

INTRODUCTION

Literature and Art: Conversations and Collaborations

ELIZABETH BENJAMIN & SOPHIE CORSER

You want to be a painter? First you must cut out your tongue because your decision has taken away from you the right to express yourself with anything but your brush.
Henri Matisse, 1942

Literature and the visual arts have been yoked together in myriad ways for centuries, enjoying a protean relationship of commonalities and differences. For authors, artists, readers, and viewers, the interaction of literature and art continues to encourage questions of form and content; of interpretations of visual and written language; of adaptation, translation, and rewriting; of influence and originality; and of the roles of creator and audience. It is a relationship that both refuses and defines the boundaries between image and word, upsetting the ways in which artists and writers invest in their media. Henri Matisse's polemical advice to students shows the strength with which mono-medial expression can be defended. Matisse, however, repeated and recalibrated this directive in a note included in 1947's *Jazz*, a book of vibrant cut-outs interspersed with handwritten text:

After having written "he who wants to devote himself to painting must begin by cutting out his own tongue," why do I feel the need to use other media than my usual ones? [...] These pages, therefore, will serve only to accompany my colors, just as asters help in the composition of a bouquet of more important flowers. *Thus, their role is purely visual.*¹

By turning to language to affirm a declared hierarchy of images over words, Matisse's anxious defence undermines his promotion of the wordless artist. The written aside of *Jazz* makes explicit a constant source of tension in the relationship between literature and visual art: the limitations of each. What can art do that literature cannot, and what can literature achieve that art cannot attain? Could the pages of *Jazz* not express the decorative purpose of the words presented in such a way that Matisse's stance on mute expression need not be challenged? Matisse's explanation intimates a limitation of his art, a need for explanatory composed text: an implication that writing can clarify in a way that art cannot, that it can in fact close off possible interpretations.

The hesitations of authors to have their texts illustrated, for fear that the images will curtail the imaginations of their readers, suggests a similar concern that the combination

¹ Henri Matisse, *Jazz*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: George Braziller, 1983), p. xv

of the literary with the visual will establish a hierarchy of signification. The suspicion of authors that an image will override their words and the curious faith of an artist that a written text can clarify their art are echoed by readers and viewers, who fret over film adaptations of favourite books and look first to the explanatory blurb printed next to a painting. At once productive and limiting, these tensions have been at work throughout the history of the relationship between literature and art, manifesting variously where painting, illustration, sculpture, photography, or installation intersect with literary writing in all its forms. Therefore the reinterpretation of a text by an artist, or an art object by an author, provokes not only an assessment of the new and original work, but also a reappraisal of art, literature, and the process of adaptation. The relationship prompts evaluations, and therefore a self-consciousness of both or either medium. The interaction of literature and art is therefore inherently critical, even theoretical.

Many examples of visual artists' experimentations with written texts directly engage with literary works – including the ancient Sperlonga sculptures depicting episodes of *The Odyssey*, Botticelli's *Primavera* (ca. 1482), or much of the output of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; arguably the wealth of art inspired by religious texts, such as the Gupta Vishvarupa sculptures of the fifth century, or ninth and tenth century Byzantine mosaics in Hagia Sophia, Istanbul; and illustrated texts from eleventh century Japanese woodblock-printed books to contemporary book-to-art projects such as Stephen Crowe's *Wake in Progress*. Others, however, operate at a remove from literature, investigating instead individual words or non-literary writing. In 1913-14 Kazimir Malevich drew a simple frame and wrote within it 'деревня' ('Village'), noting that 'Instead of drawing the huts of nature's nooks, better to write "Village" and it will appear to each with finer details and the sweep of an entire village.'² A conceptual exploration of the power of language, pitted against the visual by borrowing the frame of an exhibited artwork, Malevich's *Alogmisme 29. Village* creates a viewer/reader who must create the framed image. *Alogmisme 29. Village* challenges the role of the artist/author while investing a great deal in the modes of art and the capabilities of words. In his investigation into the effects of language as communication within a curated, artistic space, Malevich gives the word 'village' a quality that one might call literary.

