if the critic understands nothing but his own job, and the publisher (the businessman) does not even understand that, the result is the same. Once the two get together, even a quite undeserving author is made for the time being."

This capacity to indulge naïveté and yet clearly to see through that indulgence is central to Svevo as a writer: he sympathizes powerfully with the importance of fantasy in the little man’s dreary existence, having himself lived so long upon the mere fantasy of literary success; and yet he is also aware of its dangers. Samigli may be a cheerful fool, but Svevo’s other protagonists are, in their narcissistic preoccupation, dangerous to themselves and to others—indeed, lethal. Alfonso Nitti commits suicide; Emilio Brentani is indirectly responsible for the death of his sister; and Zeno, in spite of all his protestations, is implicated in the suicide of his brother-in-law, partner, and rival, Guido Speieri. Lies and delusion may be essential for happiness, Svevo seems to say, but, like smoking, they can have nasty consequences.

In Zeno in particular, Svevo goes still further: if the novel begins by asserting that "disease is a conviction, and I was born with that conviction," the last pages of Zeno’s manuscript see him cured of his imaginary illnesses—not by medicine, but by the presence of death in life, by World War I. Having pursued good health without success throughout his life, Zeno finds that his imaginary malady evaporates when the world around him is engulfed in death and destruction. "I do not feel healthy comparatively. I am healthy, absolutely," he insists. "Sorrow and love—life, in other words—cannot be considered a sickness because they hurt."

With uncanny pre-atomic prescience, he goes on to predict the apocalypse, the world’s end at the hands of "an ordinary man" who invents "an incomparable explosive": "And another man, also ordinary, but a bit sicker than others, will steal this explosive and will climb up at the center of the earth, to set it on the spot where it can have the maximum effect. There will be an enormous explosion that no one will hear, and the earth, once again a nebula, will wander through the heavens, freed of parasites and sickness."

Thus ends Zeno’s account, a narrative shaped from the fantasy of his birth to the fantasy of his death, from his first introduction to disease to its last banishment from the earth. It is both comedy and horror that that banishment will entail the end of the earth itself; it is also simply life. As Zeno aptly observes to Guido in the midst of their financial troubles, a discovery he makes to his surprise: "Life is neither ugly nor beautiful, but it’s original!"

The arc of Svevo’s own life was that of a black comedy that he himself might have written: a man’s progress from youthful literary aspiration through failure and despair to late, unanticipated literary success, only then to find himself brutally punished for that success by the hand of fate. Svevo anticipated such absurdity: from a very young age, he knew better than most what life is really like. He deserves to be read in order that we might better understand our weak and desirous selves, laughing and suffering at once. Semiltà is a fine tale, in its precise and tightly structured portrait of a weak man and the toll of his fantasy life upon the reality of others; but Zeno’s Conscience is a masterpiece, a novel overflowing with human truth in all its murkiness, laughter and terror, a book as striking and relevant today as it was when it first published, and a book that is in every good way—its originality included—like life.

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Not Yet the End

**By Christopher S. Wood**

The Invisible Masterpiece by Hans Belting translated by Helen Atkins

(University of Chicago Press, 480 pp., $45)

**N**ever was there more optimistic nonsense written about abstract art than in Germany after World War II. Abstraction, many artists and critics hoped, would guide the German public back to universal spiritual ideals and reconcile them with European civilization. The Germans were discovering abstract art anew after long years of National Socialist philistinism. "Degenerate Art," the Nazi exhibition of 1937 that is still by far the exhibition of modern art visited by more people than any other, had mercilessly derided Kandinsky and Mondrian. In place of abstraction, the Nazis had promoted muscular Neoclassical sculpture and sentimental portraits of peasant girls with braids. But after the war the Germans repented, at least aesthetically, and agreed to re-embrace pure line, shape, and color.

Critics discovered behind the apparent chaos of abstract painting a deeper harmony, a glimpse of a cosmic lawfulness. Theologians hoped that abstract art might patch together modern man’s "divided consciousness," the alienation of subject from object. Others argued that the discoveries of quantum physics—its abandonment of classical causality and logic—endorsed abstraction. Even Martin Heidegger lent his delphic voice, lecturing on Paul Klee and later writing, in an exhibition catalogue, about the reconciliation between man and things proposed by the works of the Basque sculptor Eduardo Chillida.

