

## *Naturalism and Allegory in Flemish Painting*

CONSIDER THE CHANGING STYLES of interpretation of one picture, Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Marriage* (Fig. 1). For Ruskin it is a marvelous example of the "ingenuity" of the inventor of oil painting:

eminently remarkable for reality of substance, vacuity of space and vigor of quiet colour . . . exhibiting, even in its quaint and minute treatment, conquest over many of the difficulties which the boldest practice of art involves.<sup>1</sup>

The inscription, "Johannes de Eyck fuit hic, 1434," Sir Charles Eastlake notes, can be translated, "this man was here"; possibly "the portraits are of van Eyck and his wife."<sup>2</sup> But since this couple does not resemble other images of them, it is best that this "question be submitted to those who have given much attention to the history of John Van Eyck."<sup>3</sup> Crowe and Cavalcaselle (1872) praise

the sense of depth and atmosphere; [van Eyck] nowhere blended colours more carefully, nowhere produced more transparent shadows. . . . On the other hand, the draperies are angular in places. . . .<sup>4</sup>

In 1902 Aby Warburg briefly discusses the inscription:

Jan van Eyck è state qui in questa stanza; come se il pittore volesse dire: "Vi ho ritratti meglio che potevo perché mi fu consentito di essere testimone oculare della vostra intimità domestica."<sup>5</sup>

Brockwell describes elements which are later re-interpreted (1912): the six-armed chandelier with one candle burning; the armchair with the depiction of St. Margaret; the reflections of two persons, one "apparently" van Eyck, in the

mirror.<sup>6</sup> A 1921 book speculates about the couple. "As for Arnolfini . . . The Lord deliver us from being caught as debtors to the like of him." The wife of another man depicted by van Eyck

will probably be a happier woman than Arnolfini's. Each picture tells its story so plainly that any competent novelist could set all these individuals talking for us without the least difficulty.<sup>7</sup>

Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages* evokes such a novella:

"Jan van Eyck was here." Only a moment ago, one might think. The sound of his voice still seems to linger in the silence of this room. . . . That serene twilight hour of an age . . . suddenly reveals itself here.<sup>8</sup>

On the whole, these comments, though more detailed, do not differ greatly from those of a *Quattrocento* commentator on Flemish naturalism. Bartholomaeus Facius praises one picture for lacking "only a voice," and says of another van Eyck: "Nothing is more wonderful . . . than the mirror painted in the picture, in which you see whatever is represented as in a real mirror."<sup>9</sup> The one text which perhaps anticipates modern accounts of Flemish allegory is Hegel's. Without analyzing individual pictures at any length, he does suggest that Flemish painting is not just an art of naturalism:

many artists have proceeded to introduce symbolical features . . . For example, . . . we often see Christ lying . . . under a dilapidated roof, . . . and, round about, the ruins of an ancient building, while in the background is the beginning of a cathedral.<sup>10</sup>

And Friedlaender effectively summarizes both the traditional praise for van Eyck's naturalism and anticipates the modern concern with allegory. Van Eyck "offers us a kind of snapshot,

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giving a certain event—the betrothal—in a certain place at a certain hour;” thus “the most trifling things are depicted with grave and inward-looking scruple, investing them with the value and meaning of ritual objects.”<sup>11</sup>

Within this tradition, Panofsky’s justly famous 1934 article marks a sea change in interpretative style; most later accounts accept his general viewpoint, whilst usually arguing with him about some points of detail. Since the painting, he demonstrates, is a “pictorial marriage certificate,”

the question arises whether this marvellous interior . . . is still rooted in some extent in the medieval tendency of investing visible objects with an allegorical or symbolic meaning.<sup>12</sup>

The dog is “here indubitably used as a symbol of marital faith;” the burning candle symbolizes “the all seeing wisdom of God”; the “fruit on the window sill” reminds of our innocence before the Fall; the discarded shoes at the lower left, referring to God’s command to Moses on Mt. Sinai, show that the setting is sacred.<sup>13</sup>

Once given, such an allegorical interpretation is readily supplemented. The mirror has been variously interpreted. “On peut ajouter que Jean van Eyck a superposé ici au sacrement du mariage l’idée de la rédemption . . . le petit miroir convexe, symbole du monde terrestre.”<sup>14</sup> Alternatively, the mirror is “a symbol of the Virgin, and at the same time, through the reflection appearing in it, a model of painting as a perfect image of the visible world.”<sup>15</sup> It may be an additional witness to the marriage, or perhaps van Eyck’s “intention was . . . to introduce into the world of God a painted world which would be an infinitesimal reflection of its proportions.”<sup>16</sup> But a more mundane view of the mirror is also conceivable:

The convex diminishing mirror is there in order that the whole of the room may be seen. . . . Convex mirrors are always round, for which reason the roundness in this case is not to be interpreted as a symbol of the world.<sup>17</sup>

One detail in Panofsky’s interpretation has occasioned debate:

van Eyck took the liberty of joining the right hand of the bride with the left of the bridegroom, contrary to ritual and contrary, also, to all the other representations of a marriage ceremony.<sup>18</sup>

Since in general deviations from perfect or plausible naturalism are read as carrying symbolic meanings, is this consistent? Panofsky argues that this hand position “is an anomaly often found in English art with which Jan van Eyck was demonstrably familiar,” referring to an article which notes that such hand positionings, rare on the Continent, were common in English art; possibly the artist saw those works when sent to England on a secret mission.<sup>19</sup> But Schrabaker rather sees an image of “a morgannatic, . . . i.e., left-handed marriage” in which “while the bride as usual offers her right hand, the groom now takes it in his left;” and this is a non-trivial point since, if correct, it “forces us ‘to abandon the identification of the sitters that has prevailed.’ ”<sup>20</sup>

