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## Science Versus the Humanities: Hyman on Wollheim on Depiction

Gary Kemp

In the seventh chapter of his extraordinary book *The Objective Eye* (2006), John Hyman offers various criticisms of Richard Wollheim's theory of pictorial depiction.<sup>1</sup> My immediate purpose in this short piece is to make the case that these criticisms fail. By no means do I claim that there are not other criticisms to be made against Wollheim, or that Hyman's book as a whole fails — not in its overarching attempt to rescue the objectivity of art from subjectivist views, or more narrowly that Hyman's theory of depiction fails. My claim is merely that Wollheim's theory emerges relatively unscathed by the criticisms in Hyman's chapter seven, even if it is vulnerable on other grounds, or incompatible with Hyman's positive views of visual art in general and depiction in particular. But the broader point at issue should nevertheless be kept firmly in mind, as it is fundamental to the theory of depiction and to the issue's wider significance: Must the substantive kernel of a correct theory of depiction deal only with objective matters of optics or geometry (as Hyman's theory more or less has it), or must depiction be conceived in irreducibly psychological or phenomenological terms (as Wollheim's theory has it)?

### I.

Central to Wollheim's account of depiction or pictorial representation is the concept of *two-foldedness*.<sup>2</sup> In seeing a depiction as a depiction, we see the picture-object — a certain marked surface — and *simultaneously* we see — are not merely aware of, or have the thought of — another object, the depicted item. It is a special capacity we have, not one essential to seeing as such. Wollheim calls the two aspects the “configurational fold” and the “recognitional fold” of the experience; it is a single experience, not two separable experiences. He explains the idea of two-folded perception in terms of *seeing-in*, which for present purposes can be classed with *seeing-as*, both of which Wittgenstein famously

discussed.<sup>3</sup> Under whichever name, it is commonplace; we exercise this capacity in seeing a passing cloud as a camel or a bird, or in seeing a face in a mountain or a fire, without being under the illusion that we are actually seeing a cloud, a mountain, or a fire. The capacity for seeing-in — for perceiving in a two-folded manner — for Wollheim, is a real and irreducible perceptual and phenomenological phenomenon: in principle it can be investigated in psychology, evolutionary psychology, and perhaps biology, but not explained without remainder, defined, or reductively analysed in such terms. And like seeing itself, the capacity is phenomenological bedrock: it cannot be defined in more basic phenomenological terms.

That one object can be seen in another (by the envisaged audience) is necessary but not sufficient for the latter's depicting the former. In addition, a marked surface represents a given object only if the marked surface's maker has their intention fulfilled that the depicted object can be seen by the envisaged audience in the marked surface. Thus: a marked surface represents a given item if and only if the maker successfully intends that the envisaged audience can see the depicted item in the marked surface.

## II.

Hyman raises three main objections to the theory. The first is minor and calls only for a minor adjustment. Hyman observes that it is not the case that one always sees the depicted object in front of (or behind) the picture's surface or the ground of the image,<sup>4</sup> as Wollheim says in for example *Painting as an Art*: "I discern something standing out in front of, or (in certain cases) receding behind, something else."<sup>5</sup> For example, children's stick figure drawings, or the figures in certain Egyptian vases, lack this feature. There is no harm in simply granting the point. In certain cases, the figures are relatively schematic, as much hieroglyphs or icons as realistic drawings or paintings.<sup>6</sup> They are still depictions, as Hyman says, but there is no reason not to accept that the recession or precession in seeing one thing in another can be indeterminate or even absent. Switching to Gombrich's way of speaking,

we can maintain that in certain cases only the minimal psychological triggers for representational seeing are activated, even if for more realistic pictures additional triggers come into play.<sup>7</sup> We can on Wollheim's behalf insert "typically" in the sentence quoted above.

The second region of criticism concerns Wollheim's intentional criterion of correctness: of the set of things that can be seen in a marked surface, the marked surface depicts only those that the artist intended should be seen in it.

