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Author(s): Frederick Burwick

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Lessing's *Laokoon* and the Rise of Visual Hermeneutics

Frederick Burwick

English, UC, Los Angeles

Abstract Although there have been several historical accounts of the evolution and dissemination of textual hermeneutics, the rise of visual hermeneutics in the eighteenth century has been largely neglected. In his *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik* [Introduction to literary hermeneutics] (1975), Peter Szondi has examined the contribution of Chladenius and G. F. Meier to the literary hermeneutics of this period. Visual hermeneutics engaged, challenged, and extended contemporary assumptions about the relationship between the sign systems of verbal and visual arts. The narrative engravings of William Hogarth provided a provocative testing ground for these early endeavors in visual hermeneutics. G. C. Lichtenberg sought to correct earlier commentaries on Hogarth (by André Rouquet, John Trusler, and John Ireland) by introducing basic hermeneutic categories and organizing principles to the task of interpreting the visual scene. Whereas Lichtenberg adapted and refined the arguments of Lessing's *Laokoon*, subsequent critics of the Romantic period (Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, and Thomas De Quincey) sought to elaborate on the emotional and cognitive ground of interpretation.

Hermeneutics, as fostered among theologians, supplied the philosophical principles of interpretation intended to guide and inform the exegesis of biblical texts. The secularization of hermeneutics in the criticism of literature and art, beginning in the eighteenth century, undoubtedly profited from developments in biblical hermeneutics during the previous century, but it also returned to the *ἐρμηνεία* (interpretation) of the ancient Greeks. In 1826, sixty years after the publication of *Laokoon* (1766), Thomas De

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Figure 1 Laocöon, Woodbury-type illustration from *Laocöon*, trans. by Sir Robert Phillimore (London: Macmillan, 1874). The right arm was missing when the statue was found in the subterranean baths of Titus. The outstretched right arm was fashioned by Giovanni Montorsoli in 1523. In this form, the statue was known until Ludwig Pollak, searching among marble fragments in 1905, identified the missing right arm with elbow bent. The statue, with the bent right arm in place, was opened to public view in the Belvedere Courtyard of the Vatican Museum in 1960.

Quincey introduced his English translation with a tribute to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing for advancing this mode of criticism in Germany. “What he did,” De Quincey (1890 11:157) asserted, “was to apply philosophy—by which I would be understood to mean, in a large sense, the science of grounds and principles—to literature and the fine arts; an idea which expresses accurately what the Grecians meant by criticism.”

Although it cannot be claimed that Lessing established either a *Bildhermeneutik* or a *Texthermeneutik*, his *Laocöon* certainly influenced the course of criticism during the following decades. His distinction between the temporal attributes of poetry and the spatial attributes of painting was often reiterated, even in treatises that resorted to the very *ut pictura poesis* tradition Lessing had opposed. By grounding his argument in a discrimination of natural and arbitrary signs, Lessing drew upon current interests in semiotics that also informed developments in textual hermeneutics

(Barasch 1990: 153–54; Wellbery 1984: 191–202; Todorov 1973; Bayer 1984; Weinsheimer 1993). In 1757 Georg Friedrich Meier brought forth his hermeneutic based on the examination of semiotic relationships (Szondi 1975: 100–115; Wellbery 1984: 43–98). At the very time when textual hermeneutics was beginning to assert itself in literary criticism, Lessing indicated how art criticism was to engage visual hermeneutics. The commentaries on the works of William Hogarth produced during the latter half of the eighteenth century (Trusler 1768; Ireland 1812; Lichtenberg 1967–71) through the first half of the nineteenth century (Lamb 1899–1900; Hazlitt 1933, De Quincey 1890) demonstrate how visual hermeneutics evolved as well as how the shift from the Enlightenment to the Romantic perspective altered the hermeneutic horizon.

Lessing's Precursors: Antiquity and the Earlier Eighteenth Century

Description and commentary on painting has a venerable tradition, and several of its distinct modes may be traced from classical times. One of these was rhetorical or belletristic and was generally defined by the term *ekphrasis*. Homer's description of the shield of Achilles is one example, and with Homer's example as his model, Virgil's description of the shield of Aeneas is another. The power of such visual conjuring in language was also identified by the classical rhetoricians as an effective trope in suasive discourse. Thus Hermogenes and Aphthonius provided rhetorical exercises, *progymnasmata*, in describing the work of art, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *Ars Rhetorica* (10.17) set forth the principles by which evocative language might engender an image of a visual object in the auditor's mind. A third mode, closely related to the previous two, was the creation of a gallery as a kind of literary tour de force in which the author could display his or her skills at descriptive *enargia* (Atkins 1934: 156–57). This is exemplified in the pictures in a Neapolitan collection described in the *Eikones* of Philostratus Lemnius (Steinmann 1914: 106–42), the fourteen statues described in the *Ekphrasis* of Callistratus, and the *Eikones* of Lucian in which he celebrates the beautiful Panthea by comparing her to famous works of art. A fourth mode was closely related to, and often part of, travel narratives in which the narrator provided a tour through a prominent palace and gave attention to the works of art collected there (Reinach 1981 [1921]). A fifth mode was the description intended for the artist, providing observations on compositional structure, color relationships, and perspectival strategies (foreshortening of figures, etc.). Vitruvius, for example, in the section devoted to mural painting in *De architectura*, does not simply describe such paintings; he also addresses the very practical concern of how such paint-

ings function and how they contribute to the decoration and ornamentation of temples and civic and domestic buildings.

Lessing was not the first to propose an exposition of art in terms of its efficacy as a semiotic construct. In his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et la peinture* (1719), Abbé Du Bos addressed the presumed capacity of language to conjure visual images by appealing to the mediation of signs. Whereas the natural signs of pictures or paintings are immediately perceived, words must first arouse the ideas of which they are the arbitrary signs. Only then can the ideas be assembled in the imagination where they form the pictures (*tableaux*) that move us and the paintings (*peintures*) that interest us (Du Bos 1967 [1719]: 375–77; Todorov 1973: 30–32). Du Bos recognized that although words are signs for our ideas, they are also capable of mimicking natural sounds. To the extent that they can fulfill this onomatopoeic function, words are also natural signs. Because of its immediate echoic relationship to its signified object, the word as natural sign possesses greater energy (*plus énergiques*). Some words thus refer to their objects through the immediacy of natural signs; other words, as arbitrary signs, must first evoke ideas which then may form mental images (Du Bos 1967 [1719]: 289–93). Poetry, therefore, may achieve its effects through the beauty of sound or through the beauty of sense. Du Bos identifies a third, and superior, category of beauty achieved through the harmony of both sound and sense.

Following Du Bos, but still many years before Lessing's *Laokoon*, James Harris also elaborated on the semiotic differences between poetry and painting. In *Concerning Music, Painting, and Poetry*, the second of his *Three Treatises* (1744), he repeated the argument that as mimetic art a portrait or a musical composition maintained a natural affinity with the objects that it imitated, while poetry but seldom achieved such a natural relationship to the ideas it endeavored to represent through words. Although words may appeal to the senses as natural signs, even in their onomatopoeic function they retain the broader appeal to ideas as arbitrary signs (Harris 1792 [1744]: 55, 58, 70–72; Todorov 1973: 32–33). Indeed, without such arbitrary reference they would lack cohesion and would scarcely be able to communicate coherent meaning. As is evident in Virgil's echoing of the galloping horses in book 8 of the *Aeneid*—"Quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum" (Then struck the hooves of the steeds on the ground with a four-footed trampling)—the illusion of the natural sign is more effectively achieved as a tonal complement to the description of the arbitrary sign.

Although the discrimination of natural and arbitrary signs may be traced back to the discussion of primitive and conventional words in Plato's *Cratylus*, Du Bos and Harris were among the first to apply this discrimination to the respective provinces of painting and poetry. In the crucial chapter 16

of his *Laokoon*, Lessing does not merely repeat what Du Bos and Harris had already argued. He added a new, albeit questionable, elaboration, whereby natural signs are perceived as spatial, and artificial signs as temporal. Even here Lessing's argument, as pointed out by J. W. H. Atkins, is indebted to the *Olympic Discourse* of Dio Chrysostom, which "differentiates . . . between the respective media in which poet and sculptor work," noting specifically the capacity of the poet to "represent actions or speech, rest or movements, the passage of time and the effects of illusion," while the sculptor "is confined to the single attitude, the single moment" (*Oratio* 12, paragraphs 66–71; discussed in Atkins 1934: 329).

The purpose of Dio's comparison was to celebrate the superiority of poetry to sculpture, not to examine the respective use of spatial and temporal media. Lessing gave careful attention to how signs both occupy and communicate space and time, and he went on to discuss those relationships within the work; more importantly, discriminating between spatial and temporal signs enabled him to analyze the perception and comprehension of a work. With this "science of grounds and principles" (*ibid.*), Lessing developed a means of interpreting verbal and visual relationships that persisted in subsequent critical discourse, even among those who disagreed with his notion of how poetry and painting were limited.

Adapting from contemporary developments in hermeneutics, Lessing sought to explain not simply what was represented in the work but also how that content was communicated. Not only did visual hermeneutics appeal to the semiotic coherence and the interrelationships among constituent images of a painting, as did literary hermeneutics in addressing the constituents of a text; it also emphasized a kind of narrative sequence among the images that gave the visual painting a temporality very much like that of poetry. This is the mode of analysis that was further developed in Lichtenberg's commentary on Hogarth. But it is a mode of analysis that is fraught with difficulties, especially with the reciprocity of text and image in the illustrated book, where the cross-referencings of image and text often result in an active dialogue between the two. One appropriates and renegotiates the semiotic strategies of the other.

As Du Bos argued, illusion is wrought in the imagination as a construct of signs. In discussing signs in relation to illusion, Lessing is aware of the attention paid to signs in contemporary hermeneutics. Meier's *Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst* (1757) uses semiotics to clarify a text. Lessing acknowledges this function of semiotics in critical interpretation, "where the concern is not with illusion, where one addresses only the understanding of the reader" (Lessing 1979 6:113). Nevertheless, he sees the evocative power of the sign as accompanying, yet separable from, its informational

function. The poet's task is to exercise the former; the latter is the concern of prose writers.

In the verbal arts, signs are an arbitrary set of symbols; in the visual arts, signs are appropriated directly from nature. Aesthetic illusion occurs when the sign is identified with the thing signified. This assumed identity is at work in the metaphor of the poet as well as in the visual image of the painter. We may see a scene in nature, see it again as represented by the painter, and yet again as described by the poet. Each time it is conveyed by our senses and reproduced in our imagination, whether by arbitrary or by natural signs; each time, therefore, "we must experience the same pleasure, even if not in the same degree" (ibid.). The poet may well imitate the painter in creating a verbal picture. If he succeeds, "the poet makes us perceive his object so sensually that we are more clearly conscious of his object than we are of his words" (ibid.). Thus a verbal description may bring us "closer to that degree of illusion which is the peculiar capacity of the material painting" (ibid.: 52).

Despite the similarity of effect, the semiotic process is fundamentally different, not just because the poet relies on one set of signs, and the painter on another; but, rather, because one set of signs is ordered in a temporal sequence and the other in a spatial array. How is the illusion accomplished? How can signs in temporal sequence (*nach einander*) express spatial arrangement (*neben einander*)? The signs of poetry, Lessing answers, do not follow one another in a random sequence; they are arbitrarily ordered. Metrical arrangement and grammatical structure impose a necessary spatial configuration. Similarly, temporal awareness enters our perception of a painting or a statue. Perception itself is a temporal process. We do not perceive a thing all at once; rather, we discover the *neben einander* only in terms of the *nach einander* of beholding. The "pregnant moment" of art for Lessing is the moment of rising action. Only when the artist has depicted his figures caught up in the motion and emotion of an approaching climax can the beholder engage in the process and actually respond to the temporal flux that is represented in the attitude, gesture, and expression of the spatial image. Illusion, by this account, is wrought when the mind complements the limited evidence of the senses. Verbal signs may be heard in temporal sequence, but they are also structured in arbitrary patterns. Thus they also command space and may express the body as it exists in space (ibid.: 109).

Since the signs of speech are arbitrary, it is possible through signs to let the parts of a body follow one another, just as in nature they are found next to one another. Yet this is characteristic of speech and its signs in general, not, however, insofar as they might best suit the intentions of poetry. The poet does not want merely to be understood: It is not enough that his or

her representations should merely be clear and distinct; with this the prose writer might be satisfied. The poet, however, wants to make the ideas that he or she awakens in us so lively that we believe that we are made aware of the rapidity of the actual sensory impressions of their objects, and “in this moment of illusion, we cease to be conscious of the means that he has used, even of his words” (ibid.: 109–10).

Lessing’s concept of illusion as aesthetic complementation operates in the same manner as sensation and sympathy, spontaneous and independent of deliberate rational awareness. Indeed, in listening to poetry there is a shift of consciousness. The rational attention to the sign system gives way to the sensual engagement of illusion that the signs mediate (Burwick 1991: 103–9). Because of the individual differences in experience and association, there are corresponding differences in the way the mind, “in this moment of illusion,” interprets semiotic reference. Lessing acknowledges, but also sets limits to, the heterogeneity of interpretation (Bayer 1984: 68–73; Wellbery 1984: 197–203). Although the purpose of his *Laokoon*, as De Quincey observed, is to set forth “the science of grounds and principles,” Lessing also explores their efficacy in the regions of aesthetic response. He marks the limits beyond which interest will turn to disgust and repulsion, so that no engagement of illusion will be possible.

Late-Eighteenth-Century Reception of Hogarth

Just as the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin has served as a perennial test for textual hermeneutics (such as the expositions by Achim von Arnim, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger, and Hans-Georg Gadamer), so, too, Hogarth’s narrative plates have provided a test for visual hermeneutics. Indeed, among the works that attracted critical attention during the time visual hermeneutics began to inform commentaries on art, only the illustrations of the *Shakespeare Gallery* challenged the methods of exposition to a comparable degree. The reception of the *Shakespeare Gallery* in the criticism of Ludwig Tieck and Georg Forster is significant both for its appropriations from Lessing and for its contribution to visual hermeneutics. For Tieck, however, the subject often became entangled in considerations of Shakespeare’s text and in a presumed rivalry between the poet and the painter. For Forster, the pretensions of British art under the auspices of the Royal Academy infringed on the democratic potential of art. The commentaries to Hogarth have the advantage of the artist’s appeal to popular interests; too, they are not in competition with any literary text. Hogarth himself tells the story that he illustrates, and he tells it exclusively in and through the illustrations. The complexity of his narrative derives from the abun-

dant detail that fills his scenes and contributes to their meaning, and from his reliance on a series of scenes to achieve an extended narrative sequence.

One of the first commentaries that attempted a thorough explication of Hogarth was the Reverend John Trusler's *Hogarth Moralised* (1768), whose title amply declares the means and the ends of his exposition. William Blake (1982: 702), we may recall, grew impatient with Trusler's mode of moralizing: "I feel very sorry that your Ideas & Mine in Moral Painting differ so much as to have made you angry with my method of Study. . . . You say I want somebody to Elucidate my Ideas. But you ought to know that What is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made Explicit to the Idiot is not worth my care" (to the Reverend Dr. Trusler, August 23, 1799). Blake's response is apt, for Trusler's commentary on Hogarth is indeed guided by a conventional, not to say narrow-minded, notion of morality, and as elucidation it avoids the problematic and puzzling details and fails to examine the dynamics of motion.

