Understanding Criticism

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The premise of this special issue is that we can better understand criticism by focusing on the nature of *understanding* itself. In other words, our hope is that by teasing out the basic aspects of understanding as a cognitive achievement, we can bring into view some of the characteristic features and conditions of critical writing. By "criticism" here we mean something specific: the job of getting someone else to see what you see in a work of art. Of course this isn't the only task involved in writing about literature; nor is it wholly separate from the research practices so often lumped together as "scholarship" in order to define criticism's opposite number. But this slender definition of the aim of criticism will help us to raise a set of questions that we think are newly worth asking at a moment when the styles and venues of critical writing—both inside and outside of the academy—have become newly expansive. What counts as success and failure in literary criticism? What risks and assumptions define it? How are critical techniques modulated in relation to context and audience? What is the place of a critic's own subjectivity in the work they do?

Sitting behind these questions is the more basic one of what kind of thinking is at play when critics write about their objects. This is the question that led us to "understanding." We felt that we needed something other than "knowledge," since that term tacks too heavily towards either the accumulation of facts or the instrumentalization of technical skill suggested by the administrative phrase "knowledge production." Even "critical thinking"—a phrase that at first blush should pertain to the cognitive value of criticism—doesn't capture the aim of perceptual transformation that we find to be central to our practice.[1] The more we measured the actual

procedures of criticism against the terms through which academics, in particular, feel pressured to justify it, the more we felt that our language for grasping criticism was severely impoverished. So we went looking for other terms. And after reading a range of philosophical approaches to the arts and criticism—including hermeneutics, pragmatism, and ordinary language philosophy—we noticed how prominently "understanding" has featured in both disciplinary and extra-disciplinary accounts of criticism. In fact, one of the remarkable patterns we spotted in this work is the tendency of philosophers to turn to art and aesthetic experience precisely in order to delineate the workings of understanding as distinct from knowledge. Philosophy has drawn from art to conceptualize understanding; we hope to return the favor by testing how far the concept of understanding can illuminate criticism.

In defining criticism as a way of getting you to see what I see, we draw on a signal encounter between art and philosophy: the work of Stanley Cavell, a frequent touchstone for this collection. For Cavell, criticism is an urgent appeal to the interlocutor to experience a work of art as I experience it. Appeal, not imperative: the phrase, "see what I see," is singularly conditional in the original context. Cavell here compares the ordinary language philosopher to the critic, another practitioner who "turns to the reader not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something, against himself. He is saying: Look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I say." For Cavell, the implication "is that philosophy, like art, is, and should be, powerless to *prove* its relevance…All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own."[2] Because criticism is an appeal, not a syllogism, there is no way, as Toril Moi writes, to guard against the possibility of failure; no way to decide "in advance of the reading what the *best* option would be, as if the path was already there, waiting for us. We just have to risk it.

There are no guarantees."[3] The kind of failure that is possible is as distinctive as the kind of success. To fall short as a critic, according to Cavell's description, is not to be wrong, but to be repudiated. The unsuccessful critic did not necessarily fail to grasp the facts; rather, she failed to make herself understood. "Don't you dig?" the critic asks, in one of Cavell's formulations, and the interlocutor says, *no.*[4]

The essays that follow consider what it means to succeed and to fail in the endeavor we call criticism. Some approach criticism in a theoretical key; others demonstrate—and dissect—the critical act. Some address academic criticism; others consider writing in magazines, newspapers, and online. Some are interested in the possible uses of understanding; others are skeptical. Taken together, they offer a snapshot of how, in a time marked by the proliferation of critical styles and publishing venues, we might understand all that's involved in learning to see as another sees. Our hope is that in the back-and-forth between treating understanding as an aim and seeing it as an obstacle, a fuller picture of criticism as it is practiced will emerge, alongside a renewed vocabulary for describing it.

