

A special double issue of the quarterly concerned with all that is involved with our being literate

I N S C

Inscriptions in Painting

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guest editor: Claude Gandelman

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Inscriptions in Painting

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This introductory paper defines the scope of the research concerning “inscriptions in painting” from a primarily semiotic point of view. Taking as its point of departure the antinomy between the written word and painting or drawing, it shows that in many cases (from medieval pictograms through the baroque painter Philippe de Champaigne to modern new concreteness and Max Beckmann) inscriptions are used to subvert the pictorial content of works of art. Sometimes, inscriptions also subvert theological interdictions or taboos. Inscriptions can also be said to represent the “performative” aspect of the work of art in the literal meaning of this word; that is they are used to direct the gaze of the observer to specific spots within the painting and are part of a manipulative strategy of the painter.

By Way of Introduction: Inscriptions as Subversion

Claude Gandelman

Nowadays there is almost an established tradition of research in art history which focuses on the relation between words and painting. Books like John Sparrow's *Words and Pictures* or Michel Butor's *Les mots dans la peinture* have become minor classics. A new British journal is called *Word and Image*. Museums such as the Louvre or the Bibliothèque Nationale have organized exhibitions on this theme.¹ It seems, therefore, proper that a special issue of *Visible Language* should also be devoted to the topic. Are not "inscriptions in paintings" more than anything else "language" made "visible"?

Accordingly, the last section of this issue presents a bibliography of books and articles devoted to the subject. It is perhaps, not as comprehensive as it should be. Nevertheless, the interested reader will find in it the major works as well as the more recent studies dealing with this very specific subject.

This special issue deals strictly with inscriptions "inside" or "within" a painting or a picture, not with "external" inscriptions such as titles.² Signatures are excluded although their role in structuring the viewing of pictures by an external observer is briefly mentioned.³

This introduction aims at giving some sort of unifying theoretical perspective or framework to the reader, although the excellent articles by a group of international scholars which constitute this special issue hardly make such a perspective necessary. Paradoxically, a number of these scholars find that unity is founded by "subversion"—subversion of the picture by the text it contains or of the inscription by the pictures that contain it.

But first, a few general words on the semiotic qualities of inscriptions.

A Semiotic Enclave

Words inscribed in painting have sometimes been called "a

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semiotic medium (in this case, representational or figurative icons) of another system of signs, the written sign.

In terms of the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce, written inscriptions in figurative paintings represent the intrusion of a primarily symbolic-indexic system into an iconic one. In the Western world, writing is not iconic (in the Oriental world, Chinese ideograms are); but it “points downward” or designates as a deitics or as an index which designates, or else it “stands for” (symbolizes) things located in the world.

Inscriptions imply a system of reading that is quite different from the system which directs the “scanning” of pictures: the act of sentence-reading is linear; moreover, it progresses from the apperception of signifiers to the evocation of images or concepts (the signified). What comes first in written language is the typographic aspect of a concept. This is not so with pictures.

In one of his first books on visual semiotics, Louis Marin wrote that figurative painting is the presentation of the signified rather than signifiers.⁴ Thus, when we view a painting, the surface we apperceive is a surface made up of signified (represented) objects and concepts. With language it is just the opposite: one reaches the designated objects or concepts through the signifiers, that is, through the words which stand for them.

Indeed, painting begins not with the order of signifiers but in reverse (with reference to spoken or written language), with the overwhelming presence of the signified. Meaning itself seems to be present on the painted canvas for all to see. Thus, reading a painting means going backward, like a crab, away from the surface (that is, from surface meaning), away from what C.S. Peirce called “firstness.” In the terminology of Erwin Panofsky, reading a picture means going from the surface of the painting to a “pre-iconographic” level, then to the deeper level of iconography and from there to the yet deeper one of “iconology.” Or in terms of the linguistics of Noam Chomsky, this means going from “surface structure” to “deep structure.” Reading a picture is, indeed, like engaging in archaeology: starting with “superficial” meanings and then uncovering, by degrees, layers upon layers of signifiers.

With a conglomerate of written words, a “text,” the reader progresses from the string of signifiers, the words, to the

meaning. The operative concept here is something like “construct” or “construction.” In reading a text, one constructs meaning from the string. On the contrary, reading a painting means engaging from the outset in destruction and deconstruction.⁵ We will see that many of the inscriptions presented here go even further and are tantamount to “subversion.”

Words in paintings pose the question of the primacy of language or, conversely, of the primacy of images. One wonders whether this built-in interrogation found in any word-in-picture complex is not part of a more globally philosophical or anthropological question concerning the primacy of pictures or language in mental apperception. Each conglomerate of words/pictures has a Wittgensteinian aspect: we are either “prisoners of words” or “prisoners of images”; opening the doors of verbal language confines us in the prison of images while opening the image-door, that is “naming the icon,” makes us prisoners of the verb.

In the Beginning Was. . . ?

The confrontation of words/pictures inherent in our subject poses a problem of origin: did the world begin with textual description or with visual representation?

The medieval cabalists saw the Bible as a blueprint for the word—nay, as a world-creating verbal formula. The written logos was for them the ground plan of the universe, and it was through “writing the universe,” through the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, that God created it.⁶ The world began with Scripture, not with visual representation.

And yet, archaeological evidence—the famous cave paintings of Altamira or Lascaux, to name only the best known of them—suggest that the world as a described object may have begun with picture, that is, with visual representation. However, even the frescoes at Lascaux may contain “written” signs, attempts at recording verbal language. There are curious marks on the stone. Small dashes and bars have been interpreted by Alexander Marshack and other Archaeologists as referring to the differentiation between sexes: female markers were opposed to the male markers. Thus, in the midst of very early “portraits” of beasts (rarely of men), in the very first representations of animal groups, one finds the first attempts at transcribing specific words, words which concern human sexuality. Language and representation, it seems, both began with the representation of sexuality and sexual difference.

However, many of the inscriptions analyzed herein “unsex” the pictures and claim to be typography as pure *logos*.

Techniques of Subversion

It was said above that reading a picture is tantamount to deconstructing it. Indeed, words in painting are not merely “constructs,” they are often “deconstructs.” For instance, they may subvert the image by imposing on it a “direction” for reading which is the exact opposite of the apparent orientation of the picture as it is perceived in the first superficial glance. Thus, in order to read an inscription, the observer may have to draw near the picture and move his eyes in a specific manner in order to focus correctly on the text that is written on the canvas. This is what one might call “kinetic” subversion. It imposes movement on the observer even when this observer is supposed to be contemplating a picture dispassionately from a non-moving “point of vision.”

Subversion may be of an aesthetic order: some inscriptions assert that the image which contains them is not an image or, rather, that a representation is not a representation. The picture—by virtue of this semiotic enclave—is capable of saying “No!” A well known instance of this is the famous Magritte picture entitled *This is Not a Pipe*. Sometimes it seems as though inscriptions were placed in pictures in order to trigger a philosophical discussion on this question of the negation of representation by representation itself.

Subversion may also be theological in character. Through a “hieratical” or “pseudo-hieratical” inscription, an artist may insert a specific dogma—a theological dogma—into a religious picture or counter a religious dogma that he wishes to reject. We will see how Christian dogma subverts Jewish history (if indeed, the history of Jesus is part of Jewish history) through the agency of a pseudo-Hebrew inscription placed in a specific religious picture.

Even more bizarrely, there exists a type of inscription, the Jewish and the Islamic *pictogram* or *microgram*, which presents itself as a text—indeed, which proclaims itself to be a text, not a drawing, although its outward form is that of a representational drawing. This assertion, in itself, is the subversion of a sacred prohibition, a way of “turning” the Mosaic law against images.

As a final preliminary remark, it must be observed that this issue of *Visible Language* is devoted more to subversion—of images by inscriptions and, in specific cases, of text or inscriptions by images—than to conjunction, parallelism or harmony between words and pictures. Indeed, disjunction is the dominant perspective in the studies by Louis Marin concerning the French “classical” tableau in the seventeenth century and in the two studies on the work of Magritte, by Georges Roque and Leslie Ortquist. Esther Levinger’s study of words in Jasper Johns also shares this point of view.

These authors see the work of art (insofar as it contains inscription and is inseparable from inscriptions) primarily as a *discordia discors* or a *discordia concors*.⁷ My own contribution, this introduction, is also an exercise in *discordia concors*.

Inscriptions as Subversion

First, “kinetic” subversion. There are inscriptions which enforce a microscopic form of apperception instead of macroscopic apperception of the whole picture, which compel the observer to draw near the picture plane in order to decipher what is written and which intermittently impose a close-up view of a picture. Others oppose or even negate the general orientation of a picture—for instance, the orthogonal direction “in depth” imposed by perspective—and force the observer to change directions in his viewing of it. Still others force the reader to change the movement of his gaze in relation to the painting he is observing. Thus, the observer may be forced to re-orient his gaze according to turns of 90, 180 or 360 degrees in order to read a specific inscription. This is tantamount to submitting the picture to a veritable 90, 180 or 360 degree “panning,” to use a cinematographic term. In such cases, inscriptions transform the painting into a veritable “kinetic art” form although the “kinesis” is carried out by the spectator.

In a second stage, I shall deal with what might be called “theological” or “ideological” subversion. There are words in paintings that are essentially negations or denegations (in the words of Louis Marin) of the global pictorial effect, which negate that the representations in which they are inscribed are true representations or true icons of a transcendent reality. There are usually theological or ideological, sometimes aesthetic, reasons for such a negation. This imposes on the researcher some explorations of the intellectual background behind this type of inscription.

The Corpus

The pictures examined here can be divided into two categories. First, those that deal in what I called kinetic subversion. In a first subsection, therefore, I shall examine close-up effects as well as upside-down “reversals” in pictures from the work of Fra Angelico, sixteenth-century graphic art, Cezanne, Max Beckmann, the cubist painters and the post-modern painter Georg Baselitz.

A second subsection deals with ideological or theological subversion. In it the following pictures will be presented: *The Supper in the House of Simon*, by Philippe de Champaigne; *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*, by Hans Holbein the Elder; Jewish and Islamic pictograms; *The Temptation Triptych*, by Max Beckmann; *Genius*, by Max Beckmann, and Roy Lichtenstein’s *Masterpiece*.

Kinetic subversion: on the perlocutionary force of inscriptions

In terms of modern linguistic philosophy, kinetic subversion belongs to what might be termed the “perlocutionary effect” of inscriptions.

In his seminal *How to Do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin defined two categories of what he called “performative utterances” or “speech acts”: the “*illocutionary*” in which the speaker himself “performs” acts merely by speaking (this is the case when a minister pronounces you “man and wife,” or when the chairperson of a conference “declares the session open”); and the “perlocutionary,” in which an utterance causes the hearer to do something, to perform an action.⁸

Insofar as they proclaim something concerning representation (insofar as they are the visual equivalent of metalinguistic devices, in Roman Jakobson’s terminology), inscriptions are illocutionary in character. In the case of aesthetic “subversion” they declare, for instance, that a representation is not a representation or that a drawing is an inscription and not a representation, etc. Yet, insofar as they *cause us to do things*, namely to focus on a text, to read a text so that we move our heads in order to achieve focus and reading, inscriptions are perlocutionary. Kinetic demands are made on the reader, and these demands are the expression of the perlocutionary force of inscriptions.

Focusing

Some inscriptions demand focusing, and this focusing necessarily negates the global viewing of the painting; that is, it compels the spectator to leave the spot in which he is standing and which usually corresponds to the “point-of-view” of perspective, this vantage point imposed on each viewer by perspective. Incidentally, this imposing a vantage point on the spectator, too, is a perlocutionary effect inherent in a “perspective” image. Perspective causes us to occupy a specific point in space in order to look at a picture. Thus, in the case of moving in order to read inscriptions, we perform a perlocutionary act that is, sometimes, a *counter-act* to the more globally perlocutionary demands made on us by Italian perspective.

This is the case in the great *Isenheimer Altar* by Matthias (Mathies) Grünewald in Colmar, especially in the Christ on the Cross panel. In this center panel, the inscription *illum oportet crescere, me autem minui* inscribed near the face of Saint John the Baptist (as though it were an utterance of his) forces us to quit the global vantage point in order to decipher it. In so doing, we lose the overall view of the three panels—and even of the center panel. Nevertheless, a deciphering of the inscription is essential for an understanding of what the picture is about.⁷

Similarly, many of the medieval *tituli* in fourteenth and fifteenth-century paintings, usually Biblical quotations placed on phylacteries, impose a close-up view of the picture as we approach the surface of the painting in order to decipher the inscriptions. As there are often several *tituli* in one and the same picture, a veritable “dance” is enforced upon the reading spectator, who has to zig-zag between a global-vision vantage point and focused-vision stations.

