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ARTICLE

Special Issue: ARPA Symposium: A Celebration of Steven Burns

"Nothing I Could Teach Him": Good Burns and Best Readings

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Abstract

Steven Burns argues that rich works of art tend to yield best readings rather than ambiguous interpretations. This is no mere statistical claim. Rather, Burns holds that such richness makes ambiguity less likely or sustainable. As a champion of multiple interpretability, I criticize Burns's account. Adding detail to an ambiguous work may not disambiguate it and may in fact increase the range of equally rewarding interpretations. Ambiguous works are furthermore numerous and noteworthy, and range across various artforms. All else being equal, ambiguity appears to *add* to rather than detract from the richness of artworks.

Résumé

Steven Burns soutient que les œuvres d'art riches ont tendance à donner lieu à des lectures meilleures plutôt qu'à des interprétations ambiguës. Ce n'est pas une simple affirmation statistique. Burns soutient qu'une telle richesse rendra l'ambiguïté moins probable ou moins durable. Dans cet article, je critique la position de Burns à partir de mon point de vue de champion de l'interprétabilité multiple. Ajouter des détails à une œuvre ambiguë pourrait ne pas lever son ambiguïté, et pourrait au contraire augmenter la gamme d'interprétations tout aussi enrichissantes les unes que les autres. Les œuvres ambiguës sont nombreuses et remarquables, et couvrent diverses formes d'art. Toutes choses étant égales par ailleurs, l'ambiguïté semble *ajouter* à la richesse de la plupart des œuvres plutôt que la réduire.

Keywords: interpretation; aesthetics; Steven Burns; best readings; ambiguity; art; meaning

1. Introduction

In Steven Burns's view, works of art, especially those that are what he considers "rich," tend to yield best readings. More precisely, each such work will tend to yield not a set of best readings but rather a *unique* best reading. He argues for this

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position in various works (e.g., Burns 2013, 2014). Burns is hence a champion of closed interpretation in art. That is, he believes good works of art tend toward univocal rather than multiple or ambiguous readings, toward closed rather than open interpretations. In this article, I criticize Burns's account, and I do so as a champion of multiple interpretability in art, of open as opposed to closed interpretation, and as favouring ambiguity rather than univocal or best readings. Where Burns believes that the richness of a work tends to make ambiguous readings less likely or sustainable, I argue here that, on the contrary, such works are entirely consistent with ambiguity, and furthermore that ambiguity, rather than being an outlier, or mark of a work's poverty, actually adds to its interpretive richness. My view, then, is that Burns's account mischaracterizes the relationship between an artwork's degree of richness and the variety of legitimate interpretations it may support. Ambiguity in art, in other words, is far more common and desirable than Burns's position allows.

2. Background to the Critique

Before looking in detail at Burns's position, and his argument for it, it will help to trace some of the conceptual terrain underlying this discussion. Roughly put, there are three basic positions on interpreting art. The first broad category is intentionalism, according to which a work of art means what the artist intends it to (Hirsch, 1967, 1976). Intentionalist theories bring together biographical criticism, psychological criticism, and — importantly — different notions of author constructs, whereby interpreters need not be cognizant of, or beholden to, what the actual artist intends, but instead rely on a construction or idealization of the creator (Irwin, 2002; Stecker, 1987), effectively given by the best reading of a work. This suggests the second type of theory, formalist or new criticism, according to which the meaning of a work is simply that given by a best explanation of the different elements in the work itself (Savile, 1972; Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954). This type of criticism is often seen as a reaction against intentionalist, especially biography-based interpretations, which tend to marginalize, if not outright ignore, elements of a work itself, which surely are of great importance, and on this view exclusively so. Here we distinguish the data provided by a work, be they textual data in a literary work, visual data in a painting, or what have you, from our best explanation of these data, a best curve-fitting, a best reading of the work considered in itself, independent and perhaps in contrast to what we know of the artist's intentions or, presumably, audience response. This brings up the third theory of interpretation in art, that is, so-called reader response — or what we might more generally call audience response — theories. The notion here is that it is how a reader or viewer responds to a work that matters, in the sense that interpreters can severally or jointly interpret works so as to satisfy their own aesthetic interests (Barthes, 2002; Fish, 1982). On such views, what matters is neither what the artist intends nor necessarily even what best explains the various elements of a work, but rather whatever facilitates one's appreciation of it, which may converge in some cases and diverge in others.

