

# Integral Life<sup>+</sup>

## **Integral Art and Literary Theory**

Excerpt From: *The Eye of Spirit*

Chapters Four and Five

By Ken Wilber

### **Part I**

In the process of understanding and interpretation, part and whole are related in a circular way: in order to understand the whole, it is necessary to understand the parts, while to understand the parts it is necessary to have some comprehension of the whole.

David Couzens Hoy

Thus the movement of understanding is constantly from the whole to the part and back to the whole. Our task is to extend in concentric circles the unity of the understood meaning. The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding. The failure to achieve this harmony means that understanding has failed.

Hans-Georg Gadamer

## Introduction

With the death of the avant-garde and the triumph of irony, art seems to have nothing sincere to say. Narcissism and nihilism battle for a center stage that isn't even there; kitsch and camp crawl all over each other in a fight for a representation that no longer matters anyway; there seems to arise only the egoic inclination of artist and critic alike, caught in halls of self-reflecting mirrors, admiring their image in a world that once cared.

The aim of this essay is to step out of the narcissistic and nihilistic endgame that has so thoroughly overtaken the world of postmodern art and literature, and to introduce instead the essentials of a genuinely integral art and literary theory—what might be called integral hermeneutics.

I will cover both art and literature, but with an emphasis on visual art, which is actually a "trickier" and in some ways more difficult case, since it usually lacks narrative structure to help guide the interpretation. (A subsequent essay focuses specifically on an "all-level, all-quadrant" analysis of literary signification and semiotics in general.)

It is no secret that the art and literary world has reached something of a cul-de-sac, a dead end. Postmodern literary theory is a perfect, and perfectly typical, example of the "babble of interpretations" that has overcome the art world. It used to be that "meaning" was something the author created and simply put into a text, and the reader simply pulled it out. This view is now regarded, by all parties, as hopelessly naive.

Starting with psychoanalysis, it was recognized that some meaning could be unconscious, or unconsciously generated, and this unconscious meaning would find its way into the text even though the author was unaware of it. It was therefore the job of the psychoanalyst, and not the naive reader, to pull this hidden meaning out.

The "hermeneutics of suspicion," in its many forms, thus came to view artworks as repositories of hidden meaning that could be decoded only by the knowing critic. Any repressed, oppressed, or otherwise marginalized context would show up, disguised, in the art, and the art was thus a testament to the repression, oppression, marginalization. Marginalized context was hidden subtext.

The Marxist variation was that the critics themselves existed in the context of capitalist-industrial social practices of covert domination, and these hidden contexts and meanings could be found in (and therefore pulled out of) any artwork created by a person in *that* context. Similarly, art would be interpreted in the context of racism, sexism, elitism, speciesism, jingoism, imperialism, logocentrism, phallogocentrism, phallogocentrism (batteries not included).

Various forms of structuralism and hermeneutics fought vigorously to find the "real" context which would, therefore, provide the real and final meaning, which would undercut (or supersede) all other interpretations. Foucault, in his archaeological period, outdid them both, situating both structuralism and hermeneutics in an *episteme* that was itself the cause and context of the type of people who would even want to do hermeneutics and structuralism in the first place.

In part in reaction to some of this, the New Criticism had said, basically, let us ignore all of those interpretations. The artwork, in and by itself, is all that really matters. Ignore the personality (conscious or unconscious) of the author, ignore the historical setting, the time, the place, and look solely at the structural integrity of the artwork itself (its regime, its code, its internal pattern). "Affective stylistics" and "reader-response" theory reacted strongly to all that, and maintained that since meaning is only generated in reading (or in viewing) the artwork, then the *meaning* of the work is actually found in the *response* of the viewer. The phenomenologists

(e.g., Iser, Ingarden) had tried a combination of the two: the text has gaps ("spots of indeterminacy"), and the meaning of the gaps can be found in the reader.

And deconstruction came along and said, basically, you're all wrong. (It's very hard to trump that.) Deconstruction maintained that all meaning is context-dependent, and contexts are boundless. There is thus no way to control, or even finally to determine, meaning—and thus both art and criticism spin endlessly out of control and into the space of unrelenting ambiguity, never to be seen or heard from again.

Postmodern deconstruction, it has finally been realized, leads precisely and inevitably to nihilism: there is no genuine meaning anywhere, only nested deceptions. And this leaves, in the place of art as sincere statement, art as anarchy, anchored only in egoic whim and narcissistic display. Into the vacuum created by the implosion that is so much of postmodernism, rushes the ego triumphant. Meaning is context-dependent, and contexts are boundless, and that leaves art and artist and critic alike lost in an perspectival space, ruled only by the purr of the self-centric engine left driving the entire display.

The laments are loud and well-known. Painter and critic Peter Fuller:

I feel that we are living through the epilogue of the European professional Fine Art tradition—an epilogue in which the context and subject matter of most art is art itself.

And art historian Barbara Rose:

The art currently filling the museums and galleries is of such low quality generally that no real critical intelligence could possibly feel challenged to analyze it.... There is an

inescapable sense among artists and critics that we are at the end of our rope, culturally speaking.

But who knows? Perhaps meaning is in fact context-dependent, and perhaps contexts are indeed boundless. Is there any way that this state of affairs can be viewed so as to actually restore a genuine sense of meaning to art and its interpretation? Is there any way to ground the babble of interpretations that has finally self-deconstructed? Is there any way that the nested lies announced by postmodernism could in fact be nested truths? And could this spell the endgame of the narcissism and nihilism that had so proudly announced their own ascendancy?

Could, in short, an integral orientation save art and literary theory from itself?

### **Contexts Within Contexts Endlessly**

We live in a world of holons. "Holons": the word was coined by Arthur Koestler to indicate wholes that are simultaneously parts of other wholes: a whole quark is part of a whole atom; a whole atom is part of a whole molecule; a whole molecule is part of a whole cell; a whole cell is part of a whole organism.... In linguistics, a whole letter is part of a whole word, which is part of a whole sentence, which is part of a whole paragraph... and so on.

In other words, we live in a universe that consists neither of wholes nor of parts, but of whole/parts, or holons. Wholes do not exist by themselves, nor do parts exist by themselves. Every whole simultaneously exists as a part of some other whole, and as far as we can tell, this is indeed endless. Even the whole of the universe right now is simply a part of the next moment's whole. There are no wholes, and no parts, anywhere in the universe; there are only whole/parts.

As I have tried to suggest in *A Brief History of Everything*, this is true in the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual domains. We exist in fields within fields, patterns within patterns,

contexts within contexts, endlessly. There is an old joke about a King who goes to a Wiseperson and asks how is it that the Earth doesn't fall down? The Wiseperson replies, "The Earth is resting on a lion." "On what, then, is the lion resting?" "The lion is resting on an elephant." "On what is the elephant resting?" "The elephant is resting on a turtle." "On what is the...." "You can stop right there, your Majesty. It's turtles all the way down."

Holons all the way down, in a dizzyingly nested fashion, without ever hitting a foundation. The "postmodern poststructuralists"—usually associated with such names as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and stretching back to George Bataille and Friedrich Nietzsche—have been the great foes of any sort of systematic theory or "grand narrative," and thus they might be expected to raise stern objections to any overall theory of "holons." But a close look at their own work shows that it is driven precisely by a conception of holons within holons within holons, of texts within texts within texts (or contexts within contexts within contexts), and it is this sliding play of texts within texts that forms the "foundationless" platform from which they launch their attacks.

George Bataille, for instance. "In the most general way,"—and these are his italics—*"every isolable element of the universe always appears as a particle that can enter into composition with a whole that transcends it. Being is only found as a whole composed of particles whose relative autonomy is maintained [a part that is also a whole]. These two principles [simultaneous wholeness and partness] dominate the uncertain presence of an ipse being across a distance that never ceases to put everything in question."*

*Everything* is put into question because everything is a context within a context forever. *And putting everything in question* is precisely what the postmodern poststructuralists are known for. And so in a language that would soon become quite typical (and by now quite comical), Bataille goes on to point out that "putting everything into question" counters the human need to

arrange things violently in terms of a pat wholeness and smug universality: "With extreme dread imperatively becoming the demand for universality, carried away to vertigo by the movement that composes it, the *ipse* being that presents itself as a universal is only a challenge to the diffuse immensity that escapes its precarious violence, the tragic negation of all that is not its own bewildered phantom's chance. But, as a man, this being falls into the meanders of the knowledge of his fellowmen, which absorbs his substance in order to reduce it to a component of what goes beyond the virulent madness of his autonomy in the total night of the world." Um, and so forth.

The point is *not* that Bataille himself was without any sort of system, but simply that the *system is sliding*—holons within holons forever. So the claim to simply have "no system" is a little disingenuous. Which is why Andre Breton, the leader of the surrealists at the time, began a counter-attack on this part of Bataille, also in terms that are echoed by today's critics of postmodernists: "Bataille's misfortune is to reason: admittedly, he reasons like someone who 'has a fly on his nose', which allies him more closely with the dead than with the living, but *he does reason*. He is trying, with the help of the tiny mechanism in him which is not completely out of order, to share his obsessions: this very fact proves that he cannot claim, no matter what he may say, to be opposed to any system, like an unthinking brute."

