
There is No Such Thing as Narrative Art

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What can be shown cannot be said.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

I.

ALTHOUGH IT is commonplace to speak of the spatial arts, painting and sculpture, as narrative arts—a way of speaking which suggests the intimate relations between image and text—pictorial artists obviously do not narrate stories in the same way that writers do. In a certain sense, they do not narrate at all. To speak of an artist as a teller of stories is a figure of speech, since painters and sculptors do not “tell,” they “show.” As some critics have observed, pictorial artists imply a narrative by referring to what has been said in words, but surely such allusions are not the same thing as a narrative in words.

We can trace the comparison of painting and literature back to classical antiquity, to Homer who implicitly compares his own account of the shield of Achilles to the images rendered on that great work by Hephaistos. The idea of such similitude has been sustained over a period of nearly three millennia by the notion of painting as “mute poetry” or “visible speech,” and it is still very much alive. We must always remember, however, that the comparison of literature and painting is imperfect, since it is based on an analogy and is not an identity.

The modern idea of the pictorial artist as storyteller nonetheless has important roots in Leon Battista Alberti’s treatise, *On Painting* of 1435, in which the author, himself an artist and writer both, writes famously about painting as a *historia*. The word *historia*, which means a “story,” sug-

gests something written. When Alberti says that a *historia* is a composition, he implicitly compares art to literature, since the word “composition” was traditionally used to describe literature. He further implicitly compares painting and literature when he says that in painting a *historia* the painter should seek the advice of poets and orators. Nevertheless, speaking of a *historia* as the representation of various bodies and things—human beings, animals, and other subjects or objects—he refers primarily to an image composed in space. He is not expressly concerned here with the passage of time, which is the province of literature. Of course to examine the spatial composition of a pictorial image takes time, but we are not talking here about the time it takes to read a story, but about the time that passes within the story itself.

In Renaissance art, pictorial composition, the arrangement of figures in space, often conflicts sharply with an image’s implicit associations with the temporal character of a literary narrative. This is so because the episodes of the story that a painter or sculptor presents are not always placed in an obviously identifiable sequence within the space defined by the painter. The figures of a single episode or series of episodes in a “continuous narrative” so-called are dispersed through space, above all, as a way of making the spatial composition harmonious and not necessarily or primarily as a means of making the allusion to a narrative obvious.

Two hundred years after Alberti wrote about painting as a *historia*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing underscored the fundamental difference between art, which is spatial, and literature, which is temporal, by emphasizing the intrinsic limits of both art forms. In his classic work, *Laocoön*, Lessing objected to a spatial art that aspires to suggest the passage of time. I do not wish to take up here Lessing’s argument against spatial art that aspires to be temporal. I want, instead, to suggest that any spatial art that calls to mind a story unfolding in time must take license in some degree with the temporal narrative to which it refers, since the pictorial artist’s principal concern is with the disposition of fig-

ures across the picture plane or within its spatial illusion. It is important to keep in mind those cases where the chronological narrative is at odds with the pictorial composition, because these instances remind us of fundamental differences between literature and art that we can too easily forget or ignore.

2.

IN ORDER to underscore the basic distinction between a pictorial image and a text, let us turn our attention to the canonical Renaissance *historia* of Jacob and Esau, which Ghiberti made for the Gates of Paradise at the very moment when Alberti wrote about painting as *historia* (Fig. 1). This scene is widely appreciated as a tour de force of Renaissance perspective, which is an ideal vehicle for rendering the subject, since it provides a space, indeed a stage upon which the artist can arrange his figures or actors. The space in which the artist distributes his figures is the place where he suggests the relations of his image to a story. The Jacob and Esau panel is especially fascinating because its *historia* or “story” is not always fully obvious in the way of many so-called “continuous narratives,” where one can easily recognize the suggestion of a narrative through time. Whereas Ghiberti’s pictorial composition of figures and architecture is beautifully and harmoniously conceived, the implicit temporal sequence of the story to which he alludes is radically interrupted or disrupted by pictorial considerations both planar and spatial. In the literature inspired by Ghiberti’s image there is indeed a tension between the appreciation of the panel’s harmonious composition and the full understanding of the narrative to which the scene alludes.