Held defends Panofsky. Schrabacker fails to consider the importance of the groom’s raised right hand, which seems “expressive of the sacred commitment of the matrimonial vow”; the usual joining of right hands has been modified to emphasize the gesture. Since morgannatic marriages were not known in the Netherlands, this symbolic reading of the gesture is more plausible than Schrabacker’s literal account.<sup>21</sup> And Schrabacker’s own illustration of a couple holding right hands illustrates this claim: in that image, the man’s gesturing left hand is less aesthetically convincing than is Arnolfini’s gesture. But Rosenau, whose text was one major source for Panofsky, argues that

the right hand of Arnolfini is raised not so much in a gesture of prayer, as Panofsky thinks, but of speaking. . . . The intimacy of the ceremony is thus enhanced. . . . It is the anticipation of action, rather than the action, which commands attention.<sup>22</sup>

As Harbison notes, Schrabacker’s interpretation “is based on a literal (realistic) reading” while Panofsky sees the gesture “as attributed to artistic [symbolic] license.”<sup>23</sup> The relation here between realism and symbolism becomes complex. Friedlaender earlier described the hands without raising these questions:

Arnolfini is . . . reaching out to her with his hand, against which she shyly and reluctantly lays her own. His other hand is raised in an “eloquent” gesture. . . . the master’s instinct for uncovering the hidden is wisely tempered.<sup>24</sup>

Only once Panofsky made the opposition between realism and symbolism so important was there reason to examine so closely this detail in a painting which had long been well known and on public display.

The questions raised by this example can be generalized. Allegorical interpretations make paintings seem more deeply meaningful than do earlier naturalistic descriptions; still, since no text contemporary with the works supports those interpretations, why have they only been discovered so recently? Suppose a visually sensitive, historically naive student notes that converging lines can be drawn on photographs of many *quattrocento* frescos; her argument—these painters knew perspective—is so well supported by contemporary texts that we need not seek the precise source of any given artist's knowledge of that system of representation. By contrast, the claim that van Eyck painted allegories may seem more problematic. Perhaps his intentions were so obvious that when verbal commentaries on art were terse, there was no felt need to identify those allegories; alternatively, since—as Gombrich reminds us—what we see in pictures is always dependent upon our prior beliefs, maybe our allegorical interpretations project modern concerns into his work.

Gombrich has asked whether there are such levels of meaning in Renaissance art. "I know of no medieval or Renaissance text which applies this doctrine to works of pictorial art."<sup>25</sup> This simple-seeming claim is tricky. The inscription *within* the *Arnolfini Marriage* and words *on* the original frames of other paintings may show that these works contain levels of meaning. What Gombrich means, I believe, is that though St. Bernard compares light passing through a window to the Virgin's immaculate conception of Christ, no text of van Eyck's time says that Flemish painters made images of such a scene. Still, there is some contemporary evidence. The original frame, now stolen, of a van Eyck Annunciation contained the words:

As the sunbeam through the glass  
Passeth but not staineth  
Thus, the Virgin, as she was,  
Virgin still remaineth.<sup>26</sup>

Even if van Eyck did not make the frame, it

would be remarkable did he not apply those words to his image. More generally, Gombrich allows that "religious pictures do embody things as symbols"; then "the symbol functions as a metaphor which only acquires its specific meaning in a given context. The picture has not several meanings but one." This surely begs the question, for what justifies speaking of literal *and* symbolic meanings in the *Arnolfini Marriage* is that the depicted dog symbolizes fidelity and the fruit, innocence. After quoting what I would call an allegorical account of Leonardo's *St. Anne*, "St. Anne stand(s) for the Church that does not want to have the passion of Christ prevented," Gombrich argues that we have no two meanings here because such a grouping "had never been conceived as a realistic representation."<sup>27</sup> But how then can we distinguish realistic and allegorical Christian scenes? Elsewhere Gombrich himself takes the *Mourning of Christ* as a paradigm of a realistic scene: "We seem to witness the real event as if enacted on a stage."<sup>28</sup>

Gombrich asks how an allegorical reading can be justified. To answer that question, consider another famous example, Meyer Schapiro's exceedingly skillfully motivated account of the *Mérode Altarpiece* (Fig. 2). The devil, as Augustine put it, is trapped by the cross; here mice are caught in the trap made by Joseph. The "tiny naked . . . child bearing a cross" in the central panel emphasizes that here "metaphor and reality are condensed in a single object." And the late medieval fantasy that Joseph helps deceive the devil, preventing him from recognizing Christ's divine paternity, fits nicely into this analysis; Joseph traps mice and the devil too. This religious symbolism overlaps with the sexual symbolism of the mouse-traps, candles, lilies, windows, and fireplace. "They are drawn together in our minds as symbols of the masculine and feminine." Given Christian legends about lascivious, destructive mice, seeing "the mousetrap of Joseph as an instrument of a latent sexual meaning . . . is therefore hardly arbitrary." That trap, "a female object," is also "the means of destroying sexual temptation."<sup>29</sup>

This allegorical interpretation differs in important ways from Panofsky's account of the *Arnolfini Marriage*. Since the inscription in that painting is discussed by earlier interpreters,

