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Lessing's *Laocoon* as Analytical Instrument

The Perspectives of a Classical Archaeologist

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Translated from the German by Joe O'Donnell

I arrived at Lessing and his *Laocoon* by way of a somewhat circuitous route. Unlike many other contributors in this volume, my interest was directed neither at Lessing as a person nor at the text as a document of the intellectual history of the eighteenth century. I am neither a scholar of literature nor a philosopher, but an archaeologist. In the case of Lessing, I was looking for an instrument with which to reflect on the relationship between images and texts produced in Greece between the eighth and second centuries BC. However, my critical engagement with *Laocoon* in this context ultimately proved to be not only useful but in fact indispensable.

As lucid as *Laocoon* may appear, it is marked by paradoxical obscurities. The entire text is based on a theory of the difference between poetry and painting as media that is first outlined in the sixteenth chapter—and thus around halfway through the book. Moreover, even this belated sketch is a conspicuously spare one. Lessing conceals the individual steps in his thought process rather than unfolding them in explicit form. It is almost as if he tired of his own theory while working on the book. Certainly, when now attempting to trace the argumentation in all its rigour, one is well advised to consult the fragments of earlier drafts that Lessing left out of his final version (the so-called

Table 4.1. Table laying out the main features of Lessing's theory in the *Laocoon* (setting the poles of narrative and description against the medium of language and painting)

	Object: **Actions**, succeeding each other in time Mode: **Narration**	Object: **Bodies**, juxtaposed in space Mode: **Description**
Medium: **Language** (arbitrary signs succeeding each other in time)	narrative poetry	descriptive poetry (= prose)
Medium: **Painting** (natural signs juxtaposed in space)	narrative painting (?)	descriptive painting

Paralipomena)—and which are not included in most editions. The theoretical matrix of *Laocoon* is thus not immediately evident but requires a certain amount of reconstruction work, a task that was first undertaken astoundingly late, namely in the 1970s and 1980s. Interestingly, the decisive impetus for this endeavour came not from German literary scholarship but from Tzvetan Todorov and David Wellbery,[1] whose contributions established a completely new foundation for the discussion of this famous text.

Some years ago, I attempted to summarize the main features of Lessing's theory in the form of a table (Table 4.1).[2] Poetry and painting correspond in terms of their overall goal: to imitate objects and create illusion. Both represent 'absent things as being present and appearance as reality. Both create an illusion, and in both cases the illusion is pleasing.'[3] In Lessing's view, it is precisely the production of illusion that distinguishes art from non-art. Of course, the two media achieve this by quite different means: 'Painting uses forms and colours in space. Poetry articulates sounds in time. The signs employed by the former are natural, while those employed by the latter are arbitrary.'[4] This last sentence refers to a distinction that was familiar to, indeed self-evident

[1] Cf. Todorov 1973, 1977; Wellbery 1984. For Wellbery's own reflections on his 1984 project, see also his chapter in this book.

[2] Giuliani 1996: esp. 13. [3] Lessing 1984: 3.

[4] For the relevant comments in the *Paralipomena* see Lessing 1990: 209 and 219.

for, Lessing and his contemporary readers. Natural signs are regarded here as those whose connection to the signified is based on the laws of nature (e.g. visible symptoms as signs of a certain disease) or on a relation of similarity that is comprehended as natural. By contrast, the relationship between arbitrary signs and the signified is based on human convention, a prime example being found in the array of human languages. This distinction has a second aspect: the interconnection between the signs of language (phonemes, syllables, words, and sentences) is based on the fact that they form a *temporal succession*, whereas the signs of painting (patterns, colours, and figures) are articulated in a *spatial juxtaposition*.

The two media correspond to two sorts of object that can potentially be represented by artists: 'Objects or parts of objects which exist in space are called bodies . . . Objects or parts of objects which follow one another are called actions.'[5] These two categories of object correspond to description and narration, two distinct representational modes that are both antithetical and complementary. Whereas description depicts the juxtaposition of bodies in space, narration traces the succession of actions in time.

These are the elements of Lessing's theory, which outlines both the fundamental aesthetic problem and its solution. Art is distinguished from non-art by the fact that it creates an illusion. The illusion in turn presupposes a similarity relation between the sign and the signified object. Here, painting has an advantage: its signs are natural and the similarity relation is there from the outset. The poet, by contrast, operates with arbitrary signs, which by definition are *not* based on a similarity relation;[6] how can he nevertheless achieve a similarity relation? Lessing's answer is that the poet does so by making actions rather than bodies his object: by narrating rather than describing. It is only in the narrative mode that a linguistic structure can achieve similarity to its object in that a *sequence* of words and sentences is made to represent a *sequence* of actions. In summary, a purely descriptive poetry that forgoes a narrative structure is a contradiction in terms since it fails to produce illusion and thus to achieve the primary goal of art; in Lessing's terminology, it is not poetry, but prose. The situation is somewhat more complicated in the

[5] Lessing 1984: 78.

