Works of Art and Mere Real Things

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Let us consider a painting once described by the Danish wit, Søren Kierkegaard. It was a painting of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. Looking at it, one would have seen something very different from what a painting with that subject would have led one to expect, were one to imagine, for example, what an artist like Poussin or Altdorfer would have painted: troops of people, in various postures of panic, bearing the burdens of their dislocated lives, and in the distance the horrid might of the Egyptian forces bearing down. Here, instead, was a square of red paint, the artist explaining that “The Israelites had already crossed over, and the Egyptians were drowned.” Kierkegaard comments that the result of his life is like that painting. All the spiritual turmoil, the father cursing God on the heath, the rupture with Regina Olsen, the inner search for Christian meaning, the sustained polemics of an agonized soul, meld in the end, as in the echoes of the Marabar Caves, into “a mood, a single color.”

So next to Kierkegaard’s described painting let us place another, exactly like it, this one, let us suppose, by a Danish portraitist who, with immense psychological penetration, has produced a work called “Kierkegaard’s Mood.” And let us, in this vein, imagine a whole set of red squares, one next to the other. Beside these two, and resembling each as much as they resemble one another (exactly), we shall place “Red Square,” a clever bit of Moscow landscape. Our next work is a minimalist exemplar of geometrical art which, as it happens, has the same title, “Red Square.” Now comes “Nirvana.” It is a metaphysical painting based on the artist’s knowledge that the Nirvanic and Samsara orders are identical, and that the Samsara world is fondly called the Red Dust by its deprecators. Now we must have a still-life executed by an embittered disciple of Matisse, called “Red Table Cloth”; we may allow the paint to be somewhat more thinly applied in this case. Our next object is not really an artwork, merely a canvas grounded in red lead, upon which, had he lived to execute it, Giorgione would have painted his unrealized masterwork “Conversazione Sacra.” It is a red surface which, though hardly an artwork, is not without art-historical interest, since Giorgione himself laid the ground on it. Finally, I shall place a surface painted, though not grounded, in red lead: a mere arti-
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fact I exhibit as something whose philosophical interest consists solely in the fact that it is not a work of art, and that its only art-historical interest is the fact that we are considering it at all: it is just a thing, with paint upon it.

This completes my exhibition. The catalogue for it, which is in full color, would be monotonous, since everything illustrated looks the same as everything else, even though the reproductions are of paintings that belong to such diverse genres as historical painting, psychological portraiture, landscape, geometric abstraction, religious art, and still-life. It also contains pictures of something from the workshop of Giorgione, as well as of something that is a mere thing, with no pretense whatsoever to the exalted status of art.

It is what he terms the “rank injustice” in according the class term work of art to most of the displayed items in my exhibit, while withholding it from an object that resembles them in every visible particular, which outrages a visitor, a sullen young artist with egalitarian attitudes, whom I shall call J. Seething with a kind of political rage, J paints up a work that resembles my mere rectangle of red paint and, insisting that his is a work of art, demands that I include it in my show, which I am happy enough to do. It is not one of J’s major efforts, but I hang it nevertheless. It is, I tell him, rather empty, as indeed it is, compared with the narrative richness of “The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea” or the impressive depth of “Nirvana,” not to mention “The Legend of the True Cross” by Piero della Francesca or Giorgione’s “La Tempesta.” Much the same epithet would characterize another of J’s works, what he regards as a piece of sculpture and which consists, as I recall it, in a box of undistinguished carpentry, coated with beige latex paint applied casually with a roller. Yet the painting is not empty in anything like the way that mere expanse of red-painted canvas is, which is not even empty as a blank page might be, for it is not plain that it awaits an inscription, any more than a wall of mine might were I to paint it red. Nor is his sculpture empty in the way a crate would be, after its cargo is taken out or unloaded. For “empty” as applied to his works represents an aesthetic judgment and a critical appraisal, and presupposes that what it applies to is an artwork already, however inscrutable may be the differences between it and mere objects that are logically unacceptable to such predications as a class. His works are literally empty, as are the works in the rest of my show; but literalness is not what I have in mind in saying, in effect, that J’s achievements lack richness.

I ask J what is the title of his new work, and predictably he tells me that “Untitled” will serve as well as anything. This is a title of sorts rather than a mere statement of fact, as it sometimes is when an artist neglects to give his work a title or if we happen not to know what title he gave it or would have given it. I may observe that the mere thing in whose political cause J created his work also lacks a title, but this is by dint of an ontological classification: mere things are unentitled to titles. A title is more than a name; frequently it is a direction for interpretation or reading, which may not always be helpful, as when someone perversely gives the title “The Annunciation” to a painting of some apples. J is somewhat less fantastic than this: his title is directive in at least the sense that the thing to which it is given is meant not to be interpreted. So predictably too, when I ask J what his work is about, I am told that it is about nothing. I am certain this is not a description of its content (chapter two of Being and Nothingness is about nothing, about absence). For that matter, “Nirvana” may be said to be about nothing in the sense that nothing is what it is about, a picture of the void. His work, J points out, is void of picture, less a case of the mimesis of vacuity than the vacuity of mimesis: so he repeats, about nothing. But neither, I point out, is that red expanse in defense of which he painted “Untitled” about anything, but that is because it is a thing, and things, as a class, lack aboutness just because they are things. “Untitled,” by contrast, is an artwork, and artworks are, as the description of my exhibition shows, typically about something. So the absence of content appears to be something rather willed in J’s instance.

Meanwhile, I can only observe that though he has produced a (pretty minimal) artwork, not to be told by naked inspection from a bare red expanse of paint, he has not yet made an artwork out of that bare red expanse. It remains what it always was, a stranger to the community of artworks, even though that community contains so many members indiscernible from it. So it was a nice but pointless gesture on J’s part: he has augmented my little collection of artworks while leaving unbreached the boundaries between them and the world of just things. This puzzles J as it puzzles me. It cannot be simply because J is an artist, for not everything touched by an artist turns to art. Witness Giorgione’s primed canvas, supposing the paint to have been laid on by him: a fence painted by J is only a painted fence. This leaves then only the option, now realized by J, of declaring that contested red expanse a work of art. Why not? Duchamp declared a snowshovel to be one, and it was one; a bollterack to be one, and it was one. I allow that J has much the same right, whereupon he declares the red expanse a work of art, carrying it triumphantly across the boundary as if he had rescued something rare. Now everything in my collection is a work of art, but nothing has been clarified as to what has been achieved. The nature of the boundary is philosophically dark, despite the success of J’s raid.
It is a striking fact that an arrayed example of the sort just constructed, consisting of indiscernible counterparts that may have radically distinct ontological affiliations, may be constructed elsewhere if not everywhere else in philosophy. In the sequel, I shall be as much interested in the principle that allows such examples to be generated as I shall be in the actual examples I will develop. Here, however, it may be useful to cite just one analogous array, if only as a prophylactic against supposing that we are dealing with structures peculiar to the philosophy of art. Here then is one from the philosophy of action, which I enlist not to imply that the philosophy of art is satellite to the philosophy of action, but that parallel structures are discernible in both and, indeed, in every sphere of philosophical analysis. In previous writings I have exploited structural parities between the theory of action and the theory of knowledge, without ever having been tempted to proclaim an identity between cognition and performance. In any case, if I may quote myself, here is an example with which I begin Analytical Philosophy of Action:

In the middle band of six tableaux, on the North wall of the Arena Chapel in Padua, Giotto has narrated in six episodes the missionary period in the life of Christ. In each panel, the dominating Christ-figure is shown with a raised arm. This invariant disposition of his arm notwithstanding, a different kind of action is performed by means of it from scene to scene, and we must read the identity of the action from the context of its execution. Disputing with the elders, the raised arm is admonitory, not to say domineering; at the wedding feast at Cana, it is the raised arm of the prestidigitator who has caused water to become wine; at the baptism it is raised in a sign of acceptance; it commands Lazarus; it blesses the people at the Jerusalem gate; it expels the lepers at the Temple. Since the raised arm is invariably present, these performative differences must be explained through variations in context, and while it may be true that context alone will not constitute the differences and that we must invoke Christ's intentions and purposes, still, we cannot overestimate the extent to which context penetrates purpose. (Cambridge University Press, 1973, p. ix)

