Shifting

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Reflecting on the significance of “reality” within representational modalities, Richard Shiff directs our attention to Roland Barthes’s discussion of the capacity of disjunctive or seemingly meaningless elements within a fictional narrative to foster the reader’s sense of its actuality. An author’s deployment of such anomalous components, in their striking dissimilarity from more evidently purposeful features of the story, has a dual role. First, the interruptions impart to the entire text the character of non-literary reality by spreading, as if by contagion, their incongruous qualities—their general difference—to all other particulars of the narrative. Paradoxically, in disrupting the text’s fictive order, such interweaving elements render it all the more credible. Thus it might be said that the second role of such devices is to suspend the reader’s awareness of the literary or artificial character of non-literary reality by spreading, as if by contagion, their incongruous qualities—their general difference—to all other particulars of the narrative. Paradoxically, in disrupting the text’s fictive order, such interweaving elements render it all the more credible.

There is yet another way to describe this tactic. Including non-signifying elements is also an instrument by which an author or artist might self-consciously acknowledge the conditions under which their representation takes place, conditions that are both material and historical. Their presence thematizes a distinction between those actual constraints and the work as a virtual and creative proposition made in relation to the conventions of a medium. As Shiff points out, the gesture is not merely superfluous: the achieved totality of a work (a text, a painting, a photograph) secures the meaningfulness of incidental details that otherwise appear pointless. Barthes calls this the predictive structure of narrative. Shiff explains: “Retrospectively, a reader perceives how each element prepares for some other, connecting with it. Any detail that fails to connect might justifiably be regarded as an error of composition.” But as he also intimates, even details that fail to connect begin to signify once we are sensitized to the possibility that, within the representational order, “insignificance” means something.

It may seem odd to evoke authorial decision-making in response to Shiff’s discussion of the author who most famously interrogated the concept of authorship. I do so to underscore the point that experiencing chance—undergoing it as a disconnected sequence of happenings that affects one’s whole life—is different from experiencing the representation of chance. “Chance” as it takes form in a literary text or a painting requires an interpretation in order to reveal it as such within the parameters of the delimited work (as Shiff indicates).

Some commentators (not Shiff) reduce Barthes’s nuanced inquiry to a generic version of his infamous “The Death of the Author” (1967) thesis. Consequently, they insist on the fundamental instability of signification and reference, and stress the reader’s experience of the text as essential to its meaning. What happens if following Barthes, we articulate the negative of a positive as a positive? Take as the first “positive” the postmodern commitment to the interpretatively open text (where meaning is not determined by authorial intent but is rather subject to the arbitrary associations experienced by the reader). Maintaining an extreme version of this view will entail a radical skepticism of expression and communication. The “negative” would then be a commitment to the framed and delimited text (where meaning is determined by authorial intent irrespective of the experience the reader). Here, the extreme is a belief in the fixed meaning of the work of art. The oppositional duality relaxes on application of Barthes’s formula: think of the first position—the doubtful one—as a belief in indeterminacy, a belief that chance—the meaningless—can be interpreted.

I am inclined to understand this revised formulation as implying the reader’s acknowledgment of the formal structures within which their experience of textual signification unfolds. Adopting this view refocuses our attention, in acts of interpretation, to the enabling conditions under which the content of a work of art is expressed. It thus restores to our picture of creative agency the circumstances that make communication possible. In everyday life, we drift toward expressing a meaning that—although not subject to predetermination and always open to revision—retrospectively seems to be the one we intended all along. This is not to mystify “intent” as something that exists as a mental image or plan, transparently known in advance of its realization: it is simply to describe the typical structure of communication. Of course, being a master at one’s craft increases an author’s (or artist’s) chances of expressing (or discovering) the meaning that was intended all along. (If “mastery” is unacceptable, call it expert handling: the facility to extend, modify, improve, or transform a medium and its conventions toward an end.)

In an essay on the convertibility of physicality and visuality within modernist modes of representation, Shiff included the following sentence: “Metonymic drift operates like drafts of air in circulation.” The first word shifts to the second by the substitution of a letter (and if voiced aloud, by sound). On the printed page, their conspicuous proximity calls attention to the possibility of their exchange. In other words, the analogy used to define metonymy contains a metonymy, amplifying our sense of how the trope operates. Employing metonymy in its capacity to figure the abstract in concrete terms (ideation is symbolized by a lightbulb; emotions by the heart), Shiff converts the immaterial tropological processes of language into material breeze. Although the compounding resonance I have attributed to drift and draft might simply be the result of fortuitous happenstance, I speculate that Shiff crafted it after a momentary inspiration led him to see (or think, or feel) that the two words thematized the exchanges under discussion. Nonetheless the rhetorical effect is that the line is writing itself, originating of itself, as if by chance. Its meaning is immanent.

Like Barthes and a few other distinctive writers, Shiff handles words and sentences like a painter handles marks and colors. The analogy is simple, perhaps predictable (“handling” is a major theme in his scholarship). But it is not simplistic. The medium of language (in its written form) and the medium of painting (in either its depictive or abstract forms) are both means of making meaning, each with a visual component. The lines of a text and the lines in a picture both move the eyes. To be sure, Shiff educates us. But his writing also expresses a tangible sense of the experience of thought, in all its indeterminacy and fulfillment. As a creative author, he captures the feeling of unfolding intention as an ideational, emotional, and physical process. Shifting sense, he alters us.

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