

Giulio Paolini

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I

Visiting the Italian pavilion at the 1997 Venice Biennale, I searched high and low for the work of Giulio Paolini that I knew, from the published list of artists, to be there. Repeated circuits of the labyrinthine spaces of the building refreshed my awareness of an impressive roll call of contemporary painters and sculptors. But it was only when I was retreating, mystified, from the pavilion that I turned back and saw that Paolini's *Crystal Palace* occupied the whole of the façade. I write 'occupied'. This is, however, a term that I have to correct straight away in the interests of perceptual accuracy, for the very reason why I had not taken note of the presence of the work on my entry was its delicate adjustment to the slightly curved elevation of the front entrance. Paolini had, as it were, inscribed this façade with a scattered company of small frames, mostly at an angle to the horizontal and vertical emphases of the architectural bays, and presenting more or less complex effects of overlap. In the centre he had placed a falling figure, upside down, in evening dress and a top hat.

To comment further on this work, as on any of Paolini's works, it is necessary to enter another labyrinth, which is the sedulously cross-referenced system of his total oeuvre.¹ I note that a gallery installation, *Tutto qui* (1985-6), offers many of the same features that he has transposed, in *Crystal Palace*, onto an outside wall. *Tutto qui*, however, covers the white-painted surface with a regular distribution of frames and then adds a plethora of smaller rectangles – set at odd angles, tucked in behind and superimposed on the original frames – which turn out to be photographic images of the gallery space, recognizable because of its high-placed oculus. *Tutto qui* energizes an internal space through multiple transformations. *Crystal Palace*, on the other hand, initiates a subtle reframing of the

architectural members, as if to recall that any building – and perhaps especially a place of exhibition – is a projection of ideas before it is a solid structure: a vision of Utopia as well as a product of history, in the way that Paolini's title inevitably suggests. *Tutto qui* includes at its centre a top-hatted figure in evening dress whose face is obscured by the superimposed white squares that he proffers in our direction, like a conjurer displaying his tricks. In *Crystal Palace*, the figure plummets downwards, like Icarus, or like the various surrogates for Icarus that Paolini has distributed in his installations of the 1980s.²

Who, then, is Giulio Paolini? Even a very brief sortie into the world of his works (such as this has been) immediately raises a series of questions that are not simply biographical but, as it were, mythological. In biographical terms, as will be suggested later, Paolini's career as an artist offers few features of special interest that need to be taken into account as determining factors in his work. He has not taken a conspicuous public role and, indeed, one might be excused for thinking that he has succeeded all too well, in the past few years, in a strategy of effective self-effacement. But this strategy has been compensated for by (and perhaps, indeed, logically entailed) the ingenious way in which Paolini has constructed a myth of the artist to take his place. Who is the figure in the top hat, in *Tutto qui* or *Crystal Palace*? Without much ado, one can say that he is one of the contemporary avatars of the Artist as Dandy, according to a genealogy which Carter Ratcliff has traced in an absorbing essay.³ He is inscribed in the lineage which passes from Baudelaire, through Marcel Duchamp, and no doubt as far as Andy Warhol. But the very mention of this high road of the avant-garde, at the end of which a greatly publicized life can hardly be dissociated from the body of work produced in the course of it, causes us to reflect on Paolini's very different posture. In one of two epigrams to a catalogue published in 1978, Paolini quoted from George Brummel, alias Beau Brummel and the veritable prototype of the English dandy, who was reported to have asked his valet the question, 'Robinson, which of the lakes do I prefer?'⁴ The true dandy, in Brummel's mould, was not a strutting, egregious popinjay but, on the contrary, the leader of fashion whose achievement was to persuade the Regency bucks that a sober black was the most becoming costume; and, moreover, the man of taste who delegated his judgements to his valet.