Now in the field of action theory, it has proved instructive to ask, in the manner of Wittgenstein, what it is that is left over when, from the fact that you raise your arm, you subtract the fact that your arm goes up. I am convinced that Wittgenstein's favored answer to this para-arithmetic query is "zero," that my raising my arm and my arm going up are identical. As G. E. Anscombe says in Intention: "I do what happens." Aside from other difficulties, it is hard to see how this radical answer might survive the above example, inasmuch as the raised arm not only underdetermines the differences between blessing and admonition but also between an action of some sort, on the one hand, and on the other a mere reflex, a tic or spasm, where the arm rises, as it were, without being raised by its owner, in contrast with a basic action of the sort I am supposing Christ is represented to perform. The difference between a basic action and a mere bodily movement is paralleled in many ways by the differences between an artwork and a mere thing, and the subtractionistic query may be matched with another one here, which asks what is left over when we subtract the red square of canvas from "Red Square." And though it is tempting to say, in a Wittgensteinian echo, that nothing is left over, that "Red Square" just is that red-square of canvas, or, more portentously and more generally, that the artwork just is the material from which it is made, it is difficult to see how this creditable theory can survive an example in which something like a red square of canvas underdetermines the differences between "The Israelites Crossing the Red Sea" and "Kierkegaard's Mood," as well as the philosophically deeper differences between either of them and that red square which was not an artwork but a mere thing—at least until redeemed by J.

Wittgenstein's followers realized, in the sphere of action, that something after all was left over. This yielded a formula that an action would be a movement of the body plus \( x \), which, by parity of structure, would then yield a formula that a work of art is a material object plus \( y \); and the problem in either domain is to resolve in some philosophically respectable way for \( x \) and \( y \) respectively. An early Wittgensteinian solution was this: an action is a bodily movement that is covered by a rule. The solution in question of course left unresolved a distinction between those bodily movements that were sufficiently voluntary for the agents in question to have internalized and to have conformed to a rule—as in signaling, to take a convenient and persuasive example—and those bodily movements that, though outwardly indiscernible from these, are involuntary, as tics and spasms are. Granted that these don't fall under rules because they are not actions, it follows that being an action is a condition for falling under an appropriate rule—and hence falling under a rule cannot explain a distinction it after all presupposes. And, I think, parallel perplexities remain in the parallel theory of art according to which a material object (or artifact) is said to be an artwork when so regarded from the institutional framework of the artworld. For the Institutional Theory of Art leaves unexplained, even if it can account for why such a work as Duchamp's Fountain might have been elevated from a mere thing to an artwork, why that particular urinal should have sustained so impressive a promotion, while other urinals, like it in every obvious respect, should remain in an ontologically degraded category.
It leaves us still with objects otherwise indiscernible, one of which is an artwork and one of which is not.

The Wittgensteinian impulse in the philosophy of action was polemically clear enough. It sought to escape, by collapsing actions onto bodily movements, the dualistic contaminations of traditional theories of action according to which a bodily movement is an action when caused by some interior, which is to say mental event, like a volition or a reason—and a mere bodily movement when it lacks a mental cause. Decryers of the Internal World, conflationists of mentalism with dualism, the Wittgensteinians fled to the externality of institutional life rather than admit the compromising internalities of mental life, when they recognized that radical identification was spurious. That, however, is an issue for a different book. Here, I think, it will suffice only to indicate that theories of what makes the difference between artworks and mere things have at times prevailed which may appear as philosophically unacceptable as mentalism did to the Wittgensteinians—theories to which the Institutional Theory itself, whatever the motivation of its main adherents, is an obvious hardheaded antidote.

This is one such theory, cited merely because it fits so symmetrically with the theories of action the Wittgensteinians repudiated: an artwork is an object correctly called an expression because it is caused by a feeling or an emotion on the part of its maker, and which it in fact expresses. An action and an artwork then would be differentiated by their respective orders of mental causes, and by the further differences between conforming to an intention and expressing a feeling. The theory has difficulties, of course, in differentiating artworks from paradigm cases of things which express feelings but are not artworks—tears and cries and grimaces, for instance—and inasmuch as the mere internal occurrence of a feeling cannot discriminate artworks from sobs, it can be appreciated that an external mark will be sought. But, as our red squares show, there cannot be an external mark either. Since differentiating features seem to be neither internal nor external, it is easy to sympathize with the initial Wittgensteinian response that art must be indefinable and (a later, more considered response) that a definition might be finessed out of institutional factors. But at least we have been able to see that nothing in which indiscernibilities consist can be the basis of a good theory of art—or a good philosophical theory of anything whatever. The consequences of this perhaps prematurely enunciated insight will be met and dealt with as our argument evolves.

Let us consider a somewhat richer specimen of J's oeuvre: last year, inspired by some rather famous theories of art advanced by Plato and by Shakespeare, J exhibited a mirror. The artworld was ready for an event of this order, and the question of whether it was artwork was never provoked, though the question of what enabled the mirror to be one is not without a certain intellectual interest. Strikingly, though a natural metaphor for the theory that art is imitation, this mirror perverts the theory by not being itself an imitation of anything: it is, J insists, with characteristic churlishness, just a mirror—a commonplace mirror. J could have hung a row of mirrors around the walls of the gallery and called the work Galerie des glaces, an arch imitation of the celebrated room at Versailles. But though an imitation in the sense that it happens to use mirrors to imitate mirrors, the fact that there are mirrors in subject and work alike seems incidental to the fact of imitation: in the appropriate sense, a row of broomsticks placed upright at regular intervals about the room could imitate—or "mirror"—the peristyle at Karnac: no need for columns at all. In that case, something could imitate without being a mirror, inversely to J's work, which happens to be a mirror without being an imitation. So the theories that inspired J are repudiated by the work that was supposed to illustrate them.

I am the last one in the world to refuse to honor "Mirror" as an artwork, my concern being only to investigate how it acquired this status. One thing, however, is plain, which is that though a mirror can be an artwork, its being one, in this instance, has evidently very little to do with its being a mirror, and the theory that "art is a mirror held up to nature" is curiously irrelevant to the status of this mirror as an artwork, since its being a mirror seems so little relevant to its status. J could have exhibited a breadbasket instead, for all that the theory helps, and the question why this breadbasket is a work of art and the one on my breakfast table is not, may be precisely matched by the question of why his mirror is an artwork and the one in the purse of Fraya Feldman—she whose gallery is fortunate enough to be the showplace for J's work—is not one. The richness of "Mirror" lay in the fact that we believed it connected with a theory which it apparently has nothing to do with, and this work seems, in consequence, little different in kind from the two expanses of red paint J managed to get classed as artworks.

I am not trying to defend myself against J: I just want to know wherein lies the logic of such feats. It would be laughable were J to try to get me to accept a breadbasket as a mirror. Why then is he so easily able to get me to accept a mirror as an artwork? What kind of predicate anyway is "an artwork"? Perhaps we should go back to a more tractable class of artworks, the very ones J's theory invoked, things that
are artworks because they are mirrors, rather than artworks in spite of being mirrors, as J’s appears to be. For that theory too maintained a distinction between artworks and mere things, and may help us accordingly in understanding a boundary that our examples cross without erasing.