Hogarth boldly engaged what Lessing was to call the "single instant of the action." This instant, according to Lessing's (1979 6:203) theory, was to draw from the successive flux of motion the moment "which is most pregnant, and which points least ambiguously to what precedes and follows" (De Quincey's translation, 1890 11:208). Trusler, of course, could scarcely be blind to Hogarth's depiction of tumultuous action. In plate 2 of *The Harlot's Progress*, for example, Trusler (1833 [1768] 1:41) describes Moll, as "the mistress of a rich Jew," compelled to the drastic subterfuge of "kicking down the tea-table" to distract her master so that her paramour might escape undetected. The description is accurate, but it does not acknowledge Hogarth's bold use of the "frozen moment." He has not merely shown the tea table atilt and pieces of shattered porcelain scattered on the floor; he has arrested two of the cups and the teapot itself in mid-fall. In speaking of the "noise" of the shattering china Trusler indicates that he has responded to the illusion of Hogarth's art, but he has done so without delineating the means by which Hogarth has made the illusion possible. He does not observe that the monkey in the foreground is not merely a symbol but serves an integrated function in Hogarth's manipulation of narrative time and space. The monkey may, as Trusler suggests, indicate Moll's folly, vanity, and extravagance, but Hogarth has also depicted him in the act of springing out of harm's way to avoid the flying splinters of broken china and the scalding fluid that spews from the spout of the falling teapot. For Hogarth, the tilt of the table and the arrested motion of cups and pot were not enough to ensure the illusion of motion. The leaping monkey intensifies the narrative of "what precedes and follows."

In terms of a visual hermeneutic, Trusler's major weakness is that he

does not attend to the dynamics of motion and therefore fails to pay attention to the details of cause and effect. His exposition is also constrained by a heavy-handed moralizing and an emphasis on the obvious. This is not to deny that morality is a major ingredient in Hogarth's satire. What makes it difficult to align Trusler's commentary with contemporary developments in visual hermeneutics is his failure to regard the means by which that morality is communicated. Trusler points out visual elements as if they existed as discrete entities. He does not see them as interconnected within a syntax that is defined by composition, gesture, and repetition. As Ronald Paulson (1975: 96) has phrased it, Hogarth communicates his narrative through "a graphic sign system." A visual hermeneutic must provide an exposition of the system, not just of the discrete sign.

Trusler's analysis of the final plate of *The Harlot's Progress* provides an example of the problems involved. This is a plate worth close scrutiny not because it shows Trusler at his worst—actually he is more attentive to detail here than usual in his commentary—but, rather, because it is a plate that posed difficulties for other commentators, including Lichtenberg, Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey. Trusler (1833 [1768] 1:49) describes the scene in the following two paragraphs:

The preparations for her funeral are as licentious as the progress of her life, and the contagion of her example seems to reach all who surround her coffin. One of them is engaged in the double trade of seduction and thievery; a second is contemplating her own face in a mirror. The female who is gazing at the corpse, displays some marks of concern, and feels a momentary compunction at viewing the melancholy scene before her: but if any other part of the company are in a degree affected, it is a mere maudlin sorrow, kept up by glasses of strong liquor. The depraved priest does not seem likely to feel for the dead that hope expressed in our liturgy. The appearance and employment of almost every one present at this mockery of woe, is such as must raise disgust in the breast of any female who has the least tincture of delicacy, and excite a wish that such an exhibition may not be displayed at her own funeral.

In this plate there are some local customs which mark the manners of the times when it was engraved, but are now generally disused, except in some of the provinces very distant from the capital; sprigs of rosemary were then given to each of the mourners: to appear at a funeral without one, was as great an indecorum as to be without a white handkerchief. This custom might probably originate at a time when the plague depopulated the metropolis, and rosemary was deemed an antidote against contagion. It must be acknowledged that there are also in this print some things which, though they gave the artist an opportunity of displaying his humour, are violations of propriety and customs: such is her child, but a few removes from infancy, being habited as chief mourner, to attend his parent to the grave; rings presented, and an escutcheon hung up, in

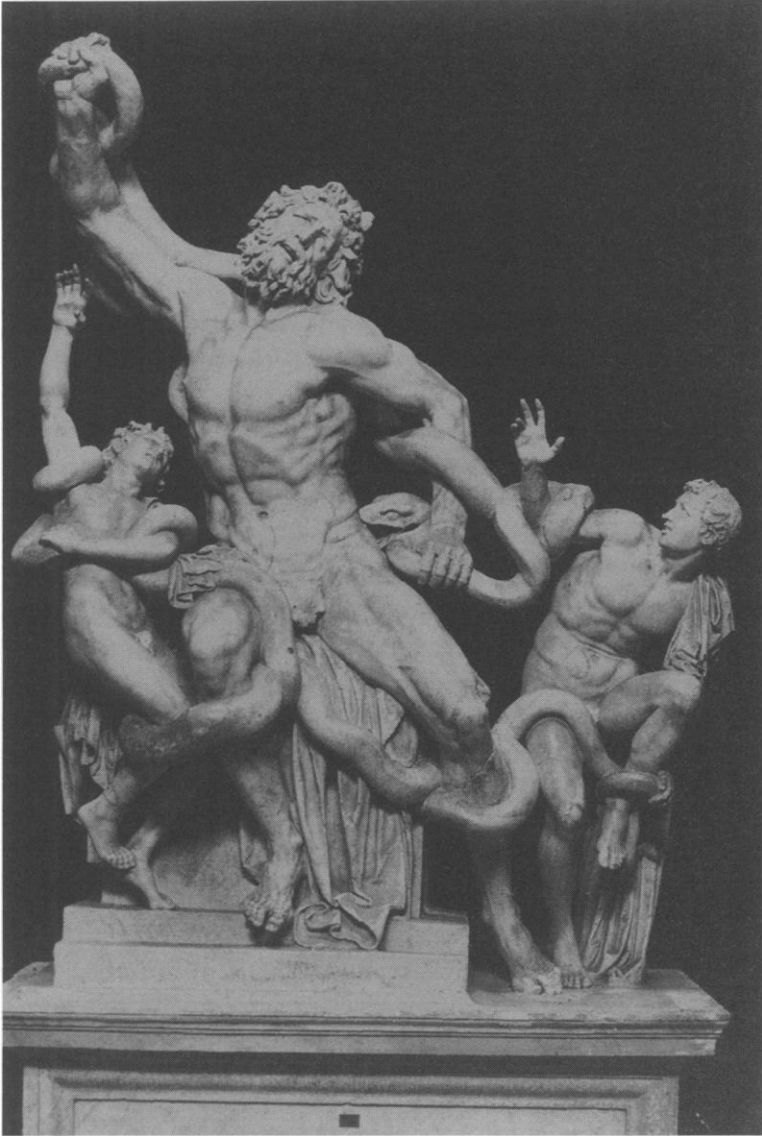


Figure 2 The Harlot's Progress, plate 6, *The Works of William Hogarth in a Series of Engravings with Descriptions and a Comment on their Moral Tendency by the Rev. John Trusler*, 2 vols., edited by John Hogarth and John Nichols (London: John Tallis, 1833), vol. 1.

a garret, at the funeral of a needy prostitute. The whole may be intended as a burlesque upon ostentatious and expensive funerals.

Neither here nor elsewhere does Trusler give attention to the compositional structure of Hogarth's narrative. He acknowledges that figures surround the coffin, but he does not tell us that Hogarth has arranged them, with the exception of the bastard child seated on the floor directly below the coffin, in a semicircular arch; nor does he note that the figures are grouped in pairs, again with the exception of the child, the woman who has served Moll Hackabout (depicted in plates 3 and 5), and the wailing woman seated in the lower right foreground (perhaps the same woman seen rummaging through Moll's belongings in plate 5). Indeed, Trusler pursues the narrative in a haphazard manner as if Hogarth had provided no visual clues to a guided "reading" of his narrative. He makes no mention of spatial arrangement, foreground or background, or highlight or shadow, and his reference to gesture is sparse and oblique. He refers to "seduction and thievery" and to "the depraved priest" without acknowledging how he has deduced either the depravity or the seduction and thievery.

Whether some cross-reference might connect the actions involving the priest and the undertaker (the only two men in the scene), Trusler does not tell us, nor does he indicate any parallel between the female "contemplating her own face in a mirror" and the one "who is gazing at the corpse." He expresses his indignation at the "maudlin sorrow, kept up by glasses of strong liquor," but he does not ponder the significance of the brandy that the priest obliviously spills into the handkerchief in his lap. He assures us that the white handkerchief and the sprigs of rosemary are accurate tokens of local customs, but he ignores where and how Hogarth has disposed them within the scene. Totally beyond the range of Trusler's analysis are the spatial and temporal relationships, the *neben einander* and *nach einander*, crucial to Lessing's semiotics.

Although he did not respond to the new directions in art criticism that called for attention to dynamics of spatial and temporal relationships, Trusler had read Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) and the commentary on the engravings by Jean André Rouquet, *Lettres de Monsieur *** (1746). Rouquet objected to the final plate as "a farce of which the dead girl is more the occasion than the subject" (1746: 40). Responding to Rouquet, Trusler (1833 [1768] 1:49) seeks to oppose the argument that *The Harlot's Progress* ends in farce: "Surely," he declares, "such was not the author's intention." Nevertheless, Trusler himself fails to dispel the aporia that generated a farcical sense of incongruity and impropriety. Trusler identifies

three elements in this final plate that he can account for only as Hogarth's "violations of propriety and customs." The first is the bastard child dressed "as chief mourner"; the second, the "rings presented" by the women who stand just beyond the opened end of the coffin; the third, "an escutcheon hung up, in a garret." As "violations of propriety," none of these things belongs in the scene and therefore none deserves Trusler's explanation.

The "moral" commentaries of Trusler maintained their popular appeal and were reprinted in editions of Hogarth's works throughout the nineteenth century. In the intervening years, however, other commentators came forth who were not content simply to catalog the obvious and to dismiss the aporia. Significantly, even for these subsequent interpreters, the apparent improprieties in the final plate of *The Harlot's Progress*, as observed by Rouquet and Trusler, were to become a major crux.

Attention to Hogarth's career continued unabated after the artist's death in 1764. Trusler's commentaries appeared in 1768. In 1781 John Nichols, George Steevens, and others assembled an edition of the *Biographical Anecdotes of William Hogarth* (London, 1781; rev. 1782, 1785). In the following decade there appeared two newly engraved collections of Hogarth's graphic works, one by the honest John Ireland and the other by the scurrilous Samuel Ireland. John and Josiah Boydell, at the very time they were engaged in the exhibition and production of engravings for the *Shakespeare Gallery*, engaged John Ireland to prepare an edition to compete with Trusler's *Hogarth Moralised*. The first two volumes of Ireland's *Hogarth Illustrated* appeared in 1791 and were reprinted in 1793. When Jane Thornhill Hogarth died in 1789, her cousin and companion, Mary Lewis, became executrix of the property, and through her Ireland acquired a number of important manuscripts, including autobiographical memoranda and the manuscript of Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty*. From this new material Ireland prepared the supplemental third volume of *Hogarth Illustrated*, published in 1798, with a reprint in 1804; the entire three-volume edition was reprinted in 1812, four years after Ireland's death.

In Germany Lessing himself contributed to the interest in Hogarth. Hogarth's *Analysis of Beauty* (1753) and Rouquet's commentary on the engravings were translated into German and published in a single volume in 1754. This edition was not only known to Lessing; it was Lessing who introduced the edition to German readers of the *Berlinische Privilegierte Zeitung* in his contributions to that newspaper for May and June (Lessing 1979 3:209–10, 212–13). The study of Hogarth's engravings persisted in Germany throughout the latter half of the century. Lichtenberg commenced his commentaries in the *Göttinger Taschenkalender* in 1784, where they continued to appear annually until 1796. From 1794 to 1799 Lichtenberg also

devoted his efforts to a more thorough explanation of the plates that he boldly titled, *Ausführliche Erklärung der Hogarthischen Kupferstiche*. Here, for the first time, we find a conscientious dedication to hermeneutic method.

As a dedicated Anglophile who had enjoyed two extended visits to London and to the court of George III, Lichtenberg recognized that the task of communicating the manners and customs satirized by Hogarth would involve close attention to detail. His readers, after all, were not English but German. Even in England much had changed in the half-century that had passed since Hogarth sketched his scenes of life at the various levels of the social hierarchy. Lichtenberg enjoyed unique advantages that no commentator would have found elsewhere. He was a professor at the university founded and supported by the Hannoverian Georges, a university that had become the leading institution in Germany during the eighteenth century. Nowhere else at this period had art history been established as an academic discipline. Over ten thousand drawings and engravings had been bequeathed to the university in 1736 from the private collection of Johann Friedrich Armand von Uffenbach. It was not until 1770 that they were deposited in the university library, with Christian Heyne, professor of classical philology, assuming responsibility for the collection. In 1784 art historian Johann Dominik Fiorillo was appointed as official curator to look after the rapidly expanding collection. Fiorillo used engravings from the collection to illustrate his lectures on art. Among the students who gathered to hear Fiorillo were the very individuals who were soon to launch their own careers as major poets, writers, and critics of the Romantic movement: Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, Ludwig Tieck, and the brothers August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel.

There was, then, an active interest in visual hermeneutics at Göttingen at the time that Lichtenberg undertook his commentaries. He commenced his *Ausführliche Erklärung der Hogarthische Kupferstiche* with a review of previous commentaries. He values Rouquet, especially because the Frenchman profited from conversations with Hogarth himself; he points out that the original edition of the *Lettres* provided commentaries on only four of the works, to which he added a fifth in a subsequently published pamphlet (1751) on the *March to Finchley*. Trusler, he says, provides many good notes. His praise for Ireland is tempered by the criticism that his commentaries contain too many digressions and too much irrelevant information. In the course of his own commentaries, Lichtenberg cites Trusler eighteen times and Ireland forty-four times; virtually every reference to these two predecessors registers his disagreement with their interpretations.

After objecting to the lack of method in previous interpretations, Lichtenberg carefully sets forth his own hermeneutic method. Hogarth's com-

positional structure, he insists, defines the narrative structure. The viewer's starting point is always the most eye-arresting attribute of the scene. That *Blickfang* is then interconnected to the other narrative elements in the scene through the kinesis indicated in the captured moment. In analyzing the kinetic temporality of Hogarth's "Laokoon moment," Lichtenberg has recourse to three hermeneutic categories: motion, activity, and action (*Bewegung, Tätigkeit, Handlung*). Motion refers to the artist's indication of atmospheric as well as physical movement; this may be either the cast of light, the flutter of wind, or falling objects. Activity is interpreted in those gestures that reveal what a figure is immediately doing (eating, yawning, crying). Action not only involves a before and after, it also reveals deliberation and choice.

