

The Production of the World: Translation, Compensation, and Anamorphism in van Gogh and Faulkner

In 'The Production of the World,' John Berger explains how viewing some Vincent van Gogh paintings in Amsterdam healed an aphasic-like inability he had been experiencing to hold meanings together or to 'make connections,' and how his angst was eliminated and reality as he understood it was 'confirmed' by the apparent wholeness of the reply in the paintings (277). For him this wholeness derived partly from what I call their *translational* capacity to unite in one work two forms of labour – that of the object world of peasants van Gogh often painted *and* the act of painting itself – which allowed for a depiction of reality beyond the 'screen of clichés' erected by society (279).

As the world becomes, according to Berger, the object of an aesthetic equation (is remade, turned into an art object), so too is desire' objectified through a process here called *compensation*. Implicit in Berger's article, compensation is a symbolic redressing of peasant drudgery and what Fredric Jameson calls the 'transformation of a drab peasant object world into the most glorious materialization of pure color in oil paint' (7). The primary source for the compensatory charge may be understood idealistically as the collective desire of the peasantry for some improvement or satisfaction in their lives, but may derive also from the sympathetic outsider – painter, viewer, or critic. For the outsider, a clear gap exists between the material world and life of peasants on the one hand, and on the other the depicted landscapes and objects with their psychic surplus energy evident in the form of 'pure color.' Exemplary of van Gogh's so-called epileptic or schizophrenic vision, this surplus energy also reflects a wider yearning (on the part of viewers and even peasants themselves) for some lost or waning wholeness that the works satisfy symbolically through the homologies of translation.

- 1 I use this term in its generally understood sense, not in the precise Lacanian one of a lack only satisfiable by another's desire (mainly because it is difficult to attribute this reciprocal capacity to the earth). If pressed to 'Lacianify' my use of "desire," I might argue that it denotes something like 'demand' (though not necessarily verbal), which involves an 'other' to whom the demand is expressed and whose attentions the subject wants in the form of an imaginary union. Continuing on this path, I might relate this want to the peasants' union or 'marriage' to the earth, the '(m)other' from which they demand some acknowledgment of their labour in the form of a successful harvest.

This yearning also manifests itself overtly by a 'slanted' quality in the pictorial style, what I will call *anamorphism* in order to alter somewhat the meaning of the *memento mori* that takes the form of a slanted skull in the foreground of Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1533). Even though many of the objects in van Gogh's world appear slanted or, as some critics suggest, clumsily rendered, it is a broader anamorphic mode that indexes his gaze, and is termed a 'protracted stain' by Slavoj Žižek to denote the difference between 'traditional' painting's anamorphic element and a wider one pervading an entire painting as in van Gogh (*Plague*, 43n30). In this sense, anamorphism is a modality reorganizing representations of material, or what could be called 'spatio-temporal' reality, as if a filter or distorting lens were laid across the painting's sights (often contravening the conventions of perspective). To some extent, all art is anamorphic. But more specifically, anamorphism results from the alternation between at least two incongruous optical registers, sometimes in a painting's single field of vision (although in much of van Gogh's art, only the viewers' recognition of reality *outside* the painting is the visual 'other'). It can be a deliberate skewing of sight through the arrangement of space and colour, but not to the point of surrealism's radical break with 'reality' and its projection of an unconscious dreamscape.²

As a way of widening this analysis, I will also consider some consonant literary examples from William Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, *The Mansion*, and *As I Lay Dying*; his work, like van Gogh's, similarly focuses on agrarian life in an increasingly modern world, also experiments with the received forms by which reality or truth is rendered, and on certain points also belongs under the rubric of expressionism. While neither van Gogh nor Faulkner is chronologically part of what art historians consider the expressionist generation, the emphasis in their work on the radical external expression of subjective experience (through pictorial equivalents) suggests that both may be said to belong to the movement. It strikes me as worthwhile, therefore, to discuss artists from different eras in order to link their formal techniques and social concerns within a broader modernist context. More-

2 At first glance, anamorphism as defined here might appear synonymous with modernist distortion or stylization, an umbrella term under which might be found, for example, defamiliarization, shock as an aesthetic effect, and even the unique style or subjective vision. It could also be said to resemble postmodernist pastiche, though the latter really involves an amalgamation of styles rather than of optics. Anamorphism has a history outside of painting and literature. The perspective or 'peep show' box, for example, provides viewers with an anamorphic image if viewed through the correct opening. There are two holes, a peephole opening onto a painted interior, and another light opening either through the same side or on the box's adjacent side. For example, in Samuel van Hoogstraeten's *Perspective Box with Views of a Dutch Interior* (c 1655-1660), one of the chairs painted inside at the junction of three perpendicular planes is distorted if viewed through the light aperture, but the image seen through the peephole is realigned. For more on anamorphism see Baltrušaitis.

over, I also suggest that a difference between translation and the other two processes – in other words the tendency of the former to meld form and referent, to embrace the ‘labour of being’ and the ‘production of the world’ as it may yet exist in our abstract world of images (the spectacle, the simulacrum, etc) versus the latter’s separation of subject and object, their psychic and formal disjunctiveness, the objective correlative as their central tenet of distantiation – narrates the tension between wholeness and fragmentation within modernism, as well as the movement towards the divisiveness, the abstraction, and the personal and social negation in capitalism.

