George Herbert's sacrilegious verses

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December 21, 2006

Abstract

In this paper, selected poems by George Herbert are read with respect to two concepts from Luhmann's systems theory: the "observer" and the "unobservable". Surprisingly, the analysis reveals blasphemous traits in Herbert's poetry: repeatedly, the verses exhibit acts of *superbia*. From the perspective taken here, the general view of Herbert as the most pious English poet in the seventeenth century cannot be upheld. The paper closes with some reflections on the application of single theoretical concepts to selected literary works and comes to the conclusion that constructivist literary theory is inevitably at odds with critical practice.

1 Introduction

"When people complain that there is too much theory in literary studies these days", what they have in mind is that "there is too much discussion of non–literary matters, too much debate about general questions whose relation to literature is scarcely evident, too much reading of difficult psychoanalytical, political, and philosophical texts", observes Jonathan Culler on the first page of his widely read *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Culler 1997, 1). That the rise of 'theory' goes hand in hand with the degradation of the work of art to mere illustration remains the most powerful argument against it. The critique comes in many different guises, this being its latest reformulation:

> In the rush to diagnose art's contamination by politics and culture, theoretical analysis has tended always to posit a prior order that grounds or determines a work's aesthetic impact, whether this is history, ideology or theories of subjectivity. The aesthetic is thus explicated in other terms, with other criteria, and its singularity is effaced. Theoretical criticism is in continual danger here of throwing out the aesthetic baby with the humanist bathwater. [...] The singularity of the work's 'art–ness' escapes and all that often remains is the critical discourse itself, reassured of its methodological approach and able to reassert its foundational principles (Joughin and Malpas 2003, 1,3).

The quotation is taken from the programmatic statement of the latest of critical movements, *New Aestheticism*. This approach aims to avoid the theoretical bias by focusing on the aesthetic aspects of the work of art:

> In other words, perhaps the most basic tenet that we are trying to argue for is the equiprimordiality of the aesthetic — that, although it is without doubt tied up with the political, historical, ideological, etc., thinking it as other than determined by them, and therefore reducible to them, opens a space for an artistic or literary specificity that can radically transform its critical potential and position with regard to contemporary culture. In the light of this, we want to put the case that it might be time for a new aestheticism (Joughin and Malpas 2003, 3).

The question today is thus no longer whether to make use of 'theory' or not,[1] but how to find the golden mean between 'theory' and the work of art, between the general and the particular. The problem with *New Aestheticism* is that it is still too general an approach: concentrating on the uniqueness of one particular work of art remains difficult because using the concept of the "aesthetic", one can only distinguish between art and non–art. This approach allows the analysis of "the singularity of the work's 'art–ness' " but not the singularity of a *specific* work of art.

We propose a different solution to the problem of theoretical bias. Instead of privileging one single aspect, such as the aesthetic, we suggest an approach

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[1]Not to make use of any theory is, strictly speaking impossible, if 'theory' means the *presuppositions* with which one approaches a work of art.

in which selected philosophical (theoretical) concepts are used to discuss particular works of art. How this can be done will be demonstrated by applying the concepts "observer" and "the unobservable" from Nikolas Luhmann's systems theory to George Herbert's religious verse. The more specific question of selection—of which concepts should be related to which works of art—will be addressed in the conclusion.

In our analysis we hope to show that this approach has many advantages. For one, we can expose an aspect of Herbert's poetry which has not been (could not have been?) noticed before: the display of blasphemous traits. From the perspective taken here, the received opinion of Herbert as the most pious of English poets becomes untenable. Secondly, the usefulness of Luhmann's concepts in literary studies will be demonstrated. Lastly, our more general claim is that heuristically valuable analyses are possible without being burdened by the theory applied. That this is a great advantage is seen most clearly when one is confronted with 'ponderous' theories such as Luhmann's.

2   The poems

> Das Unterscheiden–und–Bezeichnen ist als Beobachten eine einzige Operation; denn es hätte keinen Sinn, etwas zu bezeichnen, was man nicht unterscheiden kann, so wie umgekehrt das bloße Unterscheiden unbestimmt bliebe und operativ nicht verwendet werden würde, wenn es nicht dazu käme, die eine Seite (das Gemeinte) und nicht die andere (das Nichtgemeinte) zu bezeichnen (Luhmann 1992, 94f).