Hyman first doubts the necessity of Wollheim's criterion.<sup>8</sup> He notes that the artist may intend to depict, say, a larch — intend that a larch (and only a larch) should be seen in the picture — but nevertheless depict a spruce, not a larch. To this a simple answer is that the artist in such a case did all the same intend successfully to put a tree in his picture, which takes intentional precedence over his more detailed thoughts concerning the type of tree.<sup>9</sup> A more substantive answer is to invoke the sort of thing that Donnellan said about the man drinking a martini<sup>10</sup> — or perhaps what Putnam said about elms and beeches,<sup>11</sup> or what Kripke said about speaker's reference and semantic reference,<sup>12</sup> or what Burge says about arthritis.<sup>13</sup> The case is not described in enough detail to choose from amongst these types of response. But essentially: If one says "Prune that larch," of what was in fact a spruce, we have to allow the possibility that one should be credited with the command expressed by "Prune that spruce," even though the words uttered as standardly construed command the listener to prune a larch. What the many options allowing for this have in common is that under certain circumstances one can intend (mean, refer to, represent, perceive) something even if one mis-describes it in public language or in thought, or even misconceives it in thought, either one-off or habitually. None of the options just mentioned holds the field, and they deal with different aspects of the phenomenon, but the point is that the problem is of much greater scope than the problem facing Wollheim's position; it afflicts anyone who

employs the concept of intention and its cohorts in epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, or the theory of action. The follower of Wollheim can happily accept that the theory awaits the satisfactory resolution of these more fundamental issues in semantics or pragmatics.

Hyman next points to certain pictures that challenge the sufficiency of Wollheim's criterion: "Picasso sometimes invites the spectator to see a penis in the part of a picture that depicts a nose or a tongue, or a vulva or anus in the part that depicts a mouth, but it would be inaccurate to say that these things are actually depicted."<sup>14</sup> Again, such cases call for further elaboration of the theory, and are no means fatal to it. Call the things which are properly depicted (the nose, the tongue, the mouth) items of level-1 representational content; call the other things (penis, vulva, anus) items of level-2 representational content (I take it that Hyman means to exclude such cases as death personified in a skull in Guercino's *Et in Arcadia ego*, since the abstract idea of death is simply not the sort of thing that can literally be depicted, at least not in the sense at issue). What is the distinction? Obviously level-1 content can exist without level-2 content. But a necessary condition of a depicting item's having level-2 content is that the item has level-1 content: for level-2 representational content presupposes the existence of level-1 representational content. The sufficient condition is that the artist successfully intends the level-1 representational content to integrate spatially into the picture as a whole, whereas the artist successfully intends level-2 content to repel it. Seeing the mouth in the surface is thus level-1, whereas seeing a vulva is level-2. Of the mouth-vulva, one can see the vulva in isolation, but cannot make sense of the total picture under that interpretation. Depiction proper is restricted to level-1. One who sees the vulva in the picture but not the mouth is making a different mistake, and normally a greater mistake, than one who sees a mouth in the picture but not the vulva: one misses what the picture depicts.

The third area of objection is the most thoroughgoing, but also the most puzzling, since it seems to take an advertised feature of the view for a fault. Hyman: “The last objection to Wollheim’s theory, and the most consequential one, is that he quietly shirks the task he sets himself: defining the kind of perception he call “seeing-in.”<sup>15</sup>

And:

Wollheim offers, as an example, the case where “I recognize a naked boy” in the marks on a stained wall. But I do not really recognize or discern a naked boy in these marks because there is no boy for me to recognize or discern. Neither is my experience indistinguishable from the experience of recognizing or discerning a boy. If it were, it would be an illusion, but that, as Wollheim himself rightly insists, is not the case. So what kind experience is this quasi-recognising of a naked boy supposed to be?<sup>16</sup>

And:

Wollheim fails to address these questions... he does not tell us anything about its specific nature because the fact that the something is a boy is not explained.<sup>17</sup>

But if Wollheim is right, then of course there is nothing to say in direct response to Hyman’s question, for the question assumes that there is an answer when according to the view there is no answer. Seeing-in, as I stressed at the beginning, is phenomenologically basic. There is no effort at philosophical *definition* because the task is reckoned impossible. Maybe this is not perfectly explicit in Wollheim’s writings, but it is evident nonetheless, and even in such remarks as Hyman quotes: it “is a distinct *kind* of perception ... theorists of representation consistently overlook or *reduce* this phenomenology with the result that they garble representation.”<sup>18</sup> In a later essay Wollheim says “we must not expect ... a description from which someone who never had the experience could learn what it would be like to do so ... the philosophical point of phenomenological description ... [is] to see how some

particular experience can, in virtue of what it is like, do what it does.”<sup>19</sup> And in his exchange with Robert Hopkins he says, of the experience of seeing-in, “...to think that enough needs to be said so that someone who didn’t believe that there are such experiences is convinced of their existence is to succumb to unrealistic standards.”<sup>20</sup>