TRANSLATION

Berger couched his failure to ‘hold meanings together’ in terms of a ‘metaphysical’ collapse alienating him from his own reason (‘Production,’ 276). ‘The mere thought of making connections filled me with anguish,’ he writes, reminding us of Michel Foucault’s description in *The Order of Things* of various aphasics increasingly troubled by their failure to organize multicoloured skeins of wool into a coherent pattern on a table top (xviii). More than an organizational shortcoming or a self-alienation, however, Berger goes on to describe a linguistic disconnection between ‘words and what they signified,’ as the ‘first human power – the power to name – was failing or had always been an illusion’ (276). Here, Berger anticipates a later reading of subjectivity by Fredric Jameson in which he uses Lacan’s account of schizophrenia to diagnose the ahistoricity of the present, symptomatic of life in multinational capitalism.

This experience is encapsulated by Margaret Séccheyayé’s intensely ‘disturbing sense of unreality’ and the intrusion of elements she calls ‘illimitable vastness, brilliant light, and the gloss and smoothness of material things’ (qtd in Jameson, 27). For Berger, as for Séccheyayé, the link to an apparently stable, determinable set of ontological coordinates called reality had been broken, and ‘all was dissolution’ (Berger, ‘Production,’ 276). Both yearned to get back to a reality outside them and from which they had been alienated because of some internal ‘sickness.’ Yet Berger complicates matters by noting that events said to constitute the real are always ‘to hand’ but that the ‘coherence of these events – which is what we mean by reality – is an imaginative construction’ acting like a screen behind which can be found the real thing (279). This imaginative construction resembles the ordering of chaotic experience within modernism (Wallace Stevens’s ‘Jar in Tennessee’), though it remains unclear from Berger’s essay what criteria make one imaginative construction ‘trivial’ and another authentic. While his metaphysical dissolution is very much like Jameson’s postmodernist schizophrenia, his transformation reflects the

utopian value modernists place on wholeness, in this case a particular coherence to the world that van Gogh's paintings allegedly produce.

Four paintings – *The Potato Eaters* (1885), *Wheat Field with Lark* (1887), *Ploughed Field* (1888), and *Blossoming Pear Tree* (1888)³ – reconnect Berger to an externalized reality because, he suggests, they have successfully pierced the screen of societal clichés and duplicated through form the material world they depict. It is his awareness both of van Gogh's supposed yearning to break through this screen, and of the painter's translation of the labour so essential to the reality (the 'being') around him into the very form of his art, that heals Berger of his dissolution. Here, he thought, is someone who replied to the world in a form commensurate with it.

The paintings speak of this more clearly than words. Their so-called clumsiness, the gestures with which he drew with pigment upon the canvas, the gestures (invisible to us but imaginable) with which he chose and mixed his colours on the palette, all the gestures with which he handled and manufactured the stuff of the painted image, are analogous to the *activity* of the existence of what he is painting. His paintings imitate the active existence of what he is painting – the labour of being – of what they depict.

Take a chair, a bed, a pair of boots. His act of painting them was far nearer than that of any other painter to the carpenter's or the shoemaker's act of making them. He brings together the elements of the product – legs, cross bars, back, seat; sole, upper, tongue, heel – as though he too were fitting them together, *joining* them, and as if this *being joined* constituted their reality. ...

When he painted a road, the roadmakers were there in his imagination. When he painted the turned earth of a ploughed field, the gesture of the blade turning the earth was included in his own act. (280–81)

Berger's point about van Gogh's invisible 'but imaginable' gestures is less convincing than his insight into the visible workmanlike impasto on canvas, noticeable also on photo reproductions, whereby the traces of the passage of the artist's hand indicate not only his presence as a painter, but his labour in making an auratic as opposed to a fetish object. In these works, the history of their production is manifested rather than concealed behind the surface gloss of a sealed end product, a commodity.⁴ The viewer is aware in a material, not abstract or 'imaginable,' way of the time it took van Gogh to produce a given painting. This sense of time is

3 Berger refers to *Wheat Field with Lark* as 'Corn Field with a Lark,' *Ploughed Field* as 'Ploughed Field at Auvers,' and *Blossoming Pear Tree* as 'The Pear Tree,' though no such titles appear in the standard listings.

4 That said, these gestures in oil have come to constitute his signature style, and ironically are partly responsible for the paintings' transformation from auratic objects into commodities, selling for millions.

appropriate because it is analogous to the slow repetitive cycle of actions in peasant life, the minutiae of hand gestures holding peasants' lives together.

And more than the translation of one type of labour into another is the 'transformation of one form of materiality – the earth itself and its physical paths and physical objects – into that other materiality of oil paint affirmed and foregrounded in its own right' (Jameson, 8). Translation as understood here is not so much an evocation of an absent world as a reconstruction of the 'raw materials, the initial content, which [the painting] confronts and reworks, transforms and appropriates' (Jameson, 7).