Literature points often to the visual, however its engagement with art can draw on more than the representation of an image. For example, Frank O'Hara uses to great effect the status of revered artworks, borrowing their renowned beauty in the 1960 poem 'Having

² Malevich, *Alogmisme 29. Village*, text quoted in Aleksandra Shatskikh, 'The cosmos and the canvas: Malevich at Tate Modern', trans Marian Schwartz, *Tate Etc.*, 31 (Summer 2014), <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/cosmos-and-canvas>

a Coke with You’ to express his absorption with a lover: ‘and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them / when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank’. O’Hara references well-known artwork (including Rembrandt’s *Polish Rider*, Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and the drawings of Michelangelo) to make his adoring point, thwarting the trope of comparing a loved one to exalted art by instead deeming art inferior to the loved one:

and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint
you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them
I lookat you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world³

‘Having a Coke with You’ draws on a long history of poetry and literature written about, in full or in part, existing or imaginary works of art. Known as ekphrasis, this borrowing of the visual by authors reverses Matisse’s use of writing in *Jazz*: it hopes to add to what is conveyed by words without overpowering the medium of writing. Ekphrasis achieves this with success by evoking an image rather than presenting one, by keeping the artwork within the sphere of literature.

The conversations and collaborations of literature and art of course include combinations of text and image which attempt to balance each medium, rather than refract one through the other. The twentieth century emergence of the *livre d’artiste* and contemporary graphic novels arguably prioritise neither the visual nor the written, instead seeking a partnership. Yet the ways in which we consume and disseminate these works tend to divide them – we read mass-published graphic novels, and exhibit one-off *livres d’artistes*. The lack of any simplicity to the relationship between literature and art is in part what causes work which invokes the combination to become critical, a commentary of either or both media and of the functions of intertextuality, adaptation, and translation. By forcing us to consider each medium in relation to the other, we consider the role of all forms of art, of communication, representation, narrative, beauty.

A work which draws from both literature and visual art encourages a questioning of how the activities of artists/authors and viewers/readers are linked in a progression of interpretation, reinterpretation, rewriting, and reimagining. These interactions of literature and art are self-conscious at their origins because they depict a creative act of reading or viewing. W. H. Auden’s classic example of ekphrasis, ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’ (1938), expresses a contemplation of human suffering impelled by viewing Brueghel’s *Icarus* and

³ Frank O’Hara, *Selected Poems*, ed. Donald Allen (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 175-76

makes explicit its status as a written response to art. By representing a viewer within the poem, who considers both *Icarus* and the ways in which art can approach the realities of disaster, the invocation of Daedalus' over-reaching son turns the poem in on itself. Daedalus, the artistic creator, lingers in the background of the poem, hinting that the worries of the viewer/author are concerned also with the role of an artist and the position of art within the world.

Literature and art together lead not only to an activity of critical analysis but to theoretical questioning. Texts and images which engage with both the visual and the written encourage considerations of form and content; of representation, or the impossibilities therein; of commonalities such as narrative, framing, movement, stasis, metaphor. Interlinked, they can clarify and complicate concerns of literary and artistic theory. The work of installation and concept artist Sophie Calle – a mixture of photography, text, and event – offers responses to such concerns: the constant query of what defines 'art', the late twentieth century post-structuralist death of the author, and contemporary identity-related approaches to art and criticism. In 1979's *Suite Venitienne* Calle follows an almost-stranger to Venice, exhibiting the photographs she took of him with pieces of her own writing. Such autobiographical work eschews concepts of an absent author or artist and forms one of the many twentieth-century challenges to what counts as 'art'. Often choosing polysemantic exhibition titles, Calle uses written language to add to the sense of shifting layers of signification in her work: for example her 2003 Centre Pompidou exhibition was entitled *M'as-tu vue?*, literally translating as 'did you see me?' or 'have you seen me?', but also meaning 'show off'. As Alfred Pacquement, director of the Pompidou, comments, the title 'also emphasises the fact that, though the exhibition is made up of a set of works, ancient or modern, so to speak, it still forms a whole, to be seen and read, like a narrative, in a series of chapters.'⁴ Works which demand to be 'seen and read' absorb the dialogues and refusals between visual and written communication, and explicitly ask for us to reappraise how we consume literature and art.