Both sides are correct, in a sense. There is system, but the system is sliding. It is unendingly, dizzily, holonic. This is why Jonathan Culler, perhaps the foremost interpreter of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, can point out that Derrida does *not* deny truth per se, but only insists that truth and meaning are *context-bound* (each context being a whole that is also part of another whole context, which itself...). "One could therefore," says Culler, "identify deconstruction with the twin principles of the *contextual determination of meaning* and the *infinite extendability of context*."

Turtles all the way up, all the way down. What deconstruction puts into question is the desire to find a final resting place, in either wholeness or partness or anything in between. Every time somebody finds a final interpretation or a foundational interpretation of a text or artwork (or life or history or cosmos), deconstruction is on hand to say that the final context does not exist, because it is also unendingly a part of yet another context forever. As Culler puts it, any sort of final context is "unmasterable, both in principle and in practice. *Meaning is context bound, but context is boundless.*"

Even Jurgen Habermas, who generally takes Breton's position to Derrida's Bataille, agrees with that particular point. As Habermas puts it, "These variations of context that change meaning cannot in principle be arrested or controlled, because contexts cannot be exhausted, that is, they cannot be theoretically mastered once and for all."

That the system is sliding does not mean that meaning can't be established, that truth doesn't exist, or that contexts won't hold still long enough to make a simple point. Many postmodern poststructuralists have not simply discovered holonic space, they have become thoroughly lost in it. George Bataille, for example, took a good, long, hard look at holonic space and went properly insane, though which is cause, and which effect, is hard to say.

As for our main topic, we need only note that there is indeed system, but the system is sliding: The universe is composed of holons—contexts within contexts within contexts—all the way up, all the way down.

### **Meaning Is Context-Dependent**

The word "bark" means something very different in the phrases "the bark of a dog" and "the bark of a tree." Which is exactly why all meaning is context-bound; the identical word has different meanings depending upon the context in which it is found.

This context-dependency seems to pervade every aspect of the universe and our lives in it. Take, for example, a single thought, say the thought of going to the grocery store. When I have that thought, what I actually experience is the thought itself, the interior thought and its meaning—the symbols, the images, the idea of going to the grocery store. (This is the Upper Left quadrant, the intentional.)

Now the internal thought only makes sense in terms of my cultural background. If I spoke a different language, the thought would be composed of different symbols and have quite different meanings. If I existed in a primal tribal society a million years ago, I would never even have the thought "going to the grocery store." It might be, "Time to kill the bear." The point is that my thoughts themselves arise in a *cultural background* that gives texture and meaning and context to my individual thoughts, and indeed, I would not even be able to "talk to myself" if I did not exist in a community of individuals who also talk to me. (This is the Lower Left quadrant, the cultural.)

So the cultural community serves as an *intrinsic background and context* to any individual thoughts I might have. My thoughts do not just pop into my head out of nowhere; they pop into my head out of a cultural background, and however much I might move beyond this background, I can never simply escape it altogether, and I could never have developed thoughts in the first place without it. The occasional cases of a "wolf boy"—humans raised in the wild—show that the human brain, left without culture, does not produce linguistic thoughts on its own.

In short, my individual thoughts only exist against a vast background of cultural practices and languages and meanings and contexts, without which I could form virtually no individual thoughts at all. But my culture itself is not simply disembodied, hanging in idealistic mid-air. It has *material components*, much as my own individual thoughts have material brain components. All *cultural* events have *social* correlates. These concrete social components include types of

technology, forces of production (horticultural, agrarian, industrial, etc.), concrete institutions, written codes and patterns, geopolitical locations, and so on (the Lower Right quadrant). And these concrete material components—the actual *social system*—are crucial in helping to determine the types of cultural worldview, within which my own thoughts will arise.

So my supposedly "individual thought" is actually a holon that has all these various aspects to it—intentional, behavioral, cultural, and social. And around the holonic circle we go: the social system will have a strong influence on the cultural worldview, which will set limits to the individual thoughts that I can have, which will register in the brain physiology. And we can go around that circle in any direction. They are all interwoven. They are all mutually determining. They all cause, and are caused by, the other holons, in concentric spheres of contexts within contexts indefinitely.

And this fact bears directly on the nature and meaning of art itself.

### **What Is Art?**

The simplest and perhaps earliest view of the nature and meaning of art (and thus of its interpretation as well) is that art is imitative or representational: it copies something in the real world. The painting of a landscape copies or represents the real landscape. Plato takes this view of art in the *Republic*, where he uses the example of a bed: the painting of a bed is a copy of a concrete bed (which is itself a copy of the ideal Form of a bed). Notoriously, for Plato, this puts art in a rather bad position: it is making copies of copies of the Ideal, and is thus doubly removed and doubly inferior. Later theorists would "upgrade" this Platonic conception by maintaining that the true artist is actually copying the Ideal Forms directly, seen with the mind's eye, and thus is performing a "perfectionist" artistry—as Michelangelo said, "The beauty which stirs and carries up to heaven every sound intellect."

Aristotle likewise takes the view of art as imitative or copying the real world, and in one form or another this notion of art as *mimesis* has had a long and profound influence: the *meaning* of art is that which it represents.

The grave difficulty with this view, taken in and by itself, is that it unmistakably implies that the better the imitation, the better the art, so that a perfect copy would be perfect art, which lands art squarely in the province of *trompe l'oeil* and documentary photography: a good likeness on a driver's license photo would be good art. Moreover, not all art is representative or imitative: surrealist, minimalist, expressionist, conceptual, and so forth. So while some art has representative aspects, *mimesis* alone can account for neither the nature nor the value of art.

With the rise of the Enlightenment in Europe, two other major theories of the nature and meaning of art gained prominence, and they are both still quite influential today. Not surprisingly, these theories would spring respectively from the great rational and great romantic currents that were set in motion in the 17th and 18th centuries, and which, translated into the artistic domain, came to be known generally as formalist and expressionist (rational and romantic!).

And at this point, the question became, not so much *what* is art, but *where* is art?

### **Art Is in the Maker**

If the nature, meaning, and value of art are not simply due to art's imitative capacity, perhaps the essence of art lies in its power to express something, and not simply to copy something. And indeed, in both the theory and practice of art, emphasis often began to turn from a faithful copying and representing and imitating—whether of religious icons or of a realistic nature—to an increasingly expressionistic stance, under the broad influence of the general currents of Romanticism. This view of art and its value was given strong and quite influential

voice by theorists such as Benedetto Croce (Aesthetics), R.G. Collingwood (Principles of Art), and Leo Tolstoy (What is Art?).

The basic conclusion of these Romantic theorists: art is, first and foremost, the expression of the feelings or intentions of the artist. It is not simply the imitation of an external reality, but the expression of an internal reality. We therefore can best interpret art by trying to understand the original intention of the maker of the artwork itself (whether painter, writer, composer).

Thus, for Tolstoy, art is the "contagion of feeling." That is, the artist expresses feeling in the artwork which then evokes that feeling in us, the viewers; and the quality of the art is best interpreted by the quality of the feelings it expresses and "infects" us with. For Croce—arguably the most influential aesthetician of the 1900s—art is the expression of emotion, itself a very real and primal type of knowledge, often cosmic in its power, especially when expressed and evoked by great works of art. And Collingwood made the original intention of the artist so utterly primary, that the inward, psychological vision of the artist was itself said to be the actual art, whether or not that vision ever got translated into public forms.

This view of art as the expression of an original intention or feeling or vision in the artist gave rise to what is still perhaps the most widespread school of the interpretation of art. Modern "hermeneutics"—the art and science of interpretation—began with certain Romantically-inspired philosophical trends, notably in Friedrich Schleiermacher and then Wilhelm Dilthey, and continuing down to this day in such influential theorists as Emilio Betti and E.D. Hirsch. This approach, one of the oldest and in some ways the most central school of hermeneutics, maintains that the key to the correct interpretation of a text—considering "text" in the very broadest sense, as any symbol requiring interpretation, whether artistic, linguistic, poetic—the key to correct interpretation is the recovery of the maker's original intention, a psychological reconstruction of the author's (or artist's) intentions in the original historical setting.

In short, for these approaches, since the meaning of art is the maker's original intention, a valid interpretation involves the psychological reconstruction and recovery of this original intention. The hermeneutic gap between the artist and viewer is closed to the extent there is a "seeing eye to eye" with the artist's original meaning, and this occurs through the procedures of valid interpretation based on original recovery and reconstruction.

It is no accident that the theory of art as expression was historically paralleled by the broad trends of expressionism in the practice of art itself. The nineteenth-century expressionists and Post Impressionists, including Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, and Edvard Munch, directly opposed the Realist and Impressionist imitation of nature (Van Gogh: "Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily so as to express myself more forcibly"); from there to the Cubists and Fauves (Matisse: "What I am after above all is expression"); to Kandinsky and Klee and the abstract expressionism of Pollock, Kline, and de Kooning. In its various manifestations, expressionism was not just a stylistic or idealizing alteration of external representation, but an almost complete and total break with the tradition of imitation.