Whether or not they reflect their own considered theories, Plato and Shakespeare advanced, through the voices of Socrates and Hamlet, the theory that art is a mirror of reality. From this common metaphor, however, they drew conflicting assessments of the cognitive and, I suppose, the ontological status of art. We cannot easily tell, of course, if Socrates is being characteristically ironical, invoking mirrors as a sly counterinstance to rebut a theory that mirrors illustrate, since he must have recognized as well as the next man that mirror images of real things are not artworks as such. The theory would have been that art is an imitation of reality, and imitation itself was characterized merely in terms of duplicating an antecedent reality; if nothing more were asked of an artwork than this, there would be no criterion for distinguishing mirror images, which by common consent are not always artworks, from more routine instances of mimesis; and a further condition must be sought. At best we would have a necessary condition for artlessness. And Socrates may have been suggesting that if exact mimesis is, after all, the dominating aim of artists, as it appeared increasingly and, to his mind, dangerously to have been becoming in the art-world of his time, then, if that is all that is wanted—an exact copy—we may achieve this far more simply than the current methods of artistic education permitted, by the mere device of holding up a mirror to the world: “You would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror.” This may have been just the same sort of effort at defeating a definition that prompted Diogenes to offer a plucked chicken as a counterinstance to the definition of a man as a featherless biped, and, as an act of artistic criticism, it foreshadowed a parallel move of Picasso’s, who once pasted the label from a bottle of Suez onto a drawing of a bottle, implying that there was little point in approximating to a reality by arduous academic exercise when we could just coopt fragments of reality and incorporate them in our works, immediately achieving what the best academic hand could only aspire to. Who needs, and what can be the point and purpose of having, duplicates of a reality we already have before us? Who needs detached images of the sun, the stars, and the rest, when we can see these things already, and since nothing appears in the mirror which is not already there in the world to be seen without it? What could be achieved by detaching appearances from the world and representing them in a reflecting surface—this escaped Socrates’ comprehension. And if all that mimesis entailed was an idle duplication of looks, his puzzlement about the status of art as so characterized was perfectly justified.

But even mirrors, whatever relationship there may be between them and mimeses as a class, have some remarkable cognitive properties to which Socrates was curiously insensitive, since there are things we may see in them we cannot see without them, namely ourselves. And fixing upon this asymmetry of mirror images, Hamlet made a far deeper use of the metaphor: mirrors and then, by generalization, artworks, rather than giving us back what we already can know without benefit of them, serve instead as instruments of self-revelation. This implies a complex epistemology worth dwelling upon for a moment.

Consider, to begin with, Narcissus, with whom Leon Battista Alberti believed, upon whatever authority, that the ancients believed the practice of artistic representation began. If so, Socrates reflected the ideas of his time. Though it is true that Socrates fell in love with himself, he did not at first know that it was himself with whom he had fallen in love. What he first fell in love with was his own image, thrown back at him from the smooth surface of a crystal spring—a natural mirror—which he initially believed to be a marvelous, attractive boy looking up at him out of the depths. It would be fascinating to speculate how he came to infer that it was his own image, and hence himself, that was so obsessively attractive: it would have been possible, after all, to construe the looking-glass world as an alternative impenetrable reality into which we could only see (like the world of moving pictures), in which case the failure to consummate love, of which Narcissus died, would have been explained by him with reference to something other than our own anatomical limitations. As it was, he died of self-knowledge, just as Tiresias predicted he would, an object lesson in epistemological suicide to be taken seriously by those who suppose “know thyself,” Socrates’ celebrated cognitive imperative, can be pursued with impunity. Socrates would have scorned such a consideration, saying that it is but an instance of the infatuation with appearances of just the sort his aversion to mirror images—and mimeses generally—was intended to impugn: Narcissus’ self-cathexis, if anything, would be an object lesson of that (though it is curious that Narcissus did not fall in love with the sound of his own voice, that having been the sorry infatuation of Echo).

This, however, may merely reflect a shallow comprehension of the
recognition that Hamlet certainly has in mind when, through the Death of Gonzago he seeks to catch the conscience of the King. Claudius' recognitions are even more complex than Narcissus', since he is perhaps the only member of the audience who realizes that the play is a mirror, replicating specific historical occurrences that are his own acts. So he knows that his actions are objects in the consciousness of an Other—Hamlet himself—and at the critical moment perceives that Hamlet knows that Claudius knows that Hamlet knows the shameful truths. This is a marvelous contrapuntal consciousness, but for just this reason it is difficult to generalize it into a good theory even of mimetic art. Hamlet's image of a play as a mirror is apt in context, since it is intended to present to the King a reflection of his full moral stature. But then the King stands to the play in a very different relationship from that in which sundry members of the audience do, who may see it as an imitation of an action if they have read Aristotle, or may see it as having generalized reference to the mobility of feminine affection and the deviousness of political usurpation, or may merely accept it as a distraction for the courtiers. Of course any of us might see himself reflected in a work of art, and so discover something about himself, though only in a stretched sense was that archaic torso of Apollo, of which Rilke wrote so stunningly, the mirror image of the poet who resolved to change his life on the basis of it: I suppose he saw his softness reflected in the statue's strength: “da ist kein Steele,/die dich nicht sieht.” And a wanton may see her degradation in a painting of the Virgin. Still, we do not need art for this order of self-consciousness, as Sartre's own analyses show. Shallow or not, then, it is the duplicative function of mirrors, hence of artworks, as imitations to which we must return. It would, to be sure, have required an immense metaphysical adjustment for Plato to have accommodated how we appear into the structure of what we are, and in any case it is striking that both Plato and Shakespeare (in his final statement) should put art, appearances, mirror images, and dreams on the lowest ontological rung: “an insubstantial pageant fading.”

Plato did not precisely propose that art was mimesis, but that mimetic art was pernicious, though in a way difficult to grasp without at the same time grasping the complex metaphysical structures that compose the core of Platonic theory. To begin with, art of this sort stands at a certain invidious remove from reality, by which Plato meant primarily the reality of what he termed forms. Only forms are ultimately real, since impervious to alteration: things may come and go, but the forms these things exemplify do not come or go—they gain and
lose exemplifications, to be sure, but they themselves exist independently of these. Thus the form of the Bed must be distinguished from the particular beds, wrought by carpenters, which participate in this common form: these owe their bedness, as it were, to this participation, and are less real than the forms they exemplify. Imitations of beds do not even exemplify bedness: they merely appear to do so and, as appearances of appearances, are two degrees removed from reality and can claim in consequence only the most inferior ontological status. But because the productions of artists charm the souls of art lovers with what are little better than shadows of shadows, they divert attention not merely away from the world of common things but from the deeper realm of forms through which the world of common things alone is intelligible. As philosophy has precisely the aim of drawing attention to this higher reality, and art the consequence of drawing it away, art and philosophy are antithetical, which then constitutes a second indictment of art when one realizes the importance, moral as well as intellectual, assigned to philosophy by Plato. Finally, speaking as a precocious therapist as well as a true philistine, Plato insinuates that mimetic art is a sort of perversion—a substitute, deflected, compensatory activity, engaged in by those who are impotent to be what as a pis aller they merely imitate. And who, Plato asks, would choose the appearance of the thing over the thing itself; who would settle for a picture of someone he could have, as it were, in the flesh; or would pretend to be something in preference to being the thing as such? Those who can, do, we might interpret him as having maintained; those who can’t, imitate.

It is possible to read the entire history of subsequent art as a response to this triple indictment, to imagine that artists have been bent upon some kind of ontological promotion, which means, of course, overcoming the distance between art and reality, and moving up a notch in the scale of being. The American artist Rauschenberg once said, “Painting relates to both art and life (I try to work in that gap between the two).” Perhaps it is not altogether an accident that Rauschenberg should have exhibited a bed, as though, like philosophy according to Whitehead, art were but a collection of footnotes to Plato: a bed, to be sure, which nobody could sleep in, since it was attached upright to a wall and smeared with paint. A somewhat closer approximation to what a carpenter might have turned out was made at about the same time by Claes Oldenburg—a hideous plastic confection on which it would have been a horror to sleep, but not bad for an artist if the gap between him and the carpenter is as vast as Plato supposed it was. It would remain for our artist J to have gone the full distance, and to have exhibited his own bed as a work of art, without having to give it that bit of vestigial paint Rauschenberg superstitiously dripped over his bed, perhaps to make it plain that it was still an artwork. J says his bed is not an imitation of anything: it is a bed. No doubt it was made by a carpenter, but though the carpenter made the bed, J made the artwork, and inasmuch as beds exactly like it are beds but not artworks, standing-abreast of the carpenter could not in any case be considered a philosophical success, whatever success J's Bed may be supposed to have as an artwork.