In arguing that there are homologies between art and literature, between van Gogh's paintings and Faulkner's writing, one runs the obvious risk of setting up absurd one-to-one correspondences in which everything is 'the same' or 'playing the same score.' Rather, I will try to show how there are suggestive consonances between the two, how the initial lived situation reworked into the materiality of the paint equates with Faulkner's translation of the rural poor-white South into his 'thick' dialectical style, how the auratic trace in van Gogh is also evident in Faulkner as a consent to time within the depicted objective world, at the point of production (the labour of writing) and reception (the reader's necessary descent into the materiality of language, as Jameson wrote about Adorno's style).

Obviously, the world of van Gogh's peasants is not identical with that of Faulkner's sharecroppers or lien tenant farmers. Yet, if anything, the increasingly quantifiable nature of the latter's relationships with property owners on whom they depend for credit and supplies, and I am thinking particularly of Mink Snopes's relationship with Will Varner, is more evident than ever. Snopes is alienated even from the earth on which he carves out his desperate sustenance.

Translation as I have presented it here centres on Heidegger's argument that art emerges in the gap between Earth and World, or the space between the 'meaningless materiality of the body and nature and the meaning endowment of history and the social' (Jameson, 7). Agrarian life recreated by Faulkner of seasonal cycles and rhythmic work patterns, the laborious, self-negating hours in sun-beaten fields, is reconfigured through the mediation of language, a process evident in Mink's life and field work.

He emerged from the bottom and looked up the slope of his meagre and sorry corn and saw it – the paintless two-room cabin with an open hallway between and a lean-to kitchen, which was not his, on which he paid rent but not taxes, paying almost as much in rent in one year as the house had cost to build; not old, yet the roof of which already leaked and the weather-stripping had already begun to rot away from the wall planks and which was just like the one he had been born in which had not belonged to his father either, and just like the one he would die in if he died indoors – which he probably would even if in his

clothes, repudiated without warning at some instant between bed and table or perhaps the door itself, by his unflagging furious heart-muscles – and it was just like the more than six others he had lived in since his marriage and like the twice that many more he knew he would live in before he did die. ... (*The Hamlet*, 243)

He went back to the mule and untied the lines from the fence and hooked up the traces and ran another furrow, his back now to the house and the lane, so that not until he swung the mule at the turn-row did he see for a moment the buckboard going back down the lane at that snail's pace matched to the plodding cow. He plowed steadily on until dark, until his supper of the coarse fatback and cheap molasses and probably weevily flour which, even after he had eaten it, would still be the property of Will Varner until he, Mink, had ginned and sold the cotton next fall which he had not even planted yet.... He had not lain down nor even stopped moving, working, since daylight this morning; when daylight came again he would not have slept in twenty-four hours; when the sun did rise on him he was back in his own field with the mule and plow, stopping only for dinner at noon, then back to the field, plowing again – or so he thought until he waked to find himself lying in the very furrow he had just run, beneath the canted handles of the still-bedded plow, the anchored mule still standing in the traces and the sun going down. (*The Mansion*, 20–21)

As one commentator suggests, the 'sheer sense of effort generated here, among other things by the contorted syntax ... establishes the difference between the life of this one anonymous man and the leisurely habit of the [Varners]' (Gray, 210).

Elsewhere, Faulkner's notoriously highly wrought style serves a different purpose altogether; the discursive density of *Absalom! Absalom!*, for instance, has more to do with underscoring the complexity of history and truth than with the homologous manifestation of labour and class in form and content. Mink's desperate work, though partly necessitated by Varner's injunction to 'get to plowing' after he had ordered him to repay Jack Houston with his labour for having fed Mink's cow all winter (and having it impregnated), is also a sign of his fury at his plight (*The Mansion*, 19). He is indebted to such an extent that his work next fall will only pay for this year's living. And if the peasants' harvest implied in van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* is straightforward and causal, since they eat what they plant, Mink's is forever deferred in the economic circuit of the tenant-farmer South, over which he has no control (being forced to consume 'weevily flour,' for instance). The sentences reflect the toil of getting through a life dependent on a soil that is mediated through and through by reified social relations. Even in the closeness between form and referent that partly characterizes translation, the conflicts inherent in the labour

relations of this economy already fret the fabric of homology with their hint of emotional disturbance and point us towards compensation.

More than a translation of the labour which is the reality of his life, the sentences of the cited passages also express Mink's compulsiveness in completing his work and nearly killing himself in the process so he can prove, perversely, the true nature of 'justice' dispensed by the force he calls 'Them.' Notably, he falls asleep in the coffin-like furrow he is working on, as if anticipation of his own ultimate death years later, when at peace he lies on a ground exempt from class and from its accompanying conflicts, the 'ground already full of folks that had the trouble but were free now, so that it was just the ground and the dirt that had to bother and worry and anguish with the passions and hopes and skeers, the justice and the injustice and the griefs, leaving the folks themselves easy now, all mixed and jumbled up comfortable and easy' (*The Mansion*, 435).

Also, the passages demand what so much of Faulkner's writing does, namely the reader's own labour in 'working through' their density and rescuing meaning from them. Often difficult, the process in this case can be seen as intellectually equivalent to the material thing it describes, as well as exemplary of the opacity across modernism that readers and viewers must confront and that is thought to distinguish modernism from more accessible works denoted by the term 'pop culture.'

