that language is genetically programmed and therefore can be explained in terms of natural selection. However, continues Leakey, "what were the pressures of natural selection that favored the evolution of language? Presumably, the ability did not spring into being full-blown, so we have to wonder what advantages a less-developed language conferred on our ancestors. The most obvious answer is that it offered an efficient way to communicate. This ability, surely, would have been beneficial to our ancestors when they first adopted rudimentary hunting and gathering, which is a more challenging mode of subsistence than that of the apes. As their way of life grew more complex, the need for social and economic coordination grew, too. Effective communication would have become more and more valuable under these circumstances. Natural selection would therefore have steadily enhanced language capacity. . . . Language as we know it today [would therefore have] emerged as the product of the exigencies of hunting and gathering" (122–23). See Bertonneau 1994: 2–3.

3. In his essay "Differences," Gans notes that Jacques Derrida also defines language as the essential characteristic of the human. The difference between Derrida's thought and that of Girard and Gans, however, is that Derrida does not acknowledge the anthropological implications of his concepts. As Gans (1981a: 798) explains, though the famous neologism *différance* serves to illustrate how the "myth of atemporal presence, which Derrida sees as fundamental to Western philosophy ('metaphysics')" necessarily entails "deferral [and] separation," it fails as an anthropology through its refusal to answer the question What is man? As Gans continues, "Derrida is anthropological only to the extent that by 'deconstructing' philosophy's solution to the problem of language and implicitly to that of humanity, he concludes that no solution is possible. Language is fundamentally incapable of discovering its own origin. The question of this origin not only cannot be answered, it cannot even be asked, since only language could ask it. Metaphysics for Derrida is ultimately not so different from what it represents for Wittgenstein—*darüber muss man schweigen*" (ibid.).

beings from childhood (actually man differs from the other animals in that he is the most imitative and learns his first lessons through imitation).” Girard differs from Aristotle, however, by remarking that the intensity of the human capacity for mimesis (as Gans [1981a: 800] explains) “leads to intensified rivalry over attractive objects and thence to a generalized conflict that can only be resolved by the channeling of collective aggression against a single ‘marked’ member of the group—one whose marginal status makes him an appropriate butt for the hostilities of the others. Because this victim brings peace to the community in crisis he is the first *sacred* object; . . . he is also the first *significant* object, and the source of all significance.”

For Girard, language—the essential operation of which boils down to establishing a fundamentally mimetic relationship between an existentially present signifier and an existentially present-to-mind signified—originated in a collective crisis in which humanity’s capacity for acquisitive mimesis exceeded the instinctual dominance and submission patterns that had previously sufficed to keep intraspecific conflict from turning fatal. In Gans’s (1993: 8) words, language emerged when the protohuman primate became, “so to speak, too mimetic to remain an animal.” To counter the threat posed by imitation’s power to arouse conflict, humanity evolved nonviolent forms of mimesis in which the production of significance defers the communal dangers of appropriative mimesis.⁴

Of the many applications and elaborations of Girard’s “mimetic theory” that have appeared since he first described “triangular mimesis” in *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961) (later published as *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* [1965]), none is as fully developed and logically rigorous as Gans’s. Beginning with the publication of *The Origin of Language* (1981b), Gans has devoted four books and numerous articles to the refinement of Girard’s originary scene and the exposition of “generative anthropology,” a theory of the human based in the understanding of how humanity’s definitive categories—such as religion, morality, exchange, and desire—were constituted in “moments” of the originary event. The emergence of one such category, the aesthetic, is particularly pertinent to our examination of *Laokoon* and is sketched below.

As previously noted, for Girard (1987: 99), the “cadaver of the collective victim” becomes the primordial signifier through its capacity to serve as the focus of “a new type of attention” for the originary collectivity. Ob-

4. In this regard, Girard’s theory bears a resemblance to Freud’s scheme—laid out in greatest detail in *Totem and Taboo*—that culture finds its *fons et origo* in the desire to “memorialize” the murdered father. For Girard’s explanation of the differences between his view of originary murder and Freud’s, see *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), esp. chap. 8.

serving that this new attention has neither a necessary nor a demonstrable source in either the tensions that produce the originary event or the “scape-goat mechanism” that releases those tensions, Gans (1993: 8–9) proposes that the crucial moment of hominization was an “aborted gesture of appropriation” simultaneously directed by the group toward an appetitively attractive object, for example, “the body of a large animal.”