[6] For Lessing's talk of 'arbitrary' and 'natural' signs, and his response to Mendelssohn's critique, see above all the chapters by Beiser and Lifschitz in this volume.

case of painting, which, since its semiotic system is based on spatial juxtaposition rather than temporal succession, is inherently suited to description as a representational form. Actions are something it can at best imply by depicting bodies involved in an action. However, it can only present a single moment of the entire action: this makes it all the more important for the painter to choose the moment that is able to stimulate the imaginative power of the beholder.[7]

This is the thrust of Lessing's argument, which was formulated, as we know, with normative intent and directed against a poetry that employed predominantly descriptive rather than narrative representational forms. Lessing saw a classic example of such an approach at the time in a monumental poem by Albrecht von Haller titled *The Alps* (1729), which he regarded as poetological folly. His own interest in the pictorial art of antiquity was (at best) limited. Although he gave his treatise the title *Laocoon*, he did not see it as necessary to include an engraving of the Laocoon group in the book. There is no indication that in the course of his preparatory work for the treatise he even bothered to view a plaster-cast of the group owned by the Berlin Academy of Art, which would have been easily accessible to him.[8] Even more notable is Lessing's behaviour nine years after the publication of *Laocoon*, when he had the opportunity to visit Italy as a travelling companion of the Prince of Braunschweig. Lessing spent three weeks in Rome, and his travel notes have been preserved.[9] On 26 September 1775 he visited St Peter's Basilica, the mosaic factory (in which he was particularly interested), the garden of the Villa Medici, and the Museo Clementino: an itinerary that would do credit to any hurried tourist today. There is no mention of the Belvedere Courtyard, where the Laocoon group was located and which formed the core of the Museo Clementino. We do not know if Lessing saw the group at all; however, if he did, it does not seem to have made much of an impression on him. Lessing's intellectual horizon consisted of texts, not images. Yet this does not mean that his theory cannot be fruitful when it comes to phenomena of pictorial art: not as a normative position but as

[7] Crucial here is the third chapter of *Laocoon:* Lessing 1984: 19–22.

[8] Although *Laocoon* was written in Breslau, it was based on preparatory work done during Lessing's time in Berlin. On Lessing's lack of visual interest in the sculpture, cf. also Squire's chapter in this volume.

[9] Lessing 1989: esp. 699 (26 September. 1775).

an analytical instrument. In any case, before we move on to this discussion, we need to consider two aspects of Lessing's theory that were already seen as problematic by some of his contemporaries.[10]

The first problem concerns the possible objects of artistic mimesis. For Lessing there are two kinds of such mimesis, which he distinguishes in terms of their syntactical relations: objects that are *juxtaposed in space* (which he calls *bodies*) and objects that *succeed each other in time* (which he calls *actions*). Any phenomenon that is suited to imitative representation must fit into one or the other of these categories—*aliud non datur*. There is an elegant radicality to this position—but is it also satisfactory? Herder already saw that not everything occurring in succession over time can be meaningfully regarded as action:[11]

> I repudiate the argument . . . that objects succeeding one another can therefore be in general called actions . . . The concept of the successive is only half the idea of action: it must be a succession through force: thus action takes place. I imagine a being active in the succession of time; I imagine changes that follow one another by virtue of the force of a substance: thus action takes place.

Every action presupposes an acting subject that pursues a certain telos. If this teleological tension is absent, then so, too, is precisely what constitutes the essence of an action.[12] Everything around us is subject to constant change, but most of these processes occur without the participation of an acting subject: the oscillations of a light-wave and the movements of the tectonic plates on the Earth's surface are both processes occurring over time, but they are processes that cannot be narrated, only described.

The second point concerns a difference that Lessing discerns between the signs of language and those of painting: linguistic signs are perceived successively, whereas pictorial signs are perceived simultaneously. Both of these assertions are open to doubt. On the one hand, it is difficult to reduce the perception of language to pure successiveness. It is really only

[10] See the brilliant discussion of *Laocoon* submitted anonymously by the young, still unknown Herder in 1769 (Herder 1993): for discussion, cf. the introduction to this volume, as well as Grethlein's chapter.

[11] Herder 1993: 196.

[12] This is also how Lessing puts it in the *Paralipomena* to *Laocoon*: 'A series of movements that aim for an ultimate goal is called *action*' (Lessing 1990: 251).

the individual phonemes that temporally succeed one another. Their successiveness changes into the simultaneity of the word, and the successiveness of words into the simultaneity of the sentence. To be sure, the sentences making up a text follow one another in linear succession like the links in a chain—and yet the individual links cannot be understood in themselves, but only as part of a synthesis that the listener must construct through the progressive application of memory. Despite the successive nature of speech, any kind of meaning is always constructed on the level of simultaneity. How does this compare with the perception of the image? In this case the process involved has been well understood for around a hundred years. The field in which the human eye can see clearly is relatively small: the angle of optimal visual acuity is around two degrees. This limitation of the angle of sight is compensated for by the fact that the gaze only fixates on any one particular point for a fraction of a second. Although we are unaware of its movement, the eye constantly flits about involuntarily. It is only more extensive movements covering several degrees that are subject to conscious control. Thus, while we *think* our eyes are immobile when we focus on a particular object, they are actually in permanent, discontinuous motion, searching for conspicuous formal characteristics and instructive information.

Hearing and understanding an oral expression is thus based on a complex dialectic of successiveness and simultaneity. Moreover, the act of beholding an image proves to be a process taking place over time. But does this suffice to abandon Lessing's distinction between text and image?[13] In my opinion, we should actually maintain Lessing's distinction but under somewhat different conditions.

When different beholders are confronted with the same image and their optical paths are compared, they exhibit certain similarities but are clearly different.[14] The process of reception proceeds differently in each case. This phenomenon was clearly described by Paul Klee: 'The scanning gaze of the beholder, which is akin to a grazing animal, follows paths that are established in the artwork.'[15] Klee credits the artwork with

[13] As does E. H. Gombrich: for Gombrich's comments on 'Moment and movement in art', see Gombrich 1982: 40–63 (first published in 1964).

[14] Yarbus 1967: 171–96; for some different reflections, centred around the categories of 'narrative' and 'picture', cf. Grethlein's chapter in this volume.