Panofsky's allegorical account adds to, but is not absolutely essential for, his explanation of those words. By contrast, the distinction between naturalistic and allegorical interpretations of the *Mérode Altarpiece* is more dramatic. Friedlaender says that the artist "outdoes himself in representing everything with the utmost realism. . . . He revels in depicting still life elements and becomes almost obtrusive in his naturalism."<sup>30</sup> Huizinga, similarly, sees Joseph "occupied with making mousetraps. . . . all the details are 'genre,' with an almost imperceptible flavour of the comic about them."<sup>31</sup>

A later commentator who generally accepts Schapiro's account asks a good question: since "there is no known reference, either scriptural or exegetical, that links St. Joseph specifically to this unusual carpenter's product," how can we validate that interpretation?<sup>32</sup> Certainly Augustine's text, cited by Schapiro, was influential, and a contemporary writer, Schapiro notes, wrote of "the fishhook and bait," a related image. Schapiro's links between mousetraps, the devil, Joseph the deceiver, and lascivious mice depend, then, upon gathering diverse Christian texts which the painter might have known. By contrast, the psychoanalytic observations need no such support. "We lack . . . all knowledge of the life history of both the artist and the donor . . . but the process of symbolization is a general one . . . ." Still, weaving together Christian and psychoanalytic interpretations is tricky. Identifying the pointed and hollow things "as symbols of the masculine and feminine," Schapiro creates an image of a happy bourgeois household. The surrealists, whom he knew, might have described differently the perhaps frustrated, continent Joseph who, set apart from his virgin wife, drills holes; his carpenter shop is filled with instruments that bore, cut, slice and pierce. So, "the different layers of meaning sustain each other" only when the psychoanalytic interpretation is made consistent with the Christian reading.

The relation Panofsky and Schapiro find between realistic images and symbols is in part opposed.<sup>33</sup> For Panofsky, in Flemish art "medieval symbolism and modern realism are so perfectly reconciled that the former has become inherent in the latter"; for Schapiro, that realism involves the secularizing tendency to make painting "a vehicle of personal life, and hence

of unconscious demands" which ultimately are opposed to religious values. Instead of Panofsky's perfect harmony, Schapiro sees a "combat" between religion and "the new secular values," as when in the *Arnolfini Marriage* religious images are literally in "a marginal position . . . a secondary reality forming a border around the reflecting glass." For Panofsky, "reality itself" gives "rise to a flow of preternatural associations." For Schapiro, the "development of realism, . . . the imagining of the world for its own sake, as a beautiful fascinating spectacle," is one step towards secular art.

In part, this disagreement reflects differing art-historical perspectives. For Schapiro, the mousetraps are forerunners of Bosch's instruments, which more openly manifest this conflict; for Panofsky, Bosch is at the margin of *Early Netherlandish Painting*, beyond "the scope of this volume, . . . also . . . beyond the capacity of its author."<sup>34</sup> Schapiro's characterization of Cézanne—whose "conception of a personal art rested upon a more general ideal of individual liberty"—contrasts with Panofsky's lack of enthusiasm for modernism.<sup>35</sup> Unlike Panofsky, Schapiro sees in the *Mérode Altarpiece* one step towards Cézanne, and so finds in Flemish painting conflicts between secular and religious values which can be resolved only in the distant future.

Still other historical perspectives on Flemish art are possible. Carla Gottlieb argues that the *Mérode Altarpiece* table "signifies the altartable"; the wooden beams and rafters "identify the shrine as Solomon's bridal-bower"; and the shutter, screen and window view "symbolize the eschatological marriage."<sup>36</sup> Just as Schapiro's interest in psychoanalysis predisposes him to look at the erotic symbolism of mousetraps, so her very title—*The Window in Art*—places these windows in an account of windows in art from ancient times through Duchamp.

The natural way to introduce such allegorical readings is to indicate how a picture does not quite make sense as a purely naturalistic image. Why show *one* burning candle in an interior lit by sunlight? Why does one annunciation show *seven* beams of light passing through a window?<sup>37</sup> (Six or eight might be naturalistic; seven is a magic number.) Why does van Eyck



Figure 1: Jan Van Eyck, *Arnolfini Marriage*, 1434. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London.



**Figure 2:** Robert Campin, *Triptych of the Annunciation*, 1425-1428: central panel, *The Annunciation*; left wing, *Kneeling Donors*; right wing, *Joseph in His Workshop*. Reproduced by courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection.

show an unreasonably large Madonna in a church?<sup>38</sup> Just as we explain word slips, the lives of exotic peoples, and crazy behavior by attributing to the actors beliefs which explain their behavior, so we understand van Eyck's art by assuming in such cases that his images are intended to be allegorical. If someone says "mother" instead of "mistress"; if a tribe tells us that hyenas are Orthodox Christians and therefore fast on feast days; if a man asserts that he is God's son: then we rationalize their actions by attributing to them beliefs which by our lights make sense of those actions.<sup>39</sup> But we need not suppose that these agents accept, or could even recognize, our interpretation. Interpreting Flemish allegories involves an additional constraint: we seek the original intended meaning of the image.

Consequently, the art historians' procedure contains a possible paradox stated by Panofsky, who fails, I believe, to acknowledge its full implications. A van Eyck "possibly meant to express an allegorical meaning" at the same time appears perfectly naturalistic.<sup>40</sup> But if the naturalism is perfect, how can we detect the allegory? Since dogs, light rays, mousetraps, windows, doors and almost anything else shown in Flemish paintings are discussed in some Christian text, it is therefore always possible to construct an allegorical interpretation. Critics who propose the parallel between the allegorists' passion for details and the obsessional neurotic point to a real issue: surely the erudite art historian can find textual evidence for symbolism in any naturalistic scene.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps it is wrong to think of this as a paradox. If Flemish artists believed that God manifests Himself everywhere, why should they not put sacred symbols everywhere in their pictures? What at any rate is a problem for the writer is determining how to interpret such pictures; if every picture element is potentially meaningful, where can the analysis stop?

