THE PARADOXES OF ART

A Phenomenological Investigation

In this study, Alan Paskow first asks why fictional characters, such as Hamlet and Anna Karenina, matter to us and how they are able to emotionally affect us. He then applies these questions to painting, demonstrating that paintings beckon us to view their contents as real. Emblematic of the fundamental concerns of our lives, what we visualize in paintings, he argues, is not simply in our heads but in our world. Paskow also situates the phenomenological approach to the experience of painting in relation to methodological assumptions and claims in analytic aesthetics as well as in contemporary schools of thought, particularly Marxist, feminist, and deconstructionist.

Alan Paskow, who received his Ph.D from Yale University, is professor of philosophy at St. Mary’s College of Maryland. The recipient of Danforth and Fulbright fellowships, he has published in a wide range of subjects, including the philosophy of art and literature, phenomenology and existentialism, philosophical psychology, and the thought of Heidegger and Kierkegaard.
The Paradoxes of Art

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

ALAN PASKOW

St. Mary’s College of Maryland
For Jackie and Linnea

In gratitude,
With love
“Somehow,” he said, “nothing that philosophers or art historians – other writers too – have written about art quite captures what it is really about and what it means to me.”

“Yes, yes,” I said. “I agree. But it can be done.”

– Fragment of a conversation that I had with a philosopher colleague in 1988

“The death of Lucien de Rubempré is the great drama of my life,’ Oscar Wilde is said to have remarked about one of Balzac’s characters. I have always regarded this statement as being literally true. A handful of fictional characters have marked my life more profoundly than a great number of the flesh-and-blood beings I have known.”

– Mario Vargas Llosa
# Contents

Acknowledgments  ix

Introduction  1
Questions  1
Historical Considerations  6

1 The Reality of Fictional Beings  40
Simulation Theory: Kendall Walton  45
Thought Theory  55
Realist Theory  59

2 Things in Our World  83
How We View Things  84
Things as More Than Just Things  92
Beyond Anthropomorphism  110

3 Why and How Others Matter  123
How We Are with Others  124
The Paradox of Identification  129
Leaping in for, Leaping Ahead, and Allowing Entry  137
Allowing Fictional Beings Entry  145

4 Why and How Painting Matters  158
Symbolism  160
Inhabiting a Depicted Subworld  168
Being with the Woman Holding a Balance  175
Contents

Personal versus Public Meaning 183
Sensuous Matters 190

5 For and Against Interpretation 204
The Challenges of Theory 205
The Response to Theory 221

Works Cited 251
Index 257

Color plates follow page 148.
If someone were to ask me when I began this book, I would say it was about forty-five years ago, when I stood, as a college sophomore, before Picasso’s “The Tragedy” in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and wondered what the painting “meant” and why Picasso was so admired by art lovers. The conclusion I came to then was this: just as a dreamer takes the imagery of his or her dream as reality, so, too, I should enter into the tragic scene before me and regard it as not only about the world, but as totally real. So I concluded that paintings at least purported to be mimetic. Plato was right. But since the three figures in Picasso’s painting were after all not real people, how and why should I try to persuade myself that they were? My conclusion made no sense. My contradictory intuitions, nurtured and sustained over the years by my love of the visual arts, did not resolve themselves. But much later, around the beginning of 1987, with no clear outline in mind and yet with a sense that in doing research and writing on “my problem” I could develop a response that would at least partially dispel my disquietude, I undertook the writing of the book that follows.

Many people have helped me to formulate the ideas of this work. The philosopher’s work that inspired me the most and that provides the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of this book is Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time. I first read and discussed this work—in a mimeographed, unauthorized translation, for there was no English translation yet in print—with my fellow graduate students in a seminar directed by John Wild at Northwestern University. With his assistance, I was able to discover in Heidegger a voice that spoke to me more directly and searchingly than any other to which I had ever listened.
Acknowledgments

I am also grateful to Francis Parker, who first introduced me to the field of philosophy and whose many undergraduate course offerings I took at Haverford College before attending Northwestern. Neither he nor any other reader, however, would probably recognize that his spirit, clarity of mind, and very ideas have decisively shaped this book.

I wish to acknowledge my gratitude as well to students at St. Mary’s College of Maryland who enrolled in my successive course offerings in the philosophy of art and literature as well as in the history of modern philosophy. Their challenges to my own intuitions about art and painting helped me to define and defend them in a form that is better than it would have been otherwise.

I also wish to express my appreciation for the generous assistance of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, the founders of the Constance School of Reception Theory at the University of Constance in Germany. Professor Jauss was my mentor and sponsor at the University in 1987–8. From that period on, he read and commented extensively on everything that I wrote, until he died in 1997. He was a prompt, conscientious, perceptive reader, who demanded more justification and amplification of my claims than I had provided. At the same time he was strongly supportive of my entire philosophical project. I regret that I cannot present him with a copy of this book as a token of my gratitude. Professor Iser, in several direct conversations, helped me to thread my way through two serious impasses in the last chapter of this book. His thoughtful words proved extremely helpful to me.

I am grateful to the four anonymous readers from Cambridge University Press whose astute criticisms – and compliments – of an earlier version of this book were the stimulus for the rewriting of large sections of it. I am also happy to record my thanks to the following people, who read or responded to talks that I gave on parts of the book: Gereon Wolters and Dieter Teichart (both of the University of Constance), Peter Lamarque (editor of The British Journal of Aesthetics), Bob Scharff (editor of Continental Philosophy Review), P. J. Ivanhoe (Boston University), Richard Shusterman (Temple University), Tom McCarthy (Northwestern University), Jerome Miller (Salisbury University), and Andrea Hammer and Jeff Hammond (both of St. Mary’s College of Maryland).

[x]
Acknowledgments

I should mention as well my appreciation for the guidance and encouragement of Beatrice Rehl, senior editor, Arts and Classics, at Cambridge University Press. She enabled me to continue my work despite some tough criticisms from one of the Press’s anonymous readers. It has been a pleasure to work with her. I am grateful also to Eleanor Umali and Elizabeth Budd of TechBooks for the meticulous and patient editorial care they took with this work.

I owe thanks to Mary Bloomer, the departmental secretary who, in the face of this book’s looming deadline, found time in the midst of other pressing responsibilities to edit all of the endnotes and to compile the bibliography. I owe thanks as well to Rob Sloan and Celia Rabinowitz, librarians at St. Mary’s, for their timely bibliographic assistance.

Here I should mention that I received significant financial support for my project on several occasions. I wish first of all to record my appreciation to the Fulbright Commission for a Senior Research Fulbright grant that I received in 1987–8. It, along with sabbatical leave pay from St. Mary’s College of Maryland, enabled me to live in Germany for an entire year. Without teaching obligations, I could discuss my ideas with colleagues at the University of Constance, pursue my research at its excellent library, and commence writing this book. I was later granted an additional year-long, sabbatical leave from St. Mary’s to complete my research and writing at the University of Constance. I am grateful as well for several Faculty Development grants given to me by the College in support of my work. They allowed me to return to Europe during summer breaks to view directly and reflect on the significance of the paintings that I was writing about.

Finally, and on an altogether different plane, I want to say how grateful I am to both my daughter, Linnea, who as a painter actually creates the sort of thing I write about in this book, and my wife and colleague, Jacqueline. Linnea has taught me how artists talk about and understand their work and how I may view paintings more perceptively. Jacqueline read and commented extensively on every chapter of every incarnation of this book. Her demands for clarity were always justified, and her suggestions for better articulations of my thoughts were invaluable. She also insisted that I never give up on what I often felt to be a task that was simply too ambitious. Her faith became my faith.