In this brief introduction, we offer an anatomy of understanding as the cognitive achievement distinctive both to the writing and the reading of criticism. The qualities on which we'll focus can be extrapolated from the notion of criticism as an appeal to the other to see an aesthetic object as I see it. Making such an appeal requires the imaginative communication of an experience of an aesthetic object to another person. In that criticism communicates an *experience,* it cannot be severed from the critic-as-experiencer, or from the object's meaning to the critic. Thus criticism has a subjective dimension in a moment when objectivity can feel like more defensible ground; and it stakes claims to meaning at a moment when doing so can feel risky, even naïve. In that criticism *communicates* an experience, it also has a relational dimension. The

critic speaks to, is answerable to, some particular other or group of others. Conveying an experience is a task that necessarily involves imagination; telling you what it was like for me to see the play or read the novel is more like acting in a play or writing a novel than it is like drafting an instruction manual or writing a policy document. And it is open-ended; one experience does not preclude the possibility of others. At the back of all these features is the fact that criticism's objects are the ones whose meaning and importance we apprehend as much by attending to our experiences of them as to the features of the objects themselves: namely, aesthetic objects. Thus understanding as an epistemological genre has the following basic features. It involves *experience*, and is thus inherently *subjective*, in the special sense accorded to aesthetic judgments since Kant; it deals in *meanings*, not (only) in facts; it is *relational* (situated in contexts and addressed to particular listeners); and it is *open-ended,* always available to be overturned or creatively adumbrated by future readers and critics.

The cognitive operation of understanding refuses to be prized away from *experience* (the first feature in our anatomy). Understanding begins from where we find ourselves. This basic principle commands the agreement of nearly all the philosophical traditions we've drawn upon, including the one that the term *understanding* will likely call to mind for many: hermeneutics. For this tradition, understanding is the distinctive aim of the human sciences, as opposed to the natural sciences, whose goal is *explanation.*[5] Wilhelm Dilthey, for example, held that the human sciences required a process of inhabiting the inner reality of an object that the natural sciences did not. It was a matter of re-experiencing [*Nachfühlen*] and re-comprehension [*Nachverständnis*] of the experience and the understanding that had gone into the making of a given trace of human thought (a text, a monument, a memorial), until one could understand the state of mind of its creator. “From stones and marble, musical notes, gestures, words and letters, from actions,

economic decrees and constitutions, the same human spirit address us and demands interpretation," Dilthey wrote in the essay "The Rise of Hermeneutics," translated by Fredric Jameson for this journal in 1972.[6] Likewise, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who rebooted hermeneutics along Heideggerian lines in *Truth and Method* (1960), grounds his general account of understanding in the analysis of aesthetic experience, since "the experience of art is a mode of knowledge of a unique kind."[7]

Other approaches have similarly flagged the unique link between knowing and experiencing that characterizes aesthetic understanding. Cavell says it directly: "knowing" a work of art, he insists, "is a matter of experience," so much so that "apart from one's experience of it there is nothing to *be* known about it, no way of knowing that what you know is relevant."[8] Pragmatist philosophers, too, have long aimed at keeping philosophy rooted in experience, including when they turn to art and criticism. See, for instance, John Dewey's redefinition of the work of art as what the art object "does with and in experience," in *Art as Experience* (1934), or the theorist Louise Rosenblatt's Deweyan definition of "the poem" as an *event* enfolding reader and text, not simply the written words alone.[9]

We don't even need to look to philosophy to recognize this intimate connection between understanding and experience. When introducing the fourth and final edition of their once-ubiquitous textbook, *Understanding Poetry*, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks wrote that they might well have titled the book *Experiencing Poetry*, since a "fuller" experience of literature was, after all, its aim. Understanding, they explained, facilitates experience, and vice versa. Where understanding names the "process" through which the "end" of experience is attained, experience in turn leads to understanding: the more poems you read, the better equipped you'll be to understand them, especially if you go about the matter deliberately. The terms were deeply

linked for them, two aspects of a recursive process whereby a reader reflects on and remakes the quality of their experience from within the experience itself. Where understanding named the effort to “lift into consciousness” the “more or less unconscious process of making discriminations, comparisons, and judgments” involved in reading (and mental life more generally), experience encompassed both the result of that effort and the medium of its activity.[10]