Paolini's telling quote points to the centrality of the image of the dandy in the mythology of Modernism, and his invocation of the prototype of Beau Brummel seems no less relevant, in some respects, to the enigmatic persona of Marcel Duchamp than it is to his own practice. But again the

obligatory point of reference for all varieties of Conceptualism should be placed in a wider context if we are to appreciate Paolini's unique historicized vision of contemporary art. Valets are on hand, in line with Beau Brummel's prescription, to set up what could be regarded as a central work of Paolini's career, *The Triumph of Representation* (1983). It is central in the sense that (as Paolini himself has indicated) it refers back to the past and forward to the future. The work that he chooses to embody its past may indeed be one of the very first that he produced and exhibited, since it dates from as early as 1960, when he was twenty years old. Paolini glosses this piece, *Geometrical Drawing*, more than two decades later, by explaining that its simple structure, which we might describe as a rectangle with the cross of St George and the cross of St Andrew drawn upon it (the structure of the Union Jack), produces nine points of intersection: the four corners, the four median points on the bounding lines and the centric point where the two crosses coincide.⁵ In *The Triumph of Representation*, collage images of the valets are on hand to support and, in the strict sense, render perceptible the perspectival recession implied by linear structures arranged according to an absent vanishing point. Paolini interprets their role, with regard to both artist and spectator, in the following way:

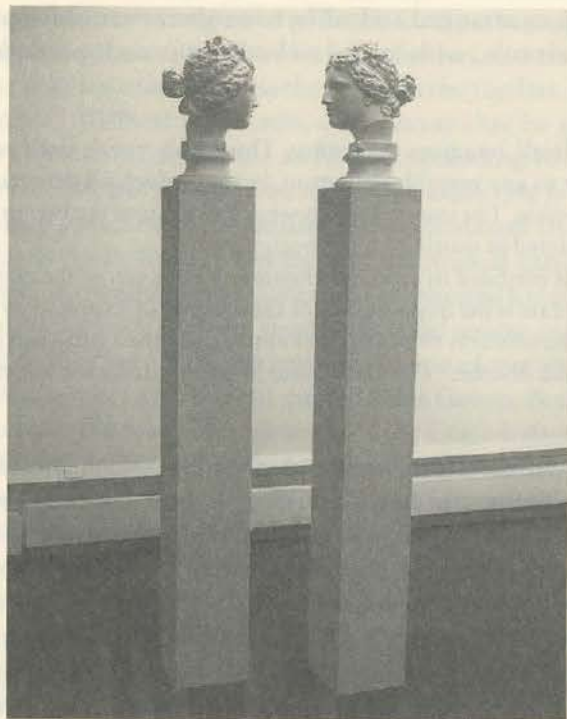
The work, in itself, imagines the author. Thus what reveals itself to the look is a moment prior to any possible definition, beyond which all definitions will, conversely, be possible. The interval which separates us from the image is the eternity which is consumed in waiting for the beginning.

The vision is confided to nine male figures: the *not yet*, or the *already no more*, that they celebrate is the quintessence of the absence of expressivity and distance. They put on the uniform of *valets de chambre*, and their presence is all the more anonymous and discreet. The artist is far away, admiring the silence of the constellations.⁶

Paolini's valets, therefore, serve a higher law which the artist has not brought into being and has no wish to imbue with his own subjective intentions. They stand obsequiously by the walls, as valets are prone to do. But in their relative diminishment of size according to the law of perspective, they assist in the definition of an illusionary space that is, after all, only tentatively indicated. Or, as in the third panel of the work, they bear the burden of the linear structure as if they were carrying a picture in the space within the frame. In *Geometrical Drawing*, the law revealed is of an axiomatic order. Those nine points of intersection infallibly occur when the lines are drawn. With the law of perspective, however, there are

perceptual consequences which bear on the position of the spectator and on that of the artist, in so far as he may be a spectator of his own work. Paolini delegates to his valets – and metonymically we might say he delegates to the properties of line – the moment of creation, which is replaced by a theoretical moment ‘prior to any possible definition’.

No one has written with more insight about this defining aspect of Paolini’s work than his compatriot, the Italian writer Italo Calvino. In an introduction to a book by Paolini dating from 1975 (the year of some of the first of his important *Mimesi* series), Calvino conducts a fascinating *paragone* between the effects available to the visual artist and to the writer in which his admiration for Modernist art becomes amply clear. The artist’s advantage lies in the fact that the artwork is both conceptual and material at the same time. Visual works are ‘moments in the relationship between the person who made the picture, the person who looks at it and the material object that constitutes the picture’.⁷ In the achievement of this relationship, the search for individual expression is minimized: ‘It is



Giulio Paolini, *Mimesi*, 1975, installation shot from Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, 1976.