As we move into contemporary manifestations of literature and art, we can perceive that the relationship has come full circle, through a consumerisation of the very association itself. Blackwell's, a notable publisher of academic and literary texts alike, now offers aesthetic realisations of classic fiction. Striking examples include those of posterisation techniques, both through the casual wearing of memorable literary quotations in t-shirt form and the bite-sized book-on-a-page prints that can be framed

⁴ Sophie Calle, *M'as-tu vue?* (Paris: Centre Pompidou and Edition Xavier Baral, 2003), p. 16

and displayed on a wall of one's choosing. Both of these products allow for the accessible presentation of (a select and marketable range of) an individual's aesthetic choices to give an implicit impression of literary worth and cultural capital without the need for in-depth discussion or knowledge of such works. Yet far from being a literal illustration of the dire state of contemporary literacy, the stark visuality of these products both undermines and adds new meaning to the role of words and narrative by drawing attention to its visual worth, as well as acting as a reminder of the importance of typography and presentation more widely, the inevitability of judging a book not only by its cover but also by the layout of its contents.

Indeed to draw upon an inherently less identically reproducible medium, we can consider the recent interest in book sculpture and the materiality of the book form. The intricate work of artists such as Su Blackwell and Brian Dettmer posit this new approach to the printed medium as a physical creation of art through literary artefacts. A contrast between these two artists demonstrates two very different approaches to the reappropriation of literature. Blackwell's sculptures are consistently composed on a surface of an open book, implying an overflow or visual outpouring of the story within, and thus extending the book (binding) as frame while respecting its role as base.⁵ Conversely, Dettmer almost completely abandons the structural character of the frame, instead treating the literature as malleable primary material.⁶ Together these artists continue to highlight the modern definitions of literature and art, that is, undefinable and often indistinguishable. It is within this space that our authors perform their analyses, towards a reassessment of artistic boundaries within and without literature.

...a meeting place for issues of visual and material culture, textuality, and poetics in so far as they all contribute to the foregrounding of creative processes...
David Bowe

Providing our earliest example of the physical artistry of the creation of literary works, David Bowe (University of Oxford) opens our issue in an exploration of the importance of the tools of writing, through his article on the work of medieval poet Guido Cavalcanti. Bowe's article performs an in-depth textual analysis of the long-neglected sonnet 'Noi siàn le triste penne isbigottite' [*We are the sad, bewildered quills*], while

⁵ <http://www.sublackwell.co.uk/portfolio-book-cut-sculpture/>

⁶ <http://briandettmer.com/art/>

emphasising the strong links with medieval writing technologies. Bowe casts light upon a writer who pre-empts many a modern sentiment of the aesthetics of the written word: indeed the knives and quills of Cavalcanti resonate with the surgical nature of the works of Blackwell and Dettmer with several centuries' divide. Through his depiction of Cavalcanti's self-aware work, Bowe raises issues of subjectivity and selfhood across the media of literature and art.

...the boundary between literary and critical representation is negotiated by means of a Medusan interchange of gazing and imagining, petrification and insightful reading.
Mathelinda Nabugodi

Mathelinda Nabugodi (University College London) continues our discussion of subjectivity through notions of self-reflection, through the oft-represented historical character of Medusa. Demonstrating that works of literature and art can be used both as a lens through which to see and as an object to be looked at, Nabugodi assesses the manifold discussion of the Medusan figure across history. Her article instructively dissects the varying myth through both critical and literary theory, with a focus on Walter Benjamin and the ekphrastic work of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Nabugodi refracts the Medusan gaze in a detailed assessment of seven disparate aspects of this deadly figure, highlighting the ambiguity of both the myth itself and the myth-making process. Through her use of a character whose petrifying capacities are themselves multiply defined, Nabugodi underlines the importance of the reader and spectator, and the reader as spectator, in the construction of these interpretations of the making-visible of Medusa.