Before we consider this disparity, let us note and locate the seven episodes from the Biblical narrative to which Ghiberti refers: (1) in the upper right hand corner of the panel, the Lord reveals his plan when he speaks to Rebecca who is pregnant with Esau and Jacob; (2) In the left middle

ground, Rebecca reclines in her bed at the time of her confinement before the birth of her twins, while four women in the foreground attend to her; (3) in the center middle ground of the scene, the older son, Esau, sells his birthright to his brother in exchange for pottage; (4) in the center foreground, Isaac asks Esau to hunt for game; (5) in the distance on the right side of the composition Esau goes off to hunt; (6) in the middle ground also at the right, Rebecca plots with Jacob the deception of Isaac; (7) in the lower right hand corner of the scene, Jacob, pretending to be the long-haired Esau by using the skin of a goat, receives the paternal blessing from the blind Isaac as Rebecca looks on. If you look closely at the panel with the Biblical story in mind, you will eventually find the allusions to these seven episodes. Understanding the way in which the panel relates to the Bible story requires the beholder to retell the story to himself. This act of recollection is itself a narrative. The figures that refer to this narrative are not a narrative in themselves.

There is a striking feature of Ghiberti's composition that commands our attention—its allusions to speech, to speaking and listening. When we focus on the various episodes of Ghiberti's panel we come to see that in all but one scene there is conversation of a particularly intense kind: God speaks momentously to Rebecca as he reveals His plan to her; Jacob and Esau are engaged in an impassioned exchange over the birthright of the latter; Isaac addresses Esau, urging him to hunt for game; Rebecca instructs Jacob in the manner of tricking Isaac; and, Isaac, in the act of blessing Jacob, necessarily speaks to his son—again in a momentous exchange. In short, the panel absorbs us in a series of conversations. Only the isolated Esau going off to hunt is not engaged in such conversation. The confined Rebecca seems isolated, but as she gazes forward, she is seemingly listening to the women attending her, who are clearly engaged in conversation. We thus come to see that in Ghiberti's panel almost all of the figures are seemingly either speaking or listening. In the dramatically culminating scene of Isaac

blessing Jacob (which is nonetheless off to one side) Rebecca, resting her head upon her hand, is profoundly attentive to Isaac's words. The depth of her attentiveness is, one might almost say, suggestive of the degree of attention that Ghiberti asks of us in the contemplation of his entire image and all of its details.

Although Ghiberti's panel is rich in verbal implications, the point I wish to make here, indeed emphasize, is that commentators on this wonderful *historia* inevitably do not follow its visual references to the Biblical story in full. This is so because the composition of the work is more important than its allusions to narrative and, if anything, the harmonious arrangement of figures in space distracts viewers from the temporal sequence of the Biblical narrative. Commentators tend to seize upon some episodes of the panel, but not the full story to which the panel alludes, or they refer to it briefly in passing. In other words, viewers do not "read" the full story to which Ghiberti refers. This is so, I believe, because the artist is concerned, above all, with the arrangement of figures in space, a factor which easily leads the viewer away from the coherent sense of the narrative to which the panel is related. In short, the harmony of the spatial composition is rendered at the expense of the coherence of the temporal sequence.

In his *Commentaries*, Ghiberti schematically remembers only parts of the narrative to which his panel refers. He mentions the birth of Jacob and Esau, the moment when Isaac sends Esau off to hunt, Rebecca's plot to deceive Isaac and, finally, the deception itself. He thus recalls four of the seven episodes from his own panel. He omits the exchange between God and Rebecca, the sale of Esau's birthright, and Esau's departure for the hunt. Like Ghiberti, his biographer Vasari also remembers only some of the episodes, in fact, the same scenes recalled by the artist. It is not impossible that Vasari recalls the same four scenes that Ghiberti mentions and not the other three because he has a copy of the *Commentaries* open as he writes. We know that Vasari read Ghiberti's book.