A few excerpts from his commentary on *The Harlot's Progress* may serve to demonstrate how he uses these categories to account for the implicit temporal development in Hogarth's narrative. As in his commentary to Hogarth's other series, Lichtenberg observes how the dramatic action is anticipated in the opening plate. Plate 1 depicts the arrival of Moll Hackabout at the Bell Inn on the York-to-London coach. In the background the slash of light between the buildings points down on her figure highlighted with hat and apron. Above, a washerwoman looks on as she hangs a pair of dripping hose to dry. The activity and motion directly behind Moll have a more direct and obvious relevance: "The old Pastor reads the address from a letter of introduction: 'To the Right Reverend Bishop—London.' . . . This moment the horse puts to use in making up for what he missed during the journey, and he munches greedily on the packing straw from the earthen ware which has been set out for sale. Flower pots, bowls, and platters, and whatever else, *all empty*, tip and fall toward the hungry horse. Very ominous!" (Lichtenberg 1967-71 3:736-37). The activity of the other figures Lichtenberg interprets in the language of gesture. The character at the inn door (Lichtenberg identifies him as Colonel Charters) gazes intently on Moll and reveals his lecherous thoughts with his anticipatory gesture: "the left hand upon his cane, and the right engaged in private business" (ibid.: 739). There is import, too, in the passive, receptive posture of Moll. The gesture of the procuress, Mother Needham, lightly tickling Moll's chin, works a seductive evil. The graphic devices that involve the action lead Lichtenberg into more complex strategies of interpretation. To some degree, both motion and activity contribute to the before/after development: the falling pots are indeed ominous, and the sinister hands of Mother Needham and Colonel Charters are certainly anticipatory. Lichtenberg discusses the import for the major action evident in the minor details, such as the basket with the goose that Moll has brought from the

country. In the plight of the goose, with the address tied round its neck, he sees a parallel to Moll's fate; it is addressed "To my lofing Cosen in Tems-tret in London." In the tumult of Thames Street, Lichtenberg observes, "lofing Cosens" abound who would be willing to accept the girl and/or her goose whose destination is so vaguely addressed (*ibid.*: 747–48).

Amidst the welter of narrative details, he detects motion, activity, and action as specific categories in experiencing the implied temporality. In order to organize the experience, however, he realizes the need for hermeneutic *organa* more systematic and analytical. The proper hermeneutic tools must be drawn from the actual perceptual and cognitive encounter. He identifies three such tools for organizing spatial relationships: the line of sight, the line of comparison, and the grounds of comparison (*Blick-Linie*, *Vergleichungs-Linie*, *Vergleichungsgründe*). The grounds of comparison are established by identifying a recurrent theme or motif; the line of comparison traces that motif from one detail of the scene to another.

In the final plate of *The Harlot's Progress*, Lichtenberg observes a ground of comparison in the activity of drinking; one line of comparison can thus be drawn from the bottle of Nants, a French liquor, in the right foreground, to the bottle of brandy being dispensed atop the coffin. Further lines can be drawn from the brandy glass atop the coffin to the one being sipped by the hooded women near the door at the rear, and to the one being tipped by the parson in the left foreground. Thematically related to the Nants and the brandy, but also serving as a subtle jest on the sisterhood, is the escutcheon that Trusler found out of place at a funeral gathering of this particular class of women. Upon a field divided by a chevron are three emblems that may, at casual glance, pass as fleurs-de-lis. As Lichtenberg points out, however, not the fleur-de-lis but the "spigot and fosset" is the thrice-repeated emblem on this coat of arms. And why the spigot and fosset? Lichtenberg coyly declines to interpret the heraldic emblems in such a way as might dishonor the person or persons whose estate is thus designated. He simply reminds the reader that the fosset is inserted into the bunghole of a barrel, and the spigot is then inserted into the fosset, where it can be screwed left or right to allow the beverage to flow. Although he grants that the figurative or allusive use in folk sayings has identified a similarity to sexual intercourse in the action of spigot and fosset, Lichtenberg keeps his word and does not apply his hermeneutic to any ground of comparison.

The aesthetic response to the line of sight is instinctive, almost involuntary. We see a man looking up to the sky, and we crane our heads and strain our eyes with him. The artist invites a like participation. Where his figures point or peer, our eyes will follow. Hogarth clearly ordains the line of sight to guide the action surrounding the upset tea table in *The Har-*

lot's Progress, plate 2. The Jewish merchant looks with surprise at his kept mistress; she impudently returns his gaze; the maid looks at the departing interloper, who turns cautiously to see if he has escaped the merchant's notice; the monkey looks at the falling teapot to see whether he has escaped a scalding; the servant boy looks with dismay at the shattering of the tea service. In contrast with plate 2, the final plate of *The Harlot's Progress* makes a much less dramatically orchestrated use of the line of sight. Here the line of sight provides the connective links between the several intimate intrigues of the scenes. Lichtenberg notes the overly solicitous look of the undertaker as he assists one of the ladies with her glove (while she surreptitiously steals his handkerchief). He calls attention to the thematic link between the woman gazing into the mirror and the woman gazing into the coffin. Behind the coffin are two women who have focused their attention on the outstretched finger of one. Trusler interpreted this scene as an exchange of rings. Lichtenberg observes that it is not the woman's ring finger that is extended, and the protrusion is not a poorly drawn ring—it is a wart. The two are awaiting an occasion to cure the wart, in accordance with a folk remedy, by touching it to the corpse. The most volatile look that Hogarth has depicted amongst these figures is the look of reprobation that Moll's former companion casts toward the hypocritical parson. Lichtenberg fails to tell us, however, why Hogarth has deliberately erased the line of sight from the eyes of the priest.

If this were to be a comprehensive history of the rise of visual hermeneutics, it would be important to give attention here to the contributions of art historian Johann Dominik Fiorillo (Burwick 1987b; Hölter 1993), the classical philologist Christian Heyne, and other members of the group of scholars at Göttingen who were developing new methods for interpreting the visual arts. At the very time that Lichtenberg was preparing his commentaries on Hogarth in Göttingen, both Tieck and Forster had been drawn into the discussion of visual hermeneutics.

Boydell's *Shakespeare Gallery*

Forster was influenced by Lessing's *Laokoon*, but he was also influenced by the revolutionary politics of his era. Both influences are clearly evident in his influential *Ansichten vom Niederrhein, von Brabant, Flandern, Holland, England und Frankreich* (pts. 1 and 2, 1791; pt. 3, 1794) (Cf. Forster, "Rundreise von Mainz" [1790], in Forster 1958–90 12:200–368; Pape 1996: 125). Accompanied by Alexander von Humboldt, who had commenced his studies at Göttingen in 1788, Forster journeyed down the river Rhine to the Low Countries, England, and France from May to June 1790. Other scholars

at Göttingen, notably Tieck and Heyne, wrote commentaries on the engraved prints of the *Shakespeare Gallery*, but Forster was the only German to write on the original paintings. His strongest indictment against Boydell's publication of engraved prints was that they were meant only "for the luxury of the rich" (Forster, "Geschichte der Kunst in England" [1789], in Forster 1958–90 7:174; Pape 1996: 126). Forster's hermeneutics were always governed by a democratic awareness of audience.

Although he accepted Lessing's argument on the temporal limits of the visual arts, he eschewed discussion of the "pregnant moment," mentioning it only when the painter has chosen a moment at odds with classical aesthetics. The allegory of Thomas Banks's sculpture *Shakespeare between the Dramatic Muse and the Genius of Painting*, at the entrance to Boydell's *Shakespeare Gallery*, Forster appraised as an appropriate confirmation of Lessing's discrimination of the provinces of painting and poetry. Forster's conception of mimesis makes him skeptical of the fanciful excursions into the magical or supernatural. For him, magic is an attribute of the negative sublime pursued in contemporary British art. This negative sublime was characterized by an emphasis on effects that astound, surprise, and intimidate. It ignores the rising action recommended by Lessing in order to exhibit "excessive passions"; it disregards Lessing's pregnant moment in order "to catch nature in its most appalling moments." It sends fantasy on "a daring flight, not into the beautiful fairyland of the ideal, but into the forbidden region of ghosts and spectres" (Forster 1958–90 7:128–30; Pape 1996: 128).

In his commentary on the *Shakespeare Gallery*, Forster finds fault with the frequent trespassing of aesthetic borders: trespassing the border of beauty and grace into a negative sublime, and trespassing the borders of painting's spatial province. But he also acknowledges the limits he confronts in his own endeavor at *Gemäldebeschreibung*. The description of the spatial mode of a visual representation must give way to temporal narrative, he insists, because the commentary is not simply about what is in the painting; it is also about what the beholder feels and thinks. A proper hermeneutic must address how art achieves its effects: "Through this reproduction of the emotions we are able to divine—not how the work of art actually was designed—, but still, how rich or poor it must have been to create these or those specific powers" (Forster 1958–90 9:39–40).

Forster's reasoning about Henry Fuseli and the limits of painting demonstrates both his fascination with this ingenious mode of visualizing the nonvisual, the nonreal, or the inner greatness by external dimensions, as well as his abhorrence of these hazardous experiments: "Between painting and poetry, it seems to us, a separating wall is drawn, which does not allow the former to put the fantastic creatures of the poet who 'gives to

airy nothing a local habitation and a name', into material outlines, thus providing form and duration to the products of illusion dwindling away." Once Fuseli "crossed this border," his genius was perverted in subservience to the nonclassical British school of history painting. Forster placed the blame on Sir Joshua Reynolds as "father and founder of the present British school," who encouraged border crossing and the false sublime. In his commentary on Reynolds's *The Infant Hercules* (1788), painted for Catherine the Great and meant to be read as an allegory flattering the prowess of the young Russian Empire within a pan-European context, Forster condemns the artist for "daring to insinuate power by huge dimensions" and thus sinning "against the hermeneutics of his art" (ibid. 7:131, 143, 135).

Although Forster fully endorsed Winckelmann on the sublime and Lessing on the boundaries between painting and poetry, he did not, and could not, call for a renewal of "Greek figures and Greek Gods, who no longer fit into the form of mankind." In his *Ansichten vom Niederrhein*, he makes clear why Greek classicism cannot serve the requirements of contemporary art. The population no longer shared the Athenian confidence that enabled them to look into the eyes of the giant Greek deities; thus they were obliged to seek fellow mortals to help them: "Equality is the essential prerequisite of love. . . . The weak searches for a being of his own kind by whom he is understood and loved, to whom he can open his heart. It is to this human-kind that our artists belong and for them they work" (ibid. 9:67–68).

The reasoning behind this characterization of his times is less catholic than it is unequivocally democratic: "The more perfect the ideals of the sublime become, the more they appear strange to our weakness." Moreover, "Today pure taste of art is confined to very few individual persons for want of everything that could form, cultivate and develop it in general" (ibid.). In his *Ansichten vom Niederrhein* this reasoning is deliberately placed into the context of the German political circumstances of 1790 (Pape 1996: 132), and in his "Die Kunst und das Zeitalter" [Art and epoch], he declares that the ground of "modern art" had been perverted by "feudalistic tyranny and constant warfare": "From one sentiment art and virtue arise; but the cold breath of despotism has made it wither" (Forster 1958–90 7:24).

These democratic sentiments direct Forster's hermeneutics, even when he does not explicitly evoke nationalist preconditions. In Boydell's *Shakespeare Gallery*, and in British history painting at large, he fails to find a mode of art responsive to common needs. Although promoted within a democratic system, the deficiency of contemporary art is due to its conventionality (ibid. 12:293; Pape 1996: 132). Forster answers the question about the

connection of aesthetics and the market place, a connection which in England “had been linked from the first” yet could only cultivate a national taste still dictated by “the whim of rich customers” (Forster 1958–90 7:113).

Tieck commenced his studies at Göttingen in 1792, and he was encouraged by two of his professors, Heyne and Fiorillo, to undertake the commentaries on the engraved prints of the *Shakespeare Gallery*. Years later Tieck recollected “having already written the attempt in Göttingen in 1793. It was objectionable for me to see these prints being praised excessively in every paper. My teacher Fiorillo, who had given me lectures (*privatissime*) on paintings, approved my essay, and Heyne, who had always been very kind and friendly to me, sent it to the editor [Christian Felix Weiße] of the *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften* in Leipzig, the journal in which it was published in 1794” (*Kritische Schriften* 1848 1:vii–viii; quoted in Hölter 1996: 136). Heyne himself had published a series of commentaries on the *Shakespeare Gallery* in the *Göttingsche Anzeige von gelehrten Sachen*, and these formed a ground on which Tieck could develop his own analysis. Tieck’s voluminous manuscript on art history (Cod. Vind. 12.821; Austrian National Library, Vienna), as Achim Hölter (1987) has shown, was composed from the notes and readings in which he was engaged while attending Fiorillo’s lectures. Tieck drew from these notes in *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* (1798), in which he describes the works of Albrecht Dürer, Lukas van Leyden, Raphael, Traini, Correggio, and Michelangelo. Wackenroder used what he learned from Fiorillo’s lectures when he drafted *Herzenergiessungen eines Künstliebenden Klosterbruders* (1796), the tale of an art enthusiast whose keen and sensitive response provided a model for the Romantic conception of art. Wackenroder’s hermeneutic focused mainly on the spectator’s experience, but he also presented the work of art and the mediating language of signs in terms of the same subjective/objective dichotomy that he used to define the spectator’s response (Barasch 1990: 293–304). Tieck was still a student, age twenty-one, when he undertook his commentary on the *Shakespeare Gallery*.

As a contribution to the visual hermeneutics being developed at Göttingen, Tieck’s critique is problematic, for it confounds the visual considerations with a firm belief in the priority of the Shakespearean text. Furthermore, Tieck was concerned with the staging and performance of Shakespeare’s plays. The artists of the *Shakespeare Gallery*, in Tieck’s judgment, were guilty of two recurring faults: either they chose the wrong dramatic moment to represent, or they presumed to outdramatize the dramatist. “The dramatic poet has moments in his drama,” Tieck asserts, “which no brush nor pencil can ever capture.” As an example, he cites a passage from *Lear* on the heath:

No, I will weep no more. — In such a night
 To shut me out! — Pour on; I will endure: —
 In such a night as this! O Regan, Gonerill!
 Your kind old father, whose frank heart gave you all, —
 O that way madness lies; let me shun that;
 No more of that.
 (*King Lear* 3.4.17–22)

What defies representation in the static medium of the painting is the rapid gamut of emotions expressed in these few lines. “One would always see only the weeping Lear, or the raging father, who restrains himself with coldness; to show how these two feelings melt one into the other, how they combine with the infirmity of reason, to which his pain gradually succumbs and becomes madness, would certainly prove impossible even to a Raphael: here stands a great boundary-marker between the province of the painter and of the poet” (Tieck 1991 [1795] 1:655).

