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## Philip Marlowe Meets the Art Historian

PAUL BAROLSKY

I WILL PUT my cards on the table at the outset. I am an unabashed “hedonist.” It matters to me not a whit that Bishop Butler dealt a deathblow to hedonism as a viable philosophy over 700 years into the last millennium. Not only a hedonist, I am also an amateur and a dilettante, an aesthete and an impressionist. What matters to me when it comes to art is aesthetic pleasure or delight. Art is a manifestation of play, which is not to say that it is unserious. What is more serious than a child at play?

I am not inclined to dwell on art history as a discipline, on the modes of understanding art, on viewing practices, rhetorical strategies, etc., etc., etc., although I fully recognize that to others these things matter. Art history is, strictly speaking, the story of art. But too often, academic art history is not a good story—by which I mean a story well told, with vivacity and delight, and written for the reader’s pleasure as well as instruction. Much “art history” so-called is scarcely a story at all.

The story of art is not, in fact, a single story but a vast multitude of stories, countless stories. The more that these many stories are absorbed into a single account, the more abstract and therefore elusive that overall story becomes. Although there is a famous textbook called *The Story of Art*, one cannot imagine anybody writing a book with such a title today. “The story of art” as a phrase is misleading; it fails to convey the richness of the ever-expanding variety of stories of art that have been told or might yet be told.

The history of art, being a wide range of stories about art, takes many forms in various genres, some of these fictional.

Such stories are written in prose, poetry, or prose poetry. They take form in orations, epitaphs, anecdotes, and letters; they appear in travel books, biographies, novels, technical manuals, theoretical treatises, and also in academic art history.

Art history depends on facts. Facts are often said to stand in opposition to fiction; however, fiction depends on facts. Otherwise, fiction would be meaningless. Indeed, you cannot write fiction without facts.

There is, nonetheless, a big and fundamental difference between the intentions of the modern art historian and those of the author of historical fiction. The historian must adhere as strictly as possible to the facts, even when these facts are bizarre, outrageous, and even unbelievable, whereas the author of fiction embellishes the facts, with a certain license, if he chooses, though he must always maintain a sense of verisimilitude.

At the same time, however, there are fundamental ways in which history and fiction are united. Both are written in pursuit of what one construes to be the truth. Both history and fiction are fictive in the root sense of the Latin word *ingere*, which means “to shape” or “to mold.”

When we stop to think about history and fiction, we realize that much modern academic art history is, in its zealous efforts to separate fact from fiction, an historical aberration. By this I mean that throughout history—from the Greeks to the Romans, from the Romans to Vasari’s history and beyond—facts have been mingled with legends, fables, fabrications, and myths.

In any event, much, far too much, academic art history, despite the best of intentions, is very badly written, is indeed artless, ponderous, and even lugubrious, giving the reader very little pleasure; on the contrary, it frequently alienates the reader from the art that it might otherwise illuminate. I take exception to the proposition that art historians aspire to write beautifully. I think the evidence massively demonstrates that most art historians are indifferent to the form of their writing, to their own literary style or absence of style. In my view, writing about art

that conveys a vivid sense of the work of art is necessarily artful and should give the reader pleasure, not just information and ideas. The artfulness of verbal interpretation can bring us into close rapport with the wordless art that it illuminates. Ever so much academic writing nowadays is so focused on context, however, that too often the work of art itself is lost sight of and little described or interpreted.

Description is necessarily a form of interpretation. There is a deep, well-known tradition of such description that we can trace back to Homer's account of the shield of Achilles—a tradition that extends to the writings of Philostratus and later Vasari and Winckelmann. It has the technical name of *ekphrasis*. All art historians know this tradition, but few practice it today. It has been said that this is so because we have photographs of works of art; but these photographs are mute and what they represent still needs to be noticed and consequently described in words. Moreover, the photograph is never a neutral or objective datum but is itself an interpretation.

I think that art historians today resist description because they fear that it will be excessively subjective or even too obvious. And besides, it is hard as hell to do. And so they often retreat to theory as an escape. We need to be reminded here of the etymology of a word. "Theory" is, in the root sense, how one sees something. It's a point of view. And what we see needs to be described. We cannot take it for granted.

The pursuit of a theory of art, justifiably rooted in a philosophical approach, too often descends into the realm of radical pomposity—indeed, to such a degree that the double-talk now current in academe reads like self-parody or farce.

Let us consider a few examples of such babble in the spirit of fun. Consider the following specimen from a book of terms used by art historians, which was assembled, at least in part, for student use.

"The modern individual or subject is interpellated into its own position in the social order as a composer of its own life, in all of its facets. Ordinary habitation in the modern world is above all an occasion for the dramaturgy of the self, as this

may be reflected ('represented') in a subject's relationships to the objects (from pitchers to paintings) with which it surrounds itself—which it may have 'collected'—and with which it carries out the routines of daily life." Is this, I ask you, a model for students or anybody else to follow in writing about art? Talk about corrupting the youth!