Each observation produces an "unobserved": one side of the observation remains unmarked and, consequently, unobserved. No observer can see everything—except God. In fact, from a systems theoretical perspective, God can be regarded as the universal observer, and this conclusion drawn by Luhmann is also in agreement with the Christian theological tradition, exemplified by (among others) Nicholas of Cusa.[2] In systems theory, God

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[2]No wonder that Luhmann's writings have been the subject of intensive discussions in evangelical theology; cf. for instance Thomas 2005. One of the most advanced and à la mode theories thus serves to justify (or at least to illuminate) Christian belief.

functions also as *the* unobservable—similar to the Christian understanding: the first commandment prohibits all attempts to make "a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above". What is more, Luhmann conceives of systems theory all in all as to be nearer to Christian theology than to the epistemological tradition:

> Keine Erkenntnistheorie der Tradition [...] hat sich so weit vorwagen können [wie der systemtheoretische Konstruktivismus], und offenbar deshalb nicht, weil der Platz, an dem von Ununterschiedenheit zu handeln wäre, durch die Theologie besetzt war. Um das zu sehen, genügt es, Nikolaus von Kues zu lesen. Gott steht jenseits aller Unterscheidungen [...]. Er ist das non–aliud, das, was nicht anders ist als etwas anderes. In ihm fällt alles, was das Unterscheiden transzendiert, insofern, als es das tut, zusammen — also das, was nicht größer und das, was nicht kleiner, das, was nicht schneller und das, was nicht langsamer gedacht werden kann (coincidentia oppositorum). Aber das, was damit bezeichnet sein soll, ohne unterschieden werden zu können, muß mit der Gotteslehre der christlichen Dogmatik übereinkommen. Es muß als Person und als Dreieinigkeit ausweisbar sein, und es ist zugleich (unterschiedslos) das eben deshalb "geheime" Wesen der Dinge (Luhmann 2001, 227f).

Luhmann points out that the observation of God is in essence an act that gestures towards blasphemy. Strictly speaking, God cannot and may not be observed:

> Im semantischen Kontext einer Welt, die als Schöpfung Gottes zu begreifen ist, ist die Beobachtung der Welt in gewissem Umfang freigegeben. Aber es gibt unauflösbare Geheimnisse, weil deren Entzifferung auf die Beobachtung des Schöpfergottes hinauslaufen müßte. Das heißt nicht, daß der Naturforschung fühlbare Grenzen gezogen werden müßten [...]. Nur der Punkt, an dem die Weltbeobachtung in Gottesbeobachtung umschlagen müßte, muß dem Beobachten [...] entzogen werden. Er bleibt der *docta ignorantia*, dem ehrfürchtigen Staunen vorbehalten (Luhmann 1992, 120).

This is the starting point for the following analysis which endeavours to uncover the sacrilegious traits in several Herbert–poems. However, we will not follow Luhmann's own explanation about why the observation of God is a blasphemy. In Luhmann's systems theory, the observer separates himself

implicitly or explicitly from the observed. Since this also holds for the observation of God, theology is in danger of finding itself in the company of Satan, the boldest observer of God ("in die Nähe des Teufels als dem [sic] kühnsten Beobachter Gottes zu geraten" [Luhmann 2001, 228]), since it is none other than the devil which separates himself from God most emphatically. For Luhmann, blasphemy resides in the act of separation:

> Seine [des Beobachters, d.V.] Absichten und Eigenschaften lassen gewisse Verwandschaften mit einem seit langem bekannten Wesen erkennen. Er stammt, wenn man so sagen darf, aus dem Hause Teufel. Sein nächster und unmittelbarer Vorfahre trägt jedenfalls diesen Namen [...]. Unter diesem Namen ist ein deutlich erkennbares Problem überliefert worden. Es betrifft den Versuch, die Einheit, an der man selbst teilhat, wie von außen zu beobachten. Diese Einheit wird in der Tradition als eine nicht überbietbare Vollkommenheit behauptet, zugleich aber über Personalisierung unter dem Namen Gott als (im Prinzip) beobachtbar dargestellt. Will man diese Einheit beobachten, muss man eine Grenze ziehen, eine Differenz einrichten, zumindest die Differenz zum Beobachter. Dieser muß, will er beobachten können, sich abgrenzen, sich ausgrenzen [...]. Wenn er aber annehmen muß, daß das Eine das Gute (der Eine der Gute) ist und als Perfektion kein Außerhalb duldet, wird er im Versuch der Abgrenzung zum Gegenteil, zum Bösen (Luhmann 1992, 118).