not the relationship of the I to the world that these works seek to fix; it is a relationship which becomes stabilized independently of the I and independently of the world.’ If the artist, for Paolini, stands back to admire the representation inaugurated by his valets, there is also Calvino the writer taking up a further position in the chain, and his comments stand as a definitive judgement on Paolini’s work – achieved in 1975 and still to come:

From one work to another the artist continues a single discourse, neither communicative nor expressive, since it does not claim to communicate anything that is outside or to express anything that he has inside, but all the same a discourse that is coherent and in continuous development. The writer looks at the world of the artist, pared down and shadeless, made up solely of affirmative statements, and asks himself how he might ever achieve such inner calm.⁸

II

Paolini’s work thus both demonstrates and questions at the same time the point made by Michael Newman about the possibility of compiling a history of Conceptual art. Newman writes that since the initial drive of the movement was to resist the fate of being recuperated by historicism, the assimilation of these artists to a traditional art-historical narrative would signify the failure of their aims.⁹ Leaving aside for the moment the question of whether Paolini was ever appropriately classed as a participant in the movement of Conceptualism, we might well acknowledge that his work has developed and intensified over the years since Calvino wrote his comments those qualities of internal coherence and, as it were, axiomatic clarity that threaten to make a nonsense of blunt historical enumeration. Having used the labyrinth earlier as a metaphor for finding one’s way around Paolini’s work, I have to admit that it is quite inappropriate, at least in so far as it conveys the idea of a single, obligatory track and the impossibility of taking an overview. Much more accurate is the image which Paolini himself used, in the passage previously quoted: ‘The artist is far away, admiring the silence of the constellations.’ The metaphor of interstellar space sits uncomfortably with any noisy narratives that we might devise for Paolini’s career.

Yet of course it is precisely in Paolini’s ahistoricism that a historical estimate of his significance can be found, however much it may fail to accord with the narratives of Conceptualism.¹⁰ For Paolini to use the term ‘constellation’ in the way that he does, it may safely be assumed that he implicitly evoked the pivotal role of the word in the poetics of the paragon

of high Modernism, Stéphane Mallarmé, and that his choice of that image is contextually related to the revival of Mallarmé in diverse artistic and critical statements throughout the third quarter of the century. The Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer explicitly used Mallarmé's term in his founding manifesto of concrete poetry, 'From Line to Constellation', published for the first time in 1954. By the time that Jacques Derrida devoted the last section of *La dissémination* (1972) to a critique of Philippe Sollers's *Nombres* in the light of *Un coup de dés*, the link between Mallarmé's astronomical language and contemporary avant-garde poetics was well established.¹¹

In effect, it may be more rewarding to pursue the hypothesis that Paolini can be approached through the general cultural matrix of European Modernism than through the specific history of Conceptual art, or indeed the history of Italian art in the post-war period. The history of Conceptualism in Italy, in so far as it has one, cannot easily be divorced from the critical and organizational activity of Germano Celant, who coined the term 'Arte Povera' in 1967, and later glossed it in the title of his important exhibition *Arte Povera: Earthworks, Impossible Art, Actual Art, Conceptual Art*. But although Paolini has been loosely associated with the Arte Povera group, and key works like his *A Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto* (1967) were indeed first exhibited under their aegis, his reputation had already been established in 1964 by a one-man exhibition at the Galleria La Sallita in Rome. While at this stage his work was certainly conceptual in character – being concerned with 'the fundamental relationships involved in the conception of an exhibition' – it would be a mistake to assimilate it to any group or movement.

Paolini himself has commented usefully on the lack of communication which existed at the period, compared with the 'crazy platform' offered by art magazines and other forms of activity just two decades later.¹² According to his testimony, there were few links, in the early 1960s, between young Italian artists, and it was only a matter of chance that he was able to see the odd work by Manzoni, together with work by Mario Schifano, Enrico Castellani and, at a later stage, Michelangelo Pistoletto. Manzoni, who died in 1963, can justly be seen as the main stimulus common to the heterogeneous group of artists, partly based in Turin, whose work became internationally known under the title of Arte Povera. However, each of the other artists whom Paolini mentions on this occasion is also significant, precisely because their effect on him must have seemed to come from several different directions. Pistoletto, born in 1933, was in essence a figurative painter, deeply influenced by Abstract



Giulio Paolini, *The Invention of Ingres*, 1968, proof on photographic paper.