The second feature of our anatomy of understanding is its *subjectivity*. In some knowledge practices, such as scientific experimentation, experience might lead to an abstraction in which little trace of the subject of experience remains. But that is not the case with understanding, where every investigation “must begin with our own personal experience of intellectual trouble,” as Moi writes.[11] Though theorists differ in the degree to which they regard the personal features of the critic as preserved in the work of criticism—the critic’s social and political identity, autobiography, personality, and so forth—they tend to agree that insofar as criticism begins with and communicates an experience, something of the “I” remains. For one contributor to this collection, Michel Chaouli, this “I” is one that is “not quite a self, an ‘I’ often unknown to itself” (he’s closely paraphrasing Roland Barthes here).[12] Indeed, in *Something Speaks to Me: Where Criticism Begins,* which has been influential for several contributors to this issue, Chaouli presents criticism as a poetic response to the felt call of the aesthetic object—a call that begins in experience but exceeds the personal.

For others, the “I” of the critic is inevitably, though not always avowedly, situated in political and social identity. Here we might think of present-day practitioners of autotheory, but also of long-standing traditions of attention to the personal in Black studies, feminist theory, and queer theory.[13] Even Dilthey, not usually foremost on the list of autotheory’s precursors, insists on the notion that our own lives are the bedrock of humanistic knowledge, however much he hoped

that subjectivity would be dissolved in the final analysis. "The power and scope of our own lives and the energy with which we reflect on them provide the basis of historical vision," Dilthey wrote. "Self-reflection alone enables us to give a second life to the bloodless shadows of the past."[14] Traditions that acknowledge the subjective component of criticism usually see a two-way traffic in which the critical act both issues from a situated self and transforms that self. Thinking about understanding thus helps bring into view the nuances of handling the personal in criticism: it illuminates when the personal is an integral part of critical practice, and when, either by becoming overly fixed or by appearing symptomatically, it gets in the way.

The third aspect of understanding that we want to highlight is its connection to *meaning*. To understand a piece of information, as opposed to merely knowing it, is to grasp its full import; to follow its implications and account for its relevance. As Hannah Arendt wrote, understanding "make[s] knowledge meaningful."[15] Note that this formulation doesn't disparage the importance of factual knowledge; it only specifies the role facts play. As John Guillory notes in the closing pages of *Professing Criticism* (2022), this model holds well for criticism. For though literary study relies on facts and busies itself with the important work of accumulating them—facts about authorship, publication, reception, genre, and so on—such knowledge isn't the final aim of the study of literature. Rather, "the *interest* of arguments in literary study is for the most part inversely related to the proportion of fact constituting the argument." What matters, Guillory explains, is *meaning*. This is because literary artifacts consist "wholly of *meaning*," such that they "can only be *known* by being *understood*" (382). "The epistemic claims of literary study," he continues, may be "dependent on facts and research" but they "are founded equally on the epistemic principle of understanding, the kind of knowledge that in its simplest expression takes the form: 'I know what you mean'" (385). We agree with Guillory that that this difference "is

worth affirming, even celebrating" in the effort to clarify the disciplinary status of literary study (385).