This threefold view of different theories of interpreting art is admittedly oversimplified, glossing over certain complexities. For one, it could be that the artist's intention, best explanation, and viewer response all contribute to, and have some

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place within, a broad, pluralistic theory of meaning in the arts (Holt, 2007, p. 237). More to the point, there are interesting relationships between an artist's intention and best explanation of a work's elements, as well as between best explanation and audience response. Because an artist's vision is largely responsible for the relevant elements in a work, there should be significant overlap between the artist's design and many features of the work to be interpreted. Thus, an artist's intention will be a good if imperfect guide to work meaning and vice versa. Likewise, many interpreters find that a best explanation-style approach to artwork enhances aesthetic experience. Presumably, most people tend to find interpretations that are more rather than less data-inclusive more satisfying for that reason (Holt, 2002, p. 76). The itch to understand why some elements appear in a work as they do can be satisfying to scratch if it fits a broad interpretation of what the work means. However, viewers who ignore or marginalize many, or key, elements in a work, may be understood to be engaged in a different and more idiosyncratic type of activity.

For the purposes of my critique of Burns, I should note that we both put great stock in the notion that interpretations, often enough, ought to include as many elements of a work, at least interpretable or interpretation-relevant elements of a work, as possible. But, where Burns sees a best reading as the end of interpretation, I see it rather as a common but not necessarily essential means to the end of providing for aesthetic experience and entertaining such readings as will enhance the quality of that experience. For Burns, best explanation is the end, whereas for me it is an acknowledged means to the appropriate end of engaging art, namely achieving aesthetic experience. Likewise, for Burns, good works will tend to yield best readings because of their quality, whereas for me this is not necessarily so. Seeking a best explanation as a heuristic guide will often help interpreters achieve the pleasure of ambiguity and multiple interpretation while engaging a work of art, and therefore should not be seen as the goal, which when unreached indicates a failure in the interpreter or the work. On the contrary, a work open to a multiplicity of interpretations will often rank as an artistic success, and a viewer able to sustain multiple or ambiguous interpretations will often find the experience rewarding. The point is not to create cognitive dissonance or any other psychological conflict. Rather, aesthetic experience consists in the resolution of such conflict, which is consistent with a work lacking a best reading, and so being, in that sense, unresolved, for "resolution in the subject of aesthetic experience does not require, and should not be confused with, resolution in its object" (Holt, 2015, p. 22).

3. Burns on Best Readings

So, Burns is a champion of closed interpretation in art anchored in the practice of best readings, whereas in my critique I will be acting as a champion of open interpretation, of ambiguity in our interpretations of art. In this section, I outline Burns's argument for his position in this debate as well as an explanation of why he thinks his conclusion follows. In addition, I identify several key assumptions underlying Burns's account and his argument for it.

Burns states his view as follows. When interpreting a work of art, "some interpretations are better than others, and if that is so, then it is likely that one

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interpretation will be best of all. I call that the *best reading* of a work …" Furthermore, such a best reading "is what we are all looking for when we argue about how to interpret [say] a novel" (Burns, 2014, p. 140). Now right away we might be sceptical about some of these claims. That some interpretations will be better than others doesn't really suggest, much less make it *likely*, that one will be best. To take a key example soon to be used by Burns himself, interpreting the duck-rabbit figure as a duck or a rabbit will be better than interpreting it, say, as a moose or a beaver. Furthermore, perhaps in debating how to interpret a work, we are interested, not in the best of all possible readings, but rather in the best reading under discussion, or the better of two readings, or whether a certain reading is worthy of consideration. I suggest, in other words, that there is far more pluralism in works and in interpretive debates than Burns would admit. I leave aside such quibbles, though, and turn to Burns's argument.