Expressionism, who made his international reputation in the mid-1960s with his 'mirror paintings', involving realistic figures attached to polished steel plates. Castellani, co-founder with Manzoni of the 'New Artistic Conception' in 1960, was a Milan-based geometrical abstract artist who created gallery installations of extreme purity and simplicity.¹³ Schifano, born in 1934, worked in Rome and developed a style of brushwork related to Johns and Rauschenberg; his deliberate references to street imagery and other Pop themes earned him the reputation as a politically committed artist who presented an alternative strategy to the canonical realist paintings of Renato Guttuso.

Though there is no reason to doubt Paolini's implication that these artists only lightly grazed his consciousness, it is clear that he shared with them the general predicament of the Italian intelligentsia during this period. On the one hand, Italy had been opened up to the diverse productions of international, and especially American, Modernism by the successful development of the Venice Biennale. On the other hand, Italian intellectual life was dominated by the need to come to terms with the changing European perceptions of the role of the Communist Party in national and cultural life. In the five

years 1957–62, as Franco Fortini had explained, the ideological dominance of the Communist party in Italy was shaken simultaneously by the repercussions of the revolts in Russia's East European satellites, Poland and Hungary, and by the unfolding of Italy's own 'economic miracle', which appeared to promise a glowing future within the capitalist world.¹⁴ Umberto Eco has written incisively of the strategy which the literary avant-garde pursued in these circumstances, where the domestic political impasse developing from the decline of the Communist Party was doubled by a 'frozen' international situation, expressed by the concept of 'peaceful coexistence'. For Eco, and his colleagues who formed the 'Gruppo 63' at Palermo in 1963, the answer lay not in the forms of activism which characterized earlier phases of the avant-garde, but in a comprehensive debate about the 'super-structural' dimension of culture:

we had to call into question the grand system by means of a critique of the super-structural dimension which directly concerned us and could easily be administered by our group. Hence we decided to set up a debate about language. We became convinced that to renew forms of communication and destroy established methods would be an effective and far-reaching platform for criticising, i.e. overturning, everything that those cultural forms expressed.¹⁵

It is no more convincing to represent Paolini as a conscious adherent of the avant-garde formation which included Eco than it is to class him with the artists in the Arte Povera, or the emerging movement of international Conceptual art. At the same time, it is clear that Paolini shared in many important respects the perspicacity and the breadth of vision which led Eco and his fellow writers to single out a particular strategy for the Italian avant-garde: not the 'Demagogism', 'Self-propagandizing' and 'Cult of modernity' associated with their Futurist predecessors, but what Renato Poggioli had termed the 'Domination of the opus by its poetics'.¹⁶ One may draw an analogy with the way in which the French Supports-Surfaces group cooperated with and drew theoretical sustenance from the *Tel Quel* writers after 1968. The difference, however, is that Paolini was in no way a follower and his independence as an artist was already well established by 1964.

Indeed, Paolini's close affiliations, and the vehicles for his own 'debate about language', turn out at a very early stage to be those of the Western artist of what could broadly be called the classical tradition. In *Idem*, the book from 1975 whose introduction by Calvino has already been quoted here, he shifts rapidly from 'the Muse up-ended, the ruin of the picture' to his own statement of purpose: 'I invoke, in my work, the etymological

transparency of the works of Fra Angelico, Johannes Vermeer, Nicolas Poussin, Lorenzo Lotto, Jacques-Louis David.¹⁷ Invocation is, indeed, the oldest trope in Western poetics. The *Iliad* itself begins with an invocation to the Muse. Paolini justifies himself as a Conceptual artist by his insistence that Western art displays an *etymology*: that is, it is like a dictionary in which we can trace the historic usage and signifying roots of terms that are still in current use. But he also singles himself out as an unusual, if not unique, Conceptualist in his use of the word 'transparency'. It is a question of *seeing through*, of the history of the image being manifested through the actual (and eternal) conditions of sight.

