

## Art and literature

Bart Nooteboom

80. Art

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*Here I start a series on art. It is based in part on a discussion with a panel of three artists and a well-known architect.*

In classical Greek philosophy the beautiful was identified with the true and the good. A strong Platonic tradition, which manifests itself in Schopenhauer, for example, is that artistic experience is a serene contemplation of eternal, immutable ideas. In this way art, in particular music, helps to escape, temporarily, from the relentless drive of our will towards the satisfaction of ever new desires that is never achieved.

In another tradition, art was seen as *mimesis*, imitation of nature or a representation of religious, historical or mythical figures or scenes.

Under the influence of the philosopher Kant, art was seen to form a category of its own, next to the true or the good.

If art is no longer associated with the good, then the horrendous, the ugly, even evil could be art, as in Dostojevsky, Mallarmé, Céline, and de Sade.

In romanticism, art became the revelation, the authentic expression, of what is delved from inside the self. Here, art is still representational, but it now represents something from inside, not out in the world.

Does a work of art have some canonical, correct or true meaning, referring to some entity in the world or in imagination? Gadamer proposed that art does not have one true interpretation of what the artist intended. The viewer or listener brings in his or her interpretative, creative arsenal of spiritual, emotional and intellectual mental frames adopted and developed along the course of life.

According to Heidegger, art does not represent anything but stands in its own, creating a new world. Albert Camus, in his *The rebel*, recognized art as creating an alternative reality. As discussed in the item on power (nr. 50) in this blog, this may yield an escape from institutionalized power. For Nietzsche art is creative destruction, and a transformation of the self, not a delving from it.

If art needs to be useful, to survive the present onslaught of economization on culture, it is not mere opportunistic rhetoric to say that it is an exercise in world making and as such is conducive to innovation.

How could this work? Earlier, in items 32-34 (on meaning) of this blog, I proposed that people categorize (assign to concepts) what they see or hear by picking out features that

fit in their mental make-up of concepts and associations that constitute their *absorptive capacity*. That is how they make sense of the world. Perhaps what art does is to offer new features that confuse, upset or bypass established categorization. It may trigger novel associations that do not fit the customary frame or script. Thus it may loosen existing categories and suggest new 'ways of world making'. It may 'not make sense' and thereby generate novel sense making.

According to my small panel of artists, art is expression, shaping. It comes from a conscious idea, meaning, decision, choice, design. It is intentional, it does not arise haphazardly or by chance, as it might for an amateur. And to be professional is to fully go for it. You cannot be a bit of an artist.

## 81. Serenity or excitement?

published 25-2-2013

According to Schopenhauer artistic genius is exceptional in its capability to escape from the drive of the will towards ever new unsatisfiable desires, into the serene contemplation of platonic, pure, eternal ideas. It is an escape from the emotional into the intellectual. For Nietzsche, by contrast, artistic genius is a manifestation of the will to power, in creative destruction. Schopenhauer lauded asceticism, breakdown of the will, Nietzsche abhorred it. Schopenhauer sought serenity, Nietzsche sought Dionysian exuberance.

So, is art serene contemplation of order, harmony? Or is it excitement in transcending order, breaking harmony? Nietzsche made the distinction between on the one hand the Apollonian, representing the harmonious, the static, the eternal, and on the other hand the Dionysian, representing the disharmony, intoxication, the dynamic, creative destruction.

According to Schopenhauer a work of art is the perfect representation of a universal, or constitutes a new universal by itself. But perhaps it is the opposite: a denial of the universal, the triumph of the individual, something in its own that does not fit any universal. A declaration of independence.

If the intellectual is the contemplation of the universal, then the rebellion of the individual is the emotional, romantic, and art is emotion, not an escape from the will but a celebration of it, but the Nietzschean, not the Schopenhauerian will.

But I don't agree that the intellectual is just serene contemplation of the universal, the eternal, the harmony. I think it also includes the exhilaration of the novel connection, the shift, the breakthrough, the discovery.

And yet, I admit, serenity also is part of artistic experience. It can be contemplation in a feeling of time standing still, of a balance, a harmony achieved.

My panel of artists rejects the separation of harmony and destruction. It is both, they say. Can art be both Apollo and Dionysus, serenity and excitement, enjoying and breaking balance? How, then, would the two combine or connect?

As follows, perhaps. The excitement lies in having an idea, a hunch, but then it needs to be realized, be 'made to work'. In scientific discovery also, a famous scientist once said 'I have got an idea but I don't yet know how to get it'. When is a work of art finished? When the artist has the feeling that it is, when there is nothing to be added or subtracted, when 'it is just right'. A mathematical theorem has beauty in that way: just right, incontrovertible, nothing too much nor too little. That, perhaps, is where the harmony lies.

Perhaps here again, as in the discussion of invention (in item 31 of this blog), and in the discussion of the change of meaning (in item 37), the cycle of change discussed there applies. From the carriage of existing harmony into novel contexts, the material and inspiration for change arise, in novel combinations that break through limits, to achieve an emergent novelty that is next ordered, reduced and polished into a new harmony.