Vasari is less interested in the chronological sequence of Ghiberti's story than he is in the beautiful rendering of the figures—the life-like appearance of Ghiberti's Isaac, Jacob, and Rebecca of which he speaks, as well as the beautifully rendered dogs. Although he is a man of letters, as well as an artist, Vasari reminds us of Alberti's emphasis on the visible representation of figures as the principal feature of a *historia*.

Ghiberti and Vasari also do not follow an obvious narrative in Ghiberti's panel, because the arrangement of the seven scenes in space does not lend itself to a predictable, easily discernible arrangement. Although the location of the conversation of God with Rebecca on a rooftop makes sense, for example, since the matriarch is speaking with God on high, the beginning of a story at the upper right hand corner of a composition is highly unusual in Renaissance art, indeed unexpected. It is not surprising therefore that both Ghiberti and Vasari do not even include it in their schematic descriptions, even though it refers to God's momentous announcement of His plan to Rebecca at the beginning of his story.

We tend to apprehend Renaissance compositions moving from left to right, but in Ghiberti's panel, we jump in a surprising diagonal movement from the upper right hand corner to the left middle ground and foreground to the confinement of Rebecca attended by the four women. Moreover, there is a kind of oscillation here between our attention to the prominent women in the foreground in high relief, and our perception of Rebecca in the middle ground in low relief. The attending women, who do not even belong to the original Biblical story but embellish it, are so commanding in their graceful, almost dance-like motions that they play a dominant role in the visual field. They hold our attention and even distract us, if momentarily, from other episodes in the panel.

It is not surprising that both Ghiberti and Vasari overlook the episode of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob in exchange for a bowl of pottage, which follows in the Biblical sequence. Why? Because the foreground figures of the panel,

Isaac and Esau, when seen from straight ahead, partially obscure this scene of the sale of the birthright. One must see this central middle ground scene from an oblique angle in order to identify Jacob clearly as he extends a bowl of pottage to Esau, whose outstretched arm mirrors his brother's. As the younger brother is identifiable by the bowl of pottage that he offers to his brother, the older brother is easily identified by the prominent bow on the floor, since he is a hunter.

In front of this scene, in the foreground and toward the center of the panel, we see a handsome youth responding to an old man. We recognize that the latter is Isaac. The former is Esau, since the older brother has with him two dogs essential to his identity as a hunter. There can thus be no confusion here of Esau with his younger twin Jacob. Esau's two dogs are nonetheless a witty allusion to both brothers at once, since one dog is shorthaired, corresponding to Jacob, while the other, closer to us, has long hair, corresponding to Esau. We are easily led from this central foreground scene immediately to the right where the younger brother, disguised with the hair of a goat as his longhaired brother, receives the paternal blessing,

But let us return to Esau in the center foreground. He listens to the aged Isaac, who requests that he go forth to hunt for wild game. But, once again, we must make an unexpected jump to the extreme right hand distance, where we behold Esau climbing a hill, bow on shoulder, as he goes off to hunt. To reach this episode, we must leap, surprisingly, over the scene of Rebecca and Jacob plotting the deception of Isaac. In order to match up the latter scene with the subsequent moment in the temporal sequence of the Bible we must next proceed in reverse before we find the bypassed episode of the plotting Rebecca with her son.

In other words, since Ghiberti's primary goal is to represent figures in space and then compose them harmoniously in that space, the allusion to a narrative in time is not obvious and is full of surprises, if not ambiguities. Eventually, we work out the implicit sequence of episodes in accord with

the Biblical narrative, but this sequence goes against the grain of the spatial composition, which distracts us from the temporal order of the story to which Ghiberti refers.

There are various aspects of the composition that attract our attention in ways that have nothing to do with advancing the narrative. Ghiberti's and Vasari's summary descriptions of the panel of Jacob and Esau conform to the sequence of details that we observe as we look across the panel from left to right, starting with the scene of confinement. Their accounts are not nearly so complex and subtle, however, as what the artist has in fact presented. For example, we can follow the sequence of figures in high relief from the four women of the confinement scene to the exchange between Isaac and Esau toward the center of the panel, finally, to the scene of the blessing at the right. In this sequence we have a condensed allusion to the Biblical narrative reduced to three scenes. But let us notice that when Esau responds to Isaac in the foreground, they are on an axis that runs in the opposite direction and deeper into space, from the center to the left, and thus back to Rebecca. This diagonal axis links Isaac to his wife shown in bed. Again figural composition is scarcely an agent of explicit narrative; in fact, it goes against the grain of a temporal sequence.