An inscription in an El Greco painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York, gives a good idea of the syn-copation in reading. In *The Adoration of the Shepherds*,¹⁰ the infant Christ lies at the center while in the background the shepherds receive the news of his coming. Yet, overhead the angels flourish a thin ribbon that bears the Latin sentence from the Gloria: “Let us praise Thee and bless Thee/ Glory be to God on High.” (*Laudamuste benedicimus(te)/Gloria (in excelcicis) Deo.*) It is impossible to read this inscription from afar; a close-up viewing is forced on us so that we move forward and backward in relation to the picture plane.

In any case, whether *tituli* or modernized version of them by Matthias Grünewald or El Greco, the result of the inscriptions is that the total picture, the representation proper, demands to be left aside for a certain period of time in order for the spectator to focus on its textuality. Only subsequently, after the necessary reading, can one view the total picture again. But, of course, this “total” picture has changed in the interval. It is now infected with textual meaning. Thus, the sort of viewing produced by the intrusion of the “semiotic enclave” is what one might call the “syncopated” viewing of a picture; that is, it causes a syncopated vision and a constant interchange and exchange of vantage points.¹¹

Panoramic scanning (panning)

The following reflections are exemplified by pictures which belong in the sphere of Western art. Yet, the perlocutionary force of inscriptions is, doubtlessly, of paramount importance in a sphere that is outside the competence of this writer: Oriental art. In Chinese and Japanese scrolls, ideographic writing normally imposes an up-down scanning of the picture (usually landscape or still life) on the literate viewer—since the reading generally proceeds up-down and from left to right. Similarly, in the Semitic world, one can generally assume that observers of paintings scan them from right to left just as they would read a written page.¹²

An artist like Max Beckmann may have been aware of the prevailing Western tendency of reading a picture from left to right, as one reads a book. In one of his paintings, *Prunier* 1944,¹³ he amused himself by painting the French words *SORTIE* backwards, as *EITROS*, with an arrow indicating the right-to-left direction, that is, the direction of the words on a transparent pane of glass. His main objective might have been the imposing on his spectators of a right-to-left reading of the picture that was diametrically opposed to built-in Western practice.¹⁴

If textuality governs the deciphering of pictoriality even though it is absent from pictures, how much more so when it intrudes in them!

Panoramic rotation is to be observed as early as pre-Renaissance and quattrocento periods. Thus, an *Annunciation* by Fra Angelico in the Church del Gesu in Cortona shows an angel “announcing” verbally to the Virgin Mary: *SPS. SIT. VIRTU. ERABIT TIBI*, written normally from left to right.

The answer of the Virgin, however, is written upside down from right to left: *ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI*. Moreover, the announcing by the angel is made in the form of an open triangle into which the answer of the virgin is inserted, thus:

SPS. SIT.
ECCE ANCILLA DOMINI
VIRTU. ERABIT TIBI

Thus, the inscriptions are icons of voices. The triangular shape is the representation of a megaphone or of a Renaissance *portavoce*. The insertion of the Virgin's words into the triangle represents the immediacy of her answer.

Similarly, in *The Death of Saint Dominic* (figure 1), from the *Life of Saint Dominic* series on a famous predella now at the Louvre, the dying saint utters a sentence that is written upside down on the canvas and from left-to-right: *CHASTITATEM PARETE VMILITATEM SERVA(N)T. PAUPER-TATEM VOLUNTARIA POSSIDETE*. (Through serving with humility and worshipping chastity, you will attain or possess the will to holy poverty.)¹⁵

FIGURE 1

The Death of Saint Dominic



By permission of the Louvre, Paris.

The inscription coming out of the mouth of the dying saint offers this aspect to a frontal observer:

CHASTITATEM PARTE VMILITATEM SERVA(N)T. PAUPERIATEM VOLUNTARIA POSSIDETE.

Such an observer, therefore, has to rotate his gaze by an almost 360 degree turn in order to decipher the words.

Over and beyond the rotating, panning view they enforce on us, the fact that the inscriptions are written upside down has a signification of its own. In the first picture, the inversion of the script signifies that the two characters represented, the angel-messenger sent by God and the still-terrestrial Virgin, do not belong to the same universe: one is from heaven, the other from this world. Moreover, the reversal of the Virgin's "letters" means, simultaneously, that her words are being read by someone who does not belong to the normal universe, someone capable of capturing human language and human intentions in their terrestrial form and of "setting them right." The reversal of the script is a sign of human/divine communication.

In the case of the dying Saint Dominic, the reversal of the letters expresses the idea of death, the idea that the saint already belongs in the world beyond and that his dying words come from yonder world to the listening and weeping monks, his brethren.

What we have here is not exactly "subversion" but, perhaps, the idea of the divine sphere (the idea of the ineffably "beyond") as an "upside-down world" which takes the form of an upside-down inscription.¹⁶ In this case, "subverting" the script meant imprinting a trace of the divine into the painting, into representation itself.

In the baroque period, many inscriptions imposed a vertical reading. This was the case, in particular, in a picture by Philippe de Champaigne which will be studied subsequently: *The Supper in the House of Simon*, in which a Hebrew inscription has to be read from down-up.

In the sixteenth century, during the first wars of religion, when the thematic of the "upside-down world" was of special importance,¹⁷ an illustrator of a Grimmelshausen pamphlet entitled *Die Verkehrte Welt (The Upside-Down World)* created a front page title which was, indeed, upside down (figure 2).

Title page from *Die Verkehrte Welt*, Sixteenth century.



Jumping over centuries (the scope of this study does not allow for a complete chronological survey of inscriptions in painting), I reach the period of the mid-nineteenth century, dominated, in France by the doctrine of realism and the personality of Gustave Courbet. This doctrine and personality were certainly among the predominant influences which affected the work of young Cezanne. Thus, a portrait of his father reading a newspaper shows the title of the paper written upside down.¹⁸ Reading the title implies that the observer “pans” or rotates his head according to a 360 degree revolution in order to read the title of the newspaper. But this rotation in itself is a sign. In the century of “realism,” the reversal is a sign of the realist doctrine. For the sake of achieving “realistic” effects, words written on objects *have to* appear upside down whenever the objects are inverted.

Inscriptions in cubist painting often impose a similar kind of contortion on the reader. This is especially true during the period of the so-called *papiers collés* in the work of Braque, Picasso or Juan Gris.¹⁹ In this case, the objective is not realism but rather provocation: the pasted papers are tantamount to the introduction of noise into an orderly picture—and the

viewers of the period were offended by the idea of random or noisy objects being incorporated into “Art.” The scraps of printed papers were, of course, also used as a sign: a sign of the new aesthetics integrating randomness and order, *objets trouvés* and a strictly controlled “composition.”

Picasso made use of this technique of provocation, even in some of his later compositions. Thus, in 1941, he sketched a woman’s face, distorted according to his manner of the period, on an upside-down page of the newspaper *Paris-Soir* so that the headline on the page *Qu’en pensez-vous, Madame?* (*What do you think of it, Lady?*) serves as the upside-down title of the picture.²⁰

A great modern artist who uses upside-down words in order to create special effects is Max Beckmann. The deciphering of many of his inscriptions imposes a 360 degree panning on the spectator. This is the case in such paintings as *Temptation*, analyzed below, and in many others.²¹ At least ten of Beckmann’s pictures contain such inversed inscriptions. This predilection for inverting may actually be a sort of parody or pastiche of the procedure used by non-figurative abstraction.²² It may have to do with the famous discovery of the abstract sign by Kandinsky. In his autobiography, this painter had told how, returning at sundown to his studio darkened by the invading twilight, he espied a magnificent picture that he could not recognize. On drawing nearer, he realized that it was a landscape that he had inadvertently placed upside down on its scaffold.²³ Beckmann, in his ironic way, may be forcing his public to “upside down” his pictures as a sort of disparaging commentary on Kandinsky’s “great discovery.”

But there is more to it than that. One of the great achievements of Beckmann, perhaps his greatest tragic painting, is the one entitled *Birth and Death*.²⁴ Reading this picture means a complete overturning of it during the process. Indeed, it was probably painted in the “right” direction, then set upside down on the easel and finished as an “inverse” picture. One wonders whether Beckmann—who was also a great connoisseur of Italian art—may not have been inspired by the example of Fra Angelico’s *Death of Saint Dominic*.

Thus it can be said that all the upside-down inscriptions in the work of Max Beckmann direct us toward this ultimate “death” in painting, which is also, to a large extent, a death

of painting; they are a preparation and prefiguration for a climax in which all normal or “straight” viewing of a picture is distorted or abolished.

The apex in this procedure of “painting reversal” is reached in our post-modernist period with the work of the contemporary German painter Georg Baselitz. Everything—trees, landscapes, people—is painted upside down. It is only due to one specific sort of inscription that it is possible to tell how the picture should be hung on the wall (namely, upside down): the signature of the painter himself. Again, we have here a type of picture in which the setting right of the trees and landscape can only be done against the “right direction” represented by the signature of the painter. Thus, the “right direction” means going against the painter himself—or, perhaps, the painter signifies by this that he is “against the right direction.” This, too, represents a very interesting technique of provocation quite different from the cubistic *papier collés*.

Ideological subversion (the illocutionary effect of inscriptions)

Hans Holbein the Elder: *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*

In a painting at the Hamburg Kunsthalle, *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple* (figure 3), probably painted between 1510 and 1515, Hans Holbein the Elder inserted a Hebrew inscription, a part of which can be deciphered (see detail). It reads *BERESHIT BARA/VE HA-EL HOSHIA/* (illegible letters). The inscription hangs on the nave wall of a roman-esque-type church (the “Temple”) and is illuminated by rays emanating from the Virgin’s aureola.

The first two words are, of course, the first two vocables in the Hebrew Bible: “In the beginning (*BERESHIT*) God created (*BARA*) the heavens and the earth.” As to the second part of the sentence, it seems to express the idea that God *EL*, here: *L*, gave succor to humanity. It means something like, “And then God helped.” This fragment of the sentence is not to be found in any canonical Hebrew text and the “Hosanna” hymn in the Christian mass does not correspond exactly to this formulation. Nevertheless, the important thing is that the fifth word *HOSHIA* (succored) is based on the same root as the name Jesus, in Hebrew *IESHU*. Thus, it is an allusion to Jesus, who is said to have been created by God “from the first” to save humanity.

FIGURE 3

Hans Holbein the Elder, *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple*, detail below.



Photos and permission by the Hamburger Kunsthall Museum.



To whom was such an inscription addressed? Who could read it? The Jewish converts who entered churches, perhaps—for it is a fact that the Jewish community of Northern Germany was living a precarious life, from persecution to persecution, in the beginning of the sixteenth century, certainly, also, the learned clerics and theologians of the period. Both categories could see in this beautiful painting an “archaeological” proof of the antiquity of Christ.

I see this montage of a real and pseudo inscription as an attempt to subvert the fundamental dogma of the Hebrew

Bible, perhaps the only Jewish dogma, namely that God is *One*. We have here the idea that the “concept of Jesus” was inscribed in the Bible “from the beginning”—and perhaps also the cognate idea that “Jesus was already created” when God created the world. This “inscribing” was done by a militant Christian bent on proving the divine nature and the divine character of the genealogy of Jesus, and by an artist who intended to show the church that he was a “scholar-painter” and knew how to use “archaeological” notations to demonstrate Christian truth.

Philippe de Champaigne: “Thou shalt not make images”

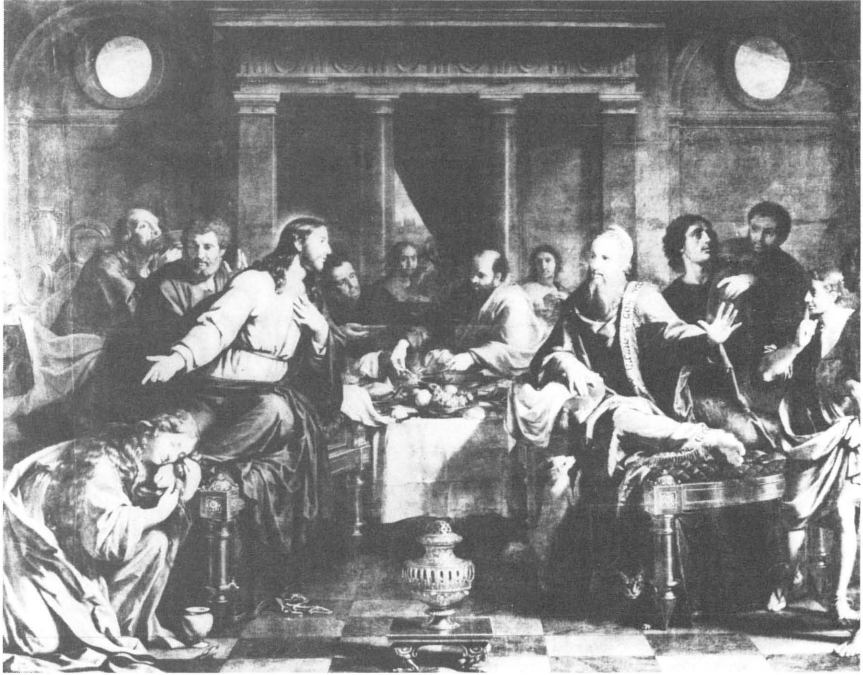
As was said above, there exist representations which negate their own essence as representations and do it through the agency of an inscription. As we observed earlier, the most famous of these is certainly Magritte’s picture entitled *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (*This is Not a Pipe*), which Michel Foucault deemed important enough to warrant writing a whole book about.²⁵ Yet, there are precedents to this picture. One of them is to be found in the first age of modernity, that is to say, in the so-called “classical” seventeenth century in France.