COMPENSATION

The compensatory process is not only evident in van Gogh when 'such things as apple trees explode into a hallucinatory surface of color,' since, one might argue, these images merely capture actual spring, but perhaps most obviously in broader swaths or panels of colour across sky and earth and the bodies of individuals in portraits, his 'village stereotypes ... garishly overlaid with hues of red and green' (Jameson, 7). It is precisely when a filter seems placed over a sight, when almost electrical energy hums from a painting's surface, and a gap opens between the object as it actually exists and the clearly stylized depiction on canvas, that compensation is at work. Unlike translation, therefore, compensation functions within the distance between material world and art work, between the former and its fantasy projection. The closer van Gogh aspired to approach the reality he saw before him, the further away he actually went, the more stylized and essentialist his works. The essence of an experience, like the heat of a summer day in the south of France, is distilled into pictorial equivalents, and thus imagistic in Pound's sense. The sky in *Olive Trees* (1889), for example, is entirely (unrealistically) the yellow of the sun, vibrating with pointillist bars that suggest its energy, while the orange ground seems to have absorbed the heat and made the trees grow. The painting narrates a causal relationship between sun and earth.

Although one might say compensation appears in van Gogh's paintings as his desire to ward off the ever-growing stain on the landscape due to industrialization (see the sooty sky above the industrial town in *Wheat Field with Setting Sun* [1888]), a 'growth' inherently unrelated to the earth itself,⁵ one could attribute the painting's compensatory stance to his longing to redress some incompleteness within himself. This incompleteness may be less the typical modernist alienation to which the response is a 'scream,' or, as in this case, a painting telling the story of the organic wholeness of the earth, than a shortfall in his 'endless yearning for reality' (Berger, 'Production,' 279). Intensifying the sight expresses the yearning to amalgamate sign and referent that produces as a substitute a form of romantic distillation discussed above, what Hopkins called 'inscape.' Or further, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, one could argue that van Gogh sought and underwent a psychic and bodily insertion in the landscape painted. According to this argument, creations are not possessions, and the painter does not simply possess the scene painted but is absorbed by it in what Merleau-Ponty termed the 'reversibility of the flesh.'⁶ 'As van Gogh painted the hot, brilliantly colored fields around Arles, they not only became burned into his being, but he was possessed by those fields, taken away from himself, outside himself, taken up into the hot frenzied play of color and light, in which it was difficult to still be himself as he had been' (Mazis, 262). In a sense, then, van Gogh did not reply to the world so much as absorb it and then find material expression for this visceral experience.

Compensation is perhaps more convincingly apparent in later paintings depicting peasants at work in fields. These figures serve to objectively correlate, to focus or channel, certain aspects of subjectivity that the scenes address. In *Wheat Field with Rising Sun* (1889), *Weatherbeaten Pine Trees* (1889), *Enclosed Wheat Field with Reaper* (1889), *Sower with Setting Sun [with Tree]* (1888), *Red Vineyard* (1888), AND *Sower with Setting Sun* (1888), a yellow globe radiates light across the skies. In these cases, the protracted stain seems reflective of the life-giving power of the sun depended on by peasants, but also points to their desire (expressed symbolically through colour across the entire surface of the paintings) for an alleviation of work and improvement in their lives as a result of the sun. In addition, these paintings convey an optimistic stance towards life rooted to the soil, the

5 In 'God's Grandeur,' van Gogh's contemporary Gerard Manley Hopkins describes the earth's infertility after industrialization in equivalent terms: 'all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil / And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell.' Reminiscent of the painter's compensatory energies, God's grandeur will 'flame out, like shining from shook foil' (1651). Notably, van Gogh was the son of a clergyman, but, unlike Hopkins, who finished his theological studies and became a Jesuit, abandoned evangelical work in 1880 at the age of twenty-seven for a career in art.

6 My thanks to Wayne Egers, a PhD graduate in English at McGill University, for alerting me to this term.

hope a good harvest will result from this cycle of labour. Many of the human figures are archetypal in their lack of specific facial features; some stand out against the land while others melt into it as if inconsequential to the forces of the earth around them, or viewed more positively, as if they had become one with the land through a sort of elemental 'marriage.'⁷

In *Sower with Setting Sun*, the turned field that takes up three-quarters of the canvas is a bluish mauve like the earth's colour at dusk. However, the colour is too blue and too bright, and the field of corn or wheat in the background too daylight yellow for this to be mimetic. Either one can attribute the inaccuracy to van Gogh's incompetence (he was unable to capture the hue correctly despite trying to do so; or, following Gauguin's encouragement, he painted from memory and the result is flawed); or, more satisfyingly, one might conclude he deliberately attempted to portray the earth blossoming in the very moment of its being seeded, as if from the perspective of the sower, and by extension himself, that eventual reality were already in his thoughts and in the earth itself.

Similarly, Faulkner's language stands in for the 'glorious materialization in oil paint' of a utopian longing evident in van Gogh's painting, and compensates for the hard impoverished world of southern lien-tenant farmers. Sometimes this compensatory act is projected from a single character's consciousness indirectly manifested by a description of a material setting. For example, immediately after learning of Jack Houston's claim to an extra dollar pound fee for feeding Mink Snopes's cow all winter, and despite having finished 'thirty-seven and a half four bit days' laying fence posts, Mink walks in the direction of Varner's store to check the law.