[15] Klee 1991: 63.

a certain steering capacity, albeit one that is not strong enough to determine the beholder's behaviour. The words Klee uses are wonderfully paradoxical. We would normally not expect to find paths in a pasture, or a pasture where there are paths. That aside, it is important to note that the 'scanning gaze' is free to move along these paths forwards and backwards and can, if it chooses to, easily depart from them altogether. All this is very different in the case of text. Here, there is a clear boundary between what the recipient has already heard (or read) and what he will subsequently hear. This boundary shifts at a certain speed and in a certain direction, which are not subject to the choice of the recipient but rather are determined by the speaker or the text itself.

Summing up: the capacity of an image to steer the process of its own perception, driving the attention of the beholder, determining its direction and focus—this capacity is low. The corresponding capacity of a text, on the contrary, is high. Any text inevitably determines the process of listening from its beginning to the end. In this I see the fundamental difference between *poetry* and *painting*, as Lessing used to call them (or between texts and images, as I would prefer to say). The difference is fundamental, because it is this control over the process of reception that gives rise to the possibility of building up suspense. Suspense necessarily presupposes a protracted, stepwise extension of what the audience gets to know, and is linked to an impending conclusion—whether hoped for or feared. It is not difficult for a verbal narrative (insofar as it works even moderately well) to place its recipients in precisely this situation; however, in this respect images face enormous problems.

The consequences of a modification of Lessing's basic theory can again be summarized in tabular form (Table 4.2). The linguistic medium has a relation to the generation of suspense that Lessing would describe as *suitable* or *easy* ('*ein bequemes Verhältniß*').[16] By contrast the task of generating suspense is far more difficult for images: the relation here is an *uneasy* one. This of course only applies up until the invention of film: by learning to move, images gained enormously in terms of the possibilities to steer the process of their reception, and film has in fact become the medium in which the generation of suspense is most intensively practised. However, prior to the invention of film the capacity to generate

[16] For the thinking behind Lessing's understanding of '*ein bequemes Verhältniß*'—and its critique—see especially the chapters by Beiser and Trabant in this volume.

Table 4.2. Table laying out a modification of Lessing's theory in the *Laocoon*, as adapted from Table 4.1

	Mode: **Narration** focused on acting subjects and their goals	Mode: **Description** focused on whatever is given, without a teleological tension
Medium: **Language** (high capacity to steer the reception process)	narrative texts: aim for suspense	descriptive texts: aim for vividness
Medium: **Painting** (low capacity to steer the reception process)	narrative images (dependent on linguistic narrative)	descriptive images (independent of linguistic narrative)

tension lay primarily in the realm of linguistically mediated narration, and not of images.

Among twentieth-century artists it is perhaps René Magritte (1898–1967) who most explicitly focused on the relationship between painting and language. One of his most famous paintings dates from 1929 and is titled *La trahison des images* (cf. Fig. 0.2).[17] It shows a pipe underneath which is written in exemplary school script: 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe'. About a year earlier, Magritte produced an image that is less famous but nevertheless more germane to the present context: *Lectrice soumise* (Fig. 4.1).[18] The conventional translation of this title—'The submissive reader'—is hardly adequate; better would be something like 'The captivated reader'. The painting shows a woman holding an open book out in front of her; her eyes (and what eyes they are!) are fixed on the text, and her entire facial expression expresses intense excitement. This suspense is set to last: she still has many pages to read. The reader has obviously had no opportunity to find a comfortable place more suited to what she is engaged in; the impulse to read has overcome her abruptly with the result that she leans against a wall in an apparently excited state. Such captivation wrought by suspense can only be achieved

[17] Los Angeles, County Museum of Art; Sylvester and Whitfield 1992: 331, no. 303. The title *La trahison des images* is somewhat more ambiguous than it appears at first glance. Is the possessive to be understood as relating to the subject or object? Are the images guilty of betrayal or are they a victim of it?

[18] Private collection; Sylvester and Whitfield 1992: 281, no. 230.