Two works from the 1960s are enough to demonstrate immediately what might be called the visual economy of Paolini's approach and, at the same time, the historical dimension which he brings to the fore. *A Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Lotto* (1967) consists of a photograph of the portrait by Lotto mounted on canvas. It is, in the words of Paolini himself, 'A reconstruction of the time and place occupied by the author (1505) and spectator (now) of his painting.'¹⁸ But this terse definition of course gives rise to certain ambiguities and even paradoxes. The 'author' – that is, Lorenzo Lotto – was also the first spectator of the painting that has been photographed. The 'spectator' – that is, Paolini himself in 1967 – is also the author who has relayed the image to another, potentially infinite, series of spectators. The 'young man' is Paolini looking at the Renaissance painting by Lorenzo Lotto, but also the object of Lotto's portraiture who stares back at the artist, the artist as spectator and the spectator who is not an artist. One could go on. But the essential point is that Paolini has used the unique indexical quality of the photographic image to demonstrate that the visual never consists of a simple relationship between subject and object. The gaze is reversible. What we see sees us.¹⁹

Dating from the year after *Young Man*, another work by Paolini involving the photographic image is *The Invention of Ingres* (1968). Here the strategy is to impose upon the image of Raphael's *Self-portrait* of 1506 the version of the painting as 'repeated and reinvented' by Ingres in 1824. An extraordinary epistemological density is created in this work as we observe the shifting grey tones of the minutely overlapping outlines and reflect on the different visual scenarios there are, so to speak, collapsed into one. Raphael's self-image, originally imbued with a narcissistic tenderness, undergoes the subtle but evidently consistent alterations of the nineteenth-century painter who worshipped him so devoutly as to collect and treasure his bodily relics – and yet insists on this inexorable transformation. What is the stake of Paolini in this process? One possibility is



Giulio Paolini, *A Young Man Looking at Lorenzo Loto*, 1967, proof on photographic paper.

that he will take Ingres's licence for a further stage of 'reinvention' that departs completely from the figurative tradition of Western art, yet retains the fundamental structure of visibility. Thus Ingres becomes the harbinger of abstraction. Paolini records this possibility, presumably after a visit to the Ingres Museum in Montauban, only to confess at the same time that 'seeing' demands a historical perspective much broader than the recent passage from neo-Classicism to Modernism:

I cannot affirm that my research is dedicated to the true (to the visible) in just the same way as I cannot, perhaps, affirm that abstract art was born, in 1810, with the 'errors' of Ingres. Two days at Montauban invite you to take possession of this discovery; one minute, afterwards, is enough to extend it (or reduce it) to the inexhaustible flux of the emotions. The only story told by these works is one of absolute dedication to the – antique – phenomenon of seeing.²⁰

III

I hope to have shown in the previous two sections how Paolini's place as a Conceptualist artist is extremely difficult to assess. If it is a precondition of being labelled in this way that an artist should have subscribed to a

common programme and participated in a shared history of exhibitions, manifestos and other public expressions of solidarity, then Paolini hardly fits the bill. This is not to say that he comes across as a unique, inexplicable creative phenomenon, as surprising in the Italian context as he seems to be when juxtaposed with his Anglo-American contemporaries. On the contrary, as I have tried to show, his distinctive avant-garde position has much in common with the precocious and sophisticated stance of the Italian intellectuals of the Gruppo 63, for whom Umberto Eco acted as spokesman. This can be said without impugning in any way his own deep commitment to 'the – antique – phenomenon of seeing' which (as Calvino's tribute acknowledges) implies attitudes and procedures quite different from those of the artist with words.

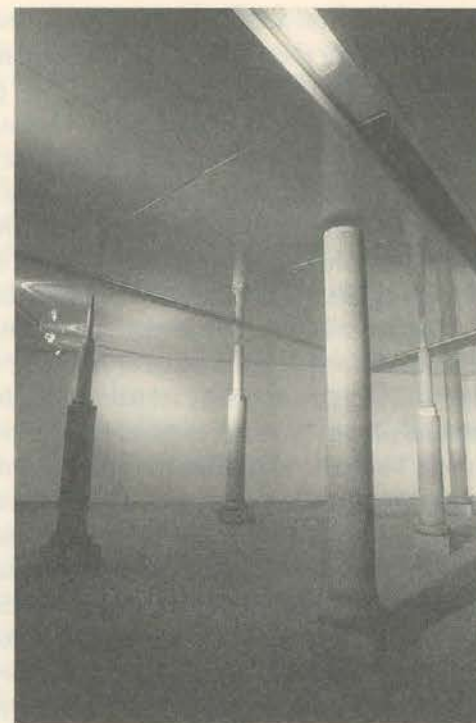
I am tempted to say, indeed, that Paolini's very distance from the competitive reductionism of early Anglo-American Conceptualism gives his work a special value in the general assessment of the significance of Conceptual art. It is not that he has a programme of his own, but precisely that his way of tackling the programme endows it with a historical and cultural resonance that is rarely present in the work of his contemporaries. Few people would disagree with the following statement, made by Michael Newman, about the fundamental aims of Conceptualism:

The aim of most Conceptual Art is for the conditions and limits of spectatorship to become a reflexive part of the work. Of course, everything depends on how those 'conditions and limits' are interpreted. Are they primarily perceptual, as was the case with Minimalism. Or do they extend to architectural, institutional and social conditions? Are they the conditions of knowledge or of being?²¹

In Paolini's case, the different steps of this definition can be read off without much ambiguity. Certainly his art is about the reflexive inclusion of the conditions and limits of spectatorship. As early as 1965, the photographic work whose title is its own date, *1421965*, encapsulates this message: we see in the photograph the photographer in the process of photographing the painter (Paolini) in the process of stretching his canvas.²² But, however much Paolini employs an abstract vocabulary at this early stage – and however much he investigates the material properties of the artwork in ways which parallel the approach of the Supports/Surfaces group in France – his fascination with 'the – antique – phenomenon of seeing' is constantly infringing upon the sobriety of his approach. Even when he is most 'minimal' there is a preoccupation with the dividing line between the real and the illusionary, and a consequent repudiation of any 'literal' reading of space, that singles him out.

This can be shown in particular if we follow up further Newman's point about the 'conditions and limits of spectatorship' and their extending into 'architectural, institutional and social conditions'. Certainly few Conceptual artists can have expressed themselves as categorically about architecture as Paolini has. He has written, in a statement of 'Homage to the architect' that 'Architecture is all'.²³ But this does not imply, on the banal level, that he aspires to the goal so cherished by the generation of Modernist sculptors immediately before him: accessibility and immortality in the form of publicly sited works in the vicinity of new building schemes. On the contrary, as Paolini makes clear, architecture is important to him in so far as it is the paradigm for progression 'from the idea to the realization of the work'.²⁴ As the history of the development of linear perspective with Brunelleschi demonstrates, the roles of the architect and the painter were inextricably connected at the time of the early Renaissance. Paolini's work recalls this historical moment, not because it aims to acquire semi-permanent status by association with architecture, but, on the contrary, because it implies the fusion of painterly and architectural intentions in the self-generating spatial project.

This can be seen clearly in the case of a recent and spectacular architectural work, in the strict sense of the term: Paolini's design of the entry to the Capitole Metro Station in Toulouse. It is evident that the basic principles of the scheme were anticipated in *Early Dynastic* (1971), a gallery installation which involved the distribution of regularly spaced double columns across a grid. However, the Toulouse work presents significant differences. The height of the ceiling is much lower and hence the non-structural role of the column is stressed. The columns themselves, of granite rather than a more temporary material, vary between the distinctive double structure (a smaller base and column mounted on a larger) and a simpler design. Judicious use of lighting, which also has to serve the functional purposes of this entry into the station allows the columns to cast shadows on the floor and to be reflected in the ceiling, while the wall shadows intersect with finely drawn lines repeating their profile. Consistent with his ideas at the period when *Early Dynastic* was first exhibited, Paolini has set up a system which seems capable of infinite extension. Indeed, it is the interplay between the non-functional architecture of the columns and their reduplication in the form of linear traces and multifarious shadows that makes the work at least as much a conceptual as a perceptual experience. Just as the title connotes Egyptian art (and refers to a pyramidal structure which completed the original installation of 1971), so the granite columns of new work generate a sense of



Giulio Paolini, *Entry to the Capitole Metro station*, Toulouse, 1994.

specifically historical complexity. They do not arrive at their capitals and so the canonical differentiation of the orders which was the legacy of Greek temple architecture is not yet in force. In the centre of Toulouse, a city notable in particular for its magnificent Romanesque and Gothic architecture, Paolini's columns intimate an archaeology of structure, a symbolic rendering of architectural morphology, prior to any actual realization in space.