The temporal implications of the four scenes mentioned by Ghiberti and Vasari are thus not obvious. The multiple representations of the main characters in Ghiberti's panel are scarcely part of an easily deciphered, continuous narrative; rather, they are, if anything, a discontinuous or disjunctive arrangement of figures when seen in relation to the temporal scheme of the Biblical story. But if we do not think about the narrative passage of time here and only of the disposition of figures within the panel's spatial illusion, we see that the story is, despite sharp disjunctions in the narrative, beautifully composed. This harmony of the composition is of greater import than the panel's lack of clarity in its narrative sequence through time. It is not surprising that two of the finest Ghiberti scholars, Richard Krautheimer and Trude Krautheimer-

Hess, wrote of the narrative of Ghiberti's composition as "torn apart." They might well have said instead that narrative was translated into something else: spatial composition.

If we step back from our close formal analysis of Ghiberti's composition in relation to the Biblical narrative, we come to realize that what the artist does is to prompt the beholder's memory of the story of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25 and with this textual sequence in mind, he can locate, though with some difficulty, the correspondences between the episodes in the panel and those in the Biblical text. In other words, we have the Biblical story in the first place and then we have Ghiberti's spatial composition that makes reference to the story, but does not exactly retell that story. We need to recognize and emphasize the fact that the beholder plays a crucial role in retelling the Biblical story to himself in order to grasp the temporal or narrative implications of Ghiberti's panel. The beholder, who retells the story, is the crucial narrator here, as he re-narrates the Biblical story. Although we can speak of Ghiberti's panel in Albertian terms as a *historia*, the panel is less a narrative than an indirect allusion to it. To speak of the implicit narrative of the figures represented in the panel is, I think, to oversimplify the translation of time into space.

A brief look at a few modern interpretations of Ghiberti's image is very instructive for our understanding of the relationship of spatial composition to temporal narrative. In their classic monograph on Ghiberti, the Krautheimers discuss the Jacob and Esau panel in a cursory, almost random manner, with only casual interest in the totality of its allusions to the Bible. In brief scattered allusions to this panel throughout their book, they identify all of the episodes to which Ghiberti refers, barely noting the scene of the sale of Esau's birthright. This omission is not surprising, since as we have seen, that episode is partially concealed and thus easily overlooked. The Krautheimers do not pause to dwell on the overall scheme of Ghiberti's work and its allusion to the Bible story, from first moment to last. They are understand-

ably much more interested in the overall grandeur of the framing architecture of the scene and the superb perspective of the panel to which this architecture is wed. Both aspects of the panel are closely related to Albertian ideals of harmony—or might we say that Albertian ideals stem from the Ghibertian performance? Spatial and figural harmony do not conceal the complex disjunctions or ambiguities of Ghiberti's sustained allusion to the Biblical narrative—the way in which Ghiberti translates a temporal sequence into a spatial composition. This is so because the panel, compelling the beholder to contemplate and admire its spatial harmony, does not invite an easy apprehension of a temporal, narrative sequence.

In the first edition to his classic survey of Renaissance art, Frederick Hartt, like Ghiberti and Vasari, refers to only several episodes of Ghiberti's narrative—not to the whole story. Moreover, he reads the panel not with the Bible in mind but with the supposition that San Antonino's *summa* was Ghiberti's source. He thus turns Esau going off to hunt at the right hand side of the panel into Jacob carrying a Cross, even though the object that Esau carries is unmistakably a bow, not a Cross. (It is not impossible that others seeing a man carrying a large piece of wood on his shoulder might similarly have misconstrued what Ghiberti pictured.) This error, subsequently corrected in later editions of Hartt's text, is a reminder of how fragile our associations of images and texts can be. Like the Krautheimers, Hartt is enthralled by the architecture of the panel. He is more concerned with specific episodes within the composition than he is with the sequence of the various scenes in a total narrative. As I have suggested, the disjunctive or ambiguous sequence of Ghiberti's figures discourages the viewer from focusing on the whole temporal sequence of the panel. Space and time here are, we might say, at odds. Most writers on the Ghiberti panel refer to some of the panel's episodes, as we have said, but they invariably do not try to follow the sequence of the artist's arrangement episode by episode, which is not, as we