Craig Harbison offers a highly ingenious response to this dilemma.<sup>42</sup> Let us understand the opposition between realism and allegory by contrasting van Eyck and the painter of the *Mérode Altarpiece*, Campin. Van Eyck manipulates "realistic objects to form religious symbols"; Campin distinguishes between opposites which "van Eyck was intent on blending and at the same time transcending." Since

usually the perfect unity of form-and-content of symbols has been contrasted with the inherent dualism of allegories, it may seem strange to think that van Eyck is both allegorist and obliterates "the purely worldly distinction between sacred and secular."<sup>43</sup> But just as a structuralist anthropologist might understand the meaning of a ritual by understanding how it is performed differently by two neighboring tribes, so describing the contrasting modes of symbolization within Flemish culture permits us to understand these two artists.

Campin seems drawn to a form of symbolism that does not compromise the integrity of the visible world, van Eyck, on the other hand, attempts to grasp in a single image the way the Spirit penetrates and transforms the world through time.

We can see van Eyck overcoming the split between realism and symbolization because we contrast his works with Campin's, which make "the transition from earthly object to sacred symbol . . . distinct and disturbing."

This strategy is perhaps a natural development of the older allegorical readings. Just as Panofsky and Schapiro translate the synchronic opposition between earlier naturalistic accounts and their allegorical interpretations into a diachronic opposition between two kinds of reference present *simultaneously* in one artwork, so Harbison contrasts his opposition between van Eyck and Campin to earlier, simpler discussions of visual allegory. "The ways images operate seem much freer and more suggestive than that indicated by the notion of a work intentionally illustrating an abstruse intellectual speculation."

Consider here some details raised following Schapiro's article. He suggested that Joseph makes a bait box, a marine equivalent to the mousetrap. Panofsky saw that board as "the perforated cover of a footstand intended to hold a warming pan"; Margaret Freeman thinks that Joseph makes spike blocks to drag on the ground between Christ's feet as He carries the cross.<sup>44</sup> Zupnick argues against all of these interpretations. A warming pan cannot be made of wood, a combustible material; it is "far-fetched" to think Joseph prepares "instruments of torture for his son"; Schapiro's analysis is too distantly related to his account of the

mousetraps.<sup>45</sup> Rather, since the holes in that board fall into random patterns and a nearby dowel would, if cut, fit into those holes, Joseph makes a maze to lure mice. The disadvantage of this interpretation, in turn, is that many pieces of this trap are not depicted; not only must Joseph construct another plank, as Zupnick notes, but he must also build ends and sides for his instrument. Heckscher sees "yet another devil-deceiving . . . device": a version of the firescreen in the central panel.<sup>46</sup> Minott interprets the board as "a holder for the rods" of Mary's suitors, the dowel being Joseph's rod.<sup>47</sup> Lavin, who has been to Italian grape harvests, sees "the centerboard of the strainer of a small winepress."<sup>48</sup> Winemaking was not a Flemish activity, but Augustine calls Christ "the grape of the promised land," and in Bruges there was a Confraternity of the Precious Blood.

Bait box; warming pan; spike-block; maze; firescreen; rod holder; winepress centerboard; each interpretation claims to be appropriate and finds some visual precedent. Given the difficulty of finding a knock-down solution here, it is predictable that once Schapiro produced his allegorical reading, other interpreters would propose other such accounts. Describing another element, the tiny figures in the street scene, Freeman says: "one can find no hidden meaning here."<sup>49</sup> After arguing with Gottlieb's interpretation, De Cooc concludes: "there can be no justification for attributing any symbolic value to the bench."<sup>50</sup> But there is no long sequence of allegorical interpretations of these elements. Concluding that Joseph's board is just a board would be more provocative—a disappointing non-solution to a longstanding puzzle.

Compare Minott's interpretation to Schapiro's account. Focusing not on the mousetrap, but on the ax, saw, and rod beneath Joseph's feet, Minott turns to a commentary on Isaiah sufficiently obscure to be worth quoting here:

Shall the ax boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as the staff should lift up itself as if it were no wood.<sup>51</sup>

This text does not obviously relate to Joseph, and it leads to an interpretation of the mousetrap

only via reference to a citation from Augustine: "The proud have hid a snare for me, and cords; they have spread a net by the wayside; they have set gins for me" (Psalm 140:5). There are two ways to compare this analysis to Schapiro's. Schapiro's analysis is a model interpretation, and Minott's account is substantially less plausible by comparison. Alternatively, precisely because Minott is less skillful, he shows the problems presented by all allegorical readings. Just as Schapiro begins with the mousetrap, so Minott starts with the ax, saw and rod; just as Schapiro weaves together Christian and psychoanalytic texts, so Minott links Isaiah and Psalm 140. The fact that texts can thus be matched to the work in differing ways can undermine our confidence in the validity of any given interpretation.

Biblical interpretation may offer one useful parallel:

The Jews then said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham?" Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." (John 8:57-8).<sup>52</sup>

Christians recall Exodus 3:14: "And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM," or in Harold Bloom's preferred translation: "I will be present wherever and whenever I will be present."<sup>53</sup> This passage, he notes, not "of the slightest interest or importance to any of the great rabbinical commentators," became important when Christians sought to reduce "the Hebrew Bible to that captive work, The Old Testament." Rabbi David Kimhi found Jesus' words nonsensical: "there can be no father and son in the Divinity . . . a father precedes a son in time." Rudolf Bultmann writes: "The Jews remain caught in the trammels of their own thought. . . . They cannot understand, because the notion of the Revealer's 'pre-existence' can only be understood in faith."