Such an object is potentially a focus of conflict, since the appetites of all are directed to something that cannot belong to all. . . . Hence, in violation of the dominance hierarchy, all hands reach out for the object; but at the same time each is deterred from appropriating it by the sight of all the others reaching in the same direction. The “fearful symmetry” of the situation makes it impossible for any one participant to defy the others and pursue the gesture to its conclusion. The center of the circle appears to possess a repellent, sacred force that prevents its occupation by the members of the group, that converts the gesture of appropriation into a gesture of designation, that is, into an ostensive sign.

Humanity’s primordial category is, therefore, the sacred. A secondary but equally constitutive human category, the aesthetic, argues Gans, is similar to but not identical with the experience of the center’s apparent sacredness. “The central focus of collective appetites,” he writes, may be said to be sacred “when it appears as the source of this repelling energy, which is really that of the mutually incompatible appetites themselves” (ibid.: 117). In contrast, the aesthetic is the experience of the collective act of designation as itself the source of the inaccessibility of the central object. This mediation through the sign is not a mere extension of the individual’s fear of collective reprisal for approaching the object. Designation by the sign becomes an integral element of the object itself; this distinguishes the aesthetic from the sacred object, the force of which is conceived as independent of representation. In the aesthetic experience, the individual imagines that the object of desire could be possessed, but he or she must then imagine the object as the inviolate designatum of the sign in order to desire it. This oscillation between imaginary possession and recognized inviolability is characteristic of all aesthetic experience, including that of “natural” beauty (ibid.: 117–18).

Thus the deep paradoxes revealed by Wellbery’s and Richter’s semiotically informed analyses of *Laokoon* may have their source not in the putative instabilities of a culturally defined (i.e., arbitrary) or contradictory set of sign-signifier relations, but in the pragmatic paradoxicality of the situation within which the first sign was emitted. As Gans (ibid.: 104) writes, the relationship between the sign and its object is inevitably problematic because the designating gesture originally revealed not the “being of the

object” but “the interdiction that separates the sign-user from the designatum”: “The sign recalls the object because it incarnates the refusal of the object. Instead of thinking of the sign as a reminder of the referent’s presence, we should understand it as a reminder of the referent’s denial. In a well-known illustration of pragmatic paradox, the experimenter orders the subject not to think of an elephant, thereby producing the opposite effect. We should conceive the sign in its originary function as operating somewhat like the experimenter: the sign tells us, ‘Don’t try to possess the object!’ and in so doing it provokes the imaginary possession of the object that is our desire for it.” The problematic differences that cling to Lessing’s attempt in *Laokoon* to draw the separation once and for all between the proper limits of painting and poetry thus can be understood as echoes of the originary event. That they would appear with greater forcefulness in a text that seeks to reestablish a forgotten but nevertheless fundamental distinction between categories of human endeavor should not be surprising, since Lessing’s attempt to return to first principles necessarily means confronting the essential structures and elements of mimesis, including its pre-representational, conflictive configurations. The difference between painting and poetry is problematic, in other words, not because their common basis and shared telos lead the theorist to blur ostensibly opposed discourses, but because representation as a fundamental category of human activity retains some of the potentially conflictive, paradoxical qualities of the acquisitive mimesis in which it originated. That this is the case is demonstrated by an examination of how Lessing arrives at one of the most important distinctions drawn between painting and poetry in *Laokoon*: painting’s limitation to representing a pregnant moment, an observation that leads to the more general statement in chapter 18 that “it remains true that succession of time is the province of the poet just as space is that of the painter” (Lessing 1984: 91).

