

# GOODMAN on the WORK of ART: AN ONTOLOGICAL OMISSION

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## I

The central bulk of Nelson Goodman's influential Languages of Art is devoted to the problem of the identity of the work of art.[1] In chapter three Goodman first expounds his now famous distinction between autographic and allographic art. Works of autographic arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, printmaking) are works whose exact duplication cannot guarantee authenticity, since their authenticity depends on having the requisite history of production (e.g., being painted by the requisite artist or printed from the requisite plate). In such arts, "the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant".[2] In contrast, the identity and authenticity of works of allographic arts (e.g., music, literature, and drama) are defined not historically but notationally. The work's essential or constitutive properties are fully determined by a notation (score, text, or script), and authentic instances of the work can be produced at will through duplication of the notation or what it prescribes.

After a detailed study of the syntactic and semantic requirements for notation (in chapter four), Goodman proceeds (in the penultimate chapter five) to provide notational definitions of the identity of works of allographic art and to explain why work-identity in the autographic arts must be differently defined. Altogether, this amounts to probably the most rigorous and comprehensive theory of the work of art's identity that has ever been presented, and not surprisingly it has been widely studied and discussed.

However, Goodman's theory of work-identity has been severely criticized.[3] The sharp distinction between autographic and allographic art has sometimes been questioned, but probably most criticism has been directed at his rigidly precise notational definitions of the identity of allographic works, definitions which

seem harshly inconsistent with common sense and ordinary critical practice. In this paper I shall not go into these familiar lines of criticism, though I should at least note in passing that the latter has considerable merit and power. My purpose here is rather to suggest an altogether different sort of problem and to criticize Goodman's theory of work-identity not for errors it has committed but for a troubling omission. I shall maintain that Goodman's theory suffers from the omission of a nominalistic formulation of his definitions of work-identity. This omission has serious ramifications, since it leaves such important issues as the work of art's ontological status and the relationship of an authentic instance of the work to the work itself uncomfortably unanswered. Moreover, anyone familiar with Goodman's radical and passionate nominalism cannot help but feel uneasy with the exceedingly platonistic definitions of the works of the various arts that he proposes in Languages of Art. Let us first consider these definitions.

## II

Goodman recognizes that in most arts (not only the allographic arts but even the autographic arts of printmaking and cast sculpture) the work of art has or at least can have a multiple identity. In other words, in most cases the work admits of more than one authentic instance; more than one object or event (performance) can be an authentic example of one and the same work of art. What, then, is the work itself which admits of many authentic instances?

Goodman's surprising answer is that the work of art itself is simply the class of authentic instances of the work. Regarding the autographic arts, Goodman asserts that "in the case of painting, a work is ... identified with (the unit class of) an individual picture; and in the case of etching, with the class of impressions printed from an individual plate." [4] In the allographic art of "music, the work is the class of performances compliant with a character", [5] i.e., the fully notational part of the score. In literary art, the work is the class of instances of the text, whether these instances be inscriptions or utterances. "In literature, the work is the character itself", [6] and Goodman has told us that "characters are certain classes of utterances or inscriptions or marks". [7] "In the drama, as in music, the work is a compliance-class of performances." [8] Finally, in the arts of architecture and dance, whose allographic status is somewhat problematic, the definitions of work-identity

that Goodman contemplates are also in terms of compliance-classes of the characters of a notation.

In short, Goodman defines and identifies the work of art as a class. Even the unique, singular work of painting is described as a "unit class". Defining the work of art as a class may seem innocent enough; but when this is done by a radical nominalist like Goodman, who denies the existence of classes, properties, and universals of any sort, it seems like criminal platonism.[9] Goodman's nominalism will recognize no entities other than individuals, and in Languages of Art he condemns talk of properties as "shameless platonism", "pampering prejudice", and "pussy-footing".[10] Goodman's other writings reveal that his nominalism is just as intolerant with respect to classes: "Nominalism for me consists specifically in the refusal to recognize classes." [11] Thus, for Goodman, talk of classes is "informal parlance admissible only because it can readily be translated into a more acceptable language", [12] viz., a nominalistic one. However, in Languages of Art Goodman offers no such translation of his platonistic definitions of the works of the various arts; and without a nominalistic formulation of these definitions his theory seems painfully incomplete. How indeed is it to be completed? Since Goodman has never provided a nominalistic translation of his definitions, we must now warily attempt to project one that would be acceptable to him and adequate for aesthetic theory.

### III

Several philosophers of art have employed Pierce's distinction between type and token to explain the multiple identity of the work of art and the relationship of the authentic instances of the work to each other and to the work itself.[13] This distinction enables us to preserve the oneness of the work of art (as an individual type), while at the same time allowing it its multiplicity, its many instances (tokens). We can identify the individual work of art as a type which is exemplified by its many different tokens or instances. Thus, for example, we may speak of Hamlet as a single work (type) and yet also speak of many different performances and texts as being Hamlet (tokens) without involving ourselves in contradiction. For though there are many different Hamlet-tokens there still may be only one Hamlet-type.