But then the world turned again; and it is not surprising that a younger generation of German artists, critics, and art historians, born under National Socialism, were dismayed by the saug fit between the promises of abstract art and the aspirations of the Adenauer-era bourgeoisie. This generation soon discovered the new disenchanted art of the American 1950s and early 1960s: the Pop of Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol, and the Minimalism of Frank Stella, Donald Judd, and Carl Andre.

This was dry, skeptical, even literal-minded art, whose "form" did not lead to "content" in any of the traditional ways. The canvases of Stella were not "abstractions" of anything; they were just painted canvases. The American artists knew nothing about nature or spirit. They were interested only in objects, formats, processes, and institutions. Pop and Minimalism attacked all the myths and the conventions that sustained the great tradition of Western art: the cult of the unique masterpiece, the heroism of the original genius, the gallery and museum spaces themselves. They were the perfect riposte to Heidegger the art critic.

This is the conceptual home ground of Hans Belting’s new book, a forceful and highly original history of nineteenth-century and twentieth-century art. It first
appeared in German in 1998 and has now been skillfully translated into English by Helen Atkins. Belting is a distinguished historian of Byzantine and Western medieval art, born in 1935, who has taught at Heidelberg, Munich, and now Karlsruhe. His work on the early history of the Christian image has ramified throughout the entire field of art history. With his inexhaustible imagination and his sharply paradoxical turn of mind, Belting is one of the dominant art historical voices of our time.

Belting’s thesis in his new book is simple, and he frequently repeats it: since 1800, new works of art have failed again and again to live up to the ideal of “absolute” art represented by the concept of the “masterpiece.” The bourgeois public has always wanted great works of the sort that they filled their museums with, works like those by Praxiteles or Raphael or Rembrandt. Avant-garde artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries obliged by trying to make modern masterpieces. But they failed, according to Belting.

They failed because a work of art is in the end just an object, and can never embody a metaphysical abstraction. Some prescient artists, notably Manet and Duchamp, did hint at the futility of the modernist project. Still, for much of the twentieth century, abstract art continued to hold out the utopian possibility of a reconciliation between matter and spirit. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s, according to Belting, that artists and philosophers of art finally conceded that the game was up.

This is an ironic history of modernism, written in effect from the disillusioned, dispassionate point of view of the American Pop or Minimalist artist circa 1965. There are many affinities between Belting’s point of view and that of Arthur C. Danto, the American philosopher turned art critic. Danto has argued that since Warhol we no longer know, or care, what art is. Warhol demonstrated the emptiness of the concepts of authorship, originality, aura, integrity of the work, and artistic content, and so brought the history of modernism to an end. Now, according to Danto, anything can be art and artists can do whatever they please. Artists no longer fret about what art might be or where it might be heading. Danto calls his own time the “Post-Historical Period of Art,” and he asserts with satisfaction that “there is no reason for it ever to come to an end.”

Belting made a similar argument in 1983 in his pamphlet The End of the History of Art? There he pointed out to art historians that contemporary artists working in the spirit that we used to call “postmodernist” had roundly abandoned the notion that art had any sort of history at all. He recommended that art historians adjust their own practice accordingly—for example, by resisting the temptation to force their historical subject matter into narrative trajectories with predetermined destinations.

Danto announces his own emancipation from utopian or metaphysical delusions as often as possible, as if he were still busy burying the pretensions of American Abstract Expressionism and Color Field painting—the often grandiose abstract painting of the 1950s and early 1960s, by artists such as Rothko, Still, Motherwell, and Louis. And it is true that American critics of the time wrote almost as much nonsense about these artists as their German counterparts did about their own (admittedly less gifted) abstract painters. Danto and Belting both came of intellectual age in the era of Warhol, and they liked what they saw. Later, in the 1980s, their writing on art converged around the postmodernist idea that works of art could no longer derive their meaning from their place within a narrative history of art. Belting and Danto now frequently reinforce each other in print. They see themselves, perhaps, as the Gombrich and Popper of their day, the art historian and the philosopher of science who in the 1960s and 1970s used to publicly advertise their intellectual friendship as a kind
of liberal bulwark against Hegel’s idealist theory of history.

