

Aesthetic Truth Through the Ages: A Lonerganian Theory of Art History

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Abstract

Classical authors were generally artistic realists. The predominant aesthetic theory was mimesis, which saw the truth of art as its successful representation of reality. High modernists rejected this aesthetic theory as lifeless, seeing the truth of art as its subjective expression. This impasse has serious consequences for both the Church and the public square. Moving forward requires both, first, an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of the high modernist critique of classical mimetic theory, and, second, a theory of truth which makes adequate reference to both subject and object. This paper argues that Lonergan offers just such an account of truth, and so cashes out the high modernist rejection of classical mimesis in Lonergan's terms, thereby creating the opportunity for a synthesis of the two views.

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The Need for Aesthetic Truth

The Catholic tradition has a very high opinion of fine art as “among the noblest activities of man's genius” which are “by their very nature...oriented toward the infinite beauty of God which they attempt in some way to portray by the work of human hands.”¹² Thus, “Ordinaries, by the encouragement and favor they show to art which is truly sacred, should strive after noble beauty”³ and “carefully remove from the house of God and from other sacred places those works of artists which are repugnant...and which offend true religious sense either by depraved forms or by lack of artistic worth, mediocrity and pretense”⁴ using “the right to pass judgment upon the arts, deciding which of the works of artists are in accordance with faith, piety, and cherished traditional laws.”⁵ If the bishops are to carry out their appointed task, they must have an aesthetics available to them which distinguishes beautiful and worthy art from depraved, mediocre, and pretentious efforts. At the same time, “the Church has not adopted any particular style of art as her very own; she has admitted styles from every period according to the natural talents and circumstances of peoples...The art of our own days, coming from every race and region, shall also be given free scope in the Church.”⁶ The Church then must have an aesthetics which can pass judgment upon the arts *without* chauvinistic preference for the art of a particular culture and period.

¹ Vatican Council II, ‘*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy’, para. 122.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, para. 124.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 122.

⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 123.

Thesis: Classical Mimetic Theory

For much of the Church's history, the basic framework for such an aesthetics was reasonably clear, relying on "the concept of mimesis" which "lies at the core of the entire history of Western attempts to make sense of representational art and its values."⁷ This concept goes back at least to Plato, who calls art mimetic (or imitative) in *Republic X* because it is produced by inspired re-presentation with only a third-hand relation to truth (597e).⁸ Plato's belief that art has only a third-hand relationship to truth rests on his broader philosophical project. Truth, Plato tells us, is saying things as they are (*Cratylus* 385b2). We learn and express how things are by acquiring specialized disciplinary knowledge, as in Plato's stock example of the doctor who knows how to diagnose and cure disease. Plato does not exempt the claims made in art from this standard. When Socrates asks Ion whether Homer speaks correctly about a chariot race, he assumes (and Ion does not contest) that the standard of accuracy is the professional knowledge of the charioteer (*Ion* 537). Since artists lack special disciplinary knowledge of what they represent, art manages to say things as they are only by a chain of inspiration back to the Muse (*Ion* 536).

Plato's analogy in *Ion* 536 treats the Muse as a lodestone, which holds to itself by magnetic force a series of iron rings. The iron rings represent the poet in his original act of creation, the declaimer in his performance of the poetry, and finally in turn the audience

⁷ Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, vii.

⁸ Beware, however, that the 'standard modern significance of imitation tends almost inevitably to imply, often with pejorative force, a limited exercise in copying, superficial replication, or counterfeiting of an externally "given" model...it is dangerous to rely on the translation "imitation" even for most early Greek occurrences of mimesis and its cognates, and far more fruitful to accept that from an early stage, when applied to poetry, visual art, music, dance, and the like, mimesis amounts to a concept (or family of concepts) of representation, which in this context can be broadly construed as the use of an artistic medium (words, sounds, physical images) to signify and communicate certain hypothesized realities.' *Ibid.*, 13–17.

member affected by the poem. The lodestone makes the first ring an instrument, giving ordinarily non-magnetic iron the power to attract further iron rings, and instrumentalizing them in turn. Each ring re-presents the magnetic force, but in a weaker way, and totally dependent upon the originating lodestone—if it is removed, all of the rings will fall away from each other. Plato's choice of the occult power of magnetism for this analogy is no accident. If the Muse were like fire, which genuinely transmitted its form by turning to fire what it touched, then each link would independently possess the form. In that case, the Muse would meet the definition of a teacher from *Theaetetus* 198b, who hands over knowledge such that it is possessed by the learner. If poetic inspiration were like fire rather than magnetism, it would transmit disciplinary knowledge. Plato is convinced, however, that artistic production is more like the occultly transmitted power of the lodestone.