2

The widespread critical misapprehension that Lessing describes in the preface to *Laokoon*—a situation that, he implies, forces him to take up his pen—bears a telling resemblance to the crisis of unchecked mimesis that both Girard and Gans view as the prelude to the emission of the first sign. For Lessing, the easy reproducibility of signs, which, as Gans (1993: 9) observes, arises from the fact that “signs are abundant because they can be reproduced at will,” has resulted in what we might call a state of semiotic intoxication. It seems, in fact, that from Lessing’s point of view, modernity’s uncritical acceptance of the ontological validity of this kind

of undifferentiation registers the degree to which intellectual acuity has degraded since antiquity. “Aristotle, Cicero, Horace, and Quintillian,” he writes, manifested “moderation and accuracy” in applying the principles and lessons of painting” to “eloquence and poetry” (Lessing 1984: 3–4). By contrast, “we moderns” have obliterated the ancients’ carefully drawn distinctions, transforming “their pleasant little lanes into highways, even though shorter and safer highways themselves become mere footpaths as they lead through wildernesses” (ibid.: 4).

In order to end this representational crisis, Lessing characteristically looks backward, reviving—though on an intellectual or metaphoric level—the designating/sacrificial gesture of the Gansian/Girardian originary scene. Believing that desperate times call for desperate measures, Lessing implies that only the forceful division of painting and poetry can suffice to reestablish sustainable critical categories. It should not surprise us, therefore, to find in Lessing’s exposition of the pregnant-moment doctrine a persistent, perhaps even obsessive return to the efficacy of sacrifice.

The pregnant moment is the first configuration of what Lessing conceives as the most fundamental distinction between painting and poetry presented in *Laokoon*. Lessing does not, however, understand or present this all-important doctrine in exclusively aesthetic terms. His exposition of the pregnant moment in chapters 2–4 occurs against the background of an implicit but far-reaching consideration of the problem of representing violence. What special demands does the depiction of violence make on the painter and the poet? How does a fictional representation of violence compare with a spectacle of actual violence? Although, as Lessing says in chapter 4, “the theater is no arena,” the two do share fundamentally the same structure, and as in the case of painting and poetry, a perfectly self-evident difference between them would require no elucidation. Beneath Lessing’s development of the pregnant moment, in other words, lies a potentially troubling intuition that the theater and the arena have something essential in common. The convincing establishment of painting’s inferiority to poetry by positing the former’s necessary limitation to representing a “single moment of time” (ibid. 1984: 19) either immediately before or after the violent climax is thus necessitated not only by the disinterested pursuit of critical accuracy but by ethical considerations as well. For Lessing, painting emerges from the explication of the pregnant moment, ethically stigmatized as an intrinsically more sacrificial mode of representation.

Painting’s stigmata do not, however, stem solely from the medium’s materiality. Rather, the need to avoid explicit depiction of violence re-creates the double, even paradoxical character of sacrificial ritual as understood by Girard and Gans. According to Girard, sacrifice is humanity’s primor-

dial ritual, an echo of the founding murder's violent resolution of the originary crisis. Its ritual manifestations can therefore be seen as instances of symbolic prophylaxis, in which the community releases pent-up mimetic tension by repeating—usually, though not always, in increasingly attenuated, less violent forms—the origin's violent expulsion of violence itself. To do so efficaciously, however, sacrifice must efface its actual origins, nature, and purpose, since to see the practice for what it really is—the immolation of an innocent victim—is to open it to justifiable moral qualms. Sacrifice's relationship to violence is thus deeply mystified: while the practice both evokes and employs violence, it does so only to mystify violence's originary relationship with conflictive mimesis (Girard 1987: 22–30). For Lessing, painting's limitation to representing the pregnant moment entails a similarly mystified evocation of the link between mimesis and violence. Not only, therefore, did the Greeks avoid depicting extremes of emotion in the plastic arts, they often softened anguish “into sadness.”