Beyond the level of the individual piece of art, on the level of culture, evidence for this is found in the fact that new artistic and intellectual impulses have typically arisen at the crossroads of cultures, as the Renaissance in northern Italy. The novel enters from the periphery to create a new centre, where the novelty becomes the mainstream and may then consolidate into a new orthodoxy.

## 82. Evolution in nature and art

published 3-3-2013

Are nature, or much of it, and art, or some of it, beautiful, or appealing, for the same or for different reasons?

I propose to consider the following idea: they are both the outcome of evolution, but in different ways. Evolution is characterized by more or less random, chaotic generation of trials that are put up to forces of selection. What survives is in harmony with its environment, until it is pushed aside by new novelty. Suppose that it is this harmony that appeals to us. Then we have a common ground for appreciation of nature and art. How would that work?

In nature, of course, novelty arises from genetic mutations, copying errors, and novel combinations of genes in chromosomal cross-over, and the selection environment in terms of food, predators, climate, wars, and illnesses decides survival (If you don't recall this from school biology, never mind).

In art, I propose, it is ideas, or views, images, shapes or musical scores that arise mysteriously, chaotically and next may or may not survive the test of 'making it work', in craftsmanship and the struggle with matter, until what survives is in harmony with the sense of the artist. The harmony of a work of art that is 'just right'.

The artist has to ruthlessly pursue that outcome. And if it is liked by others that is a bonus. Here, I think, artists set an example for the good life. If he/she temporarily or

intermittently makes likeable, saleable art in order to survive, that is fine, but if he does not keep his standards there he/she is temporarily not an artist. Rembrandt frequently painted for money, but I am sure that there also he had his standards to keep.

Now why would we appreciate such harmony arising from selection, in nature and art? Because that has contributed to our survival in evolution. If we had not developed such sense we might no longer be here. In order to survive you have to admire what has survived.

But if that is the case, would not the disturbance of order, in novelty that does not fit, or in a shift of selection environment that causes misfits, be distasteful, abhorrent? Yes, and indeed it often is. Novel art forms encounter hostility. Until they have managed to twist the selection environment to their advantage.

### 83. Art and nature

published 8-3-2013

What is the relation between art and nature? I think that the world making of art is partly inspired by nature and our evolution in it. Here I am not falling back on the old notion of art as representation of nature. The connection lies on a deeper level of ways of world making.

Is it surprising that colours and shapes in nature are mostly seen as beautiful, or do we find them beautiful because we have evolved among them, as a species and in our lives? Earlier in this blog I argued that like our bodies our cognitive make-up must in some way reflect success in evolution, in adaptation to the world, because without it we would not have survived. In item 29 of this blog I proposed that the most urgent adaptation was that to objects (food, predators, prey, obstacles, tools) and agents (friend and foe) moving and acting in time and space, and that this has formed our fundamental cognitive apparatus, yielding a *object bias* in our conceptualization of abstract notions such as happiness, love, meaning, etc. that are not at all like objects existing and moving in time and space.

I now propose that something similar is happening in aesthetic judgement. We find things beautiful that we have adapted to and that helped us to adapt. In addition to the colours and forms in nature that I mentioned, this would then include shapes and movements that helped us to survive, such as a strong or fertile body, agility perceived as grace, movement in space, rhythm of movement, etc. Perhaps that also explains our fascination with sports.

Another example is perhaps the ubiquity of the *golden rule*<sup>1</sup> in both nature and architecture, painting and sculpture. In nature it is found, for example, in the dimensions of a snail's house. In architecture it is found, for example, in the proportion between windows on different floors of 17<sup>th</sup> century houses along canals in Amsterdam. What

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<sup>1</sup> The golden rule is defined as the proportion between two line sections a and b where  $a/b = b/(a + b)$ . The solution of this little mathematical equation is that a/b is roughly equal to 0.62

makes the canals so aesthetically pleasing is that while each house has its own shape of the gable, they share the golden proportion between the windows.

Some evidence of the instinctive application of the golden rule is the following. Once, I had an old house drastically restored by an architect friend. The structure consisted of two houses separated by a space that centuries ago was part of an alley between two rows of houses. The space was almost exactly square. The architect designed a glass roof over the space and somewhere in it a spiral stairway to a bridge connecting the first floors of the two houses. It was beautiful and I wondered whether by any chance that might have to do with the golden rule. I made measurements and found that the location of the stairway obeyed the golden rule in three dimensions (in the length and breadth of the space and in the point at which the steps along the stairway switched from pointing left to pointing right). I called the architect to tell him. He did not believe me and jumped in his car to come and confirm my measurements. He was astonished. It seems to have been part of his instinct.

#### 84. The universal and the specific in art

published 14-3-2013

One of the themes in this blog is that of the *universal* and the *specific* (or *individual*). I discussed their interplay, in which a universal is abstracted from the individual and its specific context, to carry what is derived from it to novel contexts. That is a mechanism of learning by generalization. In the novel context, the universal is confronted with the richness of specific, new details, where it may fail to work and may fall apart. If this happens in several contexts, it may be reconstructed, in the form of a novel universal in the making. I connected this process to the *hermeneutic circle*, discussed in item 36 and to a *cycle of invention*, discussed in item 31. What is the relation to art, if any?