This is a picture by Philippe de Champaigne, *The Supper in the House of Simon*, illustrating a passage of the Evangelium (St. Luke Evangelium, VII, 36-48) in which Christ is invited to the house of the rich Pharisean, Simon, and engages in theological discussion (figure 4). The picture bears the inscription “Thou shalt not make images” (see detail of figure 4), the first biblical commandment.²⁶ Thus, in the very midst of a specific representation, an inscription proclaims the illegitimate character of this representation.

Moreover, the inscription itself is “represented.” It is visible as a phylactery, that is, as a Jewish liturgical object which is necessarily endowed with a persuasive force and is itself the expression of the law. Indeed, it is a reminder—for the observer of the painting—of the strictness of Mosaic law concerning representation and, more especially, the representation of human beings and of the human body. This inscription is in Hebrew. It is, therefore, accessible only to those spectators who know this sacred language. This was the case with the Jansenists, the religious movement to which Philippe de Champaigne himself belonged.²⁷ Again, the Hebrew inscription is a sort of archaeological sign.

FIGURE 4

Philippe de Champaigne, *The Supper in the House of Simon*, Louvre, Paris, detail below.



Photos and permission by Réunion des musées nationaux.



Yet what does this proclamation of an iconic interdiction really mean, set as it is in the very center of a historical representation it contradicts? Its meaning must be examined within the context of what one might call “the aesthetics of Jansenism.”²⁸

If it is true that the Jansenists have not written very much or, rather, not very systematically on the question of “the beautiful” in the visual arts, nevertheless they have examined in their aphorisms and *pensées* the question of the legitimacy of painting and representation. Pascal, the greatest thinker of the movement, will provide the paradigms defining the aesthetic attitude of Jansenism.

Pascal’s most often quoted aphorism concerning painting is the following: “What a vanity this sort of painting (is); this painting which elicits admiration through its resemblance with things whose originals we do not admire!”²⁹ (*Quelle*

vanité que la peinture qui attire l'admiration par la ressemblance de choses dont on n'admire point les originaux.)

Pascal's formulation is not devoid of ambiguity. Did he have in mind the "vanity" of all painting, of the medium "painting" or only of the genre "which elicits admiration through resemblance with things"? A second ambiguity derives from his use of the word "things": did he mean "objects" and "the world of objects"? And did he include in it men and men's bodies? The meaning of the aphorism changes if one shifts the semantic emphasis from "painting" to "that sort of painting which . . .," and according to the various acceptations of the words "vanity" and "resemblance." The word "things" is also ambiguous. Yet its ambiguity may seem meaningless in the context of Jansenism: as a Jansenist, Pascal certainly saw both the world of things and of men as corrupt, so that any representation of them was necessarily infected with their corruption.

Yet in the case that "things" applies solely to the painting of objects, Pascal's *pensée* may be a sort of wordplay which needs to be made explicit: in the baroque age, the painting of objects belonged chiefly to the genre of *vanitas*. The *vanitas* (the word is culled from Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity!") were pictures that depicted objects as symbols of the ephemeral character of human life and human knowledge: dilapidated old books, wilted flowers, brittle crystal glasses, musical instruments lying in a heap beside human skulls, etc. If, indeed, this is the meaning of *vanité* in Pascal's sentence, the sense of the aphorism is the following: "What a vanity these *vanitas* are, because they elicit our admiration through resembling objects one does not admire."

It seems strange that a Jansenist philosopher should have intended to condemn precisely the pictorial genre that aims at showing the essential vanity of the flesh and the human world. And yet, this is not totally impossible. In the first place, a hedonistic conclusion might have been derived from the contemplation of too many *vanitas*: if life is as ephemeral as these pictures reveal it to be, the conclusion might be that it is better to choose a *carpe diem* philosophy than the austerity of prayer.

Another aspect of the *vanitas* may have been repugnant to the Jansenist philosopher: they might be construed as a glo-

rification of death. “Viva la Muerte!” after all, is an old Spanish scream. Was not one of the exercises advocated by Loyola (the arch enemy of Jansenist thinking) the holding in one’s hand of a human skull while praying?

However it may be, it is possible to shift the semantic emphasis of Pascal’s sentence on the “resemblance of things.” In this case, Pascal’s critique of painting is global and concerns the general concept of mimesis. What Pascal is rejecting, then, is mimesis as a legitimate means of pictorial creation.

Another theological factor that may have contributed to Pascal’s rejection of resemblance and mimesis was the Mosaic law. Pascal wrote the following letter to his beloved sister, Madame Pèrier:

Whatever the resemblance between created Nature and its Creator—and notwithstanding the fact that the most minute and puny things in the universe represent the perfect unity that is only to be found in God through their own unity—it would be illegitimate to show the least respect for them. For there is no thing more abominable in the eyes of God and men than idolatry, for in idolatry one gives the creature the honor that belongs to the Creator. The Holy Scripture is full of the revenge wrecked by God on those who were guilty of it that is, of idolatry and the first commandment of the Law which contains all the other [commandments] forbids above all things to adore images.³⁰

In the *Pensées*, the prohibition against making idols is mentioned more than once, especially in aphorisms 597 and 498, where it is written that “the true Jew and the true Christian” should have been “without prophets. . . without a king, without princes, without sacrifices, without idols.”³¹

It is remarkable that it should have been this First Commandment, in Hebrew “lo ta’asses lekha pessel” (לא תעשה לך פסל וכל תמונה), that was placed in the center of the picture by Champaigne, on a phylactery which enhances still more its holy character. There is little doubt that it is there as the result of an intentional act and not simply as a decorative element. The mere fact that it is readable proves this. The inscription was placed there as the result of an interior conflict in the soul of the painter: the Jansenist Champaigne knew that historical and religious pictures were not well regarded by his Port-Royal friends and that figurative, iconic pictures—pictures based on resemblance with

human shapes and human physiognomy—should, accordingly bear the mark of their own negativity.

Another picture by Philippe de Champaigne bears this “conflictual” mark. It is *Le Dernier de César*, in a private Parisian collection. It illustrates the passage of the Evangelium (Luke, XX, 21-26), in which Christ is confronted by “provocators,” Phariseans who want to trip him up and claim to need his advice as to whether a citizen of the Roman Empire should pay his dues to Caesar. Christ’s answer, “let us give Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God,” has become proverbial.

Like *The Supper in the House of Simon*, this picture presents a great number of Hebrew inscriptions. One of these represents an attempt at describing Jewish phylactery or *tefilin*. It is painted in the form of an inscription on a medieval Jewish headdress covering the head of the Pharisean standing at the right of Christ (figure 5). Champaigne knew that Jews in prayer were wont to attach a biblical inscription over their forehead, but he did not know exactly what a *tefilin* looked like. He also knew that the inscription had to be the main Jewish prayer, the Shema Israel. It is indeed the Shema Israel (Listen Israel!) that is represented on the cap of the Pharisean. He knew also that this prayer was essentially a reminder of the absolute unity of God (“God is One”)—of the absolute non-representability of this God—the only dogma to speak of in the Jewish faith. Thus, in Jansenistic times, representation had to be carried out against a background that constantly reminded one of the impossibility of “representing.”

FIGURE 5

Detail from Philippe de Champaigne, *Le Denier de César*.



Private collection, Paris.

Inscription as subversion of a theological dogma: pictograms

In both Judaism and Islam, there exists a type of inscription which can be seen essentially as a device which aims at subverting a fundamental interdiction: the interdiction of making images of living creatures and especially of human bodies. Both religions prohibit the idea of iconic representation (at least the making or drawing of objects in the shape of man and beast). Islamic and Jewish artists, then, are not permitted to draw iconically; the reproduction of the human body is forbidden to them. “Thou shalt not make images,” as Pascal said, is the first law of all laws.

What was the rationale behind this prohibition of images? Actually, the letter by Pascal, quoted above, defines this rationale quite exactly: one should not build a beautiful idol, the icon of a beautiful human body, because it would be a distortion of the imageless concept that is God and also because it would mean distracting men from the main object of the true cult, precisely this abstract and “shapeless” God. An icon, a body, is tantamount to a definition of God. Similarly, Koranic Allah is primarily a “conceptual” God, and his awesome beauty should not be discarded for the false beauty of idols.³²

Thus, the Semitic artists are condemned to work exclusively in the realms of architecture and decorative art. Indeed, one would look in vain for statues and figurines representing bodies in the art of the first centuries. And yet, the Semitic “artists of the book” devised one procedure for “turning” or subverting the essential prohibition which characterizes both Judaism and Islam: the pictogram, that is, the picture made with letters.

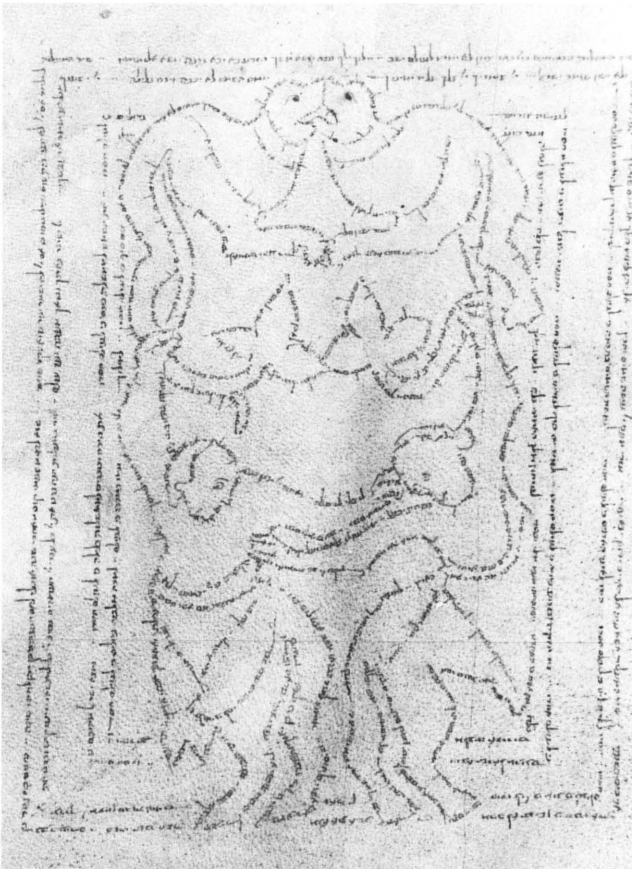
Thus, an Islamic pictogram shows a human face composed with the four letters of the name Allah (figure 6). Similarly, a medieval Jewish pictogram shows apes and men fighting. (figure 7).³³

FIGURE 6



FIGURE 7

Pictogram, fourteenth-century Spanish



By permission of the National and University Library, Jerusalem.

Through the genre of the pictogram, the Semitic artists proclaim that they do not “draw” but “write” faces and bodies. They are theologically “safe,” and the law is also safe: it has merely been subverted through a sort of trick, but this trick is a legal one.

There would be much to write on what one might call “subversive legal procedure” in Judaism and Islam. In the Christian view, “tricking” God through such an emphasis on the letter (no pun intended!) of the law would certainly be considered a Pharisaic abomination. In Semitic theology, this is perfectly “kosher,” perfectly according to norm.³⁴

This character of “legal” subversion by pictograms deserves to be discussed. In the fairly large body of specialized literature concerning the picto- or microgram (this includes a special issue of *Visible Language*),³⁵ very little has been written on the theological motivation behind these astonishing drawings. It seems fit, therefore, that a word about their essentially subversive character (and their theologically recognized and accepted “subversion”) should be said.