No sooner was this theory (and practice) of art as expression put forth, than another offshoot of the broad Romantic movement—psychoanalysis—pointed out that many human intentions are in fact unconscious. And further, these intentions, even though unconscious, nonetheless can make their way in disguised forms into everyday life, perhaps as neurotic symptoms, or as symbolic dreams, or as slips of the tongue, or, in general, as compromise formations expressing the conflict between a forbidden desire and a censoring or repressing force. The psychoanalyst, trained to spot the symbolic expression of these hidden desires, could thus interpret these symbols and symptoms to the individual, who in turn would thus gain, it was duly hoped, some sort of understanding and amelioration of his or her distressing condition.

In the sphere of art and literature, this inevitably meant that the original maker (artist, writer, poet) would, like everybody else, have various unconscious intentions, and these intentions, in disguised forms, would leave traces in the artwork itself. It followed then with mathematical precision: 1) if the meaning of art is the original intention expressed in the work; and 2) if the correct interpretation of art is therefore the reconstruction of this intention; but 3) if some intentions are unconscious and leave only symbolic traces in the artwork, then 4) an important part of the correct interpretation of an artwork is the unearthing and interpreting of these unconscious drives, intentions, desires, wishes. The art critic, to be a true critic, must also be a psychoanalyst.

### **Art Is in the Hidden Intent: Symptomatic Theories**

This soon opened a Pandora's box of "unconscious intentions." If the artwork expressed the unconscious Freudian desires of the artist, why limit it to Freudian themes? There are, after all, several different types of unconscious structures in the human being, the list of which soon exploded. The artist exists in a setting of techno-economic structures, the Marxists pointed out, and a particular artwork will inexorably reflect the "base" of economic realities, and thus the correct interpretation of a text or work of art involves highlighting the class structures in which the art is produced. Feminists soon caught the fever, and aggressively tried to suggest that the fundamental and hidden structures were primarily those of gender, so that even Marxists were driven by the unconscious or thinly disguised intentions of patriarchal power. Womanists (feminists of color) very rapidly outflanked the mainstream feminists with a criticism whose opening line was, in effect, "We can't blame everything on the patriarchy, white girl..." And so the list would go: racism, sexism, elitism, speciesism, anthropocentrism, androcentrism, imperialism, ecologism, logocentrism, phallogentrism.

All of those theories might best be called Symptomatic Theories: they view a particular artwork as symptomatic of larger currents, currents the artist is often unaware of—sexual, economic, cultural, ideological. They generally grant that the meaning of art is the expression of an original feeling, intention, or vision of the artist. But they immediately add that the artist might have, or exist in, structures of unconscious intention, and these unconscious structures, generally not available to the awareness of the artists themselves, would nonetheless leave symbolic traces in their works of art, and these traces could be spotted, decoded, deciphered, and interpreted by the knowing critic. A valid interpretation is thus one that decodes and exposes the hidden intentions, whether individual or cultural.

### **Art Is in the Artwork**

While there may be much truth to each of those positions—and we will shortly return for an assessment—nonetheless, few critics would concede that intentions alone, conscious or unconscious, define the nature and value of art.

In part as a reaction to these originally Romantic and expressivist versions of art, there arose various more "formal" interpretations of art and literature; and this, as I suggested, was in large measure a legacy of the more rational side of the Enlightenment agenda.

This Enlightenment rationalism had several profound influences on art theory and practice. The general atmosphere of Enlightenment scientific realism soon translated almost directly to the realist trends in literature and painting (Zola, Balzac, Flaubert, Courbet), and from there to the Impressionists, who repudiated so much of the Romantic-expressionist trends and sought instead to capture "immediate visual impressions" rendered intensely and impersonally, the emotions of the artist being quite secondary at best (Monet, Renoir, Manet, Pissarro, Degas), as

well as the objective rendering of contemporary and actual experience, sometimes verging on the documentary, and always in sympathy with a realist attitude.

But Enlightenment rationalism also entered art theory and practice in a rather strict and dry sense, namely, in the view that the nature and value of art is to be found in the form of the artwork itself. Much of this formalism had its modern origin in Kant's immensely influential *Critique of Judgment*, but it would soon be powerfully expressed in music theory by Eduard Hanslick and in the visual arts by Roger Fry and Clive Bell. Formalism would likewise find its way into literary theory, most significantly with the Russian formalists (Jakobson, Propp); the American New Critics (Wimsatt and Beardsley); the French structuralists (Levi-Strauss, Barthes), neo-structuralists (early Foucault), and post-structuralists (Derrida, Paul de Man, Hartman, Lyotard).

For formalism in general, the meaning of a text or an artwork is found in the formal relationships between elements of the work itself. A valid interpretation of the work, therefore, involves the elucidation of these formal structures. In many cases, this was (and is) coupled with an aggressive denial of the importance or significance of the maker's original intention. Indeed, the artist or the author or the subject was pronounced "dead" — totally irrelevant to the work — as in Barthes's famous "death of the author" ("amputate the art from the artist"). Language itself replaced the author as the producer of the text, and structural analysis (in its original, neo-, or post- forms) became the only sure method of artistic interpretation. The "death of the subject" meant as well the death of the subject's original intention as a source of valid interpretation, and "What comes after the subject?" became the new rallying call.

In the rather influential American New Criticism, this view was expressed most forcefully by Monroe Beardsley and William Wimsatt, Jr. In their now famous essay, "The Intentional Fallacy," they conclude bluntly that the maker's intention is "neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work" of art. □ It was to the artwork itself that the

interpreter and critic must essentially look. After all, they maintained, how can you know the intent of the artwork if it is not expressed in the art itself? Where else could you possibly look? Intentions that don't make it into the artwork might be interesting, but they are not, by definition, part of the artwork. And thus interpretation should center first and foremost on elements intrinsic to the artwork considered as a whole in itself.

Similar formalist theories of art were put forth in music by Hanslick (*The Beautiful in Music*), who maintained that the meaning of music was in its internal forms (melody, rhythm, harmony); and in the visual arts by Roger Fry (*Vision and Design*) and Clive Bell (*Art*), who both maintained that the nature and meaning of art was to be found in its "significant form" (Cezanne, for both of them, being the great exemplar).

In all of these versions of formalism, the locus and meaning of art is not in the intention of the artist, nor does it lie in what the artwork might represent, nor what it might express. Rather, the nature and meaning of art lies in the formal or structural relationship of the elements manifested in the artwork itself. And thus valid interpretation consists primarily in the elucidating of these forms and structures.

### **Art Is in the Viewer**

As the modern world of the Enlightenment and its Romantic rebellion gave way to the postmodern world, yet another extremely influential trend in art and literary criticism emerged. Just as formalist theories killed the artist and centered solely on the artwork, this new trend further killed the artwork itself and centered solely on... the viewer of the art.

For these various theories of "reception and response," the meaning of art is not found in the author's original intention, nor is it found in any specific features of the artwork itself. Rather, these theories maintain, since the only way we actually get to know a work of art is by viewing it

(looking, listening, reading), then the primary locus of the meaning of the artwork can only be found in the *responses* of the viewers themselves.

Thus, according to this view, the nature and meaning of art is to be found in the history of the reception and response to the artwork; and likewise, a *valid* interpretation of the artwork consists in an analysis of these responses (or the cumulative history of these responses). As Passmore summarizes it, "The proper point of reference in discussing works of art is an interpretation it sets going in an audience; that interpretation—or the class of such interpretations—is the work of art, whatever the artist had in mind in creating it. Indeed, the interpreter, not the artist, creates the work."

These theories trace much of their lineage to the work of Martin Heidegger, whose hermeneutic philosophy broke with the traditional conception of truth as an unchanging and objective set of facts, and replaced it with the notion of the historicity of truth: human beings do not have an unchanging *nature* so much as a changing *history*, and thus what we call "truth" is, in important ways, historically situated. Moreover, we come to understand the historicity of truth not so much through scientific empiricism but rather through *interpretation* (through "hermeneutics"), just as, if you and I want to understand each other, we must interpret what we are saying to each other ("What do you mean by that? Oh, I see"). Interpretation lies at the very heart of the historicity of truth.

Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy has had an immense influence on art and literary theory, principally through two major students of his work: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jacques Derrida. We briefly mentioned Derrida in connection with structuralist and post-structuralist theories, which locate the meaning of a text in chains of formal signifiers (and according to "post-structuralism," the chains of signifiers are endlessly "sliding"). Gadamer's influence has been equally widespread; he is now arguably the foremost theoretician of aesthetics.

For Gadamer, even a "purely" aesthetic event, such as looking at an abstract painting, is not merely a simple sensory occasion. The moment we start to ask what the painting means, or how it affects us, or what it might be saying—the moment the mute stare gives way to meaning—then we are inexorably stepping out of the "merely sensory" and into language and history. We are stepping into the linguistic world, which itself can only be understood by *interpretation*: What does that *mean*? And all meaning exists in history; that is, all meaning is marked by historicity. What a painting means to us, today, will be different from what that painting means to, say, people a thousand years from now (if it means anything at all). In other words, for these theorists, we cannot isolate meaning from the ongoing sweep of history.