Belting’s new book begins with the Louvre, the national museum of France, founded in 1793 and instantly stocked with masterpieces of ancient sculpture and modern painting. The Louvre, once and for all, extracted these admired samples of ingenuity and taste from temples, churches, and palaces and set them before the eyes of Frenchmen. The original historical functions of the Greek statue or the Renaissance altarpiece, whether cultic or propagandistic, were, as much as possible, forgotten. Instead the treasures of the museum testified to a common ideal: the ideal of “art,” an ideal difficult to define but (as everyone agreed) solidly embodied in the masterpieces of the past. Artists over the next century and a half spent a great deal of time in the Louvre scrutinizing historical art, trying to figure out how to make their own masterpieces. The bourgeois public, who were frequenting the same galleries, expected no less from their artists.

Belting then tells the story of Romantic painting in a series of brisk, wry episodes. The painters are all cursed by the past. They know too much art history. Ingres becomes obsessed with Raphael and paints a series of pictures illustrating his life. Delacroix sinks into despair when he realizes that “all the great problems of art were solved back in the sixteenth century.” He struggles to produce a “true masterpiece” of his own, a painting that would be “an argument for the immortality of the soul.” Meanwhile, in Germany, a cult develops around Raphael’s Sistine Madonna, which had been in Dresden since 1793. This great canvas in its simplicity and directness seemed to transcend its historical origins and speak to every modern beholder across the gulf of time. It was testimony to the miracle of art. It is hard to overstate the role that this work played in the German aesthetic imagination. Winckelmann, Schlegel, Hegel, Wagner, Nietzsche, Mann, Heidegger, and Benjamin all wrote about the Sistine Madonna. Already by the early nineteenth century the gods had been supplanted by the great painters. Belting remarks almost in passing that “the Christian religion ... by now amounted to nothing but an aesthetic need.”

Belting’s history of modern art clusters around the meta-masterpieces, those ancient and modern works that most attracted the attention of writers and thinkers and so came to stand for the very possibility that a single work might embody an ineffable ideal of art. So, for instance, Géricault’s Raft of the Medusa (1819), a mighty effort to jettison the past between the young Poussin, just arrived in Paris from the provinces in 1612, and an ancient curmudgeon named Frenhofer, last pupil of the early sixteenth-century Flemish master Jan Gossaert. Frenhofer has spent years sequestered in his studio working on a mysterious masterpiece that he refuses to show to anyone. He boasts defiantly that his painting will capture the essence of the female, body and spirit, as no other modern painting has done. But when the masterpiece is finally revealed, Poussin sees no woman; he sees nothing at all, just “colors daubed one on top of the other and contained by a mass of strange lines forming a wall of paint.” Only in the lower corner of the canvas does he spy the tip of a bare foot, the merest hint of a foot emerging from the chaos. That night Frenhofer burns all his work and dies.

To find such a text, with its apparent prophecy of abstraction, perched on the threshold of modern painting is almost too good to be true; and virtually every modern French critic and theorist of art has felt compelled to write something about Balzac’s story. For Belting, the story is a parable of the futility of aesthetic idealism, and from this point on in his account there can be no apology for the pretensions of the idealist artist. Frenhofer’s failure predetermines all the stubborn failures of modernism, and Belting’s book must proceed under this cloud. (Balzac’s story, by the way, has just been retranslated by Richard Howard and published by New York Review Books with an introduction by Arthur Danto, who finds a way to make mention of Belting’s work on the medieval cult image.)