Perhaps then we should reconsider the history of art: if there still is a gap, and if, moreover, closing it after the manner of J merely opens up another gap between his artworks and the real things that exactly resemble them, the gap itself may be more interesting than what happens to lie on either side of it. Suppose that we look at the gap between imitations and reality to see what sort of gap it is, and then endeavor to discover what it might have in common with the gap between art and life which contemporary artists seem so bent on exploiting; and then perhaps we can get a better understanding of art and of reality at once. So let us return to the most elementary consideration of art as imitation, as a duplication of an ulterior reality, standing to it even in the way a mirror image stands to a thing reflected, abstracted from Shakespearean complications due to consciousness and Platonic considerations having to do with metaphysics. My motive for scrutinizing this ancient theory is that the gap between imitation and reality may be a more perspicuous way of appreciating the gap between art and life. It would be an impressive strategy if both turned out to exemplify the same sort of gap.

It is widely appreciated that resemblance, even exact resemblance between pairs of things, does not make one an imitation of the other: all the exemplars in my exhibition of red expanses are required, by the logic of the principle they were regimented to exemplify, to resemble one another; but each, so far as I have described them, is independent of the other, and none imitates any other (though I could add a painting of the mere red square, exactly like its subject, which it imitates perfectly, or add some copies of the acknowledged artworks in the original example). Similarly, J’s bed resembles any old bed, but is an imitation of none: it is, he patiently explains, really just a bed, not an imitation of one, say of the sort Van Gogh depicted in one of his room-scapes. Imitations contrast with reality, but I am hardly in position to use in the analysis of imitation one of the terms it is my object to clarify. Still “that it is not real” must evidently contribute to the pleasure men derive, according to a stunning piece of psychology by Aristotle, from
imitative representations. "The sight of certain things gives us pain," Aristotle writes in the Poetics, "but we enjoy looking at the most exact imitations of them, whether the forms of animals which we greatly despise or of corpses."

The knowledge that it is an imitation must then be presupposed by the pleasure in question, or, correlatively, the knowledge that it is not real. So the pleasure in question has a certain cognitive dimension, not unlike a great many even of the most intense pleasures. Part of sexual pleasure, surely, is the belief that one is having it with the right partner or at least the right sort of partner, and it is not clear that the pleasure would survive recognition that the beliefs taken for true are false. Similarly, I should think, there are beliefs presupposed by the pleasure one derives from eating certain things, namely that they are the sorts of things one believes one is eating: the food may turn to ashes in one's mouth the moment one discovers the belief to be false, say that it is pork if one is an Orthodox Jew, or beef, if one is a practicing Hindu, or human if one is like most of us (however good we might in fact taste). It is not required that we should be able to taste the difference for there to be a difference, since the pleasure in eating is commonly more complete, at least in humans, than the pleasures in tasting and, as Goodman has pointed out in a parallel case, knowledge that it is different may in the end make a difference in the way something tastes. Or, to the degree that it does not, the difference between the two may after all not be something one sufficiently cares about for the relevant beliefs to figure in the background of one's pleasure.

To be sure, beef is not imitation pork—nor are males imitation females, to revert to the sexual case in which one believes oneself involved with one sort of partner when in fact it is of another sort altogether—and in these cases it is merely that the beliefs are false, and of taking something for something else. I am not sure that what divides the imitation from the real is anything like what divides male from female or pork from beef, in part because I am not certain what sort of differentiating property reality itself will turn out to be. But it is striking that the source of pleasure, in the case of imitations, must be understood as other than real, whatever this is to mean, and the concept is accordingly presupposed available to whomever takes pleasure of this order. Possibly children take less pleasure in imitations than adults do, because they have not yet developed a sense of reality—or acquired the concept of reality—and though imitations may indeed give them pleasure, this will not be because they are imitations, as Aristotle's observation requires. You may give considerable pleasure to a gullible person by imitating that person's long-lost son, by pretending to be that son—but the person's pleasure could hardly be supposed to survive the discovery that you are an imitation son; and the parent's pleasure, accordingly, would be just the inverse of the pleasure Aristotle describes, where you must know that it is an imitation and where its being an imitation is part of the explanation of your taking pleasure in it. Thus a person may take pleasure in what he believes is an imitation of his son, which would be a deeply transformed pleasure upon the discovery—the "recognition" as Aristotle would term it—that what one took to be an imitation was one's real son after all. The pleasures taken in imitations are, accordingly, something of the same order as the pleasures one takes in fantasies, where it is plain to the fantasist that it is a fantasy he is enjoying and that he is not deceived in believing that it is the real thing. Fantasists sometimes become haunted by guilt, thinking that if their fantasies are morbid or sadistic, then they must be that, whereas in truth most fantasists would be horrified at the correspondent realities, as we are by what Aristotle speaks of as the animals we most despise, whose effigies please us the more exact they are. There is no inference that "deep down" we really love those animals. Part of the pleasure surely is due to the knowledge that it is not really happening, and not because we learn from the imitation, as Aristotle goes on to say, seeming to give an explanation but actually changing the subject.

This sort of pleasure, then, is available only to those who have a concept of reality which contrasts with fantasy—or imitation—and who realize that it would be a different sort of pleasure altogether were we to try to realize our fantasies. Or if there is no difference in the pleasures, the first cannot be explained as pleasure taken from fantasies, since the difference between fantasy and fact evidently makes no difference at the hedonic level: it is a fantasy that causes the pleasure, but not because it is a fantasy. So knowledge about the explanation of the pleasure, as well as a knowledge of the identity of the source of the pleasure, must be presupposed as well. And neither of these is available if the concept of the difference between reality and fantasy—or imitation—is either not yet formed, as in the case of a child, or is inoperative, as in the case of a madman, according to a criterion of Plato, who proposes that the madman really lives the pleasures most of us only dream. We are dealing with a different sort of false belief, then, than the belief that something is beef when it is really pork, and learning the difference between appearance and reality seems to be learning of a different and somehow more philosophical order than learning the difference between pork and beef, or between male and female, and we ought to make some provisional effort to clarify it, all the more so if it resembles learning the difference between an artwork and a real thing. In any
case the art lover is not like Plato’s cavedweller, who cannot mark a difference between reality and appearance: the art lover’s pleasure is exactly based upon a difference he is logically required to be able to mark.

Let us return to Narcissus, who falls in love with what he believes he sees in the water: a comely boy. It would at that point have been possible for Narcissus to believe that there are two orders of boys, those who live in water and those who, like himself, live in the air. On the basis of such a belief, he might generate a complex anthropology for waterpeople, discovering by sustained observation that they have forms and ways remarkably counterpart to our own, though curiously anisotropic and insusceptible to wounds: spears driven through waterboys draw no blood. And they are to Narcissus maddeningly unembraceable. However it is that Narcissus may have hit upon the idea of a reflection, it immeasurably simplified anthropology, physiology, and hydrology at small cost to optics. Reflection-boys, he proposes, are not boys but only simulacra of boys, and Narcissus spontaneously has discovered a predicate (“reflection”) which, when attached to a noun, fails to yield the sorts of inferences that predicates normally attached to nouns yield—fat boys are boys, lean boys are boys, but reflection-boys are not boys. The world containing as it does large classes of such counterparts, sooner or later each of us must master a certain number of such predicates. Thus a child reports to his mother that there was a cat in his room during the night and that it wanted to eat him. His mother, surprisingly enough considering her usual protectiveness, does not go on a cat hunt, but instructs the boy in the concept of a dream: a dream-cat is not a cat.

It is difficult not to admire the extreme theoretical effort which must have gone into the invention of such predicates. There are tribes of people whose members believe that the experiences had in dreaming really occurred, explaining away the obvious incoherences this way: during sleep you sleep your body for a time, occupying another, in which you have in fact the experiences we would say were not had but dreamed. The distortions widely appreciated as characteristic of dreams are explained—fortunately—as due to the rigors of bodily interchange. I say “fortunately” because the alternative possibility would remain of referring the distortions to the world, and believing then that reality is immensely more intricate than life in our own humdrum bodies would lead us to suppose, full of mad metamorphoses and transmogrifications, and in which what we merely wish for can be fulfilled in the flesh. Accounting for distortions as they do, by contrast, enables these tribes to have a better chance at projecting a plausible science than would be possible if they had to integrate what they dream with what they routinely observe: there hardly could be any laws of nature for them. “Is a dream,” like “is a reflection” or “is an echo,” serves as a shock absorber to the system of beliefs that conservatively defines a world, extruding into a quite different and ontological space entities which, if admitted into the world, would immensely complicate that system. To be sure, even when we are equipped with such concepts, it is not always easy to apply them in specific instances, particularly when the instances so resemble what would be the counterparts in the real world that nothing internal to the first would enable one to classify it properly.