The work of art, accordingly, exists in this historical stream, which brings forth new receptions, elicits new responses, gives new interpretations, unfolds new meanings as it flows. And, according to this view, the artwork is, so to speak, the sum total of its particular historical stream. The artwork is not something that exists by itself, outside of history, isolated and self-regarding, existing only because it looks at itself; rather, the only way we know the artwork is by viewing and interpreting it, and it is those interpretations, grounded in history, that constitute the overall art.

### **And So *Where*, Exactly, Is Art?**

We have seen that the major theories of art disagree sharply on the nature, locus, and meaning of art. Intentional theories locate art in the original intent or feeling or vision of the maker. Formalist theories locate the meaning of art in the relationships among elements of the artwork itself. Reception and response theories place the nature and meaning of art in the viewer. And symptomatic theories place the locus of art in larger currents operating in a mostly unconscious fashion in the artist and viewer alike.

In fact, the whole of art theory can be seen as a spirited attempt to decide exactly what the locus of art is, and therefore where we can find or locate the meaning of an artwork—and thus, finally, how we can develop valid interpretations of that art. In short: What and where is art?

And I am saying, the nature and meaning of art is thoroughly holonic. Like every other entity in the universe, art is holonic in its nature, its locus, its structure, its meaning, and its interpretation. Any specific artwork is a holon, which means that it is a whole that is simultaneously a part of numerous other wholes. The artwork exists in contexts within contexts within contexts, endlessly.

Further—and this is the crucial point—*each context will confer a different meaning on the artwork*, precisely because, as we have seen, all meaning is context-bound: change the context, you elicit a different meaning.

Thus, all of the theories that we have discussed—representational, intentional, formalist, reception and response, symptomatic—are basically correct; they are all true; they are all pointing to a *specific context* in which the artwork subsists, and without which the artwork could not exist, contexts that therefore are genuinely *constitutive* of the art itself—that is, part of the very being of the art.

And the only reason those theories disagree with each other is that each of them is trying to make its own context the only real or important context: paradigmatic, primal, central, privileged. Each theory is trying to make its context the only context worth serious consideration.

But the holonic nature of reality—contexts within contexts forever—means that each of these theories is part of a nested series of truths. Each is true when highlighting its own context, but false when it tries to deny reality or significance to other existing contexts. And an integral art and literary theory—covering the nature, meaning, and interpretation of art—will of necessity be a holonic theory: concentric circles of nested truths and interpretations.

The study of holons is the study of nested truths. And now we can see exactly how postmodernist deconstruction took a wrong turn at holons and got hopelessly, helplessly lost. They looked clearly at holonic space and then, rather like Bataille, went properly insane: reality consists not of nested truths but of nested lies, deceptions within deceptions forever, precisely the features of a psychotic break. They have it exactly backwards, the photographic negative of a reality they no longer trust. And once having stepped through that inverting mirror and into Alice's Wonderland, nothing is ever what it seems, which leaves only the ego to impose its will, and nothing real to resist it—leaves the nausea of nihilism and narcissism to define a world that no longer cares.

Not nested lies, but nested truths. A comprehensive art and literary theory will of necessity be concentric circles of enveloping truths and interpretations. We can now very briefly follow the story of art from its original impulse forward, honoring and including each of the truths in this development that is envelopment, as each whole becomes part of another whole, endlessly, miraculously, inevitably.

# Integral Life<sup>+</sup>

## Integral Art and Literary Theory

Excerpt From: *The Eye of Spirit*

Chapters Four and Five

By Ken Wilber

### Part II

*We can now very briefly follow the story of art from its original impulse forward, honoring and including each of the truths in this development that is envelopment, as each whole becomes part of another whole, endlessly, miraculously, inevitably....*

*(And who knows? Proceeding thus, searching for the source of art, we might eventually find ourselves residing in the eye of Spirit, the Beauty in the eye of the Beholder, delivered unto a luminous Kosmos that, in its entirety, is the extraordinary Artwork of our own highest Self—so that the final meaning of Art will reveal its own Original Face, exquisite to infinity, obvious in the ordinary, the entire canvas of the Kosmos as its radiant vision, always and even now.)*

Without in any way ignoring the other numerous contexts that will determine the artwork, in many important ways we can date its beginning with an event in the mind and being of the artist: an interior perception, feeling, impulse, concept, idea, or vision. From exactly where, nobody knows, the creative impulse bubbles up. Many contexts no doubt precede it; many more will follow. But let us start the story here, with the primal artistic perception or impulse, and let us call that the primal holon of art.

This primal holon may in fact represent something in the external world (the basis of imitative or representational theories). But it might also express an interior state, whether a feeling (expressionism) or an idea (conceptualism). Around that primal holon, like the layers of a pearl growing around an original grain of sand, will develop contexts within contexts of subsequent holons, as the primal holon inexorably enters the historical stream that will govern so much of its subsequent fate.

The primal artistic holon itself, even when it first bubbles up in the consciousness of the artist, nonetheless instantly arrives into numerous contexts that already exist, contexts into which the primal holon is instantly subsumed: perhaps unconscious structures in the artist; perhaps structures in the artist's culture; perhaps larger currents in the universe at large, about which the artist might know little. And yet those larger holons have their fingerprints all over the primal holon from the very first instant of its existence: they indelibly stamp the primal holon with the codes of the larger currents.

But the theories that focus on the primal holon are, of course, the expressivist theories. For these theories in general, the meaning of art is the primal holon—the original intent of the maker—and therefore a correct interpretation is a matter of the accurate reconstruction and recovery of that original intent and meaning, that primal holon. Thus, we are to understand the artwork by trying to accurately understand the original meaning that the artwork had for the artist.

And this makes sense to most of us. After all, when we read Plato's Republic, we want to know, as best we can, what Plato originally meant. Most of us do not want to know what the Republic means to my grandmother; we want to know what it means for Plato.

In this task of recovering the original meaning, these traditional hermeneutic theories do indeed rely, to some extent, on other contexts. They might look at other works by the same maker (which often show a pattern that helps to explain individual works); at other works in the same genre (which might highlight originality); and at the expectations of the original audience (e.g., the fools in Shakespeare's comedies are always jousting and punning in ways that most moderns find tiresome and dull, but Elizabethans—the original audience—enjoyed and expected comedies to have this structure, and thus this expectation would be a part of the original intention of the author, which helps us to understand and interpret it). All of these other contexts will help the interpreter determine and recover the original meaning of the artwork (the text, the book, the painting, the composition). But, for these intentional theories, all of these contexts are, in a sense, secondary to—and none of them constitutive of—the primal holon.

No doubt that attempting to "reconstruct" and "recover" this original intent is a very delicate, difficult, and in some ways endless task. And it might even be that this attempt is, in the last analysis, more of an ideal than a pragmatic possibility. But this is no warrant to simply dismiss this original intent as if it did not exist at all, which is what virtually every subsequent theory of art and its interpretation has done. Art certainly cannot be limited and confined to the primal holon; but neither can it ignore it. And the idealized attempt to recover as much of the original, primal holon as is pragmatically possible: this will always be part of an integral theory of interpretation in general—including, of course, art and literary interpretation as well.

Nonetheless, the attempt to pin art down to just the primal holon and its expression is precisely where the trouble begins. All of the definitions that attempt to limit art to the original

intention and its expression have failed in very significant ways. The reason, of course, is that the primal holon is a whole that is also a part of other wholes, and so the story unavoidably continues....

For example, even if we agree that art is found first and foremost in the original intention of the artist, it is now widely acknowledged, as we were saying, that the artist can have unconscious intentions: patterns in his or her work that can be clearly spotted by others but might not be consciously known to the artists themselves.

### **Unconscious Intentions**

No doubt, as the primal holon bubbles up, it bubbles up through structures of the artist's own being, some of which are unconscious. Freud himself was perhaps the first to dwell on these unconscious structures and their influence on the actual features of the artwork, most famously in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci (an essay which, interestingly, Freud always said was his own favorite work). As Freud points out, Leonardo da Vinci had suggestively recalled, "This writing distinctly about the vulture seems to be my destiny, because among the first recollections of my infancy it seemed to me that as I lay in my cradle a vulture came to me and opened my mouth with its tail and struck me many times with its tail inside my lips." □

In the psychoanalytic interpretation, this fantasy is a key to both Leonardo's infancy and the origins of his homosexuality (a fellatio fantasy), and is therefore also a key to interpreting much of his artistic endeavors. That is, whatever primal artistic holons that might well up in Leonardo's psyche, they well up through the structures of his unconscious desires. The primal holon therefore inexorably arrives on the scene already set in contexts of this unconscious wish. And thus, if the meaning of art is to be found in the original intent of the maker, then some of this meaning is unconscious because some of the intentions are unconscious. It is, therefore, the job

of the psychoanalytic interpreter to discern and elucidate these deeper contexts, these background holons, within which the primal holon arises.