Tieck acknowledges here the demarcation between the spatiality of painting and the temporal flux of poetry precisely as it had been defined in Lessing’s *Laokoon*. Although Tieck may have considered his effort at writing a commentary on the engraved plates of the Boydell *Shakespeare Gallery* as an extension of the principles developed in Lichtenberg’s commentaries on the engraved plates of Hogarth, Tieck’s method actually has little in common with Lichtenberg’s. Unlike Lichtenberg, Tieck locates his hermeneutic task in his sense of the artist’s fidelity to Shakespeare. His standard, then, is the extent to which the artist “catches the poet’s spirit”: “If a kindred genius of art catches the poet’s spirit, and portrays his delicate intellectual ideas in a vivid and sensual way, makes them lasting by the magic of color and lets us feel that pleasure as if durable which we only catch in flight while reading, and captures those appearances which are only fleeting in an actor’s performance (and naturally have to be): Then he deserves warmest thanks by any friend of the great poet as well as by any friend of art” (Tieck 1991 [1795] 1:653). As Shakespearean scholar, he has already laid a hermeneutic claim to the dramatic reference attempted in these engravings. The tales that Hogarth told in *The Rake’s Progress*, *The Harlot’s Progress*, and *Marriage à la Mode* were stories with no text, plot, character, action, setting, signs, or symbols other than what Hogarth himself supplied. Lichtenberg addressed himself exclusively to the picture. His task was to translate visual signs into language. Tieck, however, had a text before him, an acquaintance with numerous performances, and even previous endeavors, including Hogarth’s, to paint scenes and characters from Shakespeare. While he could thus avoid Lichtenberg’s confrontation with

visual aporia, he was obliged to address the issues raised by Lessing's discrimination of the verbal and visual arts.

The representation of the "frozen moment" of art in Fuseli's painting from *King Lear* (engr. Earlom) was doomed, according to Tieck, to a emotional reductionism. In the illustration to the opening scene, Tieck was displeased to find that Fuseli depicted Lear at the extremity of his anger. Rather than attending to the "rising action," which Lessing had recommended to the artist, Fuseli passed over Lear's petty cajoling and pique. He turned instead to the irrational outburst, after Cordelia confesses her inability to "heave my heart into my mouth," in which Lear disowns his "sometime daughter."

Few works of art afford the eye such a repugnant view. All the bodies here are strained in an unnatural manner, all muscles are put into activity without need. Lear, the major figure, is of them all the worst, for it is the most exaggerated: instead of the strength and energy of Shakespeare one sees here only affectation and bombast. Lear here utters his curse of Cordelia in the extremest rage, with no trace of the weak and childish old man as described by the poet. Here he is a giant. It is most insipid that in his feet, through his clothing, one can study the anatomy of his muscles. His outstretched hand is affected. Even here the artist wants only to demonstrate his academic mastery. (Tieck 1991 [1795] 1:677)

For the illustrations to *King Lear* Boydell gave commissions to three of the most dramatic painters of the age. The scene on the heath was painted by Benjamin West (engr. W. Sharp), president of the Royal Academy after Reynolds's death. Although he grants some skill to West's execution, Tieck finds this painting inadequate in representing "one of the greatest scenes of the play: Lear's descent into madness."

He speaks with the disguised Edgar, and finally tears off his clothes, in order to become human again, just as he was when nature brought him forth, without being disfigured by robes and useless ornament. The moment here is very well chosen, and it cannot be denied that this plate, especially through the light that is cast by the torch, has a great effect, and in many respects can be designated a beautiful composition. — But if I also think on the great poet, then I promptly discover that the two artists have little in common with each other. At the very outset it must even be objected, that West has allowed the Earl of Gloucester to enter here, who, to be sure, provides the great effect with the light from his torch that is cast upon the scene, but who nevertheless disrupts the unity of impression and the attention which ought to rest exclusively upon Lear and his agony. (Tieck 1991 [1795] 1:678)

Because he is thus being judged in terms of dramatic as well as artistic composition, West is at a disadvantage under Tieck's criteria. Indeed, even

the dramatic criteria presuppose a fidelity to the text. Tieck has acknowledged the artist's difficulty in overcoming the temporal constraints of a static medium, but he will not condone West's visual maneuver of leaping ahead to Gloucester's entrance with a torch (at the Fool's cue: "Look! here comes a walking fire," 3.4.117), while Lear is still addressing Edgar as "unaccommodated man, . . . a poor, bare, forked animal" (3.4.110–11). West (the engraver Sharp deserves much of the credit) is praised for the masterly chiaroscuro introduced through Gloucester's torch. That Gloucester's presence also gives meaning to Edgar's disguise of madness, and that the father/son relationship provides a thematic parallel to Lear's own crisis, certainly would seem ample dramatic justification, but Tieck objects that it has required a trespass against the text and has somehow diminished the focus on Lear himself.

Fuseli's representation of Lear has been judged repugnant and affected; West's, as visually effective but dramatically misconceived. Worst of the three illustrations of *King Lear*, in Tieck's judgment, is Barry's rendition of Lear with the dead Cordelia in the final scene (engr. F. Legat).

Expression, drawing, composition,—every aspect here is equally miserable, every thing is mannered in the worst way, without bringing forth even a momentary effect. The folds of the robes are unnatural; Edgar is much too large in relation to the other persons; nowhere is nature evident. Why the corpse of Edmund should be naked, I cannot comprehend. One figure which almost arouses laughter is Lear: he is utterly without character; round about him there is no breeze, only in his hair does a storm seem to blow; perhaps this was intended as a substitute for the lack of expression, and one must grant that the artist could not achieve it more cheaply. (Tieck 1991 [1795] 1:655)

At the end of his critique, Tieck apologizes that he may have expected too much of the individual artists. From the outset, he reminds his reader, he has based his criteria on expectations commensurate with the genius of Shakespeare (*ibid.*). To be sure, Tieck began his commentary by positing the possibility that the artist might "apprehend the mind of the poet, and render vividly to the senses his fine intellectual ideas, and capture permanently through the magic of paint, so that we might continue to feel the pleasure, which in reading we can only snatch in passing, and even hold onto those appearances which in the performance of the actors are only fleeting, and so must be by their very nature" (*ibid.*: 653). What is essentially transitory, according to this set of expectations, must be captured in a permanent medium. Tieck has set up the rivalry between text and image in a way that clearly gives advantage to the former. He wants the artist in a purely visual medium to capture what the playwright accomplishes through language and performance.

In representing a scene from a play, Tieck reasons, the artist should not rely on stage performance, but endeavor instead to re-create the characters and actions through his or her own imagination. To copy the representation on the stage, in Tieck's judgment, is to copy a copy rather than to engage directly the vitality of the original. In terms of this criterion, one might expect Tieck to be tolerant of the artist who endeavors to depict a description of an offstage event. Yet he faults Hodges for taking the subject of "melancholy Jacques" (enr. S. Middiman) "not from the scene itself, but from a description out of the mouths of one of the speaking persons." The artist should not be bound by stage performance, but it is nevertheless an error to depart from what Shakespeare intended as part of the stage action: "Without yet commenting on the value of the drawing itself, this procedure seems to be very much in error, for I cannot possibly hold this plate for a subject taken from the play itself. Granted, that very many descriptions in Shakespeare offer the artist every thing possible for the most beautiful compositions; nevertheless here, where the action of the play should be presented to view, must only that be represented which actually occurs in the play, and not that which is external, or merely narrated" (ibid.: 665-66). After thus opposing the choice of the subject, Tieck turns his attention to the execution. In his critique of the illustrations to *Lear*, he had made the point that the artistic renditions were too one-sided, depicting anger but not anguish, and the seeming coldness but not concealed suffering. The representation of melancholy Jacques, as a comic character described in a comic dialogue, would seem, in accordance with Tieck's critical argument, to call for a certain co-presence of the light and the dark, the cheerful and the pathetic. But Tieck is not satisfied with the resulting ambiguity.

The misanthropic Jacques lies in the forest; a stag wounded by a hunter sadly approaches the forest brook; about this object Jacques speaks to himself, fully in the character of his moody temperament. What the artist want to express here, if his primary purpose were not to reveal the dark mood of the misanthropist? and how could he express it? The tiny figure of Jacques is almost lost, and the splendid landscape can arouse in the viewer feelings of cheerfulness as well as of melancholy. This plate, therefore, is merely a vignette among the paintings of Shakespeare's plays. The execution deserves all praise; it is very painstaking, but the figures are much too lost. (Ibid.: 666)

Such were the problems that had been identified and discussed in Lessing's *Laokoon*. What is given to the artist's medium is space, and what challenges but also limits visual representation is the possibility of creating within that static space the illusion of temporal movement. What is given to the poet in the consecutive sequence of language is temporal movement, and the poet

must strive to create illusions of space. Although he does not acknowledge it, Tieck has allowed his conception of Shakespeare's text to transcend its literary boundaries. Thus he has imposed upon the artist a double handicap: the visual rendition must not only compete with the verbal, it must compete with the verbal already visually realized as performing art. The drama has asserted its presence visually as well as verbally, spatially as well as temporally. The discussion of an appropriate "moment" of artistic representation, therefore, must have reference to considerations of dramatic action and character as engendered within their own particular dimensions of theatrical space and time. Tieck may generously wish to thank the artist, who has rendered "durable" those scenes "which we only catch in flight while reading" and has, on the same canvas, managed to capture "those appearances which are only fleeting in an actor's performance." Not surprisingly, he found no artist who could meet his expectations.

Romantic Reception of Lessing's *Laokoon*

Henry Fuseli, the artist whose "negative sublime" was reproved by both Forster and Tieck, was nevertheless one of the most popular artists of the period. Although Fuseli himself was fond of denouncing Lessing's *Laokoon*, he had quietly absorbed many of Lessing's ideas into the lectures he delivered at the Royal Academy. His repudiation of Lessing was a part of the polemic he often addressed against the German Enlightenment and neoclassicism. Thus in his review of the *Travels* of Friedrich Leopold Count Stolberg he ridicules the incapacity of the German dilettante "boldly to kick aside the tripod from which [Johann Joachim] Winckelmann, Lessing, and [Anton Raphael] Mengs promulgated their false and frigid oracles" (*Analytical Review* 26 [Dec. 1797]: 548; Fuseli 1951: 119). Objecting to "the very narrow limits prescribed to painting with regard to the choice of objects," he disparages, without explicitly naming Lessing or Winckelmann, the critics responsible for imposing those limits. The very sculpture cited by those "tame antiquarians," Fuseli (1951: 216) declares in his review of Thomas Hickey's *History of Painting and Sculpture*, offers a potent argument against the presumption of temporal limits: "Laocoon, with his sons, will always remain a sufficient answer to all that has been retailed in our days on the limits of the art by tame antiquarians from our tamer painters" (*Analytical Review* 14 [Oct. 1792]: 165).

Fuseli's (1831 3:71-72) own interpretation of the sculpture of Laocoon makes clear that he saw in the struggles a much more vigorous temporal/spatial dynamism than Winckelmann or even Lessing was willing to acknowledge:

In the group of the Laocoon, the frigid ecstasies of German criticism have discovered pity like a vapour swimming on the father's eyes; he is seen to suppress in the groan for his children the shriek for himself,—his nostrils are drawn upward to express indignation at unworthy sufferings, whilst he is said at the same time to implore celestial help. To these are added the winged effects of the serpent-poison, the writhing of the body, the spasms of the extremities: to the miraculous organisation of such expression, Agesander, the sculptor of the Laocoon, was too wise to lay claim. His figure is a class, it characterizes every beauty of virility verging on age; the prince, the priest, the father are visible, but, absorbed in the man, serve only to dignify the victim of *one* great expression; though poised by the artist, for us to apply the compass to the face of the Laocoon is to measure the wave fluctuating in the storm: this tempestuous front, this contracted nose, the immersion of these eyes and, above all, that long-drawn mouth, are separate and united seats of convulsion, features of nature struggling within the jaws of death. (Fuseli, *Lectures on Painting* [1801], lecture 1)

Although the artist has given the figure of Laocoon “*one* great expression,” that expression cannot be fixed; “to apply the compass to the face of the Laocoon is to measure the wave fluctuating in the storm.” Fuseli seems to resort here to paradox: the facial expression is fixed, but it is also fluctuating. But the paradox is no paradox at all. Although sculpture is immobile, the viewer is not; every shift in perspective alters the perception of anatomical contour. The muscles seem to flex, the serpents to writhe, and the face to express varying intensities of agony. Fuseli, in his account of facial expression, was still very much a student of Johann Caspar Lavater's physiognomy.¹ Directed against Winckelmann is his scorn of the “frigid ecstasies of German criticism” that have discerned “pity like a vapour swimming on the father's eyes.” Opposed to Lessing's conviction that the sculptor has “softened the cry to a sigh” to avoid the ugliness of convulsion when pain is at its utmost extremity, Fuseli has seen in the face of Laocoon a fluctuating storm; the varying features are “separate and united seats of convulsion.”

After years of repudiating Lessing's tameness and frigidity, Fuseli finally came to terms with Lessing's *Laokoon*. In his review of Uvedale Price's *Essay on the Picturesque*, he begins with disdain for the “long bigoted deference to the old maxim that poetry is painting in speech, and painting dumb.” The old maxim, of course, is from Simonides, “the Greek Voltaire,” whom Lessing quotes at the beginning of his *Laokoon*. But Lessing, too, cautions that because the phrase seems to have its true side, one tends to overlook

1. Fuseli advised on translating, editing, and illustrating Johann Caspar Lavater, *Physiognomic Fragments*, 5 vols., edited by Thomas Holloway and translated by Henry Hunter and Thomas Holcroft (London: 1789–98).

that as a whole it is not merely imprecise but false. Fuseli, endorsing Lessing's discrimination between the spatiality of art and the temporality of poetry, talks about the error of poets who are deluded into producing a "deluge of descriptive stuff, which overwhelms by a rhapsody of successive sounds what can only be represented by a figure." He acknowledges Lessing as the critic "of great acuteness and some taste" who has shown "the futility of such mutual inroads of poetry and painting on each other." He goes on to add, however, that Lessing's temporal and spatial demarcation was nevertheless "a tame principle" and that the author had not drawn "the inferences that obviously derive from his rules" (*Analytical Review* 20 [Nov. 1794]: 259; Fuseli 1951: 206-7).

In his lecture "On Invention," seven years later, Fuseli (1831 3:133-34) again opens with reference to the "dazzling antithesis" of Simonides, but on this occasion he endorses Lessing in an almost verbatim translation that he properly acknowledges in a footnote: "As Poetry and Painting resemble each other in their uniform address to the senses, for the impression they mean to make on our fancy, and by that on our mind, so they differ as essentially in their *materials* and in their modes of application, which are regulated by the diversity of the organs which they address, ear and eye. *Successive action* communicated by sound and *tune* are the medium of poetry: *form* displayed in *space* and momentaneous energy are the elements of painting." The element of truth that Lessing was willing to accept in Simonides' phrase was that both poetry and painting involved a medium of communication; thus he invokes a system of natural signs in art, of artificial signs in poetry. In endorsing Lessing's notion of successive action, Fuseli also affirmed the "middle moment, the moment of suspense." The artist could best achieve the illusion of dynamic flux by representing the moment "pregnant with the past and not yet having given birth to the future" (aphorism 96; *ibid.* 3:94).

Fuseli frequently repeats the point that the language of art is spatially constitutive, while the language of poetry is temporally successive. Thus in his review of William Cowper's *Homer*, he asserts that "poetic imitation . . . is progressive, and less occupied with the *surface* of the object than its manner." He finds this very point also confirmed, not in Lessing, but in William Roscoe's account of Renaissance art: "Mr. Roscoe with great propriety places the essence of poetic diction (not of poetry itself, for that consists in invention), in representing its object in motion, to impress us with its variety of action and attitudes, in short in following *time*, avoiding a minute anatomy of motionless surfaces, to which words, its vehicle, are totally inadequate." Surfaces are the subject of the visual arts, for surfaces "can only be discriminated by line and colour." It is curious that Fuseli,

with not the slightest objection, here allows Roscoe full credit for ideas that he well knows derive from Lessing. While this is possibly a covert mark of his anti-Lessing campaign, it may well be simply an indication that Lessing's ideas have gained such wide currency that anyone can assert them with great propriety (ibid. 1:89).