Like the Christian, the allegorizing art historian seeks texts to interpret the van Eyck or Campin image; like the rabbi, the skeptic about that procedure asks if so doing tells us the meaning of the picture. The Christian believes that matching Old Testament with New is possible; given that belief, what happens, almost inevitably, is that successful matching occurs. The rabbi finds the success of this procedure

unconvincing. Believe that the New Testament fulfills the Old and you will look for prophetic passages; reject that belief, and such a practice seems full of contradictions. What for the rabbis is a paradox—how could Jesus have seen Abraham?—is for Christians a sign that Jews are bad and biased interpreters.

This analogy admittedly elides one distinction between art history and theology. Art historians argue for their conclusions; appeals to faith carry no ultimate weight. But pointing to this fact may not be helpful. Panofsky, Schapiro, and their successors believe that Flemish art should be interpreted allegorically, and that assumption determines how they argue. If earlier discussions of Flemish naturalism make the paintings seem simpler, that—an allegorist would say—is because those writers failed to look closely enough. Like the Christian who believes that his account of John 8:57-8 makes sense of words which the rabbis think absurd, the allegorist trusts a method of interpreting which is not really open to counter-argument. Any given interpretation might of course be rejected; but what would constitute a demonstration that allegorical interpretations, as such, are mistaken?

What seems seductive about allegory, such suspicious interpreters as Nietzsche, Foucault, and Nehamas have emphasized, is the belief that through it hidden meanings, present in text or picture but accessible only to those who read and look deeply, are revealed.<sup>54</sup> Drawing attention to the ways that such interpretation is an institutionalized enterprise, we may ask: what constitutes a tradition of interpretation? Who determines what are acceptable interpretations? How are deviant interpretations dealt with? Held usefully suggests that the motto for *Early Netherlandish Painting* should be one sentence from that book: "There is . . . no other answer to this problem" of identifying allegory "than the use of historical methods tempered . . . by common sense."<sup>55</sup> This common sense is defined by professional consensus. The nineteenth-century commentators would be astonished by Panofsky's text, and today it would seem crazy to relate van Eyck to Buddhist writings, or Campin to the Koran. We can give good arguments for these beliefs. It is plausible that Flemish artists expressed Christian doctrines in their work, and unsurprising that be-

fore the invention of modern art history such symbolism was undetected. But since these common sense views rely on a consensus created relatively recently, it seems over-optimistic to be certain that our allegorical interpretations correctly identify the artists' intentions.

A possibly useful parallel is offered by two allegorical readings of more recent art. For Ruskin, in Turner's *Apollo and Python* the "dragon was a treasure-guardian. . . . Apollo's contest with him is the strife of purity with pollution, of life with forgetfulness; of love with the grave."<sup>56</sup> Color, especially scarlet, stands for dignity and power; it is "the great sanctifying element of visible beauty inseparably connected with purity and life." But a darker message is also presented, since a small serpent crawls from the dying Python. "Alas, for Turner! This smaller serpent-worm, it seemed, he could not conceive to be slain." Ruskin interprets in relation to his more general pessimism: "men . . . destroy all beauty. They seem to have no other desire or hope but to have large houses and to be able to move fast."

Turner scholars are divided about the validity of this interpretation. Perhaps "Ruskin had no comprehension of Turner's vision" and so interpreted him in terms "wholly alien to a man who was a poet in paint"; alternatively,

although the painter may not have known or drawn upon the precise texts Ruskin cited . . . there is little doubt that Turner knew a great deal of mythology and that he understood it essentially the way his interpreter claimed.<sup>57</sup>

The artist and his commentator talked and dined together; Ruskin read part of *Modern Painters*. By comparison, interpreters of van Eyck and Campin are historically distant from their Flemish culture, and know little about their personalities. Still, maybe differences between Ruskin's and modern uses of allegory make our art historians' interpretations more reliable. For Ruskin,

What counts . . . is not the illumination of a particular picture, . . . but our understanding of the image, whose meanings are greater than and independent of any particular picture . . . in which they occur.<sup>58</sup>

In his text it is difficult to separate the account of *Apollo and Python* from the more general remarks on color, nature and society. By con-

trast, Panofsky and Schapiro say nothing explicit about social problems, nor do they aspire to a free play with symbols.

Rauschenberg's collages of old master images also involve allegory; indeed, one work is titled *Allegory*. Some interpreters treat him like a Flemish master. If "the utilization of every detail" carries "both formal and thematic significance within the work," then *Female Figure (Blueprint)*, made by placing the model on photographic paper, is "a witty example of those reclining females so dear to the Romantic tradition"; the rooster in *Odalisk* is "a parody of Ingres's *Grande Odalisque*"; and in *Rebus* the wings of "the photograph of the flying insect . . . rhyme with those of the wind deities in the neighboring Botticelli."<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, it is "difficult, if not impossible," to discover in such works "any common property that might coherently link these things."<sup>60</sup> Rauschenberg's allegories could be intentionally unintelligible; "only the blind application of traditional art-historical methodologies to contemporary art" leads critics to interpret his works thus.