Subversion of an inscription by the pictures which contain it: “In the Beginning was the Word”:

The inscription bearing those words, the beginning sentence of the Saint John Evangelium, is found in Max Beckmann’s great *Temptation* triptych in the Bayrisches Museum in Munich. Once again it is written in reverse and can only be deciphered through contorting one’s head (figure 8). The picture seems to have been inspired by Flaubert’s *Temptation de Saint Antoine*,³⁶ and it is no wonder, therefore, that literacy connotations should be suggested by the actual presence of written words. Nevertheless, the inscription has not been put there merely as a sign of a “literariness.” It tells something of its own. In particular, it tells something through its position in the picture—it seems to have been trampled underfoot. The “saint” is sitting on the scroll, as though he had discarded it and had renounced reading it. Obviously possessed by voluptuous thoughts, he is staring at the opulent flesh of a semi-nude woman, the temptress, who is seated beside a mirror.

At first sight, this inscription seems to have a philosophico-theological function and to relate to the problematic first defined at the beginning of this introduction: Which comes first? Does the word come before the picture? The words of Saint John doubtlessly pose the question of origins. Simultaneously, the inscription is certainly set there for the sake of irony. Words are depicted as powerless against sex. Beckmann’s inscription also negates the power of the biblical word. The word cannot help the artist who confronts the power of the female body, the might of the “great female God” who presides over our destinies.³⁷

Thus, in *Temptation*, we have an inscription that is negated by a picture—and not an inscription which negates a representation as in the case of the Champaigne picture. Beckmann knew that he ran counter to the whole classical tradition in which pictures were seen as the exact translation of texts.³⁸ This was against the tradition represented, for instance,

FIGURE 8

Max Beckmann, *Temptation* (central panel) with detail below



Staatsgalerie moderner Kunst, München.



by the baroque French artist Nicholas Regnier and his idea that painting is “the invisible verb made visible.” (figure 9)

Genius, also painted by Max Beckmann, is a cityscape probably made after a sketch of the Sacré Coeur in Paris, as seen from a hotel window. A girl in her morning slip stretches against a window. Birds are perched on the roof-sills. A gigantic inscription—*GENIUS*—is located in the middle of the composition to achieve its full effect.³⁹ Without the

FIGURE 9

Nicholas Regnier, "Art is making the Verb visible."



Private collection, Paris.

inscription, the painting would merely be a typically Beckmannian cityscape. With it, what we have here, again, is a denegation by a genial painter of his own génie, of his genius.

This is the year 1945—March 1945, to be more exact—when the whole world seemed to be covered in blood in the final death throes of Nazism. Entries in Beckmann's journal mention the constant flight of bombers overhead. One of the entries reads "*Todesangst? Mais oui.*" (Fear of death? But yes.)⁴⁰ The genius of an artist did not carry much weight in the apocalyptic Europe of 1945.

GENIUS designates a pair of opaque spectacles, empty eyes which, perhaps, seem to the painter to be a reflection of his own eyes which have seen death and mass-death. One thinks

of a passage in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Great Gatsby* in which a pair of empty spectacles, like empty eyes, watches over a valley of death.⁴¹

In our post-modern times, the pop artist Roy Lichtenstein, very like Max Beckmann, used a comic strip-like balloon inscription to debunk his own "genius." The work, painted in Lichtenstein's usual comic strip style, shows a girl looking in admiration at a canvas on its stretcher that we cannot see. It is entitled *Masterpiece*, another expression which, in the eyes of Lichtenstein (as before him, in those of Max Beckmann), perpetuates the romantic cult of the painter as "superhero," as deriving his talent from heaven—an expression which the picture intends to debunk and to subvert.⁴² The title expresses the beautiful romantic lie about the supposedly superhuman "great artist," but the truth behind this lie is the naked reality of art-market values and prices. Lichtenstein, like Beckmann, is aware of the "economics of genius."

Thus, the subversive irony of the two artists is directed, first and foremost, against the merchants who have pitched their tents inside the Temple of Art. In our time, the subversion inherent in inscriptions set against representations also aims at the art market itself. It is directed toward the myth propagated by the art market itself. Demystification as well as subversion, or perhaps demystification through subversion of the visual, has become the ultimate objective.

- 1 Cf. *Les mots dans le dessin*, Catalogue of the 87th exhibition in the Cabinet des Dessins, Musée du Louvre 20 June-29 September, 1986.
 - 2 A number of studies have appeared on the question of "Titles"; see, for instance, in the series Urbino Pre-Publications in Semiotics and Language, *Pour une sémiotique du titre*, by Leo Hoek, No. 20/21, gen. febr. 1973/ Seri D.
 - 3 On this subject, see Claude Gandelman, "The Semiotics of Artistic Signatures: a Peircian Study." *American Journal of Semiotics*, Vol. 3, No. 3 1985, pp.73-109.
 - 4 Cf. "Eléments pour une sémiologie picturale," in *Etudes sémiologiques*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1972, pp.28-30.
 - 5 To some extent, it could be maintained that what Derrida has done is to apply iconographical—nay, iconological—methods to the written text, thereby turning it into a picture to be deconstructed.
 - 6 On the subject see especially Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, Schocken, New York, 1974.
 - 7 To borrow a concept evolved during the sixteenth-century mannerism in Europe.
 - 8 See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford, 1960; J.R. Searle, *Speech Arts*, Cambridge University Press, 1969; O. Ducrot, *Dire et de pas dire*, Hermann, Paris, 1972., etc.
 - 9 *Illum oportet crescere, me autem minui*, from the *St John Evangelium*, III, 30: "It is fit that he should grow, I myself should diminish" or perhaps "For him to grow, I must diminish" is a sort of wordplay: the Baptist, as the observer knows, will be indeed, diminished—beheaded by the Herodian hangmen.
- The total picture shows the painter Grünewald standing in the right-hand wing of the triptych as Saint Sebastian pierced with arrows. Thus, through the inscription, the painter alludes to his essential character of a "martyr" (from Greek *martos*), that is, "witness" of Christ. We have here an utterance in which the painter "subverts himself": that is, negates his own quality of "artist," and proclaims himself essentially "chronicler" or "documentor" of Christ's greatness.
- 10 Reproduced, for instance, in Katherine Baetjer, *El Greco*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981, pp.32-34.
 - 11 It is a surprising paradox that modern non-figurative abstraction implies *continuity* in the viewing of a picture rather than *syncopé*! But this goes, perhaps, hand in hand, with the essential research for stability—that is, for the stability of the sign—that characterizes modern abstraction. On this question, see the conclusion of Claude Gandelman, "The Metastability of Signs/Metastability as a Sign." *Semiotica* (28), 1/2 pp.83-103.
 - 12 On this subject see Claude Gandelman, "The Scanning of Pictures." *Communication and Cognition*, June/July 1986, Vol. 19/1. pp.3-26.
 - 13 Reproduced in *Max Beckmann*, catalogue of the Haubrich Kunsthalle, Cologne, 19th April to 24th June 1984, p.112.
 - 14 On the subject of Beckmann and the cabala, see F.W. Fischer, *Max Beckmann: Symbol und Weltbild*, Munich, Fink, 1972, especially pp. 53, 65,67ff., 82, 87, 100 f., 108, 167ff., 175, 184.
 - 15 This fits well the personality of this saint, the founder of the first mendicant order in the thirteenth century.
 - 16 On this subject see Claude Gandelman, "Monde Renversé et Carré Sémiotique." *Neohelicon* XIV/1, 153-175. I am presently engaged in preparing a monographic study on the subject. Observe that medieval dialectics, with its "logic square" based on contraries and contradictions (the logic square delineated by Boethius, for instance) unites the idea of world and

anti-world, world and upside-down world.

17 Not only was the Luthern Reformation seen as the "setting right" of a world upside down, there took place in those days a true social revolution in which "the last became the first": the famous "peasant republic" of Thomas Muenzer.

18 Reproduced in *Cézanne* (London, Phaidon, 1947) figure 7. The title of the newspaper is *L'ÉVENEMENT*. Another very intersecting inscription by Cézanne is the name *ACHILLE EMPERAIRE PEINTRE* written in big stenciled letters as though on a crate in the portrait of Achille Empereire (ibid., figure 6).

19 See, for instance, Picasso's *Still Life With Fruit and a Violin* (1913) with the title *..URNAL*. The lower half of the picture is actually a newspaper page pasted upside down on the canvas. Reproduced in Edward Fry, *Cubism*. I am citing from the French edition of the book (Bruxelle, "La Connaissance," Exclusivité Weber), Plate V.

20 Reproduced in *Pablo Picasso: Sammlung Marina Picasso*. Catalogue of the *Haus der Kunst*, Munich, 14 February 20 to April, 1981 (Prestel Publisher, Munich), p.217, Figure 366.

21 Among these, let me note—and, as I observed above, this is far from being an exhaustive list: *Stilleben mit Margariten*, "Still Life with Daisies," 1921; *Grosse Riviera Landschaft*, painted in 1940, which contains the words, *Le Temps*, name of a French daily paper of the time; his Carnival triptych, at the Iowa City Museum, which shows the name "Amsterdam" written upside down on what seems to be a piece of cardboard. All of these are reproduced in *Max Beckmann*, ibid., respectively, pp.211,81,97.

22 Thus, the perlocutionary in Beckmann also has an illocutionary "met-apictorial" side.

23 Kandinsky's autobiography entitled "Reminiscences" in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, Vol. 1 (1901-1921) ed. K.C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (Boston, G.K. Hall, 1982) pp. 355-382. See especially 369-370.

24 Reproduced in *Max Beckmann: Retrospektive*, ed. by Carla Schulz-Hoffman and Judith C. Weiss (Munich, Prestel Verlag, 1984), p.269, figure 82.

25 Cf. M. Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982). The picture, in a Belgian private collection, is reproduced on the cover.

26 On this painting see Claude Gandelman, *Le Regard dans le Texte: peinture, écriture du Quattrocento au XXe siècle*, Paris, Klincksieck, 1986, pp.95-118.

27 Jansenism was also a sort of Christian revival of the Hebrew tongue. Thus, Sainte Beuve wrote of Antoine Le Maistre that he "devoured Hebrew books" and insisted that Nicole knew both Greek and Hebrew to perfection; cf. his *Port-Royal*, Paris, Hachette, 1922, Vol. I, p.392. Numerous Hebrew words are cited and discussed in the *Pensées* of Pascal.

28 Comparatively few studies have been written concerning this question of Jansenist aesthetics, and some of the writings devoted to the question even negate the idea of such a concept. Werner Weisbach, the author of one of the important books on baroque art, *The Baroque as Art of the Counter-Reformation (Der Barok als Kunst der Gegenreformation)*, wrote in another work of his "It would be an impossible task to trace a specific taste nurtured in Port-Royal and the attempts that were made to prove the existence of a Jansenist aesthetic are pure fabrications, based as they were on the inflating of the isolated opinions of individual Jansenist writers." *Franzoesische Malerei des XVII. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, V.H. Keller, 1932, pp.226-288, my translation).

In "Le Jansénisme et l'Art Français," *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Port-Royal*, Bernard Dorival, the author of a recent monograph on Philippe de Champaigne, is less categorical: "There are aesthetic ideas and a specific aesthetic attitude. . . . Yet one should not speak of Jansenist aesthetic proper. Nobody in Port-Royal ever exposed artistic conceptions in a systematic manner. One would search in vain for an equivalent of the famous letter written by Saint Bernard (Apologie a Guillaume de Saint Thierry) in all of their writings. In their abundant literature, there are only rare and summary judgments on art. Yet these are enough to delineate a common attitude when confronting the Beautiful—if not an aesthetics." (p.8, my translation)

29 Cf. the 1950 Pléiade edition of Pascal's works; aphorism No. 116.

30 "Car quelque ressemblance que la nature crée ait avec son Créateur, et encore que les moindres choses et les plus petites et les plus viles parties du monde représentent au moins par leur unité la parfaite unité qui ne se trouve qu'en Dieu, on ne peut pas légitimement leur porter le souverain respect, parce qu'il n'y a rien de si abominable aux yeux de Dieu et des hommes que l'idolâtrie, a cause qu'on y rend a la créature l'honneur qui n'est du qu'au Créateur. L'écriture est pleine des vengeances que Dieu a exercées sur ceux qui en ont été coupables, et le premier commandement du Décalogue, qui enferme tous les autres, défend sur toutes choses d'adorer les images" (*Pléiade*, *Ibid.*, p.262.)

31 "sans prophètes. . . sans roi, sans princes, sans sacrifices, sans idols . . ." (*Pléiade*, *ibid.*, p.975).

32 A whole Talmudic treatise, *Avoda Zara*, expounds all sorts of techniques for "annulling" the idols or the beautiful fragments of idols found by religious Jews near Greek and Roman settlements.