7 I would like to pause here to complicate the origins of this process by suggesting that certain subjective responses seemingly evident in such paintings may not be entirely attributable to peasants themselves. Peasants' appreciation for the land, for example, is not, in my experience, an aesthetic Romantic one comprehensible in the terms of artistic or poetic convention. Rather, it is one experienced mainly through the body. A countryside is beautiful in the sense that it is, or can be, bountiful, is both the product or creation of the peasant body and its sustainer. This pragmatic relation between body and land, this flowing out of and back to the body is necessarily accompanied by some emotion (contentment, relaxation). My years in rural northern Croatia suggest that peasants there generally see their connection to the land as a functioning one, which produces that pleasure that makes the land seem 'beautiful' in a particular sense. One experience in particular proved this apparent truth to me. It was winter, and a freezing rain had sheathed the land in ice. Fruit orchards glistened whenever the sun slid out of the clouds, and icicles hanging from spectral branches tinkled and clacked when I brushed by them. For the peasants, the ice was mainly worrisome because of the damage it could inflict on the season's fruit trees, and, more importantly for some villagers, on the plum brandy yield. I acknowledge that the people I know cannot simply be equated with the 'pure' peasants of van Gogh's late nineteenth century (i.e. the former are more integrated in and reliant on urban centres and a money economy); still, the *gestalt* of peasants living in different social milieus is not entirely dissimilar.

He walked through the bright sweet young morning between the burgeoning woodlands where the dogwood and redbud and wild plum had long since bloomed and gone, beside the planted fields standing strongly with corn and cotton....; treading peacefully the rife and vernal earth boiling with life – the frantic flash and glint and crying of birds, a rabbit bursting almost beneath his feet. ... (*The Mansion*, 26)

The juxtaposition of this moment with his feelings of disbelief at Houston's demand and with his astonishment at yet 'one more test, harassment, enagement They tried him with,' is too sharp to pass as contextualization, as neutral description (*The Mansion*, 27). Rather, the passage expresses our recognition (and Mink's also, I think) that even as he walks across it, he can no longer be part of this peaceful, fecund summer world, and that even though its potential has already come to fruition he will reap nothing from it himself, not so much in terms of aesthetic pleasure (of which he shows few signs) from seeing spring blossoms but, more importantly, in terms of freedom resulting from his own harvest. His wish for what ought to be is here inscribed in the surrounding physical space and site of his labour. It is true that as Mink leaves Houston he is said to walk 'peacefully and steadily' down the road to Varner's, but this peace is really the outward expression of a complex of emotions: dismay, perhaps even shock, and reluctant acceptance of *Their* sadism, combined with a contrary sense of release that comes with a decision that actually frees him – that once he confirms what he already knows, that Houston does indeed have the law on his side, he will kill Houston.⁸ In other words, he will accept this seemingly minor ordinance, but will repudiate it and the law more radically by committing murder. Speaking to Varner may indicate some glimmer of hope for himself, hope that the law is not set against him, and that he can operate within it as the sort of man his pride will allow. His misgiving that this hope is doomed partly contributes to the elegiac note in the passage's lyricism, though the words taken on their own suggest the opposite. It is as if the price his freedom from the law and from Them takes is a sort of nostalgia registered in the third-person description.

When it appears in *The Hamlet*, the compensatory mode is projected from an omniscient narrator quite unlike the genealogical voice with which the novel opens, and at odds with the novel's agrarian background. At one point a spring night is described in almost baroque imagery (Gray, 218). In particular, the blossoming pear tree resembles one of van Gogh's fruit trees exploding into a 'hallucinatory surface of color.'

8 Even before he talks to Varner, Mink prepares what we learn later is a place to ambush Houston: 'But there was one thing he could be doing, one preparation he could be making while he waited, since it was not far. So he went there, to the place he had already chosen, and did what was necessary since he already knew what Varner was going to tell him' (*The Mansion*, 28).

They went up the road in a body, treading the moon-blached dust in the tremulous April night murmurous with the moving of sap and the wet bursting of burgeoning leaf and bud and constant with the thin and urgent cries and the brief and fading bursts of galloping hooves. ... The moon was now high overhead, a pearled and mazy yawn in the soft sky, the ultimate end of which rolled onward, whorl on whorl, beyond the pale stars surrounded. They walked in a close clump, trampling their shadows into the road's mild dust, blotting the shadows of the burgeoning trees that soared, trunk branch and twig against the pale sky. Then the pear tree came in sight. It rose in mazed and silver immobility like exploding snow; the mockingbird still sang in it. (*The Hamlet*, 338–39)