I doubt very much that Goodman would avail himself of this distinction and solution, for at least with respect to linguistic characters he explicitly rejects it, preferring to "dismiss the type altogether and

treat the so-called tokens of a type as replicas of one another".[14] His chief reason for rejecting the type is, I suppose, that types are usually considered to be universals or classes, and Goodman simply cannot tolerate such entities. However, E. M. Zemach and, more recently, J. Margolis have suggested that types may be regarded as individuals or particulars.[15] This ontological view could rescue Goodman's theory from platonism; for instead of being a platonistic class of performances, prints, etc., the work of art would be a nominalistic type-individual exemplified by its instances or tokens. Yet the ontology of type-individuals seems intuitively unconvincing, and, as Zemach admits, it often clashes with our established ontological views of the individual as an object or event.[16]

Another nominalistic device available to Goodman is to treat the name of the work of art, e.g., 'Hamlet', not as a proper name denoting a single individual but rather as a term with multiple denotation. There is not one individual denoted by the name 'Hamlet' but many individuals. Thus, there is, in a sense, not one work of art, Hamlet, but many works of art or more simply many aesthetic objects and events which are labelled or denoted by the name 'Hamlet'. By this nominalistic view, the statement 'This is an authentic instance of Hamlet' should be translated as 'The label "Hamlet" can be correctly applied to this object or event', or alternatively as 'This object or event complies with the term "Hamlet". Similarly, the statement 'Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet' could be translated into something like 'Shakespeare is the author of the first object/event properly labelled "Hamlet". Finally, statements like 'Hamlet is a tragic work' might be translated into statements like 'Those objects/events which most deserve to be labelled "Hamlet" are tragic' or 'If x is an object/event which is paradigmatic for the application of "Hamlet", then x is exceedingly likely to be (or must be) tragic'.

Thus, according to this brand of nominalism, 'Hamlet' does not name a unique, individual entity, be it a class or type, which is exemplified at different times and different places by the many different performances and texts which we recognize as instances of Hamlet. Instead 'Hamlet' is seen as a label or predicate which fits many aesthetic objects and events. Therefore, in a sense, the work of art, Hamlet, does not really exist, but in its place remain the many artistic products--texts, performances, records, films--which are correctly labelled 'Hamlet'. A performance of Hamlet or a text of Hamlet is thus not a performance or a text of something (e.g., a type or class) existing

above and beyond the performance or text; and therefore the nominalist might prefer to speak more perspicuously here of Hamlet-performances and Hamlet-texts instead of performances and texts of Hamlet.

This nominalistic view of the work of art, though eminently frugal, seems remote from the spirit of Goodman's theory of work-identity with its extended effort to supply a 'real definition' of the individual allographic work of art that is exemplified in its many authentic instances. Surely in undertaking such a labour, Goodman seems to believe that some such individual--the work--exists to be defined. Nor is there any hint in Languages of Art that there exists no such entity as Hamlet that is exemplified by its authentic instances, and that instead there are merely Hamlet-instances exemplifying the label 'Hamlet'. Thus, it seems unlikely that Goodman would accept this nominalistic view of the work of art, where the work dissolves into a range of instances with a common label.

#### IV

If he rejects the type theory and the label or predicate theory, what then would be Goodman's nominalistic explanation of the work of art? Most likely he would explain the work of art as a superindividual composed of the sum of all its actual instances. Max Black remarks that in Goodman's nominalism "it is ... admissible to conceive of the word 'red', say, as the superindividual composed of the sum of all its actual occurrences or 'inscriptions'." [17] This suggests a similar treatment of the work of art, particularly the literary work of art, which is itself, like 'red', a linguistic character.

However, this view that the work of art is the superindividual composed of the sum of all its actual instances is a view which presents some puzzling problems. For by this view, each unabridged copy of Paradise Lost is but a fraction of the work, Paradise Lost, which is the sum total of all the copies and utterances of this work. Thus, one could probably never read the entire work, for indeed the work grows longer and longer with every copy printed. Similarly, in music, a complete performance of a genuine score of Beethoven's Eroica would be but a minute fraction of this work, if the work were identified with the sum of all such actual authentic performances. Here too the work would grow with every performance, and we would seem unable to hear the entire work. But surely we should not alter our conceptions of hearing a symphony and reading a poem just to conform to this new-fangled

ontology of art. Goodman might argue that these objectionable consequences come only from playing with words and intentionally ignoring that hearing a (complete) symphony or reading a (complete) poem are elliptical for hearing a (complete) performance or reading a (complete) copy of the given work. However, many aestheticians would assert that the ellipsis is justified and significant, the point being that in confronting a complete performance or copy of a work we can also confront and experience the entire work itself, because the work itself can be said to be in a particular instance. For this reason it is often argued that the work of art is a type or universal, rather than a mere class or superindividual whose relation to its constituent elements is not so intimate or intrinsic.[18]