Baudelaire urged the modern painter to heed the lesson of Balzac’s tale and resist the “morbid allure” of beauty. Instead, Baudelaire proposed, the artist must confront modern life itself, and capture its dynamism and glitter by transfiguring it into paint. Manet succeeded in doing this, momentarily, in his Olympia (1863) and his Bar at the Folies-Bergères (1881–1882). But even these metallic fictions, in Belting’s view, were haunted by the ideal of absolute art. For the bourgeois public, “modernity” and “art” could not be fused, and Manet’s pictures were slowly transformed back into museum pieces. As time passed, Proust correctly predicted, the once vast gulf between Ingres and Manet would close. In the writings of Proust and Ruskin, and in the paintings of the late Monet, the tone is again melancholy and the idea of art ripe for another dethroning.

That dethroning came at the hands of Duchamp and his readymades, the now-
quaint scandals of Bottlerack (1914), In Advance of the Broken Arm (i.e., the snow shovel, 1915), and Fountain (i.e., the urinal, 1917). For Belting, Duchamp decisively demonstrated that all works of art are empty fictions, tokens of a valueless currency, the ideal of absolute art. At the time, however, Duchamp’s readymades only seemed to offer new theoretical legitimation for abstraction by liberating art from the expectations of the public and re-affirming its radical autonomy, or freedom.

To Belting’s exasperation, the avant-garde refused to abandon its project, which he defines as the “eternal struggle against matter and against the death of the work.” The abstract painters of the 1910s and 1920s, Malevich, Kandinsky, and Mondrian, believed that pure form would help to defeat the “serpent” of materialism, and perhaps even usher in a new historical epoch. These were the very ideas about painting revived by the proponents of abstract art after World War II. Belting, like so many other Germans of his generation, has little sympathy for utopian aspirations.

Belting’s twentieth century finally shapes up as a dialectic between Duchamp and Picasso. The latter did not seem to want to hear the bad news about the end of absolute art, and so went ahead and painted a painting that is very like a masterpiece: Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907), now at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Picasso believed that he could keep art alive simply by looking for models elsewhere than in the Louvre, in this case in African sculpture. But in fact Picasso showed no signs at all of wanting to escape the conundrum described by Balzac. He went on and on like Frenhofer, trying to capture the female nude on canvas after canvas.

Whether Picasso had any success in this venture is, for Belting, moot. For the project had simply lost its meaning. Inevitably Picasso fell under the spell of Balzac’s story. In 1931, Ambroise Vollard published an edition of the story illustrated with thirteen etchings by Picasso. (This is one of a number of points at which the Balzac tale re-enters Belting’s narrative, ingenuously knitting the book together and preventing it from ever reading like a textbook.) In these etchings Picasso dramatizes the crucial shift—for him, the archetypal shift—of the painter’s desire and attention away from the female model and onto the unfinished work itself. Picasso was drawn to the Old Masters: he copied their works and engaged them—Velázquez, notably—in agonistic competition, and he painted pictures designed to hang on the walls of the great museums.

Duchamp was also drawn to the Old Masters. In 1919 he took a postcard of the Mona Lisa and added a mustache, a beard, a signature, and the punning letters L.H.O.O.Q. Later he constructed two elaborate anti-masterpieces, the Large Glass and the Etant donnés . . . both now in Philadelphia, “riddles rather than works” in any traditional sense. In these two projects, all the elements of the old idealist project came crashing into one another: the nude female model; the voyeurism of the male artist and his complicity with the beholder; the perspectival devices serving as a cover for the erotic, predatory impulse; the entire ritual “staging” of the work in the museum. Belting’s complex readings of Duchamp’s Large Glass and Etant donnés . . . are among the most successful sustained interpretations of single works in the book. For Belting, Duchamp prized apart the idea and the object and thus foreshadowed the radical split carried out in the 1960s, when some artists produced works that were nothing but ideas (Conceptual Art) and others produced works that were nothing but objects (Minimalism).

From this point Belting’s narrative rushes toward the 1960s as if drawn by a magnet: Pollock and Rauschenberg figure as heroes, of course, though even they work “under the shadow of the museum.” They are still trying to “capture” the motif, and in the end they are foiled by the materiality of paint and canvas, no matter how they try to escape by putting a canvas on the floor or hanging bedclothes on the wall. The real “Call to Freedom,” as the penultimate chapter is titled with uncharacteristic earnestness, was issued by Warhol. In this and the final chapter Belting runs through an accelerated survey of Pop, Conceptual Art, Minimalism, performance art, Happenings, object art, Fluxus, installation art, appropriation art, video art, media art, and finally photography, oddly enough making here its first appearance in the book (apart from a brief mention of the nineteenth-century photographer Félix Nadar).