And that is surely true enough, and surely part of the overall story we wish to tell. Although, equally surely, it is not the entire story, nor is it the entire locus, of the artwork. To begin with, once we acknowledge that there are unconscious structures in the artist (as well as viewer and critic), we are immediately allowed to ask, What is the actual nature and extent of this unconscious? Are there no other unconscious structures besides the narrowly Freudian? When we look into the depths of the psyche of men and women, is sex and aggression really all that we will find?

The answer, of course, is No. Subsequent psychological and sociological research has demonstrated a plethora of largely unconscious structures, patterns, codes, and regimes, each of which has a hand in governing the shape of our conscious intentions. We already mentioned several of these background structures, these deeper and wider holons: linguistic, economic, cultural, historical, and so on. It is these background holons, these wider contexts, to which all of the "symptomatic theorists" look in order to discern deeper and wider meanings in the particular artwork, because, once again, context determines meaning, and thus wider contexts will disclose deeper meanings, meanings and patterns perhaps not obvious in the artist or the artwork alone.

### **The Spectrum of Consciousness**

I will return to these larger symptomatic theories in a moment. Let me first point out that, even in the "individual psyche," research has unearthed, in addition to the Freudian unconscious, several important levels of usually unconscious contexts. In particular, the schools of existential-humanistic and transpersonal psychology—the so-called "third" and "fourth" forces of psychology (in addition to behaviorism and psychoanalysis)—have discovered and confirmed

numerous "realms of the human unconscious," realms that are in many cases the very key to understanding conscious life.

The human being, like all entities in existence, is a holon, a compound individual, composed of physical, emotional, mental, existential, and spiritual or transpersonal dimensions. And all of those structures serve as background contexts through which our surface consciousness moves. And just as an unconscious "Freudian" structure can color and shape our conscious intentions, so any of these deeper realms can ride hidden in the Trojan horse of our everyday awareness.

We need not go into all the detailed evidence; for our simpler purposes it is enough to note that, according to transpersonal psychology, there is in fact a spectrum of consciousness, reaching from the isolated and individual ego, at one end, to states of "unity consciousness" and "spiritual union" at the other. This overall spectrum of consciousness consists of at least a dozen levels of awareness, each with a very recognizable structure (including instinctual, Freudian, linguistic, cognitive, existential, and spiritual levels).

The essential point is that any or all of these dimensions can contribute—consciously or unconsciously—to the artist's overall intention which eventually finds expression in the artwork. And thus a familiarity with the spectrum of consciousness would give the discerning critic a palette of interpretations quite beyond the shallower Freudian array, by elucidating deeper and wider contexts of awareness.

Thus, part of an integral or holonic theory of art interpretation and literary criticism would include all of these various realms of the human unconscious as they manifest in the intention of the primal holon and its subsequent public display (the artwork and its reception). Human intentionality is indeed "onion-like": holons within holons of intentionality in an extraordinary

spectrum of consciousness. (I will later return to this spectrum of intentionality and give several examples of how it can effectively guide interpretation.)

The various schools of intentionality—covering the entire spectrum of consciousness—are most definitely on the trail of a very important aspect of the nature and meaning of art. But again, these theories—whether focusing on conscious or unconscious realms—are still, by their very nature, partial and limited. They tend to ignore the technical and formal features of the artwork itself, and thus cannot account for, say, the importance of the structure of musical harmony and melody, or plot structure and function in a narrative, or the technical applications of types of paint, or the structural conditions for various artworks, and so forth.

For all these reasons and more, many theorists began to look more closely at the actual structure and function of the artwork itself, divorced from either maker or viewer. For the fact is, when the artist attempts to express the primal holon in an actual work of art, that primal holon runs smack into the material conditions of its medium: the rock of a sculpture, the actual paint and canvas of a painting, the various instruments and their players in a musical composition, the actual grammar and syntax of a narrative: the primal holon is instantly clothed in a medium that has its own structure, follows its own rules, imposes its own limits, announces its own nature. The primal holon is now a part of another whole, the overall artwork itself.

### **The Artwork Holon**

Art theories have historically gone back and forth in a wave of action and reaction between two extremes: trying to determine the artist's original meaning, or, tiring of that seemingly endless task, looking elsewhere for a way to interpret the meaning of art. The most common is to focus on the artwork itself, that is, on the public piece of artwork (the painting, the book, the performed play, the musical), which we will simply call the artwork holon.

The great strength—and great weakness—of this approach is that it intensely focuses on only one context: the public artwork as it is immediately perceived. All other contexts are bracketed or basically ignored: the maker's intentions (conscious or unconscious), the historical set and setting, the original audience expectations, the history of reception and response—all are bracketed, removed from the story, thrown out of court when it comes to judging the success or failure of the artwork.

These theorists have their reasons for these exclusions. How are we to know, they ask, what the artist's original intentions for the artwork are, except to look at the artwork itself? If the artist had intentions that didn't make into the artwork, well then, the artist has simply failed in that regard; intentions that didn't make it into the artwork are, by definition, not part of that artwork, so they can and should be ignored (to assume otherwise is the "intentional fallacy"). And why should we even ask the artist what he or she *really* meant? Just as you and I are not always the best interpreters of our own actions (as our friends will attest), so artists are not always the best interpreters of their own works. Thus, in all cases, we must simply look to the artwork itself, and judge it on its own terms, as a whole unto itself: the artwork holon.

And that is what all artwork theories do. They judge the art as an intrinsic whole, and the meaning of the artwork is to be found in *the relationships among the elements or features of the work itself* (i.e., the relations among the "sub-holons" constituting the artwork). We already looked briefly at many variations on this theme: formalism, structuralism, neo-structuralism, post-structuralism, New Criticism—applied to music, visual arts, poetics, linguistics, and literary theory.

However limited, the merits of this approach are nonetheless obvious. There are indeed features of artworks that stand, relatively, on their own. True, the artwork is actually a whole that is also a part of other wholes. But the "wholeness" aspect of any holon can indeed be focused

on; the wholeness aspect is very real, very genuine. Various formalist and structuralist theories have rightly gained a permanent foothold in the repertoire of legitimate interpretive tools precisely by focusing on the wholeness aspect of any holon. Doing so, such theorists have offered a list of qualities that many find valuable in the artwork: criteria such as coherence, completeness, harmony of elements within the whole; but also uniqueness, complexity, ambiguity, intensity.

All of which tell us something interesting about the artwork holon itself; none are to be excluded. Still, we cannot in the last analysis forget that every whole is also a part; it exists in contexts within contexts within contexts, each of which will confer a new and different meaning on the original whole, a meaning that is not obvious, and cannot be found, by looking at the individual holon itself.

Imagine, for example, you are watching a game of cards, perhaps poker. All of the cards are being used according to rules, but the interesting fact is that none of these rules are written on the cards themselves—none of the rules can be found anywhere on the cards. Each card is actually set in a larger context which governs its behavior and meaning, and thus only by taking a larger perspective can the actual rules and meanings of the card in that game be discovered and correctly interpreted. Focusing merely on the card itself will completely miss the rules and meanings it is obeying.

Just so, the very content of an artwork itself will be determined in part by the various contexts in which the primal holon arises and in which the artwork holon exists. Here's a quick example, which pinpoints the inadequacy of focusing on the artwork holon alone:

### **A Pair of Worn Shoes**

In his essay entitled "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger interprets a painting of a pair of shoes by Van Gogh in order to suggest that art can disclose truth. And however much we

might agree with that general conclusion, Heidegger's path, in this particular case, is a prime example of what can go so horribly wrong when holonic contexts are ignored.

The painting to which Heidegger refers is simply of a pair of rather worn shoes, facing forward, laces undone, and that is pretty much all; there are no other discernible objects or items. Heidegger assumes they are a pair of peasant shoes, and he tells us that he can, with reference to the painting alone, penetrate to the essence of its message:

There is nothing surrounding this pair of peasant shoes in or to which they might belong, only an undefined space. There are not even clods from the soil of the field or the path through it sticking to them, which might at least hint at their employment. A pair of peasant shoes and nothing more. And yet.

And yet, Heidegger will reach deeply into the form of the artwork, all by itself, and render the essence of its meaning:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stands forth. In the stiffly solid heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field, swept by a raw wind. On the leather there lies the dampness and saturation of the soil. Under the soles there slides the loneliness of the field-path as the evening declines. In the shoes there vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening corn and its enigmatic self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field. This equipment is pervaded by uncomplaining anxiety about the certainty of bread, the wordless joy of having once more withstood want, the trembling before the advent of birth and shivering

at the surrounding menace of death. This equipment belongs to the earth and it is protected in the world of the peasant woman. From out of this protected belonging the equipment itself rises to its resting-in-itself.

That is a beautiful interpretation, beautifully expressed, lodging itself carefully in the details of the painting, which makes it all the sadder that virtually every statement in it is wildly inaccurate.