Where this softening was impossible, where anguish would have been disparaging as well as distorting—what did Timanthes do? We know the answer from his painting of the sacrifice of Iphigenia: he imparted to each bystander the particular degree of sadness appropriate to him but concealed the face of the father, which should have shown the most intense suffering. . . . Timanthes knew the limits which the Graces had set for his art. He knew that the anguish appropriate to Agamemnon as the father would have to be expressed through distortions, which are always ugly. He went as far as he could in combining beauty and dignity with the expression of anguish. He would have preferred to pass over the ugly or to soften it, but since his composition did not permit him to do either, there was nothing left him but to veil it. What he might not paint he left to conjecture. In short, this concealment is a sacrifice that the artist has made to beauty; it is an example, not of how one pushed expression beyond the limits of art, but how one should subject it to the first law of art, the law of beauty. (Lessing 1984: 16)

The painter's sacrifice of mimetic faithfulness to the Law of Beauty thus conceals. It spares the viewer a potentially disturbing glimpse of Agamemnon's ineffable anguish—or is it the general's culpability for the death of Iphigenia that Timanthes veils? That it might be the latter is hinted at by Lessing's (*ibid.*: 21–22) other example of the pregnant moment in painting, Timomachus's lost portrayal of the madness of Ajax: “Ajax did not appear raging among the herds, binding and slaughtering cattle and rams, mistaking them for men. He was depicted sitting there exhausted after these deeds of insane heroism, and contemplating suicide. That is really the raging Ajax, not because he is raging at this moment, but because we see that he has been raging and because we can recognize the enormity of

his madness most vividly from the desperate shame he himself now feels at his actions. We see the tempest in the wrecks and corpses which it has cast ashore.” In both examples, the painter’s restriction to the pregnant moment amounts to a sacrifice that, like sacrifice in Girard’s view, veils or temporizes the fundamental role played by violence in the generation of significance. If, as Lessing holds, the phenomenological horizon of representational violence and suffering is the spectator’s experience of actual violence, painting’s more drastic Faustian bargain with the Law of Beauty demands from the plastic arts a particularly heavy sacrifice of the aesthetic scene’s ability to reveal cultural and cognitive truth.

Poetry’s advantage in this regard stems primarily from its sequential nature. For Lessing poetry is better able than painting to imitate the structures of actions, thereby effecting a more comprehensive revelation of the ethical significance of a scene of suffering. Poetry’s freedom from painting’s limitations, however, also enables it more fully to represent what Lessing, anticipating Gans, sees as the essentially temporal, oscillating experience of the aesthetic, as opposed to the static quality of the merely sacred or significant. Both Sophocles’ literary greatness and poetry’s inherent superiority are exhibited for Lessing by the Greek dramatist’s masterful depiction of the sufferings of Philoctetes, the extremity of whose agony is never veiled. In fact, writes Lessing (*ibid.*: 25), “How marvelously the poet has strengthened and enlarged the idea of [Philoctetes’] physical pain!” This is accomplished first by changing Philoctetes’ “divine punishment” from a disease to a wound in which a “supernatural poison raged unceasingly . . . , interrupted at intervals by a more violent attack of pain which was always followed by a benumbing sleep, allowing his exhausted body to regain its strength in order to set out again on the same path of suffering” (*ibid.*: 25–26). In addition, Sophocles compounded Philoctetes’ physical pain by adding to it “other ills which likewise could not in themselves greatly move us, but which receive from this combination a coloring just as melancholy as that which they in their turn impart to physical pain” (*ibid.*: 26). The central figure’s solitude and privation produce an alternation between the acute suffering of physical pain and the less heightened (melancholic) emotion of despair, “and no pity is so strong,” observes Lessing, “none melts our very soul so much as that which is mingled with despair” (*ibid.*: 27).

In Sophocles’ hands, poetry displays its power to re-create the temporal tensions that structure the originary scene of beauty. Like the original object of aesthetic contemplation, Philoctetes’ presence in the center of the scene of representation makes him an object of desire, a desire that manifests itself as envy of the suffering hero’s capability to elicit the audience’s pity. He is also, however, existentially absent and interdicted, both by the

repulsiveness of his festering wound and by his isolation. While the former contrivance is formally available to the painter, the latter is not, since the viewer is by virtue of the bracketed image free to surmise that any companions might be outside the picture's frame. The poet is therefore more capable than the painter of representing the totality of the scene or, more precisely, the interplay of center and periphery in the generation of beauty. Sophocles' *Philoctetes* is therefore not only emotionally affecting; he is also beautiful for having functioned very much like Gans's aesthetic sign. Inaccessibility and desirability combine so that his plight "melts our very soul."

