

WHAT GOODMAN LEAVES OUT

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Nelson Goodman stands accused of multiple sins of omission. He has, we are told, left out history, mind, and a host of other worthies deserving of recognition. Is he guilty as charged? Only if he has made the omissions in question. And only if such omissions are faults.

W. J. T. Mitchell thinks indifference to history vitiates Goodman's aesthetics.¹ His argument, briefly, is this: In 'Routes of Reference', Goodman disavows any interest in history.² Elsewhere, he construes realism in the arts as either routine or revelatory representation.³ But to classify a work as routine or revelatory requires embedding it in an historical context. Goodman's account of realism and his indifference to history thus are not cotenable. But Goodman requires both. To discredit resemblance theories, he needs to ground realism in habituation. And to provide a neutral, comparative study of reference, he needs to disavow historical contingencies. So, Mitchell concludes, Goodman's aesthetics deconstructs. Its fundamental commitments undermine each other.

Is Mitchell right? I think not. The passage he cites concerns reference exclusively. Reference, Goodman maintains, is independent of history. But there is no reason to think indifference to history extends beyond reference. So unless realism is wedded to reference, Goodman can consistently maintain that realism depends on history and reference does not.

Were metaphysical realism the issue, Goodman would be in trouble. On that theory, the world is as it is no matter how we characterize it, our statements being true just in case they correspond to the world. Such a realism is evidently bound to reference, for the requisite correspondence obtains only if our terms refer to the world's constituents. Goodman adamantly rejects this position. He denies that the world is just one way, and denies that a single correspondence links symbols and their referents.⁴ Metaphysical realism has no place in Goodman's philosophy.

Realism in the arts, however, is something else entirely. Realistic works abound. But a work's status as realistic is neither determined by nor determinative of its reference. For in the arts, realism is a matter of style, not substance. What Goodman denies is that realistic works connect any more directly to their objects than works in other styles. Mitchell's conundrum dissolves. For style, Goodman maintains, 'consists of those features of the symbolic functioning of a work that are characteristic of author, period, place, or school'.⁵ Style then is explicitly concerned with history; reference, explicitly indifferent to it.

Goodman's work does not seem imbued with any special vision of the past. Nor is he much concerned with particular historical facts. Still, his philosophy is hardly indifferent to history.

According to Goodman, inductive validity turns on projectibility. And projectibility requires entrenchment -- fit with past inductive practice. 'Green' is projectible and 'grue' is not, because 'green' has been successfully projected far more often than 'grue'.⁶ This historical fact, though contingent, is decisive. History then is woven into the fabric of

Goodman's epistemology.

Goodman has not studied the social forces that entrench particular predicates or those that favor one mode of representation over another. But investigation into such matters could fruitfully take place within the theoretical framework he provides.

Goodman explicitly defers to history in his discussion of autographic art. The identity of paintings, sculptures, and other autographic works is determined, Goodman maintains, by their history of production.⁷ Nothing but the product of Rembrandt's hand can be The Night Watch. Why not, Richard Wollheim asks, extend the requirement of historicity to all art?⁸ Then novels and symphonies, like paintings and sculptures would depend for their identities on their histories of production. Only inscriptions whose history extends back to Bronte would be instances of Jane Eyre; only performances whose history goes back to Beethoven would be instances of the Eroica.

Goodman demurs. Notations are available to identify works of allographic art. And where works are notated, syntax and semantics answer the question of work identity. But, Wollheim retorts, they may supply the wrong answer. They allow that the very same allographic work -- the same poem or novel or sonata -- could be independently created by different artists. Goodman and I concede the possibility; Wollheim balks. How should the disagreement be mediated?

In explicating a concept already in use, conformity to established usage is desirable. Other things equal, a criterion should count as identical works we already consider identical, count as distinct works we

already consider distinct, and settle cases that are pretheoretically in dispute. Unfortunately, the two criteria pretty much agree about clear cases. Inscriptions spelled the same as Jane Eyre are overwhelmingly likely to be copied from an inscription that was copied from . . . an inscription of Bronte's manuscript. And inscriptions spelled the same as Finnegan's Wake are overwhelmingly unlikely to be copied from an inscription that was copied from . . . an inscription of Bronte's manuscript.

Much then turns on our 'intuitions' about a few (fictional) puzzle cases. Should we say that Menard and Cervantes wrote different novels? That the medieval poet and the beach boy wrote the different poems? Does it matter?