have observed, so easy to do. Indeed, there is to date no full account in the scholarly literature of how the Biblical chronology is transformed in Ghiberti's panel into compositional harmony.

I have saved for last one of the fundamental differences between a pictorial image and a text. When we read a work of literature, we read word by word, line by line, across and down the page. Our activity is precisely prescribed. When we look at a pictorial image, however, our eye is led in various directions by the forms of things, by the shapes of buildings, the grouping of figures, the degree of relief of the figures, or the perspective construction, and we encounter a multiplicity of ways of seeing the image as we gaze upon it and look in the different directions in which it guides us. We can take in the entire Ghiberti image from a distance, but we can also in a more open-ended way follow the artist's lead as he directs us, detail by detail, in various directions. For example, we might follow the figures in high relief across the foreground of Ghiberti's panel, from the birth of Jacob to the scene of Isaac addressing Esau to the passage where Isaac blesses Jacob, as we have already said, or we might pursue the vertically aligned images of Rebecca at the right from the scene where God speaks to her through her plot with Jacob below, finally, to her thoughtful contemplation in the scene where her favorite son receives the paternal blessing, or we may contemplate the three scenes framed by arches: Rebecca confined, the sale of the birthright, and the plot to deceive Isaac.

The beholder of a pictorial image is not constrained by a specific format in the same way that a reader is. The beholder is led through space in various directions. He is led now here, now there, whereas the reader's eye is always led across the page in the same way—word by word from left to right, from the top of the page to the bottom. This is a huge and fundamental difference between reading a narrative and looking at its transformation into a spatial composition—a difference so obvious, so transparent, that it is easily taken for granted or ignored.

I do not think that anything I have said here is going to change the way commentators discuss what they call “narrative art.” In the first place, the millennia-old comparison of art and literature is deeply ingrained in our thinking and encourages us to speak of art and literature in the same breath. The sibling rivalry between the spatial arts and the temporal art of literature encourages us to compare rather than contrast the one with the other. Moreover, we are inclined to speak of an image in relation to words because our own medium is verbal, and so we often mistakenly speak of “reading” an image, which is, as I have suggested already, scarcely what we do.

I think that rather than refer to Ghiberti as a narrator, we might pause to reflect upon our habits of mind and see more clearly that he was a kind of translator of literary narratives into something other than a story. For he translated the temporal sequence of the Biblical story into a spatial composition in which we are more likely to admire various details in space and their seemingly endless interconnections than to ponder the totality of its narrative allusions and dwell on its various disruptions or ruptures. As Lessing said, there is an essential difference between images, which are spatial, and texts, which are temporal. That difference explains, I believe, why commentators ignore or write so briefly about the sequence of Ghiberti’s panel in its totality. It explains why Ghiberti’s references to the Bible have been perceived as “torn apart,” even though his image is visibly so harmonious.

The proper appreciation of Ghiberti’s art rests on the understanding of his composition as essentially spatial. For all of his conspicuous allusions to words, to speaking and listening, his art is not verbal. Ghiberti’s panel is explicitly spatial and only temporal by implication. The difference between narrative and image is based on fundamental differences between space and time, between literary composition and pictorial composition—a distinction too easily overlooked when we dwell excessively on the similarities between art and literature. What is at stake in insisting on this

distinction is the very integrity of a mute spatial image, which is what it is, and what it is, is not a narrative! When *we* attempt to put words to such mute images as Ghiberti's, we ourselves become narrators. But *that* is another story.

NOTE

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