From literary study's concern with meaning arises its distinctive tendency to move back and forth between whole and part, general and particular. If criticism aims at getting someone to see what you see, it proceeds not by pointing out individual details in isolation but by providing a framework within which to see those details. Criticism works through Gestalt shifts. A reader begins with an observation; links it up to others in the provisional construction of a whole; then returns to the particulars, which will appear transformed by the hermeneutic process. The New-Critical term for this interchange—equally a feature of poems and of their interpretation—was irony.[16] But even when critics no longer subscribe to the notion of the poem as an organic whole or perfectly balanced machine—a kite, in one of Cleanth Brooks' metaphors, elegantly poised in the wind—they still make sense of their objects through attention to what philosopher Jonathan Kvanvig calls "coherence-making relationships."[17] Kvanvig draws a strong distinction between knowledge and understanding along these lines, arguing that "understanding requires, and knowledge does not, an internal grasping or appreciation of how the various elements in a body of information are related to each other,"[18] This feature of understanding fits well with the work of criticism. Coming to understand a poem or play more fully—coming to comprehend its *meaning*—involves seeing more of its parts in relation to one another, or seeing some of its parts in relation to a larger complex (a philosophical debate, a sociological or historical context, a genre, an author's *oeuvre*).

By the same token, if critical interpretation requires attending to relationships within and beyond an object, critical address requires attending to the critic's relationship to their interlocutors. The fourth feature of understanding is that it is situated and *relational*—it always

happens in the context of the critic's audiences and milieux. When we appeal to someone to see an object as we see it, it makes sense to consider what kind of case that interlocutor will need to hear. Cavell repeats from David Hume a story of two wine connoisseurs asked to judge a vintage; one tastes iron, the other leather, and both are jeered. Later, a key with an iron thong is discovered in the vat. Unlike Hume, Cavell says that this discovery isn't what vindicates the critic. Rather, "his vindication comes not from his pointing out that it is, or was, in the barrel, but in getting us to taste it there."[19] A critic considers what will allow the interlocutor to taste it there—and that inevitably means considering the relationship to the interlocutor and the institutional and generic structures that shape the exchange.

The better to think about the variety of such relationships, we bring together in this special issue a group of critics who are differently situated professionally. Some write for a variety of academic audiences, some write for literary publics, and others write for both. Those differences of venue matter for how the critical act is performed. For some of our contributors, teaching, rather than writing, is the foremost critical context. In the classroom, as in the academic journal, criticism involves an object in common; but some of the essays that follow consider the equally common situation of literary reviews, which assume no previous familiarity with the literature discussed, almost by definition. What these differences show is that understanding is always situated, that in thinking about critical understanding it pays to ask not only *understanding what* and *understanding how,* but also *understanding where,* and *for whom.* Here we follow our respondent Jeff Dolven, who in *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (2007) writes that "there are many understandings," and many ways, too, to gauge whether someone understands: "I may be satisfied to hear you repeat my words back, just as I spoke them or in some more-or-less elegant variation. Or it may suffice merely that you profess agreement: 'Yes, I understand!' But I

might also press the matter, asking you questions: what follows? Can you give an example?" It is possible I might require "a particular look in your eyes"; it may even be the case that "nothing will count but your laughing or bursting into tears."[20] In judging the success or failure of criticism, we must take into account the interlocutor's response (or lack thereof).

We cannot say categorically what would count as evidence of understanding, and we do not understand something once and for all. The indeterminacy of understanding is one of the features that can be hard to defend in an atmosphere of scientism. But *open-endedness* is a virtue here, not a weakness (and it is also the final item in our anatomy of understanding). While it is true that the hermeneutic tradition hoped to arrive at a final and total interpretation, we do not share that hope. Like Hannah Arendt, we assume that understanding will be "an unending activity by which, in constant change and variation, we come to terms with, reconcile ourselves to reality, that is, try to be at home in the world."[21] Something of this same insight underwrites the conspicuous unendingness of the literary critical enterprise. To return to Rosenblatt's theory of literature as an event, if each evocation of a poem involves the readerly activity that brings it about, then "even the most objective analysis of 'the poem' is an analysis of the work as they themselves have called it forth."[22] Criticism, then, consists in the "reenacting of the work as evoked" for the benefit of another reader, and such evocations would not, in principle, come to an end until there were no more readers.[23] There are always more relations to grasp, more lines to follow, different patterns to propose: in other words, more criticism to be performed.