Along the way Belting does generate some suspense about how exactly his account will end, where it will point. In the end, it points nowhere. Once he has discredited the avant-garde project of a heroic struggle to capture the ineffable in the matter of paint, Belting is left without any model for what art might do or what its place in modern life might be. His closing examples and episodes have a fatigued and desultory quality. The final chapter of the book focuses on Tom Wesselman, Roy Lichtenstein, Malcolm Morley, Renato Guttuso, Marcel Broodthaers, Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Wall, artists who

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seem to have little to offer, at least in Belt- ing's account, but a melancholic, toothless nostalgia for the old idea of great art. It is a neat case for the essential pointlessness and superfluity of art—which is not quite the case, I think, that Belting really wants to make.

Belting has written about the art of the modern era as if from a distance of centuries. He approaches the idea that a work of art might afford a glimpse of a hidden alternative reality as if it were an outlandish fable. At one point he remarks in a curiously matter-of-fact way that the association of art with the “deepest mystery” was an idea “which had, after all, only entered people’s cultural awareness with Romanticism.” It is hard to gather from Belting’s ingenious, relentless narrative why anyone over the past two centuries has bothered about art at all.

In Belting’s book, museumgoers figure only as gulls, and philosophers of art only as irresponsible dreamers. The book offers no criterion for artistic achievement, unless it is proximity to Warhol. At one point Belting chides Stendhal for not seeing what made Delacroix’s Massacre of Chios “so superior” to the other works in the Salon of 1824. But Belting does not really explain what he himself means by “superior,” either; and he never again tries to do so. There is just no foothold for art in this book.

Belting cares enormously about contemporary art, but something has gone away in his disaffected account of its pre-history. He has gotten himself into a bind by focusing on a conceptual model for the modern work of art that is far too limited. That model is basically the one established in the Middle Ages by the theological critics of idolatry. The religious image, according to its detractors, was doomed to fail because divinity is infinite and intangible and so it can never be reduced to shape, line, and color. Jewish, Muslim, and the stricter Christian theologians all agreed that a painting was too gross a vehicle to give an adequate rendering of pure spirit. When Belting says that the modern easel painting can never capture the ideal of freedom or the ideal of truth, he is saying more or less the same thing.

Here Belting’s history of modern art links up with his earlier scholarly work on early Christian and medieval art. His extraordinary book Likeness and Presence, which appeared in 1980, is a monumental history of the Christian icon, covering more than a millennium of material. It is one of the most important art historical books of the last half-century. In Likeness and Presence, Belting traced the icon from its origins in late antique royal portraiture and pagan ancestor cults. The icon was a portrait of the divine personage—Jesus or the Virgin Mary—and purported to stand in magic for that otherworldly person. The icon was a surrogate body. But this was a pagan system and it did not sit well with Christian theologians, who maintained that a painted wooden panel could not possibly capture the elusive, potent numen of the Godhead. They felt that paintings could at best represent the idea of divinity, that is, convey it through some agreed-upon symbolic language.

Belting shows how the icon adapted to this criticism throughout the medieval centuries, first embedding itself within an elaborate framing device, the altarpiece, that attested to its real connection to the cultic mysteries, and later developing a new animation and rhetorical flexibility in order to attract and to persuade worshippers. By the early sixteenth century, however, the period of the Italian High Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, the icon’s days were numbered. The theologians banished the magical image from the religious rite and exiled it to the secular realm, to palaces and villas, and to the dwellings of the bourgeoisie. The icon was dead, or it survived only as a puppet suitable for the poor and the credulous. In its place was born the modern work of art, with a private magic of its own.