If the two poems are distinct, an anthology could without redundancy include both. Indeed, if Wollheim is right, the very same words might have been inscribed by five hundred independent poets and constitute five hundred distinct poems. Then an anthology could consist of nothing but inscriptions of the various poems composed of exactly the same sequence of words. What would be the point of such an anthology? My intuition is that it would be wildly redundant. But intuitions about such matters are suspect, for the cases they concern rarely arise. And concepts are sharpest where they get the most exercise.

Wollheim has at least two points in his favor. First, his criterion would provide a more uniform treatment, the identities of all works of art depending on their history. More uniform, but not completely uniform. For whether or not they are answerable to a principle of historicity,

allographic works, unlike autographic ones, remain subject to syntactic and, in some cases, semantic standards. Regardless of its history of production, differences in syntax disqualify an inscription as an instance of Jane Eyre. But a smudged print, if taken from Dürer's plate, is an instance of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Second, much aesthetic understanding requires appeal to history. We cannot judge a work original or derivative, early or late, or appraise its influences and anticipations without knowing who did it and when. If we demand such information anyway, why not incorporate it into the identity conditions of the works?

Goodman and I, of course, do not deny that knowledge of their history often informs understanding and appreciation of musical and literary works.⁹ But criteria of identity determine what an object is, not what is important about it. So we can concede the importance of historical properties without considering them essential to or constitutive of the works. If the book in my possession is spelled the same as true copies of Jane Eyre, we maintain, it is an instance of the work regardless of how or why or by whom it was produced.

It may be worth emphasizing how little our criterion does. As Paul Hernadi points out, what counts as a particular literary work is typically a product of editorial revision, often informed by scholarly conjecture.¹⁰ Significant controversy surrounds the issue of which sequence of words deserves to be called Shakespeare's Hamlet. Goodman and I would say that each of the alternatives constitutes a different work. So we would frame the issue for scholars and critics as: Which of the several works counts

as Hamlet? And a criterion that determines that something is a work is not sufficient to determine whether that work counts as Hamlet. It is, however, sufficient to fix the identities of the contenders.

On Wollheim's account, allographic works admit of forgery. If my copy of Jane Eyre lacks the proper historical connection to Bronte's manuscript, it is a fake. Then despite the fact that I've read a work that is word for word identical to Jane Eyre, I've never really encountered the work.

If syntax is decisive, however, such a predicament cannot arise. If my book is spelled the same as true copies of Jane Eyre, it is an instance of the work; otherwise not. In neither case, though, could it be considered a fake. For a work comprised of different words would fool no one. Our criterion then makes sense of the impossibility of forging allographic works. Wollheim's does not.

Wollheim, of course, has another reason for wanting to incorporate the principle of historicity. He contends that a work's meaning depends on the fulfilled intentions of the artist.¹¹ So if its meaning is integral to it, the work wouldn't be the work it is had it been produced by a different artist. Wollheim thus faults Goodman's aesthetics for omitting intentionality.

Wollheim's conception of intention is refreshingly complex. The artist's intention is not just his explicit plan. It involves 'the desires, beliefs, emotions, phantasies, wishes -- conscious, preconscious, and unconscious -- that cause the artist to make the work as he does'.¹² Even so, intention is not, we maintain, determinative of meaning.

Most works of art are bad. Either their creation is caused by

conscious, unconscious, or preconscious self-destructive motives, or such works fail to fulfill their artist's intentions. Self-destructive tendencies no doubt abound. Still, it seems likely that much bad art is due to a simple lack of talent. And such a lack need not be a function of the artist's desires, beliefs, emotions, phantasies, and wishes. It may simply be an inability to get his hand to do what he wants it to.

Good art also is apt to have unintended features. One would not want to exclude them from a work's meaning simply because they were not consequences of the artist's psychological state. Works of art are often more and often less than their artists intend.

Artist's intentions are frequently inaccessible.¹³ Sometimes the artist is unknown; sometimes he is known only through his work. Typically, subsidiary information about the artist's psyche is scant or misleading. Whether or not he fulfilled his intention remains a mystery. But his work still admits of interpretation. We study the play, not the little we know about Shakespeare's biography, to discover the meanings of Hamlet.

The main reason Goodman and I do not consider the artist's intention determinative of a work's meaning is that we think works of art bear multiple meanings. At most the artist's intention determines one.