The open-endedness of critical understanding is part and parcel of its nature as a creative act. As Chaouli writes, "The basic gesture of poetic criticism is not to bring the process of reading and writing to a close, but to further it…ideally, it becomes itself a call for future response."[24] The poetic critic responds to the work of art with the impulse to make something of

their own—a work of criticism, which itself, as a made thing, may elicit responses from others. For Chaouli, "Understanding is in play, and therefore of interest, to the exact degree that it prompts me to make something of my present moment. What and how I understand therefore depends on what and how I end up making."[25] When we think in these terms, Chaouli proposes, the most praiseworthy criticism produces not the most "definitive" interpretation, but rather the most prolific one—prolific, that is, in calling forth responses to itself.

Some of the worst dangers lurking in the framework of understanding result from forgetting, or betraying, the open-endedness of the critical act. If we mistake the provisional order required to bring an object into view as absolute, or if we fix on one framework as final, then the appeal to "see as I see" may indeed begin to look like the imperative that, according to Cavell, it cannot be. In pursuing the potential uses of understanding for criticism, then, we want to resist from the outset the temptation to treat our key term as something that could ever be established once and for all, without remainder. Here we find it useful to recall the etymology of *understanding*, which is stranger than expected. The term does not denote something that *stands under* something else, supporting or grounding it. Rather, the archaic Germanic root behind *under-* more likely meant "in the midst of," such that to understand referred to the process of orienting oneself *from within* the situation, not outside or below it.[26]

We are grateful for the opportunity to orient ourselves from within the essays that follow, which, in their formal, stylistic, and argumentative variety, offer a rich survey of how criticism is understood and practiced. We begin with a trio of essays that variously perform and query the centrality of the critic's "I." The first, by Michel Chaouli, launches off from the wholly clear and yet utterly baffling style of Franz Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" to propose a theory of critical understanding that refuses to shed its affiliation with a motivating—and unsettling—aesthetic

encounter. Rather than offer a leap from confusion into certainty, the "knot of understanding," in Chaouli's account, holds understanding and incomprehension within "the same experience." Next, Jesse McCarthy's essay takes stock of the role that identity plays in aesthetic judgment by considering two objects that call out this kind of powerful response in him: a sentence from Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* and a ring shout from the Georgia Sea Islands. Insisting on a distinction between social identity and vocational identity, and unfolding an intricate analysis of the unexpected affiliations and nuances of his chosen objects, he argues that a too-quick reliance on demographic notions of the self can, as his title has it, impose "a limit to aesthetic judgment." Emily Ogden's contribution continues this inquiry into the role of the personal in criticism. Starting from a specific kind of failure peculiar to criticism—namely, that the reader may think that the perspective performed by the writer doesn't actually exist, that the object indeed is *not* seen in that way, even by the critic—Ogden extracts a justification of the personal in criticism on the basis of the nature of aesthetic judgment. She then goes one step further, offering a description of *idiolect* as a way of grasping how the first-person is staged in critical writing.

The next two essays elaborate the procedures and risks involved in our central metaphor of getting someone to see as you see, though from very different angles. Becca Rothfeld takes us through her own aesthetic education at the hands of Alcibiades's speech in Plato's *Symposium*—a speech that prompted her to see Socrates differently—in order to elaborate what is involved in the critical act of imaginatively communicating an experience. Mimesis, autobiography, the evocative image: these are some of the techniques that Rothfeld finds in the critic's toolbox, and she details examples of their effective use to explain the role of criticism in shaping aesthetic experience. But can this critical persuasion go too far? Eugenie Brinkema, in her reading of Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017), finds a horrifying literalization of the desire to see through someone else's eyes and

thus a dark side to the goal of critical understanding. Drawing on the radical formalism she developed in *Life-Destroying Diagrams*, Brinkema argues that critical responses to *Get Out* demonstrate the dangers of having *too much* understanding, of relying on already-understood accounts of the logic of racial violence to guide their reading. As a corrective, she follows the film's own intricate formal efforts to "dethrone *any* definitive reading—a generic one, an Afropessimist one, an Afrofuturist one—that would purport to bring interpretive labor to a close."