33 From a fourteenth-century Jewish *Mahzor*. The National and University Library. Jerusalem.

34 In Jerusalem, there exists a special institute, Makhon Kol, where researchers, rabbis, and laymen, are entrusted with the task of *legally* "turning" Mosaic law. Instances of inventions which enable modern living to "adjust" to Mosaic law are sophistications like "the non-stop elevator" or the "Sabbath-automatic electrical switch"—devices which function during the Sabbath so that no human hand has to switch on the light or open the doors and press the buttons of elevators. In the age of robotics—the mind boggles at the possibilities it opens—everybody will be able to live a *comfortable* Jewish life.

35 On Jewish Pictograms see Stanly Farber, "Micrography: A Jewish Art Form." *Journal of Jewish Art*, Vol. 3/4. 1977, pp.12-24., and a response to it by Leila Avrin in the same journal, Vol. 6, 1979, pp.112-117. Leila Avrin and Colette Sirat produced a bilingual joint publication, *La Lettre Hébraïque et sa Signification/Micrography as Art*. Paris, Editions du CNRS, 1979.

On Islamic micrography, see Jerome Peignot, *Calligramme*, Paris, Dossiers Graphiques du Chêne, 1978, especially, pp.70-799, and above all, Abdelkebir Khatibi, *L'Art Calligraphique Arabe*, Paris, Le Chêne, 1976.

On Christian pictography, the latest book is an exhibition catalogue by Jeremy Adler and Ulrich Ernst, *Text als Figur: Visuelle Poesie von der Antike bis zur Moderne*, Exhibition of the Herzog August Bibliothek No. 56, 1st Sept. 1987 to 17 April 1988. See also the enormous bibliography at the end of the catalogue and my (forthcoming) review of it in *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, Paris. An author who does not appear in their bibliography is Paul Zumthor: "Carmina Figurata," in his *Langue, texte, énigme* (Paris, Seuil, 1975), pp.25-35, an essential work on the subject. For a more general overview, see the special issue, Pattern Poetry, *Visible Language*, volume XX, no. 1, (Winter 1986).

36 On this subject, see Clifford Amyx, "Max Beckmann: The Iconography of the Tryptichs." *Kenyon Review*, No.113, 1951, pp.613-623.

37 On this subject, see Friedhel W. Fischer, *Max Beckmann: Symbol und Weltbild* (Munich, W. Fink, 1972), pp. 110,136ff., 150ff.

38 See Rensselaer W. Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: The Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York: Norton and Co., 1967).

39 That is, it can be described as "gigantic" in relation to the total scale of the picture.

40 Cf. Max Beckmann, *Tagebuecher: 1940-1950*, Munich, Vienna, Langen Mueller, 1979. Entries for 1944-1945. *Genius* is mentioned for the first time in March 1945.

41 "About half way between West Egg and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, so as to break away from a certain area of land. This is a valley of ashes - a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke, and finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey, men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. . . . But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift suddenly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently, some wild wag of an oculist set them down there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens and then sank down himself into eternal blindness. . . . But his eyes, dimmed a little by the many paintless days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground." (F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, p.183.)

42 The picture is reproduced in many works on Lichtenstein or pop-art; see, for instance, *Art about Art*, Catalogue of the Whitney Museum Exhibition by that name, p.54.

43 Max Beckmann could still be considered an exponent of the Neue Sachlichkeit, or "New Objectivity" movement, at the time when he painted *Genius*.

Inscriptions are legible, prominent public displays intended for reading. Two major groups of pseudo-inscriptions are identified: disguised inscriptions, which, at first glance, do not convey a text but appear to be real things such as embroidery or pearls, and proper pseudo-inscriptions, which may have clearly delineated individual letters that taken together, make no sense.

A study of Renaissance pseudo-inscriptions could uncover little-known facets of the encounter between East and West. That Venice and the Netherlands were, respectively, centers of Arabic and Hebrew pseudo-inscriptions coincides with the scholarly publishing concerns which they were known for during the Renaissance.

Some Oriental Pseudo-Inscriptions in Renaissance Art

Moshe Barasch

It is with some diffidence that I have chosen the topic of this talk. I have never worked on inscriptions, though, like every art historian, from time to time, I have had occasion to puzzle over one. But I have always been attracted by the problem of ambiguity in art, and I should like to think that meditating over pseudo-inscriptions may help us to better understand that broader problem. I hope I may dispense with the ritual of an introduction, and with establishing a “framework,” without which, we are often told, no lecture can make sense. Pseudo-inscriptions may belong to the realm of the ambiguous, but the questions they pose are obvious. And the first one, of course, is simply: what is a pseudo-inscription? Or to be more explicit: what are the criteria that make us define a combination of letters or words as a pseudo-inscription?

I shall begin with a well-known example, the wooden doors of the Cathedral of Le Puy (figure 1). Le Puy was an important stop on the road to Jerusalem. As early as the eleventh century, the monks of a neighboring abbey (Savigny-en-Lyonnais), which straddled the *via podiensis*, were given the right to collect donations from pilgrims on their way to Le Puy, Saint-Gilles, Rome and Jerusalem. The wooden doors of Le Puy are remarkable for many reasons, not least for the ornamental border in Kufic script. Even today, I am told, the doors are called *portes arabes* or, in a vaguely oriental sense, *portes de cèdre*. The ornamental border is a short inscription, continuously repeated. It has long attracted attention, and the few scholars who have studied it have proposed different readings.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a French scholar deciphered the involved and sharply-cut script as meaning “There is no other God beside Allah,” the Muslim profession of faith. In 1934, another scholar suggested a different reading: “This is what Allah desired,” a formula used to ward off ill-luck and the evil eye, and therefore, as Walter Cahn noted, particularly well suited for a doorway. A few years later, still another

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FIGURE 1

Wooden doors, Cathedral of Le Puy



Photograph by the author.

scholar offered a third reading, namely “All power to Allah.” It is totally beyond my powers to form an opinion as to which reading is correct; I have enough trouble in simply following the arguments of those scholars (some as involved as the lettering itself).

Detail of wooden doors, Cathedral of Le Puy



Photograph by the author.

Yet without being able to read the inscription, and only on the basis of discussions, I am bound to reach two conclusions. The first is quite simple: the interlacing pattern of the door in Le Puy does make literal sense. It is an inscription. No one who has studied the doors has suggested that what we see here is “just an ornament,” as nowadays we are so often fond of saying. And even without being a specialist, you can recognize in these borders of the doors the sign for “Allah” (figure 2), which we know also from other works of European art of the same period.

The second conclusion is less simple: it is a hypothesis rather than a reading. It seems impossible that the artist who carved the doors, and the public which accepted them, could read, or make sense, of the sharply-cut, complex shapes. Le Puy, we remember, was a center along the Crusader road, where those warriors of the faith might rest and pray. The period to which the doors belong is a turbulent one of religious tensions in the southeast of France, which gave full impetus to the Crusader imagination. Can we imagine a sermon against the infidel being preached in the Cathedral of Le Puy while praises of their god are so openly flaunted on its very doors? I know, of course, that in the late-eleventh century, people were not entirely ignorant of the fact that Kufic is a form of script and not just a brilliant ornament. Yet I cannot but agree with Walter Cahn that the very substance of the Le

FIGURE 3

Albrecht Dürer, detail of the title page from
St. Jerome's Letters, 1492



Puy inscriptions practically excludes the possibility that they were understood by artist or public.

I cannot discuss this example in detail, fascinating as it is. We must ask ourselves: is the Kufic inscription on the door of Le Puy a pseudo-inscription? Had a learned Muslim by chance reached Le Puy, he would have knelt down in prayer. But Christians, unable to read it and yet aware that these were letters (or shapes derived from letters), would have assumed that it was an ornamentation based on some kind of script. To put the question more broadly: is our inability to understand an inscription a sufficient reason to declare it a pseudo-inscription?

This, of course, is manifestly wrong. There are hosts of inscriptions which most of us cannot read, yet no one would doubt that they are indeed inscriptions. Moreover, artists have often produced perfectly legible inscriptions which they themselves could not read. When Dürer in 1492 designed the woodcut for the title page of an edition of *St. Jerome's Letters* (figure 3), he juxtaposed the Latin translation of Genesis I:1 with the Septuagint Greek and the Hebrew original. Dürer's knowledge of Latin was modest indeed, and he knew neither Greek nor Hebrew. But he was so precise in copying the model which some learned adviser must have provided him that a Hebrew paleographer can reconstruct—

mainly on the basis of the ligatures—the type of script that served him as a model. Similarly Carpaccio, who also knew no Hebrew, carefully and precisely copied a sentence from Job in his *Meditation of the Passion*; it is a sentence which has been interpreted as an Old Testament prophecy of Christ's death. Neither the artist's ability to make sense of the words copied, nor the inability of almost all of his spectators, makes us doubt that we have a genuine inscription in front of us.

To attempt a definition of a pseudo-inscription we must recall for a moment what a proper inscription is. John Sparrow, in his study *Visible Words*, defines an inscription as a sequence of words designed to be read with the eye. If we just grasp a sentence (for instance, by having it read aloud) without visually perceiving how it is displayed, we have missed something that is essential for an inscription. For the purpose of defining a regular inscription, Sparrow's formulation will do. But if one wishes to outline the domain of the pseudo-inscription, one must look for additional characteristics of the proper inscription. The pseudo-inscription differs from the proper one not with regard to visibility—both are addressed to the eye. The differences between them will become manifest when we consider other features of the regular inscription.

One feature, quite manifestly, is legibility. An inscription, whether commemorative or explanatory (the two major types), must be legible. An illegible commemorative inscription, for instance on a tombstone, does not commemorate; an illegible explanatory inscription, such as may be found on a medieval *titulus*, does not explain.

Another feature is less measurable, but it is not less crucial in evoking in our minds what we normally associate with an inscription. A regular inscription, as we have learned in the course of European history, is something public, meant to be seen and easily grasped. It is placed to be immediately seen and identified as an inscription. On a Roman arch of triumph, the dedicatory inscription is to be found on the continuous surface above the archway, a surface undisturbed by any external form and attracting our glance by its elevated position. On a Renaissance tomb, as on Leonardo Bruni's by Bernard Rossellino, the inscription is carved on a highly visible plaque which, in this case, is even held by angels. Prominence of display and at least the intention of legibility seem essential features. An inscription is usually paraded.

FIGURE 4

Poussin, *Et in Arcadia Ego*



Photograph by the author.

The same principles are at work in the pictorial representations of inscriptions in paintings. In Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* (figure 4), the gestures of the figures, the direction of their gaze and even the pointing finger of a figure approaching the tomb direct the spectator's attention to the inscription. The letters may be weather worn, but it is obvious that they were meant to be easily seen and grasped. If the inscription appears on a scroll, as in Pontormo's portrait of Cosimo de Medici "il vecchio," it is also highly visible (though, in this particular case, not easily explained). And there are, of course, depictions of the very medium of the word—the book—bearing an inscription. In Botticelli's *Madonna of the Magnificat*, the open book, prominently placed in the composition as well as in the coloration (the white pages attracting the spectator's attention), bears the legible inscription of the very verse that gives the picture its name.

I should like to distinguish between two major groups of pseudo-inscriptions, characterized by their specific deviation from the norms of a regular inscription. In reality the two groups frequently overlap, yet conceptually, as types, they should be kept apart.

FIGURE 5

The Ghent Altarpiece



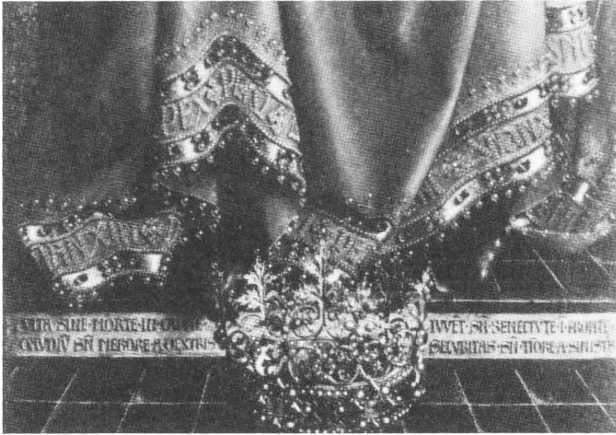
Photograph by the author.

Disguised Inscriptions

The first type of pseudo-inscription I should like to consider here poses an interesting problem of definition. It is perfectly legible, and its contents are what you would expect from a regular inscription. Why, then, should we call it pseudo-inscription? It should be counted among pseudo-inscrip-

FIGURE 6

Detail of *The Ghent Altarpiece*



Photograph by the author.

tions, I believe, because it does not appear as an inscription, but as something else; ostensibly it is not meant to be read—its primary function, at a first glance, is not to convey a text.

