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Aesthetic Value, Experience, and Indiscernibles

I

I will take as my text two familiar passages, both, as it happens, referring to nightingales: the first by Shakespeare, the second, Kant.

Here is Portia at the beginning of Act V of *The Merchant of Venice*, speaking to Nerissa:

The crow doth sing as sweetly as the lark,
When neither is attended; and I think
The nightingale, if she should sing by day,
When every goose is cackling, would be thought
No better a musician than the wren.
How many things by season season'd are
To their right praise and true perfection!

[Act V, scene i, 102-8]

Portia is elaborating on a similar analogy she had drawn a few moments earlier:

A substitute shines brightly as a king,
Until a king be by; and then his state
Empties itself, as doth an inland brook
Into the main of waters.

[Act V, scene i, 94-7]

Before commenting, let me give the passage from Kant:

What do poets set more store on than the nightingale's bewitching and beautiful note, in a lonely thicket on a still summer evening by the soft light of the moon? And yet we have

instances of how, where no such songster was to be found, a jovial host has played a trick on the guests with him on a visit to enjoy the country air, and has done so to their huge satisfaction, by hiding in a thicket a rogue of a youth who (with a reed or rush in his mouth) knew how to produce this note so as to hit off nature to perfection. But the instant one realises that it is all a fraud no one will long endure listening to this song that before was regarded as so attractive.

[Critique of Judgment, Pt. I, Bk.II,§42]

Earlier in the same section, Kant had produced another example of deceit:

... it is of note that were we to play a trick on our lover of the beautiful, and plant in the ground artificial flowers (which can be made so as to look just like natural ones), and perch artfully carved birds on the branches of trees, and he were to find out how he had been taken in, the immediate interest which these things previously had for him would at once vanish. ... The fact is that our intuition and reflection must have as their concomitant the thought that the beauty in question is nature's handiwork; and this is the sole basis of the immediate interest that is taken in it.

Shakespeare and Kant are not making the same point, though I think the points are related. Shakespeare, through Portia, is speaking of the context-dependence of judgments of beauty. The lark and the crow can be judged equally fine songsters, with their own very different melodies, as long as they are not heard together; and if the nightingale should sing during the day amidst the cackle of geese and other sounds we would not rate her higher than the wren. The point is not one (or not just one) of relativity for Portia introduces a normative element, insisting on "right praise" and "true perfection". Our judgments of beauty demand that the proper context be taken into account. The songs should be valued for what they are but, as phenomena of aesthetic interest, what they are is partially determined by the context in which they occur. The beauty of the nightingale's song is inextricably linked to the setting in which it naturally occurs, including no doubt Kant's somewhat sentimental "lonely thicket on a still summer evening by the soft light of the moon".

The point Kant is making in his passage is not dissimilar from the contextualisation point. It is not just the sound per se of the nightingale's song which gives it its charm but also the fact that it is made *by the nightingale* and not, for example, by "a rogue of a youth". It is the sound under-a-description which is the object of our appreciation or as Kant puts it there must be a concomitant thought that the beauty in question is nature's handiwork. Kant offers the example, as also that of the artificial flowers, for his own polemical ends. It is part of an argument to show the superiority of natural beauty over art and also to help establish the claim that the interest we have in the beauty of nature is, as he puts it, "a mark of a good soul". Nevertheless, it might seem surprising that Kant of all people, with his tendency to aesthetic formalism, should insist on so clear a distinction between responses, on the one hand, to two perceptually indistinguishable sounds, the nightingale's song and the youth's imitation, and on the other between two visually indiscernible appearances. The Kantian judgment of taste, after all, precludes the importation of concepts such as "sung by a nightingale".

II

What I want to explore is the role of experience in judgments of aesthetic value and the constraints in characterising that experience. There seems to be a broad consensus that the aesthetic value of an object is connected in some essential way with a distinctive kind of experience – pleasurable experience – that the object affords. Thus Malcolm Budd identifies the value of a work of art with "the intrinsic value of the experience the work offers"¹; Jerry Levinson sees pleasure of an aesthetic kind, suitably defined, as having a "close and natural connection" with artistic value²; Alan Goldman locates artistic value in "the ultimately satisfying exercise of ... different mental capacities operating together to appreciate the rich relational properties of artworks"³.

