

BOOK REVIEWS

David E. Wellbery, *Lessing's Laocoon: Semiotics and Aesthetics in the Age of Reason*. Cambridge, 1984. pp. 275.

This book begins with the broad mandate suggested by its subtitle and moves towards the specific analysis of Lessing's *Laocoon*, Wellbery's method is historicist in the best sense, but his book is anything but a traditional history of aesthetics. Inspired by Arthur Danto and Michel Foucault, Wellbery attempts to "describe the set of theoretical Parameters that, in a particular age, programmed what counts as a work of art, an aesthetic quality, or an aesthetic experience" (p 1). Thus he seeks to show that the new discipline of aesthetics was *made possible* in late eighteenth-century Germany by a certain type of thinking about signs. Wellbery offers novel interpretations of the foundations of aesthetics and his discussion of the Enlightenment's concern with the sign raises questions of continuing importance today when semiotic analysis is central in the humanities.

What Wellbery sees as the framework Enlightenment semiotics was constructed by Christian Wolff, and the analysis of Wolff's thinking provides many of the ideas necessary for the later chapters. The first of these ideas is that "representation" is fundamental to eighteenth-century thought and to its semiotics in particular. The question of how Wolff's theory of

representation came to be taken as truth, and an account of the effects this theory had on contemporary semiotics and aesthetics is precisely what interests Wellbery. For example, several "oppositional pairs"-obscure/clear, confused/distinct, non extensive/extensive, incomplete/complete-stem from Wolff's definition of representation as binary, and for Wellbery, "constitute part of the conceptual grid which, in the Enlightenment, governed and organized inquiry in various domains. Indeed . . . the questions raised and the answers found in Lessing's *Laocoon* were made possible by the representational structure of knowledge in the eighteenth century" (p. 15).

Wellbery goes on in this first chapter to discuss the relationship of eighteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of the sign. He uncovers more differences than similarities, and perhaps the greatest divergence involves the inception and use of individual signs. For Saussure and most modern semioticians, signs are spawned and controlled by society and its institutions. But in the eighteenth century, notions of freedom held sway to the extent that "the sign [was] essentially a name freely chosen to mark a representation itself directly knowable; language [was] a nomenclature for the realm of ideas" p.19). From Wolff to Lessing, there are two types of signs to mark these representations: "arbitrary" and "natural." Natural signs are the most common since through them the world "communicates" to man, shows him

fire, for example, with smoke. As Wellbery points out, the distinctions between the types of signs are not always clear, but arbitrary signs seem to be created solely by man as a means to signal his all-important representations. Thus we come to understand how important signs are: without them we could not communicate, think, or even perceive. The classification of these signs was a constant preoccupation in eighteenth-century philosophy partly because arbitrary signs were thought to be inferior to the natural type. Natural signs were held to derive from God's choice, his language, (thus preserving the notion of freedom): our language was supposed to strive for similar purity by bringing its arbitrary signs in line with God's natural ones. This moral and theological imperative figures largely in the Enlightenment's hierarchy of the arts, since, as Wellbery shows, the individual arts came to be distinguished by their different use of signs.

Wellbery claims that the new field of semiotics is organized by the category of representation (as opposed to that of performance or expression). He asserts further that for Mendelssohn especially, the representational model defines Beauty. This model trades in logical and metaphysical distinctions rather than in the psychological aspects of aesthetics in whose terms Mendelssohn, Meier, and Baumgarten are usually considered. Here, then, Wellbery is redefining the history of aesthetics by emphasizing the importance of semioti-

for these thinkers. He defines the Enlightenment's science of signs as an attempt to answer the questions, what are the general laws of aesthetic semiosis and what are the specific laws that apply to the individual arts?" (p.70) According to Wellbery, Mendelssohn anticipates Lessing by differentiating the various arts according to the semiological principle of the material nature of their essential signs. Painting's signs are necessarily two-dimensional, for example, and this properly limits the content of the artform. Semiotics allows the particular separation and hierarchy of the Enlightenment: nowhere is this more evident than in the *Laocoon*.

Wellbery's discussion of Lessing's text occupies more than half the book and integrates the ideas of the first two chapters. Semiotics was a complex and, at times, ambiguous science in the eighteenth-century, but our understanding of it is greatly assisted by the clarity of Wellbery's analyses and his willingness to summarize his argument. At the beginning of the Lessing chapter, for example, he recapitulates the general nature and role of signs ;

When we think a truth, we are thinking an idea, or group of ideas, that corresponds to a real state of affairs. But because the mind is finite, it cannot think ideas alone. They are too elusive Therefore man marks his ideas with signs [that] . . . allow him to recall his representations .