Let me start with an example from a work of art not less famous than *The Ghent Altarpiece*. Around the head of God (figure 5) there are three rows of inscriptions. The lettering is paraded; the lines are meant to be read, though to many of us they may not be easily legible. But on the embroidery of God's stole we also find an inscription; it spells out the Old Testament epithet for God, SABAWT. On the mantle of the same figure, we notice on the embroidered borders an inscription reading, in the abbreviations current in van Eyck's period, the phrases **PEX PEGV, ΔNC ΔNAVXIN** (translated: *Rex regorum, Dominans dominatum*) (figure 6). These inscriptions are, in fact, more easily legible than the proper ones arranged in three rows around God's head. And yet they are inscriptions only in a very particular sense. Only if you disregard what they profess to be, namely embroidery, do you discover that they are inscriptions. Modifying slightly Panofsky's seminal concept of "disguised symbolism," we may here speak of "disguised inscriptions." As disguised symbolism, in Panofsky's words, is "the disguising of symbols under the cloak of real things," disguised inscriptions are the disguising of inscriptions under the cloak of such real things as embroidery, pearls, etc.

Early Netherlandish painting abounds in examples of disguised inscriptions. In the depiction of the musical angels of *The Ghent Altarpiece*, the floor tiles also bear abbreviated inscriptions; the letter M for the Virgin Mary, the letters IHS, W and YECYC for Christ, and the cabalistic inscription ΑΓΔΑ. Another painting by Jan van Eyck, the Berlin *Madonna in the Church*, provides a further example. The richly marked border of the Virgin's magnificent red robe contains, embroidered and partly visible, the favorite Mariological text of the van Eyck brothers. (It appears also in *The Ghent Altarpiece*.) Panofsky suggests that this text, based on the Book of Wisdom, VII; 29, 26, explains why the light is here streaming from the north. But whether we here follow Panofsky or not, there can be no doubt that what we see is a disguised inscription.

I shall not go on adducing further examples; those we have seen clearly show, I believe, what the type of inscription is that I have in mind. There are, however, some broader questions which, if I cannot answer them, should at least be asked. The first and most obvious is this: do we find disguised inscriptions where we find disguised symbols? Or, to put it differently: is the late medieval realism which produced the disguising of traditional symbols under the cloak of real things also the origin of disguised inscriptions? Are the motives for both the same? From a modern point of view, it seems easier to accept a disguised symbolism than a disguised inscription. Symbols, we may feel, need not be paraded; they may be slowly discovered, even by later generations, without ceasing to be symbols. (Some Renaissance scholars would even have argued that only those symbols that are difficult to unriddle are true symbols.) But can an inscription, which is so obviously meant to be public and which so openly addresses itself to the spectator-reader, be hidden and disguised without losing its very character? I can offer no simple answer to these questions. What seems obvious to me is that the motives for disguised inscriptions need closer study than what has yet been given them.

Proper Pseudo-Inscriptions

The other type of inscription I should like to present here may be called a proper pseudo-inscription. It is frequently a disguised inscription, though sometimes it may appear also in undisguised form. Its characteristic feature is that it is not legible. The individual letters may be, and usually are, clearly outlined. But taken together, they do not make sense. Hav-

FIGURE 7

Mantegna, *Triumph of Minerva*



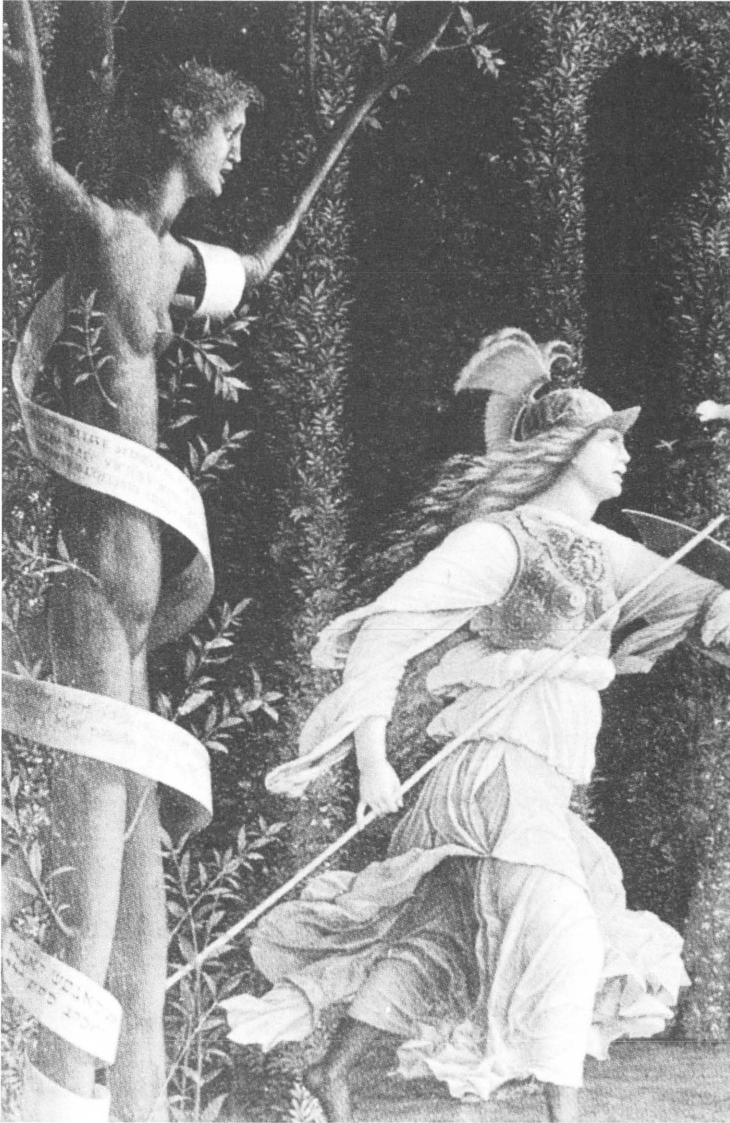
Photograph by the author.

ing Sparrow's definition of an inscription in mind, we should say that a pseudo-inscription of the latter kind is *perceived* by the eye, but it cannot really be *read*, let alone read aloud.

Our first example, of great interest in many respects, is Mantegna's *Triumph of Minerva*, in the Louvre (figure 7). The painting so much abounds in inscriptions that one cannot help feeling something of the spirit and tradition of the medieval *titulus* continuing its life here. It is not surprising that most of the inscriptions identify figures or pronounce their virtues, and, accordingly, are fully legible. The *virtus deserta* at the extreme left of the picture is a laurel tree with a woman's head. A ribbon wound around the trunk of the tree bears a trilingual inscription—in the three holy languages: Latin, Greek and Hebrew (figure 8). The Latin is legible, but the Greek and, particularly, the Hebrew do not seem to make sense. The square Hebrew letters stand out more clearly than those of the other languages, and we can identify every single one. But, in spite of many efforts, I could not make a word or meaningful sentence out of them. After much hesitation I have to conclude, then, that they are just a collection of Hebrew letters intended to look like an inscription. This is particularly interesting since Mantegna was an epigrapher of sorts. The copies of ancient inscriptions rendered in his paintings were judged sufficiently reliable to be included in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. As to

FIGURE 8

Detail of *Triumph of Minerva*



Photograph by the author.

his knowledge of Greek, one must have serious doubts, and he certainly knew no Hebrew. It seems unlikely that he was copying an existing inscription, and he probably did not have a good adviser. Why did he paint these letters?

The best known tradition of illegible inscriptions is the so-called pseudo-Kufic. In many fifteenth-century paintings (and also earlier), one can see the beautiful, angular Kufic letters more or less faithfully copied. But while Mantegna's Hebrew pseudo-inscription is openly displayed, the Kufic inscriptions are usually disguised. An interesting and rich example is the *Martyrdom of St. Denis* by Malouel and Bellechose, in Paris. The draperies, painted in bright colors and pervaded by a decorative, almost heraldic spirit, have richly ornamented borders; on these borders, Kufic letters appear in brocade. As opposed to the Le Puy doors, where the Kufic letters are correctly represented and form legible sentences, the "Kufic" on the draperies of the *Martyrdom of St. Denis* is not precise, even as regards the shape of the individual letters; they certainly do not form legible sentences. They are *pseudo*-inscriptions. One cannot help asking why so much work, care and skill were invested in depicting these semi-words. Was there not a desire to "authenticate" the scene by lending it an oriental air?

To give an authentic oriental air to biblical scenes seems, in fact, to have been one of the reasons for depicting pseudo-inscriptions. An interesting example is provided by one of the most famous paintings in European art, *The Merode Altarpiece*. Ever since Panofsky published his *Early Netherlandish Painting*, in 1953, and made *The Merode Altarpiece* the center of his exposition of disguised symbolism theory, the discovery of submerged symbols in that painting has become a minor industry. It may also yield something to the subject matter of the present talk. The vase on the table of the central panel is decorated with an ornament which, on the vertical stripe, is a curious blend of Hebrew and Kufic letters. Some of the letters can be made out; others are more difficult to define. Surely, however, they do not form an inscription.

But while they do not make sense in a literal meaning, they may still have some significance. The theme of the famous *Annunciation*, as everybody knows, is the growing of the new out of the old, of the Christian gospel from the old law. Should we not interpret the Hebrew-like, orientalizing letters as indicating that the vase stands for the old law? That the white lily of the Virgin's purity blossoms forth from that vase may even be an additional dimension of the painting's overall disguised symbolism.

FIGURE 9

Detail of *The Merode Altarpiece*



Photograph by the author.

Once one's attention is focused on orientalizing pseudo-inscriptions, one discovers many of them, and one cannot help marveling at their variety. The Master of Flemalle himself (or somebody closely related to him) used a similar motif in the *Madonna of Humility Before a Grassy Bench*, in Berlin.

The Virgin sits on the ground, and her mantle is decorated with Hebrew, or Hebraicizing, letters. Two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, A (Aleph) and D (Dalet), can definitely be made out; others are not as clear. But again, the letters do not form a word or sentence. It is certainly unlikely that the square shapes of these individual Hebrew letters originated by chance only, or that they were “just a decoration.” Somebody, at some time, must have been aware of their meaning and embroidered them on the Virgin’s garment.

A most intriguing example, which so far has remained a mystery, can be found in Roger van der Weyden’s *Triptych of Jean de Braque*, in the Louvre, painted in 1451 or 1452. The three half-length figures of the central panel are flanked by St. John the Evangelist and Mary Magdalen. The whole work abounds in easily legible inscriptions, all but one taken from the Gospel of St. John. On Mary Magdalen’s turban, however, there is an inscription of a different nature, distinguished from the rest of the headdress not in color, but in texture. What is here “inscribed” is thicker and rougher than the cloth on which it appears. These signs can, therefore, be seen only in a raking light, and, so far as I know, they have never been properly photographed. F. de Mely, a scholar who combined great learning with a sometimes bold imagination, believed this inscription to be pseudo-Kufic and to read “Wijden.” De Mely’s reading has rightly been regarded with hesitation. Carefully looking at the Magdalen’s turban, I have become convinced that the quadratic shapes, which are so difficult to see, lack the rich floral ornamentation characteristic of Kufic script; they look much more like ritual Hebrew script than like flowering Kufic. Once I even believed I could read the inscription, but meanwhile I have become more skeptical. But to whichever group these features may belong, they are letters of sorts and form an altogether hidden inscription.

Different, and more complicated, forms of orientalizing pseudo-inscriptions are found in a large group of paintings by Giovanni Bellini and his workshop. They differ from the Netherlandish examples I have referred to both in the themes of the paintings and in the language of the inscriptions. All the paintings of the Venetian group represent the Presentation of Christ in the Temple or the Circumcision of Christ. The High Priest who appears in all these scenes usually wears a mantle closely related to the Jewish prayer shawl (*talith*). The actual prayer shawl normally has a brocaded

Vincenzo dalle Destre da Treviso, the *Presentation*

Photograph by the author.

edge, and in all the Bellini pictures this feature is, indeed, prominently displayed. It would be interesting to find out why the High Priest wears such a prayer shawl—whether this, too, is a means of authentication or just another example of “*Trachtenrealismus*” (as Hercules was depicted wearing the armor of a knight). However that may be, Bellini and his assistants could never have seen in reality the ornamental patterns painted on these borders. In the London *Circumcision*, the pattern of intricately interlaced bands with rounded endings, though alien to proper prayer shawls, reminds the beholder of complex Arabic calligraphy.

This may be only a general air, but another example is more specific. In the *Presentation* in Padua (figure 10), attributed to Vincenzo dalle Destre da Treviso, the High Priest wears a garment that seems to be a combination of a Jewish prayer shawl and the traditional drapery of a Christian saint. This garment also has a brocaded headpiece, and what we see on it is certainly Arabic script in a cursive hand. Reading from the bottom upwards, the first two letters that can be made out read “la” the Arabic ending for “ours.” The first letter of the next word in an “L.” It may be that further study, with better photographs, will uncover a real Arabic inscription.