Wollheim does offer various remarks *about* seeing-in, which make more of the character of the phenomenon more explicit — especially expansive are the ones at pp. 217ff of his “Seeing-as, seeing-in, and pictorial representation” which elucidates the phenomenon and connects it to the imagination — but there is no ambition to define the experience or to reduce it. So the response to Hyman’s objection is that it does “succumb to unrealistic standards” — that it insists on the very thing that according to Wollheim is not possible.

Of course, Wollheim might be wrong about this. Maybe seeing-in can after all be reductively analysed, presumably in phenomenological terms; maybe alternatives to Wollheim’s attempts at elucidation might fare better, or maybe the idea is too problematic and should simply be dropped. One can name Budd, Hopkins, Walton, Lopes, Kulvicki, Bantinaki, Dorsch, and Baz as among Wollheim’s critics, ranging from constructive (e.g. Dorsch) to destructive (e.g. Baz).<sup>21</sup> But many theorists continue to accept the idea even if they accept that it needs modification. Hyman’s saying merely that Wollheim fails to *define* the notion is no criticism.

### III.

According to Wollheim, the essential relation between a picture and the object which it depicts runs through the mind. According to Hyman, it does not: the relation is that of objective similarity in occlusion shape (or more or less, in *outline* shape). And if we think of shadows on walls, or photographs, it’s hard not to agree with Hyman; the relation, at least in central cases, is simply an geometric or optical relation, fit to be studied by the methods of impersonal science, not those of introspective psychology or the humanities. But contrary

pressure is felt if we ask *why* we are obsessed with pictures, and make two further observations: (1) That at least in some cases, similarity of occlusion shape alone is inadequate to explain depiction, as in the case of a single brushstroke depicting a bird, or the distorted figures in Klee, de Kooning, or Picasso. (2) That in certain possibly counterfactual circumstances, objective similarity does not *cause* the experience necessary for seeing a depiction as a depiction, but some other property — say some other geometrical relation, or some motley assortment of features that engage our visual system; what seemingly qualifies these as examples of depiction is their capacity to bring about the required experience<sup>22</sup> (which for Wollheim is that of two-folded seeing), suggesting that Hyman’s view is at most only contingently adequate (for Newall it is not even that;<sup>23</sup> and note the parallel with Kripke’s argument for the independence of pain from its physical basis<sup>24</sup>). Of (1), Hyman is well aware of these cases and addresses the challenge they pose.<sup>25</sup> I don’t believe that Hyman considers in print the challenge posed by (2) or what he would make of it. But I do think the matter is a standoff so far. And make no mistake: If Hyman is right, depiction, or at the least central region of it, is straightforwardly a scientific topic, as it was in the Renaissance; the past roughly four hundred years — since at least the time of Descartes — during which pictorial representation has been regarded as essentially a subjective, phenomenological, or imaginative matter, a province to be learned and studied in the humanities, has taken a wrong turn.

### **Acknowledgements**

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<sup>1</sup>John Hyman *The Objective Eye: Color, Form, and Reality in the Theory of Art* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2006).

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<sup>2</sup> The sketch in this paragraph and the next is drawn from Richard Wollheim, “Seeing-as, seeing-in, and pictorial representation,” in his *Art and its Objects: With Six Supplementary Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 205–226; Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 43–59; Richard Wollheim, “Representation: The Philosophical Contribution to Psychology,” in his *The Mind and Its Depths* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) 159–170; Richard Wollheim, “On Pictorial Representation,” in *Richard Wollheim on the Art of Painting: Art as Representation and Expression*, Rob van Gerwen ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13–27; Richard Wollheim and Robert Hopkins, “What Makes Representational Painting Truly Visual?,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 77 (2003): 131–167; and Richard Wollheim, “In Defense of Seeing-In,” *Looking into Pictures: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Pictorial Space*, eds. Heiko Hecht, Robert Schwartz and Margaret Atherton (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 2003), 3–15.