With the programmatic metaphysics of the divided line developed in *Republic* VI (509d-511e), we can see why Plato thinks mimesis must be like magnetism rather than fire. A teacher of genuine disciplinary knowledge imparts his own knowledge to his students, staying at the same level of the divided line, as does fire which makes one sensible thing genuinely like another. Art, by contrast, trades in mere imaginative likenesses of sensible things, and thus operates in the lowest part of the divided line. The goal of the human mind is form, and in Plato's metaphysics form can never be represented in matter without corruption, just as the force of the lodestone progressively weakens in each additional iron ring.

Given this metaphysical backdrop, it is no wonder that Plato bans the mimetic arts from the philosophers' city. First, the reproductive work of the fine artist, unlike that of the artisan producing from a blueprint or copying an already existing artifact, is not based on disciplinary

knowledge. If the artist is to create truthfully, then, he can only do so on the basis of divine inspiration, which is outside of the intellectual control desirable in the philosophers' city. This is the argument of the third book of the *Republic*, and explains why the skilled mimetic artist is revered as holy but nonetheless banished from the city (III.398a). Second, the imitations produced by mimetic artists trade only in appearances, and so cannot educate citizens in the higher truths of the forms, but appeal only to baser parts of the soul (X.603a). This is the argument of the tenth book of the *Republic*, and explains why Plato is so insistent that mimetic artists morally corrupt their participants and audience members.

Aristotle, too, thinks truth is saying things as they are (*Metaphysics* 1011b25), and so mimesis is also a "master-concept" in his aesthetics⁹—the poet "is a poet by virtue of the imitative element in his work" (*Poetics* 9.1451b28).¹⁰ Nor does Aristotle disagree with Plato that art must represent truly by saying things as they are, according to the standard of disciplinary knowledge (*Poetics* 25.1460b28). The difference is that for Aristotle, "the poet must be more the poet of his plots than of his verses...it is actions that he imitates" (*Poetics* 9.1451b27-29).¹¹ Whereas imitating verses given by the Muse requires only inspiration, the imitation of action aims at real knowledge of universals, namely those regarding "what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do" (*Poetics* 1451b8). Probable knowledge is adequate for the poet by the nature of the subject, since "precision is not to be sought for alike in all

⁹ Else, *Aristotle's Poetics*, 12.

¹⁰ Aristotle, 'Poetics', 2323.

¹¹ Ibid.

discussions” or “in all the products of the crafts” and actions especially “exhibit much variety and fluctuation” (*Nic. Ethics* I.4.1094b13-15).¹²

Gerald Else suggests that Aristotle’s recentering of mimesis around plot and action leaves the concept “meaning almost the exact opposite of what Plato had meant by it.”¹³ Aristotle’s differences with Plato, however, are not about the meaning of the term ‘mimesis’ but the metaphysical picture backing it. In granting real disciplinary knowledge about character to the poet, Aristotle is taking up Ion’s suggestion that the poet’s expertise concerns what is appropriate for a certain kind of person to say in a certain situation (*Ion* 540b). Socrates dismissed this suggestion by assuming that what people say in particular situations is merely a matter of their own disciplinary knowledge (*Ion* 540c-e). The factor introduced by Aristotle is that what the agent says and does depends on the nobility of his character (*Poetics* 1448b25-26), not a change in the meaning of mimesis.

Aristotle’s revaluation of mimetic art is not therefore due to a change in the concept of mimesis, but rather to an expansion of what counts as disciplinary knowledge and a general revaluation of sense experience.¹⁴ While for Plato the poet has only inspiration and can only appeal to the baser nature of his audience, for Aristotle the poet possesses real knowledge of forms under the intellectual control of ethics and his mimetic art actually purges the baser nature (*Poetics* 6.1449b28), which has positive political consequences (*Politics* VIII.7). This revaluation need not lead Aristotelians to totally reject Plato’s metaphor of the iron rings

¹² Aristotle, ‘Nicomachean Ethics’, 1730.