¹ Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art*, The Penguin Press, 1995, p.4.

² Jerrold Levinson, 'Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 32, no.4 (1992), p.304.

³ Alan H Goldman, *Aesthetic Value*, Westview Press, 1995, p.8.

Kendall Walton defines aesthetic value in terms of “pleasurable experiences” or “appreciation”, including the pleasure of finding something valuable.⁴

Needless to say, each of these philosophers has a great deal more to add to this initial or summary characterisation of aesthetic value in terms of pleasurable experience. Take Budd for example. He expands on the idea of “the intrinsic value of the experience [a] work offers” by explaining that this is “an experience of interacting with it [the work] in whatever way it demands *if it is to be understood*” [my italics]. Not only must the experience “be imbued with an awareness of (all) the aesthetically relevant properties of the work” (p.4) but it must also involve a grasp of the meaning of the work through an interpretation (pp.40-1). And when Levinson comes to fill out his notion of aesthetic pleasure it too rapidly takes on what might be called an intellectual or conceptual accretion. The appropriate pleasure is not a mere sensation or merely passively enjoyed or of a merely subjective or personal kind; it is an active, informed pleasure, often taking the form of a complex imaginative-cum-intellectual engagement with a work of art.

Although I do not deny the need to fill out the idea of aesthetic experience, perhaps along just such lines, I do think there is a danger of philosophers trying to have it both ways or giving with one hand what they take away with the other. There is a strong intuition, based if nothing else on etymology, that the aesthetic has an intrinsically *sensuous* nature, that something can be appreciated and valued aesthetically for its own intrinsic qualities directly accessible to the senses without any elaborate theoretical or conceptual underpinning; this is the intuition behind Kant’s pure judgment of taste as disinterested pleasure, indifferent to the “real existence of an object” and not grounded in concepts. But there is also an equally strong intuition that works of art, the paradigm of the aesthetic in post-Hegelian times, are complex entities whose proper appreciation calls for special training and background know-how. To experience works of art aesthetically, according to this intuition, is far from a merely sensuous pleasure, disinterested and concept-free. In the light of the marked tendency in modern times to reduce aesthetic value to artistic value, any explana-

⁴ Kendall L. Walton, ‘How Marvelous! Toward a Theory of Aesthetic Value’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51, 3 (1993), p.504.

tion of the former in experiential terms has come to be qualified and shorn up with layers of intellectualisation more naturally associated with the latter. Maybe some of the tension can be eased by insisting on a clearer distinction between aesthetic value *per se* (resting on a purer form of experience) and the value of art (resting on experience-cum-conceptualisation) – Kant’s distinction between free and dependent beauty might aid this manoeuvre.

However, although I think we should mark a distinction between aesthetic and artistic value, I do not think this can usefully be done in terms of whether or not the experience is “intellectualised”. For one thing it is doubtful that there is such a thing as pure sensory experience void of all conceptual content, so “intellectualisation” as I have called it will always be a matter of degree. But, more interestingly, if we are to preserve, as I think we should, the connection between aesthetic value and pleasurable experience we need to give our attention to the peculiar kind of directedness or intentionality of aesthetic experience. The question is how objects of any kind enter into experience, such as to be perceived as yielding aesthetic interest or value. There is no reason a priori to suppose that the aesthetic value of art is different in kind from that of other artifacts or natural objects.