Such would have been the case, for instance, with those poor voyagers caused to believe by Prospero’s magic that there was a fire on their ship and a storm at sea: such disasters after all do occur, and it would have been virtual insanity in the midst of the turbulence experienced to propose that it was hallucination. In fact, when Prospero claims to have brought it about by magic, it was more plausible to regard him as mad, and it is the epistemic function of the rather rapid allegory in Act IV of The Tempest to demonstrate to Ferdinand that he, Prospero, indeed has such powers: “I must / Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple / Some vanities of mine art.” For how otherwise would one believe him, without sacrificing one’s own confidence in distinguishing fact from fancy? The shipwreck, then, has no more ontological weight than “the baseless fabric of this vision,” and all the beliefs based upon counteracting its reality must be revised and the true history of recent events recovered from the counterfactual history erected upon illusion. Think how hard it would be to explain the intact ship, once encountered, if one continued to believe in the fire at sea and the shipwreck. And though the case is complicated by the concept of magic—its nearly of the same logical order as “dream” and “reflection”—there is enough strength in the issue to have given rise to the entire problem of skepticism in philosophy. For the predicates of concern to us, entailing that the thing to which they apply is a false thing—in the sense that a false friend is not a friend or a false pregnancy not a pregnancy—leave it an open possibility that we may, since to outward appearances a false x sufficiently resembles an x to be taken for x, take a false x for an x, as Descartes supposed we might always take a dream world to be the real world; and inasmuch as an imitation x is also a false x, mimetic art, in Plato’s suspicious mind, presented the permanent possibility of illusion. Beliefs about false things are not, of course, necessarily false beliefs, and we might note, since it is an ambiguity to which we shall have occasion to return, that a false belief is a belief, as a false sentence is a sentence.
In any case, and questions of illusion to one side, it would have been this stigma of descriptive falsity which must have concerned Plato in connection with mimetic works of art, though it evidently did not occur to him that the concept of a work of art serves pretty much the same function of extruding the objects it applies to from the real, no matter whether, in addition, the object in question happens to be an imitation, almost as if it had not occurred to Plato that there are other ways than being imitations through which things might be disqualified as unreal.

Consider the role of such an expression as “I did not mean it” applied to an action. It serves precisely to withdraw the action in question from the framework of assessments and responses that an outwardly similar action would be subject to if meant. So with “It was only a joke” or “It was just a game” or “It was only in play” or, finally, “It is an artwork.” But what then are we to say of J’s bed which, though an artwork, exactly resembles an ordinary bed because it is one? J tells us to go ahead, lie down on it, it is perfectly all right to do so, etc. Gingerly we comply: gingerly, because we are pretty sure of what to do with beds, radically unsure about what to do with artworks that happen to be beds. For with ordinary beds such reassurances would be puzzling. Whatever the case, there are close conceptual ties between games, magic, dreams, and art, all of which fall outside the world and stand at just the same kind of distance from it which we are trying to analyze. To be sure, one will have gone only a certain way in the understanding of imitation in characterizing it this way, for in addition to being a false thing, imitations have a more important function of representing real ones. But the concept of representation itself has an ambiguity it would be well to canvass before proceeding further.

The two senses of representation I wish particularly to mark emerge in Nietzsche’s discussion of the birth of tragedy out of what he speculated were first and originally Dionysian rites. It may be allowed that the identification of something as religious excludes it from at least the routine realities—holy water is not just water, however, indiscernible a sample of it may be from commonplace water—and there is accordingly some logical parallel to be drawn between the boundary of some sacred precinct (the Grove of Dionysus, say) and the precinct within which what happens is officially to be classed as art. I shall return to the parallels directly, but for the moment let us just consider Nietzsche’s theory. We must first recall that the Dionysian rites were orgiastic occasions, the celebrants working themselves up, through intoxication and sexual games, to a state of frenzy largely associated with Dionysus. “In nearly every case,” Nietzsche writes in The Birth of Tragedy, “these festivals centered in extravagant sexual licentiousness . . . the most horrible savage instincts were released, including even that horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty which has always seemed to me to be the real witches brew.” The effort, in brief, was to stun the rational faculties and the moral inhibitions, to break down the boundaries between selves, until, at the climax of the moment, the god himself made himself present to his celebrants. Each time he was believed literally to be present, and this is the first sense of representation: re-presentation. However, and over whatever interval of time it took place, this ritual was replaced by its own symbolic enactment, which was tragic drama. The celebrants—who came in time to be the choros—did not so much engage in the rites as imitate the dancing, and so on, as a kind of ballet. As before, at the climax of the ritual, not so much Dionysus himself as someone representing him made an appearance, and indeed it is Nietzsche’s thought that the tragic hero was an evolution out of this early surrogate epiphany. This is the second sense of representation, then: a representation is something that stands in the place of something else, as our representatives in Congress stand proxy for ourselves.

The difference, of course, is immense between the mystical appearance to a kind of group-soul of a genuine god and the symbolic representation to what in effect is a kind of audience of someone merely imitating the god in question. But my interests are less historical, or even religio-psychological, than they are conceptual, and what impresses me is this, that the two senses of representation correspond quite closely to two senses of appearance, according to the first of which the thing itself appears, say as when the Evening Star appears in the sky, and appears in such a way that it would be ridiculous to say it is “only the appearance” of the Evening Star and not the Evening Star itself; and according to the second of which we indeed contrast appearance with reality, with Plato perhaps, and say what you took to be the Sun was “only an appearance,” perhaps a solar effigy, a bit of bright light. Dionysus is believed to have appeared to the celebrants in the first sense of appearance, and if any of them believed it was “only an appearance” they would feel that the ritual had not worked. Dionysus appears in the second sense of the term in the tragic enactments in which the rituals are put at a certain distance in the hellenic transfiguration. If someone believed it was a god appearing, he would be told that it was only an appearance (and not the real thing); and if the first person were right, the
second one would have to feel that some wild violation of theatrical propriety had occurred, gods themselves having no business in the theater.

I think this ambiguity runs very deep indeed, and that it is not confined to the example from which we have derived it. Surely something like the first sense of representation or appearance must have been widely connected with the concept of art, and perhaps accounts for the magicality often associated with art. The artist had the power of making a given reality present again in an alien medium, a god or a king in stone: the crucifixion in an effigy true believers would have regarded as the event itself, made miraculously present again, as though it had a complex historical identity and could happen—the same event—at various times and places, roughly perhaps in the way in which the god Krishna was believed capable of simultaneously making love to countless cowgirls in the familiar legend. How, save against the background of some such belief, are we to account for the urgency of iconoclasm or the interdiction against graven images? Plato supposed the forms were present in their appearances, so the latter had at least a degraded degree of reality; and then he contrasted appearances with reality, exploiting, as it were, both sides of the ambiguity. In any case, when something stops being a re-presentation of the crucifixion, but merely stands as what we might term a crucifixion-representation—a mere picture—the congregation that addresses it has become an audience rather than coparticipants in a piece of mystical history, and the walls of the church are half-transformed into the walls of a gallery, close architectural kin to the walls of the theater, which were architectural transforms, if Nietzsche is right, out of the boundaries of the sacred precincts.