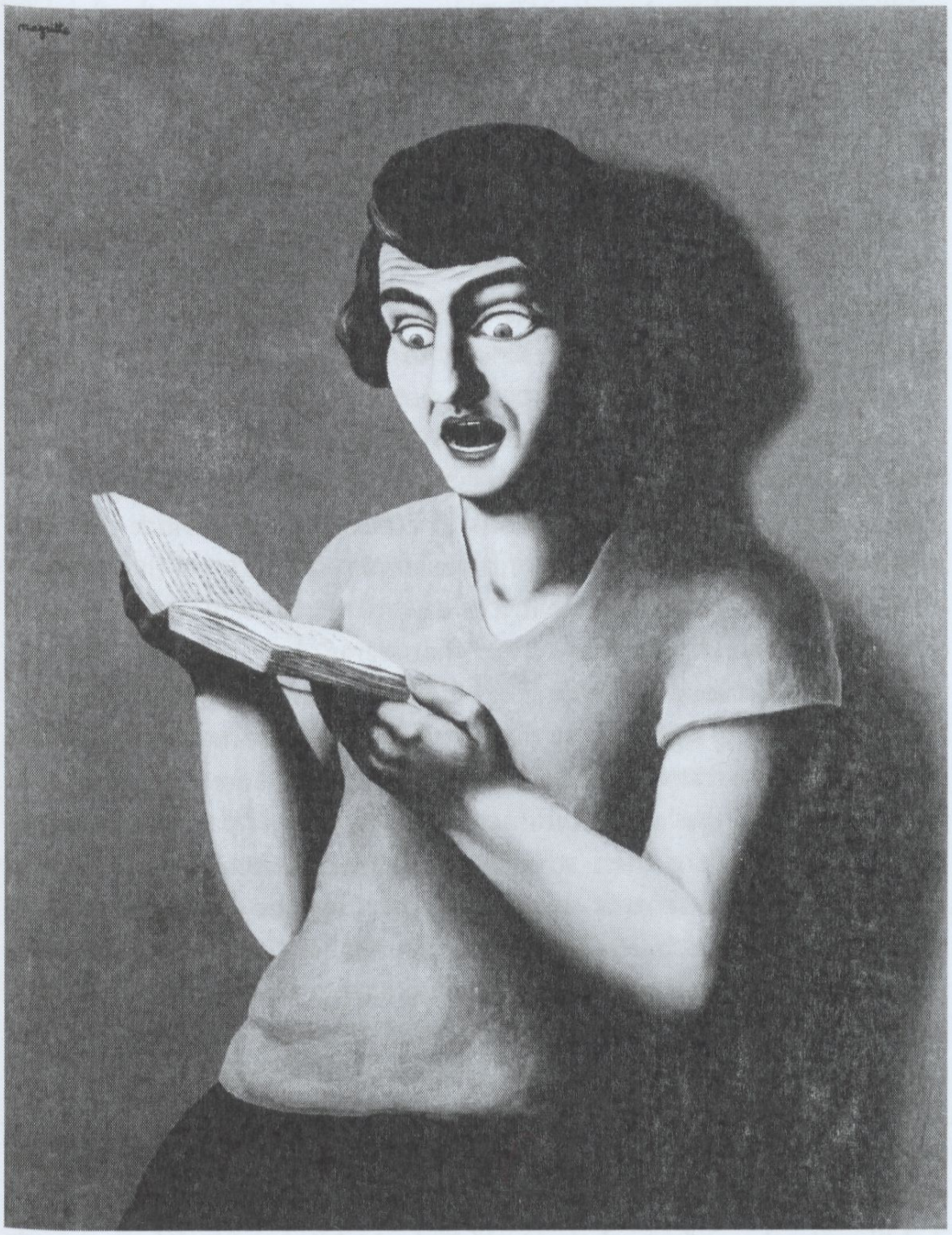

Fig. 4.1. René Magritte, *La lectrice soumise* ('The submissive reader'), 1928. Private collection. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2016.

by a text, not by an image. However, such an expression of tension can be depicted only in an image, not in a text. The painting visualizes precisely what it cannot effectuate itself. Thus, Magritte puts the entire antinomy of text and image in a nutshell.

In all this the distinction between the two representational modes of *narration* and *description* remains fundamental. Yet their fields of

application have shifted somewhat. The spectrum of narration has become narrower, that of description broader. Narration is inevitably focused on acting and/or afflicted subjects, on what they want to achieve; it has no other option than to follow certain strands and thereby take as given what lies outside the respective strand. Every narrated action (and this applies to the epic of antiquity as much as it does to the novel of modernity) is played out within a horizon that is presumed to be given. This horizon cannot, *ipso facto*, itself be narrated; it must be described. It follows that the realm of description is by no means restricted to juxtaposition in space but can also include processes over time. The potential object of description is virtually (to borrow from Wittgenstein) 'everything that is the case', and thus, in the extreme case, nothing less than the world itself.

How useful are these distinctions in concrete terms? Since my own field is classical archaeology, my first example will draw on the *Iliad*, an obvious choice in the sense that it is a work that Lessing himself dealt with extensively. Here we have a text that seems almost ideally suited for our purpose, because the difference between the two modes of narration and description is signalled by the text itself. On the one hand, the *Iliad* features a clear narrative strand. We have the dispute between Agamemnon and Achilles and the latter's refusal to take any further part in the Trojan campaign; robbed of their strongest warrior, the Achaeans lose their advantage and the Trojans come close to setting the Achaean ships on fire; at this point Achilles' friend Patroclus takes the former's place in battle and is slain by Hector; in order to avenge the death of his most beloved friend, Achilles returns to the campaign and kills Hector; at the end of the poem Hector's father, Priam, goes to Achilles and beseeches him to hand over Hector's body so that Priam can bury his son. This is all *narrated*. However, there are also purely *descriptive* passages, the most famous of which is the description of the shield Hephaestus fashions for Achilles (in the eighteenth book).[19] The shield is richly adorned with images, the thematic horizon of which could hardly be broader. It depicts the sky with the sun, moon, and all the stars; this is followed by scenes of rural life, which portray all the four seasons; finally, urban life is also represented in the form of two cities, one at peace and one at war. The city at war is particularly interesting for us: it is under siege, and the attackers

[19] *Il.*18.478–628. For Lessing's own discussion of the passage in the eighteenth chapter of the *Laocoon*, cf. Lessing 1984: 91–7; for further bibliography, cf. Squire 2013 (with references at p. 183, n. 1 and discussion of Lessing's treatment of the passage at pp. 160–1).

and defenders are fighting one another. This theme suggests an association with the war between the Trojans and Achaeans, which is the main subject of the narrative. However, there are conspicuous differences between the battles that make up the narrative material of the *Iliad* and the scenes of war depicted on the shield. First, in the *Iliad* narrative every person who takes the stage, even very briefly because a few verses later they are killed, is given a name by the poet; by contrast, on the shield all the warriors are nameless. The second difference is of a grammatical nature. In the narrative passages of the *Iliad* verbs are used almost exclusively in the aorist form. In the shield description, however, the verbs are in the imperfect. The aorist is used in Greek in relation to actions taking place at a particular point in time and tending to completion, whereas the imperfect denotes processes that are incomplete and underway. In the case of the shield description the imperfect reminds us that we are dealing here with images, depictions of actions that are naturally ongoing and cannot be brought to a conclusion. There is also a third difference. The narrative of the *Iliad* is determined and driven forward by a powerful tension regarding the outcome of the action. Will Achilles continue to refuse to rejoin the battle, even if the Achaeans face defeat? Will Patroclus survive? Will Achilles release Hector's body? The list goes on. But in the scenes of war on the shield there is no sense of suspense at all. The defenders battle against their besiegers and in the end all the text tells us is that 'they came to blows . . . and fought, hauling away one another's dead'.[20] Here the passage breaks off and we do not learn whether the city was successfully defended or overrun: we are presented not with the narration of an occurrence but the description of a situation, a process that could happen anywhere and at any time. And it is precisely for this reason that the warriors involved remain anonymous and the outcome of the conflict open. Indeed, it is the passage's thematic proximity to the *Iliad* narrative that makes the specific character of the descriptive mode particularly evident.