It is not enough for Lessing, however, that poetry's superiority over painting stems solely from the former's greater capacity to elicit sympathy in the viewer for the object of aesthetic representation. That his argument invariably looks to representations of violence and suffering for its examples of the fundamental operations of both modes of representation brings Lessing close to a recognition of the ordinary links between mimesis, violence, and aesthetics. He even acknowledges this in what appears at first glance to be a digression but that under closer analysis serves an important purpose in the overall aim of *Laokoon*.

To Adam Smith's claim of "offended decorum" at the sight of *Philoctetes*' "moans," "shrieks," and "horrible convulsions" (*ibid.*: 27), Lessing responds with a frank avowal of his dislike for "the philosophy of Cicero," the purpose of which is less to discredit Smith's specific objection than to establish an ethically condemning parallel between stoicism and painting's inescapable need to veil the reality of human suffering. Lessing (*ibid.*: 29) writes,

In the second book of the *Tusculan questions*, [Cicero] drags out the problem of the endurance of physical pain. One would think he wanted to train a gladiator, so violently does he inveigh against giving utterance to pain. . . . In Sophocles' play he hears only *Philoctetes*' cries and laments, and overlooks entirely his steadfast bearing in other respects. But where else would he have found an excuse for his rhetorical sally against the poets? "Their object is to make us soft-hearted by introducing the bravest men weeping." They have to let them weep, for the theater is no arena. It was the duty of the condemned or hired gladiator to suffer everything with grace. No sound of complaint should be heard, no painful convulsion seen, for since his wounds and his death were intended to amuse the audience, it was part of his act to conceal all show of feeling. The slightest expression of it would have awakened pity; and pity, frequently awakened, would soon have put an end to these heartless and cruel shows.

Pity is the essential component of the tragic stage because it is the surest means by which the scene of suffering can function as a locus of ethical revelation. That this is the case is demonstrated by the comparison

between what he views as the “diametrically opposed” conventions governing fictional and actual spectacles of violence, a comparison inscribed within a psychologically conceptualized notion of the “natural.” Tragic heroes “must give utterance to their pain and let nature work unadorned. If they betray any training and constraint, they leave our hearts cold” (ibid.: 30). Gladiatorial training and constraint, by implication, are thus unnatural and primarily conduce to artistic failure: “I am firmly convinced that the holding of gladiatorial games was the prime reason why the Romans always remained so far below the level of mediocrity in the art of tragedy. The spectators lost all understanding of nature in the bloody amphitheater, where at best a Ctesias might have studied his art, but never a Sophocles” (ibid.).

Its association with the degraded and degrading aesthetics of the bloody amphitheater alone, however, are not sufficient grounds to delegitimize the stoic code. Lessing’s purpose in bringing the arena into the exposition of the pregnant moment is not merely to explore the phenomenology of perception but to establish, on the firmest basis available to him, the ethical superiority of poetry over painting. Timanthes took advantage of painterly muteness to avoid not only an aesthetic problem but a moral one as well: that presented by Agamemnon’s unnatural—and portentous—decision to assent to his daughter’s death. What Timanthes’ “veil” avoided was the impossibility not of reconciling anguish with beauty but of depicting Agamemnon’s stoic constraint in such a way that the general’s actions could appear above reproach. Poetic—especially tragic—volubility is therefore more cognitively and ethically revealing than painting, which like sacrifice, is constitutionally incapable of understanding itself. In Richter’s (1992: 89) view, Lessing’s desire to exalt poetic representation over painting is inevitably frustrated at crucial junctures of *Laokoon* by unforeseen, horrifying evocations of the “stubbornly present corpse of language.” Though Lessing hopes, Richter argues, that poetry, the medium of the spirit, will give birth to a “beautiful winged figure [that] flies into spirit’s oblivion—‘*dass mann nicht an ihn dächte*’” (ibid.), what inevitably appears is something *frostig*: language thus points to death. Our analysis suggests instead that language’s potentially scandalous materiality is, in Lessing’s mind, more than compensated for by discourse’s revelatory capacity and that language leads away from, not toward, suffering and death. In fact, as the argument of *Laokoon* proceeds, Lessing’s conviction of this grows stronger, and the more categorically and confidently he distinguishes between the limits of painting and poetry, the more explicitly he portrays language as an alternative to violence. Indeed, by chapter 18 the crisis of undifferentiation which was the impetus for the work is sufficiently quelled so that Lessing

(1984: 91) is willing to propose a truce between the painter and the poet, the terms of which allow them “on their extreme frontiers [to] practice a mutual forbearance by which both sides make peaceful compensation for those slight aggressions which, in haste and from force of circumstance, the one finds himself compelled to make on the other’s privilege.”