Venice, as we know, was widely open to influences coming from the Islamic East, and the ties of the Bellinis with the

Orient are too well known to require further comment. Gentile Bellini's *Turkish Boy* clearly shows that the Venetian artist was familiar with Arabic script. But what could have been the motive for applying Arabic, or semi-Arabic, script to the High Priest's mantle? Was it the same reason that made Giovanni Bellini depict the High Priest in a Jewish prayer shawl (an object of much later origin), namely, the desire for authentication? (It is interesting to remember that, according to Sanuto, the Sultan's emissary who invited one of the Bellinis to Constantinople was a Jew.) Arabic inscriptions never appear on actual prayer shawls, but in Venice they may have been considered as a properly oriental feature, and were, therefore, combined with the prayer shawl.

The observations made are too fragmentary to warrant the drawing of any conclusions. They may have shown, that the study of pseudo-inscriptions in Renaissance art promises some insights into the history of art; they may also uncover an interesting and little-known facet of the encounter between East and West during the Renaissance. Even from our few examples, it seems, one can deduce that in the fifteenth century orientaling pseudo-inscriptions appear mainly in two centers: in the Netherlands and in Venice. One can perhaps even discover some differences between the two centers, though this is a matter of impression only: in the Netherlands, Hebrew seems to prevail among the oriental languages, or alphabets; in Venice, Arabic is more frequent.

We know nothing of the actual origins and immediate background of these pseudo-inscriptions. Who were the advisors? What were the models employed? What did the patrons, and the public in general, think of these strange features? None of these questions can be answered satisfactorily. Of the general background, however, we know a little more. We remember, for instance, that both the Netherlands and Venice were at that time centers of scholarship in oriental languages and in the secret wisdom of the Chaldeans and related peoples. When the printing press emerged as a major cultural factor, texts in oriental languages, Hebrew and others, were published mainly in the Netherlands and in Venice. Pseudo-inscriptions in Netherlandish and Venetian paintings are never mentioned, so far as I know, in histories of printing, yet it does not seem too farfetched to assume that the same tradition of scholarship which made possible the first editions of oriental texts also shines through in the depicted pseudo-inscriptions.

We cannot help asking, why were these pseudo-inscriptions produced? What was the motivation behind these strange features, and what purpose were they meant to serve? We must resist the temptation to offer an answer. Even superficial study convinces one that the reasons must be as complex as they are fascinating. But much remains to be done before we can venture a generalization. Even now, however, we can say that they reveal an attitude. Oriental pseudo-inscriptions were obviously not conceived as a means of communication (even if a modern linguistic specialist is able to make sense of some shapes or letters). They were not meant to be read as a dedicatory inscription on a Roman arch of triumph was meant to be read. But they intimate a mystique that must have surrounded them—both as ancient documents and simply as text, as words carrying a symbolic significance beyond what they actually say. The very appearance of letters, particularly in ancient scripts, conveys the sense of symbolic confirmation. Even if illegible, they inspire the spectator with veneration for the word, for the text, a veneration which is so crucial for western culture in general and for the Renaissance in particular. They make us feel how powerful was the belief that “In the Beginning was the Word.”

This paper was originally presented as the opening lecture in a colloquium titled “Visibility and Readability” at Ben Gurion University in Beer-Sheva.

The term “representation” in this paper is taken in the sense that was given it by the grammarians and logicians of Port-Royal. The semiotic experiment attempted here explores the fluctuations of meaning produced by interferences between textual and figurative representation within one picture. Examples such as the portrait with its presentation of the subject and the topographical city plan with its representation of space by drawing and typographic naming of places provide the foundation for a more in-depth exploration of the Ex-voto of 1662, by Philippe de Champaigne. This painting is an exceptional illustration of the interference between image and text.

*The Order of Words and the Order of Things in Painting*¹

Louis Marin

In the following lines, I am attempting a “semiotic experiment” along guidelines which were already defined in the seventeenth century by the Port Royal grammarians and logicians. This experiment consists of investigating the complex fluctuation of meaning produced by the interferences between texts and images, inscriptions and figures, in one and the same surface of representation.

If one takes as a guideline for the whole problematic the general theory of the sign as it is formulated in the pages of the *Grammaire General de Port Royal* and, above all, the *Logique* of Port Royal—two texts which constitute a sort of chart of modern rationalism—one is struck by the fact that this theory of signs follows a double model, iconical and scriptural.² The two paradigms that these works use to illustrate their definition of sign/representation are the geographical map and canvas painting—more specifically, portrait painting. When the Port Royal logicians intended to illustrate the traditional difference between the natural and the conventional sign, the additional paradigm of the picture-reflection of man in a mirror was introduced as a model for the first type while the written word remained as a model for the second.

There would be much to write on the question of the overlapping and shifting among the various sign classifications and the representation-functions they suggest.³ I will, however, restrict myself to a couple of remarks concerning this subject.

The model provided by geographical maps—those drafted by draftsmen and engineers who were sympathetic to the outlook of Port Royal—seems appropriate to exemplify what one might call the transitive dimension of the sign: every sign represents something every sign makes present something that is not, or no longer, present. Thus, the map of Paris puts under my eyes, through a sort of *hypotypical*

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iconicity, a Paris I have never seen, and will never see, as the *real* configuration of the thing itself. Thus, a draftsman named Gombouse placed in the upper left-hand corner of his map an actual landscape entitled “Paris viewed from Mont Martre,” and in the lower right-hand corner, delineated small human figurines on a fictitious hill from which they “contemplate” Paris as they would, indeed if such a hill had existed in the neighborhood of Charenton. (Actually, they view the map as we do.) Most of the Paris buildings are represented through their eye-level plane and not through their picture seen from above.

Nevertheless, to return to the exemplification devised by the Port Royal logicians, when we confront such a map we say “this is Paris,” and quite rightly so. Therefore, every sign/representation achieves a “reality effect” or “truth effect” whose textual equivalent is “this is”⁴

However, the portrait as a model exemplifies the reflexive dimension of the sign. Indeed, every sign is tantamount to a presentation of the very function of representation. In the very instant when it renders present a being that is absent (or dead), the sign doubles or reflects the operation of representation itself.

The character of representation-presentation of the sign is especially obvious in the portrait. In it, the “I” represents itself but also *presents* itself to itself through the sign which stands for it—as it does, more generally, in every sign/representation. Every sign causes a coming to the fore of the concept of subject.⁵

Yet whether one considers the portrait or the map, the values of the traced line, of the sketch and of the intention behind the sketch proclaim the significant intention behind its inscription, or its “scription.” Not only is the map a delineation, a drawing, it becomes a true representation only when it is invaded by written names which identify it as a sign/representation of the very spots which are their actual loci. It is, therefore, not surprising that the logicians of Port Royal, who followed the mainstream of Western philosophical tradition, are opposed to natural signs—whose model was the visible image of a man in a mirror—in favor of the conventional sign whose relationships are arbitrary and depend on social convention; it is not surprising that

they should have placed at the top of their typology of signs the conventionality of the visible and written word, this drafted representation of a language instance supposed to represent thought.

In this sense, the “portrait” exemplified by the well-known portrait of Saint Cyran by de Champaigne partakes, more than the map, of the mirror-image quality of a man looking at himself in a mirror as well as of the inscription quality of a name written on a plane surface (though the map was called portrait or *pourtraict* in the seventeenth century). And this is less the result of a theoretical procedure (the portrait of a man is his natural sign, his visible name as it were) than that of a procedure of inscription, delineation and design, *pourtraicting* or *pour-traiting*, one might say. Thus, I must remark upon a detail which is far from being devoid of meaning—at once semiotical, historical and philosophical: what is written on the Saint Cyran portrait is not the name of the model but his age (62) at the time of his death (1643). Thus, a portrait as sign/representation given us as totally faithful, or even *truthful*, to its model (the transitive dimension) always signifies a certain relationship to death (its reflexive dimension).⁷ This is a point that would warrant a longer development in another study, especially with reference to Port Royal.

I would now like to verify the truth of the above observations with a double experimentation accomplished through an investigation of a specific painting, a painting where conventional signs of language—written words—intervene, appear or intrude in the midst of painterly representation, in the midst of iconical representation. They are “words within painting” and located in a type of painting one would like to call “inverse”: that is, in which painting itself carries its representational intention to such extremity—or accomplishes its transitive capacity (“to represent something”) so perfectly—that its reflexive dimension (“to present the action of representing through representation itself”) becomes somewhat blurred as though *things themselves* were present on the surface of the canvas, things in a state of absolute presence in painting.

This double experimentation corresponds to a double objective, both theoretico/philosophical and historico/ideological. First, it will enable a precise and critical interrogation of the question of representation in painting or of painting qua

representation, that is, of the functioning of the symbolic function of painting. Its method is the placing of painting in a double situation of crisis, one in which a heterogenous element is introduced into the picture: written words, which belong to another semiotic substance. They are an interrogation of the "same" through the "other," an interrogation that is all the more intense as the reader is not conscious of the written characters when he reads them but only grasps the ideas *sign-ified* by these letters organized into words; and yet the reader has access to such ideas only through the mediation of the signs.⁸ Such is the paradox of the presence/absence of the sign so vividly perceptible throughout classical literature. It is this paradox which is necessarily brought to the fore by the inscription of words in the very midst of a picture, since representation in painting, whatever its mimetic capacity may be (or perhaps because of this capacity), realizes exactly a process that is inverse to reading: through its freezing or fixing our gaze on the representational sign, it conceals from it the represented thing.⁹

Another paradox is the coming to the fore of what one might call a representative apex or climax within representation itself and through the phenomenon of representation. This climax is caused by a sort of internal excess of representational functioning, by the becoming, as it were, "haywire" of this representational machine. We have here a hypertrophy of the figurative functioning which is tantamount to an interrogation of the "same" by the "same." We have here a sort of blind man's bluff played by the representational sign. Far from causing the recognition of the represented thing within the sign which represents it, far from pretending that the sign does not exist in order to attain representation, the represented thing seems to be *in praesentia* in the picture itself. In both cases, the critique of representation presents itself as a *crisis* of representation.

As we said above, the second objective of this experiment is historical and ideological. It is inscribed within the framework of a history of symbolic forms, in the sense of the terminology of Cassirer. The examples that will be presented, and which look somewhat marginal at a superficial glance, aim at proving that the rational process which produces them in our imagination (to speak, again, like Cassirer) is historically inseparable from their own exaggeration and transgression. Thus, the intusion of written words in pain-

terly representation, their forcing us to read signs inscribed in a simulacrum of real presence, manifests the reappearance of a residue that the representational apparatus constantly tries to control or master: transcendental forces, the irreducible otherness of desire, hunger for the absolute, the irreducibility of indetermination, the intrusion of a deathly violence into the art work—a violence which contemporary philosophical reflection attributes to the sublime, to the post-modern, etc. . . .

The Picture

I am writing here about a very distinctive picture. It belongs to the classical tradition, to French culture and to the sphere of Port Royal—that is, to the specific locus where the theory of the sign/representation was elaborated in the first place. This theory, to this day in France, is the necessary and unavoidable historical and philosophical reference for scientific thinking dealing with language and the sign. It is a painting by Philippe de Champaigne (figure 1), painted in 1662, which evokes and glorifies a miracle which had visited his own daughter.¹⁰

The Champaigne picture is an *ex-voto*—in other words, a demonstration of the way in which a painting as picture, as representation, shies away from itself in order to become a spiritual instrument for adoring God and becomes a practical means toward accomplishing spiritual exercises. It is a demonstration of the way in which mimetic representation deconstructs itself into the sacred narrativity of an image which transforms itself into a text.

How is this done? Through the mere inscription of a clearly and explicitly readable text within a painting, a text which hinders contemplation not *of* the picture but *in* the picture itself, so that it causes it to oscillate between a sign that merely signifies and an image which represents.

Being inscribed within the picture, the readable text acquires an anti-natural visibility which functions as an anti-visibility and antagonizes the overt visibility of the painting. But conversely, it is through the inscription of a text in its own space that the visible image acquires an unnatural legibility. And this, in turn, prevents the legibility of the text from becoming a mere readability and imposes on the written signs the opaque quality of abstract images.

FIGURE 1

Philippe de Champaigne, *Ex-voto of 1662*



By permission of the Louvre, Paris.