Moreover, one cannot help wonder how the various instances of the work are combined to create the superindividual and whether this superindividual is anything like what we mean by a work of art. Goodman asserts that "where two works are performed in succession, the resultant event, though it contains performances of each of the two, is itself a performance of neither but of the conjoint score".[19] By much the same argument one could maintain that if two performances of the same score are combined, we have not two performances of the original work and score but rather a performance of a new work composed of the combination of these two performances and compliant with a new, different score composed of the original score taken twice. For Goodman a compound character which contains other characters is nevertheless different and disjoint from the characters it contains, and thus the new score and the work it defines are different and disjoint from their components.

Similarly, the literary work of art as a superindividual composed of the sum of all inscriptions and utterances of the text would be a new compound character, a new text, different and disjoint from any of the unabridged copies of the original text. If the literary work of art is this 'super-compound' character or text, then what we usually call a complete, unabridged copy or utterance of the text is only a minute fraction of this super-compound text that constitutes the work, and the value of this fraction will constantly grow smaller with each additional unabridged inscription or utterance. And if this is the case, one must ask how an utterance or inscription which is only a minute and constantly more minute fraction of the work of art can nevertheless be a fully authentic instance of the work.

Perhaps Goodman is ingenious enough to supply answers to all these troubling questions arising from

this nominalistic translation of his theory, or better yet provide a clear and convincing nominalistic formulation of his own. However, such a formulation is strikingly lacking and not even adumbrated in Languages of Art, nor can it be found in Goodman's more recent publications in aesthetics.[20]

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>N. Goodman, Languages of Art (London: Oxford University Press, 1969). The book has been republished in a slightly revised edition (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976). All page references to the book are to the first edition.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>3</sup>For criticism of Goodman's theory of work-identity, see, for example, J. Margolis, "Numerical Identity and Reference in the Arts," British Journal of Aesthetics, 10 (1970); A. Saville, "Nelson Goodman's Languages of Art: A Study," British Journal of Aesthetics, 11 (1971); and A. Ralls, "The Uniqueness and Reproducibility of a Work of Art: A Critique of Goodman's Theory," Philosophical Quarterly, 22 (1972).

<sup>4</sup>Languages of Art, p. 197.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>9</sup>Defining the work of art as a class is, however, problematic, irrespective of nominalism, for a class does not have the aesthetic properties we attribute to the work. Thus, for example, though The Minute Waltz, in all its authentic instances, is a lively waltz about a minute long, the class of these instances is neither lively, nor a waltz, nor a minute long. Moreover, if we try to construe the class extensionally and more concretely as the totality of things that are its members (as K. Godel suggests we can in his paper "Russell's Mathematical Logic," in The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell, ed. P. A. Schilpp, Evanston, IL: Library of Living Philosophers, 1946, pp. 137-41), then other problems seem to arise. For if, say, a literary work is seen as the class or totality of its authentic instances or copies, then what we normally call a complete, unabridged copy of the work will become a mere fraction of the work, and a smaller fraction with every new copy printed. Similarly, in music, a complete performance of a popular work would present but a minute fraction of the work, and to hear the entire



work one would have to hear all its authentic performances.

<sup>10</sup>Languages of Art, pp. 46n., 89n., 87n.

<sup>11</sup>N. Goodman, "A World of Individuals," reprinted in Problems and Projects (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), p. 156.

<sup>12</sup>Languages of Art, p. 131n.

<sup>13</sup>For example, C. L. Stevenson, "On 'What is a Poem?'," Philosophical Review, 66 (1957); J. Margolis, "The Identity of a Work of Art," in F. J. Coleman, editor, Contemporary Readings in Aesthetics (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969); and R. Wollheim, Art and its Objects (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), pp. 90-100.

<sup>14</sup>Languages of Art, p. 131n.

<sup>15</sup>See E. M. Zemach, "Four Ontologies," Journal of Philosophy, 67 (1970), pp. 241-47; and J. Margolis, "The Ontological Peculiarity of Works of Art," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 36 (1977), pp. 45-49.

<sup>16</sup>Zemach, op. cit., p. 241n.

<sup>17</sup>M. Black, "Review Article: The Structure of Symbol Systems," Linguistic Inquiry, 2 (1971), p. 518.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Wollheim (op. cit., pp. 90-98); Margolis, "The Ontological Peculiarity of Works of Art," pp. 45-49; R. Meager, "The Uniqueness of a Work of Art," Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 59 (1958-59), pp. 49-70.

<sup>19</sup>Languages of Art, p. 204.

<sup>20</sup>See the section on art in Problems and Projects (cited above), the revised edition of Languages of Art (cited above), and Goodman's latest book, Ways of Worldmaking (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978).