Wollheim disagrees. His principle of integrity asserts that a work of art has exactly one meaning. A work may be 'shot through with ambiguity'. But it is impossible that there should be 'two or more (rival and incompatible) interpretations each of which seeks exclusively to give the meaning of the work'.¹⁴ Henry V then bears a univocal interpretation as both favoring and opposing war.

Wollheim's principle of integrity leads to a logical difficulty. The conjunction of two truths is true. So on Wollheim's account

(p) Henry V opposes war & Henry V does not oppose war is true. But (p) is a contradiction. And everything follows from a contradiction. So if we accept the thesis that works bear univocal interpretations as ambiguous, we can deny nothing. Not a happy result.

Goodman and I avoid it by relativizing 'Henry V opposes war' and 'Henry V does not oppose war' to separate interpretations. The play neither absolutely favors nor absolutely opposes war. Relative to one right interpretation it favors, relative to another equally right interpretation it opposes war. The pluralism we advocate does not, however, mean that all interpretations are right. There is, as far as I can tell, no right interpretation on which Henry V favors conventional wars and opposes nuclear wars.

Where it is available, the artist's intention might provide an interpretation, or at least resources for constructing an interpretation of his work. But the view we advocate does not privilege the interpretation(s) favored by the artist.

Disregard of the artist's intention may be a special case of the absence of mind that, Paul Hernadi charges, undermines Goodman's theory.¹⁵ Hernadi takes the notion of mind to be unproblematic. His discussion suggests that Goodman treats minds rather like unicorns. It's quite clear what unicorns would be. But, as it happens, there are none. Similarly, on Hernadi's view, it's quite clear what minds and mental states would be. But, Goodman perversely insists, as it happens, there are none.

Goodman however thinks it is not at all clear what minds and mental states would be. Mentalistic terminology stubbornly resists explication. So to claim, as Hernadi does,¹⁶ that reference must be mediated by mind is to introduce a black box into the referential chain. Goodman does not, of course, deny the reality of the phenomena mentalistic vocabulary purports to comprehend. So he does not exclude the subject matter of psychology. He simply avoids a familiar, but theoretically problematic way of talking about it.¹⁷ Rather than agreeing with Hernadi that 'hippopotamus' refers to a hippopotamus because a mental act connects word and object, Goodman says the word refers to the beast because it is so used. And being so used involves intersubjectively accessible factors such as understanding the symbol, learning the symbol, applying the symbol, correcting and being corrected in misuses of the symbol, and so on. What Goodman omits then is not the psychological realm but a particular way of characterizing it.

Goodman's approach to psychology is evidently congenial to Jerome Bruner.¹⁸ The self, Bruner urges, is constructed through autobiography -- a narrative that both situates a person within and differentiates her from her society. If so, constructing a self is a 'literary' or at least a symbolizing activity. What matters is not just the events that constitute a life, but which of them are singled out as important and how they are described. The very same incidents might occur in the lives of, and lead to the construction of quite different selves.

Turning points are crucial. What a person makes of her life depends on her vantage point. And after psychologically major events, new self-descriptions and interpretations of one's past become for the first

time available. Who one takes oneself to be, Bruner finds, is a function of the categories available for self-description. And these can change drastically over a lifetime. Moreover, 'self-making is powerfully affected . . . by the interpretations others offer of your version. . . . [W]hile Self is regarded (at least in Western ideology) as the most 'private' aspect of our being, it turns out on close inspection to be highly negotiable, highly sensitive to bidding on the not so open market of one's own reference group'.¹⁹ Public opinion evidently even influences who you think you are.

The self that Bruner finds is no fixed Cartesian ego locked away in the black box of the mind, but a malleable construct that both shapes and is shaped by events, its construal of them, and other people's construals of its construals. That Goodman didn't say this first is something of a surprise.

Mitchell contends that in the last chapter of Reconceptions, we exclude truth absolutely.²⁰ As Joe Ullian's paper shows, this is something of an exaggeration.²¹ We absolutely exclude truth as correspondence, being unable to make sense of the thesis that truth consists in a favored relation between words and the mind-independent world. But we're willing to endorse a semantic conception of truth. We agree that

'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white.

What this amounts to, of course, depends on what world version or symbol system is in effect.²² Our point at the end of Reconceptions is that truth is not philosophically preeminent.²³ It is too narrow a notion, being restricted to declarative sentences. And it is of limited interest even

within its restricted range. Many symbols besides declarative sentences convey understanding and insight. And the understanding and insight conveyed by declarative sentences often does not turn on their truth. Science prefers sweeping approximations to convoluted truths. We suggest then that truth is but one of several modes of rightness of symbols, and not by any means the most important.