III

Some of the issues emerge clearly in reflecting on the old conundrum of the perfect fake, already suggested in the cases of Kant’s mischievous youth and the artificial flowers. In *The Languages of Art* Nelson Goodman asks whether there could be an aesthetic difference between a Rembrandt and a near perfect copy in the circumstances where just by looking we could not tell the paintings apart. He replies by arguing that there is an aesthetic difference because once the forgery is exposed we could always come, through training, to tell which is the original and which the copy (even though it does not follow that the original must have more aesthetic value than the copy). The force of Goodman’s argument is not entirely clear. He seems to be suggesting that there will be, indeed must be, some objectively perceivable property of the paintings – however initially elusive – which will serve to distinguish them

and which will acquire salience when the appropriate knowledge of their origins is in place. There is a hint, though, that he holds a stronger thesis namely that the knowledge itself is sufficient to establish not only that there is an aesthetic difference but that the paintings actually look different before and after that knowledge is acquired.

It is this stronger thesis, whether or not held by Goodman, which I want to examine. It is a thesis that other philosophers have defended, including for example Leonard Meyer and Mark Sagoff, though it is not without controversy.⁵ The thesis, more precisely, has two parts: first, that the experience of seeing the Rembrandt, to take this particular case, and the experience of seeing the near identical copy are qualitatively different experiences when imbued with the knowledge of the respective origins of the paintings, regardless of the existence of any visually discernible intrinsic properties of the paintings themselves; and second, that this difference of experience amounts to, or implies, an aesthetic difference between the works themselves and ultimately provides grounds for different aesthetic evaluations.

The truth of this strong thesis in its composite form is by no means self-evident; in fact on the face of it, it seems almost paradoxical. There is, to start with, a seeming paradox in the claim that there might be no visually discernible properties distinguishing X and Y even though an observer could have a different visual experience in looking at X and looking at Y. But even on the matter of aesthetic differences there is an oddity, if not a paradox. If, to change the example slightly, an acknowledged expert, like the Vermeer scholar Abraham Bredius, could not tell a van Meegeren from a Vermeer by the closest visual inspection and indeed praised van Meegeren's forgery *Supper at Emmaus* as one of the finest Vermeers he had ever seen, how could the later discovery of the forgery make a difference to the *aesthetic* value of van Meegeren's painting? Other judgments relating to value of course would change but it seems as if aesthetic value should be impervious to external or relational facts. Here, for example, is Alfred Lessing stating the case resolutely:

⁵ Leonard B Meyer, 'Forgery and the Anthropology of Art' and Mark Sagoff, 'The Aesthetic Status of Forgeries', both collected in Denis Dutton, ed. *The Forger's Art*, University of California Press, 1983.

Aesthetic experience is ... wholly autonomous It does not and cannot take account of any entity or fact which is not perceivable in the work of art itself. The historical context in which that work of art stands is just such a fact. It is wholly irrelevant to the pure aesthetic appreciation and judgment of the work of art. And because the fact of forgery ... can be ultimately defined only in terms of this historical context, it too is irrelevant to ... aesthetic appreciation. The fact of forgery is important historically, biographically, perhaps legally, or ... financially; but not, strictly speaking, aesthetically”.⁶

So what is the argument the other way? The first step is to establish that there could be different experiences associated with looking at two objects which do not differ intrinsically in any visually discernible properties. Of course one has to be careful here not to beg the question over what counts as a visually discernible property. But we can mitigate that problem somewhat by postulating not two distinct objects but one and the same object viewed at different times, like van Meegeren's *Supper at Emmaus* viewed before and after its exposure as a forgery. The claim is that the experience of looking at the work – indeed the aesthetic experience that the work affords – differs at these different times, and thus that its aesthetic value changes. But how could the experiences be different? At the broadest level an explanation might begin by invoking certain general claims about the nature of perception, to the effect that there is no such thing as “bare perception”, the objects of perception are not merely “given” but largely constructed from antecedent beliefs, expectations, conceptual frameworks, and so forth. Gestalt psychology, aspect seeing, versions of epistemological anti-realism are thought to support this general contention. Mark Sagoff even elicits support from Descartes in the argument of the Second Meditation that “bodies are not really perceived by the senses of the imaginative faculty, but only by intellect; they are perceived not by being touched or seen but by being understood”. But I do not want to get sidetracked into the theory of perception. In fact the debate about visual experience and so-called “bare perception” is by no means resolved; however, that there is some sense of “experience”, even “visual experience”, which allows for different experiences of identical objects has enough plausibility not to stall

⁶ Alfred Lessing, ‘What is Wrong With a Forgery?’, in *The Forger's Art*, p. 76.

the argument at this stage. It is the next stage, introducing aesthetic considerations, where the controversy starts.