Or, consider this bit of nonsense: "The central premise of the category 'Renaissance' suffers from *metalepsis*, or chronological reversal, meaning that the object of study seems to justify its presence on the basis of a preexisting historical context, whereas 'Renaissance' is the construction of a context based on the historian's prior understanding of history's significance." To which one can only reply: Duh!

How about, also just for fun, this further example of art-historical gibberish: "To articulate a narrative account of the history of art is to authorize a relational experience that is, ultimately, strategically situational." Finally, my favorite bit of pomposity: an art historian who, lecturing on art and sex, recently referred to having sex as "inter-corporeal relationality." I wonder what *that* feels like. Such "writing," so-called, is born, I believe, of the fear that art history is not sufficiently profound. It is probably easier to use unnecessarily technical words with abandon than it is to write clear, vivid, and evocative descriptions of works of art.

Now as we turn away from such absurdity, let us ponder a wonderful description of art—a vivid and engaging account of the main hall of an ostentatious house:

The main hallway of the Sternwood place was two stories high. Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn't have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the rope that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn't seem to be really trying.

There were French doors at the back of the hall, beyond them a wide sweep of emerald grass to a white garage, in front of which a slim dark young chauffeur in shiny black leggings was dusting a maroon Packard convertible. Beyond the garage were some decorative trees trimmed as carefully as poodle dogs. Beyond them a greenhouse with a domed roof. Then more trees and beyond everything the solid, uneven, comfortable line of the foothills.

On the east side of the hall a free staircase, tile-paved, rose to a gallery with a wrought-iron railing and another piece of stained-glass romance. Large hard chairs with rounded red plush seats were backed into the vacant spaces of the wall round about. They didn't look as if anybody had ever sat in them. In the middle of the west wall there was a big empty fireplace with a brass screen in four hinged panels, and over the fireplace a marble mantel with cupids at the corners. Above the mantel there was a large oil portrait, and above the portrait two bullet-torn or moth-eaten cavalry pennants crossed in a glass frame. The portrait was a stiffly posed job of an officer in full regimentals of about the time of the Mexican war. The officer had a neat black imperial, black mustachios, hot hard coal-black eyes, and the general look of a man it would pay to get along with. I thought this might be General Sternwood's grandfather. It could hardly be the General himself, even though I had heard he was pretty far gone in years to have a couple of daughters still in the dangerous twenties.

You have been reading Philip Marlowe's description of General Sternwood's house at the beginning of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*. It's all there: architecture, landscape gardening, topiary art, stained glass, metal work, painting, sculpture and furniture—not to mention art criticism. No matter that Marlowe is a character in a novel, no matter that he is the subject of fiction, no matter that the world he describes is imaginary. His account has verisimilitude, and Chandler's prose is superb—lively, precise, lucid, spare, witty; attentive to scale, color and materials, to psychology, class consciousness, social aspirations, and to much, much more—above all, the art of storytelling. We can all learn a thing or two about writing from Chandler, I think, even we art historians who, too often plumbing the depths of our discipline, forget to describe what we see on the surfaces of art.

Authors of fiction often illuminate the meaning of art. Not trained formally in art history or its methods, the novelist often surpasses the art historian in describing and thus interpreting what he sees and is thus more the art historian than the art historian. Although many scholars have supposed Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time*, a Counter-Reformation exposé of luxury, the painting is more plausibly an amusingly coy and shameless celebration of sexuality (fig. 1). In his novel, *What's Bred in the Bone*, Robertson Davies captures the sensual fun of the picture when he says facetiously that Venus is "naked as a jaybird," indeed "astonishingly naked." This joking captures the tone of a picture that is scarcely moralizing. The novelist continues by observing that the kiss, which the picture represents, "meant more than good morning or something like that." If Venus and Cupid are really mother and son, Davies says, "it's a pretty queer situation." The author of fiction captures the bizarre playfulness of a painting that is rendered humorless in ever so many iconographical commentaries.

Or consider an observation of Richard Howard's in a long poem, "The Giant on Giant-Killing," which is about Donatello's *David* (fig. 2). By now it is commonplace to observe the sensuous role of the feather of Goliath's helmet that rises to stroke the boy victor's inner thigh (fig. 3). Nice. How many art historians notice, however, a similar detail below—a detail that the poet sees and ever so drolly describes in the voice of Goliath (fig. 4)? With amused pleasure Goliath asks us to "notice the way my moustache turns over his triumphant toe (a kind of caress, and not the only one)." Ultimately, as Howard's Goliath proclaims, "the victory is mine." Part of the charm of the poet's description and interpretation resides in his way of referring to the wing stroking the leg without describing it. Howard only hints at the detail of the inner leg caressed, thus avoiding an art historical cliché.