The extremely ancient theory that a representation embodies what, on a more modern theory, it merely stands for, is perhaps grammatically evidenced by the fact that we continue to speak of the content of a story—or of a picture—so that something is a picture of Marx or the story of O in a way that is grammatically of a piece with something's being a bottle of beer or a kettle of fish, where the “of” marks what grammarians speak of as a deep prepositional phrase. It might appear, thus, that the two are of different forms through the fact that the one—say the story of O—admits a genitive form (O's story) whereas nothing counts as the beer's bottle (you drink a bottle of beer but you don't drink the bottle). But this, I think, is illusory. For “O's story” is ambiguous: it can indeed be that tale audique concerned with the sexual degradation of that young woman. But it could just be one of those stories O tells: just as "picture of the Duke of Wellington" could indeed be that portrait of the Iron Duke by Goya, but it could also be any picture in the Duke's collection, perhaps that very picture, in which case it would be the Duke's picture of the Duke, where “of the Duke” is a predicate that identifies which among the Duke's paintings we are referring to: what Goodman would use hyphens for to form the predicate “Duke-of-Wellington-picture.”

If it is possible to speculate that mimetic representations evolved out of what were earlier believed to have been representations in that earlier sense, namely re-presentations of the thing itself, then, to the extent that it was possible to believe, in that earlier case, that one was in the presence of the thing itself, it was possible to misbelieve, in connection with mimetic representations, that one was in the presence of the thing itself, assuming (doubtless contrary to historical fact) the two representations to resemble one another and hence, in the latter case, to resemble what would have been taken as the real thing. For nothing in the appearance need have undergone a change, only one's conception of the relationship in which the appearances stood to the reality: in the one case the relation was that of identity—in seeing the appearance one was seeing the thing—and in the other the relation was that of designation, a gap having opened up, so to speak, between the reality and its representations, comparable to, if not indeed the same as the gap that is perceived to separate language from reality when the former is understood in its representational, or descriptive, capacity.

Though I shall return and return to this dual conception of representation, for the moment it is primarily the mimetic form that concerns me. As soon as it is appreciated that something is a representation which, by prevailing criteria of similarity, must be supposed sufficiently resemblant to reality to be considered mimetic of it, the possibility opens up that mistakes of a special order are possible: one can mistake a reality for its own imitation or, more likely one can mistake an imitation for its designated reality, and hence take toward what is presented the attitudes and expectations appropriate only to its counterpart on a different ontological plane. So artists committed to the program of rhimesis must take precautions of a special sort in order to abort these inverse errors. And this must be one of the functions of the theater where what is witnessed on the stage is put at a distance, and is excluded by convention from the framework of beliefs the precisely resemblant thing would fall under were it taken for real.

Aestheticians have thought to find some utility in the concept of psychic distance, a special insulation that a transformation
of attitude puts between us and the object of our attentions, and which is meant to contrast with what is designated the practical attitude. The basis for the distinction is to be found in Kant’s Critique of Judgment, where it sounds, and perhaps is meant to sound, as if there are two distinct attitudes that can be taken toward any object whatsoever, so that the difference in the end between art and reality is less a difference in kinds of things than in kinds of attitudes, and hence not a matter of what we relate to but how we relate to it. There is clearly something to be said for this view when the objects in question are not to begin with works of art, but are just things that have a role to play in the network of expediences that define the practical world. It is always possible to suspend practicality, to stand back and assume a detached view of the object, see its shapes and colors, enjoy and admire it for what it is, subtracting all considerations of utility. But since it is an attitude of contemplative detachment that may be adopted toward just anything, however unlikely (and think of the way tools fall out of the Zeugganzes of practical labor and become elevated into objects of aesthetic contemplation), it is possible to see the whole world across aesthetic distance, as a spectacle, a comedy, or whatever. But for just this reason we cannot explicate the connection between artworks and reality on the basis of this distinction, which is at right angles to it.

My own view incidentally is that there would be cases in which it would be wrong or inhuman to take an aesthetic attitude, to put at psychical distance certain realities—to see a riot, for instance, in which police are clubbing demonstrators, as a kind of ballet, or to see the bombs exploding like mystical chrysanthemums from the plane they have been dropped from. The question instead must arise as to what one should do. For parallel reasons, I think, there are things it would be almost immoral to represent in art, precisely because they are then put at a distance which is exactly wrong from a moral perspective. Tom Stoppard once said that if you see an injustice taking place outside your window, the least useful thing you can do is to write a play about it. I would go further, suggesting that there is something wrong in writing plays about that sort of injustice in which we have an obligation to intervene, since it puts the audience at just the sort of distance the concept of psychic distance means to describe: something like this has been offered as a criticism of the photographs of Diane Arbus. This, to be sure, is to admit that there is something to the notion of psychic distance, save that it will not help us with framing the distinction we want, though perhaps it might be suggested that an artwork is an object toward which only an aesthetic and never a practical attitude is appropriate. But this is at odds with the fact that art has often had useful roles to play as art, didactic, edificational, purgative, or whatever, and the theory thus presupposes a degree of detachment available only in special periods of art history. It certainly was no aim of the art of the high Baroque to be perceived disinterestedly: its aim was to change men’s souls. For this reason, then, I rather applaud the polemic of George Dickie, who contests what he speaks of as “the myth of psychic distance” and says that what prevents us from attempting to intervene in actions we see on a stage is not due to some mysterious sort of attitude, but to the fact that we know how to look at a play: we have mastered the conventions of the theater. For knowing that it is taking place in a theater is enough to assure us that “it is not really happening.”

The conventional perimeters of the theater serve, then, a function whose analogue might be that of quotation marks, where these serve to dislocate whatever is contained within them from ordinary conversational discourse, neutralizing the contents with regard to the attitudes that would be appropriate to the same sentence were it asserted, for example, rather than merely mentioned. And the quoter has no responsibility for the words he speaks or writes—they are not his words in the act of quotation (though he may of course quote himself, which is a different order of linguistic act from repeating his words). Indeed, parallel features may be found throughout the domain of art: picture frames or display cases, like stages, are sufficient to inform the person privy to the conventions they imply, that he is not to respond to what they mark off as though it were real; and artists will exploit them to just that end and violate them only when it is their intention to cause illusions or to create a sense of continuity between art and life, as in the case of the painting of the entombment of Saint Petrinella by Guercino, where the lower edge of the painting is coincident with the actual edge of the tomb of Saint Petrinella herself, above which the painting was originally displayed.

No doubt the concept of mimesis shades off into the project of creating illusions, and it is the danger of this possibility which figures in part in Plato’s anxiety about mimetic art; but mimesis itself, providing that the conventions of dislocation are clear to the audience, in fact inhibits just those beliefs that would be activated without those conventions. But then it is precisely the confidence that the conventions are understood which enables the mimetic artist to carry mimesis to its extreme point, to make whatever is to appear within the relevant brackets as much like what would be encountered in reality as he can manage. And his major problem might be phrased thus: to make whatever is so bracketed sufficiently like reality that spontaneous identification of what is being imitated is assured, the brackets themselves guaranteeing
that no one will take the result for reality itself. Of course, it is always possible for the project to misfire; we can imagine one actor really stabbing another, and when the other actors take their bow, the corpse may remain supine on the proscenium, blood pooling around him, the audience applauding innocently, thinking this a striking conceit and an exercise of realism, a device for extending the illusion past the curtain fall in a way more or less of a piece with Guercino’s conceit in the painting just described. The brackets are very powerful inhibitors of belief.

This sort of perversion apart, though, it is safe to say that the greater the degree of realism intended, the greater the need for external indicators that it is art and not reality, these becoming increasingly necessary as the work itself is decreasingly realistic. Recall the celebrated broadcast of Orson Welles in the 1930s, when the radio audience genuinely believed the earth was being invaded by Martians, there being no easy way for anyone listening to know that it was simulation and not fact (on television he could have had a message printed at the bottom of the screen, but nothing like this was possible in radio broadcasting, for we cannot hear things at once in a way in which we can see two things at once). When one takes theater into the streets, one has to count on making it very plain indeed that these are actors playing roles, not real people doing real things: hence the need for such devices as masks, special costumes, makeup, characteristic intonations, and the like. In realistic plays, realistic costumes enhance the artistic illusion, but in street-plays they would confuse attitudes on the part of spectators, who are uncertain whether they are witnesses or audiences. Much the same considerations point to the importance of uniforms or special items of clothing. A doctor I know jogs to his train every morning and, because he wears ordinary clothes and carries a medical bag, is invariably offered rides; this would not occur were he in jogger’s garb—joggers themselves not running to anything, merely running—but then the medical bag would have countered the clothing. If a man stands in the middle of 114th Street and makes elephant cries or barks stunningly like a dog, he would be considered mad, whereas on the stage nothing of the sort would be believed about him, for we would know that he is imitating animals and not believing that he is one, or whatever we suppose him to believe about himself when he barks on 114th Street. So I do not think we can exaggerate the philosophical role of these nonmimetic features of art (to use Meyer Shapiro’s expression) in view of the fact that it is they which make mimetic art a possibility.