Suppose we do experience van Meegeren's painting differently in the light of our knowledge that it is a forgery – we look at it differently, or, as we might say, “now it looks different”, even though no intrinsic property has changed. Could a difference in aesthetic value be grounded in this fact? In the light of Arthur Danto's work, aestheticians are well-accustomed to thinking about differences between indiscernibles. But Danto's examples are not decisive on the issue in question. We might agree that while an Andy Warhol *Brillo Box* is indistinguishable perceptually from a commercial brillo box nevertheless the former is a work of art while the latter is not; Warhol's work has intentional content, it is about something, it embodies a thought, it is located in an art-historical tradition, it elicits a different kind of attention from the mundane brillo box. But the question still arises whether they are different from a strictly aesthetic point of view? Do they differ in aesthetic value? Rather than settling such questions, Danto seems to be steering us away from them. Isn't he driving a wedge between art and aesthetics traditionally conceived? It is part of Danto's project to pull apart artistic value and aesthetic status at least where the latter is explained in purely experiential terms.

Kant's nightingale merely poses the problem but does not solve it. Certainly something about our experience changes when we discover that the nightingale's song was a mere imitation; according to Kant, what happens is that our interest fades. But we cannot conclude from that alone that the aesthetic value changes. There is a strong intuition that it is the intrinsic beauty of the sounds that determines aesthetic value and that facts about the origin of the sounds cannot, or should not, affect this intrinsic beauty even if they can affect some of our other responses and judgments.

What needs examining is the idea of an object's having intrinsic qualities which give rise to aesthetic appreciation. Leonard Meyer writes, apropos the forgery cases:

Our willingness to become involved in aesthetic experience is partly a function of the relationship we feel with the artist's creative force. An original drawing, for instance, is more valuable than the finest reproduction, even one all but indistinguishable from it. This is true not merely in the economic

sense The original is also more valuable and more exciting aesthetically because our feeling of intimate contact with the magic power of the creative artist heightens awareness, sensitivity, and the disposition to respond. Once a work is known to be a forgery that magic is gone.⁷

Meyer seems to be claiming the following: (i) there is a distinctive experience of feeling oneself in the presence of an artist's "creative force"; (ii) that experience is lacking when it is known that the work is a forgery; and (iii) it is an experience that directly bears on aesthetic value. Something analogous might be said about the sounds of the nightingale. The trouble is this explanation fails to identify anything about the object itself, any feature of the object *per se*, that is the source of the relevant experience so it does not meet the intuition that aesthetic value resides in the appreciation of an object for its own sake. After all, we might have a qualitatively identical experience (feeling an intimate contact with the magic power of the creative artist) when viewing a forgery under the mistaken belief that what we are viewing is an original work. So the experience Meyer describes cannot be sufficient for aesthetic value. But it cannot be necessary either, as we might fail to have such an experience through holding the contrary belief, again mistaken, that what we are viewing is *not* the original. But it would seem strange that such a failure on our part should affect the object's aesthetic value (we can imagine a case where, on external grounds, a work – say a sculpture – is thought to be a late Roman imitation of Praxiteles and not well regarded, but then comes to be authenticated as by the master himself and its true aesthetic value finally acknowledged and appreciated).

Another point of Meyer's, however, does go some way towards accommodating the intuition of the intrinsic nature of aesthetic value, when he characterizes the very identity conditions of a work in terms of facts about its origin. "What a thing *is* – its significance – includes our knowledge and belief ... of how it came into being" (p.88). Unfortunately, he gets sidetracked from this important observation into a discussion of the influences and subsequent history of a work and how that might explain its significance and value. Although I accept that the subsequent history of a work might affect its identity (what work it is)

⁷ Meyer, *op cit*, pp. 86-7.

and that its importance might not emerge until that history is uncovered, I think this direction of argument is open to the charge that it is no longer aesthetic value that Meyer is characterising – rather artistic or historical value. We should focus on the point about identity.