To begin with, these are Van Gogh's shoes, not some peasant woman's. He was by then a town and city dweller, not a toiler in the fields; under its soles there are no corn fields, no slow trudging through uniform furrows, no dampness of the soil and no loneliness of the field-path. Not an ounce, nary a trace, of enigmatic self-refusal in the fallow of the desolation of the wintry field can be found. "Van Gogh's painting is the disclosure of what the equipment, the pair of peasant shoes, is in truth," exclaims Heidegger.

Perhaps, but Heidegger has not come near that truth at all. Instead—and while not in any way ignoring the relevant features of the artwork holon itself—we must go outside the artwork, into larger contexts, to determine more of its meaning.

Let us go first to the maker's intent, as Van Gogh himself described it, or rather, talked generally about the circumstances leading up to the painting. Paul Gauguin shared a room with Van Gogh in Arles, in 1888, and he noticed that Vincent kept a pair of badly worn shoes which seemed to have a very important meaning for him. Gauguin begins the story:

In the studio was a pair of big hob-nailed shoes, all worn and spotted with mud; he made of it a remarkable still life painting. I do not know why I sensed that there was a

story behind this old relic, and I ventured one day to ask him if he had some reason for preserving with respect what one ordinarily throws out for the rag-picker's basket.

And so Vincent begins to recount the tale of these worn-out shoes. "My father," he said, "was a pastor, and at his urging I pursued theological studies in order to prepare for my future vocation. As a young pastor I left for Belgium one fine morning, without telling my family, to preach the gospel in the factories, not as I had been taught but as I understood it myself. These shoes, as you see, have bravely endured the fatigue of that trip."

But why exactly were these shoes so important to Vincent? Why had he carried them with him for so long, beaten and worn as they were? It turns out, Gauguin continues, that "Preaching to the miners in the Borinage, Vincent undertook to nurse a victim of a fire in the mine. The man was so badly burned and mutilated that the doctor had no hope for his recovery. Only a miracle, he thought, could save him. Van Gogh tended him forty days with loving care and saved the miner's life."

It must have been an extraordinary forty days, deeply etched on Van Gogh's soul. A man so badly burned, so horribly in pain, that the doctor had abandoned him to certain and gruesome death. For more than a month, Vincent at his side. And then a vision came upon Vincent, a vision that he disclosed to his friend Gauguin, a vision that explains why this incident was so important to him.

Gauguin begins at the beginning: "When we were together in Arles, both of us mad, in continual struggle for beautiful colors, I adored red; where could one find a perfect vermilion? He, with his yellowish brush, traced on the wall which suddenly became violet:

I am whole in Spirit

## I am the Holy Spirit

"In my yellow room—a small still life: violet that one. Two enormous wornout misshapen shoes. They were Vincent's shoes. Those that he took one fine morning, when they were new, for his journey on foot from Holland to Belgium. The young preacher had just finished his theological studies in order to be a minister like his father. He had gone off to the mines to those whom he called his brothers....

"Contrary to the teaching of his wise Dutch professors, Vincent had believed in a Jesus who loved the poor; and his soul, deeply pervaded by charity, sought the consoling words and sacrifice for the weak, and to combat the rich. Very decidedly, Vincent was already mad."

"Vincent was already mad"—Gauguin repeats this several times, thick with irony; that we all should be graced enough to touch such madness!

Gauguin then tells of the explosion in the mine: "Chrome yellow overflowed, a terrible fiery glow.... The creatures who crawled at that moment...said 'adieu' to life that day, goodbye to their fellow-men.... One of them horribly mutilated, his face burnt, was picked up by Vincent.

'However,' said the company doctor, 'the man is done for, unless by a miracle....'

"Vincent," Gauguin continues, "believed in miracles, in maternal care. The madman (decidedly he was mad) sat up, keeping watch forty days, at the dying man's bedside. Stubbornly he kept the air from getting into his wounds and paid for the medicines. A comforting priest (decidedly, he was mad). The patient talked. The mad effort brought a dead Christian back to life."

The scars on the man's face—this man resurrected by a miracle of care—looked to Vincent exactly like the scars from a crown of thorns. "I had," Vincent says, "in the presence of

this man who bore on his brow a series of scars, a vision of the crown of thorns, a vision of the resurrected Christ."

At this point in telling Gauguin the story, Vincent picks up his brush and says, referring to the "resurrected Christ": "And I, Vincent, I painted him."

Gauguin finishes: "Tracing with his yellow brush, suddenly turned violet, Vincent cried

I am the Holy Spirit

I am whole in Spirit

"Decidedly, this man was mad."

Psychoanalysis, no doubt, would have some therapeutic interpretations for all of this. But psychoanalytic interpretations, relatively true as they might be, do not in themselves touch any deeper "realms of the human unconscious," such as the existential or the spiritual and transpersonal. And thus, as I earlier pointed out, if we look to the school of transpersonal psychology for a finer and more comprehensive account of the deeper dimensions of human awareness, we find a compelling amount of evidence that human beings have access to higher or deeper states of consciousness quite beyond the ordinary egoic modes—a spectrum of consciousness.

And at the upper reaches of the spectrum of consciousness—in the higher states of consciousness—individuals consistently report an awareness of being one with the all, or identical with spirit, or whole in spirit, and so on. The attempt of shallower psychologies, such as psychoanalysis, to merely pathologize all of these higher states has simply not held up to further scrutiny and evidence. Rather, the total web of crosscultural evidence strongly suggests that

these deeper or higher states are potentials available to all of us, so that, as it were, "Christ consciousness"—spiritual awareness and union—is available to each and every one of us.

A transpersonal psychologist would thus suggest that, whatever other interpretations we wish to give to Vincent's vision, the overall evidence most clearly suggests that it was very probably a true vision of the radical potential in all of us. These higher states and visions are sometimes intermixed with personal pathologies or neuroses, but the states themselves are not pathological in their essence; quite the contrary, researchers consistently refer to them as extraordinary states of well-being. Thus, Vincent's central vision itself most likely was not pathological, not psychotic, not madness at all—which is why Gauguin keeps poking fun at those who would think that way: decidedly, he was mad. Which means, decidedly, he was plugged into a reality that we should all be so fortunate to see.

Thus, when Vincent said he saw the resurrected Christ, that is exactly what he meant, and that is very likely exactly what he saw. And thus he carried with him, as a dusty but dear reminder, the shoes in which this vision occurred.

And so, you see, an important part of the primal meaning of the painting of these shoes—not the only meaning, but a primal meaning—is very simple: these are the shoes in which Vincent nursed Jesus, the Jesus in all of us.

### **The Viewer Holon**

Whatever one might think of that interpretation, one thing is certainly obvious: a merely formal or artwork approach—Heidegger's, for example—would miss important *meanings* of Van Gogh's painting. Many moderns will stop short of my transpersonal interpretation—would it help if I pointed out that Gauguin finishes his account with this?: "And Vincent took up his palette

again; silently he worked. Beside him was a white canvas. I began his portrait. I too had the vision of a Jesus preaching kindness and humility."

Are we moderns too jaded for this? Ah, well, whether we accept this transpersonal aspect of the interpretation, we can easily accept the rest of the account—the mining accident, nursing the man, and so on—as providing some very crucial contexts which confer various added meanings to the artwork holon itself (since meaning, as always, is context-bound).

Thus, the various artwork approaches (which are true but partial) suffer by overlooking the primal holon (the maker's intent in all its levels and dimensions). But they also attempt to ignore the viewer's response. These theories consequently cannot account at all for the role that interpretation itself plays in helping to constitute the overall nature of the art.

The artist did not parachute to earth, antiseptic and isolated and hermetically sealed. Both art and artist exist only in a stream of history, and thus the primal holon itself *never* arrives in a *tabula rasa*, a clear and blank slate formed only by the artist's isolated intention. Rather, the primal holon itself is shaped, *even as it is forming*, by a cultural background. And this cultural background is historical through and through—it is itself unfolding in history.

Thus, without in any way denying any of the other meanings of the artwork, from the primal intention of the maker to the formal elements of the artwork itself, nonetheless the fact remains: when I view the artwork, it has meaning for me. Each and every time a viewer sees a work and attempts to understand it, there is what Gadamer so unerringly calls a "fusion of horizons"—as I would also put it, *a new holon emerges*, which itself is a new context and thus carries new meaning.

Obviously, the meaning of an artwork does not reside solely in my particular response to it. Other people might have different responses. But the general point is that the meaning of an artwork cannot be divorced from the overall impact it has on viewers. And in a stronger version,

"the viewer" simply means the entire cultural background, without which meaning would not and could not exist in the first place. This great intersubjective background, this cultural background, provides the ocean of contexts in which art, artist, and viewer alike necessarily float.

Even when the artist is first starting to work on a piece, he has somebody in mind; some sort of viewer looms in his awareness, however briefly or fleetingly; the intersubjective background is already a context within which his subjective intentions arise. The viewer response is thus already at work in shaping the art. The cultural background of interpretations is already a part of the very makeup of the artwork. And as the artwork goes public, it will enter a stream of further historical interpretations, each of which will form yet another layer in that temporal and historical pearl. And each new, emerging, historical context will confer a new meaning on the pearl, a new layer to the pearl which will in fact be an intrinsic part of the pearl itself, a whole that becomes part of yet other wholes and is changed in the process itself.