<sup>3</sup> I do think they are phenomenologically at the same level — see Gary Kemp, “Seeing a Measure of Kant in Wollheim,” in *Seeing-as/in: Wittgenstein, Wollheim, and Pictorial Representation*, Gabriele Mras and Gary Kemp eds. (Abingdon UK: Routledge, forthcoming) —, but Wollheim did not — see Wollheim, “Seeing-as, seeing-in, and pictorial representation,” and Wollheim and Hopkins, “What Makes Representational Painting Truly Visual?,” 144.

<sup>4</sup> Hyman, *The Objective Eye*, 133–136.

<sup>5</sup> Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 46 (see also 60, 62); and Wollheim, “On Pictorial Representation,” 19. In Richard Wollheim, “On Drawing an Object” in his *On Art and the Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 27, he asserts that the depicting marks can be seen in front of, behind, or *on a level with* the surface.

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<sup>6</sup> See Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 60. Because of my recommendation, the different readings of Wollheim's claim that Hyman considers — whether the thing depicted must be perceived in front of (or behind) the *surface* or another *depicted object* — do not matter.

Later, Wollheim makes it clear that he intends the latter, in his “In Defense of Seeing-In,” 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Gombrich, “Representation and Misrepresentation,” *Critical Inquiry* 11, no. 2 (1984): 198ff.

<sup>8</sup> Hyman, *The Objective Eye*, 137.

<sup>9</sup> Hyman: “... there are more general terms that apply to the depicted object and that do conform to the artist's intention ... This does not affect the argument” (*The Objective Eye*, 137). I'm not sure why Hyman says this; if intentions can be ranked as I suggest, then as far as I can see it does affect the argument.

<sup>10</sup> Keith S. Donnellan, “Reference and Definite Descriptions,” *The Philosophical Review*, 75, no. 3 (1966): 281–304.

<sup>11</sup> Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning,’” *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7 (1975): 131–193.

<sup>12</sup> Saul Kripke, “Speaker's reference and semantic reference,” in *Studies in the Philosophy of Language*, eds. Peter French, Theodore Uehling, and Howard Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 255–296.

<sup>13</sup> Tyler Burge, “Individualism and the Mental,” in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy IV*, eds. Peter French, Theodore Uehling, and Howard Wettstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 73–121.

<sup>14</sup> Hyman, *The Objective Eye*, 137–8.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 140.

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<sup>18</sup> Wollheim, *Painting as an Art*, 46 (my emphasis).

<sup>19</sup> Wollheim, “On Pictorial Representation,” 20.

<sup>20</sup> Wollheim and Hopkins, “What Makes Pictorial Representation Truly Visual?,” 135. Also: such is the main point of Wollheim “Representation: The Philosophical Contribution to Psychology.” Philosophy can offer up *representational seeing* — the heart of which is seeing-in — to psychology as a capacity to be *studied*.

<sup>21</sup> Hopkins, e.g. in Wollheim and Hopkins, “What makes representational painting truly visual?”; Katerina Bantinaki, “Picture Perception as Twofold Experience,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Depiction*, eds. Katerina Bantinaki and Catherine Abell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 128–150; Kendall Walton “Seeing-in and Seeing Fictionally,” in his *Marvellous Images* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008), 133–142; Fabian Dorsch “Seeing-in as aspect-perception,” in Mras and Kemp, *Seeing-as/in: Wittgenstein, Wollheim, and Pictorial Representation*; Dominic Lopes *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); John Kulvicki, “Heavenly Sight and the Nature of Seeing-In,” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67, no. 4 (2009): 387–397; Malcom Budd, “On Looking at a Picture,” in John Hopkins and Anthony Saville, *Psychoanalysis, Mind and Art: Perspectives on Richard Wollheim* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1992), 259–280; Avner Baz, “Aspects of Perception,” in Mras and Kemp, *Seeing-as/in: Wittgenstein, Wollheim, and Pictorial Representation*.

<sup>22</sup> Wollheim hints strongly at this argument in “In Defense of Seeing-In,” 14–15; for a recent defense of Wollheim on this point, see Michael Newall, “Pictorial Resemblance,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 68, no. 2 (2010): 91–103.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 101.

<sup>24</sup> Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 144–155.

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<sup>25</sup> See Hyman's discussion of the gold braid in Jan Six's cloak in a picture by Rembrandt, *The Objective Eye*, 146–151.