Lessing does not specify exactly what he means by “peaceful compensation” for such aggressions. The example he provides of the poet’s encroachments, however, suggests that the latter’s assumptions of the painter’s prerogatives entail less risk than would the opposite of rekindling open warfare between the two arts. That he creates a metaphor of painting and poetry as rivals is revealing, however, for it once again places his ostensibly bracketed aesthetic discussion in the context of the fundamental human problem of violence. In spite of Lessing’s jocular tone, the truce arrived at between painting and poetry—well into *Laokoon*—remains an uneasy one, because poetry’s manifestly more ethically complete rendering of the representational scene apparently possesses the power continually to arouse painting’s resentment. Something is therefore needed to effect poetry’s final ethical victory. Lessing finds that something in *ekphrasis*, the poet’s self-conscious appropriation of painterly vividness. Yet again, Homer is called on to provide an example of how poetry surpasses painting in revealing the ethical content of the static, pictorial scene.

Achilles’ shield, described at length in book 18 of the *Iliad*, presented to Lessing’s immediate forebears something of an enigma. “The elder Scaliger, Perrault, Terrason and others” (*ibid.*: 99) objected that Homer described more pictures than could fit within the shield’s dimensions. Lessing reminds his readers that this plethora of illustration may be at least partially accounted for by remembering that Homer described the shield as “artistically worked on all sides” (*ibid.*). The better explanation, however, again invokes what Lessing has already described as the poet’s greater imaginative freedom. After quoting lines 497–508,⁵ Lessing (*ibid.*: 99–100) observes,

Obviously, not everything Homer says can be combined into a single picture; the accusation and denial, the presentation of witnesses and the shouts of the divided crowd, the attempts of the heralds to still the tumult, and the decision

5. From Homer 1974: “A crowd, then, in a market place, and there / two men at odds over satisfaction owed / for a murder done: one claimed that all was paid, / and publicly declared it; his opponent / turned the reparation down, and both / demanded a verdict from an arbiter, / as people clamored in support of each, / and criers restrained the crowd. The town elders / sat in a ring, on chairs of polished stone, / the staves of clarion criers in their hands, / with which they sprang up, each to speak in turn, / and in the middle were two golden measures / to be awarded him whose argument / would be the most straightforward.”

of the judges are events which follow one another and cannot exist side by side at the same time. However, to use the language of scholastic philosophy, what is not contained in the picture *actu* is there *virtute*; and the only true way to express an actual picture in words is to combine *virtute*, i.e., what is implied in the picture, with what is actually visible, and not to confine oneself to the limits of the art, within which the poet can reckon the data for a painting, to be sure, but can never create a painting.

Again, painting's semiotic disadvantage is expressed in terms of a sacrificial economics. Restricted to depicting "one single moment" (*ibid.*: 99), the painter forfeits to his or her medium's compromise with the Law of Beauty any chance of achieving cognitive clarity about the represented object. It is not accidental, however, that of all the examples of Homeric ekphrasis that were available to Lessing, he chose this one. As was the case with the paintings of Timanthes and Timomachus, the subject of the picture is, broadly speaking, violence. Poetry's advantage over painting in representing such scenes emerges from this analysis as at least twofold. First, the temporal unfolding of linguistic signs more nearly mimics the essential temporal structure of events. Second, and more consequential, though, is poetry's revelation of the fundamentally ethical orientation of verbal discourse. The precise content of the single image that instigates Homer's imaginative flight is less important than the demonstration by this ekphrasis of language's ability to discursively reconfigure—and therefore prevent—a scene of violent human conflict. Language enables the tumultuous throng to exchange words, that is, relatively noninjurious signs, instead of the blows and spear-thrusts—things—to which their conflict would more immediately lead them if they lacked the sophisticated semiotic means that language grants them to express their differences. Poetry's medium, like that of the legal process through which Homer's divided crowd is transformed from a menace to a polis, is language. The poet can show, therefore, more reliably than the painter, how "accusation and denial, the presentation of witnesses and the shouts of the divided crowd, [and] the attempts of the heralds to still the tumult" succeed to the "decision of the judges."