IV

Here then is the line I want to suggest. Aesthetic value should be associated with the qualities objects possess in themselves and the pleasurable experiences that arise from attention to those qualities. But the qualities that matter in aesthetic evaluation are aesthetic qualities; and aesthetic qualities in turn are determined by facts about the identity of the object. However, as Meyer observes, the identity of an object will rest not only on its intrinsic properties but also on certain of its relational properties, for example facts about its origin or even the context of its viewing.

It might look as if there is some kind of internal contradiction in this progression; it begins by associating aesthetic value with inherent qualities of objects yet it seems to end by explaining them in terms of extrinsic or relational qualities. I do not think there is any contradiction.

I will explain what I am getting at by starting at the end and working backwards. An example – also involving indiscernibles – from Jenefer Robinson sets the scene:

Imagine two painted canvases, perceptually indistinguishable, which consist of a field of red crossed vertically by three thin black or white bands. One of these is a painting by Barnett Newman and has Barnett Newman's style. The other was produced by me and is the unfinished design for my new open-plan living-room, the thin bands marking the positions in the room where I wish to place, respectively, a Japanese screen, a long sofa, and an *étagère*. Ex hypothesi we cannot tell the two works apart just by looking at them, yet Barnett Newman's painting has Barnett Newman's distinctive style, whereas mine has no style at all. Why is this? The reason is that Newman's work has aesthetic significance whereas mine does not. In Newman's work, the position of the three lines which divide

the canvas, the nature of the lines themselves ... and the exact hue of the four zones of red created by the three lines all have aesthetic significance and all were created with a specific aesthetic intention. In my work the positioning of the lines has a practical but no aesthetic significance, while the nature of the lines and the exact hue of the background is a purely accidental feature of the design. My work, I suppose, can be looked at *as if* it were a Barnett Newman, but the fact remains that it was not created with any aesthetic intention and does not have any aesthetic status. It would therefore be absurd to talk of it as a painting with a place in the history of style as the Barnett Newman is.⁸

Once again we have a thought-experiment with perceptually indistinguishable objects. The argument, though, rests less on Danto's precedent than on the tradition initiated by Kendall Walton in his paper 'Categories of Art'. Walton has established, I take it conclusively, that we cannot identify aesthetic properties simply from the nonaesthetic properties immediately perceived in a work, independently of other facts about the work, in particular what "category" it is assigned to.⁹ I will not rehearse Walton's arguments, which are now familiar among aestheticians, but I will take them as decisive in establishing the connection I want between the identity of a work, including what category it belongs to, and the aesthetic properties it possesses. That is not the controversial step in the argument.

What is controversial is the idea that the aesthetic qualities on which judgments of aesthetic value are based are inherent in objects and when suitably recognized and appreciated become the direct source of the pleasurable experiences that underpin aesthetic value. The position I am defending is more of an *ontological* than a *psychological* thesis. It is not just, as Kant would have it, that our experience is accompanied by (or has as its concomitant) a thought of a certain kind; rather the experience is directed to an object of a certain kind. When we speak of qualities being inherent in objects, the clue is in rightly interpreting the phrase "inherent in objects". For "objects" here must be understood as objects-under-a-description or intensional objects.

⁸ Jenefer Robinson, 'Style and Significance in Art History', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 40, 1981, p.8.

⁹ Kendall Walton, 'Categories of Art', *Philosophical Review*, 79, 1970, pp.334-67.