This passage from the novel's section titled 'The Peasants' has V.K. Ratliff and a handful of other men call on Varner, then return with him (Varner carrying his assortment of veterinary instruments) to tend to an injured buyer of Flem Snopes's wild horses. Certainly visual in orientation, the description appeals generally to the senses, evoking a sensual totality both beautiful in and of itself and symbolic of a collective desire among the farmers for a good season, a desire juxtaposed to the foolish one of buying within the rising rapacious capitalist economy represented by Flem Snopes. Says Varner, the jocular, quasi-feudal lord/monopoly capitalist who increasingly represents an economy in decline (though one that may be no less exploitive), "Look at that tree. ... It ought to make this year, sho." "Corn'll make this year too," one said' (*The Hamlet*, 339). The otherwise ungriving land that seems to condemn many of its lien-tenants to endless cycles of decline now seems energized with new life. Its denied potential is momentarily realized as if it were briefly transformed into a different, perhaps ideal, state, becoming a landscape appreciable above all to the eye.⁹

Elsewhere in Faulkner, compensation is projected from a single character's stream of consciousness, a personal corrective to a general condition described by the narrative. In *As I Lay Dying*, for example, Darl's poetic language may be read as his own artistic vision used in part to cope with a harsh backward life and, more specifically, the increasingly awful state of things on the Bundrens' trip to Jefferson in which he is less and less in control, even of his own reason. His description of the flood scene is one instance where referent and meaning are counteracted by a style at once commanding and beautiful.

9 The spring night and blossoming pear tree return us to van Gogh. Berger's comments about the painter seems applicable to Faulkner also: 'When he painted a small pear tree in flower, the act of the sap rising, of the bud forming, the bud breaking, the flower forming, the styles thrusting out, the stigmas becoming sticky, these acts were present to him in the act of painting' ('Production,' 280). Faulkner's closeness to the processes of the natural world signals a nostalgic longing for some pre-social moment untainted by reified relations.

Before us the thick dark current runs. It talks up to us in a murmur become ceaseless and myriad, the yellow surface dimpled monstrosly into fading swirls travelling along the surface for an instant, silent, impermanent and profoundly significant, as though just beneath the surface something huge and live waked for a moment of lazy alertness out of and into light slumber again. ... Through the undergrowth it goes with a plaintive sound, a musing sound; in it the unwinded cane and saplings lean as before a little gale, swaying without reflections as though suspended on invisible wires from the branches overhead. Above the ceaseless surface they stand – trees, cane, vines – rootless, severed from the earth, spectral to above a scene of immense yet circumscribed desolation filled with the voice of the waste and mournful water. ... The river itself is not a hundred yards across, and pa and Vernon and Vardaman and Dewey Dell are the only things in sight not of that single monotony of desolation leaning with that terrific quality a little from right to left, as though we had reached the place where the motion of the wasted world accelerates just before the final precipice. (127, 132)

The funereal quality of the scene is filtered through and reworked by Darl's language. While we can picture the setting clearly enough, the description is not entirely transparent to the thing it describes, since it is overlaid with virtuoso-like language that shows how close he tries to approach the world around him, yet how removed he is, like a lens homing in on its faraway object. His family's failures (both in terms of their general socio-economic situation and the journey to Jefferson itself, where his father exchanges a dead wife for a living one), and his own failure later to act in anything but a despairing, destructive fashion by setting fire to the barn in which Addie's coffin sits, are symbolically overcome by his masterful style. In a manner simultaneously reminiscent of expressionism's objectification through pictorial equivalents of inner emotion, yet unlike it in its sublime-darkness, Darl's language reflects a mind and a gaze gone awry.

ANAMORPHISM

Distorting as it is, compensation may be folded within a broader anamorphic tendency in modernism, especially in expressionism. Anamorphism is a technique of distortion whose effects are even more severe than compensation's and whose meaning must be salvaged by decoding its visual language and explaining its (seemingly irreconcilable) relation to its context, its support.¹⁰ In that juxtaposition lies some of the meaningful

¹⁰ When the balance shifts from a selective use of anamorphism as a method of juxtaposing two modes of perception, one 'normal' and one not, to a broader anamorphism in which everything appears slanted, we are not only confronted with a particularly acute aesthetic style but even the dissolution of the process itself, dependent as it is on the contrast of

impact of anamorphism. In both the works of van Gogh and Faulkner, the anamorphic element, or the object perceived awry, widens into the protracted stain that embodies a subject's gaze (the painter's or writer's, the subjects' in the works themselves, and implied sometimes the viewers' and readers') or, as I will argue, a wider unspecified ontological presence that can be called drive.

The successful tension between optical registers is probably most famously rendered in Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, in which the slanted skull in the foreground completes the painting's meaning. Were the skull painted in the same mode as the rest of the painting, Berger argues, its 'metaphysical implications would have disappeared; it would have become an object like everything else, a mere part of a mere skeleton of a man who happened to be dead' (*Ways*, 91). That is, if the conventional language of the *memento mori* were maintained and the skull included on the shelf with all other objects there, its impact would be lost within competing symbols and within a more conventional rhetoric about time and death. But I would argue that the painting's success rests, more importantly, on the skull's *concealed* nature for a first-time viewer and then on the epiphany once it is recognized. A sort of delayed eruption of intellectual energy results, which becomes part of the aesthetic effect of the painting. Some critics suggest that when the skull is recognized, everything else becomes 'illegible,' that 'two systems coexist in one painting but are at the same time mutually exclusive: to comprehend fully one of them the viewer has to lose sight of the other' (Bätschmann and Griener, 188). However, it seems more accurate to say that when one register wanes the other is foregrounded, that when the skull is viewed from an angle the rest of the painting appears on a slant, and vice versa. This perpetual tension, this sliding into and out of visual normalcy, which also bears obvious thematic importance (like the contract between worldly imperialistic ambitions and death as the final statement about the former's vanity), is anamorphic.¹¹