These ideas are just as ingenious as they are laboured: why should the difference between God and his observer be modelled as a difference between God and Satan? Why are all beings which separate themselves from God automatically diabolical? Man, too, is separated from God—and that according to Christian doctrine: the observer which separates himself from God becomes not Satan, but Man.

A more simple explanation is conceivable of why the observation of God is a sacrilege: those who observe God violate the integrity of the absolutely "unobservable". It is an offence against the first commandment (in Christian doctrine).[3] It is a transgression against a divine command, and being so, it is an act of *superbia*: one assumes oneself to be equal or even superior to God.

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[3]Admittedly, the argument is not new: Jewish and Islamic theology has attacked the doctrine of the holy trinity on the very same grounds. 'Spelling out' God's identity—as in the teaching of the trinity—is observing the unobservable.

Those who observe God commit a deadly sin: pride. It is our contention that in several of his poems, George Herbert does just this.

In "Clasping of hands", the relationship between God and man is turned around again and again:

> Lord, thou art mine, and I am thine,
> If mine I am: and thine much more,
> Then I or ought, or can be mine.
> Yet to be thine, doth me restore;
> So that again I now am mine,
> And with advantage mine the more,
> Since this being mine, brings with it thine,
> And thou with me doest thee restore.
>   If I without thee would be mine,
>   I neither should be mine nor thine.
>
> Lord, I am thine, and thou art mine:
> So mine thou art, that something more
> I may presume thee mine, then thine.
> For thou didst suffer to restore
> Not thee, but me, and to be mine,
> And with advantage mine the more,
> Since thou in death wast none of thine,
> Yet then as mine didst me restore.
>   O be mine still! still make me thine!
>   Or rather make no Thine and Mine!

The alternation of just four rhymes—mine, more, thine, restore—establishes a playful tone, while the resulting repetitions lull the reader. His alertness is diminished, he takes it all for a game, and it is questionable whether he really 'processes' each step in Herbert's poetical reasoning. Thus, the boldness of Herbert's lines can pass unmarked.

It is daring to make an exercise of logic out of the relationship between man and God. The argumentative leaps as well as the preoccupation with possession call to mind John Donne—yet it is not the Dean of St. Paul's who is evoked here, but the author of those (not infrequently) scandalous seduction poems. Were Herbert's verses addressed to a woman, they could pass for one of the *Songs and Sonets*. In that case, the urging of unity in the

last two lines would be merely audacious. Herbert, however, speaks to God; this makes the ending of his poem a blasphemy.

The emphatic ending annihilates the premises of the poem—this is a familiar move in Herbert.[4] Yet the rejection of *these* particular terms (thine and mine) is an act of *superbia*: Herbert demands the elimination of the *possibility* of differentiation between man and God. Were his wish granted, Man and God could not even be theoretically separated. It is total fusion that Herbert is aiming at.

The union of man and God is a constitutive figure of thought in Christian mysticism.[5] For the mystic, however, this condition is an end in itself: there is nothing beyond it. Herbert, on the other hand, remains 'active': he makes use of the divine power. He will act like God.

Consider the poem "The Sacrifice", which begins as follows:

> *OH all ye, who passe by,* whose eyes and minde
> To worldly things are sharp, but to me blinde;
> To me, who took eyes that I might you finde:
> Was ever grief like mine? (1–4)

When the "lyrical I" speaks in the name of God (Christ), it follows an established liturgical and poetical tradition. The extra–scriptural Monologue or Complaint of Christ, including the so–called *O vos omnes qui transitis* poems, becomes a poetic convention as early as there are extant religious lyrics in Middle English, observes Rosemund Tuve (Tuve 1951, 33). "The Sacrifice" has been invariably seen as a poem which fits perfectly into this tradition: it has been read as a detailed account of Christ's words spoken from the Cross.[6] However, it seems that some verses render not the *words*, but the *thoughts*! The transition from Christ speaking to his torturers to Christ speaking to himself, that is, to Christ thinking, is discernible in the following sequence:

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[4]Cf. Arnold Stein on "Clasping of Hands": "loosening of form by rejecting the established terms of a poem is not infrequent in Herbert" (Stein 1968, 151).