For Belting, the glory days of the work of art stretched from 1500 to 1800. In those centuries, he suggests, art knew its aims and its proper place in society. Art adorned life and told absorbing stories about gods, heroes, and modern history. This epoch was at least aesthetically stable. But the trouble began all over again around 1800, in Belting’s telling, when artists began to listen to what the philosophers Kant, Fichte, and Hegel were saying about them, and got caught up once more in unreasonable metaphysical pretensions. Modernity’s error, for Belting, was to have gone on trying to produce religious art long after the death of the icon. In effect, Belting presents the futile quest to produce a modern masterpiece as the profane, secular version of the old Christian effort to capture the physiognomies of Jesus and especially Mary in paint.

He thus retells art history as a tale of doomed love. The real leitmotiv of Belting’s book is the erotic encounter between the male artist and the (usually nude) female model. Painting from the live model is an infinitely intriguing encounter, at least for the painter, and it captures Belting’s imagination, even if he knows that it has to be broken up and the studio wall has to be torn down. It is striking how many key episodes of The Invisible Masterpiece involve attempts to fix the female form: Ingres’s fascination with Raphael and his model and mistress “La Fornarina,” the odalisques of Ingres and Delacroix, the modern cults of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna and Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, Manet’s Olympia, Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings, Cézanne’s ungainly bathers, Ruskin’s writing on the Golden Virgin of Amiens, Picasso’s many female figures, Matisse’s new odalisques, Duchamp’s ravaged “brides,” Warhol’s Mona Lisa, Nam June Paik’s TV Bra for Living Sculpture.

It is inevitable that an account of the history of art driven by this chivalric model will falter: The hackneyed geometry of voyeurism and desire is not enough of a conceptual scaffolding for the work of art. This was clarified once and for all by Jacques Rivet’s film La Belle Noiseuse (1991), a non-ironic retelling of Balzac’s story that transposes it to the present. The film treats the drama of the studio confrontation between the male painter and his elusive female quarry as if it were still a burning urgency, as if that encounter still captured the essence of art-making. The failure of this film, which points to the bankruptcy of the ideal of the artist and the model, is that in watching it one has absolutely no curiosity about the painting, the “Unknown Masterpiece,” which, just as if one were still reading Balzac’s story, one never actually sees. The weakest moment of Belting’s book is thus the concluding moment, in which he describes Rivet’s film as “a stage on which the memory of the work’s aura is performed once again.” This demoralizing passage suggests that there is simply nothing else left for art to do. Belting closes his book with a still from Rivet’s film, a shot of Emmanuelle Béart crouching naked, sphinx-like, on the floor of the studio in Michel Piccoli’s rambling château.

It is rare to find an historian of pre-modern art who can write with confidence on modern art (though not as rare, admittedly, as the specialist on modern art who writes on pre-modern art). Only a few have ventured it: Meyer Schapiro, whose essays on Impressionism remain as vital as his pioneering studies of Romanesque art; Leo Steinberg, the maverick who both deciphered the Sistine Ceiling and explained why Rauschenberg put pillows and patches of grass in his paintings; and—for Belting the most significant predecessor—Hans Sedlmayr, an Austrian scholar with pronounced Fascist leanings, a specialist on medieval and Baroque architecture, whose brilliant reactionary diatribe against modern art, Art in Crisis: The Lost Center (1948), was
widely read and frequently reprinted in the postwar period.

Belting's book can be read as an ambivalent rebuttal, published exactly half a century later, to Sedlmayr's book. For a decade Belting occupied Sedlmayr's former academic position, the prestigious chair of art history at the University of Munich. He now writes, as Sedlmayr did, for a wide bourgeois public. Sedlmayr recognized in 1948 that modern artists were not merely incompetent, perverse, or cynical, as the "Degenerate Art" show had foolishly claimed. Instead he saw modern art as the powerful expression of modern civilization's deliberate abandonment of God and of an ideal image of man. Sedlmayr deplored modern art, but he conceded its gravity and its effectiveness. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, his view challenged the optimistic, conciliatory claims made for abstract painting, which welcomed abstract paintings as if they were new icons, channels to the divine. Sedlmayr instead stressed the unbridgeable gulf between the religious art of the High Middle Ages, with all its questing sincerity, and our modern artifacts, with their deadly flatness and emptiness.