... The link between sign and idea is arbitrary . . . , [and thus] a distance is opened up between sign and idea, and in the space of this distance resides the possibility of error. (p. 99)

The potential gap between sign and idea troubles Lessing and helps to determine the distinctions he draws between the arts. Like those thinkers already discussed, Lessing wants the arts to present and preserve the intuition or presence-to-mind of the idea. All the Enlightenment semioticians mistrust the inevitable materiality of the sign in what is--though Wellbery doesn't mention it--a noticeably Platonic way. Yet recognizing the need for signs, Lessing insists that they provide a direct intuition of the real. The less material a sign is, the better able it is to perform this function: this is the basis of Lessing's famous valuation of poetry over the visual arts.

To compare and arrange the arts on a scale of value, Lessing must first provide a common factor, which he calls "illusion." Both poet and painter create illusion, but with different means and results. For Lessing, poetry is decidedly superior because its signs are less material. Critics have claimed that Lessing thus overturns the doctrine of *ut pictura poesis*, but Wellbery shows instead that Lessing has actually "relocated [this doctrine] on a different level of generality" (p. 198). Poetry is like painting--both seek illusion--

but poetry is more semiotically advanced than its rival. Lessing's often-remarked bias in favor of poetry finds a semiotic justification in Wellbery's analysis. Painting and sculpture, which Lessing conflates, are more "worldly" because their signs are more material. "Painting . . . is less purified than poetry" (p. 136), and its worldliness is to be transcended (again in a Platonic sense). Lessing's is thus a teleological view of the individual arts based on a "progressive semiosis," on the principle that types of signs and the arts to which they properly apply can be refined,

Wellbery's explication of Lessing's attempt to raise the stature of poetry is so direct and clear that it is beyond reproach. At the same time, however, he seems too engaged with Lessing's semiotic system to be able to stand back and evaluate in any detail a claim like "the 'invisible' lies outside the semantic universe of painting and sculpture" (p. 150), or Lessing's belief that "it is impossible for painting to make use of [metaphor]" (p. 196). Wellbery does criticize such ideas briefly in his concluding remarks, but a more immediate response to the fruits of Lessing's semiotics is called for if as Wellbery wishes, we are to re-think Lessing's *Laocoon* and discover its continued application to the problems of philosophical aesthetics.

At the end of his study, however, Wellbery does discuss several areas of

present research suggested by Lessing's work : a "comparative analysis of the arts in terms of a typology of modes of sign production," "the general theory of narrativity," and "the semiotic definition of the negative" (pp. 245-47). Readers will, I think, be inspired by this book to add their own ideas to Wellbery's list. I would suggest an attempt to accommodate Wellbery's discussion of signs in Enlightenment aesthetics to the semiotic art history of Norman Bryson's brilliant *Word and Image : French painting of the Ancienne Regime* (Cambridge, 1981). Bryson devotes his second chapter (The legible body : LeBrun") to the possibility of a semiotic "reading" of the human body in painting, a possibility denied by Lessing because of his rigorous separation of the semiotics of poetry and the visual arts. Another area of inquiry might be the relevance of the eighteenth-century penchant for ranking the arts. According to Lessing, the sign should be transparent so that the Idea can be seen perfectly. Since he claims that poetry's signs are less visible and thus more effective, he also seems to want the arts themselves to become immaterial. Are the arts and their signs then simply functional, mere Platonic shadows of a higher reality ? Lessing's conclusions prompt us to question the ontological status and social role of the arts, and Wellbery's study thus laudably fulfils its aim

to promote the continuing importance of Lessing's *Laocoon*.

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Paul H. Fry : *The Reach of Criticism : Method and Perception in Literary Theory*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1983.

The Reach of Criticism is an excellent, timely book, coming as it does in the midst of controversies over method vs. dissemination, synchrony vs. diachrony, and in yet another key irony vs vision, Paul Fry's book is a learned and powerful critique of method that begins with the notion of "error" and ends with the affirmation of vision.

"Method" is a vexed term in literary theory, most often associated with the desire for a metalanguage and with spatial configurations which come to rest on a particular epistemology. To speak of method is to speak of the possibility of knowledge distinct from the subject. If knowledge can be separated from the activity of knowing, then it should be possible to lay bare the structure, the properties, the problematic elements of any given area, and to do so in a way that is both objective and intelligible to all. Method lays claim to such objectivity and universality (though such claims are often veiled in the more modern versions of its discourse), and in the process it organizes what it "knows" so that the structure itself of an area of knowledge is

is rendered present all at once. From Aristotle's predilection for classification to Northrop Fry's total form of literature, to Gadamer's connection between truth and method, and to contemporary versions of the grammar of language, the idea is to clarify, to structure, to define but especially to contain and thus "possess" knowledge through method. Method is a stabilizing principle, performing in literary theory a function equivalent to that played by form in literary studies.