The argument Burns offers for his theory turns on a contrast he maintains between the aforementioned duck-rabbit figure and "rich" or "greater" works of art (Burns, 2013, 2014). The duck-rabbit is an ambiguous figure, one that sustains two equally good but incompatible readings: it is either a duck or a rabbit, but not both. In other words, the duck-rabbit does not have a best reading. But, for Burns, "the ambiguity only exists because the drawing is so oversimplified, so schematic. If we were to add feathers or fur to the drawing we would make it richer, make it a better portrayal …. So it goes with greater art" (Burns, 2014, p. 141). In Burns's estimation, "[t]he richer and more detailed a work, the less likely it is to sustain ambiguity, and the more likely it is that a unified interpretation will prove to be the best one" (Burns, 2013, pp. 159–160). Ambiguity, on Burns's account, is explained along these lines, as a failure to include the sort of disambiguating details that would (so he thinks) enhance the quality of any depiction. So, for Burns, rich artworks tend to yield best readings, and they do so because *detail disambiguates*. Burns himself doesn't use this slogan, but I believe it effectively captures his view.

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to identify certain implicit assumptions here. First, works of art that qualify as "rich" do so for Burns in a twofold sense. He has in mind here works such as Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers* (see Burns, 2014). Unlike the duck-rabbit, such works have substantially more detail, and are consequently, as Burns sees it, substantially more rewarding — which suggests a bias against minimalist art, though I leave this point aside. Second, Burns is not making a mere statistical claim but rather a normative one. His point is not that most artworks lend themselves to best readings as a matter of fact. Rather, his point is that good works of art tend to yield best readings because they are sufficiently rich in detail to make those works both sufficiently rewarding and less likely to sustain ambiguity. Third, Burns is not making a trivial claim but rather a substantive one. One could argue that the duck-rabbit figure has a best reading, *pace* Burns, namely *as* an ambiguous figure. Trivially, any artwork will either have a best reading or not, in which case its lack of a best (object-level) reading will *constitute* a best (meta-level) reading, the best reading being that there is no best reading. Burns's concept of a best reading, however, excludes ambiguity as a crucial point of contrast. Ambiguous works, for Burns, tend to be poor in both detail and reward, but univocal works tend to be rich in both. In this sense, that a work has no best reading can't itself *be* a best reading.

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For Burns, a work that richly rewards attention will do so because of a richness of detail where such detail makes ambiguity less likely or sustainable. For me, however, when art richly rewards attention, it may do so in virtue of richness of detail, or by such other means as elegant simplicity, where ambiguity does not necessarily imperil, but often even enhances, the richness of a viewer's appreciative experience. For Burns, then, "rich" means artistic value that depends on detail and a corresponding lack of ambiguity. For me, it means artistic value that depends on potential significance, which may be enhanced by ambiguity.

I will begin my critique proper by considering Burns's perspective on the relationship between richness of detail and ambiguity on the one hand, and that between ambiguity and richness of reward on the other. In the first place, I address the question of whether detail disambiguates, as Burns claims, and in the second, I explore how, contra Burns, richness of detail and richness of reward may pull apart irrespective of richness of detail.

4. Does Detail Disambiguate?

On Burns's view, again, what makes a work of art like *Beautiful Losers* rewardingly susceptible to a unified reading is the wealth of detail distinguishing it from figures such as the duck-rabbit, which are ambiguous and held to be poorer works as a result because of their "oversimplified" and "schematic" character. Adding certain details to the duck-rabbit, again, will disambiguate it from duck-rabbit to rabbit in the case of adding fur, and from duck-rabbit to duck in the case of adding feathers. Suppose we grant this.

Note, however, that this only pertains to certain specific details. One could add detail to the duck-rabbit figure without disambiguating it at all. Indeed, along with the simplified figure with which we are most familiar, there are well-known variations on the figure that are notably more detailed, in which the figure is not oversimplified or schematic but rather filled in with no loss of ambiguity. Indeed, the vast majority of details that could be added, not to the figure but to the background, for instance, would fail to disambiguate it. Some details do disambiguate, but only some. Most don't.