In the spirit of poetic fun, let us consider next the middle section of Ursula Fanthorpe's poem, "Not My Best Side,"

about Paolo Uccello's painting of Saint George and the Dragon in the National Gallery in London (fig. 5). Here we have Uccello's maiden speaking:

It's hard for a girl to be sure if  
She wants to be rescued. I mean, I quite  
Took to the dragon. It's nice to be  
Liked, if you know what I mean. He was  
So nicely physical, with his claws  
And lovely green skin, and that sexy tail,  
And the way he looked at me,  
He made me feel he was all ready to  
Eat me. And any girl enjoys that.  
So when this boy turned up, wearing machinery,  
On a really *dangerous* horse, to be honest,  
I didn't much fancy him. I mean,  
What was he like underneath the hardware?  
He might have acne, blackheads or even  
Bad breath for all I could tell, but the dragon—  
Well, you could see all his equipment  
At a glance. Still what could I do?  
The dragon got himself beaten by the boy,  
And a girl's got to think of her future.

This is seemingly pure poetic fantasy and tells us little, if anything, about the painting, right? Well, not quite. The poetry is decidedly playful and if you look at the capricious forms of Uccello's picture, the cunning contours of the cave opening, the monstrosity of the dragon, the decorative perspective of his wings, his curling tail, his great claws, and Saint George's toy horse, you see that they are all manifestations of a painter at play. What we might say, therefore, is that the poet enters with extreme license into the playful spirit of the picture. The maiden thinking ever so coolly about her future is appropriate to Uccello's aloof damsel holding her pet dragon by a leash—whatever the iconographical conventions might be.

I think it fair to say that, as a general rule, poets and novelists writing about art exhibit a far greater sense of humor or

wit in their celebrations of art than do art historians, who are excessively serious. This is not to say that art historians lack a sense of humor in real life, but when they turn to historical exegesis, they too often check their playfulness at the door. And when they do recognize a playful detail, rather than evoke its charm, they flog it to death. The alienation of art history from art as a form of play is a striking feature of the discipline. Excessive seriousness trumps, if not crushes, playfulness almost every time.

There are various ways of writing well about art. But these many ways of writing, above all, in the artful description of art, are not much cultivated in our academic institutions where we, to use the jargon of industrialized scholarly prose, “problematize” works of art—and at a cost. As I have said, it is exceedingly difficult to describe works of art in precise, evocative, or inspiring ways. In the present circumstances we would need a revolution in our institutions to effect a change. Who, dashing toward professional success—tenure or scholarly prominence—will pause to take sufficient time to do the work necessary to write beautifully and without unnecessary jargon in a prose that is seemingly effortless? Such work requires endless revision and polishing. Although the realization of an excellent prose style takes time, we might at least make a gesture toward the cultivation of vivid and engaging writing.

In our advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars on theory, methods, and historiography in which students read classic texts that range predictably from Vasari to Kant to Greenberg (and some of the absolutely terrible stuff I quoted above), we might as well also insert into the curriculum some selected writings from novelists and poets and also such excellent journalists and critical essayists as Alex Ross or Anthony Lane. Such writings might serve as models of vigorous, beautiful, and suggestive descriptions of works of art of various kinds—interpretations in a language that would be compelling, indeed, a pleasure to read. In the history of English and American literature, for example, there is a great tradi-



tion of such writing from Hazlitt, Lamb, Thackeray, Browning, Hawthorne, and Dickens—not just Ruskin and Pater—to Woolf, Cather, Byatt, and Barnes, among others. And one finds similar traditions of writing in other languages. Such prose or poetry might encourage students not merely to write in a clear jargon-free exposition of facts and ideas, but to write with a certain élan. This, I believe, would be a step in the right direction. And who could possibly object to that?



Fig. 1. Bronzino's *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time*, oil on wood; National Gallery, London, Great Britain. Photo credit: Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 2. Donatello, *David*, bronze sculpture; Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy. Photo Credit: Scala / Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY.



Fig. 3. Donatello, *David*, bronze sculpture, back view detail, Goliath's feather; Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy. Photo Credit: Scala / Ministero per i Beni e le Attività.



Fig. 4. Donatello, *David*, bronze sculpture, detail, head of Goliath; Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.



Fig.5. Paolo Uccello, *Saint George and the Dragon*, oil on canvas; National Gallery, London, Great Britain. Photo Credit: © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.

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## Improvisations on Salvatore Quasimodo

MARTIN BENNETT

### WINTER (AFTER ANACREON)

That time of year: Poseidon,  
lord of the calendar, conjures  
rain-bloated clouds, a din  
akin to furious furniture  
now more stormy weather sets in

### INVERNO (ANACREONTE)

Ecco, il mese di Poseidone  
comincia; e gonfiano d'acqua  
le nubi e cupamente  
le impetuose bufere rombano.