To give a crude example, think of the controversy today surrounding Columbus's voyage of 1492. If, as an example, we pretend that his voyage is an artwork, then what is the meaning of that art? Even a few decades ago, the meaning was something like this: Columbus was a rather brave fellow who, against some very difficult odds, made a perilous voyage that discovered the Americas—the New World—and thus brought culture and civilization to a fairly primitive and backward people.

Today, many people would give the meaning more like this: Columbus was a sexist, imperialist, lying, rather cowardly low-life, who went to the Americas on a voyage of plunder and pillage, in the process of which he brought syphilis and other scourges to the peace-loving peoples he everywhere met.

The meaning of the original artwork not only looks different, it is different, based on its subsequent history of reception and response. There is no way to avoid this historicity, this

constitutive nature of interpretations. Subsequent contexts will confer new meaning on the art, because meaning is always and inevitably context-bound. And the viewer-response theories, in their various forms, focus on this history of response as constitutive of the art.

Thus, these reception and response theories maintain, as one critic explains it, that artistic meaning "is not a function of its genetic origin in an author's psyche [the primal holon], nor of purely intrinsic relations between the printed marks on a page [formalist theories], but of its reception in a series of readings constituting its history of influence, [which] stresses the temporality and historicity of understanding and interpretation."

The partial truths of viewer response are surely part of any holonic theory of art and its interpretation. And yet, as with every other approach we have seen, the true but partial notions of viewer response, when they pretend to be the whole story, become not only distorting but outright comical.

And it is the viewer-response theories, coupled with the symptomatic theories, that have almost totally dominated the postmodern art scene—in theory and in practice—thus leading, as we earlier suggested, into increasingly narcissistic and nihilistic ramblings.

Start with viewer response.

### **The Wonder of Being Me**

Art critics have always been in a slightly awkward situation: the unkind word is "parasitic." Flaubert's view was typical: "Criticism occupies the lowest place in the literary hierarchy: as regards form, almost always; and as regards 'moral value' incontestably. It comes after rhyming games and acrostics which at least require a certain inventiveness." □

Couple this parasitism with another awkward fact: more than one social commentator has seen the baby boomer generation defined by a rampant narcissism, and if one item marks narcissism, it is a refusal to take a back seat to anybody.

From which it follows, art and literary theory in the hands of the boomers was going to be a wild affair. As parasitic collided with grandiosity, something would have to give. The critic needed desperately to get out of the back seat and into the driver's seat.

The means for this glorious promotion were provided, as I began to suggest, by viewer-response theories coupled with symptomatic theories, together parading under the broad banner of poststructural postmodernism. If the nature and meaning of art lies solely in the viewer—"the interpreter, not the artist, creates the work"—and if only knowing interpretation is valid, then voila: the critic alone creates all art.

And so it came about that the viewer response—that is to say, me—became the alpha and omega of art, which placed the critic—that is to say, me—in the very center of the creative act, not to mention at the very heart of the artworld. Thus Catherine Belsey in her *Critical Practice*: "No longer parasitic on an already given literary text, criticism constructs its object, produces the work."

Which, of course, comes as news to most artists. The partial truths of viewer response became a platform from which the critic as sole creator gained (and still has) enormous currency. The embarrassing dilemma for this brand of postmodernism is that it completely and totally erases the artwork itself, and thus it ends up with a viewer-response theory that—oops!—has nothing to actually respond to.

If the artwork is not there to respond to, your ego alone remains. All of this has played precisely into the two trends, barely concealed, of extremist postmodernism—namely, nihilism and its hidden core of narcissism—as the more observant critics have recently begun to note.

David Couzens Hoy points out that "freeing criticism from its object" — that is, erasing the artwork by emphasizing viewer response— "may open it up to all the possibilities of rich imaginations; yet if...there is now no truth of the matter, then nothing keeps it from succumbing to the sickness of the modern imagination's obsessive self-consciousness." Criticism thus becomes "only the critic's own ego-gratification." The culture of narcissism. "Then a sheer struggle for power ensues, and criticism becomes not latent but blatant aggression," part of "the emergent nihilism of recent times."

These viewer-response theories, as I said, were particularly coupled with symptomatic theories—the most influential being Marxist, feminist, racist, and imperialist (post-colonial studies). The idea being, recall, that the meaning of art is found in the background social and economic contexts, contexts that are often masquerades for power and ideology, and contexts that therefore confer a specific meaning on art produced in those contexts, meanings that the knowing critic can pull out by highlighting and elucidating the particular background structures.

All true enough; and all terribly partial, lopsided, and distorted when taken in and by themselves. These views have promoted the notion, given currency by Foucault's early work, that truth itself is culturally relative and arbitrary, grounded in nothing but shifting historical tastes, or power and prejudice and ideology. Since truth is context-dependent, the argument goes, then it is completely relative to changing contexts. All truth is therefore culturally constructed—the social construction of gender, the social construction of the body, the social construction of pretty much everything—and because all truth is culturally constructed, there are and can be no universal truths.

Unfortunately, that view itself is claiming to be universally true. It is making a series of strong claims that it insists are true for *all* cultures (the relative nature of truth, the contextuality of claims, the social construction of all categories, the historicity of truth, and so on). This view thus

claims that there is no universal truth at all—except for its own, which is universal and superior in a world where nothing is supposed to be universal or superior at all. It's not simply that this stance is hypocritical to the core, concealing its own structures of power and domination; as an added bonus, the sheer narcissism of the stance once again rears its wonderful horrible head.

But *contextualism*, on which these symptomatic theories are all based, means neither arbitrary nor relativistic. It means determined by contexts that constrain the meaning. In other words, "context" means "constraints," not chaos. These contexts are neither arbitrary, subjective, idiosyncratic, merely constructed, or radically relative, contrary to the abuse to which these theories have been subjected by extreme postmodernists.

Thus, even Foucault abandoned this "merely constructivist" approach to knowledge; he called it "arrogant." And even a foremost interpreter of Gadamer's very strong version of the historicity of truth could explain that "since no context is absolute, different lines of interpretation are possible. But this is not radical relativism, since not all contexts are equally appropriate or justifiable.... Contextualism demands justifying reasons for interpretations, and these reasons can be assumed to be as factual or 'objective' as any objectivist could produce. [Therefore] the choice of context or framework is far from arbitrary."

Thus, meaning is indeed context-dependent (there are only holons!), but this means neither arbitrary nor relative, but firmly anchored in various contexts that constrain the meaning. And, of course, these contexts—whether in artist, artwork, viewer, or world at large—must themselves be real contexts, actually existing contexts. We are not allowed to arbitrarily dream up contexts; any ole context will not do. Rather, the context that is being used for interpretation must itself be justified according to the total web of available evidence.

And this puts many symptomatic theories at a great disadvantage, because too many of these approaches take a rather specific and often quite narrow context and make it the sole,

dominating, hegemonic context within which all interpretations must be registered, whether imperialist, racist, capitalist, ecologist, feminist.

The results, as I said, have become more often than not quite comical, as minor truths are blown up to cosmic proportions. Alfred Kazin, recently called "the greatest literary critic in America" by *The New Republic*, reports on a typical scene, a session on Emily Dickinson organized by the Modern Language Association in 1989. The session was entitled "The Muse of Masturbation," and, says Kazin, "it was thronged," the point being "that the hidden strategy of Emily Dickinson's poetry is in her use of 'encoded images of clitoral masturbation to transcend sex-role limitations imposed by the nineteenth-century patriarchy'." Kazin: "The basic idea was that Dickinson loaded her work with references to peas, crumbs, and flower buds in order to broadcast secret messages of forbidden onanistic delights to other female illuminati."

It is one thing to expose a context; quite another to impose one. And too much of symptomatic theory is, alas, the imposition of the critic's pet context and ideology, bereft of confirming truth or evidence or justification (since, after all, there is no truth, only social constructions, why bother with evidence in the first place?).

And thus, from the uncontested fact that all truth is context-dependent, and that contexts are boundless, we have finally arrived, slipping and sliding, at the dizzy notion that all truths are merely subjective and relative, arbitrary and constructed. Truth is whatever you want, which leaves us nothing at all, except that shell of nihilism filled with the thickest of narcissism, a postmodern pastry from hell.

## Conclusion

Let us realign the postmodern scene more adequately: Contexts are boundless means, not nested lies and arbitrary constructions depending only on egoic whim, but nested truths

anchored in wider and deeper realities. The nihilistic and narcissistic spin is dismantled right at the beginning, and meaningless relativism gives way to richly textured contexts of value and meaning that ground sound interpretations. That all things are holons means that all things are contexts within contexts forever, and each context confers a new and genuine meaning upon the original holon itself.