[5]As far as mysticism tries to level the difference between subject and object (man and God), observer and observed, it tends to be in itself blasphemous. In this respect, the suspicions of the Church against mysticism are well–founded.

[6]Cf. Empson 1949, 226-233, Eliot 1962, 27–28, Vendler 1975, 73, Tuve 1951, 19–99.

In healing not my self, there doth consist
All that salvation, which ye now resist;
Your safetie in my sicknesse doth subsist:
                            Was ever grief like mine?

Betwixt two theeves I spend my utmost breath,
As he that for some robberie suffereth.
Alas! what have I stollen from you? Death.
                            Was ever grief, &c.

A king my title is, prefixt on high;
Yet by my subjects am condemn'd to die
A servile death in servile companie:
                            Was ever grief, &c.

They give me vineger mingled with gall,
But more with malice: yet, when they did call,
With Manna, Angels food, I fed them all:
                            Was ever grief, &c. (221–240)

While in the first two verses quoted Christ addresses directly the ungrateful
crowd, in the third stanza he refers to them as "my subjects", while in the
fourth he switches to the pronoun "they". It is difficult to assess the com-
municative situation (who is addressed?) in this last verse unless we assume
that Christ is in fact thinking. If someone can think Christ's thoughts, he
must have access to his consciousness. There is only one entity who can
accomplish this: God himself.[7] When Herbert renders Christ's thoughts on
the cross, he assumes the position and the powers attributed to God. He
becomes omniscient, he penetrates the mind and foresees the future:

Nay, after death their spite shall further go;
For they will pierce my side, I full well know;
That as sinne came, so Sacraments might flow:
                            Was ever grief like mine? (245–248)

The blasphemy lies not in the fact that Herbert knows these particular future
events: everyone in a Christian community possessed this knowledge. What

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[7]Here another element from systems theory proves heuristically valuable: the drama-
tisation of the difference between consciousness and communication. Cf. Luhmann 1992,
11ff.

is blasphemous is Herbert's design of the communicative situation, a design quite unique in seventeenth century religious verse: the choice to render at times not the words, but the thoughts of Christ.

While in "The Sacrifice", the communicative situation changes again and again, the narrative situation is likewise complicated: there are instances of simultaneous narration, there are descriptions of future as well as past events. Here, the switching between addressees and times still attenuates the audacity of Herbert's enterprise. In the later poems, however, the transgression is upheld throughout.[8] The clearest case is "The Pulley", where Herbert goes even a step further and observes not from the position of God, but from *beyond* God's perspective:

> When God at first made man,
> Having a glasse of blessings standing by;
> Let us (said he) poure on him all we can:
> Let the worlds riches, which dispersed lie,
> Contract into a span.
>
> So strength first made a way;
> Then beautie flow'd, then wisdome, honour, pleasure:
> When almost all was out, God made a stay,
> Perceiving that alone of all his treasure
> Rest in the bottome lay.
>
> For if I should (said he)
> Bestow this jewell also on my creature,
> He would adore my gifts in stead of me,
> And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
> So both should losers be.
>
> Yet let him keep the rest,
> But keep them with repining restlessness:
> Let him be rich and wearie, that at least,
> If goodnesse leade him not, yet wearinesse
> May tosse him to my breast.

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[8]As the chronology of Herbert's writings is largely unknown, *earlier* and *later* refer to Herbert's arrangement of the poems in *The Temple*.

In her explication, Helen Vendler described the communicative situation in this poem as follows: "logically speaking, it is somewhat bizarre" (Vendler 1975, 32). Theologically speaking, we may add, it is somewhat blasphemous: Herbert here is observing God creating Man.