Not only that, but there is a further problem lurking in the wings of the duck-rabbit case, especially if one considers that Burns's paradigm of rich works is literary fiction, where we tend to encounter multiple characters and events. Suppose we take the duck-rabbit as analogous to an ambiguous character in a novel or short story. Adding character-relevant detail might indeed disambiguate the character, but most other details, about the setting, events, other characters, and so on, invariably won't. Indeed, assuming that the duck-rabbit — literal or figurative — has only a twofold ambiguity (duck or rabbit, not ambiguous, both, or neither), if we have one duck-rabbit, and add the particular detail of *another* duck-rabbit, the result will be four permutations (duck and duck, duck and rabbit, rabbit and duck, rabbit and rabbit). For any ambiguous item A, the number of global interpretations (x) will be the number of interpretations of A (y) raised to the power of the number of tokens of A (n): $x = y^n$. For twofold ambiguity, $x = 2^n$. So, three duck-rabbits will yield eight global interpretations.

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Since added detail can itself be ambiguous, adding detail could increase ambiguity, even where there is none to begin with. Consider M. C. Escher's famous *Relativity*, for instance. If we focus on the bottom centre of the work, we see an unambiguous figure climbing a staircase. But, if we widen our gaze, taking in more detail, we see different figures on different staircases and other positions in different spatial orientations incompatible with the figure and spatial orientation of the bottom centre. Which way is up depends on which part of the work we focus on, and there is, despite a wealth of detail, no best reading of the spatial orientation of the scene as a whole. Indeed, adding detail by taking in the entire scene, rather than the bottom centre detail, adds an appreciable ambiguity where before there was none. Even if we consider this work to depict an impossible figure rather than an ambiguous one,[1] it remains a work that lacks a best reading in Burns's sense, despite its richness of both visual detail and contemplative reward. If one argued that the best reading of (which way is up in) *Relativity* corresponds to the standard orientation of the presented image itself, this would apply no less to the schematic duck-rabbit as often presented at an angle suggesting duck more than rabbit, where rotating the figure 90° clockwise suggests rabbit more than duck. Besides, insisting on a best reading absolutely misses the whole point of *Relativity*. Burns's theory suggests that it would improve the work to add more detail to resolve the ambiguity — which is hardly imaginable — or else that it is an outlier rather than indicative of what we should seek and often find in art.

5. The Rewards of Ambiguity

Burns's account suggests that ambiguity is an artistic flaw despite sometimes being a central and indeed essential feature of various great works. The ambiguity in such cases is not indicative of a lack of either sufficient detail or sufficient aesthetic reward. Before raising illustrative cases, note that works lending themselves to straightforward best readings are quite often not particularly challenging. They may be marked by excessive, unnecessary detail. A best reading may indicate that the work in question is, after all, superficial, obvious, generic, mediocre. This is not to claim that a presumed best reading implies mediocrity, only that various undistinguished works share what Burns considers the mark of more distinguished ones. One could argue that it is rather the lack than the presence of ambiguity that often indicates an artistic flaw, although that is not my line of argument. Consider notable examples from various artforms of how ambiguity can yield rich rather than poor aesthetic experience, either in concert with, or irrespective of, a richness of detail.

1. *Rashomon* is one of Akira Kurosawa's greatest films. Its conceit is depicting the same story from the perspective of different witnesses who give contradictory accounts. It is plausibly the ultimate example of cinematic ambiguity, and though its running time is a mere 1 hr 28 m and divides this time among different versions of the same story, its richness hardly pales next to, say, the more conventional and more detailed narrative of the epic *Seven Samurai*, clocking in at 3 hr 27 m.

[1] I thank Letitia Meynell for this point.

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2. The *nouveau roman*, an experimental fiction movement led by such writers as Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras, is predicated on providing highly detailed descriptions of scenes and events, but leaving all expected clues to psychology and significance entirely absent, leaving it up the readers to appreciate and, indeed, revel in the indeterminacy, the ambiguities of what they are reading and what, indeed, this may suggest about life itself.
3. The basic question in David Lynch's groundbreaking TV series *Twin Peaks* — i.e., who killed Laura Palmer? — ambiguously supports both a natural and a supernatural explanation of the murder, with the killer either a human psychopath or a demon. An unequivocal account either way would make the series less engaging, less compelling (Holt, 2008, pp. 254–256). Many of Lynch's films, such as *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*, trade on similar ambiguities.
4. *Last Year at Marienbad* is a *nouvelle vague* film turning on a fundamental unresolved ambiguity: the lovers who — spoiler alert — run off together at the end of the film either did or did not have an affair the previous year at the resort at Marienbad (or some similar resort). The story X tells A — "X" and "A" are the characters' placeholder names — to persuade her to leave her husband and run away with him is either a reminder of their past *or* a seductive fiction: we don't know which, and they don't seem to either.
5. There is a famously ambiguous line in *Othello* (Act 3, Scene 3), in which the Moor tells Desdemona to "Let it alone," referring either to a dropped handkerchief (the absence of which becomes a key plot point later) or to one of the subjects recently discussed. Though this is only a small ambiguity in the play, the entire tragedy in a sense turns on it. Without the minor error of Othello's inattentiveness, or his ambiguous phrasing combined with Desdemona's mistaking what he meant, the whole tragedy seemingly could well have been avoided.
6. René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* depicts a pipe accompanied by the slogan, "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*." The provocative ambiguity here is whether we should read the painting as asserting its representational character (as an image of a pipe) or its surrealist character (since it clearly depicts a pipe).