John Opie was among those lecturers at the Royal Academy who also managed to repeat Lessing's arguments with only the slight impropriety of neglecting to mention Lessing as the source. Opie, the "Cornish Wonder" whose natural genius in portraiture brought him into prominence, was noted for his ingenuity in the dynamics of light and shade. At a time when historical settings and period costuming were being adopted in theater productions, Opie's paintings for the *Shakespeare Gallery* had a significant influence. His historically dressed figures set standards for the so-called costume-history-piece. In 1805 he became professor of painting at the Royal Academy. Because he was concerned with the problems of how the artist adapts from Shakespeare and other literary sources, he made frequent use of Lessing's *Laokoon* in his academy lectures. Even without identifying Lessing by name, his adaptations from Lessing's arguments are unmistakable. In his lecture of February 23, 1807, he borrows from Simoni-des the familiar distinction between painting as "*mute poesy*" and poetry as "*speaking pictures*." So great is the "diversity in their modes and means of exerting their powers," he adds, "that the study of one can, at best, be considered as a *general* only, and, not at all, as a *technical* help to invention in the other." They may aim at similar effects, but their means of obtaining them are as entirely different as are "the senses of hearing and seeing, the different gates by which they enter the mind." Opie (1809: 61–62) draws on Lessing's temporal/spatial distinction with only slight alteration:

The one operates in time, the other in space; the medium of the one is sound, of the other colour; and the force of the one is successive and cumulative, of the other collected and instantaneous. Hence the poet, in his treatment of a story, is enabled to bespeak the reader's favour by a graceful introduction, describing his characters, relating what has already happened, and showing their present situation and thus preparing him for what is to come, to lead him on step by step with increasing delight, to the full climax of passion and interest; whilst the painter, on the contrary, deprived of all such auxiliary aid, is obligated to depend on the effect of a single moment. That indeed is the critical moment in which all the most striking and beautiful circumstances that can be imagined are concentrated, big with suspense, interest, passion, terror, and action; in short, the moment of explosion, which illuminates and brings at once into view the *past*, *present*, and *future*, and which, when well rendered, is often more than equivalent to all the successive energies of the past.

In the medium of language the narrator can move backward and forward in time and order the narrative sequence in a variety of ways to enhance interest and emotional effect. The painter, by contrast, “is obliged to depend on the effect of a single moment.” Opie’s advice to the artist in determining that moment closely follows Lessing’s case for rising action and the illusion of successive motions and accumulative events. Because of the difference in their means and their medium, the “subjects equally adapted to both arts” nevertheless require radically different means of organization and representation. “The most striking beauties, as presented to one sense, being frequently wholly untranslatable into the language of another, it necessarily results that many interesting passages in history and poetry are incapable of affording more than a bald and insipid *representation on canvass*” (ibid.: 63).

Romantic Reception of Hogarth

Because he had objected vehemently to the engraved prints of John Boydell’s *Shakespeare Gallery*, it may seem strange that Charles Lamb warmly praised the engraved prints of William Hogarth’s *The Rake’s Progress*, *The Harlot’s Progress*, and *Marriage à la Mode*. Lamb’s hostility to the prints of the *Shakespeare Gallery* was aroused principally by seeing the artist as a would-be rival of the playwright. “What injury (short of the theatres) did not Boydell’s ‘Shakespeare Gallery’ do me with Shakespeare!” As Lamb makes clear, the actors and the theaters no less than the artists and the gallery were guilty of the injury committed against Shakespeare. The injury was one of particularizing and thereby limiting the poet’s “infinite variety.” The injury was “to be tied down to an authentic face of Juliet!” (to Samuel Rogers [Dec. 1833]; Lamb 1933 3:394). At fault was the very act of visual concretization that rendered the shapings of the imagination too explicitly to the eye. Lamb’s indictment was not simply against Opie’s rendition of Juliet or Richard Westall’s portrait of Imogen; it was leveled against Eliza O’Neill as well for her presumption in appearing as Juliet at Drury Lane and against Maria Foote for daring to play Imogen at Covent Garden.

Because Shakespeare is the most imaginative playwright of all times, according to Lamb’s peculiarly paradoxical expression of bardolatry, he can be “played” only in the mental theater of the reader’s imagination. Any performance, any visual representation, is an infringement, a curtailment of the conjuring power. Lamb, to be sure, might close his eyes at the theater in order to relish the poetic power of the spoken word (presuming it not to have been badly spoken). But a painting could offer him only external appearances, not the essential qualities of character. He disliked

the crude display of “the infirmities and corpulence of a Sir John Falstaff,” and he objected with xenophobic vehemence to the visual reminder of “Othello’s colour” (“Barrenness of the Imaginative Faculty in the Productions of Modern Art”; Lamb 1899–1900 3:152). Because he could not bear to witness an enactment showing how a blackamoor in a fit of jealousy kills his innocent white wife, Lamb (1899–1900 6:52–54) concluded that Shakespeare’s play was unsuited for the stage (“The Tragedies of Shakespeare considered with reference to their fitness for Stage Representation”). He raises no objections to Shakespeare’s text. The text as literary work is safe. Dangerous, however is the visual physicality of the pictured image or the stage performance.

In Hogarth’s prints Lamb saw no such danger, for there was no such rivalry with the text. Hogarth did not presume to “illustrate” Shakespeare. He created his own scenes, narrated his own tales. His manner of visual narrative, and especially his astute representation of character, made him a kindred spirit rather than a rival of Shakespeare. Too, Hogarth’s images had been enhanced by the passage of time; the years had added a patina of domestic familiarity and nostalgic associations. Even stage performances become precious when recollected from the theater of yesteryear. While Hazlitt enthusiastically reviewed current performances and became a strong supporter of the acting of Edmund Kean, Lamb avoided the contemporary stage and reserved his praise for performers of an earlier decade, Thomas Betterton and Joseph Shepherd Munden (“On the Artificial Comedy of the last Century”; *ibid.* 4:275–87; see also “On Some of the old Actors,” 4:257–74, 288–91). These actors played their roles only in the author’s memories of a bygone era.

A similar aura of nostalgia made the engravings of Hogarth especially precious to Lamb. They are pictures familiar to him since childhood. “One of the earliest and noblest enjoyments I had when a boy, was in the contemplation of those capital prints by Hogarth, the *Harlot’s* and *Rake’s Progresses*, which along with some others, hung upon the walls of a great hall in an old-fashioned house in —shire, and seemed the solitary tenants (with myself) of that antiquated and life-deserted apartment” (“On the Genius and Character of Hogarth,” *Reflector*, no. 3 [April–Sept. 1811]; *ibid.* 6:102–33). Lamb thus contains his critique of Hogarth within a frame of personal recollection. At the close of his critique he evokes again the domestic familiarity by describing “the matchless *Election Entertainment*, which I have the happiness to have hanging up in my parlor.”

Lamb presents his account of “the genius and character of Hogarth” to oppose the denigration of the artist “as a mere comic painter.” The paintings of “the Historical School,” Lamb objects, are often cited to argue

Hogarth's inferiority as one who paints not the grand scenes of history but scenes of "an inferior and vulgar class." This sort of argument is specious, Lamb asserts, because it bases its valuation on the subject of a painting, not on the skill of composition and execution. Hogarth, he declares, is properly understood as an artist not of idealized history but of social realism, who brings an unrivaled satirical vigor to his depiction of the scenes of London life during the 1730s, 1740s, and 1750s.

Lamb's essay contributes significantly to the argument that Hogarth's pictures must be "read." Hogarth's visual images, Lamb insists, function as words in a text: "His graphic representations are indeed books: they have the teeming, fruitful, suggestive meaning of *words*. Other pictures we look at,—his prints we read." Although the picture itself is a text to be read, Hogarth also places within his picture other pictures and actual texts, such as letters, books, bills, and receipts. Lamb does not see the presence of written text as an indication of any inadequacy in Hogarth's ability to tell his story visually. When Hogarth incorporates verbal texts into his sign system, he does so in a way that is fully natural. "All artists but Hogarth have failed when they have endeavored to combine two mediums of expression, and have introduced words into their pictures." Lamb claims too much. Other successes, such as Nicolas Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*, would allow Hogarth prestigious company in introducing words into picture. But Lamb's point is that Hogarth owes his success in introducing the text as a natural artifact, one that belongs in the scene. Perfectly natural, for example, is the playbill in the foreground of *Strolling Actresses dressing in a Barn*. It announces the performance of *The Devil to Pay*, with the added notice that this will be the last performance before the parliamentary edict prohibiting strolling actors goes into effect. The written text is punctuated, as it were, by the chamber pot and royal crown just below it. Reading a Hogarthian scene requires reading the texts in the picture, but also reading the pictures in his pictures. For the pictures, too, such as the pictures on the wall in plate 2 of *The Harlot's Progress* or the escutcheon in the final plate, comment on the characters and the action.

Lamb also stresses that much of the "suggestive meaning" is recorded in "the human face." In spite of its relatively "small part, reckoning by the geographic inches in the map of man's body" or "calculating from its proportion to the whole (a seventh or an eight, I forget which)," the human face is capable of revealing a range of expression that rivals the spoken language for its vast and subtle complexity and in many circumstances becomes eloquent precisely at the point when spoken language falters and fails (Lamb 1899–1900 6:122). Hogarth, in Lamb's appraisal, was especially gifted at capturing the language of facial expression. To understand

Hogarth's meaning, then, one must study the countenances of his *dramatis personae*.

The author who readily confessed, "I have no ear," was by no means also bereft of an eye. To be sure, his eye was too sensitive to bear scenes that assaulted the comfortable sense of English values. When Hogarth depicts the *Stages of Cruelty*, from the child's cruelty to animals to the adult's unflinching act of murder, Lamb is unwilling to acknowledge any satirical merit. He objects not to the incremental horrors of the *Stages of Cruelty* but, rather, to the want of moral purpose informing the satire. The dissection of the cadaver does not proclaim "poetic justice" being meted out to the original perpetrator of cruelty; the "Reward of Cruelty" seems, instead, to institutionalize cruelty in the medical study of anatomy. He dismisses the entire series "as mere worthless caricatures, foreign to his general habits, the offspring of his fancy in some wayward moment." But he goes on to affirm that "there is scarce one of his pieces where vice is most strongly satirised, in which some figure is not introduced upon which the moral eye may rest satisfied" (ibid. 6:126-27). This does not mean that Lamb will ignore the horrors of *Gin Lane* in order to expatiate on the nostalgic values of *Beer Street*. He grants that many viewers are "disgusted and repelled" by the poverty and drunkenness of *Gin Lane* and that "many turn away from it, not able to bear it," but he defends the unflinching honesty of Hogarth's satirical critique as a challenge to complacency. Hogarth has not exaggerated, but, rather, he has consolidated the recurring events of St. Giles into a single moment (ibid.: 107-8).

How one understands and interprets a text or image depends on the range of experience one brings to the task. Because interpretation is in large measure an associative process, individuals are apt to vary in their response. The emotional response, Lamb (ibid.: 105-6) asserts, is especially susceptible to the sway of individual temperament: "In the perusal of a book or a picture, much of the impression which we receive depends upon the habit of mind which we bring to such perusal. The same circumstance may make one person laugh, which shall render another very serious; or in the same person the first impression may be corrected by after-thought." The corrective function of afterthought Lamb finds indispensable to understanding Hogarth's use of incongruity. By its very nature, incongruity elicits multiple and conflicting responses. Whether Hogarth uses it for humor or satire, incongruity has a meaning, and that meaning can only be derived from an understanding of the plurality of response. It is the task of interpretation to reconcile that plurality.

As defined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1983 1:168, 156, 293, 2:16, 23), the imagination is the "*esemplastic*" power "to shape into one," capable of

reconciling opposites and reducing multitude to unity. Lamb (1899–1900 6:108), in describing the richness of Hogarth’s works, insists on the pervasive presence of the imagination, and he defines the imagination as “that power which draws all things to one,—which makes things animate and inanimate, beings with their attributes, subjects, and their accessories, take one colour and serve to one effect.”

Hogarth’s *Gin Lane* provides Lamb with an example of the informing and unifying power of the imagination: “Every part is full of ‘strange images of death’ [*Macbeth* I.3].” Hogarth depicts an entire population reduced to poverty and abject degradation. The only businesses that flourish are those to the left and right, S. Gripe, Pawn Broker, and Kilman Distiller, as well as the Gin Royal in the foreground and the establishment marked by a coffin as its sign. At the top of the picture a building is collapsing, about to fall on the funeral procession passing below. In the foreground a baby falls from the arms of its drunken mother and is about to plunge to its death; seated before her on the stairs is a cadaverous man, clutching the basket with his gin bottle to his side even as his gin glass slips from his hand. “It is perfectly amazing and astounding to look at. Not only the two prominent figures, the woman and the half-dead man, which are as terrible as any thing Michel Angelo ever drew, but every thing else in the print contributes to bewilder and stupefy,—the very houses, as I heard a friend of mine express it, tumbling all about in various directions, seem drunk,—seem absolutely reeling from the effect of that diabolical frenzy which goes forth over the whole composition” (Lamb 1899–1900 6:108–9). Not only is the whole composition infused with a diabolical frenzy, Hogarth has engaged a mode of aesthetic complementation that prompts the viewer to seek the horrors beyond what has been rendered visible. “Not content with the dying and dead figures, which he has strewn in profusion over the proper scene of the action, he shows you what (of a kindred nature) is passing beyond it. Close by the shell, in which by direction of the parish beadle, a man is depositing his wife, is an old wall, which, partaking of the universal decay around it, is tumbling to pieces. Through a gap in this wall are seen three figures, which appear to make a part in a funeral procession which is passing by on the other side of the wall, out of the sphere of the composition” (ibid.: 109). This trick of extending the interest in the subject “beyond the bounds” of the art form itself, Lamb asserts, is a mark of genius.