...the sister arts can be also considered, in the specific case of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, as the sisters' arts, that is two different means of expressing the same underlying aesthetic principles as well as the closeness of their professional and private relationship.
Annalisa Federici

Remaining within the realm of narrative blurring, Annalisa Federici (University of Perugia) brings an extra level of artistic intimacy to the table through her article on sisters Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell. Federici dissects the relationship between art and artist, character and narrative, in such a way that provides new commentary on the self-development of aesthetic principles. Federici demonstrates a cross-fertilisation of techniques of narrative and design that make these works both complimentary and self-referential. The interactions between visual and verbal imagery open up an interactive space for the creation of a common language of aesthetics between abstraction and impressionism.

...the image is no longer relegated to an ancillary function as mere illustration... the work of Éluard and Ernst accomplishes an interchange and interaction of disparate fragments of media that cannot necessarily be treated as separate entities, but demand to be viewed as intermedia.
Lauren Van Arsdall

Lauren Van Arsdall (University of California Los Angeles) extends our modernist destruction of artistic boundaries in an analysis of the Surrealist collaborations of Max Ernst and Paul Éluard. Moving on from Federici's analysis of tightly-entwined sister(s) arts, Van Arsdall explores an artistic forum that demonstrates a level of collaboration that puts pressure even on the notion of intertextuality. Her article draws upon the problematic of automatic writing as a means of expression, and posits a redefinition of the method by Ernst and Eluard. Using the Surrealist text *Les Malheurs des immortels*, Van Arsdall performs an in-depth textual dissection of selected doublets in order to demonstrate the possibility of new analysis of the imagery of language, as well as a rebuttal to the notion of the avant-garde as nonsensical or meaningless.

...Butor's engagement with form in this text sees him develop a string of brief encounters with different artworks over the course of the book, allowing us to align our progression through the text, as readers, with the trajectory of a visitor leisurely making her or his way through an exhibition space.
Elizabeth Geary Keohane

Elizabeth Geary Keohane (University of Toronto/University of Johannesburg) offers a novel approach to the notions of illustration and ekphrasis, suggesting the potential for a text to play the role of a museum guide. Her analysis of Michel Butor's *Les Mots dans la peinture* suggests limits to the associative potential of ekphrasis, while opening up word-image relations through her designation of the text as a reader in its own right. Offering a very different approach to ekphrasis from Nabugodi's, Geary Keohane steps back from the analysis of the work's contents in order to posit a renewed interest in the structural importance of the text as an entity; an aesthetic of writing beyond the simple depiction of works of visual art. In so-doing, she sets up a meta-curation of the art exhibition, highlighting the continuous potential for verbo-visual interaction.

...we might tentatively suggest a transgressive experience à la Houellebecq from the perspective of sentimentality, altruistic love and compassion, a crucial element of Houellebecquian aesthetics, tentatively and at least partially opposed to the cruelty and suffering he observes in contemporary cultural production.
Russell Williams

Russell Williams (University of London Institute in Paris) rounds off the issue with our most contemporary response to the theme of literature and art, through a discussion of the transgressive in the works of Michel Houellebecq. Williams demonstrates how the

postmodern aesthetic of Houellebecq's texts implicates both author and reader in their scandalous depictions that border on the surreal. As we saw Federici depict the modernist artist as character and the image as narrative, so Williams depicts a postmodern destruction of this distinction that is at once playful and violent. Furthermore, this breakdown illustrates the constant potential and desire for auto-biography in art and literature, as expressions of selfhood in a hyper-aware exploration of self-reflective potential.

In our initial call for articles we invited reflections on the following questions: How can we define the fluctuating relationship between literature and art, and how has it changed over time? What reasons can we attribute to its continuing importance? Responding in a wide-ranging and personal manner to these challenges, our six authors elucidate that the relationship between literature and art is longstanding and multifaceted, from the medieval to the contemporary, and from illustration and description to the fully intermedial. The articles in this issue highlight the creative potential of a constant renegotiation of the boundary space between literature and art. *Conversations and Collaborations* does not aim to provide a full or complete response to the problematic of the tumultuous relationship between literature and art. Instead, its selection of approaches intend to provoke further questions, and further interest in unpicking this rich subject area, in a contemporary world where accessibility and interdisciplinarity provide the backbone of cultural interaction.