The point here is that ambiguous artworks are numerous and noteworthy, range across various artforms, and offer one way of realizing the aesthetic rewards of engaging works of art. This isn't to say that ambiguity is a necessary artistic virtue, but rather that it provides for a kind of interpretive richness beyond richness of detail in the form of potential significance.

6. Co-Optimal Engagement

I have argued that ambiguity and richness of detail in art pull apart and that the former, like the latter, often fosters richness of aesthetic reward. Although many notable works exhibit aesthetic reward via ambiguity, I will now argue that even in cases where we assume that best readings are available, it will be still *more* rewarding to entertain other plausible readings, or as I call them "co-optimal" readings, which

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alongside best readings tend to increase the aesthetic pleasure of engaging these works. That is, however rewarding an alleged best reading may be, it will often be still *more* rewarding to explore lesser but still supported readings for the sake of adding to the richness of our encounter with the art. A best reading on its own probably won't maximize our experience of a work's significance, which means an *elective ambiguity* might be preferable to a best reading from an aesthetic point of view. That is, aesthetic appeal might be facilitated by adding detail, not to the work itself, but to its significance.

Take *Don Quixote*. Suppose the best reading of Miguel de Cervantes's masterpiece is as a satire of chivalric romances, with the eponymous hero as simply a fool. This is, after all, the conventional reading. Consider, however, the reading suggested by the musical *Man of La Mancha*, in which the satiric fool of Cervantes is reimagined as a romantic hero, not an old crank who has lost his wits but a sympathetic idealist in a too cynical world. I have claimed that the original novel may itself be ambiguous (Holt, 2002, p. 76), but the subtler point here is that even if there is indeed a best reading, it is profitably supplemented with another. The romantic reading of *Quixote*, if not optimal, is nonetheless co-optimal in adding to the richness of the work as an interpretable with a potential significance extending beyond its alleged best reading.

For another example, I have a pet theory of *Hamlet*. One topic of debate in interpreting the play is what lies at the root of Hamlet's indecisiveness. My theory addresses this debate by taking the graveyard scene (Act 5, Scene 1), which could be seen as inessential to the narrative, as key to unravelling the mystery. It is a deflationary theory of Hamlet's indecisiveness expressed originally in a free-verse poem: "… the reason he can't act / isn't indecision / but that the fool / must be played / and he / since yorick is dead / must play / the fool himself / and by definition / the fool can't act / only comment / on the action …." (Holt, 2019, p. 17). Supposing that this pet theory of mine does not figure in the best reading of *Hamlet*, I submit that it is, nonetheless, an entirely plausible reading, one worth considering, and one that adds to whatever proves to be a best reading. Note that the explanatory ambiguity here points to the work's suggestiveness, not necessarily or plausibly to some kind of artistic flaw.

In some ways, perhaps one of the most challenging cases of ambiguity in art — standing as a counterexample to Burns's theory — is the *Mona Lisa*. Setting aside the ambiguity of the figure's smile and other elements of the work, suppose our best reading of it is the standard one: it is a portrait of Lisa Gherardini (wife of Francesco del Giocondo), a contemporary of Leonardo da Vinci. There is also, however, provocative evidence that the *Mona Lisa* is actually a self-portrait of da Vinci himself (Schwartz, 1988). Either way, however, we have a multiply ambiguous work in itself or one of which it would behoove us to take an ambiguous interpretation, as the idea of *Mona Lisa* as self-portraiture is compelling to contemplate irrespective of whether it passes the best-reading test. Here, indeed, the elective ambiguity is too attractive to ignore and becomes, in a way, a different kind of necessity.