Once the anamorphic element mutates and pervades the entire surface of a given work – and indeed one can find evidence of this in van Gogh and across expressionism – the suddenness of intellectual epiphany wanes. Anamorphism becomes the dominant visual language through which a non-cognitive experience is rendered (which does not mean that Holbein's skull is an object only appreciable cognitively, or that van Gogh's works

registers. Both van Gogh and Faulkner walk this line, the former more so, at once ensuring the inclusion of their works within modernism (partly defined as it is by the so-called 'unique style') and leaving themselves open to accusations of stylistic excess.

- 11 In the context of Lacan's identification of anamorphism as a 'pathological bias constitutive of reality,' Slavoj Žižek says this sliding in Holbein's painting makes us aware 'that reality already involves our gaze, that this gaze is *included* in the scene we are observing, that this scene already "regards us"' (*The Ticklish Subject*, 78). According to Žižek, Lacan argues for a blind spot in reality that 'introduces anamorphic distortion into reality itself' (79).

exclude all cognition). One becomes aware of the painting's disturbance to reality as usually perceived, but to a reality *outside* the frame. Of course, surprising anamorphic objects of a sort exist *inside* van Gogh's paintings too. For example, the arrangement of the scene in *Sower with Setting Sun* is as disjunctive as the use of colour itself. The line of full-grown wheat below the yellow sky (closer examination suggests it is wheat) jars with the recently ploughed field in the foreground. Unless one concludes that around Arles a second crop is seeded in early summer (not the case), or that the field actually consists of yellowed corn stalks and that the sower is seeding wheat in the fall for the following spring, one might argue persuasively that the painting is telling a story about time; accordingly, the two lower bars of colour (field and wheat) represent the earth at *different* stages, even though they are juxtaposed spatially in the same frame. This 'temporalized space' could be conceived as the converse of narrative's spatialized time in Joseph Frank's sense. The eventuality of the earth's evolutions, while not visible to the peasant per se, is nevertheless a *potentiality* perceivable in his mind's eye, rendered through the distortions visible to viewers. Like *The Ambassadors*, *Sower with Setting Sun* encourages a period of critical thinking or 'working through' whose conclusion seems similarly epiphanic. The latter painting's anamorphism results partly from its contrast of visual modes, its recognizable, perspectival referentiality and its obviously distorted personal vision. Although this contrast exists within the frame of the painting, the recognizable object world is necessarily undergirded by the viewers' awareness of the thing itself, beyond the frame.

Other anamorphic objects include the paintings on the wall in *Van Gogh's Bedroom* (1888), which hang at odd angles and appear to highlight their own 'paintedness,' as well as the rudimentary chairs in later works that look skewed, especially in relation to their surrounding space. One detects in these chairs an anticipating of cubism's hovering at different planes or its rotation around objects or, perhaps more plausibly, some early movement towards abstraction in which objects flatten out onto a self-consciously anti-perspectivist plane. But such objects appear crafted in a manner more accidental than deliberate. The same does not seem to be the case with the bright hues in *Sower with Setting Sun*.

In a related but slightly different interpretation of its features, and thus a way further into the meaning of anamorphism, Žižek attributes to this colour a 'massiveness' that 'pertains neither to the direct materiality of the colour stains nor to the materiality of the depicted objects – it dwells in a kind of intermediate spectral domain of what Schelling called *geistige Körperlichkeit*' (*Plague*, 32). He explains that there is an 'absolute gap between organic body and the mad eternal rhythm of drive to which its organs ... can be submitted. In this precise sense, drive can be said to be "meta-physical": not in the sense of being beyond the domain of the physical, but in the

sense of involving another materiality beyond (or, rather, beneath) the materiality located in (what we experience as) spatio-temporal reality. In other words, the primordial Other of our spatio-temporal bodily reality is not Spirit, but another "sublime" materiality' (32). As I see it, this spectral materiality lies between the two materialities evident in the translational process, embodying the drives of the expressionist artist before being translated into the final, corrupted materiality of the painting that traces out its existence. Instead of the adjective 'beneath' used by Žižek, one might substitute 'between' to more accurately convey these layers. Using drive, therefore, allows one to modify the objective correlative technique by adding complexity to the simple, direct link between internal 'spiritual' emotions and outward aesthetic form. The heft that drive takes in van Gogh's protracted stains is neither literally in the paint nor in the object, but in a psychic gap between the two. Anamorphism in this sense is the resulting distortion that encapsulates a wider drive whose origins are not always individualized (thus, perhaps, explaining the problem in identifying the source of the compensatory energies in some of his paintings).