This stance is even more scandalous than the identification with God. To think of something which would be greater or wiser than God, something which sees more than God, can be sanctioned neither philosophically nor theologically. In philosophy, the arrangement is by definition impossible: Anselm's and Descartes' ontological proofs of God are based on the impossibility of conceiving of something which is greater than God.[9] The idea is also in conflict with theology: A.D. Nuttall sensed Herbert's peculiar attitude to religious doctrine as he noted that "Herbert's poetry overthrows Calvinism by subjecting it to the test of ingenious loyalty" (Nuttall 1980, 81).[10] One could go even further, however. It is not only Calvinist doctrine that Herbert, the most pious of English poets is subverting: it is Christian doctrine in general.

In the light of what has been said so far, the following lines from "The Temper (I)" should increase our suspicion:

> Although there were some fourtie heav'ns, or more,
>   Sometimes I peere above them all;
>   Sometimes I hardly reach a score,
>   Sometimes to hell I fall. (5–8)

Is this an attractive poetical rendering of Pico della Mirandola's thoughts on the dignity of man, or is it to be taken more literally? And if so, is it not the clearest expression of *superbia*? Lines like these must have prompted F.E. Hutchinson to remark that Herbert's spiritual struggle was not simply over the priesthood but over "the more general issue of his submission to the Divine will" and that "his principal temptation, the 'one cunning bosome–

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[9]Cf. Descartes 1986 and Anselm 2005.

[10]Helen Vendler also perceived the strangeness of some of Herbert's poems, but she did not pursue this point further. She remarked in connection with *The Pulley* merely that: "Nevertheless, there remains, for all the beautiful ending of the poem, an edge or frame of frivolity or entertainment about the whole, as about all such fanciful speculations" (Vendler 1975, 36).

sin' which is apt to break through all his fences, is ambition" (Boutens 1967, 154).

Finally, let us turn to the boldest of Herbert's poems. The first stanza of "Ungratefulnesse" strikes a delicate balance between submissiveness and pride:

> Lord, with what bountie and rare clemencie
>   Hast thou redeem'd us from the grave!
>   If thou hadst let us runne,
>   Gladly had man ador'd the sunne,
>   And thought his god most brave;
> Where now we shall be better gods then he. (1–6)

While the poem begins on the note of gratitude, in the last line, overtones of excessive pride are discernible. In the following three verses, Herbert retreats into a meditation on God's "two rare cabinets full of treasure, / The Trinitie, and the Incarnation". After this testimony of reverence, the closing stanza comes as a shock:

> But man is close, reserv'd, and dark to thee:
>   When thou demandest but a heart,
>   He cavils instantly.
>   In his poore cabinet of bone
>   Sinnes have their box apart,
> Defrauding thee, who gavest two for one. (25–30)

Helen Vendler reads the "oddly gloomy" ending as a "condemnation of man", with no solution proposed for "this dark state of affairs". "God is left defrauded; man unredeemed" (Vendler 1975, 188f). Vendler rightly regards the last stanza as an expression of "speculative mistrust", as a description of a state of affairs that Herbert is most displeased with. However, the very idea that God can be defrauded should give us pause. Herbert calls into question divine omniscience. How else could man remain reserved and dark to his creator? What's more, Herbert denies not only infinite knowledge to God, he claims epistemic superiority for man: the poem ends with man deceiving God.

Our analysis has endeavoured to reveal the sacrilegious traits in Herbert's religious verse. We believe that in the light of these findings the common view of Herbert as the most pious of English poets should be reconsidered. However, we are also fully aware of the objections and obstacles in such an enterprise, most eruditely specified by A.D. Nuttall:

> To argue, as I have done, that Herbert's poetry overthrows Calvinism by subjecting it to the test of ingenious loyalty will be dismissed by many people as merely 'silly–clever'. Few now believe that Milton, by pertinaciously striving (and failing) to justify the ways of God to man, ended by proving them unjust. Similarly, David Hume's remark to Boswell that it took Locke and Clarke to make a real atheist of him is often treated as a mere joke. Yet the real impetus of ideas, as they disengage themselves from the local and particular intentions of their first proponents, often works in this way. Hume's own horrifyingly sceptical philosophy was crucial in producing, in the mind of Immanuel Kant (remember how *The Treatise* broke in upon his 'dogmatic slumbers') the most developed positive philosophy of the modern world. But to see this you must take your thinkers and your poets seriously. The cartographer of rhetorical convention, on the other hand, unlike Kant, may sleep secure (Nuttall 1980, 81f).