Theory pays a considerable price for this stability. I will limit myself in this discussion to two aspects of the limitations of method. First, space in literary theory is a recuperative category, refusing to acknowledge in any final way the pressures of temporality. So for example knowledge transcends human time in Aristotle's reading of Oedipus, and familial relations are restored, recovered from the very jaws of time, in Fry's readings of Shakespearean romance. The desire for method in this sense would put into evidence the [Lacanian] subject's desire for an ego or mastery that cannot be achieved. Method assumes for itself the possibility of a totalizing knowledge, and indeed at times finds itself coterminous with such knowledge. What it rejects in so doing is the recognition of its own repression. The second limitation of method I wish to pursue--is all-too-neat distinction of subject and object, of knowledge and the activity of knowing--may stand in a metaphorical relation to the first. The

ego's desire for mastery, in this case, would repress the function of that desire and its impact on the knowledge it presumably achieves. It would also have to repress, in the process, the de-stabilizing function of temporality, which robs us at each turn of the possibility of such mastery. Walter Benjamin tells us that one reason we read is to learn about "endings," since the knowledge of our own ending is forbidden us. Benjamin insists on the pressure that temporality exerts upon the possibility of knowledge, the way it thwarts our desire for closure and totality. Temporality also thwarts our desire for objectivity, for it triggers a will-to-power in us which finds its most satisfying but also most repressive expression in the concept of method.

It is in this ongoing theoretical discussion on method and its limitations that Paul Fry's book, *The Reach of Criticism*, inserts itself. Fry opposes to method a notion of "perception" which accounts for the intimacy between knowledge and the knowing subject and for the radical discontinuities produced by temporality. Though his meditation on the theoretical tradition begins with Aristotle, it could well have begun with Plato. Classical criticism was uneasily aware of the difficulty of separating knowledge from subject, and from the language (rhetoric) through which such knowledge would have to be articulated. Plato's *Theaetetus* is an exemplary dialogue in this respect. When Socrates tackles an opponent in

other Platonic dialogues, he is usually able to demolish him by logic—a logic which partakes of the properties of method. But in the case of the *Theaetetus* Socrates abandons his stance of mastery, aborts the dialogue, so to speak, on this particular issue, and admits that on the question of knowledge there exists in all of us “a depth of darkness” Already in Plato we can find a dismantling of the very possibility of method, a refutation of its claims to knowledge, and it is this epistemological dislocation which underwrites the Longinian sublime. Aristotle, on the other hand, has been considered by virtually every critic a formalist who by way of “method” responds to Plato’s arguments about art, and indeed, literary theorists have found it comfortable to divide Western theoretical practice into concerns with form and concerns with the sublime. Fry’s brilliant deconstruction of Aristotelian criticism does away with this easy division. The sublime for Fry is a dislocation of form, but this dislocation occurs in the supposedly formalist text of *The Poetics*, which Fry reads in terms of Aristotle’s repression of such dislocation,

To see two distinct paths of literary theory thus implicated, at the start, with one another, is a significant contribution to the discourse. Method, for Fry, discards the very density, the propensity for “error” which is the earmark of what we call “literary” But it is within the very structure of method that the literary arises to dismantle its claims, and

it is here that Fry’s rhetoric comes closest to that of contemporary (Lacanian) psychoanalysis. “What is missing from Aristotle’s Wonderful is the ‘irrational,’ the truly *alogos*” (34). The unnamable, or that for which there are no words, comes to haunt the discourse of method. The unconscious interrupts the assumed mastery of method, dismantles the systematizing efforts of western metaphysics.

Fry uses three terms to oppose to method: interpretation, perception, and distraction. Interpretation in the rhetoric of contemporary criticism points to the impossibility of an (objective) outside, to the implication of knowledge in the rhetoric it is presumed to transcend. Perception and distraction are Fry’s way of insisting on the discontinuities brought about by temporality, and his book links such discontinuity with the very triumphs of insight to which perception and sublimity refer. The movement of the Longinian sublime, which is taken up in the second chapter, “is disordered and traces a disorder” (50). Dismemberment, disorder, the skirting of the inarticulate, these are the significant moments for Longinus, and they come to rely not on a given outside, nor on the objectivity of knowledge but on the impossibility of separating, rhetorically or epistemologically, what we have created from what we have heard. Epistemology, in this tradition of sublimity, becomes subsumed in rhetoric, and the desire for knowledge is perceived, precisely, as *desire*. Figuration and sublimity, as Longinus

indicates, and as Neil Hertz so suggestively points out, cannot be separated, and this the undoing of "method" as a system of knowledge,