This is a political dispute about the "end of painting." If Rauschenberg can be interpreted like van Eyck, putting both into the same museum is appropriate; but if "Rauschenberg enacts a deconstruction of the museum," that is misguided.<sup>61</sup> That Rauschenberg himself is "little inclined" to agree with the later view disturbs its proponents not at all; should he understand the real meaning of his art of the 1960s, it is unlikely that he would pursue his present career. Perhaps, then, randomness itself constitutes a statement about the impossibility of achieving aesthetic coherence; alternatively, beneath apparent randomness, a deep order may be found. To interpret Rauschenberg, we must choose between these views, and it is not certain that anything he says need influence our choice.

Such an argument might also be applied to Flemish painting. Since we are in many ways ignorant of the culture of van Eyck and Campin; since allegorical interpretations are a recent creation; since those accounts are often debatable, we could question their general validity. Recent studies of Titian and seventeenth-century Dutch art offer a precedent for such a skeptical argument, which is sure to appear in some forthcoming account of Flemish art.<sup>62</sup>

Once we give up the belief that allegorical meanings are deeper than those shown by mere appearances; once we question Panofsky's vision of art history as a humanistic discipline, and Schapiro's dated view of psychoanalysis—then the suggestion that Flemish artists are "just" superb naturalists might again seem interesting.

This argument, which could be made by a reader of Foucault, is supported also by one reading of *Art and Illusion*. Panofsky made famous the distinction between what we simply observe in an artwork and symbols visible only to those who know texts.<sup>63</sup> A Buddhist sees men sitting around a table where Christians see a Last Supper. In arguing that seeing representations always requires prior knowledge, Gombrich undermines this distinction between naturalistic images and visual symbols, and so suggests that allegorical representations are not inherently deeper, or different in kind, than naturalistic scenes.

I myself have used the realism/allegory opposition without much critical examination. Following Gombrich, consider now how to make that contrast more concrete. Chapter Five of *Early Netherlandish Painting* gives many examples; I list literal meanings on the left, and symbolic equivalences on the right:<sup>64</sup>

right/good; left/evil;  
 monkey/undesirable;  
 Mary/New Eve;  
 three Gothic windows/Trinity;  
 laver and basin/the Virgin's purty,  
 lions/Throne of Solomon;  
 candlestick/Virgin;  
 Mary/the Church as a spiritual entity;  
 Sunlight/Divine radiance.

Schapiro contrasts:

mousetrap/Christ's cross;  
 utilitarian objects/theological symbols,  
 mice/womb; unchaste females, prostitutes/the devil,  
 white mouse/incarnation of souls of unborn children,  
 mousetrap/female object, means of destroying sexual  
 temptation

The Virgin, Solomon's Throne and the Cross are objects; the Trinity, the Church as Spiritual Entity and souls of unborn children are harder to picture; good, evil, purity and means of destroying sexual temptation are properties of

things. So, to simplify, the realism/allegory contrast really marks more and less obvious references; seeing sculpted lions requires less knowledge, all things being equal, than identifying them as Solomon's throne. Christ's cross is not more difficult to identify than a mousetrap, but it takes more knowledge of texts to know that a mousetrap symbolizes that cross.

Allegory thus privileges texts over pictures, overruling the seemingly immediate presence and unity of the image in favor of the system of texts which are needed to identify objects in that image.<sup>65</sup> The traditional ideal of organic unity, which conceives of a picture as self-sufficient, no element of it either superfluous or missing, is replaced by the transformation of that artwork into a source for indefinitely many readings. Panofsky found charm in van Eyck because "the spectator is not irritated by a mass of complicated hieroglyphs"; now that belief seems questionable.<sup>66</sup>

Paecht asks a good question: is

the alleged sophisticated planning of complex allegories producing in the picture a strew-pattern of allusive detail . . . really consistent with the stilled life of Jan van Eyck's world[?]<sup>67</sup>

Interpreted allegorically, the picture becomes rebus-like, and therefore like a text:

Obviously we can only form a proper judgment of the rebus if we . . . replace each separate element by a syllable or word that can be represented by that element in some way or other. *The words* . . . may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance.<sup>68</sup>

Held anticipated this situation when he worried that "with every object potentially a carrier of a concealed meaning, . . . some trigger-happy iconologists may take this as an invitation to shoot from the hip."<sup>69</sup> As my account of the *Arnolfini Marriage* and the *Mérode Altarpiece* shows, closing off this process is difficult. The more an art historian reads and the more visual sources he or she gathers, the more interpretations are possible, but once we discard the belief that the unique, original meaning of the work is to be found, Held's worry may seem unreal. Interpretation is an open-ended process because the successors of Panofsky and Schapiro will treat every object as "potentially

a carrier of concealed meaning." But this is a good thing, not a danger, since it means that future art historians have much work to do. And we might understand this situation in two ways. Lacking enough information about the artists and their times, we cannot definitively narrow down the range of possibilities. Alternatively, however much we know—as the examples of Turner and Rauschenberg may imply—differing interpretations always are possible. For Schapiro

the latent symbolism is not consciously hidden by the artist . . . but was implicit for him and the contemporary spectator . . . in the objects in question because a certain allegorical meaning was traditionally associated with them.<sup>70</sup>

This lesson may be generalized.

Having long pondered the methods of our allegorical interpreters, I am now prepared to add a modest novel example myself. Since Panofsky discusses the one lit candle in the *Arnolfini Marriage*, and Heckscher the smoldering candle in the *Mérode Altarpiece*, what other candles are to be found in Campin's painting? There are two candleholders above the fireplace, though only the one on the Virgin's right holds a candle. In a triptych whose central panel of the Annunciation has three windows, it is easy to think that these three candleholders are meaningful. And given Panofsky's remarks about the equation of "left" with what is evil, the absence of a candle in the holder on the Virgin's left easily appears meaningful; that side of the fireplace is closer to the place where Joseph labors making his traps.