Lamb elucidates this trick of genius by quoting from Shakespeare’s account of visual synecdoche and complementation in *The Rape of Lucrece* (ibid.). He turns to the lengthy ekphrasis (thirty-one rhyme royal stanzas) in which Lucrece beholds

the skillful painting, made for Priam's Troy;
 Before the which is drawn the power of Greece,
 For Helen's rape the city to destroy.
 (Ll. 1367–69)

Lamb quotes the passage that describes how “the painter made a part stand for the whole”:

For much imaginary work was there,
 Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind,
 That for Achilles' Image stood his spear,
 Grip'd in an armed hand; himself behind
 Was left unseen, save to the eye of mind:
 A hand, a foot, a face, a leg, a head,
 Stood for the whole to be imagined.
 (Ll. 1422–28)

It is the greater, not the lesser, artist that confidently engages the imagination of the beholder. “Lesser artists show every thing distinct and full, as they require an object to be made out to themselves before they can comprehend it.” But greater artists, as Shakespeare knows, put their trust in what is here called imaginary work. The appeal to the eye of mind of what the artist has left unseen is a matter to which Lamb (1899–1900 6:117) returns when he insists that intellectual nature demands not the mimetic mirror of physical nature but, rather, that peculiar mirroring capacity of art that reflects mental activity: “The mental eye will not bend long with delight upon vacancy.” The eye of mind, Lamb affirms, is also attracted by the abundance of visual clues that Hogarth distributes about a room, such as pictures on the wall and statues on the mantelpiece, and it is intrigued by the details that are only suggested but hidden from sight. Speaking of the *Election Entertainment*, Lamb (*ibid.*: 130) notes “the unwritten numberless little allusive pleasantries that are scattered about; the work that is going on in the scene, and beyond it, as is made visible to the ‘eye of mind’ by the mob that chokes the doorway, and the sword that has forced an entrance before its master.” No art can achieve its effects without that willing cooperation in which “the spectator must meet the artist in his conceptions half way; and it is peculiar to the confidence of high genius alone to trust so much to spectators or readers” (*ibid.*: 109–10).

Like Trusler and Lichtenberg before him, Lamb (*ibid.*: 107) found much in the final plate of *The Harlot's Progress* to challenge his methods of interpretation, not only his reliance on the semiotics of facial expression but also his effort to reconcile or resolve incongruities. “It is easy to laugh at such incongruities as are met together in this picture,—incongruous objects being of the very essence of laughter, but surely the laugh is far

different in its kind from that thoughtless species to which we are moved by mere farce and grotesque.” Only the first and superficial response provokes laughter; a more careful inspection leads to “a very different frame of mind.” The major source of incongruity, after all, is that the funeral is not what a funeral should be. The viewer has his or her own sense of the grief and sorrow at the loss of another human being that ought to be a part of the funeral. The initial response of laughter over the shallow pretense of mourning gradually gives way to the more profound aesthetic complementation, in which the awareness of what is absent influences the response to what is present.

I never look at that wonderful assemblage of depraved beings, who, without a grain of reverence or pity in their perverted minds, are performing the sacred exteriors of duty to the relics of their departed partner in folly, but I am as much moved to sympathy from the very want of it in them, as I should be by the finest representation of a virtuous death-bed surrounded by real mourners, pious children, weeping friends,—perhaps more by the very contrast. What reflections does it not awake, of the dreadful heartless state in which the creature (a female too) must have lived, who in death wants the accompaniment of one genuine tear. (Ibid.: 106)

Similar to the visual synecdoche of the funeral procession concealed behind the wall in *Gin Lane*, incongruity evokes the “imaginary work” of aesthetic complementation.

The incongruity, however, would itself be vacuous if its effects were discharged once the scene became haunted by the imagined contrast of “real mourners.” The incongruity of Hogarth’s satirical assemblage of mock mourners is too vicious to be easily dismissed. Lamb again compares Hogarth with Shakespeare to describe the workings of incongruity, workings that are essential to the effects which De Quincey was later to describe in “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*” (1823). The “admixtures” of the comic among the truly tragic circumstances, Lamb (ibid.: 114) declares, generate a “force” that enables the viewer to assimilate the scenes of art to “the drama of real life”: “Merriment and infelicity, ponderous crime and feather-light vanity, like twi-formed births, disagreeing complexions of one intertexture, perpetually unite to show forth motley spectacles to the world. Then it is that the poet or painter shows his art, when in the selection of these comic adjuncts he chooses such circumstances as shall relieve, contrast with, or fall into, without forming a violent opposition to his principal object. Who sees not that the Gravedigger in *Hamlet*, the Fool in *Lear*, have a kind of correspondency to, and fall in with, the subjects which they seem to interrupt.” Because of the operative co-presence of opposing elements, incongruity by its very nature poses dif-

ficult hermeneutic problems. In Lamb's reading, moral sentiment exists as the external complement to the actual display of depravity and hypocrisy in Hogarth's satire. It is therefore difficult for him to grant any redeeming qualities to those who are gathered in this mockery of mourning: "That wretch who is removing the lid of the coffin to gaze upon the corpse with a face which indicates a perfect negation of all goodness or womanhood—the hypocrite parson and his demure partner—all the fiendish group—to a thoughtful mind present a moral emblem more affecting than if the poor friendless carcass had been depicted as thrown out to the woods, where wolves had assisted at its obsequies, itself furnishing forth its own funeral banquet" (ibid.: 106–7). With his image of Moll's carcass thrown to the wolves, Lamb himself contributes to the Juvenalian mode of satire he sees governing Hogarth's scene. More intriguing is his reference to "the hypocrite parson and his demure partner," which would seem to provide another instance of the incongruous, yoking together the pretense of virtue with the pretense of modesty. In both instances, Hogarth has recorded the game of pretense in the facial expression: the parson stares vacantly into space; his companion "looketh as butter would not melt in her mouth."

When Lamb addresses the semiotics of facial expression, he declares as operative principle that Hogarth loathes a vacuum: he gives even his menial characters—the knife-grinder or the flute-player in *The Enraged Musician*, or the sign-painter in *Beer Street*—"intense thinking faces." Even when the situation would not seem to require it, he animated his figures with pondering or responsive facial expressions, "as if it was painful to Hogarth to contemplate mere vacancy or insignificance." "This reflection of the artist's own intellect from the faces of his characters, is one reason why the works of Hogarth, so much more than any other artist, are the subject of meditation. Our intellectual natures love the mirror which gives them back their own likenesses. The mental eye will not bend long with delight upon vacancy" (ibid.: 117). It is therefore all the more surprising that Hogarth has bestowed upon the parson a look so vacant that one is prompted to wonder where the parson's mind has wandered. Lamb may be confident in his judgment of the parson's depravity, but he does not tell what factors he has judged. Lichtenberg is more specific: the parson's left hand holds the glass with the brandy that he is spilling into his handkerchief. If his right hand were under that handkerchief, he would notice the spill, even in his tipsy condition. The demure damsel to his right has her left hand, holding the sprig of rosemary, tucked under the parson's right arm; with her right hand she holds her hat over the peculiar rise in her dress. As Lichtenberg notes, the parson's right hand must be engaged in some exploratory venture underneath her garments, which she coyly con-

ceals with her hat. Lichtenberg does not comment on the absence of a line of sight in the parson's eyes, but the vacant expression is to be attributed not to dull inebriation but, rather, to preoccupation with the territory his right hand surveys.

Lamb may be right in observing that Hogarth, "so much more than any other artist," gives his characters the facial expression of intelligence. He grants that this is no universal principle and that the exceptions often contribute to the intrigue of incongruities. The vacant and vacuous expression that occasionally occupies one face amongst a company of alert and responsive faces inevitably sends the viewer to search for an explanation. Hogarth is able to give vacancy of expression a subtle variety of meaning. Consider alongside the parson's vacant stare the look of lethargy and dissipation in the face of the husband in *Marriage à la Mode*, plate 2, or in the final plate of *Marriage à la Mode*, the look of helpless idiocy on the face of the servant who has delivered the laudanum with which the disgraced widow has poisoned herself or, again, "the exquisite idiotism of the little gentleman in the bag and sword beating his drum in the print of the *Enraged Musician*" (ibid.: 116–17). Even such faces as these, which register vacancy, Hogarth has imbued with a wide range of meanings.

Lamb makes a similar point about Hogarth's modulation of meaning in the expressions of madness. Madness has not one face, but many. Crediting Hogarth with an instinctive grasp of the typology of madness, Lamb (ibid.: 104–5) sees in the final plate of *The Rake's Progress* a subtle nuancing of mental pathology clearly distinguished from the artist's indulgence in grotesque caricature.

Here is desperate madness, the overturning of originally strong thinking faculties, at which we shudder, as we contemplate the duration and pressure of affliction which it must have asked to destroy such a building; and here is the gradual hurtless lapse into idiocy, of faculties, which at their best of times have never been strong, we look upon the consummation of their decay with no more pity than is consistent with a smile. The mad tailor, the poor driveller that has gone out of his wits (and truly he appears to have had no great journey to get past their confines) for the love of *Charming Betty Careless*,—these half-laughable, scarce-pitiable objects, take off from the horror which the principle figure would itself raise, at the same time that they assist the feeling of the scene by contributing to the general notion of its subject:—"Madness, thou chaos of the brain."

Hogarth has produced an "assortment of the ludicrous with the terrible" that Lamb likens to the "medley of mirth checked by misery, and misery rebuked by mirth" in the scene from *King Lear* where Lear, Kent, and the Fool encounter Tom o' Bedlam.

While Hogarth could engage burlesque and grotesque caricature, he never confounded caricature with the expressive and truly human faces that populate his scenes. Lamb does not regard it an attribute of Hogarthian incongruity that beauty is found in the very midst of the ugly and the deformed. That combination is what will actually be witnessed in any mixed crowd, as Coleridge had also observed in the passage Lamb quotes from *The Friend* (no. 16 [7 Dec. 1809]; Satyrane's Letters, II [Ratzeburg 26 Oct. and 8 Nov. 1798]):

“Hogarth himself,” says Coleridge, from whom I have borrowed this observation, speaking of a scene which took place at Ratzeburg, “never drew a more ludicrous distortion, both of attitude and physiognomy, than this effort occasioned: nor was there wanting beside it one of those beautiful female faces which the same Hogarth, *in whom the satirist never extinguished that love of beauty which belonged to him as a poet*, so often and grandly introduced as the central figure in a crowd of humorous deformities, which figure (such is the power of true genius) neither acts nor is meant to act as a contrast, but diffuses through all and over each of the group a spirit of reconciliation and human kindness; and even when the attention is no longer consciously directed to the cause of this feeling, still blends its tenderness with our laughter, and *thus prevents the instructive merriment at the whims of Nature, or the foibles or humours of our fellow men, from degenerating into the heart-poison of contempt or hatred.*” (Lamb 1899–1900 6:117–18; Lamb's italics; Coleridge 1969 2:213)

Although Lamb claims to endorse Coleridge's observation, he is not willing to apply it universally. He may agree to the operative effect of the beautiful female face in the madhouse scene that concludes *The Rake's Progress*, but he has been less generous in acknowledging it in the concluding plate of *The Harlot's Progress*. Both the moralizing Trusler and the satirical Lichtenberg were kinder to these harlots in mourning than “gentle-hearted” Lamb (1899–1900 6:104), who denied “all goodness or womanhood” to the young mourner who looks down upon a corpse of her own age. Trusler (1833 [1768] 1:50) went so far as to declare that “the woman looking into the coffin has more beauty than we generally see in the works of this artist.” Lichtenberg (1967–71 3:815) not only ranks her as “one of Hogarth's beauties,” he also sees that beauty as thematically relevant. Hogarth, after all, has placed her at the focal center of the scene: it is she who beholds in the coffin the hazard that threatens the beauty of all young prostitutes. Hogarth has placed as the keystone in the arched composition of figures this memento mori encounter in which a living beauty beholds a beauty who has perished. In Lichtenberg's interpretation, Hogarth has created a silent dialogue in which the deceased says to the beholder, “What you are, and as you are, I too once was.”

Lamb was by no means the first to comment on the facial expression of Hogarth's figures. Trusler (1833 [1768] 1:50) referred to "Mr. Hogarth's thorough knowledge of the operation of the passions upon the features." And Lichtenberg, who had elsewhere debated the methods of physiognomy, frequently drew upon that expertise in his *Ausführliche Erklärung*. But it was Lamb who attended most conscientiously to facial expression as a semiotic system capable of conveying a vast and complex range of meanings. Even if he balked, presumably because of his own moral discomfort, at giving proper attention to the female faces in this gathering of harlots, he nevertheless agreed with Coleridge that the beauty of a female face amidst "a crowd of humorous deformities" could diffuse "a spirit of reconciliation" over an entire scene.

Hogarth, Lamb (1899–1900 6:118) adds, could achieve a similar effect with the faces of children, which are capable of diffusing "tranquillity and a portion of their own innocence to the subject." As one example, Lamb cites "the baby riding in its mother's lap in the *March to Finchley*." In this print Hogarth depicts four women with infants or small children, as well as the pregnant woman in the center foreground who is reminding the officer of her condition and his obligation. The march has brought the regiment to the dangerous straits between Scylla and Charybdis, the tavern to the left and the brothel to the right. Lamb interprets the faces of the children in this scene as Hogarth's effort to assert the virtues of marriage, family, and domesticity amidst a chaotic tumult in which the vices of debauchery and drunkenness wield the more powerful sway. When Lamb refers to the baby's "innocent face placed directly behind the face of the treason-plotting French priest," he has inadvertently shifted his attention to another infant, not the one "riding in its mother's lap," but the one being carried on its mother's back as she strides between the pregnant woman and the conspirators.

As another example of the diffusion of innocence from the face of the child, Lamb (*ibid.*) cites "the boy mourner winding up his top with so much unpretending insensibility in the plate of the *Harlot's Funeral*." For Lamb, the presence of the child counters the hypocrisy that prevails among other figures in the scene. The child is "the only thing in that assembly that is not a hypocrite," and his presence "quiets and soothes the mind that has been disturbed at the sight of so much depraved man and woman kind."

Both Hazlitt and De Quincey responded to Lamb's commentary on Hogarth. Hazlitt's contribution to the hermeneutic process was an attention to composition. But he also made it clear that his appraisal was dedicated to Hogarth as an artist of common life. In the supplemental *Conversations with Northcote*, titled "Conversation as Good as Real," Hazlitt

(1933 20:273) defends, as did Lamb, Hogarth's skill with facial expression: "Has not Hogarth hit off the exact character and expression; and is not that a proof of the painter's hand and eye?" The reply that he records from Northcote is curious: "It may be so; but you cannot be sure of it." What Northcote, or Hazlitt, means is that the accuracy with which facial expression is rendered is difficult to judge if the face itself is a distorted caricature. This is an opinion that Hazlitt himself would oppose, for he has already argued that Hogarth's compositions "are equally remote from caricature, and from mere still life" (Hazlitt 1933 6:138). Hazlitt's Northcote, whose voice Hazlitt often seems to manipulate as *advocatus diaboli*, may agree that composition should be given proper attention, but he acknowledges that the reception of Hogarth has been almost exclusively under the aegis of Hogarth as storyteller: "The correspondent of the paper² laughs at the idea of Hogarth's coming under the article of writing. He *has* come under the article of writing. Does not the critic speak of his 'immortal tales'? Does Mr. Lamb expatiate on the drawing, colour, and effects of light and shade, or only on the moral and the story? He has left out one half of the language of painting in the prints; and they are better for it" (ibid. 20:273). That Hogarth indeed "*has* come under the article of writing" does not simply reflect Lamb's contention that Hogarth's must be *read*; Hazlitt repeated Lamb's claim as part of his justification for including Hogarth among his *Lectures on the English Comic Writers* (1819). If Lamb's commentaries are "better" for having "left out one half of the language of painting," then Hazlitt's endeavor to correct the neglect of the artist's techniques has been undercut. The implication is that Hogarth is not the sort of artist whose work would merit close scrutiny of technique. Even the attention to Hogarth as storyteller had become overblown. Lamb defends Hogarth as a satirist capable of depicting character with the power and precision of Shakespeare, a defense that Hazlitt considered exaggerated. When Hazlitt's Northcote protests that he cannot "see what objection there is to the comparison of Hogarth to buffoons on the stage" (ibid. 20:273), he repudiates Lamb's endeavor to elevate Hogarth from his reputation as mere comic artist.