The relevant qualities that an object possesses under one description might not inhere in the object under another description. Yet the appropriate descriptions or categorisations are not arbitrary or subjectively determined and serve to characterize the objects' identity conditions. What Jenefer Robinson's example shows is that Barnett Newman's painting is an object of a different kind from her own groundplan for her living room. In spite of being indistinguishable in surface appearance they have fundamentally different identity conditions; they belong to different categories and relative to their identity possess different aesthetic properties. The nonaesthetic properties that they have in common – the configuration of lines, the coloured spaces – are perceived or experienced in different ways once the identity of the objects is understood. The nonaesthetic properties in the Newman painting, unlike those in Robinson's, are perceived as having aesthetic significance. Conceived as an Abstract Expressionist work of art, a product of a specific aesthetic intention, Newman's painting genuinely, objectively, possesses the stylistic features that Robinson identifies. It would be a mistake, not just a matter of arbitrary convention, to fail to recognize that the painting is in a certain style. It would be to fail to appreciate the work for what it is. And so we come round to experience again. Once we know what kind of work we are looking at – its identity under a description – which might involve appealing to facts, as Meyer puts it, about how it came into being, we can then directly experience the aesthetic qualities which the work manifests under that identity. We can appreciate its aesthetic value as a work of that kind. Aesthetic value, as the nightingale example suggests, can only reside in objects under-a-description, objects as identified as of a certain kind, but that is not to say that the relevant experience is not *of those objects* in their own right or for their own sake.

V

In this final section I want to broaden the discussion, drawing on what has gone before, with some thoughts on aesthetic value in relation to literary works. My examples so far have been predominantly from the visual arts or, in the case of the nightingale, from qualities of sound. It

might be thought that this is the natural realm for any talk of aesthetic experience and that such talk is inappropriate when applied to the literary arts. Indeed, given the close connection in common idiom between aesthetic value and pleasurable experience, the conclusion might be drawn that literary works, unlike works of a directly perceptual nature, are simply not assessable for *aesthetic* value as such.¹⁰ However, this is a line of thought I reject. Literary works, as works of art, do possess aesthetic qualities, they do exhibit aesthetic value and they can be seen to invite and elicit a specific kind of aesthetic experience which, following the work of Stein Haugom Olsen, I shall call appreciation.¹¹ Nor should this be conceived in purely formalistic terms, with reference only to such things as mellifluous prose, resounding imagery, poetic rhyme and rhythm, alliteration, syntactical subtlety, complex structures, and so forth. Novels as well as lyric poetry and drama can have aesthetic qualities and it is not just the rhetorical or linguistic form of literary works but also their representational content which contributes to their aesthetic value. Giving a full explanation of just how this can be, or what it means, is too big a task for a short space but let me give a few pointers, making connections as far as possible with the earlier discussion.

First of all, literary works, like the visual works discussed earlier, are also amenable to indiscernibility thought-experiments. The obvious case is Borges's much discussed fictional story 'Pierre Menard: Author of the *Quixote*', in which Pierre Menard has the ambition to write *Don Quixote*, not by merely copying the original, but by a fully inspired act of literary creation. Here is a passage from the story:

It is a revelation to compare Menard's *Don Quixote* with Cervantes's. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counsellor.

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the 'lay genius' Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:

¹⁰ Nick Zangwill seems to be inclined in this direction. See Nick Zangwill, 'Aesthetic/Sensory Dependence', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 38, 1 (1998), p.74.

¹¹ e.g. Stein Haugom Olsen *The End of Literary Theory*, Cambridge, 1987.

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counsellor.

History, the *mother* of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened: it is what we judge to have happened. The final phrases – *exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counsellor*—are brazenly pragmatic.

The contrast in style is also vivid. The archaic style of Menard – quite foreign after all – suffers from a certain affectation. Not so that of his forerunner, who handles with ease the current Spanish of his time.¹²

The point about style recalls Robinson's example. It might be thought that the lesson from Borges's joke is pretty banal: philosophers are familiar with the notion that the same sentence-type can bear different meanings and also that what utterers mean by any token of a sentence-type might differ from occasion to occasion. But the profound lesson, at least for literary criticism, from Pierre Menard goes well beyond that: it is the need to distinguish *text* from *work*, a lesson that modern literary theorists from Roland Barthes onwards have failed to learn.¹³ What this extreme case shows, apparently, is that the very same text can support different works: that text identity is not the same as work identity. Furthermore what makes something the work it is rests not on its textual properties alone but on facts about its origin, including the intentions of its creator. The idea that we can discover all the information we need as literary critics – about meaning, interpretation, allusion, reference – by examining the text itself is shown to be radically misguided. This is the literary application of Walton's thesis.