When I say that the entire passage taken up by the shield description is rendered in the descriptive mode, this therefore applies in a dual sense. On one level, this statement is tautological because the shield is described and we call this a description. But on another level (which is more important in the present context and no longer tautological) the entire iconography of

[20] *Il.* 18.539–40.

Fig. 4.2. Late Geometric Attic cauldron-stand, *c.*740 BC. Athens, Kerameikos Museum: inv. 407. Photograph: D-DAI-Athen, Neg. Ker. 4830.

the shield that is described has a descriptive relationship to the world: the images on the shield are not narrative but descriptive.

Bearing in mind this difference between narrative and descriptive passages, we can now turn to the images. My thesis is that this distinction can also be applied to the iconography. Were more scope available to me here, I would attempt to show that the world of images found on

Fig. 4.3. Alternative view of the same Late Geometric Attic cauldron-stand. Photograph: D-DAI-Athen, Neg. Ker. 4923.

Geometric vases has a generally descriptive rather than narrative character and that narrative images first emerged around 700 BC. However, I will limit myself to a single example.

A Geometric cauldron-stand in Athens is decorated with a frieze of heavily armed warriors marching around its upper part (Figs. 4.2 and 4.3).[21]

[21] Athens, Kerameikos Museum, inv. 407; Giuliani 2013: 27–31.

Underneath, on each of the four legs, we see a man fighting with a lion. How are we to interpret this? In the first place, the painter of these images had almost certainly never seen a lion. A lion population can at best coexist with nomadic herdsmen but not with sedentary farmers. In the eighth century BC central Greece was densely settled and under cultivation: this was an environment no longer suited to lions. Nevertheless, lions were (as they are now) regarded as real animals. This is evident not least in the Homeric similes, which always deal with real subjects and in which lions play an essential role.[22] Thus, although in ancient Greek culture lions do not belong to the horizon of everyday experience, they are indisputably part of the real world. There is no reason to assume that the painter of our stand had a different outlook in this respect. But has he based his images on a story? Or is he describing a situation? Let us take a closer look.

All the figures fighting with lions wear helmets, indicating that they are warriors. Two of them hold a calf in their arms, attempting to shield it from the lion's attack; the other two are engaging with the lions with sword and lance. Can these images be related to a mythological narrative? In Greek mythology there is only one lion-conqueror, and that is Hercules. However, it is difficult to relate the iconography on this stand to this figure and his story. First, Hercules is an excessively violent hero, a first-class killer. Looking after a calf is hardly in keeping with his character. Second, Hercules fights his lion with his bare hands, without using any other weapon at all. The Hercules myth thus does not fit here; and there is no other lion-conqueror available in the Greek heroic sagas. What could the painter's intention have been? For him (as for the epic poets who composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*) the lion is the strongest and most dangerous of all predators: the ultimate adversary of the heroic, lone fighter, the lion tests the combatant's skill to the extreme and marks the top end of the scale of danger; in this role the lion is indispensable. Its non-occurrence in the everyday world does not seem to have detracted at all from its status in the world of both the imagination and the imagery. This stand was produced in a culture in which each aristocrat was also a warrior. Thus, the warrior and the cattle-herder were not contrasting roles but

[22] Lonsdale 1990.

complementary aspects of one and the same figure. The lion-fighters on the stand can thus be identified as aristocratic (which is why they are also all wearing helmets) cattle-owners. They belong to the same category as the warriors depicted around the stand's upper edge; and like them and the figures in the shield description, they are nameless. These images do not aim to narrate occurrences but describe situations; they show us the way of the world.

But what do narrative images look like? I would like to turn here to a motif that emerged about 100 years after our stand in the Kerameikos, and that over the following period remained one of the most popular in Greek painting. A neck amphora in Berlin, produced around 550 BC, depicts a fight with a lion, but in this case the form of combat is wrestling (Fig. 4.4).[23] This certainly does not correspond to the way of the world: men do *not* wrestle with lions; wrestling is one thing, lion-hunting quite another. A wrestling-match with a lion is an unprecedented occurrence that raises questions. Why does the wrestler need no weapons? And how will the struggle end? The answers to these questions are provided by a story.

The beholder has to know that in Nemea in the Peloponnese there was a lion whose hide was impenetrable—no weapon could wound it. Hercules (whose name is inscribed on the amphora) solved the problem by strangling the lion with his bare hands, without using a weapon and without damaging its hide (which he subsequently used as armour). What is important in the present context is the fact that the narrative image does not itself tell its story but rather *needs* a story, which the beholder has to know. It is this story that provides the key to understanding the image.

Two other examples are provided by a mixing-bowl in London (Fig. 4.5)[24] and an amphora in Kassel (Fig. 4.6).[25] The image on the bowl depicts a typical situation: we see men reclining on couches in pairs, drinking and making music; under some of the couches there are crouching dogs. This is how an aristocratic symposium is conducted; it is

[23] Berlin, Antikensammlungen SMPK, inv. F 1720: Beazley 1956: 143, no. 1.