2. Hazlitt, "Hogarth and Fielding—Mr. Northcote's Opinions," in Hazlitt 1933 20:267–71). In response to the earlier installment of "Conversations as Good as Real" (ibid. 20:260–61; 28 July 1829), a correspondent took issue with the discussion between Hogarth and Fielding. Allan Cunningham criticized Sir Joshua Reynolds for not having noticed Hogarth in his lectures. Northcote, in Hazlitt's (ibid. 20:268) account of the conversation, is supposed to have said of Hogarth and Fielding, "Both of them were great wits and describers of manners in common life, but *neither* of them came under the article of *painting*." If Fielding had been the one who was neglected, the correspondent asked, would Northcote have defended the omission in the same words? "'Both of them were great caricaturists and painters of manners in common life, but neither of them came under the article of *writing*.'"

Hazlitt (*ibid.*) does not deny that Hogarth possessed skills as caricaturist and often took liberties with anatomical proportion: “Who will set limits (by the author’s *crambo*) to the length to which he lolls out his tongue, or to the portentous rolling of his eyes in a squint of ecstasy?” The liberties with anatomical proportion also allow the artist certain other liberties that, lacking precision in perspective and proportion, escape censure because they cannot be ascertained with certitude. As an example, Hazlitt refers to the potentially scandalous aporia of the final plate of *The Harlot’s Progress*. What sort of action has the artist depicted in the figures of the parson and his companion? “Is the sly leer and drooping of the widow’s eyelids, or the position of the parson’s hands in the ‘Harlot’s Funeral’, drawing as well as character and invention?” (*ibid.*). Neither Trusler nor Ireland nor Lamb had made reference to the position of the parson’s hands. Only Lichtenberg had suggested that the parson’s right hand appeared to be fumbling under his companion’s dress. If Hazlitt was familiar with Lichtenberg’s commentary, he does not admit it. It is more likely, judging from the oblique innuendo of his reference, that he has presumed that most connoisseurs of Hogarth’s engravings were already aware of the peculiarity in the placing of the parson’s hands. As a critic of Hogarth, in other words, he could rely on a popular familiarity with the plates and interpretive speculation on the meaning of many of the ambiguous images.

Hazlitt’s essay “On Hogarth’s ‘Marriage à la Mode’” (1814) adds a dimension neglected in previous commentaries, for Hazlitt takes advantage of the recent exhibition of Hogarth’s original oil paintings.³ He concludes the second installment of this essay by saying that he will not comment on *The Rake’s Progress*, not only because he considers the painting inferior to the prints, but also because the prints “have already been criticized by a writer, to whom we could add nothing, in a paper which ought to be read by every lover of Hogarth and English genius” (Hazlitt 1933 4:31). This is high praise; but it is a mere addendum to the essay, and Lamb is identified by name only in the footnote. That Hazlitt owes a larger debt to Lamb is acknowledged in the revised and expanded version, “On the Works of Hogarth,” which formed a part of his *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, delivered at the Surrey Institution.⁴

Lamb’s dictum—“Other pictures we see, Hogarth’s we read”—is equally crucial to Hazlitt’s hermeneutic. Where he differs from Lamb is

3. The exhibition of Hogarth at the British Institute was reviewed by Hazlitt in the *Morning Post*, May 7, 10, 1814 (Hazlitt 1933 18:21–24).

4. Hazlitt, “On Hogarth’s ‘Marriage à la Mode,’” *Examiner*, June 5, 19, 1814; “On the Works of Hogarth,” lecture 7, from *Lectures on the English Comic Writers*, delivered at the Surrey Institution, Nov. 1818–Jan. 1819 (Taylor and Hessey, 1819), 4:25–31, 6:133–49.

in seeing composition and color as part of the semiotic system. In the musical soiree of *Marriage à la Mode*, plate 4, Hazlitt refers to the thematic “alliteration” the artist has accomplished by repetitions of the color red: “The sanguine complexion and flame-coloured hair of the female virtuoso throw an additional light on the character. This is lost in the print. The continuing [of] the red colour of the hair to the back of the chair, has been pointed out as one of those instances of what may be termed alliteration of colouring, of which these pictures are every where full” (Hazlitt 1933 6:135–136). Again, the subtlety of the color nuances dramatically coordinates the effective use of facial expression and “masterly” characterization in the final plate of *Marriage à la Mode*:

I would particularly refer to the captious, petulant, self-sufficiency of the Apothecary, whose face and figure are constructed on exact physiognomical principles; and to the fine example of passive obedience and non-resistance in the servant, who he is taking to task, and whose coat, of green and yellow livery, is as long and as melancholy as his face. The disconsolate look and haggard eyes, the open mouth, the comb sticking in the hair, the broken gapped teeth, which, as it were, hitch in an answer, every thing about him denotes the utmost perplexity and dismay. The harmony and gradations of colour in this picture are uniformly preserved with the greatest nicety, and are well worthy the attention of the artist. (Ibid.: 136)

In addition to these examples of how color may provide harmonic unity or thematic links among the parts of a scene, Hazlitt also notes how Hogarth will deliberately violate color harmony to garishly highlight elements that he wants to expose as disruptive. In *Marriage à la Mode*, plate 3, Hazlitt notes, Hogarth manages a subtle but telling contrast between “the pale countenance of the husband and the yellow whitish colour of the marble chimney-piece”; it is a contrast, Hazlitt explains, that at once confirms the “fleshly tone of the former” but also exposes its insalubrious hue (ibid. 6:135).

What he takes over from Lamb’s attention to facial expression, Hazlitt recasts in terms of compositional study. On this point he insists, as already noted, that Hogarth’s composition is “equally remote from caricature, and from still life.” For detailed attention to the face, Hazlitt argues, some artists treat portraiture as if it were still life; they require, that is, that their models pose with “those attitudes and expressions which can be assumed the longest.” By thus “taking the pains and time” the artist might then “produce almost as complete *fac-similes* as he could of a flower or flower-pot.” The technique of caricature is just the opposite: “Subjects of drollery and ridicule affording frequent examples of strange deformity and peculiarity of features have been eagerly seized by another class of art-

ists, who, without subjecting themselves to the laborious drudgery of the Dutch school and their imitators, have produced our popular caricatures." Hazlitt attributes to Hogarth a method that balances these two extremes: he avoids "the insipid tameness of the one, and the gross extravagance of the other, so as to give to the productions of his pencil equal solidity and effect." His renditions of facial expression may "go to the very verge of caricature," but they "never (I believe in any single instance) go beyond it." Consequently, Hogarth achieves a natural mobility and animation of expression that are beyond the reach of either the portraitist or the caricaturist (*ibid.* 6:138–39).

Hogarth achieved his greatness in the "familiar style," Hazlitt asserts; the "grand style" was beyond his scope. Lamb endeavored to treat this province as if it were a matter of the tragic versus the comic or the genteel versus the vulgar or the passionate versus the superficial. In fact, the discrimination is based on the difference between the real and the ideal. Hogarth was an artist of the real. Because he was "a painter, not of low but of actual life," he could move easily across the full spectrum of social hierarchy: "The ridiculous and prominent features of high or low life, of the great vulgar or the small, lay equally open to him." Hazlitt notes the natural transformation that is wrought upon the "Country Girl, in the first plate of the *Harlot's Progress*," who is introduced as "simple and ungainly," when she reappears in the second plate, "thoroughly initiated into the mysteries of her art, and suddenly accomplished in all the airs and graces of affectation, ease, and impudence." Then, "when put to beat hemp in *Bridewell*," her "affected languor and imbecility . . . is exactly in keeping with the character she has been taught to assume" (*ibid.* 6:143).

Operative in his characterization, Hazlitt argues, is more than "a perception of fashion" and an ability to capture the mannerisms of gesture. Hogarth, as Lamb had already emphasized, had "a sense of natural beauty." Hazlitt's Northcote, in "Conversations as Good as Real," denied that Hogarth created women of stunning beauty (*ibid.* 20:272), but Hazlitt unreservedly affirms that "there are as many pleasing faces in his pictures as in Sir Joshua," and he proceeds to call attention to several: "the girl picking the Rake's pocket in the *Bagnio* scene," "the Poet's wife, handsomer than falls to the lot of most poets," "the theatrical heroine in the *Southwark Fair*, who would be an accession to either of our play-houses," "the girl asleep, ogled by the clerk in church time," "the sweetheart of the Good Apprentice in the reading desk in the second of that series," "the girl in her cap selected for a partner by the footman in the print of *Morning*." Hogarth has generously scattered beautiful women throughout his pictures, Hazlitt declares, "like 'stray-gifts of love and beauty.'" He was by no means

a caricaturist limited to grotesque distortions and deformity: “He painted beauty or ugliness indifferently, as they came in his way” (ibid. 6:144).

Hazlitt readily affirms Lamb’s contention that Hogarth could also modulate “between the comic and the tragic, between loose laughter and deep passion.” He gave Lamb full credit for demonstrating “unanswerably” Hogarth’s skill in representing “scenes of the deepest distress” and “the heart-rending calamities of common life.” Lamb had also rightly observed Hogarth’s ability to communicate emotion through the language of facial expression: “ungovernable rage, silent despair, or moody madness, enhanced by the tenderest sympathy, or aggravated by the frightful contrast of the most impenetrable and obdurate insensibility, as we see strikingly exemplified in the latter prints of the Rake’s Progress.” Hazlitt objects, nevertheless, that “Lamb has gone too far in paralleling some of these appalling representations with Shakespeare.” Lamb’s exaggeration was clearly prompted by his endeavor to oppose the prejudice that had demoted Hogarth to the inferior rank of caricaturist. Lamb was right, Hazlitt concedes, in claiming that there was no “want of passion and intense feeling,” and that Hogarth shared with Shakespeare not only “the power of embodying the serious and the ludicrous,” but also the ability to reconcile “these contradictory faculties” (ibid.).

What Lamb does not acknowledge in Hogarth’s language of facial expression is the careful attention, not just to the emotions, but to the anatomy of facial musculature that gives him such “complete and absolute mastery over the truth and identity of expression and features”: “Every stroke of his pencil tells according to a preconception in his mind. If the eye squints, the mouth is distorted; every feature acts, and is acted upon by the rest of the face; even the dress and attitude are such as could be proper to no other figure: the whole is under the influence of one impulse, that of truth and nature” (ibid.: 145). Because of the anatomical accuracy with which he communicated the movement and change of facial expression, Hogarth gained control over the illusions of temporal flux. That illusion is conjured and sustained, not in the falling cups, saucers, and teapots of *The Harlot’s Progress*, plate 2, but in the responsive musculature in the countenances of those who behold the action. Unintimidated by Lessing’s discrimination of the temporal versus the spatial, Hazlitt declares that Hogarth was an artist of temporal action:

He represented the manners and humours of mankind in action, and their characters by varied expression. Every thing in his pictures has life and motion in it. Not only does the business of the scene never stand still, but every feature is put into full play; the exact feeling of the moment is brought out, and carried to its utmost height, and then instantly seized and stamped on the canvass for ever.

The expression is always taken *en passant*, in a state of progress or change, and, as it were, at the salient point. Besides the excellence of each individual face, the reflection of the expression from face to face, the contrast and struggle of particular motives and feelings in the different actors in the scene, as of anger, contempt, laughter, compassion, are conveyed in the happiest and most lively manner. (Ibid.)

Hogarth's limitations were not in depicting life in all its moods or society in all its classes. He was limited, rather, by anything that existed beyond immediate experience and observation. He had, Hazlitt asserted, no "sympathy with that which existed only *in idea*." "His mind had feet and hands, but not wings to fly with." Set him up with his easel in the midst of a city crowd, and he could paint "a mighty world of sense, of custom, of everyday action, of accidents and objects coming home to us." His was "the gross, material, stirring, noisy world of common life and selfish passion." But he had no access to that other "mightier world, that which exists only in conception and in power, the universe of thought and sentiment, that surrounds and is raised above the ordinary world of reality, as the empyrean surrounds this nether globe, into which few are privileged to soar with mighty wings outspread." One turns to Hogarth for representations of the real, not the ideal; of the mundane, not the sublime. "Hogarth only transcribes or transposes what was tangible and visible, not the abstracted and intelligible. You see in his pictures only the faces which you yourself have seen, or others like them; none of his characters are thinking of any person or thing out of the picture: you are only interested in the objects of their contention or pursuit, because they themselves are interested in them. There is nothing remote in thought, or comprehensive in feeling" (ibid.: 147). For this reason, Hazlitt insists, Hogarth remains far behind Shakespeare in the representation of human aspirations and far behind Raphael in the apprehension of the ideal (ibid.: 148–49).

The eighteenth-century principles that had given rise to the neoclassical predilections of Winckelmann, Mengs, and Reynolds had also produced that empirical and common-sense set of mind that won a great following for Hogarth. Romantic artists, however, tended to wrestle with far different temporal and spatial conceptions than those schematized by Lessing. That Romantic critics also struggled with these problems is evident in Friedrich Schlegel's (1967 2:111) complaint that he picked up Lessing's *Laokoon* in the eager anticipation of finding a "rock-solid science of the first and last principles of the plastic arts and their relation to poetry," only to put it down "utterly unsatisfied and therefore utterly disappointed." William Blake (1982: 272–75) created his own dialogue on the problems of verbal and visual limits in his graffiti-encumbered engraving of the Laocoon (see

Burwick 1996). And Thomas De Quincey sustained a probing debate with Lessing's contentions in his annotated translation from the *Laokoon* (1827).

In addressing the supposed temporal limitations of the visual arts, De Quincey recognized the peculiar challenge of providing a verbal description of a visual artifact or a visual representation of a literary passage. De Quincey addressed what he saw as an insurmountable crux in Lessing's critique of the classical examples of ekphrasis: Homer's description of the shield of Achilles and Virgil's description of the shield of Aeneas. Lessing grants the laurel to Homer rather than to Virgil because the poet of the *Iliad* succeeded in liberating the frozen moment of art by narrating the process of its creation (De Quincey 1890 11:211–12). De Quincey, however, was suspicious of the claims for a liberating language, for the capacity of poetic ekphrasis to reanimate the “imitation of human action,” presumably “frozen” in the visual artifact. Ekphrasis is but an illusion, and all mimetic illusions of language are entrapped in the stasis of a literary text.