In a paper for the Dutch Prince Claus fund, dedicated to preservation of cultural heritage, Charlotte Huygens discusses themes that are, I think, related to this.

One topic in the paper is how in art exhibitions, which serve to present new contexts, art works can obtain new, multiple interpretations. This is related to the theme of locality and globalization. At the Documenta Art Exhibition in 2012 ‘... interaction of art works with the local environment ... formed an integral part of the concept’. This localization of art produces a dialogue (or ‘polylogue’) with other places.

A second theme is the relation between universalized, globalized art, footloose across the world, exhibited mostly in developed countries, and locally embedded crafts still tied to a specific heritage. The challenge is to connect them better, as a feature of exhibitions, as occurred in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, with ‘its mission to encourage classical, craft-based art forms as a source of inspiration for contemporary creation ...’. Such cross-fertilization may break through the ‘.. pitfall ... that cultural heritage and craft is associated with non-Western countries, .... considered to be in the past, whereas contemporary art is associated with Western civilization’.

A third theme is that of art as resistance to dictatorship and totalitarianism where individuals are subjugated or even sacrificed to universalized ideologies. I would add, however, resistance also to similarly subjugating dogmas of capitalism, such as a universalized, context-independent regime of markets.

The three themes come together, I think, as follows. First, universalized art can adopt new meanings by being embedded in novel contexts with their own localized art and craft. Second, the resulting contrasts can jolt universalized art into novel experiments and shifts, to produce the emergence of novel universals. Third, such infusion from local heritage and local variety, diverse individuality, can prevent universals from becoming totalitarian, a steamroller that squashes individuality and variety, where everything becomes a carbon copy, a clone, and a McDonald burger. In this way art is part of the rebellion of the individual against the threat of existing universals and contributes to the emergence and thriving of novel ones.

In conclusion, the mixing and meeting of the global and the local, the universal and the individual, in art and culture, is a crucial part of maintaining the vitality of art itself and of humanistic society.

## 88. Wabi-Sabi

published 9-4-2013

In this blog I have pleaded for *imperfection on the move* (see item 19): for a positive appreciation, not just acceptance, of imperfection, the impossibility, even undesirability of absolutes, and acceptance of change, and of the provisional nature of ideas, knowledge and morality. In change, imperfection can become less imperfect without ever becoming perfect. In that change lies the journey of life. And as Nietzsche indicated, pain, misery, grief, and anguish are part of that life and should be faced rather than hidden in the distraction of false beliefs and hopes. Is there some ultimate goal of that journey, beyond life? Who knows? Probably not. But cannot life yet flourish, and isn't that enough?

How does this relate to art? Does art aim to achieve perfection, or can it rejoice also in imperfection on the move? There is a Japanese tradition in art that does just that. It is called *wabi-sabi*, which means the beauty of imperfection, impermanence and incompleteness. It stands in contrast to modernism, in a way that perhaps resembles my opposition to Platonic and Enlightenment ideals of context-independent, immutable universals.

In his booklet on wabi-sabi Leonard Koren (1994) lists the following differences between modernism and wabi-sabi:

## modernism

*the box as metaphor (rectilinear, precise, contained)*

*manmade materials*

*ostensibly slick*

*needs to be well-maintained*

*purity makes its expression richer*

*solicits the reduction of sensory information is intolerant of ambiguity and contradiction*

*cool*

*generally light and bright*

*function and utility are primary values*

*perfect materiality is an ideal*

*everlasting*

## wabi-sabi

*the bowl as metaphor (free shape, open at top)*

*natural materials*

*ostensibly crude*

*accommodates to degradation and attrition*

*corrosion and contamination make its*

*expression richer*

*solicits the expansion of sensory information*

*is comfortable with ambiguity and*

*contradiction*

*warm*

*generally dark and dim*

*function and utility are not so important*

*perfect immateriality is an ideal*

*to every thing there is a season*

I would not want to subscribe to all these features of wabi-sabi, to the point of rejecting modernism. I still rejoice to see modernist Bauhaus architecture, for example, though I might not want to live in it, but I equally rejoice in seeing an gnarled old wooden door about to fall from its rusty hinges, though if I lived there I might want to replace it.

Are we here facing Nietzsche's opposition between Apollo and Dionysus again, in a different form? Before (in item 81), I argued for a dynamic unity of the two, an echo of dialectics in philosophy, where there is temporary balance, reduction and purity, that is next carried into novel settings that break harmony, in a falling apart of an established order that meets its limits. I would like to see wabi-sabi decay as a movement towards new life, in new forms that aspire to a perfection that is never achieved.

I am reminded of the late self-portraits of Rembrandt: the decay of old age, lines becoming diffuse in rough, thick strokes of paint, the ruby blotch of a thickening nose, astonishingly expressionist for his time.

## 89. Aesthetic judgement

published 16-4-2013

Is aesthetic experience purely subjective, or is it also objective, somehow, or inter-subjective? Can we give arguments for our aesthetic appreciation, trying to get others to agree? And what kind of agreement could that be? How rational could it be? The philosopher Kant posed this question. Rather than elaborating his view I offer my own, which resembles Kant's but goes its own way.