¹³ Else, *Plato and Aristotle on Poetry*, 74.

¹⁴ The peripatetic axiom that ‘*Nihil est in intellectu quod non sit prius in sensu*’ (Aquinas, *De Veritate* (v1) Q. 2, art. 3, ad 19) has its foundation in *De Anima* III.8.432a7-9.

dangling from the lodestone. Mimetic transmission must still be more like magnetism than fire, because otherwise the actors would fully become what they imitate—as the virtuous acquire virtue by doing virtuous acts (*Nic. Ethics* II.4.1105a18)—whereas Aristotle suggests that it is a failing to over-identify the actors with the characters (*Poetics* 9.1451b36). The actor always remains distinct from the part (*Poetics* 25.1461b35-2a1). We can, however, substitute our modern scientific understanding of magnetism for the occult view. The rings really do become magnets, but only temporarily or situationally, and both actors and audience disengage when the performance is complete. The poet must have scientific knowledge, and that knowledge affects the actors and audience, but not by simple permanent transmission as in the case of the teacher. The transformation of actor and audience must occur within the scope of the performance. For Aristotle, poetry is magnetic, but its magnetism is not occult.

As Arne Melberg puts it, “Aristotle tried to stabilize what in Plato was, as we saw, unruly, paradoxical, ambiguous. He was successful in the sense that Aristotelian mimesis has dominated the history of aesthetics.”¹⁵ Stephen Halliwell finds this success attested in the

widely shared judgment...that a certain range of artistic practices and their products—above all, poetry, painting, sculpture, dance, music, but also certain other activities too (including vocal mimicry and theatrical acting)— could be considered to share a representational-cum-expressive character that made it legitimate to regard them as a coherent group of mimetic arts. While subject to some refinement and debate, mostly at the margins, this type of judgment remained part of the common currency throughout antiquity and was effectively revived by the neoclassicism of the Renaissance.¹⁶

¹⁵ Melberg, *Theories of Mimesis*, 44.

¹⁶ Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 7.

Indeed, this basic outlook remained stable well through the major aesthetic shift of the 19th century.¹⁷ Even Monet, who strayed so far from conventional 19th century realism that critic Marcelle Nicole described his work as having “nothing to do with painting...formless...without rhyme or reason,”¹⁸ held an explicitly mimetic theory of art. Like Plato, Monet thought that art was more about appearances than forms, but unlike Plato, Monet placed great value in the representation of appearance, advising that painters “try to forget what objects you have before you” and instead “merely think, here is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact color and shape, until it gives your own naïve impression of the scene before you.”¹⁹

The ancient mimetic view of art thematized by Plato and Aristotle was “transformed but not simply abandoned” by the subsequent two thousand years of artistic development.²⁰ “The common thread” throughout the entire period “is an idea of correspondence or equivalence—correspondence between mimetic works, activities, or performances and their putative real-world equivalents, whether the latter are taken to be externally given and independent or only hypothetically projectable from the mimetic works themselves.”²¹ The better the imitation, the better the art—the more closely bound the rings. And the higher the thing being imitated, the more truth is in it, so the better the imitation can be—a stronger magnet transmits more force. Nearly everyone could agree with Plato that truth in art was evident in a kind of third-hand correspondence, even as they disagreed vehemently over the theory of magnetism which

¹⁷ Ibid., viii.

¹⁸ Quoted in Heller, *Why a Painting Is Like a Pizza*, 65.

¹⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 37.

²⁰ Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis*, 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

would allow the corresponding rings to be indirectly joined. In any variant of the theory, however, a stronger magnet and a greater magnetic susceptibility of the medium would allow art to speak more truly.