Let us now, continuing to think in terms of Nietzsche’s historical speculation regarding theatrical history, suppose that by the time of Euripides, who was the villain in Nietzsche’s account, charged with having destroyed tragedy through reason, the conventions of the theater were sufficiently internalized by the Athenian audiences that he could embark on a program of purification, eliminating from his dramas anything whose counterpart was not to be found in life. “Nothing was beautiful which was not rational” Nietzsche supposes him to have believed, executing in his dramatic works a program of rationality Nietzsche associates with Socrates. Thus, if he does not quite eliminate the chorus, he renders it pretty vestigial, inasmuch as choruses would be mimenetically unconvincing, none of us in actual life enacting our destinies in the presence of a noisy anonymous set of kibbitziers. Of course the chorus has a cognitive function in the tragedies: it was part of its function to know what the hero was thinking, for example, and through the chorus this information was transmitted to the audience, who then could better understand what was going on. This informative function was crucial, the question only being how to perform it through “natural” avenues, and it would be this that is the role of the confidant—the lieutenant or the personal maid—to whom the hero and heroine can in a wholly credible way reveal their innermost fears and ambitions. For similar reasons, the heroes and heroines had to be cut down to size, made more like you and me, so that we could without special effort assimilate their conduct to the beliefs and practices through which we rationalize one another’s behavior, and assign them motives we could similarly internalize and recognize as counterparted in our own lives. The old heroes were too cosmic, their motives too exalted, too remote from any that might enter into the practical syllogisms ordinary persons can internalize. So they were replaced with types we can understand: housewives, jealous husbands, difficult adolescents, and the like, and the dramatic personae of intelligible tragedies are accordingly banalized. This is what Nietzsche speaks of as Aesthetic Socratization. Of course, these ordinary persons are thrust by Euripides into the most unordinary situations, which almost test the limits of moral reason. But there is little doubt that a certain mysteriousness is sacrificed and, with this, something essential to art, in Nietzsche’s view, is expunged in the interests of rationality—a mysteriousness he supposed in his own time to be reintroduced into art through the mythic content of Wagnerian opera; it is not art unless it defies rational explanation, and unless its meaning somehow escapes us.

So in the end Euripides achieved an artistic surface comprehensible in terms of the categories of ordinary life. Then indeed art is imitation
in the sense that it resembles what is possible, but though this may indeed be Socraticism in a sense, it immediately encounters the problem posed by Socrates in Book Ten of the Republic: what is the point of having in art something which so resembles life that no difference between art and life can be marked in terms of internal content? What is the need or good of a duplication of what we already have? Who requires a world just like this world, Nelson Goodman asks centuries later, adding in his characteristically snappy way that “one of the damned things is enough.” A map, it may be said, is a kind of duplicate by means of which we can find our way about a certain reality but, as Lewis Carroll made plain, a map cannot be a duplicate of the country, or to the degree that we are lost in the one we are lost in the other. Moreover, the idea here is that life itself is supposed to be something like a map for art, since it is by reference to life that we find our way through what is set up as an imitation of life. So the cognitive defense the analogy to maps might offer is gone forfeit in the case of such art. And immediately a counterprogram suggests itself: if art is to have any function at all, it must be exercised through what it does not have in common with life, and this function can hardly be discharged by the Euripidean program. Only to the degree that it is discontinuous is it art at all, this countertheory holds. So under pressure of Socrates’ question, mimetic art fails when it succeeds, when it gets to be like life. But then, to the degree that it is to succeed in whatever function it is to discharge, it cannot be through mimesis. This we may speak of as the Euripidean dilemma.

We are familiar enough with attempts to slip the dilemma, which suppose art to consist in the discrepancies between reality and its imitative replications. Euripides, it is argued, went in exactly the wrong direction and paid the price by producing something oblique and parasitic, like an echo or a shadow. Let us instead make objects which are insistently art by virtue of the fact that, lacking counterparts in reality, no one can make the sort of mistake that is possible so long as imitation prevails as an artistic program. The pleasure we take in imitations is, as noted, dependent upon the knowledge that it is an imitation and not the real thing. We take a (minor) pleasure in the crowcalls made by a man imitating crows which we do not ordinarily take in crowcalls themselves, not even when one crow repeats the same calls made by another. It is essential that the man not be inept: he must make crowcalls close enough to the original that they can be mistaken for such by, say, an overhearing crow, for otherwise his ineptitude blocks by distorting the (minor) artistic signals intended for our delectation. And it is essential that we know enough about crowcalls to know what these are imitations of; otherwise, as Aristotle suggests, the pleasure is due not to the imitation but to something else—in this instance perhaps to sheer raucousness—in which case the pleasure in question could be indifferently had whether the noises were made by crows or by men imitating them or even by men so stricken in the pharynx that their only vocal utterances are tragically indiscernible from what crows make in the common course of nature.

So there are varieties of mistakes possible in the case of imitation which are not possible if the object in question is a product of the counter-Euripidean program just sketched. We may suppose, if it is successful, that there is nothing in reality to mistake the artwork for, or for which the artwork itself can be mistaken; and it may be this order of artwork that Plato himself would have endorsed, being rather more a mystic in any case than his hero. Thus the disfigurements banished in the name of Aesthetic Socratism are one by one reintroduced, this time by an artistic decision: one cultivates a self-conscious woodenness, a deliberate archaism, an operatic falseness and falsetto so marked and underscored that it cannot be taken as our intention to subject our audience to the danger of illusion (unless they should happen to live in worlds so different from our own that in being discontinuous with our own we have created something continuous with theirs). But to an audience from the artist’s own world it must be clear that the artist is not a failed imitator, like the inept crow simulator, and that his aims lie elsewhere. Think for a moment of an inept magician, who inadvertently reveals the false bottom in his boxes and the cards up his sleeve, and who fails in consequence to bring off the benevolent deceits which are what magic shows are made for. But contrast this with a man who deliberately shows what is up his sleeve and makes plain the phoniness of his boxes. Then he raises his art to a new level, which now may be puzzling because it is discrepant with the banal conventions of prestidigitation: wherever (if anywhere) illusion is to be located here, it will not be at the customary place between hand and eye. And so it is with this counter-Euripidean art, of which, if Nietzsche is right, Wagner is an example, with an already initial advantage in the fact that he used opera, the least probable of the arts save for such communities as those in which members communicate normally by singing and perhaps resort to talking for entertainment, so that our plays, even such ruthlessly realistic ones as Euripides’, would be as abstract to them as operas are to us. In any case, the essence of art, on this new theory, lies in precisely what cannot be understood through simple extensions of the same principles that serve us in daily life. Inevitably, then, art is going to be mysterious: and, as before, it is in the expurgation of mystery in the name of
reason that Euripides was claimed to have engineered the demise of tragedy.

Here can be no doubt that this is a serious theory, and that a great deal of extremely interesting and in some instances strikingly great art can be enfranchised by means of it. But it is not without its difficulties when we approach it somewhat philosophically and put out of consideration the fact that it is, to begin with, somewhat parasitic upon and hence conceptually interlocked with the theory it rejects, namely mimetic theory itself. Moreover, reintroduction of earlier conventions cannot be done with the expectation that they will mean the same to a present audience as they meant to an earlier one, for it will not merely be drama which will have changed in the interval but society itself; so a contemporary audience will of necessity stand in a very different relation to the reactivated conventions than did that audience for which they were indeed conventions, and spontaneously accepted as part of theatrical—or artistic—experience generally.