For this, I continue the analysis of meaning in connection with art that I started in item 80 of this blog. In my earlier discussion of meaning (in items 32-34) I proposed that rational understanding of something entails that we categorize it, i.e. assign it to a concept. We do

this by picking out perceived features of it, depending on the context, to see if they fit the concept. We do this by comparing features to a *prototype* or a *script* that represents the concept. That is how we make sense of the world. The process depends partly on shared linguistic practice and partly on our personal cognitive make-up with its repertoires of connotations that we attach to things, developed along the course of our lives.

In item 81 I proposed that art upsets or bypasses this process: observed features do not fit into established categories. In that sense art is not representational, embodies what cannot yet be thought. The flower in a painting does not quite fit our notion of a flower. In abstract art it is not even clear what the corresponding concept might be. Art is a way of world making, as Heidegger said. Art explores or suggests new scripts, in new connections between old and new features. In some arts that yields a static structure, as in painting and sculpture, in others it is sequential, in a new connection between elements in time, as in music, film and theatre,

Since scripts are part of cognition, in script making art touches upon cognition, but rather than script usage it is script building, cognition on the move. There lies a connection between art and discovery.

However, script building is not a solipsistic affair. Existing scripts are widely shared, more or less, between people, as part of language and culture, and from such shared scripts and their usage we infer principles and elements of script building that are likely to also be shared more or less between people to the extent that they belong to the same culture. Our ways of world making can thus be recognizable to others. On that basis one can try to objectify aesthetic experience, in pointing at shared principles of script architecture and construction. In avant-garde art even those principles are set aside.

In the way described, art lifts us beyond conceptual understanding and ordinary experience. In that sense it is transcendent, going beyond the world or ourselves. It can be ecstatic, lifting the self out of itself, or sublime, rising above existing concepts, rules or standards. And there, as Kant said, art can touch upon religion, and it can serve to engender religious experience.

## 90. Ethics, art and education

published 23-4-2013

The Dutch philosopher Fons Elders proposed that ethics concerns protest against what exists: *This is not as it should be*, while aesthetics concerns acceptance of what exists: *This is what it is*. And indeed, the classical Greek term *aesthesis* means perception, seeing what is. Aesthetics is being in the world.

This reminds us of Heidegger. In item 40 of this blog I discussed Heidegger's *being in the world* as a process by which the self is constituted by action in the world. I connected this with *pragmatism* (see items 23, 26, 28): the view that ideas guide action but are also changed in action. So, being in the world is not static, but a movement of constitution, of self and of ideas. This forms one of the sources of *existentialism*.

In item 41 I made a connection with *entrepreneurship* as a pragmatist search for novelty by exploring the limits of what exists in the economy, by adapting and transforming ideas and practices as they fail or open up novel opportunities.

As I discussed in item 80, Heidegger referred to art as *world making*. This indicates a change, replacement or alternative to what exists. That may entail protest against what is, but it may also leapfrog any such protest in going ahead to make a new world, in moving away from what exists. In preceding items in this blog I discussed how art goes about taking us outside what is, in world making.

Ethical protest entails criteria for good and bad. Where do those come from? Are they independent, outside from what is? Can one criticize what is without first creating a perspective from which criticism is made? Perhaps ethics requires art to create such new perspective.

What is the relation between art and education? If education includes ethics and ethics requires art, then education requires art.

But this goes deeper. *Education* is derived, literally, from the Latin *educere*, which means 'leading outside' from a given situation. In other words, education is not initiation into what exists, and certainly not subjection to existing authority in knowledge or ethics. It is giving means to find one's own way. It is guidance to freedom.

If immersion and then departure from what exists arises in art, in forms, colours, movement and sounds, and arises in entrepreneurship, in action in the economy, and if education is helping to depart from what exists, then education needs art, not only for ethics but for life more widely, including entrepreneurship.

So why are modern societies saving on art? Will that not entail a thwarting of ethics, education, and entrepreneurship?

## 91. Stability and change, art and sex

published 3-5-2013

At several places in this blog I have argued that the self does not have a fixed, given identity (item 8) but is constituted in action in the world (item 40), and that ideas guide action but are also changed in it (26), as they are confronted with new challenges and opportunities in new contexts (31). I also argued that art is a way of world making and upsets established meanings and perspectives (80). Here I elaborate on the relation between art and identification, the constitution of the self.

I will refer to Eastern philosophy because there the idea of an identity in flux arises more than in Western philosophy.

We are dealing here with the ancient theme of *stability and change*. The self orders perception, assimilating it into existing mental frames that serve as a source of stability, of identity. This identity separates the self from the world, as a subject contemplating objects in the world, *objectively*, or so it claims. This is the Cartesian self. It breeds the scientist. Here we find a duality of subject and object, of self and the world. It projects the self as master of the world. In Eastern philosophy (e.g. Buddhism) it is a male principle: of structure, power, impact, and penetration.

But identity is identity on the move. When assimilation fails, is allowed to fail, there is a jolt to the self, with experience breaking and entering, disordering the mind and putting identity out of joint. This loss of self can be unnerving, frightening, alienating. But it can also be exhilarating, ecstatic, in denying the duality of self and the world. That is what Buddhism tried to achieve. In Eastern philosophy it is a female principle. In being penetrated the male becomes female.