[24] London, The British Museum, inv. B 46: Beazley 1956: 91, no. 5; Schmitt Pantel 2011: 569, no. 17, Pl.17.

[25] Kassel, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, inv. T 674: Beazley 1971: 56, no. 31 bis.

Fig. 4.4. Attic black-figure neck amphora, *c.*550 BC. Berlin, Antikensammlung der Staatlichen Museen (Preußischer Kulturbesitz): inv. F 1720. © SMB/ Antikensammlung. Photograph: Johannes Laurentius.

the usual way of the world, and we do not need a story to understand it. Quite different is the image on the amphora. Here we see one man on a couch who is obviously a warrior, as shown by the weapons on display. Most striking, however, is the presence of the corpse of a slain adversary that lies under the couch. From the left an old man approaches, gesturing plaintively towards the dead body. Mourning and death form a sharp contrast with the relaxed enjoyment of a feast: a combination that is certainly not common. Indeed, the scene depicted here is a singular one

Fig. 4.5. Attic black-figure mixing-bowl, *c.*550 BC. London, British Museum: inv. 1867,0508.956. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Fig. 4.6. Detail of an Attic black-figure amphora, *c.*540 BC. Kassel, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen: inv. T 674. Photograph courtesy of the Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel (Antikensammlung).

and, according to Greek custom, highly offensive. As such it is also in need of explanation, and this explanation is again found in a story, which is told in the final book of the *Iliad*. The reclining figure is, of course, Achilles, to whom Priam has come to claim the body of Hector.

Because this story is told in the *Iliad*, it is possible for us to compare the text and the image with one another. In what follows I will try to show how painters deal with the text, where they follow it and where they depart from it. We can begin with Hector's corpse, which is, of course, the pivot on which the meaning of the image turns. Were there no corpse under the couch and no bereaved old man, this image could be seen as a purely descriptive depiction of a symposium; there would be no reason to look for a narrative meaning. Now, we would expect that the painter took this central element, the presence of the corpse, from the *Iliad*, but that is not the case. In the *Iliad* Priam is explicitly prevented from seeing his dead son. The father asks to see the body, but in vain. Achilles orders his waiting-women to wash the body but to 'take it to a place where Priam should not see it, lest if he did so, he should break out in the bitterness of his grief, and enrage Achilles, who might then kill him and sin against the word of Zeus'.[26] Achilles fears that Priam might lose control of himself if he sees the body, which could in turn lead to an escalation of emotions on the part of Achilles himself. In the final book of the *Iliad* both Priam and Achilles move, as it were, on thin ice, which any additional tremor could cause to break. Achilles thus has good reasons for preventing the father from seeing his son's body. In this context, the text has no difficulty in *speaking* of the absent corpse. It is precisely due to his absence that Hector remains the focus of attention. By contrast, the image has no possibility open to it of turning concrete absence into represented presence. Something that is not depicted in the image is not somehow present elsewhere; it is simply non-existent. The corpse thus needs to be made visible, if only because without it the scene would remain incomprehensible. However, in meeting this need the image is able to do something that no text can, namely to present the dead Hector directly and physically. By positioning the corpse under the couch on which Achilles lies, the painter achieves an additional conflation. The victor enjoying his repose and his dead adversary lie extremely close

[26] *Il.* 24.582–6.

together, not side by side but one on top of the other. This parallelism and immediate proximity creates a direct and strange correspondence between the two figures, and painters, as we shall see, used it to great effect.

But first let us look again at the beginning of the scene as narrated in the *Iliad*. With the aid of Hermes, Priam enters the Achaean camp and 'walked straight into the hut where Achilles usually sat. He found him inside . . . He had just finished eating and drinking and the table had not yet been removed. Great Priam came in unobserved by them, went up to Achilles, grasped his knees and kissed his hands, those terrible, man-slaying hands that had killed so many of his sons.'[27]

I would like to emphasize two points here. First, in ancient Greece eating and drinking were activities undertaken collectively. This is reflected in the term symposium itself, which is of course made up of the words *syn-* (meaning 'with' or 'together'), and *potaomai* (meaning 'I drink'). Accordingly, the mixing-bowl in London shows the symposium as a collective event. And in the *Iliad* Achilles has eaten together with comrades. The amphora (and this applies to the entire iconography of this episode) deviates from this by leaving the comrades out. It shows Achilles as someone who drinks and eats entirely alone, outside the community. His repast is a solitary one and, according to Greek standards, this in itself already represents a clear breach of norms. Second, in the *Iliad* Priam approaches Achilles unnoticed and grasps the latter's knees (a common gesture of entreaty). However, on the Kassel amphora Priam is shown unequivocally reacting to the sight of his dead son. He stretches out his arms in a vain attempt to embrace him (i.e. what takes place here is precisely what Achilles so painstakingly seeks to avoid in the *Iliad*).

We find a different approach on a (somewhat later) red-figure drinking-cup in Munich (Fig. 4.7).[28] Achilles, who lies on his couch, holds a cup in his hand very similar to the one on which the scene is painted: a nice example of *mise en abyme*. From the left a young man approaches bearing sumptuous gifts, and other gift-bearers follow on the other side of the bowl; they all carry gifts being offered to Achilles in return for the release of the corpse. In the *Iliad*, Priam undertakes the nocturnal (and foolhardy) trip into the Achaean camp alone, accompanied only by Hermes. The painter dispenses with these details and equips

[27] *Il.* 24.171–9.

[28] Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, inv. SH 2618: Beazley 1963: 61, no. 74.