Antithesis: The Modernist Revolt

This mimetic view is precisely the aesthetic theory rejected in *Dead Poets' Society*. The fictional textbook by Dr. J Evans Pritchard²² defines poetic greatness as the product of artfulness in achieving an objective and the importance of that objective.²³ The higher the form the stronger the magnet, and the better the execution the more magnetically susceptible the material, yielding a tighter mimetic correspondence. The English teacher played by Robin Williams demands that we “Rip. Shred. Tear. Rip it out!”—he “want[s] nothing left of it” because the “casualties” of the mimetic view are the “hearts and souls” of his students.²⁴ In treating the reader as the mere neutral object of the pull of the lodestone, the mimetic view has undermined the genuine subjectivity and freedom of the audience. Freed from mimeticism, Williams’ teacher promises, “you will learn to think for yourselves again.”²⁵

High Modernism has arrived. Moving from tragedy back to history, its spokesman was Piet Mondrian,²⁶ who in his second sketchbook of 1914 firmly rejected the idea that art should correspond to reality. Rather, “In order to approach the spiritual in art, one employs reality as little as possible...This explains logically why primary forms are employed. Since these forms are

²² A stand in for Perrine, Johnson, and Arp, *Perrine's Sound & Sense*, see p. 252.

²³ *Dead Poets Society*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ ‘Mondrian has come to mean Modernism. His name and his work sum up the High Modernist ideal. I don't like the word “iconic”, so let's say that he's become totemic – a totem for everything Modernism set out to be.’ Stephen Bayley, quoted in Darwent, *Mondrian in London*.

abstract, an abstract art comes into being.”²⁷ Mondrian attempts to approach the ‘spiritual,’ the really true and important object of art, by foregoing any direct connection with reality, thus forging an abstract art parallel to philosophical idealism. In Susan Sontag’s telling, this is the programmatic point of departure for understanding contemporary art:

A great deal of today’s art may be understood as a flight from interpretation. To avoid interpretation, art may become parody. Or it may become abstract. Or it may become (‘merely’) decorative. Or it may become non-art. The flight from interpretation seems particularly a feature of modern painting. Abstract painting is the attempt to have, in the ordinary sense, no content: since there is no content, there can be no interpretation. Pop Art works by the opposite means to the same result: using a content so blatant, so ‘what it is,’ it, too, ends by being uninterpretable.²⁸

Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* of 1917 epitomizes these trends. The urinal does not represent anything and was not even created by the artist. All that makes it art is the artist’s gaze, and the curatorial and public willingness to bring their own artistic gazes to the work. Sontag, however, thought that even Duchamp did not go far enough:

Even in modern times, when most artists and critics have discarded the theory of art as representation of an outer reality in favor of the theory of art as subjective expression, the main feature of the mimetic theory persists. Whether we conceive of the work of art on the model of a picture (art as a picture of reality) or on the model of a statement (art as the statement of the artist), content still comes first.²⁹

In Sontag’s view, what is needed in order to avoid a “straightforward relation between intention and performance” is a complete “victory of ‘style’ over ‘content,’ ‘aesthetics’ over ‘morality,’ of irony over tragedy.”³⁰

²⁷ Quoted in Heller, *Why a Painting Is Like a Pizza*, 31.

²⁸ Sontag, ‘Notes on Camp’, 101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 114–15.

Sontag calls this “vision of the world in terms of style” *Camp*.³¹ Camp achieves its victory over content because it “sees everything in quotation marks,”³² “turn[ing] its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment”³³ in favor “of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience.”³⁴ Unlike mimetic art which finds truth in saying things as they are, Camp “is the love of the exaggerated, the ‘off,’ of things-being-what-they-are-not.”³⁵ Camp goes beyond *Fountain* because now not even the ‘artist’ has any role in creating the effect. The victory of style over content occurs directly in the mind of the viewer, because “Pure Camp is always naïve. Camp which knows itself to be Camp is usually less satisfying...Camp rests on innocence.”³⁶ Camp frees the viewer from the pull of the lodestone by entirely reversing the magnetic metaphor. Now it is the pull of the viewer which takes heretofore neutral objects and magnetizes them, creating art. Whereas Plato thought mimetic arts corrupted the moral virtue of those who beheld them, Sontag takes it that viewers with a Camp sensibility corrupt the innocence of the art objects they behold.³⁷ Aristotle redeemed mimetic art with his penetrating analysis of tragedy, but as Sontag says, “Camp and tragedy are antitheses.”³⁸

A Lonerganian Synthesis

A theory of aesthetic truth which can do justice to both the mimetic pull of art on its audience and the transformative gaze of the audience on art must give both subject and object their due. Bernard Lonergan has just such a theory, one that “conceives objectivity to be the

³¹ Ibid., 108.