As given, this remains an incompletely motivated interpretation. I lack a theological text to support my analysis, and visual parallels from other Flemish paintings. Still, once attention is called to those two candleholders it is both surprising that they have not been discussed earlier and hard to believe that the difference between them is merely accidental. Sir Charles Eastlake or Crowe and Cavalcaselle would have found my preoccupation with such a seemingly small detail puzzling. Present day art historians may find this detail worth further discussion. In any case, I—like all modern viewers of Flemish painting—thus am influenced by the work of our great allegorical interpreters.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn (London, 1909), 12:256.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Charles Locke Eastlake, *Methods and Materials of Painting of the Great Schools and Masters* (1847; reprint, New York, 1960), p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Compare some earlier accounts cited by W. H. James Weale, *The Van Eycks and Their Art* (London, 1912), p. 118 "the man is trying to read in the lines of the lady's outstretched hand the future of the babe" (1853). Also, "The man . . . is solemnly holding up his right hand to attest . . . that the child whose birth the lady is evidently expecting is his" (1855).

<sup>4</sup> J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle, *The Early Flemish Painters* (London, 1872), p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> Aby Warburg, *La Rinascita del Paganesimo Antico*, trans. E. Cantmore (Florence, 1980), p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> Weale, *The Van Eycks*, p. 112

<sup>7</sup> Sir Martin Conway, *The Van Eycks and Their Followers* (London, 1921), p. 68

<sup>8</sup> J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman (London, 1927), p. 237. My source for many of these references is the National Gallery Catalogue: Martin Davies, *Early Netherlandish School*, London, 1945, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Baxandall, "Bartholomaeus Facius on Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 27 (1964): 102.

<sup>10</sup> Hegel's *Aesthetics*, trans. T. J. Knox (Oxford, 1975), 2:883, 861. Compare Goethe's account of a work he thought a van Eyck: "The Annunciation takes place in an enclosed room . . . lit by a row of windows high up. Everything in it is as clean and neat as befits that innocence which is aware only of itself and its immediate surroundings." (*Goethe on Art*, trans. J. Gage [Berkeley, 1980], p. 143).

<sup>11</sup> M. J. Friedlaender, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Leiden-Brussels, 1967), 1.41.

<sup>12</sup> Erwin Panofsky, "Jan van Eyck's 'Arnolfini' Portrait," reprinted in *Modern Perspectives in Western Art History*, ed. W. E. Kleinbauer (New York, 1971), pp. 198-201.

<sup>13</sup> The last detail added in Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York, 1971), p. 203.

<sup>14</sup> Charles de Tolnay, *Le maître de Flémalle et les Frères van Eyck* (Brussels, 1939), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Heinrich Schwarz, "The Mirror in Art," *Art Quarterly* 15 (1952): 100.

<sup>16</sup> Henri Focillon, *The Art of the West in the Middle Ages* (London, 1965), 2:169.

<sup>17</sup> Ludwig Baldass, *Jan van Eyck* (London, 1952), p. 75, see also Elisabeth Dhanens, *Van Eyck* (New York, n.d. [after 1977]), p. 203.

<sup>18</sup> Panofsky, "Jan van Eyck's 'Arnolfini' Portrait," p. 199

<sup>19</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p. 439.

<sup>20</sup> Peter H. Schrabacker, "De Matrimonio ad Morganaticam Contracto: Jan van Eyck's 'Arnolfini' Portrait Reconsidered," *Art Quarterly* 35 (1972): 377.

<sup>21</sup> Julius S. Held, *Rubens and His Circle* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 56-57

<sup>22</sup> Helen Rosenau, "Some English Influences on Jan van Eyck," *Apollo* 38 (1942): 126.

<sup>23</sup> Craig Harbison, "Realism and Symbolism in Early Flemish Painting," *Art Bulletin* 61 (1984): 602. In arguing

that "the mirror establishes the sacramental connection between Passion and marriage while pointing to the latter's analogical value as it leads the soul upward toward the final purifying marriage in heaven," Roger Baldwin offers a still more elaborate allegorical reading. His account depends upon drawing parallels between van Eyck's positioning "on a vertical axis the crucified Christ, the mirror, the joined hands, and the dog, symbolic of faith" and a number of earlier images: see his "Marriage as Sacramental Reflection of the Passion: The Mirror in Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*," *Oud Holland* 98, no. 2 (1984) 67.

<sup>24</sup> Friedlaender, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 1:41.

<sup>25</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (London, 1972), pp. 15-16.

<sup>26</sup> Millard Meiss, *The Painters' Choice* (New York, 1976), pp. 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (London, 1966) p. 147.

<sup>29</sup> Meyer Schapiro, "'Muscipula Diaboli,' The Symbolism of the Mérode Altarpiece," reprinted in his *Late Antique, Early Christian and Medieval Art* (New York, 1979), pp. 1-11.

<sup>30</sup> Friedlaender, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 2:37.

<sup>31</sup> Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, p. 279.

<sup>32</sup> Irving L. Zupnick, "The Mystery of the Merode Mousetrap," *Burlington Magazine* 108 (1966): 126, the one text making such a connection is Peter Pindar's *Lyric Odes to the Royal Academicians*.