Belting's dilemma is clear: he agrees with Sedlmayr that the main drama of modern art is its abandonment of the ideal. He considers Christianity to have been an empty formula already by the early nineteenth century—but he does not regret this negative turn, as Sedlmayr did. In what spirit, then, does one write the history of a negation? There can be no hope of an answer from Hegel, who wanted to "negate the negation" by installing a new idealism. Such idealism led only to more utopian schemes, even social and political messianisms to which painting and sculpture were duly expected to contribute. Belting, a liberal, is skeptical of all this. In the end he chooses simply to show us how institutionally, modern art went about distancing itself from idealism. What is the "content" of modern art? There is no content at all. And Belting, following Warhol, is unruffled by this verdict.

The Marxist art historian T.J. Clark has recently written an intellectual testament in which he, unlike Belting, fully acknowledges the success and the force of modern art, and yet laments that success. For Clark sees that modern painting, with all its ingenious "representational deflections," quickly lost sight of its original Baudelairean purpose, the description and the criticism: of modern life. Belting, by contrast, shares none of Clark's grief and frustration. He seems to have no confidence in the capacity of paintings to say anything important about modernity. Indeed, modern life enters into Belting's account only through its institutions, never through the pictures themselves.

In retrospect, the disenchanted "Pop" flavor of Belting's book was already present in his work on medieval art. Belting never tried to bring medieval art "back to life": he never forced medieval images into cozy "contextual" relationships with the social, political, or intellectual life of the time. One was always thankful for the absence in his work of any of those nostalgic, crypto-Christian sympathies that contaminate so much work in the medieval field. Instead Belting told the story of the icon as a cold competition between formats, functions, doctrines, and institutions. It was a clinical history, as if medieval art was, if not dead, at least anesthetized. And he treats modern art the same way. Finally one cannot tell whether Belting has no confidence at all in the concept of meaning or whether he simply considers meaning an irretrievably private affair.

I teach art history next door to a pretty important art school, and as far as I can see the art students in the studios are neither paralyzed by history nor wandering forward aimlessly, cut off from history. Among the twenty-five-year-olds, I think, there is no abatement in the drive to make art, and there is no loss of confidence. Belting teaches at an art school in Germany, so he must see this, too. It is true that young artists no longer take the human soul as a model for the integrity of a work of art, or erotic tension as the model for the act of creation. They are interested simply in "work," no longer in "the work," the self-contained artifact that the dealers, the museums, and the critics expect of them. It is also true that young artists today no longer cower under the burden of, say, Picasso, as Pollock once did. But that is a far cry from saying, as Arthur Danto does, that today's artists have been liberated from history. It is just that they look back and see a different history of art, a history completely reshaped not only by Duchamp and Warhol, but also by more recent artists such as Robert Morris, Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Robert Smithson.

Those figures are mentioned briefly or not at all in Belting's book. Their art, much of it made in the 1970s, is best understood not in terms of discrete works, but in terms of processes, installations, sites, events, performances, information, statements, sketches, notes, projects. It is art that reflects intensely and mysteriously on the precariousness of coded meaning, on the brave promises of information and evidence, on the disappointment of visible form. Such art, even more

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—Richard W. Bulliet, Columbia University
Tighter and Tighter

By Ruth Franklin

The Haunting of L.
by Howard Norman

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 326 pp., $24)

Howard Norman's novels are hard to like. Starting in 1987 with The Northern Lights, each novel has featured a taciturn, antisocial male protagonist, as disconnected from his own inner life as he is from the people around him. Norman's landscapes mirror the emptiness of the characters who inhabit them: this American writer is unique in setting his books in the bleakest regions of Canada, from the expanses of northern Manitoba to turn-of-the-century Newfoundland. And his prose is as inhospitable as the terrain. Bumpy in pace and flat in texture, it goes down awkwardly, like something hard to chew.