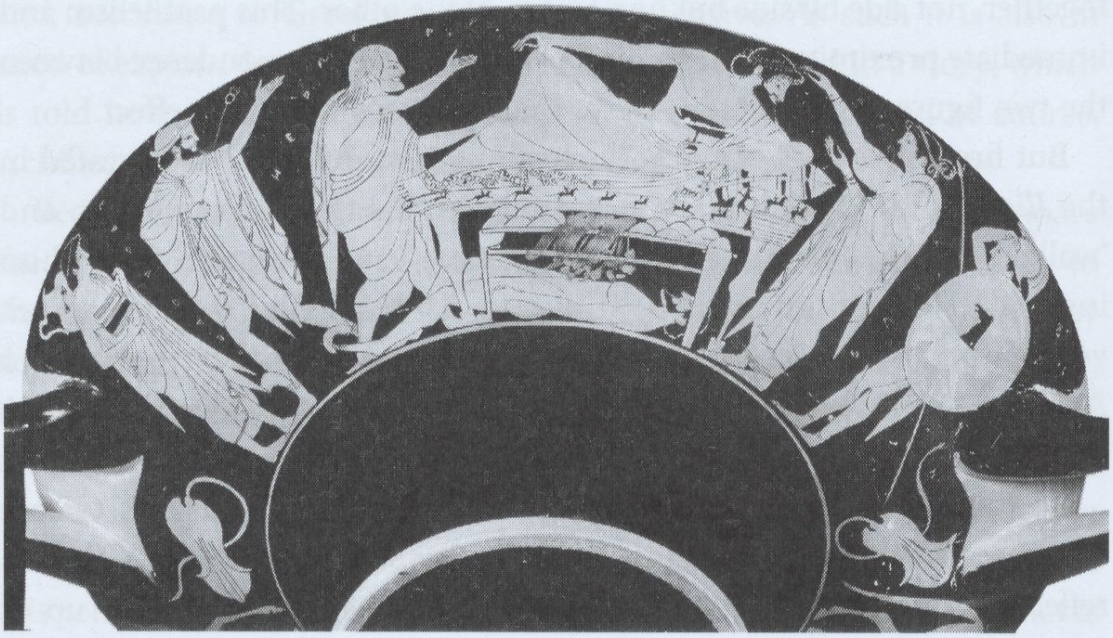

Fig. 4.7. Attic red-figure drinking-cup, *c.*520 BC. Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek: inv. SH 2618. Photograph: Renate Kühling.

Priam with a retinue in order to better display the richness of the gifts. However, what is particularly interesting for us about this image is the temporal aspect of the representation. To the left we see Hermes, who has accompanied Priam to Achilles' tent, departing with a gesture of farewell. Priam (whose hair and beard have been shorn as a sign of mourning) hurries towards Achilles, about to grasp the latter's knees. Achilles, however, has turned his face to the right, away from Priam, an aspect that has no parallels in earlier images of this scene. In concrete terms this is motivated by the fact that a woman is placing a wreath in his hair. However, the point is not the presence of the wreath itself but the fact that Achilles has not yet seen Priam. This introduces a moment of surprise to the image, and the painter has amplified it by adding yet another contrasting figure to the far right: the guard, who, unlike Achilles has already seen Priam and is grasping his helmet in readiness.

My final example is a skyphos in Vienna (Fig. 4.8).[29] Its dimensions are unusual for a drinking-vessel: the vase holds two litres, and it would seem that it was designed more for pictorial ornamentation than for practical use. The structure of the image on the skyphos is similar to that on the Munich bowl. Again we see Achilles turning to the right, where in

[29] Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. 3710: Beazley 1963: 380, no. 171.