3

What Eva Knodt (1995: 34) has called David Wellbery's "now canonical reading of *Laokoon*" begins with a frank exposition of the semiotic pre-suppositions that underpin his interpretation:

- (1) . . . the production, circulation, and interpretation of signs within a culture are governed by a kind of deep-structural theory, a system of assumptions, let us

say, about what constitutes a sign and what it is proper to do with one; and (2) . . . this general theory of language and signs lays down guidelines for the organization of the aesthetic field (as well as other domains). (Wellbery 1984: 1–2)

Wellbery (ibid.: 35–36) thus sees Lessing’s laying down of the law surrounding painting and poetry as itself circumscribed by a set of higher laws that govern the “practical and theoretical relations that obtain between language, knowledge, and experience.” Those laws, however, are according to Wellbery based on a maddeningly ambiguous, even contradictory notion of the sign. Handicapped by a received concept of the sign as “at once essential and accidental” and “the medium of knowledge as well as of error” (ibid.: 35), in Wellbery’s view Lessing is left with no alternative but to fail in his attempt to separate painting and poetry. Like his sign, the critic is caught between “perception and divine cognition” and thus is forced to advance an aesthetics that “has as its immanent *telos* the reconversion of conventional signifying operations (symbolic cognition) into a language that ‘exhibits notions as if before the eyes’” (ibid.: 41–42).

Wellbery’s purpose, of course, is not to hold Lessing accountable for some critical failure but to delineate the important features of what he calls the “metasemiotic” of the Enlightenment. But however well critiques such as these serve to illustrate how aesthetics may be understood “as part of a larger cultural matrix” (ibid.: 228), their own refusal to understand culture as anything but the expression of a metasemiotic prevents any consideration of the possibility that Lessing’s demonstrably influential essay might have discovered and preserved valuable insights into the definitive characteristics of humanity—that it might in some ways have achieved, that is, what Lessing set out to do.

The advantage of this essay’s interpretation over narrowly structural/semiotic and deconstructive approaches is not, however, solely a function of its presentation of a “rehabilitated” *Laokoon*. Rather, it shows that the conclusions to which Lessing’s analysis inevitably leads are the products not of the presumptive “arbitrariness” of the sign or the self-enfolding and self-stultifying nature of representation but of what René Girard has called the “double bind” of mimesis—the ever-lurking and potentially destabilizing originary identity between the conflictive configuration of mimesis and its mature, elaborated, representational forms. The particular capabilities and characteristics of painting and poetry, as Lessing admits, are difficult to delineate. There is a natural human tendency to collapse them, but that tendency itself is revelatory. Not only does it reveal something essential about the two modes of representation; it also reveals something about humanity, for whom representation is an ambivalent, perhaps even paradoxical gift. The difference between poetry and painting

emerges from Lessing's analysis as one of degree rather than kind, but the functional implications of this difference carry important consequences. Painting and poetry are configurations of the same essential human capability; their relative value is arrived at through a consideration of their differing powers to represent the ineradicable actualities evoked by language, whether painterly or poetic. The goal of aesthetic discourse is thus for Lessing what it is for Girard and Gans: a means of understanding the human. To inquire into the difference between painting and poetry is therefore to bring to light, rather than to evade, analogize, or overlook the deep affinities between representation and violence. That Lessing habitually returns to examples of representational suffering and violence in his attempt to separate the "sister arts" indicates that for him such a task could not be undertaken in the absence of a consideration of representation as a defining aspect of humanity. If, within the calm exterior of Lessing's Enlightenment discourse, there lies a seething, unstable core, it is because he, like many in his age, rose to the challenge of grounding aesthetics in the potentially fearful verities of humanity itself.

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