Norman's protagonists get themselves into harrowing situations: adultery, theft, murder. But when these situations force them to take the measure of their characters, they invariably come up short. Some eventually recognize their own limitations, but that is as much as Norman offers in the way of epiphany or resolution. To Forster's famous exhortation "Only connect," Norman's characters answer, "How?" In contrast to the exuberant irony of Don DeLillo or Dave Eggers, this detachment, whittled down further by the monochromatic apathy of Norman's style, seems the very essence of late postmodernism.

Each of Norman's novels is in its way a bildungsroman, following a character's emotional development from immaturity to self-awareness. Read together, of course, the novels become also the story of Norman's development as a writer. His progress has occurred in huge leaps, with each novel deepening in emotional complexity as well as resolving the flaws of the one that preceded it. The Northern Lights is a coming-of-age story more original than most, but—not unusually for a first novel—its impact is hampered by overly emphatic symbolism and inconsistent pacing. The Bird Artist, published in 1994, smooths out the pacing and lightens up on the symbols, but it suffers from an overly eccentric and implausible main female character. In The Museum Guard, which appeared three years later, Norman broadened his scope, examining what it means to engage with a work of art against the backdrop of the approach of World War II. Though the female protagonist at first appears to be another of Norman's mannered eccentrics, in the end her behavior has a compelling foundation, and the book is Norman's subtlest and deepest work so far.

The expectation that mounts after a writer produces a great book is similar to the desire for dessert after a luxurious meal: we shouldn't need it, but we want it anyway, and so much the better if it is big and rich. And so it is disappointing that Norman's progress seems to have halted with The Haunting of L. Ironically, the protagonist has greater emotional depth than any of his predecessors; but this time it is the story that does not live up to the character. Each of his books has been notable for the restraint of its central character, but here it is his own imagination that Norman is restraining.

Both The Northern Lights and The Bird Artist are anchored by their characters' isolation, epitomized by the sentence from Giorgio Bas-sani that serves as epigraph to the latter book: "Suddenly, with extreme violence, he felt himself seized by the desire to be, rain or no rain, at any price, in the midst of the valleys: alone." Noah, the teenage protagonist of The Northern Lights, lives with his mother and orphaned cousin in an area so remote that "our house in northern Manitoba made up the entire village of Pudnova Lake." The only transportation and out is the sporadic mail plane. His mother, Mina, collects fanciful postcards depicting the story of Noah's ark, which she—and apparently Norman, rather ponderously—sees as a prototype for their family: "This house is ... like an ark, one that's drifted into a part of the world which, well, it has dangers," she tells her two charges. The biblical story, of course, is one of companionship amid isolation, but Noah himself (the novel's protagonist, not the biblical character) experiences it more as isolation amid companionship.

Noah spends summers with his friend Pelly in Quill, where they fish and play checkers with the native Cree people. (Norman's depiction of the Cree Indians is one of the more effective elements of The Northern Lights, particularly the way he renders their halting speech by inserting commas after nearly every word: "Coffee, I get, now.... See you, later, sometime, eh?") At night they listen to the radio, new to Quill, which brings news from as far away as Toronto and Halifax. But the novel begins to run aground when, after Pelly's sudden death, Noah returns to Quill to stay with Pelly's parents. Norman has not shown us enough of Noah's relationship with Pelly—we certainly are not privy to many of his thoughts—for us to understand their closeness. And the real reason for Noah's visit to Quill becomes apparent soon enough: Norman needs him there to discover that his father, Anthony, has become a hermit, living in a disheveled shack in the woods outside the town.

The chapter that brings Noah to the confrontation with his father is uneven and jerky, but the scene that awaits him inside the hut is magnificently drawn. Anthony's favorite pastime in better days was flipping through the Dictionary of Musical Instruments, and Norman now vividly picks up on this to evoke Anthony's mental disarray:

[The hut's] door was propped open with a bassoon stuck in the ground. A hacked-apart cello lay in the threshold.... A clarinet, an oboe, and a few string instruments were in the fireplace, smoke issuing from keyholes, heating the soup. Hung on the wall were a triangle and a trombone. An accordion was fanned out on the floor.

Though Noah is able to elicit only shrieks and howls from the broken instruments, his attempt to play them at all is the first step toward overcoming the distance that he imposes between him-