Thus, to locate art is to situate it in its various contexts. Art includes, in its development that is envelopment:

- the primal holon or original intent of the maker, which may involve numerous levels of the psyche, both conscious and unconscious, reaching from the individual self to the transpersonal and spiritual dimensions (the spectrum of consciousness).
- the artwork holon itself, the public work materialized, in both its form and content.
- the history of reception and response (the numerous viewer holons) that in important ways are constitutive of the overall work.
- the wider contexts in the world at large, economic and technical and linguistic and cultural contexts, without which specific meanings could not be generated in the first place.

Each of those are wholes that are parts of other wholes, and the whole confers meaning on the parts which the parts themselves do not possess. Each wider whole, each broader context, brings with it a new meaning, a new light in which to see the work, and thus constitute it anew.

Thus, any particular meaning of an artwork is simply the highlighting of a particular context. The interpretation of an artwork is the evoking and elucidating of that highlighted context. Justifiable interpretation means verifying that a particular context is indeed real and

significant, a justification procedure that, like any other, involves a careful look at the total web of evidence.

And the understanding of an artwork means to hermeneutically enter, to actually enter as far as possible, the contexts determining the art, a "fusion of horizons" —the emergence of a new holon—in which the understanding of a work of art is simultaneously a process of self-understanding, liberating in its final effect. To understand the art I must to some degree enter its horizon, stretch my own boundaries, and thus grow in the process: the fusion of horizons is a broadening of self.

Thus, the validity criteria for justifiable interpretations of art and literature rest, in the last analysis, on what the critic thinks is the nature and locus of meaning in an artwork. And I am saying, it is holonic. There is no single correct interpretation because no holon has only one context. There are as many legitimate meanings as there are legitimate contexts, which does not lead to nihilism but cornucopia. This is far from arbitrary and relative, because while there is no one right interpretation, there are plenty of wrong ones (the necessary and important fallibilist criterion is most definitely part of artistic interpretation).□

"Interpretation is dependent upon the circumstances in which it occurs.... A strategy for finding a context may be essential to all interpretation as a condition for the very possibility of interpretation," points out Hoy.□ Indeed so, but not just as a condition for the possibility of interpretation, but rather of existence itself: there are only holons.

An integral theory of art and literary interpretation is thus the multidimensional analysis of the various contexts in which—and by which—art exists and speaks to us: in the artist, the artwork, the viewer, and the world at large.□ Privileging no single context, it invites us to be unendingly open to ever-new horizons, which broaden our own horizons in the process, liberating us from the narrow straits of our favorite ideology and the prison of our isolated selves.

## Contemplating Art

Let me return to what art is finally all about. When I directly view, say, a great Van Gogh, I am reminded what all superior art has in common: the capacity to simply take your breath away. To literally, actually, make you inwardly gasp, at least for that second or two when the art first hits you, or more accurately, first enters your being: you swoon a little bit, you are slightly stunned, you are open to perceptions that you had not seen before. Sometimes, of course, it is much quieter than that: the work seeps into your pores gently, and yet you are changed somehow, maybe just a little, maybe a lot; but you are changed.

No wonder that for the East and West alike, until just recent times, art was often associated with profound spiritual transformation. And I don't mean merely "religious" or "iconographic" art.

Some of the great modern philosophers, Schelling to Schiller to Schopenhauer, have all pinpointed a major reason for great art's power to transcend. When we look at any beautiful object (natural or artistic), we suspend all other activity, and we are simply aware, we only want to contemplate the object. While we are in this contemplative state, we do not want anything from the object; we just want to contemplate it; we want it to never end. We don't want to eat it, or own it, or run from it, or alter it: we only want to look, we want to contemplate, we never want it to end.

In that contemplative awareness, our own egoic grasping in time comes momentarily to rest. We relax into our basic awareness. We rest with the world as it is, not as we wish it to be. We are face to face with the calm, the eye in the center of the storm. We are not agitating to change things; we contemplate the object as it is. Great art has this power, this power to grab

your attention and suspend it: we stare, sometimes awestruck, sometimes silent, but we cease the restless movement that otherwise characterizes our every waking moment.

It doesn't matter what the actual content of the art is; not for this. Great art grabs you, against your will, and then suspends your will. You are ushered into a quiet clearing, free of desire, free of grasping, free of ego, free of the self-contraction. And through that opening or clearing in your own awareness may come flashing higher truths, subtler revelations, profound connections. For a moment you might even touch eternity; who can say otherwise, when time itself is suspended in the clearing that great art creates in your awareness?

You just want to contemplate; you want it never to end; you forget past and future; you forget self and same. The noble Emerson: "These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God today. There is no time for them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time." □

Great art suspends the reverted eye, the lamented past, the anticipated future: we enter with it into the timeless present; we are with God today, perfect in our manner and mode, open to the riches and the glories of a realm that time forgot, but that great art reminds us of: not by its content, but by what it does in us: suspends the desire to be elsewhere. And thus it undoes the agitated grasping in the heart of the suffering self, and releases us—maybe for a second, maybe for a minute, maybe for all eternity—releases us from the coil of ourselves.

That is exactly the state that great art pulls us into, no matter what the actual content of the art itself—bugs or Buddhas, landscapes or abstractions, it doesn't matter in the least. In this

particular regard—from this particular context—great art is judged by its capacity to take your breath away, take your self away, take time away, all at once.

And whatever we mean by the word "spirit"—let us just say, with Tillich, that it involves for each of us our ultimate concern—it is in that simple awe-struck moment, when great art enters you and changes you, that spirit shines in this world just a little more brightly than it did the moment before.

Take it one step further: What if we could somehow manage to see everything in the entire universe as being exquisitely beautiful, like the finest piece of great art? What if we right now saw every single thing and event, without exception, as an object of extraordinary beauty?

Why, we would be momentarily frozen in the face of that vision; all of our grasping and avoiding would come momentarily to rest; we would be released from the self-contraction and ushered into the choiceless contemplation of all that is. Just as a beautiful object or artwork momentarily suspends our will, so the contemplation of the universe as an object of beauty would open us to the choiceless awareness of that universe, not as it should be or might be or could be, but simply as it is.

Could it then be possible, just possible, that when the beauty of all things without exception is perceived, we are actually standing directly in the eye of Spirit, for which the entire Kosmos is an object of Beauty, just as it is, precisely because the entire Kosmos is in fact the radiant Artwork of Spirit itself?

In this extraordinary vision, the entire Kosmos is the Artwork of your own highest Self in all its shining creativity, which is exactly why every object in the universe is in truth an object of radiant Beauty when perceived with the eye of Spirit.

And conversely: if you could right here, right now, actually see every single thing and event in the entire universe as an object of sheer Beauty, then you would of necessity be undone

as ego and stand instead as Spirit. You would want nothing from the Kosmos at that moment except to contemplate its unending Beauty and Perfection. You would not want to run from the universe, or grasp it, or alter it at all: in that contemplative moment you will neither fear nor hope, nor move at all. You will want nothing whatsoever, except to Witness it all, contemplate it unendingly, you want it never to end. You are radically free of will, free from grasping, free from all mean motion and commotion. You are a center of pure and clear awareness, saturated in its Being by the utter Beauty of everything it contemplates.

Not a single particle of dust is excluded from this Beauty; no object whatsoever, no matter how "ugly" or "frightening" or "painful" — not a single thing is excluded from this contemplative embrace, for each and every thing is radically, equally, unendingly, the brilliant radiance of Spirit. When you behold the primordial Beauty of every single thing in the universe, then you behold the glory of the Kosmos in the eye of Spirit, the I of Spirit, the radical I-I of the entire universe. You are full to infinity, radiant with the light of a thousand suns, and all is perfect just as it is, always and eternally, as you contemplate this, your greatest Artwork, the entire Kosmos, this thing of Beauty, this object of unending joy and bliss radiant in the Heart of all that arises.

Think of the most beautiful person you have ever seen. Think of the exact moment you looked into his or her eyes, and for a fleeting second you were paralyzed: you couldn't take your eyes off that vision. You stared, frozen in time, caught in that beauty. Now imagine that identical beauty radiating from every single thing in the entire universe: every rock, every plant, every animal, every cloud, every person, every object, every mountain, every stream—even the garbage dumps and broken dreams—every single one of them, radiating that beauty. You are quietly frozen by the gentle beauty of everything that arises around you. You are released from grasping, released from time, released from avoidance, released altogether into the eye of Spirit, where you contemplate the unending beauty of the Art that is the entire World.

That all-pervading Beauty is not an exercise in creative imagination. It is the actual structure of the universe. That all-pervading Beauty is in truth the very nature of the Kosmos right now. It is not something you have to imagine, because it is the actual structure of perception in all domains. If you remain in the eye of Spirit, every object is an object of radiant Beauty. If the doors of perception are cleansed, the entire Kosmos is your lost and found Beloved, the Original Face of primordial Beauty, forever, and forever, and endlessly forever. And in the face of that stunning Beauty, you will completely swoon into your own death, never to be seen or heard from again, except on those tender nights when the wind gently blows through the hills and the mountains, quietly calling your name.