I do not accept the Buddhist claim that in such an instant one sees 'reality as it really is'. For that I am still too much of a Western philosopher, a Kantian, a Humean, sceptical of our knowledge claims. Nor do I believe that such breakthroughs are achieved primarily in meditation, in opening up to the inside of the self. That mostly fosters delusion, I think.

I see the opening up of the self as brought about by action in the world, stumbling in it. We are shocked, moved, in e-motion, outward motion, to see the world differently from how we did. Art can achieve this. It is the Dionysian in art (item 81). But we do not suddenly see reality as it is in itself. It remains imperfection on the move (item 19). We are shifted into a different self, and then dualism resumes, is re-established. We cannot permanently merge with the world, and identity re-emerges. After art we return to routine, but perhaps a different one.

Thus spiritual life is a marriage between the two: between ordering and disordering, stability and change, dualism and unity, between male and female, between science and art, in orgasmic tension and release.

## 92. Free will and literature

published 8-5-2013

As discussed in item 5 of this blog, on free will, we have no free will in the sense that much of our conduct is triggered and executed by unconscious impulses and processes. That could hardly not be the case. Just think of having to consciously activate and coordinate muscles, breathing, the beating heart, and pumping adrenalin into your bloodstream when danger looms.

We employ routines for automatic, unreflected action, as when we drive a car. Such action is needed to make room for conscious thought on other matters. Next, emotions are needed to draw attention to urgent conditions and to catapult us out of our routines. A car careening towards you shocks you into action, but that also is routinized, in hitting the brakes. Conscious deliberation would be too slow.

However, we do have influence on our conduct by conscious influence on unconscious impulse. Mentally we simulate the course and the possible repercussions of possible conduct, and thereby we can anticipate regret and punishment for bad conduct. That releases fear that impacts on unconscious motives for conduct. In mental simulation we tap from own experience and experience of others, discussions, books, films, etc.

For social legitimization of our conduct we give explanations of it, even though that is often rationalization after the fact. We don't know our real motives well because they are largely unconscious, and when we do know them we may not want to disclose or even face them. Instead of a true account we fall back on a store of socially acceptable rationalizations.

For all this we need language. Language is full of unconscious concepts, associations, and metaphors, but in the formation of sentences and of causal or logical connections, as in the simulations and explanations of actions, language use is conscious. The serial coherence of concepts in sentences also serves to integrate distinct parts and functions of the brain, and contributes to the coherent mobilization of unconscious feelings and emotions that are relevant for the situation at hand.

Next to aesthetic value, then, literature, film, theatre, opera and ballet have an ethical, social-cultural function of exercising mental simulation and explanation of the conduct of others to the self, and of oneself to others. They increase the scope of mental and emotional sources by tapping into the experience of others in other contexts.

Literature etc. offer an exercise in empathy, putting oneself into the shoes of others, and in horizontal transcendence, transcendence not in God but in the other human being. They help to explore and practise socially desirable explanations of conduct, but also to see through their shallowness and hypocrisy, and to escape from prejudice and stereotypes.

In the earlier discussion of universals, in items 16 and 17, and meaning, in 36 and 37, I indicated that universals are provisional. In their application to specific contexts they must be expanded with contextual richness, and there they can become unstuck and dissolve, in the formation of a new universal, along the *hermeneutic circle* (36). That, I propose, is what literature does.

## 120. Does reading literature make people better? published 17-11-2013

In item 5 of this blog, on free will, I argued that we do not have full free will, we do not have full conscious control over unconscious impulses, but we do have some conscious influence. We can consciously simulate the effects and outcomes of possible actions. While this may not determine the choice of action it may affect it. When we consider how bad smoking is for our health, this may not keep us from smoking, but it may still affect the impulse to do so.

In item 92 I argued that reading fiction helps to develop empathy and the ability to simulate the consequences of acts. *Fiction* is about *possible worlds*, and the reader must *suspend disbelief*.

The Belgian philosopher Patricia de Martelaere argued against this view. She claimed that it is a ruse to maintain the old, failing philosophical view of meaning in terms of *reference* to things in the world. She claims that the very term *fiction* is misguided. The claim of the reference view is that with our words in language we can access ‘reality’; that literature is not about this reality and hence must be ‘fictive’.

De Martelaere claims, correctly, that we cannot claim to ‘represent reality realistically’. We use language not to *mirror* reality but to *form* it conceptually. Presumed ‘reality’ is already fictive. In literature we simply go a step further, adding ‘more of ourselves’, in deliberate imagination.

While I agree with this, I still think that it is useful to think of literature as being about possible worlds rather than what we *see* as reality. It makes a difference whether we violate reality because we cannot do otherwise, in language and thought, or do so deliberately, in phantasy.

De Martelaere claims, correctly in my view, that in reading fiction we do not take more distance from protagonists but less. In real life we have good reasons not to identify with others. We might suffer from it in various ways. Our identification may not be reciprocated. We may have to follow it up with sacrifices. We look away from miserable people lying crumpled on the sidewalk, from personal tragedies we encounter, and from global hardship and terror displayed on TV. We identify more easily with Madame Bovary, or with Othello.