These are important points, but not the ones that concern me. My concerns are these: (1) What is to distinguish an object that happens to be discontinuous with reality as thus far defined by an audience from just a new piece of reality? And is every new piece of reality—a new species, say, or a new invention—to be considered a contribution to art? (2) What about J’s objects, such as his plain old bed, similar to all the beds his contemporaries sleep in (no fancy surrealistic embellishments, no superogatory paint, just plain bedding)? So that with these there is nothing to distinguish them, no discontinuity whatever between them, as beds at least: for though J’s bed may be a novel work of art, its novelty does not consist in its discontinuity with reality since none can be marked, and hence the novelty cannot be located where this theory seeks to locate it. (3) Finally the conventions of theatricality supposed constant, it must now seem that anything which appears within the brackets they provide, whether or not it imitates reality, whether it is continuous with or discontinuous with life, merely in consequence of occurring within brackets, is art. But then being a work of art must seem to have as little to do with any intrinsic features of the object so classed as with the conventions through which it first gets to be a work of art. Then the program of mimesis and the program of countermimesis projected by Nietzsche are each of them irrelevant to the essence of art. This appears to leave us only with the institutional framework: just as someone is a husband by virtue of satisfying certain institutionally defined conditions, though he may outwardly appear no different from any other man, so something is an artwork if it satisfies certain institutionally defined conditions, though outwardly it may appear no different from an object that is not an artwork, as in the case of J’s bed. But this puts us back where we started, and clarity on the nature of the boundary evades us still.

Before commenting on this, however, it is worth dramatizing the dilemmas that occur within the brackets of convention as artists struggle with reality. The Euripidean dilemma was that, once one has completed the mimetic program, one has produced something so like what is to be encountered in reality that, being just like reality, the question arises as to what makes it art. The effort to escape this dilemma, by exaggerating non mimetic elements purged in the name of the program, results in something so unlike reality that the question just raised is stunned. But another, of virtually the same force, remains: what, given that at the extreme we have something discontinuous with reality, remains to distinguish this as art—and not just another piece of reality, supposing that we want to say that not just every novel thing is ipso facto an artwork and we want, after all, to suppose that reality can be enriched without this having to be through art?

Consider, for example, the very first canopener ever made, designed by that benefactor who made preserved food a practical possibility as a handy gadget within the economic reach of every household and whose use did not tax the manual dexterity of the average housewife: nothing like it had been seen before, a model of utility and economy, to which the inventor thoughtfully added the now familiar corkscrew. An archaeologist of the future, unearthing one of these, might wonder whether it is not a votive object executed in base metal, but I am less interested in this possibility than that the canopener enriches reality by being a novel form which nevertheless is by common consent not a work of art. Now we may suppose that at just the very moment that its inventor deposits it in the world with a cry of Eureka! an artist, quite independently, has produced a work of art that exactly resembles it, shape for shape. Here is a critic’s glowing assessment of this work, which I translate from the Chronique des beaux arts:

The single starkness of its short, ugly, bladelike and surprisingly ominous extremity embodies an aggressive masculinity, all the more pronounced by its formal and symbolic contrast with the frivolous diminishing helix, which swings freely but upon a fixed enslaving axis and represents pure unavailing femininity. These two motifs are symbiotically sustained in a single powerful
composition, no less universal and hopeful for all its miniature size and commonplace material. Had it been of a preciousness commensurate with its size, like a piece of orfevrerie, it would have lost scope, for the message concerns male and female as common denominator of the human condition. And had it been huge (and one must admit its essential monumentality) it would have exaggerated through heroization the cosmic banality of its theme. No, size and substance together reinforce image and import: a masterpiece of condensation, a major statement by J, from whose teeming genius so many remarkable works have sprung, a fitting member in that select circle of instant and insistent chef d’oeuvres defined by Donatello’s *St. George* and Brancusi’s *Mlle. Pogany*.

As an artwork, of course, the object so magnificently received must as a matter of course have whatever properties are thought by theorists of art to characterize artworks as a class: Purposiveness without Specific Purpose, for example, or Significant Form. To be sure, it is an object that could be used as a canopener by a philistine, but the question is how it could be possible that this object should possess such qualities while another, exactly congruent with it—the true first canopener—should not? It would be astonishing that two things be of exactly the same shape, size, and substance, and yet one possess and the other lack Significant Form! True, either object can be set at an aesthetic distance and held up for aesthetic appreciation; but, predictably, the distinction we are after is orthogonal to the revelations available through aesthetic distance, relative to which the distinction between artworks and mere things is inescapable. So none of these theories will help much in drawing the line, any more than will the historical fact of mere novelty, since either object is discontinuous with whatever was before it. And the irrelevance of novelty so construed may be underscored by supposing the historical order somewhat different. Imagine the first canopener to have entered the world several months before its exalted counterpart, which we may as well title *La condition humaine*, though J, true to type, detests that sort of blague and has only scorn for the critic of the *Chronique*, on the basis of whose tribute he nevertheless sells the thing to the Frankfurter Kunstalle for upward of a million marks.

So it is as though the Euripidean dilemma arises in a different form at the opposite end of the spectrum from that at which it was originally provoked. Given that revolutions in art tend to be characterized by swings in either direction as defined by this spectrum—from extreme realism to extreme idealism—the dilemma seems to be inescapable no matter what direction we move in. And perhaps the dilemma is going to be forever inescapable so long as we attempt to define art in terms of features that either compare or contrast with features of the real world.

But *then*, it might be said, it must be fatally inescapable, since what else save comparative or contrastive features can there be upon which to erect a theory of art? That is the form I want the question to take: for then, like all serious philosophical questions, it looks like the sort of puzzle whose solution is to be found only by moving, as it were, onto another plane from that in which the facts seem to be deployed in a way fiendishly resistant to a solution, and perceiving them from a direction indefinable in terms of that plane. So far all we have are the “conventions,” within the space defined by which this dialectical comedy has been allowed to play itself out. This suggests the natural next answer, that the difference between art and reality is just a matter of those conventions, and that whatever convention allows to be an artwork is an artwork.

There is an element of truth in this theory, but at the same time it seems to me shallow: “is a work of art,” as evidenced by J’s egalitarian reaction at the beginning of this discussion, is an honorific predicate. And honors do indeed seem very much to be matters of convention. But there are honors which are earned, and the question is what entities something to this honor: is there not something which must first be present before the honor relevantly descends? And what about defeating conditions? Are there not at least some facts such that, if we knew those facts, the object of which they were true would be disqualified as an artwork no matter what anyone says? Imagine that we learned that the object before us, looks like a painting that would spontaneously move us if we believed it had been painted—say the *Polish Rider* of Rembrandt, in which an isolated mounted figure is shown midjourney to an uncertain destiny—was not painted at all but is the result of someone’s having dumped lots of paint in a centrifuge, giving the contrivance of a spin, and having the result splat onto canvas, “just to see what would happen.” And what happened is that, by a kind of statistical miracle, the paint molecules disposed themselves in such a way as to produce something to all outward appearances exactly like one of the deepest paintings of one of the deepest artists in the history of the subject, a painting through which a person might define his life? Now the question is whether, knowing this fact, we are prepared to consider this randomly generated object a work of art. Well, suppose someone declares it to be one and that, as with J, it is one. Then the question is whether it is by such a declaration that the *Polish Rider* got to be an artwork and, if this should prove true, whether there is nothing further to say about it than that it is an artwork by fiat. Or was it instead recognized an artwork through features the present object lacks, even though it is exactly like the *Polish Rider*? What can these features be? And if it
got to be an artwork through them, what theory can we have of art wide enough to cover the case of the Polish Rider and such objects as J's bed or this surprising array of paint, the Polish Rider's semblable? Or can there be no theory wide enough to cover both cases, so that in effect there can be no general theory of art? And suppose that indeed all there is to the matter is the honorific bestowed by discriminating citizens of the artworld, that something is an artwork just because it is declared to be that: then how are we to account for the profound differences between these two indiscernible artworks. Or are we prepared, as I believe we are not, to say of this fortuitously caused object that it, like its indiscernible counterpart, is "one of the deepest paintings in the history of the subject"? Is it deep at all—or even is it shallow, empty in the manner of J's work? These are questions the conventionalistic theory of art does not enable us to answer: so we must press further.