From spectrality within expressionism, I will turn to the spectral vision in Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, which also serves as an anamorphic moment. The section often referred to as 'Ratliff's Dream' is spectral in the sense described by Žižek, not so much because it occurs *beyond* the text's material historical world or even *between* that world and the real one it is thought to represent but because it conveys the apparently *instinctive* propensity of the carpetbagger Flem Snopes towards corruption and represents in its objective form the (less than consciously rational) antipathy on Ratliff's part – and by extension, on Faulkner's as well – for Snopes and his dealings. The passage conflates Flem's unconscious (or at least unstated) satisfaction in fulfilling his genetic nature to be 'bad' with an observer's visceral revulsion and astonishment at the Snopes phenomenon in action.

Perhaps more importantly for this essay, Ratliff's Dream continues the juxtapositional and epiphanic model of anamorphism evident in *The Ambassadors* some five centuries before. Coming after Snopes's incremental steps up the ladder of power in the county, this section describes his meeting with the 'Prince' (of Darkness) in the latter's hall. Willingly returning for his soul, which he seemed to have signed over in exchange for unspecified powers in the 'real' world, and thus willing to enter hell, Snopes refuses to accept a different soul after his own, stored in an 'asbestos matchbox,' has gone missing (167). Implied by the leftover smear is that the soul has either shrivelled to nothing or been stolen (somehow by Snopes himself). If it is the latter, then Snopes is employing the rather familiar technique of a disingenuous appeal to law as a façade over an unstated, unacknowledged illegality (the irony being, I suppose, that earthly legality and its contrary still mean something in hell). In short, he accuses the Prince of blocking his legal right to eternal damnation! If his

soul is not available, then maybe something else is; even the Prince, using bribes, cannot appease Snopes or refute his 'legal' claims for the very throne the former now occupies. Importantly, Snopes apparently possesses a power beyond mere documents or words, even beyond the discernible technique of a legal façade over criminality, and this inexplicable and invisible power finds its perfect expression in the visible distortions of anamorphism.

While the scene has its bizarre internal logic, its anamorphism partly depends on its juxtaposition with the preceding 'normal' narrative. If one assumes the last narrative focalizer to be Ratliff, then the scene could be said to emanate from his consciousness, although no clearly unambiguous segue exists. More interestingly perhaps, an argument can be made for the equivalence between slanted skull and Ratliff's dream in its entirety, which is to say for their similarity as anamorphic objects rendered disjunctively in comparison with what surrounds them. In relation to the rest of the text, the italicized scene is awry, like the skull, yet impinges thematically on the story. It highlights the point, which might otherwise drift into the background as the *memento mori* might were it placed on the shelf, that Snopes is an unstoppable force (like death) for which no explanation exists in the rational discourse of the novel or in the declining economy of the moment.

Were one to continue this tack, returning to the spatio-temporal world, one might explore further the ineffable, intangible 'something' that anamorphism partly concerns itself with in the context discussed here. In a peasant economy, or really any simple economy whose central axis is labour (i.e. labour in the sense of a production of material, not abstract 'goods'), the intangible something is absent (i.e. its central cog and workings are relatively evident to analysis), and translation as an aesthetic technique seems suitably attuned. But in the absence of this axis on a wide scale – the missing centre of being as Berger might call it, the evolution of capitalism towards ever greater abstraction – translation signals a longing for a dereified production of the world. Any such longing can be confused with a Marxist (or even Arnoldian, or Catonist) nostalgia for a pre-ideological moment, but is in fact symptomatic of a need among late capitalist subjects to 'make connections' and make their reality 'to hand.'

WORKS CITED

- Baltrušaitis, Jurgis. *Anamorphic Art*. Trans W.J. Strachan. New York: Harry N. Abrams 1977
- Bätschmann, Oskar, and Pascal Griener. *Hans Holbein*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1977
- Berger, John. 'The Production of the World.' 1983. *The Sense of Sight: Writings by John Berger*. Ed Lloyd Spencer. New York: Pantheon 1985

- *Ways of Seeing*. 1972. London: BBC and Penguin 1988
- Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. 1930. New York: Random House 1964
- *The Hamlet*. 1940. New York: Vintage 1991
- *The Mansion*. 1955. New York: Vintage 1959
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. 1966. New York: Vintage 1973
- Gray, Richard. *The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers and the American South*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1977
- Holbein, Hans. *The Ambassadors*. National Gallery, London
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press 1991
- Mazis, Glen A. 'Merleau-Ponty, Inhabitation and the Emotions.' *Merleau-Ponty: Critical Essays*. Ed Henry Pietersma. Lanham, Maryland: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and University Press of America 1989, 251-68.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press 1968
- Van Gogh, Vincent, *Blossoming Pear Tree*. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam
- *Enclosed Wheat Field with Reaper*. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo
- *Olive Trees*. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis
- *Ploughed Field*. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam
- *The Potato Eaters*. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam
- *Red Vineyard*. Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
- *Sower with Setting Sun*. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo
- *Sower with Setting Sun [with Tree]*. Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection, Zurich
- *Van Gogh's Bedroom*. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam
- *Weatherbeaten Pine Trees*. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo
- *Wheat Field with Lark*. Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam
- *Wheat Field with Rising Sun*. Private Collection
- *Wheat Field with Setting Sun*. Kunstmuseum, Winterthur
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. 1997. London: Verso 1999
- *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*. 1999. London: Verso 2000

Copyright of University of Toronto Quarterly is the property of University of Toronto Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.