In *Early Dynastic*, and its Toulouse avatar, the historical reference is muted. Yet in the works by which Paolini is best known, there is a much more explicit invocation of classical, mainly Greek, iconography. This alone would serve to distinguish his work, on a basic level, from that of virtually all other Conceptual artists. As David Elliott has pointed out, Paolini strictly subordinates his iconographic references to 'his research into the function of art'.²⁵ Where he uses 'well-known paintings', such as those by Lotto and Ingres, or plaster casts of classical Greek sculptures, they are part of his overall argument: 'not so much works in themselves but a critique of

the social, economic and cultural accretions which have become associated with the history of art.²⁶ This is certainly true. But care must be taken to distinguish Paolini's approach from the 'critique' of pre-modern art embodied in the work of the majority of Conceptual artists, which may be ironic – in the tradition of Duchamp's altered *Mona Lisa* – or downright condemnatory when the familiar cultural icons are viewed simply in terms of their fetishized commodity status. Nothing could be further from Paolini's intentions. Indeed, this is the context in which he can be seen, perhaps more convincingly than any of his contemporaries, to pose the question specified by Michael Newman. Are 'the conditions and limits of spectatorship . . . the conditions of knowledge or of being'?

Around 1975, Paolini began a series of related works in which casts of classical sculpture were placed opposite each other, as if one cast was gazing at its exact replica. The general title for the series was derived from the Greek term for imitation, itself retained as a crucial marker for realistic representation throughout the Western tradition: *mimesis*. In one sense, there is an implicit irony in the very confrontation of such copies with their identical counterparts, but this is an irony which is historically based, rather than being a gesture of contemporary iconoclasm. The Graeco-Roman sculptural tradition was, indeed, a history of copies and copies of copies, to the extent that, during the Renaissance and for centuries afterwards, discrimination between originals and later versions was impossible to achieve. In the mid-eighteenth century Winckelmann began to construct the foundations for a genuinely historical estimate of the different periods and phases of ancient sculpture. In the same period, however, William Blake magnificently undermined the whole basis of historical connoisseurship by asserting that such archetypal works as the Venus de' Medici and the Apollo Belvedere were themselves simply copies of the original images of the Cherubim, which he himself had seen, 'having been taken in vision' to their original Asian location.²⁷

Where Blake repudiates the condition of belatedness by asserting the visionary primacy of the artist's imagination, Paolini bases his strategy on the very structure of vision, creatively interpreted. What the self-regarding busts of *Mimesi* (1975) disclose is not the sovereign power of the Romantic imagination, but the essential reciprocity of the gaze. In this sense, the work does indeed become the artist's own portrait, as he has persuasively argued:

The illusion that has dogged the artist since time immemorial, namely that of translating his own image into another that has more significance and is thus less

precarious, is not at all inconceivable. The gaze, fixed on a picture or a sculpture, is directed neither at the maker nor at others, nor does it allow of one or many viewpoints, but it reflects in itself the demand in its own presence.²⁸

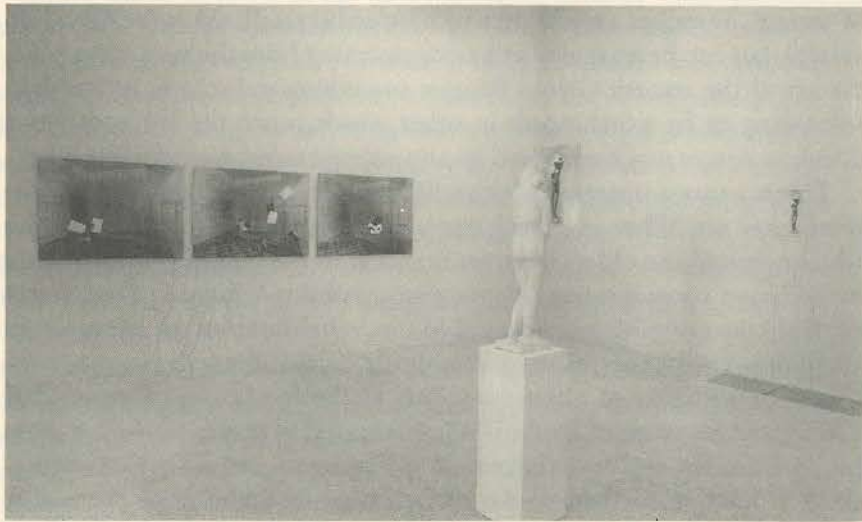
It is important to be precise about what is being claimed here, and what is epitomized by Paolini's *Mimesi* series. The effect that he so compellingly obtains could be described as a *mise-en-abîme* of the gaze, in the way that contemporary theorists have analysed it. Norman Bryson rightly associates this concept with the Renaissance (re)invention of perspective, and the Albertian construct of a single vanishing point that is 'anchor of a system which incarnates the viewer'.²⁹ It is in relation to the hegemony of the Albertian system in academic painting, from the Renaissance onwards, that we can postulate 'the dyadic reversibility of the two gazes' – 'something is looking at my looking: a gaze whose position I can never occupy, and whose vista I can imagine only by reversing my own, by inverting the perspective before me . . .'³⁰