³² Ibid., 109.

³³ Ibid., 114.

³⁴ Ibid., 115.

³⁵ Ibid., 108.

³⁶ Ibid., 110.

³⁷ Ibid., 112.

³⁸ Ibid., 114–15.

fruit of authentic subjectivity.”³⁹ The subjective pole must come first, because form without anyone disposed to behold it is not art, but the artistic gaze can, at least on occasion, make due with completely accidental objects. Henri Matisse reminds us of the first: “To see is itself a creative operation, requiring an effort.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, John Cage’s 4’33” as “an act of framing, of enclosing environmental and unintended sounds in a moment of attention”⁴¹ proves the second by taking such purely “accidental sounds” as its music.⁴²

Loneragan insists, however, that objectivity is only the fruit of *authentic* subjectivity. As Pablo Picasso notes, “The fact that for a long time Cubism has not been understood and that even today there are people who cannot see anything in it, means nothing. I do not read English, an English book is a blank book to me. This does not mean that the English language does not exist.”⁴³ The understanding of both artist and audience is not unconstrained but rather somehow validated by the artistic product itself.⁴⁴ Lonergan does not offer a complete theory of how this occurs, but gives us a hint by claiming that art “seeks to mean, to convey, to impart...through a participation, and in some fashion a reenactment of the artist’s inspiration and intention.”⁴⁵ The intention, the conveyance, and the participation must all be authentic for a successful reenactment, and all can fail. Lonergan’s answer to artistic idealism is a kind of mimetic realism—an idea is re-presented, after all—but one lacking naivete.

³⁹ Lonergan, ‘Philosophy of God, and Theology’, 172.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Heller, *Why a Painting Is Like a Pizza*, 21.

⁴¹ Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 11.

⁴² Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, 71.

⁴³ Quoted in Heller, *Why a Painting Is Like a Pizza*, 118.

⁴⁴ Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 208.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

If the audience fully participates in the intention, though, what distinguishes Lonergan's conception of art from Plato's conception of teaching? Here Lonergan's answer is a distinction in the experiential pattern of the subject. In the intellectual pattern, the subject operates with "the pure desire to know,"⁴⁶ which has as its objective "understanding correctly" and so must be "cool, disinterested, detached"—not for the satisfaction of the subject but "for cognitional contents."⁴⁷ Were art conducted in this pattern, it would be merely instructional aid, and Sontag would be right to complain that content excluded style. The aesthetic pattern, however, "is purely experiential. It is of the seen as seen, of the heard as heard, of the felt as felt. It is accompanied by a retinue of associations, affects, emotions, incipient tendencies that are part of one, that arise spontaneously and naturally from the person."⁴⁸ Here content is not privileged over style because the reenactment is itself a free and creative exercise. Willem de Kooning explains how the process works:

Painting isn't just the visual thing that reaches your retina—it's what is behind it and in it...I paint this way because I can keep putting more things in it—drama, anger, pain, love,...my ideas about space. Through your eyes it again becomes an emotion or an idea. It doesn't matter if it is different from mine as long as it comes from the painting which has its own integrity and intensity.⁴⁹

Making art requires disciplinary knowledge: drama, anger, pain, love, and even space can be misunderstood, or poorly conveyed. The viewer's reenactment, however, is not a reenactment of the disciplinary knowledge in its full abstraction but rather in its emotive impact.

⁴⁶ Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, 214.

⁴⁷ Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 373.

⁴⁸ Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, 214.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Heller, *Why a Painting Is Like a Pizza*, 140.