Unlike Ullian, however, we don't draw a principled distinction between observation and non-observational sentences. All sentences, we believe, are subject to the same strictures and are vulnerable in the same ways. Observation sentences, Ullian says, are sentences that could have been learned by ostension. But what a person learns by ostension, indeed what she could learn by ostension, depends on what she already understands. So against different cognitive backgrounds, the same sentence may be observational and non-observational. An observation sentence, Ullian continues, has clear conditions for assertibility and hence for the ascription of 'true'.²⁴ But even a sentence whose seemingly clear conditions of assertibility have been satisfied may be given up as false if a better overall account emerges. Eyewitness reports are notoriously unreliable.

Ullian's metaphor of a puzzle with multiple correct solutions²⁵ is closer to our view. Truth there is a matter of what has been firmly established, what may safely be taken as a starting point for further work. There is no suggestion of any special epistemic access to those parts of the puzzle we have managed to solve.

Anne Hawley, too, charges Goodman with an omission.²⁶ She recognizes

the power of the thesis that art is cognitive, and sees in it the potential for reinvigorating museums. Goodman has identified the end of the museum, she suggests, but omitted the means. She's right. At best he provides illustrations. In his multimedia works, 'Hockey Seen' and 'Variations on Las Meninas', he has shown some ways to make works work. But one always wants more.

Tom Mitchell notes that questions of value, excluded at the beginning of Languages of Art, come in at the end.²⁷ The role they play, however, is not the one traditional aesthetics cast them in. In Goodman's aesthetics, merit transmutes from end to means.²⁸ Differences in value serve as goads not goals of aesthetic understanding. The strategy is characteristic of Goodman. What may at first seem omissions turn out to be reassignments. History, truth, intention, and the like are not excluded absolutely. But they are stripped of their preeminence, and their function is reconceived. They are factors that may contribute to understanding in the arts and elsewhere, but they have no epistemically privileged position.

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NOTES

- ¹W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Realism, Irrealism and Ideology', THIS JOURNAL.
- ²Nelson Goodman, 'Routes of Reference', Of Mind and Other Matters, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, (1984), p. 55.
- ³Nelson Goodman, 'Three Types of Realism', Of Mind and Other Matters, p. 127.
- ⁴Nelson Goodman, 'The Way the World Is', Problems and Projects, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., (1972), pp. 24-32.
- ⁵Nelson Goodman, Ways of Worldmaking, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., (1978), p. 35.
- ⁶Nelson Goodman, Fact, Fiction, and Forecast, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, (1983), pp. 92-99.
- ⁷Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., (1972), pp. 115-122.
- ⁸Richard Wollheim, 'The Core of Aesthetics', THIS JOURNAL, pp. [ms. 11-15].
- ⁹Nelson Goodman and Catherine Z. Elgin, Reconceptions, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., (1988), pp. 49-65.
- ¹⁰Paul Hernadi, 'Reconceiving Notation and Performance', THIS JOURNAL, pp. [ms. 8-10].
- ¹¹Wollheim, pp. [ms. 15-16].
- ¹²Wollheim, p. [ms. 8].
- ¹³Goodman and Elgin, p. 55.
- ¹⁴Wollheim, p. [ms. 16].

- ¹⁵Hernadi, p. [ms. 3-11].
- ¹⁶Hernadi, p. [ms. 4].
- ¹⁷Goodman, 'On Thoughts Without Words', Of Mind and Other Matters, pp. 21-28; Goodman and Elgin, pp. 83-92.
- ¹⁸Jerome Bruner, 'Self-Making and World-Making', THIS JOURNAL.
- ¹⁹Bruner, p. [ms. 18].
- ²⁰Mitchell, p. [ms. 6].
- ²¹Joseph Ullian, 'Truth', THIS JOURNAL
- ²²Goodman, Ways of Worldmaking, p. 120.
- ²³Goodman and Elgin, pp. 155-159.
- ²⁴Ullian, p. [ms. 4].
- ²⁵Ullian, pp. [ms. 13-14].
- ²⁶Anne Hawley, 'A Venerable Museum Faces the Future', THIS JOURNAL
- ²⁷Mitchell, p. [ms. 3].
- ²⁸Goodman, 'Merit as Means', Problems and Projects, pp. 120-121.