This does not mean, however, that Paolini's artistic practice is fixated on the historical development of perspective theory, let alone that he is merely reacting to current ideas in art-historical methodology. Quite the opposite, Paolini's work with perspective (which I discussed at the beginning of this essay) and his *Mimesi* series both belong, together with the many facets of his mode of working, to a practice which reflects on the whole history of Western representation. When he writes of 'the – antique – phenomenon of seeing', he evokes a tradition which indeed crystallized in the Albertian system, but can be imagined as having operated from the very stage when the art of the ancient Greeks became something to be seen, rather than something to be worshipped: in other words, since the cultic value of Greek sculpture was supplanted by an aesthetic value, rooted in visibility.

This is a transformation which still resonates through the field of contemporary art. What was Duchamp's ready-made if not a parallel move which wrested the object from its function in the practical domain and invited our consideration of its pure visibility? Indeed, Duchamp's explicit concern with what he called the 'rehabilitation' of perspective, and his optical experiments culminating in the *Anemic cinema*, contribute to a totality of artistic response to the conditions of seeing that anticipates the work of Paolini. What is excluded in this transition from the Modern movement to the period of Conceptualism is, as Eco emphasized in relation to Gruppo 63, the avant-garde activism of the earlier period: 'Futurism; No more Latin in class . . . Dada; let the children have their fun.'³¹ There are no moustaches on the plaster upper lips of Paolini's

classical casts, though it is obvious enough that they, like so many of the objects utilized by Paolini, can be allotted quite legitimately to the category of the ready-made.

It might indeed be thought that Paolini, in contrast to Duchamp, works exclusively within the registers of the iconic and the symbolic, without dirtying his hands with the indexical. But this would be to overlook the crucial role which the photographic image plays in his artistic practice. Reference has already been made to the photographic portrait of 1421965, and to *Lorenzo Lotto*. In mature installation works like *The Three Graces* (1978), Paolini justifies his assertion, 'Photography is more than a technique, it is genuinely the revelation of the language'.³² Although the use of the photographic image in Conceptualism is too widespread to merit attention in general terms, it is Paolini's special achievement to have realized that photography implied a comprehensive reevaluation of the different signifying properties of the western artist's traditional techniques. Above all, it implied a reappraisal of the role of line, within the new conditions of temporality inaugurated by the instantaneity of the image. The following passage, written in 1986, helps to explicate the dynamic movement of *The Three Graces*, in which the circulation between three basic elements (the sculptural cast, the large photograph and the smaller variant imprinted with a drawing) is doubled by the circulation of three techniques: casting, drawing and photography:



Giulio Paolini, *The Three Graces*, 1978,
installation shot from Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris, 1978.

By extension each one of my works is a photograph: it implies a photographic way of seeing, even if in material terms it is not one – in the sense that it photographs a gesture, a distance, even an absence – that is to say, it tends to illustrate the instant of the eternity of the image. It is the experience of photography that has allowed me to comprehend the meaning of drawing, that which is designed as true, and this as intact, for all time.

If there exists no drawing without line, line nonetheless *advances*, as in a chess game, with no object to meet it (and so without entering into time), appearing in the place where it ought to appear. So many precarious and precious motifs, like those that the hand of the archaeologist brings back to the light of day, surrounding with diligent care these traces laid down by time.³³

Paolini deserves to have this last word of his work. His final remarks do indeed epitomize its special character.