Last, consider one of Burns's own extended examples: Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers*. Burns argues at length (Burns, 2014, pp. 141–151) that the best

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reading of this difficult and, to all appearances, highly ambiguous, multiply interpretable novel, is a *political* reading. In arguing for his political reading, Burns raises, then dismisses as inferior, other plausible readings: poetic, psychological, sexual, and religious. There is reason to resist this position, especially as Cohen's work in general is, at its most political, not very political. But even if Burns is right that the book is primarily a political work, dismissing these other readings, rather than entertaining them together with the presumed best reading, does a disservice to the work. At its best, Cohen's art revels in multiple meanings, as with the title of his 1984 album *Various Positions*. If preferring a best reading to elective ambiguity means doing a disservice to a work, then for the sake of aesthetic reward, we should opt for ambiguity. Perhaps, then, as I explore in the next section, charitable readings may require prescinding from disambiguation.

7. "Nothing I Could Teach Him"

Since best readings tend to exclude or marginalize other readings, what reason do we have to consider alternative readings once we have settled on the best one? I suggest that richer aesthetic experience is one reason. Another is fallibilism, as we can, or should, never be sure that, in interpreting art, we have indeed arrived at the last word. There may be exceptions in the case of simple works, but even here it is presumptuous to be complacent and closed-minded to the possibility of further insights from others or from one's future self. If nothing else, since new works may cast old ones anew — can reframe them, as it were — there is no guarantee that a best reading today will be the best one tomorrow. Presuming otherwise gives us reason to disengage from the work rather than considering it further, since we have, as it were, "solved the puzzle." Since the presumption of a best reading may do a disservice to the richness of a work, charitable interpretation suggests prescinding from a best reading in favour of an open-ended set of plausible and rewarding readings.

As a last illustration, I will describe in part a literary event in which Burns and I both participated. It occurred in 2003 at Dalhousie University's University Club, a launch for my third book of poetry, *A Hair's Breadth of Abandon* (Holt, 2003). When the person scheduled to introduce me failed to show up, my publisher scrambled to find a replacement. Fortunately, Burns, a longtime friend of hers, was in attendance, and he knew me well enough, having supervised my master's thesis in aesthetics, to provide an impromptu introduction, which he did generously, with grace and panache. Most of his introduction concerned our teacher-student relationship, and before welcoming me to the podium to read my work, he paused slightly before delivering the closing line that perfectly tied the speech together: "There was nothing I could teach him."

This pleased me as a lovely compliment, and I proceeded to give my reading warmed by what I considered to be praise. After the event, however, it struck me that "There was nothing I could teach him" *could* have been a compliment — that I was a knowledgeable and self-reliant student — but it could *also* be taken as an insult, that I was a bad student, that despite his best efforts I was obdurate and insensitive to learning from him. This ambiguity, I realized, was a great stroke of

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wit, one that would be undone by assuming a best reading either as an oblique compliment or as a slightly veiled insult. A charitable reading of Burns's remark, of his wit here, requires not a best reading but an ambiguous one.

To conclude, adding detail to a work may not lessen and may in fact increase ambiguity. There are, furthermore, various noteworthy ambiguous works. Indeed, ambiguity often *adds* to the richness of a work. Ambiguous interpretation will often prove to be more charitable and aesthetically rewarding. Finally, what counts is engaging plausible readings, not fixating on a presumed best reading to the detriment of other readings. If nothing else, because presumed best readings may vary according to both the purposes of individual readers and the standards of disciplinary practice (Holt, 2002, p. 76), where there is a best reading, there may also, the air of paradox notwithstanding, be others. Although I echo Burns's (2013, p. 166) endorsement of Ludwig Wittgenstein's dictum, "Explanations come to an end somewhere" (Wittgenstein, 1953, §1), there is little reason to believe our encounters with art should end with a best, rather than ambiguous, reading, unless such readings, contra Burns, can ultimately count as best, which perhaps they should.

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