I still think that reading fiction (I maintain that term, notwithstanding de Martelaere’s criticism) entails a *suspension of disbelief*, but, and here I agree with her, that it also entails a *suspension of distance*, and leap of identification, at no cost or risk.

Because of that we can experiment, intellectually and morally, with emotions, motives and actions, at no cost and risk, using literature as an exercise in simulation and empathy.

Does the development of empathy make people better? There is warm and cold empathy. Warm empathy is accompanied with feelings of compassion, remorse, and shame, arising in the amygdala, deep in the brain. Cold empathy is a purely intellectual, dispassionate insight in how people think and feel, in the prefrontal cortex of the brain, in a disconnect with the amygdala.

It is a feature of psychopaths, and of other people who remain calm and lucid under danger, violence, risk or what to other people would be stress. Think of surgeons, heroes, and investment bankers. Empathy is for better or for worse.

If you have the urge to aspire to perfection, and to feel special, significant, essential in life, does that make you a narcissist, or only if you need to be admired, celebrated for it? However that may be, how does one satisfy that urge?

Patricia de Martelaere saw three ways: art, love and God. The problem with God is that he does not answer or speak, and you cannot be sure he really exists and loves you. The problem with romantic love (*eros*) is that the loved one may cease to love you or may desert you. Art has the advantage that it is under your own control, if you have the talent for it. Unfortunately, the price you pay is that it is dead, not alive by itself. Yet for control freaks, seeking to achieve an essential life without risk, that may be the way. Perhaps that is why often artists (and philosophers) wind up alone, avoiding the risks of love.

Foucault, at the end of his struggle with pervasive and all-invasive powers of social structures, sought a way out in turning one's life into a work of art. How could that go?

De Martelaere said that death does not fulfil life but interrupts it, prevents one from rounding it off as a finished product, and that to foil death an artist (and, I would add, also an intellectual, scientist or entrepreneur) seeks to achieve a finished work, after which one can say: I achieved that before death could snatch it away.

How could this be related to the *imperfection on the move* that I advocate in this blog, and the idea that the only life after death is the life of others that one leaves behind?

For the artist (or intellectual, scientist, entrepreneur), after finishing a project there is always the next one to engage upon, which may not get finished and in any case is only a step in an ongoing series that will certainly never be finished.

Suppose one sees one's life not as a series of projects for oneself but as a contribution to an ongoing stream of life, where one's projects contribute to those of others to come. Then, may not the urge to feel essential in life be satisfied by making essential contributions to what may come, to the potential after life? But how does one know whether one's contribution is essential? That also is up to posterity to decide. All one can do is to strive for it to the best of one's capability and insight.

That is also what parents, especially mothers perhaps, do, in bringing up children as a project without end, contributing to the potential of posterity. And how about workers in health care, say? In their way they can feel essential in life.

In both Western and Eastern philosophy there is a tendency to reserve enlightenment for an elite of the initiated, the illuminated, the trained, the ascetic, in gaining access to a transcendent, elevated, absolute, supreme being (God, Brahman) or condition (Nirvana). If one renounces absolutes and embraces imperfection on the move, one can achieve

freedom from self-obsession in ordinary life, in transcendence that is horizontal, in others, and immanent, during life.

## 252. Hermeneutics and literature

published 20-3-2016

I have a hermeneutic question: how should we interpret hermeneutics? If it means the search for the single, true or ultimate meaning of a text, I do not go along with it. If it means that multiple interpretations may remain, and ever new ones may arise, I go along with it. That, I think is implied in the 'hermeneutic circle'.

I discussed that earlier, in item 36 of this blog, but here is a summary. Language use entails that terms for concepts (on a 'paradigmatic axis') get inserted into sentences in action contexts, composed by grammar and syntax (on a 'syntagmatic axis'). Paradigmatic concepts arise in abstraction from use in specific contexts. That entails generalization, a reduction of meaning to apply more widely, beyond contexts of application and origination. When inserted again in sentences they connect with other terms, increasing the richness of meaning with context-specificity, narrowing the reference to something specific to the context. This ongoing interchange between the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic axes forms the hermeneutic circle.

I tried to connect this with the 'cycle of invention' proposed in this blog and summarized in a preceding item (no. 250). There, invention of a novelty at first yields a variety of alternative tentative new forms, which next gets narrowed down, converging onto a dominant form (paradigm), abstracted from the context where it originated, and more precise, after getting rid of remnants of the old and ambiguities of the new. This also means that what was liquid gets petrified. This then is embedded in other, new contexts (syntagm), in a variety of forms according to the different contexts, becoming more liquid. Misfits may then be encountered, and novel opportunities for novel modifications, which can yield a novel concept, with trials of different modifications, where we are back at the beginning of the circle. Liquid becomes gas, mixed with other gases, to yield a new distillation.

In the exploration of novelty, unable to specify something in language that does not yet fit, and misses or distorts it, one needs indirect images, associations, or metaphors. After new meaning becomes more determinate, in a new language, then one needs metaphor again for getting novelty across to others still dwelling in the old language.