At this point, our special issue shifts to consider more directly the varieties of knowledge peculiar to criticism. Ryan Ruby argues that we should align criticism with knowledge gained through experience—*gignosco*, in the ancient Greek, or what the French call *connaître*—rather than with propositional knowledge (*eidenai*, *savoir*, knowing-that). From this position, he criticizes Jonathan Kramnick's recent claim for "truth" as an essential part of disciplinary practice, arguing instead for a counter-tradition of "criticism as an ethos" that predates the institutionalization of literary studies and continues to thrive outside its halls. Audrey Wasser similarly resists what she sees as an overly empiricist bent in characterizations of criticism. Her essay turns to Louis Althusser's criticism of the empiricist conception of knowledge to bring into focus the way that literary works are themselves *constituted*—that is, determined as objects of knowledge—through the procedures of criticism. This process of construction raises several questions, which Wasser takes in turn: What's the difference between reading a text and writing criticism about it? If each critical act constitutes the literary object, how can we adjudicate agreement and disagreement within the discipline? And what's the role of theory?

Nicholas Gaskill's essay continues these inquiries into the epistemology of criticism by asking why it is that the disciplinary imperative to "produce knowledge" so often excludes

aesthetic criticism and its ties to experience. To find a different framework, one that doesn't force literary studies to squeeze into ill-fitting metrics of disciplinary worth, he turns to John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead, philosophers who rethought the category of knowledge from the perspective of aesthetics, and then to Suzanne K. Langer, Rosenblatt, and Kenneth Burke, each of whom built on those philosophers to register the distinctive kind of thinking at work in criticism and the arts. But why, we might ask, is this kind of thinking so difficult to articulate, such that an alternative history has to be unspooled to see it? Elaine Auyoung's essay offers an answer by drawing on philosophical notions of "hermeneutic injustice" to reveal the "matrix of institutional structures and values that impede access" to the epistemic resources of aesthetic criticism. In the process, Auyoung details what these resources are, drawing on empirical work in education and perceptual learning to give a precise account of critical expertise and the means necessary to acquire it. It's not enough to tell students to pay close attention, she explains; instead, if we really want to give all students the chance to see as the critic sees, we should focus on the pedagogical techniques that foster inductive discovery and perceptual transformation.

The final essays in the issue point, in different ways, to the importance of keeping criticism situated and responsive to its specific objects, audiences, and institutions. Monica Huerta draws attention to the unspoken boundary lines that too often define methodological discussions of criticism, lines that separate "English," narrowly construed, from networks of study that address "the wide distance between the world as it is and the world as it has been imagined to be." Through evocative readings of video installations by multimedia artist Sofía Córdova, she offers resources for holding on to "what's multidimensional about living and thinking," against disciplinary pressures to ignore the embodied, social, and political aspects of intellectual life. Next, David Kurnick analyzes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work in the early

nineties to mark the pivot whereby "queer" ceased to designate an identifiable social category and instead evoked a well-nigh metaphysical—and insistently *positive*—critical concept. Tracking this movement through Sedgwick's shift from literary critic to queer theorist, and then through historian Joan Scott's essay "The Evidence of Experience," Kurnick tracks how both "queer" and "the literary" lost touch with their "terrestrial coordinates" in "the long 1993." As a contrast, he looks to the SF writer and polymath Samuel R. Delany's career-long effort to write about sexuality and literature as "richly complex social and imaginative facts, alongside others," not as terms of blanket praise. Lauren Michele Jackson takes on a similarly capacious writer, Percival Everett, to question the litany of ways that criticism tries to find a short-cut to understanding: allegory, theory, labels like "metafiction," quotations from the author, the list goes on. Taking Everett's 1999 novel *Glyph* as her object, Jackson suggests that these short-cuts ultimately stand in the way of the more basic task of reading, which might, in the end, require not understanding but something like love.