Like many critics who have since explored the temporal and spatial presumptions of the verbal and visual arts, De Quincey was not convinced by Lessing's discrimination. One of his lengthier notes to Lessing's text concerns the argument about the sort of temporal movement that might be effectively halted in the frozen moment of art. The power to move, which De Quincey insists is the object of art, depends in turn on the capacity of art to reveal that power in process. If art is to move, it must appear dynamic rather than static. As Lessing seeks to establish the regulative principles that govern the artistic endeavor to express “the *acme* or transcendent point of action,” De Quincey inserts no contrary notes. Lessing, of course, is also concerned with how mimesis in visual art is to overcome the bondage of its physical condition, “its punctual restriction to a single instant of time.” To resolve this problem of temporal restriction, the artist must show the “arrested movement”; the artist must create, that is, the illusion of a continuity of movement in the single instant that the work of art depicts. Once that continuity is perceived, it can be reanimated in the active mind of the beholder: “If it be granted of the artist generally that of all this moving series he can arrest as it were but so much as fills one instant of time, and, with regard to the painter in particular, that even this insulated moment he can exhibit only under one single aspect or phasis, it then becomes evident that, in the selection of this single aspect, too much care cannot be taken that each shall be in the highest possible degree pregnant in its meaning, —that is, shall yield the utmost range to the activities of the imagination” (ibid.: 177). The “pregnant” moment is not the ultimate moment of crisis, Lessing argues, but in the movement leading toward that crisis. Thus the artist should represent the moment before the action rises to its extremity

of passion: "To present the last extremity to the eye is in effect to put fetters on the fancy, and, by denying it all possibility of rising above the sensible impression of the picture or statue, to throw its activities forcibly upon the weaker images which lie below that impression" (ibid.: 178). De Quincey is in complete accord with Lessing's contention that the temporal moment of art must appear continuous, and that the imagination of the beholder must be stimulated to reanimate the action. Crucial to this argument is Lessing's discrimination of two modes of temporal movement. At this point, De Quincey finds it necessary to insert another lengthy note, not to disagree with Lessing, but to elucidate further the two modes of temporal movement. One mode involves a homogeneous movement, which reveals a continuous, self-repeating, enduring action; the other, a heterogeneous movement, which, as he translates Lessing's phrase, is "essentially evanescent." The artist must represent the former, not the latter. Although De Quincey agrees with Lessing, he explains the problem in terms that are more particularly relevant to his own grappling with temporal perception: "It is in the very antagonism between the transitory reality and the non-transitory image of it reproduced by Painting or Sculpture that *one* main attraction of those arts is concealed. The shows of Nature, which we feel and know to be moving, unstable, and transitory, are by these arts arrested in a single moment of their passage, and frozen as it were into a motionless immortality" (ibid.). For visual representation, Lessing argued that the artist must select events that progress through self-repeating rather than self-effacing action. Lessing's principle of the "essentially evanescent," De Quincey explained, referred to "all appearances in nature which bear the character to our understanding of sudden birth and sudden extinction, and which by their essence are fluxionary." The frozen moment of art must be durational rather than evanescent. This sort of movement is unsuitable for representation in painting and sculpture, because it will inevitably appear "unnatural when fixed and petrified, as it were, into the unchanging forms of art." If evanescent forms are "frozen," Lessing asserts, they immediately appear unnatural and, even if "otherwise agreeable or terrific, inevitably become weaker and weaker in the impression the oftener they are contemplated" (ibid.: 178-80). De Quincey in fact provides counterevidence to the major distinction that Lessing attempts to draw between the spatiality of art and the temporal flux of language.

Although critical of Lessing's endeavor to define the temporal limits of visual arts, De Quincey was intrigued by Lessing's effort to reconcile the seeming paradox of the representation of pain as the subject of art. The representation of agony and suffering in art was closely related to the problem in tragedy that also depicted suffering and death. But the very

temporal boundaries that reduce the representation of that suffering to a single moment would also curtail the possibility of engaging the catharsis that Aristotle had proposed as the explanation of why an audience was attracted to such a representation. In beholding the agony of Laocoon and his sons, the spectator was denied the experience of a dramatic context; there was no sense of the hamartia of character, no foreboding of disaster, no reconciliation in death. The entire process of tragedy that would allow for catharsis had been restricted to a single moment, and that moment, as Lessing demonstrated, depicted the action as it approaches its dire climax. Because he could not invoke a catharsis, Lessing had to locate the aesthetic appeal in a reconciliation of the anguished expression of suffering with the perception of ideal form. The poet, he declared, had already “succeeded in strengthening the idea of bodily pain” (ibid.: 184); the sculptor’s task was more difficult, not simply because it was restricted by the single moment, but because the body must be displayed in such a way that the struggle could be rendered fully visible. On this ground Lessing defends the nudity of the figure. Here, too, De Quincey imposes a lengthy note on the principle of *idem in altero*, “the interfusion of the similar and the dissimilar” (ibid.: 194–96). The aesthetic debate over the nude and the draped body, De Quincey recognized, replicated the debate over natural and artificial signs. The real problem concerned not the convention of representation, but whether that convention was capable of preserving a sense of intimacy and identity with what it presumed to represent. While the alterity of signs and symbols can be absorbed through perception into the mind, they never lose the alterity of their external reference; by contrast, however, the identity that the artist or poet seeks to express has a fragile, perhaps only illusory “afterlife” in the work (Burwick 1995; Barasch 1990: 153–54, 181–82).

For De Quincey, as for Coleridge, art was always “a reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities” (Coleridge 1983 2:16). Thus De Quincey often addressed how that reconciliation was achieved. Wherever he confronted the aporia of discordant elements in art, he went in search of the unifying and harmonizing principle. This was the aim of his essay “On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*” (De Quincey 1890 10:389–94), and it was also why he wrote his response to Lamb’s critique of Hogarth. It was a belated response, and it came at a time when De Quincey was otherwise inundated with articles for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* on the riots, the repeal agitation, the debates in Parliament, and political economy. Lamb’s “On the Genius and Character of Hogarth” (1811), reprinted in 1817 in volume 3 of *The Genuine Works of Hogarth*, attracted De Quincey’s attention in the midst of his more political journalistic endeavors of 1843. Five years earlier, De Quincey had written for *Tait’s Magazine* a memorial, “Recollec-

tions of Charles Lamb" (1838), and five years later, as a review of Thomas Noon Talfourd's *Final Memorials of Charles Lamb* (1848), he was to write another. But on this occasion, De Quincey sought only to redress Lamb's appraisal of "the misemployed and incongruous characters" in the funeral scene that concludes *The Harlot's Progress*.

The role of the bastard child dressed as chief mourner and the actions of the parson and his companion, as recognized by Trusler, Ireland, and Lichtenberg, as well as Lamb, are aporia that oppose interpretive reconciliation. Having acknowledged incongruity as a characteristic of Hogarthian satire, Lamb satisfied his hermeneutic responsibility simply by labeling these figures as incongruous. Not content with that explanation, De Quincey seeks another explanation in the principle of "making discords do the work of concords."⁵

What is discordant in one frame of reference becomes concordant in another. Discords thus send the mind in quest of concords. Plutarch (1932: 1073) had observed that "music, to create harmony, must investigate discord" ("Demetrius"). "All discord," Pope (1764 3:20) had declared, was "harmony not understood" (*Essay on Man*, epistle 1, l. 292). Discord, De Quincey (1890) readily grants, is everywhere exhibited in the apparent mockery that has been made of the funeral, most strikingly in the figures of the child and the parson: "The thoughtlessness of the infant is sublime: chief mourner it is by office and title of connexion. And even the worldly obdurate clergyman that attends in his robes of office, and seems more alien even than is the infant from this." What Lamb saw as "incongruous," De Quincey here reappraises as the "thoughtlessness" of the child, and the "alien" preoccupation of the clergyman. The problem, as De Quincey identifies it, is that neither the child, who is dressed as "chief mourner," nor the parson, who is to conduct the funeral service, give any sign of grief or awareness of death.

The parson has abandoned his spiritual office in pursuit of sensual interests. And the child, oblivious to the loss of his mother, focuses all his attention on the top he is winding with string. De Quincey, who calls the toy a "cat and dog" (its popular name among children; see entry in *OED*), concedes that Hogarth has carried his depiction of childish thoughtlessness further than propriety might sanction, but he nevertheless defends the inclusion of the plaything. What is inappropriate for the funeral Hogarth has seen as perfectly appropriate for the child: "The cat and dog is so awful

5. I thank Robert Woof, director, and the trustees of the Wordsworth Trust, Dove Cottage, Grasmere, for permission to quote from De Quincey's "On Hogarth's Funeral in the Harlot's Progress] as noted by Lamb" (October 1843; Dove Cottage MS 70 2005984).

an impertinence as to be effectually a blasphemy: tho' the painter in this respect foolish and ineffectual probably thought of them only as accidents belonging to real life" (ibid.). Even in recognizing that a child playing at cat and dog may be a fitting scene of "real life," De Quincey still insists that it is out of place in this scene of death. Neither classical Greek poetics nor neoclassical French criticism, De Quincey declares, would have comprehended the function of discord in the figures of the child and the parson. "Now a Greek would find, tho' not the same contradiction, yet the same alien and unsupported character in the child. Here he would say is a figure unconscious of its share in the drama: incapable of repeating or prolonging the grief which belongs to the scene. True: and because the principle of the Greek and French degeneration is to move only by concords—the large Science being utterly unknown which works by discords—i.e. by making discords do the work of concords—he readily admits the intractability of the child in Grecian hands" (ibid.). How, then, is De Quincey to establish a reconciling concord in the discordant "impertinence" of the child at play beneath the coffin? Accepting Lamb's account of Hogarth as "Shakespearian painter," he claims that one can anticipate a narrative structure more complex and profound than "the vulgar principle of a contrast acting as a foil." Previous exegesis of this plate, unable to see more than contrast, discord, and incongruity in Hogarth's use of the child, has assumed that the artist intended to make the viewer "see the horror more profoundly when brought into juxtaposition with infant pleasure."

This "vulgar principle of a contrast" has disrupted the hermeneutic process, stopped it short of recognition and comprehension of what the child shares with the mother: "The infant's joy is meant not as the contradiction to the poor ruined harlot's misery. It has a nearer alliance with the poor wreck in the coffin than this. The joy the innocence is hers: it is the joy which once she had: it is the rest from misery which once again she has found in her coffin. After a fever how rapid, running mountains high into misery and raving despair, here is again typified in her now peaceful posture—the haven which she has reached—and in the infant that joyous innocence which one stage back was associated with peace" (ibid.). A thematic reconciliation for the role of the "obdurate clergyman" cannot be located in his relationship to the dead harlot or to those who have gathered for her funeral. De Quincey (ibid.) argues that the reconciliation is located in the viewer's capacity for human sympathy and in the viewer's recognition of the want of such sympathy among the mourners, and most emphatically in the person of the clergyman:

Nay pass on to the clergyman who sounds a note even less reconcilable with the more profound misery of the key note, because alien from all passion whatever

traduced by sensual ease and utter worldliness of heart—which becomes hardness of heart in the end. At first sight he and his companion resist even more effectively the tendency of the drama—they, in the language of electricity are obstinate “non-conductors” to the pathos of the groups. Yet No: if read more profoundly they also are essential. They repeat the common sentiment not by their constant sympathy but by the very refusal of that sympathy the utter blind insensibility to their own insensibility when coupled with the fact.

The very figure who ought to be the instrument and mediator of compassion has forsaken his spiritual office and given himself over to “sensual ease and utter worldliness of heart.” The wanton self-indulgence of the parson and his companion has left them both oblivious to the death of the young woman who lies in the coffin. Hogarth has revealed not only their insensibility to the immediate situation, but also a more hardened condition of depravity—“the utter blind insensibility to their own insensibility.” These are characters, De Quincey (*ibid.*) observes, who are cast in a role very similar to the “vanity figures” depicted in the many medieval versions of “The Dance of Death”: “We see death and change and sorrow standing behind the shoulders of those chiefly who refuse to see the forms belonging so essentially in front. What we mean is expressed in that famous Dance of Death which occupied so many of the medieval art[ists]. The King, the soldier, the lady, are seen mincing in the multitudinous dance: and by a momentary glimpse beneath the phantom crown is seen the fleshless scull—through a rent of the armour or through a jewelled robe of the lady is seen the . . .” The lacuna at the close of the passage is not De Quincey’s attempt to replicate in prose Hogarth’s visual trick of hiding the parson’s hand. His manuscript ends here. He has made his point about “making discords do the work of concords.” The parson and his companion prompt us to look more deeply into the scene to discover the elements of human sympathy that have been displaced by the insensibility of the figures in front. That sympathy, in De Quincey’s (*ibid.*) affirmation of spiritual redemption, resides in the unseen figure in the coffin: “The peace is there come back again which once she had in her native solitude and in her father’s cottage. She seems to have recovered it in her coffin after some frightful fever. The little infant, that is playing on the floor amongst funeral pageantries that for itself are but holiday trophies rehearses the condition which once was hers.” De Quincey, although clearly endorsing a religious doctrine of “moral regeneration,” has not made his hermeneutic dependent on that doctrine. His is not an allegorical reading or a “Hogarth moralized”; rather, he has set forth a method of reconciling the aporia of discordant elements.

Summary

The rise of visual hermeneutics was given major impetus and direction in Lessing's temporal/spatial discrimination of poetry and painting in terms of natural and arbitrary signs. The commentaries on the works of Hogarth provided a challenging ground for demonstrating the competency and capacity of visual hermeneutics. While early commentators, such as Rouquet, Trusler, and Ireland, were oblivious to sign systems and unconcerned with developing a coherent hermeneutic approach, Lichtenberg defined specific hermeneutic categories—motion, activity, and action—and he developed a hermeneutic of line of sight, ground of comparison, and line of comparison. With the establishment of art history as an academic discipline at Göttingen under the influence of Johann Dominik Fiorillo, other scholars at “the British university in Germany” followed the lead of Lichtenberg in attempting thorough exegesis of works of art. Tieck and Forster addressed their hermeneutic ingenuity to the analysis of the works in Boydell's *Shakespeare Gallery*. Fuseli and Opie, two of the artists of the *Shakespeare Gallery*, revealed their familiarity with Lessing's arguments by incorporating into their lectures and critical essays Lessing's discrimination of the temporal and spatial limits. Altering the hermeneutic horizon to give more attention to the dynamics of human emotion, Lamb added to the interpretation of Hogarth a consideration of the function of incongruity and the semiotics of facial expression. Although the commentaries of Trusler and Ireland were still available to the English reader, it was not their exposition of the Hogarth plates but, rather, Lamb's exposition that demanded the attentive response of Hazlitt and De Quincey. Hazlitt demonstrated that composition, use of color, and technical aspects of painting could inform an understanding of the artist's meaning; to Lamb's scrutiny of facial expression Hazlitt added an awareness of anatomical principles and Hogarth's dedication to empirical observation. With his translation of Lessing's *Laokoon*, De Quincey provided a major contribution to the British reception of Lessing. In his commentary on the final plate of *The Harlot's Progress*, De Quincey also showed the hermeneutic utility of the principle identity in alterity, first posited in his commentary to Lessing, and its corollary, concord in discord, with which he endeavors to resolve the aporia of the incongruous figures, making discords do the work of concords.

Although *Gemäldebeschreibung* had a venerable tradition dating back to Philostratus and Callistratus, it acquired hermeneutic rigor in the eighteenth century, when the secularization of textual hermeneutics and the attention to sign systems made possible a new mode of investigating the dynamics of visual representation. Lessing's *Laokoon* consolidated many of the

ideas that had been brought forward earlier in the century by Du Bos and Harris. His innovation was in aligning the discrimination of the respective temporal and spatial provinces of poetry and painting with the possibilities afforded by their respective reliance on artificial signs and natural signs.

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