The problematics of knowledge and its intersection with figuration becomes the subject of essays on Dryden and Shelley. But Fry does not limit himself to following the rhetoric of poststructuralist discourse, which insists on the subsumption of knowledge into metaphor. His argument is rather, that at that intersection between epistemology and rhetoric there is "a liminal understanding of form" (85), and this concept of the threshold moves him from the rhetoric of poststructuralism to that of phenomenology. We know, from Heidegger, just how close those two positions can be. From his readings of Holderlin's poetry and language as the naming of Being, Heidegger moves to the deconstruction of logos. Fry insists, instead, on that liminal knowledge which renders objectivity problematic and which turns the best science, as Shelley says, into literature.

Fry devotes the final chapter of his book to Walter Benjamin, and through him to what he calls "a theory of asystematic understanding." No method, says Fry, can accommodate the inmethodical wandering of the mind, and Benjamin's "distraction" recognizes the pressures (temporality, the unconscious, the world) that prevent meaning from ever being fully present to itself, and

that therefore prevent a true distinction between criticism and literature. If wholeness (the self-presence of meaning) is an illusion, then all literary texts are fragmentary, interrupted by their own unconscious. Longinus' notion of the fragment leads directly to the experience of the sublime, and for Benjamin "the movement of the sublime is the movement of distraction" (178). Fry points out that though critics perceive Benjamin's "aura" in opposition to his concept of distraction, aura arises out of a moment of distraction and is inseparable from it. Distraction is for Fry the contemporary version of sublimity, intersected by Freud's metaphor of the unconscious and his concept of the uncanny. The unconscious defies the will to mastery and closure, and the uncanny attests to that impossibility. We are not present to ourselves as subjects any more than meaning is present to itself, and thus pressured by time we seek those moments of illumination which Fry terms "a grace beyond the reach of art" (3). This liminal category reaffirms Fry's notion of art as mediation. If Heidegger is right that "the doctrine of a writer lies in what remains unsaid in his writing" quoted in Ned Lukacher's *Primal Scenes* then otherness, error, dislocation, distraction mark out a trajectory towards a moment of vision. Otherness is not the opposite of vision, but the very condition of its occurrence. Fry's book is an eloquent reminder of these possibilities.

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A. J. Smith, *The Metaphysics of Love: Studies in Renaissance Love Poetry from Dante to Milton*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1985, pp. 349

Love as a concept in literature has been treated in several ways by theologians, preachers, poets, philosophers and writers alike since the dawn of human civilization. The book under review is one such challenging endeavour which attempts to study the entire gamut of European love, with particular emphasis on the Renaissance love poetry from Dante to Milton. The book is divided into six sections, each section further containing some sub-sections. The age-old conflict and reconciliation between love - sacred and profane, tangible and intangible, infinite and ephemeral - constitute the central theme which runs through all the sections. The introduction of the book entitled "Preamble: The Linneage of Love" presents, in a capsule form, a preamble to what one may say, the constitution of love in the western world. It entails an extensive survey of the evolution as well as linneage of love right from Herackitus and Empedocles through plato, Aristotle, St. Paul, St. Augustine to many other Neoplatonic and Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages.

The argument in section one ("Sense and Innocensus") of the book grows out of a close contrast between Dante's idea of tempestuous passion and Milton's notion of innocent love.

Through a comparative glance at the contrasting kisses between Adam and Eve on onehand, and paolo and Francesca on the other, the author sharply points out that Milton strives for physical fruition in wedded love in which there is an "understanding between innocent sense and the tranquil gratification of the mind". Dante, on the other hand, in the light of the courtly ardour of the unattainable lady's 'invincible chastity, transcends the realm of sex in guest of a 'secret rose''

In section two of the book, the author tries to establish the suzerainty of the love of Petrarch's Laura which nullifies the tyranny of death. Laura's mortal love in *I Triofi* achieves spiritual glory finally affording a hope of eternal fulfilment. The love poems of Michel angelo, Shakespeare and Spenser, too, tend to reconcile sense and spirit.