The special issue concludes with a response from Jeff Dolven that synthesizes the major tensions and insights emerging from the preceding essays and weaves them together with a critical reflection on George Herbert's "Prayer (I)." The result clarifies the major through-lines that emerge from our gambit that understanding can help us to think about criticism and, in the process, builds to a powerful articulation of the open-endedness of criticism. "Understanding," Dolven writes, "is translation, the exercise of the capacity to answer the desire to understand in new ways"; it's less the seeing and more the willingness—the commitment—to try again, and to refresh our own ways of seeing in the process.

Criticism, we've argued, does its work with and through experience. And that holds for the essays that follow. Our quick summaries can't do justice to the complex arguments and

brilliant readings offered by our contributors; they can only serve to whet your appetite to experience these essays for yourself. Through their differences of approach, the essays in this special issue combine to offer a provocative portrait of criticism's most distinctive techniques and concerns, all flowing from a seemingly straightforward question: how can I show you what I see?

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[1] Audrey Wasser, “Critical Thinking,” *New Literary History* 52, no. 2 (spring 2021): 191-209.

[2] Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* Rev. ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 89.

[3] Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 182.

[4] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 87.

[5] Wilhelm Dilthey, “Ideas for a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology” [1894], in *Understanding the Human World* (2010), *Selected Works*, vol. II, R.A. Makkreel and F. Rodi (eds.), Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985–2010, p. 147.

[6] Wilhelm Dilthey, “Rise of Hermeneutics,” trans. Frederic Jameson, *New Literary History* 3, no. 2 (winter 1972): 229-244, p. 232.

[7] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 88. What matters to us here is the shared emphasis on experience, though we should note that Dilthey and Gadamer give that concept different spins, even different words. Where Dilthey emphasizes *Erlebnis*, or “lived experience,” Gadamer favors the more historically thick notion of experience as *Erfahrung*. See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 55-91, 355-70.

[8] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 201-202.

[9] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Perigee, 1980), 3. Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 12.

[10] Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 4th edition (Wadsworth, 1976), 15, 16.

[11] Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, 184.

[12] Michel Chaouli, *Something Speaks to Me: Where Criticism Begins* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), 24.

[13] An overview and assessment of this tradition can be found in Max Cavitch, “Everybody’s

Autotheory," *Modern Language Quarterly* 83.1 (2022): 83-116.

[14] Wilhelm Dilthey, *Selected Works*, *vol. 3: The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences,* ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Fritjof Rodi (Princeton University Press, 2002), 222.

[15] Hannah Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," *Partisan Review* 20.4 (July-August 1953): 380.

[16] Cleanth Brooks, "Irony as a Principle of Structure" (1949), in *Critical Theory since Plato,* ed. Hazard Adams (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 1041-1048.

[17] Brooks, "Irony as a Principle of Structure," 1048; Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 192. Among the contemporary philosophers who push back against the default veneration of knowledge in classical epistemology, Alva Noë, whose approach explicitly combines Dewey and Cavell, offers a particularly germane account of understanding as the task of making sense of an artwork. As he puts it, "The work of art becomes visible through the understanding." Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 2.

[18] Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding,* 192-93.

[19] Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?,* 81.

[20] Jeff Dolven, *Scenes of Instruction in Renaissance Romance* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 15.

[21] Arendt, "Understanding and Politics," 377.

[22] Louise Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, 15.

[23] Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem,* 134.

[24] Chaouli, *Something Speaks to Me,* 70.

[25] Chaouli, *Something Speaks to Me,* 39.

[26] See Anatoly Liberman, "The Incomprehensible Word 'Understand,'" *OUPblog* (9 Februrary 2022): https://blog.oup.com/2022/02/the-incomprehensible-word-understand/