The view of aesthetic truth that we are given by Lonergan does not resemble a series of passive rings held by a lodestone. Unlike in the classical mimetic view, the audience is not a mere passive participant, captive to the active principle of the Muse or originating universal form. Unlike in the modernist view, the viewer is also not the source of artistic power, drawing to himself raw material which is indifferent in itself. For Lonergan, neither the form nor the receiving subject have a purely passive part to play. Nor, however, are the art object and the viewing subject two horseshoe magnets tightly attached at their opposing ends, active principles locked in a rigid and necessary embrace. The subject's reenactment is not a weak imitation, but it is also not a simple mirroring. I think that the right metaphor for Lonergan's notion of mimesis is the electromagnet. The wire solenoid is the subject, serving as the genuinely active principle. If the coiled subject is not charged by a directed operator, there is no magnetic force whatsoever, no artistic power. If the coiled subject is not correctly wound in the aesthetic pattern of experience, the force is considerably weakened. When wound correctly, this subject is capable of drawing heretofore indifferent material to itself with artistic force, but the force of the coil alone on such indifferent material is quite weak. The electromagnet only becomes strong in the presence of a correctly designed core of magnetically susceptible material. While the core is not the active source of the magnetic force, it is also not indifferent—if the core is made of ferromagnetic or paramagnetic material then the field will be strengthened—up to thousands of times its value otherwise—while if it is made of diamagnetic material the field will be weakened. The art object at the core of Lonergan's mimesis is not bound to its coiled subject, but interacts freely with it in a patterned way.

Concluding Judgment

Plato leaves one small opening for non-classical art, banning poetry from his city only insofar as it is mimetic—in his (as we have now seen quite restricted) sense—but not claiming that all poetry definitively has this character (*Republic* X.595a).⁵⁰ Nonetheless Plato apparently cannot concretely envision any poetry which escapes this stricture. Sontag leaves another, somewhat larger, opening for art which moves beyond high modernism:

Programmatic avant-gardism—which has meant, mostly, experiments with form at the expense of content—is not the only defense against the infestation of art by interpretations. At least, I hope not. For this would be to commit art to being perpetually on the run. (It also perpetuates the distinction between form and content which is, ultimately, an illusion.) Ideally it is possible to elude the interpreters in another way, by making works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be...just what it is.⁵¹

Here Sontag suggests that her discomfort with Camp might have a solution which respects its basic premise (the importance of style) without coming at the expense of content. What might that solution look like in practice? Would a technically flawless interpretation of any work meet her criteria of unity, cleanliness, rapidity, and directness? I suggest not: the only real way to elude the interpreters is to meet them head on, to bring the style of the work to the fully conscious participation of the audience rather than attempting its naïve submersion in content. Sontag herself suggests an artist who has met her criteria, the filmmaker Andre Bresson:

The power of Bresson's six films lies in the fact that his purity and fastidiousness are not just an assertion about the resources of the cinema, as much of modern painting is mainly a comment in paint about painting. They are at the same time an idea about life, about what Cocteau called 'inner style,' about the most serious way of being human.⁵²

⁵⁰ Melberg, *Theories of Mimesis*, 11–12.

⁵¹ Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', 101.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 136.

But what does it mean to make a formal conceit an “idea about life” rather than merely a commentary about the medium itself? If we are to pass artistic judgment, we must have some concrete idea of what this looks like.

New York Times theatre critic Ben Brantley introduces one group, Elevator Repair Service, whose stage productions of classic American novels give us an example. Brantley distinguishes the group's show, *Gatz*, in which the cast literally read the entire text of *The Great Gatsby* for six hours, from modernist shows staged at the same festival:

“Gatz” is much more accessible...but it is also richer and more subtle in its ultimate achievement. Throughout the show, the relationship between what is read and its context keeps shifting, with the real world finally giving way entirely to the fictive one...the most astonishing metamorphosis is that undergone by the cast, whose interpretations of Fitzgerald's creations go from quotation-mark-framed stiffness or jokiness into a style that is compellingly sincere without ever being purely naturalistic. Mr. Shepherd, in a performance of symphonic calibration, progresses from detached curiosity to intense engagement to an emotional fluency that allows him to discard the book altogether and recite from memory. By the end, he has become Nick Carraway. So have you...as can happen when you're caught up in a book.⁵³

Gatz is apparently able to transcend the “quotation-mark-framed” nature of Camp for a broader horizon in which realism is preserved (“he has become Nick Carraway”) yet style is conspicuously front and center (“as can happen when you're caught up in a book” as a comment about a public reading...). The actors' consciousness has raised a “surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be...just what it is”⁵⁴—the entire power of the work escapes the critic for the integrity and intensity of the audience: “So have you.”

⁵³ Brantley, ‘A Novel “Gatsby”’: Stamina Required’.

⁵⁴ Sontag, ‘Notes on Camp’, 101.

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