Section three Yokes sense with spirit in metaphysical poetry, particularly in John Donne. Considering love an active state of mutual enterprise, Donne in his Poetry and prose treats human nature essentially in terms of a subtle-knot of body and spirit. The author successfully points out as to how the union between flesh an Flesh is made possible in Donne towards making of "One Flesh"

Section four discusses, in nutshell, the decadence of a long European tradition of love - the dilemma of sense and spirit - in the caroline lyric poets such as Stanley. Lovelace, Suckling and Carew, who, in the midst of perpetual uncertainty,

frailty of human desire, and scepticism, consider love a victim to the world of flux. Even the post-Restoration love poetry of Etherage, Sedley and Buckhurst treat love as a mere "glow upon the blind biological urge" (p. 247)

However, in Section five, the author revives, through an elaborate discussion on Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans*, the dilapidating hope of attaining spiritual sublimity through love and successfully reconciles "sensitivity with understanding" with a hope "to see Eternity the other right" (p. 257).

In the concluding section, the author once again recollects the telling contrast between Milton's pattern of human love and Dante's pining for the intelligible vision of love.

Within a limited canvass of 349 Pages, Smith has delicately handled a much discussed problem of human psyche in a style which is strikingly modern. What is more important about the book is the contrasting attitude towards sacred and profane love presented in each section, which involves wide-ranging experiences and critical scholarship. The book, it is needless to say, will be of immense help to the researchers and readers of love literature in general and to the scholars of comparative literature in particular,

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P. D. Juhl, *Interpretation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey : 1980, pp x+332.

Juhl's book purports to provide an analysis of the concept of meaning and interpretation of a literary work. His thesis is that what a work means is what its author intended it to mean. As its corollary, Juhl claims that the propositions or beliefs a work expresses or conveys are attributable to, not an "implied author", but rather the real historical author, and, further that a work has logically one and only one correct interpretation. Juhl thus sets up an interesting controversy with a variety of theorists: the anti-intentionalists like Wimsatt and Beardsley, Wayne Booth, the structuralists and post-structuralists. He also distinguishes himself from such influential anti-intentionalists like E. D. Hirsch and claims a logical work and the connection between the meaning of a author's intention unlike the latter who merely recommends such a connection.

Juhl uses 'intuition' in the sense of what an author meant by the words he used when he wrote a certain sequence of words. Intention is thus different from what the author planned to write or to convey his 'motive' of writing or the sustained focal effect of the work. Juhl's concept of intuition is related to his view that a literary work is an utterance, an instance of the use of language by its

author. Arguing against Beardsley, Juhl claims that the meaning of a *sentence* may depend upon "public conventions of usage" but the meaning of an *utterance*, the use of sentence by a speaker, depends on what the speaker intends to mean by the sentence, the dependence of utterance-meaning on the speaker's intention is best seen in the interpretation of ambiguous sentences. Juhl argues for the relevance of author's intuition its interpreting allusion and irony in a literary work.

After making this preliminary case for the author's intention, Juhl goes over to detailed evidence in support of his claim. The appeal to the text commonly made in interpreting a literary work is shown to be basically an appeal to the author's intuition. Textual features are evidence of what a work means in virtue of being evidence of what the author meant. Similarly, the appeal to the context and rules of language turns out to be related to the author's intuition. The distinction between the speaker or narrator and the author of a work does not support the claim that the meaning of a literary work is not what the author intended. For what the speaker or narrator means is what the author has him mean. The function of stage directions in a play, of explanatory comments or notes, and the use of parallel passages in interpretation support this claim. In chapter VI, Juhl demonstrates that even aesthetic considerations proposed by the

antiintuitionists frequently depend on assumptions about the author such that they are in fact evidence of his intuition, Juhl's intuitionists thesis can thus adequately account for the meanings and implications of a work's detail if intending is not mistakenly assimilated to planning by the author.

Chapter VII "Life, Literature and the Implied Author"—is a radical re-examination of the autonomist thesis through discussions of Empson on Housman, Crane on *Gulliver's Travels* Book IV and Booth on Fielding and others in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Juhl shows that if a work expresses certain propositions, then its author is committed to the corresponding beliefs and to their truth. The final chapter addressed to the problem of varying interpretations of a literary work poses great difficulty, to the theorist of intuition. Juhl, however, is wisely tentative and indirect and provides some arguments for the claim that a literary work has one and only one correct interpretation. Since, there can not be logically incompatible readings of a text, it is intelligible to suppose that only one of the possible readings of a work is correct. The inexhaustibility of a work and the variety of interpretations are explained in terms of Hirsch's distinction between *meaning* and *significance*.

In a long appendix, Juhl adds an examination of the doctrine of *verstehen* as

developed by Peter Szondi and argues against the latter that an interpretation of a literary work can in principle be objectively confirmed and hence is not a matter of subjective experience, personal preference, or individual taste. Despite its persuasiveness and logical vigour, Juhl's

book is less likely to silence the anti-intentionalists but will surely provoke them to more forceful rebuttals.

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