The humble Joseph, so genteelly made,  
Poor Gentleman! as if above his trade,  
And only fit to compliment his wife;  
So, delicate, as if he scarcely knew  
Oak from deal-board, a gimlet from a screw,  
And never made a mouse-trap in his life.

([1785], quoted by Hamish Miles, "The Merode Mousetrap," *Burlington Magazine* 108 [1966] 323

<sup>33</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p. 201; Schapiro, "Muscipula Diaboli," p. 9

<sup>34</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p. 357

<sup>35</sup> Meyer Schapiro, *Cézanne* (New York, 1952), p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> Carla Gottlieb, *The Window in Art* (New York, 1981), pp. 114-9; see also her "Respiens per Fenestras. The Symbolism of the Merode Altarpiece," *Oud Holland* 85 (1970): 65-84.

<sup>37</sup> Meiss, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p. 145

<sup>39</sup> See *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. M. Hollis and S. Lukes (Cambridge, 1982); and Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, 1984)

<sup>40</sup> Panofsky, "Jan van Eyck's 'Arnolfini' Portrait," p. 201.

<sup>41</sup> Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (1980): 72; Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, 1964), p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Harbison, "Realism and Symbolism," pp. 591-93.

<sup>43</sup> See also Paul de Man's literary examples in which "it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings . . . prevails. . . . This choice can be made only if one postulates the possibility of distinguishing the literal from the figural" (*Alle-*

gories of Reading [New Haven, 1979], p. 10, 201)

<sup>44</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, p. 164; Margaret Freeman, "The Iconography of the *Merode Altarpiece*," *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* 16 (1957): 138.

<sup>45</sup> Zupnick, p. 130; Panofsky is defended by Goesta Berg, "Medieval House Traps," *Studia Ethnographica Upsolensia* 26: 7-8.

<sup>46</sup> William S. Heckscher, "The Annunciation of the *Merode Altarpiece*: An Iconographic Study," *Miscellanea Jozef Duverger* (Ghent, 1968), p. 48; also see Mojmir S. Frinta, *The Genius of Robert Campin* (Mouton, 1966), p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> Charles I. Minott, "The Theme of the *Merode Altarpiece*," *Art Bulletin* 51 (1969): 267-68.

<sup>48</sup> Marilyn A. Lavin, "The Mystic Winepress in the *Merode Altarpiece*," *Studies in Late Medieval and Renaissance Painting in Honor of Millard Meiss* (New York 1977), p. 298.

<sup>49</sup> Freeman, "The Iconography of the *Merode Altarpiece*," p. 136

<sup>50</sup> Jozef De Coo, "A Medieval Look at the *Merode Annunciation*," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 44 (1891) 128.

<sup>51</sup> Minott, "The Theme of the *Merode Altarpiece*," p. 267.

<sup>52</sup> Here I have been aided by Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, 1979).

<sup>53</sup> Harold Bloom, "'Before Moses Was, I Am': The Original and Belated Testaments," in *Notebooks in Cultural Analysis*, ed. N. Cantor (Durham, 1984), p. 5, 13.

<sup>54</sup> See Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche Life as Literature* (Cambridge, 1985.)

<sup>55</sup> Julius S. Held, review of *Early Netherlandish Painting*, *Art Bulletin* 37 (1955). 205. A further study of art historians' "common sense" might explore the responses to two deviant interpretations. Maurice W. Brockwell, *The Pseudo-Arnolfini Portrait* (London, 1952); Zdzisław Kepiński, "'Arnolfini Couple' or John and Margaret van Eyck as David and Bethsheba," *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* 10 (1974). 149-64. Like books proclaiming that Bacon is the real author of Shakespeare's plays, these accounts are not really taken seriously

<sup>56</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (Boston, n.d.), 5:405

<sup>57</sup> Joan Evans quoted in George P. Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (Princeton, 1971), p. 433, pp. 436-7; see also Jack Lindsay, *Turner*, London, 1973, p. 285; and Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (Cambridge, 1982)

<sup>58</sup> Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art*, p. 254

<sup>59</sup> Charles F. Stuckey, "Reading Rauschenberg," *Art in America* 65 (March-April 1977). 74-84

<sup>60</sup> Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins," *October* 13 (1980). 68.

<sup>61</sup> This argument is anticipated by Rosalind Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *Artforum* 13 (1974): 40-41.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Hope, *Titian* (New York, 1980), Charles Hope, "Artists, Patrons, and Advisers in the Italian Renaissance," in *Patronage in the Renaissance*, ed. G. Lytle and S. Orgel (Princeton, 1981), pp. 293-343; Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing* (Chicago, 1983)

<sup>63</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, 1955), p. 27

<sup>64</sup> Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, pp. 133, 138, 143, 148, 147

<sup>65</sup> See Fletcher, *Allegory*

<sup>66</sup> Panofsky, "Jan van Eyck's 'Arnolfini' Portrait," p. 201.

<sup>67</sup> Otto Paecht, "Panofsky's 'Early Netherlandish Painting'-I," *Burlington Magazine* 98 (1956) 276

<sup>68</sup> Freud, *The Standard Edition* (London, 1958), 4: 277. My italics

<sup>69</sup> Held, review of Panofsky, p. 213.

<sup>70</sup> Paecht, "Panofsky's 'Early Netherlandish Painting'-I," p. 276.

<sup>71</sup> Even this modest proposal generates further debate. Craig Harbison questions whether such symbolism is intentional; Alexander Nehamas asks why the candle on the fireplace is unlit. I believe that the general approach of this paper suggests how these questions might be answered.

Thanks are due to Craig Harbison, Alexander Nehamas and, especially, Mark Roskill.