Note, however, that metaphor is also misleading. For example, the thesis of an 'object bias' in language, proposed earlier in this blog, entails that we conceptualize abstract notions using metaphors from objects in space, and the handling of them, with containers, avenues, vessels, materials, flows, channels and the like, thereby misconstruing those notions. Like being 'in' love, 'grounding' an argument or theory, then 'bringing it across', taking a 'position', sending information across a communication 'channel', the 'content' and the 'boundary' of a concept, the 'expressing' an idea, 'absorbing' a message, and so forth.

The notion of ‘digging’ for an ultimate ‘ground’ of a theory may be a linguistic delusion, Like sticking a spade into the ocean.

Now, I propose literature is connected to all this as follows. It explores new meanings, in images or metaphors. It is not theoretical, i.e. not abstract, not paradigmatic, concerned with the general, the universal, but specific, contextual, syntagmatic, concerned with the singular, the individual. It puts familiar ideas into unfamiliar contexts, deviating from established, taken for granted general meanings and truths, and thereby shifts them. Dare I say it, with a bow to Derrida: it deconstructs. This applies also to conventions, rules, morality, and identity. Crime may turn into virtue, the ugly into beauty. People turn out not be what they were thought to be. Reading literature is an exercise in exploring and shifting meaning and morality. Earlier, in item 120 I asked whether reading literature ‘makes people better’, in exercising and developing their moral sense.

So, literary texts are not only subject to deconstruction by readers, they may deconstruct the reader.

In exploration, science also needs to do all this, and as a result it has a taste of the literary, for which is often condemned, for not (yet) being rigorous, well defined, univocal, unambiguous, determinate, abstract, tightly argued. It is blamed for being ‘ad hoc’, incidental, particularistic, indeterminate. And it is, has to be. The petrification of theory comes later.

Feyerabend once said that demanding a budding theory to be clear and exact is like letting a baby box against a grown man.

### 273. Philosophy, science, and literature

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Science, or ‘normal science’, as Thomas Kuhn called it, takes certain primitive terms and basic premises for granted, often not even consciously, as the rock bottom to build theories on and conduct experiments. That is what makes it ‘hard’.

We might see it as the playing of a Wittgensteinian language game.

In his ‘theory of scientific research programmes’, Imre Lakatos proposed that a scientific theory consists of a fixed ‘core’ of basic notions and principles, with a ‘protective belt’ of auxiliary assumptions that may be adapted to protect the core from falsification, accommodating misfits, thus ‘saving appearances’.

When contrary evidence becomes ‘excessive’ (Kuhn), and repair with auxiliary assumptions becomes too forced and contrived, there arises pressure for a more fundamental change of view, called a ‘paradigm switch’ by Kuhn, consisting of a breakdown and replacement of the core.

Here, I want to re-connect this with the ‘hermeneutic circle’, discussed in several earlier items in this blog (see e.g. item 252). Along the ‘paradigmatic axis’ words and concepts (‘paradigms’) are taken for granted, are inserted in sentences/propositions, in specific contexts of action, along the ‘syntagmatic axis’. Let me call that ‘the way down’. There, abstractions are enriched, infused, nourished to life from practical life. And then, in application, in the practical business of life, one sooner or later encounters misfits or novel opportunities, where concepts seem forced, and this occasions tentative shifts or replacements of them, along the paradigmatic axis. Using words shifts their meaning. Let me call that ‘the way up’.

That is the business, in particular, of literature, in storytelling, where life is shown to be richer than theory. Conduct that according to norms of normality are irrational or immoral are swallowed in a ‘suspension of disbelief’. Literature burrows into individual experience that bursts the seams of abstraction. The most telling case of meaning shifts is that of poetry.

Then, the difference between science and literature is that between applying paradigms in application, in normal science, and using experience to shift notions and meanings, in literature. Philosophy used to be seen as belonging to the first category: using concepts to clarify experience. 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy rejected that and made philosophy more literary, narrative, going from experience, from action in the world, to shifts of concepts. No longer only the way down but also the way up.

Science is in crisis when it also needs to take the way up, to craft a paradigm shift. Established abstractions are unhinged. Then it becomes more like literature. Fundamental discovery is the poetry of science. It remains narrative until scientists have put novel abstractions in place, and scientists can again throng along the way down.

These days I am confronted with this as follows. I am participating in a large project to transform economic theory and teaching. The financial crises have woken up some economists to the inadequacies of their science. In a recent meeting, new principles were proposed. They were discarded by other economists as ‘mere story telling’, in betrayal of the established rigour and clarity of their science. There, in defending and maintaining its analytical strength science becomes a force of conservatism.

Elsewhere in this blog, I proposed a ‘cycle of invention’, with an alternation between fitting experience into existing theory, along the ‘way down’, in ‘assimilation’. In several stages this can lead to a break into new theory, along the ‘way up’, in ‘accommodation’, and I indicated the connection with the hermeneutic circle. The cycle of invention is one guise, or form, of the hermeneutic circle.

In earlier work I used the term ‘discovery’, but that literally means the removal of a cover from something that exists, lies there, ‘behind experience’, waiting to be dis-covered. The term ‘invention’ is better, with its connotation of ‘creating by thought’.