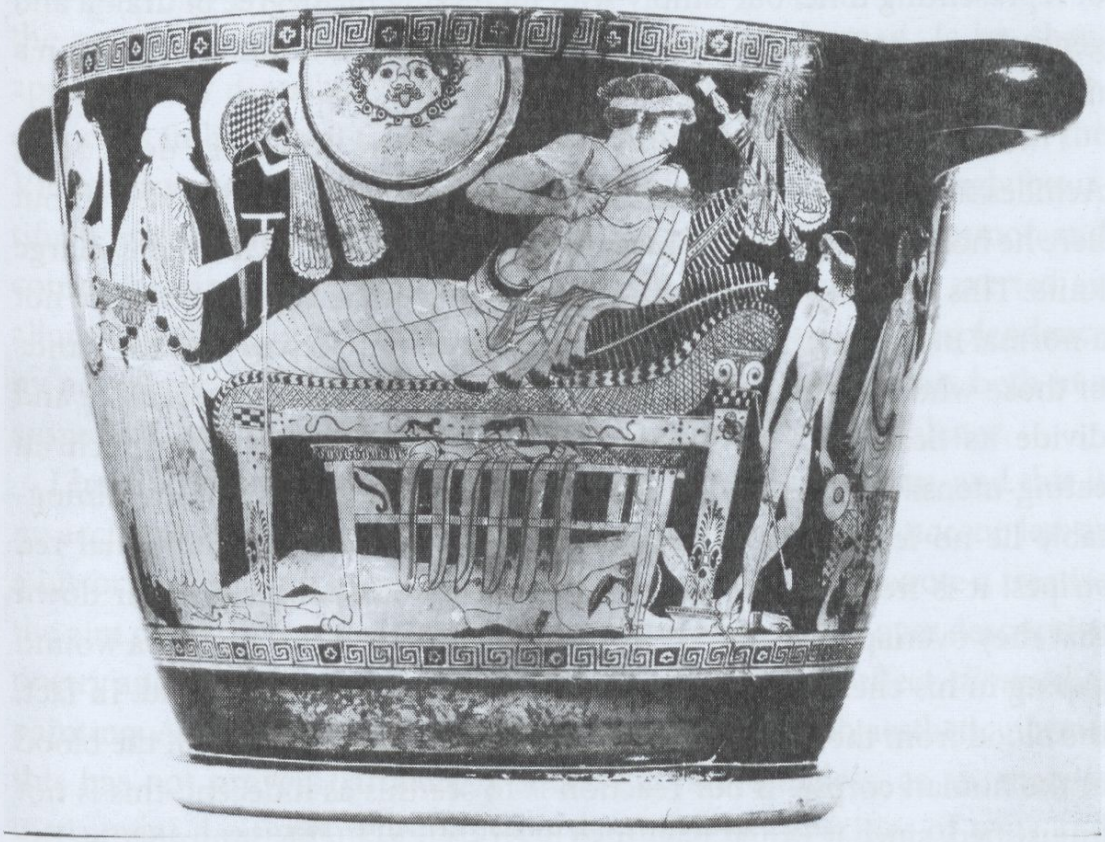

Fig. 4.8. Attic red-figure skyphos, *c.*480 BC. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum: inv. 3710. Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Manuela Laubenberger.

this case a young slave is filling a drinking-bowl. Priam enters the image from the left accompanied by four gift-bearers. The moment of surprise is wrought even more strikingly here. It concerns both Achilles and Priam: the first has not yet noticed his unexpected guest, while the latter has not yet seen his son. The beholder of the image is thus privy to something that the protagonists do not yet see. The beholder is a decisive step ahead them, and it is precisely this aspect that generates tension. How will Achilles react to the arrival of Priam and how will Priam react to the sight of the corpse? The painter reduces the action to a single moment, to the state of *not yet*, in order to generate suspense. This recalls Lessing's concept of the *single* or *fruitful* moment. He believed that pictorial art was unable to represent anything but a single moment, but this is not true. In Archaic art (and again in fifteenth-century painting) there are numerous examples of images that combine different stages of an action with one another. However, in the early fifth century BC this type of depiction fell out of fashion. It is almost as if the painters had read Lessing. In reality they were primarily concerned not with a certain way

of representing time, but simply with increasing the degree of drama and generating suspense. Fixation on a single moment is nothing more than a means of reaching this goal.

I would like to close with a final observation. In earlier depictions, Achilles is shown as simply reclining or holding a drinking-vessel, but here he holds a long piece of meat in his left hand and, in his right, a large knife. This is highly unusual for symposium iconography. Knives are not a normal utensil in this context. Where we do find knives is in the hands of those who slaughter animals in the context of collective sacrifice and divide its flesh into portions. Achilles' knife is thus not so much an eating-utensil as a reminder of the preceding slaughter. On the dining-table lie no fewer than six pieces of fillet, painted with additional red stripes: it is fresh, *bloody* meat. These pieces of flesh hang so far down that they overlap the contours of Hector's body. We can also see a wound gaping in his chest from which blood is dropping to the ground. In fact, the blood from the slaughtered meat is threatening to mix with the blood of the human corpse. If our reaction is to see this as indecent, this is not unjustified, since it would have also been seen as highly improper by the ancient beholder. This image very deliberately presents the violation of a social norm, for Greek culture also drew a fundamental boundary between the flesh of an animal meant for eating and that of a human body requiring burial. The responsibility for this violation lies with Achilles. It seems that there is something fundamentally not right about this hero. His competence clearly lies in his ability to kill; where he fails is in dealing with the slain in a way that is common among other human beings. Achilles has killed an animal, but is now consuming its flesh alone instead of as part of a community. Likewise, he has killed Hector but is now letting the body bleed out underneath his couch instead of releasing it for burial.

We have seen how the iconography deviates from the text of the *Iliad* in many ways. It positions Hector's corpse in the centre of the image and places it under Achilles' couch; it has Achilles enjoy a solitary feast during which he consumes mountains of flesh alone. All this is absent from the *Iliad*. And yet these elements combine into an image that corresponds in an astounding way to the problematic nature of Achilles as depicted in the *Iliad*. It is the highly ambivalent image of a hero whose strength and courage are unparalleled, but who places his honour (*timê*) above the well-being of the community. He brings misfortune upon his

comrades and transgresses all boundaries in the heat of the moment, to the point of behaving in ways that are no longer human. Is he, then, appropriately described as 'Achilles the animal', as Christa Wolf repeatedly does in her novel *Cassandra*? This is perhaps too simplistic. On the Vienna skyphos we see Achilles as a youthful, radiant, ravishingly beautiful figure, and in a culture in which homoerotic love was a common and completely accepted phenomenon such an image must have exerted an allure that is hard for us to imagine today. Nevertheless, this resplendence by no means outshines the darker aspects. The image presents both in a suspenseful synthesis that is difficult to endure in its ambivalence.

I have travelled a considerable distance away from Lessing, and this is no accident. As I wrote at the beginning, I am interested in *Laocoon* less as a historical text than as a basic theoretical model. Lessing wrote a treatise the aim of which was to assert the superiority of narrative over descriptive poetry and of poetry over pictorial art; it is a text that, in effect, *diminishes* painting. As many other theoretical attempts to establish aesthetic norms, this has not proven particularly successful. Nevertheless, as an analytic instrument, Lessing's reflections on the different capacities of texts and images and on the difference between the descriptive and narrative modes remain fundamental. They have opened my eyes—and provided me with a new way into the understanding of Greek iconography.[30]

[30] My thanks to Avi Lifschitz and Michael Squire for hosting my chapter in this volume, and to Joe O'Donnell for his translation of it from German into English. For their help in providing photographs and the permission to publish them, I would like to thank Charles Arnold, Astrid Fendt, Joachim Heiden, Ursel Kästner, and Rüdiger Spittler.