What about a literary work's aesthetic qualities? We should note that a vocabulary common to aesthetic judgments across all the arts is also applicable to literary works: unity, complexity, balance, coherence, tension, as well as terms like vividness, concreteness, universality, sublimity, vitality, delicacy, and of course beauty. To see how these

¹² Jorge Luis Borges, 'Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*', in *Labyrinths*, Penguin, 1964, p.69.

¹³ Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *Image-Music-Text*, essays selected by and trans Stephen Heath (London, 1977).

are applied in the literary context we need to distinguish between textual features and aesthetic features in a literary work. All texts, whether literary or not, possess textual features, which include grammatical structure, syntax, vocabulary, narrative or rhetorical device, imagery, figures of speech, denotation, self-reference, and what can loosely be called content. However, merely noticing or describing such features, however, “literary” or “poetic” they might seem in themselves, is not yet to engage in aesthetic appreciation or to identify aesthetic features. Aesthetic features of a text emerge only when textual features are perceived as fulfilling some aesthetic function, or contributing to an overall aesthetic effect, or acquiring aesthetic significance. Indeed this exactly parallels what we saw in Robinson’s example. The lines and colour patches in the two paintings do not themselves possess aesthetic significance but only acquire such relative to the prior identification of the kind of work at issue, in the Newman case its being the product of an aesthetic intention. Not even the most discriminating characterization of the exact hue of the colours, the precise length and positioning of the lines will reveal what aesthetic interest they invite. Only by perceiving how the configuration displays a style or how it enhances a coherent aesthetic vision can a viewer attain the appropriate aesthetic experience. What this reinforces in the literary case is again the importance of the distinction between a *text* and a *work*. It is not the sentences *per se* that determine our different responses to the Cervantes and the Pierre Menard texts, or which yield distinctive stylistic features, but their embeddedness in different works. In general, only when a text is conceived as a work of a certain kind—either broadly as a literary work or as a work in a more specific category—is the emergence of aesthetic qualities out of textual properties possible. Only under the description “literary work” are expectations of what the work might yield conventionally brought into play, as well as procedures for exploring the ways in which the literary values are manifested.¹⁴

Appreciation of a literary work is a kind of perception (or experience); it calls for imagination, discrimination, even what in the 18th Century was called sensibility. It is not just a passive admiration of textual features, like virtuosity of language use or rhetorical structure. It involves perceiving how a theme is elicited from a subject, how the work

¹⁴ For more on this, see my *Fictional Points of View*, Ithaca, NY, 1996, Ch.12.

coheres as an imaginative realisation of a humanly interesting vision. Appreciation is a perception of value. It is wrong to assume a sharp distinction between description and evaluation, probably in any aesthetic context, but certainly in literary aesthetics. For a description of a work's aesthetic qualities – the way that textual features cohere and acquire significance – is already an assumption of aesthetic value or interest. Of course a failure to find any aesthetic coherence will signal a lack of aesthetic value but that will be apparent in the perception itself. The work simply won't yield the experience promised.

Let me make all this a little more concrete and accessible with another example. Here is Lionel Trilling writing about *Little Dorrit*:

The subject of *Little Dorrit* is borne in upon us by the informing symbol, or emblem, of the book, which is the prison. The story opens in a prison in Marseilles. It goes on to the Marshalsea, which in effect it never leaves. The second of the two parts of the novel begins in what we are urged to think of as a sort of prison, the monastery of the Great St Bernard. The Circumlocution Office is the prison of the creative mind of England. Mr Merdle is shown as habitually holding himself by the wrist, taking himself into custody, and in a score of ways the theme of incarceration is carried out, persons and classes being imprisoned by their notions of predestined fate or of religious duty, or by their occupations, their life-schemes, their ideas of themselves, their very habits of language.¹⁵