### 314. Imperfecting poetry

published 8-5-2017

Is poetry a quest for perfection, for the Platonic, transcendent absolute? Then it is bound to fail. And it risks to be seen as pretentious, irrelevant, impertinent, an irritant, even. I pick up this theme from the April 6, 2017 issue of the New York Review of Books.<sup>i</sup>

Plato claimed that in order to perceive any particular thing as imperfect, we must have in mind some ideal of perfection. But how is it possible to set out from perfection?

In my move of ‘imperfection on the move’, discussed in this blog (item 19) and in a book<sup>ii</sup>, I turn it around. Any notion of the perfect is at best imperfect, temporary, and at worst an illusion. It is better to face and take on the pursuit of an ongoing variety of imperfections, one extending, varying, shifting the other, in a never ending search for improvement or novelty, moving on without knowing where to.

This is how I see art, knowledge, and science.

It is also related to my process view discussed in the previous item in his blog.

Poetry, then, is not a doomed grasp for perfection, but an antidote to illusions of perfection. Resistance, rebellion against the lure of the abstract and universal, unmasking it, dancing on its grave. It goes underground, away from the clarity and light of reason, in a treasure hunt, mining for the individual, the particular, that worms from under the abstract universal.

This can be connected, I think, to the hermeneutic circle (item 36 of this blog), with science and philosophy pursuing the abstract, extracted from the complex, variable melee of individuals with their disorderly quirks, and then, with poetry, bringing it back again, dishevelled it, embedding it again in the flux of life.

The argument also applies, though perhaps less prominently, to novels. However, there we find the ‘novel of ideas’, as in the work of Thomas Mann and Dostoyevsky. There is a tricky temptation to surrender to the lure of abstraction, neglecting the celebration of the particular that is, I propose, the central purpose of literature, as opposed to science and philosophy.

That is why I hesitate to try and write a novel, though I would like to, afraid that having written so much non-fiction I will be explaining rather than showing. Turning the suspension of disbelief into the preaching of belief.

### 329. Art and hope

published 19-8-2017

Recently, Rudi Fuchs, curator for a sculpture exhibition in Amsterdam, associated art with hope. For art, things are not necessarily as they are, can be different. Art offers new

ways in and new ways out. Liberation, escape from stagnation or despair. That intrigued me.

Hope is having a goal, positive and realistic expectations of ways to get there, and confidence in agency, ability to do it. Without the realism hope becomes false, wishful thinking. Hope entails an expectation that ‘things will be all right’, depending in part on one’s own actions, but also on outside forces that one cannot control. This brings the notion of hope close to the notion of trust, as I discussed in item 107 in this blog.

What of that applies to art? The new ways in and new ways out. Escape.

A good illustration is a strophe from a poem by Baudelaire, from the section *Spleen et idéal* of his bundle *Les fleurs du mal* (the flowers of evil). Spleen here is heaviness of spirit, existential anguish, disgust, boredom, paralysis. The hope lies in escaping from it into the ideal, perfection. The title of the poem is *Elevation*. I first give the French text and then my English translation.

*Derrière les ennuis et les vastes chagrins  
Qui chargent de leur poids l’existence brumeuse,  
Heureux celui qui peut d’une aile vigoureux  
S’élancer vers les champs lumineux et serains.*

Behind the troubles and the vast griefs  
That weigh down misty experience,  
Happy is the one who with a powerful wing  
Can launch himself into fields luminous and serene.

Is this picture of art too pretty? How about the Marquis de Sade, Celine, Dostoyevsky? Do they yield hope? Such art also can be seen as an escape, in liberation from constraints of morality and law. But hope is positive, and how positive are those? How, if at all, can this be seen as escape into an ideal? Dostoyevsky said that without God humanity is irreparably evil. Does art here show hopelessness rather than hope?

Art is creative destruction. Perhaps destruction may need to take place first, to make room and create an incentive for the new. Is that how de Sade may be seen: destroying old morality to make room for a new one?

How about the sublime? Think of a hurricane, thunderstorm, or a forbidding mountain. Those inspire awe, astonishment, respect, fear perhaps, transcend the beautiful, and are beyond human grasp and influence. According to Kant it is beyond art, which would only yield a bad imitation of the sublime in nature. It transcends but cannot be achieved, and then lies beyond hope. Yet it is sometimes applied to art, such as a work of Bach or Beethoven, say.

If hope is required for trust, and art can produce hope, one might expect that art can help trust. However, when producing novelty, new ways in and new ways out, art also yields

uncertainty, and can produce broken expectations, yielding broken trust. Given its uncertainty, trust requires courage, and that would seem to apply also to art. Art may be an exercise in courage, and thus may help people in learning to manage trust.

So, apart from the intrinsic value of art, it has value for society in bringing transcendence, Baudelaire's 'elevation', and in developing and exercising hope, courage and trust.

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<sup>i</sup> A review by Charles Simic of a book *The hatred of poetry* by Ben Lerner

<sup>ii</sup> Bart Nooteboom, *Beyond nihilism: imperfection on the move*, Kindle/Amazon, 2015