3   Conclusion

In the introduction we claimed that single philosophical (theoretical) concepts can be fruitfully applied to literary works without being burdened by the complete theory. Admittedly, this is a widespread practice in literary studies. However, the implications of this procedure are seldom reflected upon: there is a 'justification–gap'.

What is central is the question of selection. Which concepts can be applied to a given literary text? Which criteria allow us to decide whether a concept (e.g. Luhmann's "observer" or "unobservable") and a text (e.g. Herbert's religious poems) are 'congruous'? We have already hinted at the answer: it is the "heuristic gain" that justifies a concept–text combination. This suggestion should not be particularly objectionable: "heuristic value" is (silently) acknowledged even by many of the core constructivists as a decisive

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quality marker of a given reading.[11]

Nonetheless, this answer raises a number of difficult questions. How can the heuristic value of a specific concept–text combination be 'measured'? Can we evaluate readings at all? Using the term "heuristic value" assumes that a literary text possesses a pre–existent, 'objective' meaning—and that there are epistemic claims inherent in the expression is undeniable. It also implies that this meaning can be discovered and conveyed—at least in part. However, these essentialistic implications run counter to the premises of the majority of current theories in literary studies. It appears that critical practice is at odds with critical theory.

Brian McHale, one of the most renowned contemporary literary theorists, provides a distinct account of this problem. He considers himself a constructivist, yet he admits that a strictly constructivist access to literary texts is wanting in persuasive force. He therefore 'clothes' his constructivist approach in an essentialist guise in his major works, *Postmodernist Fiction* and *Constructing Postmodernism*:

> This is a rhetorical problem (though not merely a rhetorical one): how to persuade the reader to entertain a particular construction of postmodernism while at the same time preserving a sense of the provisionality, the 'as if' character, of all such constructions? Inevitably (or so it seems), in the course of an exposition devoted to substantiating one particular construction of postmodernism, the constructivist emphasis tends to get lost (McHale 1992, 1).

McHale himself suggests—without going into details—that the problem is "not merely a rhetorical one". Strictly speaking, what is at stake is the consistency of the constructivist approach.[12] Declaring oneself a constructivist, but nevertheless offering quasi–essentialistic readings of literary texts,

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[11]Cf. z.B. Jahraus 2002, 28.

[12]Is it merely accidental that McHale does not regard "consistency" as a quality marker of constructivist literary theories? "The appropriate criteria for evaluation now are, for instance, the explicitness; its intersubjective accessibility; its "empirical–mindedness", i.e. its aspiration to be as empirical as possible, where empiricism is not a method but a *horizon* to be approached only asymptotically; and, above all, the adequacy of the version to its intended purpose [...]" (McHale 1992, 2). That "heuristic value" is not mentioned is likewise remarkable. Could it be that McHale's attempt to keep the theoretical framework free of all recurrences to essentialist thinking should compensate for 'going astray' in practice?

is a performative self–contradiction. As soon as the essentialist premises of his readings are revealed, there is also a *logical* contradiction: on the one hand it is claimed that "texts are possible sources of objective knowledge", on the other that "texts are not possible sources of objective knowledge". Constructivist literary theory is therefore faced with a dilemma. It either adopts essentialistic procedures of analysis—in this case, it relinquishes its consistency; or it adheres strictly to constructivist principles both in theory and in practice—and the consequence is the continuous annihilation of the interpretations that it brings forth.

From this perspective, constructivism is certainly not unassailable. It seems that some apparently outmoded answers to fundamental methodological questions in literary criticism should be reconsidered. The rise of *New Aestheticism*—the starting point of our analysis—is an expression of this need: it seems that without recourse (in some form or another) to the classical notion of "beauty", it is not possible to grasp the singularity of a work's "*art–ness*". Our considerations led us to an analogous conclusion: to grasp the singularity of a work of art, we need to make use of terms which are—for better or for worse—part of an essentialist vocabulary. We'll thus end with a proposal for an informed reintroduction of the epistemological dimension into discussions on art: it is not impossible that in some form or another, the classical notion of "truth" could still prove useful. Could it be that Keats had a point, after all?

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