What is happening in this not untypical piece of critical prose is that connections are being made between different episodes of the novel and shown to have unity and significance under the general thematic concept of the prison. The reader who follows Trilling's interpretation is led beyond an immediate apprehension of narrative content to an appreciation of a broader vision elicited from, and making sense of, this content, the story told. The prison becomes a unifying symbol in the work, a recognition of which enhances the work's interest: the prison symbolizes, in Trilling's words, a "practical instrument for the negation of man's will which the will of society has contrived". The aesthetic value of the work lies not in the expression of that particular theme –

¹⁵ Lionel Trilling, Introduction, *Little Dorrit* (New Oxford Illustrated Dickens, Oxford, 1953), p. vi. The example is discussed by Stein Haugom Olsen in 'Literary Aesthetics and Literary Practice', in *The End of Literary Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

there is nothing aesthetically valuable in the theme itself – but in the subtle ways in which the theme is given imaginative realisation. Of course if the theme did not have any inherent interest, being trivial or merely parochial, that would affect the aesthetic value a reader might find in the work and the aesthetic pleasure it might afford; the effort of appreciation would be seen as unrewarding or to no serious purpose.

It might be asked whether the prison symbol in *Little Dorrit*, the imaginative exploration of which I have suggested is at the heart of the novel's aesthetic value, is truly an objective feature of the novel itself or somehow an imposition from a critical interpretation (or perhaps present only relative to such an interpretation). The question might be taken to parallel the earlier discussion of whether the aesthetic qualities perceived in the nightingale's song are in the sounds themselves or in the sounds only as interpreted; or whether the qualities identified and admired in the van Meegeren vanish when the work is exposed as a forgery. But what I tried to show then applies now as well, namely that we need a more refined conception of what it is for a quality to inhere in an object, as opposed to being read into it. The contrast in these stark terms is simply not applicable in all cases, even though we can readily think of cases where we can distinguish "belonging to" and "being read into". What we have seen is that the identity of an object is not necessarily determined exclusively by its intrinsic physical (including textual) properties (Theseus's ship which has all its planks replaced might be another case to cite in this context). Facts about its origin, the intention behind its creation, the category to which it belongs, and other extrinsic qualities, contribute literally to making it the object that it is. Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of works of art, or any intentional objects. What happens in the forgery cases or the cases of perceptual indiscernibles is not just that the experiences change with the knowledge of the true origins of the objects but that in a sense the objects themselves change and thereby afford different experiences.

No doubt this doesn't quite answer the question about the interpretation of *Little Dorrit* but it sets it in the right context. The applicability of the prison symbol has, of course, to be justified by reference to textual properties, including facts about narrative content. Interpretation can turn out to be weakly supported. But only when identified as a literary work does it make sense to speak of a theme such

as the prison symbol being imaginatively realised in a unified artistic structure. The theme is “in” in the work only *qua* literary work. If the work were to be categorized as historical or biographical this would become an inappropriate mode of appreciation.

So finally we come back to Portia’s observations about the nightingale who sings in the day amid the cackle of the geese or the substitute who shines brightly as a king until the king himself appears. It would be wrong, as I said at the beginning, to treat this merely as an assertion of the relativity of judgments of beauty, as saying merely that the nightingale’s song seems beautiful in some contexts not in others – for this would be of no more interest than saying that some people enjoy it, some do not. Throughout the paper I have wanted to resist a slide into any bald evaluative relativism by stressing the sense in which objects themselves can be said to possess aesthetic qualities once the identity of the objects has been established. When Portia speaks of how things “by season season’d are to their right praise and true perfection” I take her to be implying not only that there is a correct context in which informed judgments should be made but that this context, for example the nightingale’s song at night, is part of the very character, the identity, of the song itself. To experience the song in an inappropriate context is not really to experience the song at all.¹⁶

¹⁶ Earlier versions of this paper were read at a conference on Aesthetic Value, organised by the Open University, in May 1996, at a meeting of the Nordic Society of Aesthetics, in Lund, in the same month, and at a research seminar at the University of Leeds in December 1996. I am grateful to participants at those meetings for their helpful comments.