Even though we view the image as a transparent, transitive representation of things and beings, we cannot fail to observe the presence in it of excessive and incoherent elements, of enigmas. Notwithstanding the fact that a rigorous, almost cubistic, organization organizes a complex geometry of straight angles, triangles, rectangles and cubes, each placed in a situation of conflict in respect to the other, a conflict emerges beneath the appearance of identifiable objects. Hyper-realistic details spring out all over the scene: nails are stuck in the floorboards, sinews of wood appear in the boards, paint peels off the back wall. This produces in the very midst of the linearity of the geometrical structure—an effect of reality that is at once powerful and desultory.¹¹

Light seems to come from the upper left-hand corner of the painting and is regularly distributed over the various object surfaces. The ray of light, however, falls from above without illuminating any specific object. It is at once within representation and outside it, present in it without having a representational function: it appears arbitrary.

Two “narrative figures” are placed harmonically in the picture, two Port Royal nuns, who are represented with folded hands. Yet one of them is kneeling while the other one is reclining on a chaise longue. Thus, only one of the two shows the totality of the external signs of prayer, the folded hands and the kneeling posture.

The Text

These incoherences and enigmas refer us to something more that is located in the left-hand corner: a text. This perfectly readable text consists of three parts which are graphically as well as visually distinct; each part is differentiated from the other through indents or through the style of the letters.¹²

The first part is: “To Christ, the sole physician for the souls and bodies.” The second part, linked to the first syntactically though not typographically, is a very long sentence: “Sister Catherine Suzanne de Champaigne—after a 14 month fever which terrified the physicians through its persistence and the seriousness of its symptoms; when half her body was paralyzed, Nature exhausted, and her physicians had given her up, having joined in prayer Mother Catherine Agnes, in one instant of time recovered her perfect health—offers herself again” that is, “to Christ.” The third part is a sentence com-

pletely separated from the second one through an alinea. It is syntactically and typographically autonomous: "Philippe de Champagne, this picture of such a great miracle and testimony of his joy, he placed it beside (God)" that is, he "presented it to (God)" in the year 1662."

The use of Latin and of its specific syntactic order enabled the writer—not Champagne but Antoine Arnauld—to compose his text according to a disposition which fulfills both the syntactical and the scriptural demands.

Three remarks on the text: First, the sentences "to Christ. . . Sister Catherine Suzanne de Champagne. . . offers herself" and "Philippe de Champagne. . . presented in 1662" delineate a space of signification of which they form the grammatical (syntactic) and typographic (inscriptionary) frame.

Second, the first of these two sentences is performative in character: performatives are indicative utterances which present themselves as descriptions of events but are endowed with the extraordinary property of accomplishing the event they are describing through the very utterance of the description itself.¹³ Indeed, it is at the very moment when Sister Catherine utters the words through which she offers herself again to Christ that the act of offering is accomplished. The present tense of the indicative mode that is used would be sufficient in itself to indicate that. Yet, by giving the verb the third person form and, even more so, by writing down the complete formula, the act of inscribing as well as the surface on which it is written acquire a final value.

The second expression is constative: it designates the historical presence of an event which took place in 1662 and in which Philippe de Champagne presented ("beside" the text) the picture of the perpetual offering of herself made by his daughter, Sister Catherine Suzanne.

This detailed description of mine may be deemed too finical. Nevertheless, it seems to me justified by the mere fact that the Latin text was written by the great Arnauld, the author of the *Logique de Port Royal*.¹⁴

Third, the first two sections of the written text are inscribed syntactically as well as typographically within a framework that is constituted by the performative utterance, "To Christ

... Sister C. . . offers herself.” The words that are framed-in narrate a story, the story of an illness and of its miraculous cure. This being so, the global meaning of the text is somewhat ambivalent: the miracle appears both as the cause and as the effect of the offering and of the vow. Yet the narrative is part of the formula. It is integrated into the spatial totality of the text. The events that are recounted are no longer the elements of a past history but are now those of a relation *in praesentia* between the nun and Christ. The gift made to the church by the painter is shown as a permanent gift. The narrative in the past tense becomes an integral part of the *in praesentia* formula expressing the vow. Thus, narrative representation becomes a permanent *presentation*.¹⁵

The last section of the text (the second sentence) is a signature of the work. This signature is not exterior to the picture since it designates “this picture,” the whole painting, through its use of the demonstrative pronoun. Yet it is itself within the picture since there is no rupture between the picture and the text. It is really the transgression of the signature function in a painting. It is not a sign of property but the expression of a feeling (joy) and the designation of an operation that is constitutive of the total picture—not as a construct fabricated by an author but as an “offering.”

Interferences

We must now turn to the interferences between the text and the picture proper. The text is inscribed in the very surface of the painting, in the plane of representation itself. By virtue of this fact, it makes visible a sphere that can be described as representing one of the conditions of the possibility of the whole representational apparatus.

Concerning the typography, analysis arrives at opposite results. The written characters belong to the sphere of the visual and yet function as “transparent” elements during the reading (are not perceived per se but are transcended toward a referent). Nevertheless, they need a support in order to be written, a “real” and neutral support which enables their visibility. On the contrary, the represented objects are visible from the outset, but visible on a surface which is at once real and invisible (the canvas) and also transparent (is used as the plane for representation).

The introduction into the plane of representation of both written letters and represented objects causes a mutual subversion of inscription and representation. The plane of representation is made visible and is perceived as such. The inscription surface becomes invisible or transparent; it is not perceived as such. From now on, the text floats between two kinds of space: represented space and real space. It is written on a liminal zone which it simultaneously designates. It is the constitutive limit of the representational apparatus. And yet, conversely, the figures do not cease to be represented but are transformed into signs that “sign-ify” to us and have become the vehicles for another meaning and of “presence” or presentations situated “this side” of their own representations or beyond it.

Two additional remarks: concerning the role of light as a composition device and the additional ray of light: their corresponding element in the text is the story of the illness and the formula of the vow. But this correspondence is inverse. Whereas a performative speech act frames-in the text syntactically and typographically, the ray of light ruptures the unity of the composition through its falling from above and in the center from an external source.

Concerning the proper names and the portraits: the iconic equivalent of the proper name is the portrait. In the text, three proper names are mutually linked by a remarkable series of identities: Mother *Catherine Agnes*, Sister *Catherine Suzanne de Champaigne*, Philippe *de Champaigne*. Religious and biological filiation coincide in the name of the miraculously saved woman. Only the name of Christ remains isolated. Two names have iconic equivalents: the portraits of the Mother and the Sister. Two figures are missing, that of Christ and of Philippe de Champaigne. Christ, who is metaphorically the subject of the picture as “physician of the bodies and the souls”—the source and the author of the miracle—remains invisible, present only through his signs, the cross and the ray of light. As for Champaigne, he is *metonymically* “inside” the painting, through the signature which represents his authorship, and through the part of the text which attributes the authorship to him.

A third stage: the internal functioning of representation mediating between text and picture.

The reclining nun looks out toward a specific objective. If

one should extrapolate in the direction indicated by her gaze, one would not fail to encounter the first words of the text, "Christo uni Medico." She is represented not as engaged in reading this portion of the text inscribed on the left of the picture but as the name of Christ to whom she offers herself and to whom she is praying in the representation. We have here an exchange operation between text and picture. In the text, she offers herself to Christ; in the picture, she receives from Christ the miraculous gift of health.¹⁶

On the left, a visible and legible text is displayed as if it were on a page, but this page is the painting. On the extreme right, an object is visible resting on the chair, a closed book, visible but not legible. It is an image, a sign, of a possible reading, just as the visible text is the sign of a real vision; the sign-picture is the sign of a representation of this vision.

In the midst of the representation proper, in the lap of the reclining nun, one can see an object which lies open near the folded hands. It is a small portable reliquary which is half open. It contains a relic but is at the same time a pious picture. Thus, in her lap, a picture is open like a book—not closed like the book on the right, but open. It is an image that is not seen, just as the book is not read, but is, nevertheless, recognizable. It is a reliquary—that is, a sort of intermediary sign between text and picture. It conceals and shows, simultaneously, a thing-sign and a sign-thing: a relic.

Is not the whole picture the transformation of painting into a relic, that is, into a sign of efficaciousness which transcends its own representation? And this transformation is achieved by the text, especially through the last sentence in the text.

Thus, this tiny object placed in the very midst of representation designates the production and generation process of the global representation, both text and picture, through its relationship to the book and to the text. A mere element inside the totality, it signifies the generating of the totality, the double and mutual transformation of a text into a picture and of a picture into a text.¹⁷

Returning to the historical problem that I addressed at the beginning of this study, what I have attempted to do here is to show how a series of semiotic interferences, of semiotic overlapping, is underpinned by a theology of Nature and

Grace, of Man and the Divine, both Cartesian and Augustinian in character, at a turning point in seventeenth-century France. In other words, I have tried to show how representation is underpinned by a specific ideological, historical, social, cultural configuration.

In classical *epistémé* one can detect a counter-intention which is in part the manifestation of an archaic disposition—perhaps of an “archeology of knowledge”—in the representational dimensions of language, discourse, image and figure. But this disposition is also the manifestation of the internal permanent crisis, that of modern representation around 1662. It is this crisis that produced a form of space which belonged to neither the order of the picture nor the order of the textual. This space testified to the existence of an “other” reality which was read by Port Royal as the manifestation of the “radically other,” of the God who, like his Grace, is permanently *absent-present*.¹⁸

The votive function in painting

The Champaigne picture was sometimes designated as *Two Port Royal Nuns* or *Mother Agnes and Sister Suzanne de Champaigne* before being given its present title, *The Ex-voto of 1662*. This indecision itself is significant. The genre of the *ex-voto* is part and parcel of a very long and archaic tradition which cannot be described here in its full historical development.¹⁹ Only two of its essential features may be brought to the fore. The first is the inscription, the written trace which marks “the thing” presented or offered as an offering or as a “grace,” as a sign of gratitude for a personal gift received from God. The other is the character of “double” in the *ex-voto*. As often as not, the *ex-voto* is the iconic representation of a part of the body of the person who made the vow. In other words, the *votum* is both the religious ritual of the offering and the object which is offered. Yet, being unable to offer the actual organ which had been the object of the miraculous cure, the donor offered the *double* of his hand, eyes, belly, sex, breasts, ears or feet. The idea of the *ex-voto*, therefore, oscillates between the inscription and the “double,” between the written “name,” which designates the intention of the offerer, and the “double,” which functions as a simulacrum of the miraculously-saved organ and as a sort of magical metonymy.

Things in painting: the study of the *ex-voto* by Champaigne allows us an indirect approach into this theme precisely because of the votive function triggered by the text written on the left of the picture. This is a function which transcends both the representational apparatus which underpins it and its metaphoricity, whether mimetic or analogical, arbitrary or conventional.

Finally, I would like to return for a moment to the question of the forms and structures of the representational sign to emphasize that the written characters which resolve themselves into words on the surface of the picture have an essential function: causing a *state of crisis* within the representational sign concerning the formal and structural conditions of possibility of this sign. They do this through their exhibiting of these conditions, that is, by exhibiting the very representation (the picture) these conditions made possible.

Through the writing inscribed within the picture, it is the plane of representation which is brought to the fore. But it is a plane which is “denegated” by represented space and by the figures that it contains. Such writing is tantamount to a showing of the limits of representation. Such a showing is not merely the framework within which the inscription functions but its total sphere of intentionality. It causes a fragmentation of the apperceptive consciousness, which is a witness of the repression to which representation is submitted while it is also an active agent in the global enforcing of this repression. This is the very definition of Freudian “denegation.”

- 1 The reader will recognize this title as an allusion to the book of Michel Foucault *The Order of Things*, a book which contributed a great deal to a definition of what Foucault himself called the "classical epistème."
- 2 *Les Mots et les Choses*, Paris Gallimard/N.R.F., 1971.
- 3 Cf. *Logique de Port Royal*, 5e edition, Paris, 1963. See especially First Part, Chapter I and IV, Second Part, Chapter XIV, and Third Part, XIX; *Grammaire générale et raisonnée*, 1e edition, Paris, 1660.
- 4 Cf. L. Marin, *La Critique du Discours*, Minuit, Paris, 1975, pp.799-113.
- 5 *Logique de Port Royal*, p. 205.
- 6 Cf. Louis Marin, *Portrait du Roi*, Minuit, Paris, 1981, p.10.
- 7 *Logique de Port Royal*, p. 58.
- 8 Cf. Louis Marin's study on this same portrait in *Etudes sémiologiques, écriture, peinture*. Klincksieck, Paris, 1971. See also Jean Orcibal, "Frontispices graves de Champagne," *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Port-Royal*, 1952, and the note by B. Dorival, Philippe de Champagne et Port-Royal, Catalogue, 1957, pp.15-16.
- 9 Cf. Francois Recanati, *La transparence et l'enonciation*. Paris Le Seuil, 1979, pp. 15-22 and pp. 31-34.
- 10 Cf. L. Marin, *La Critique du Discours*, p.58.
- 11 Cf. B. Dorival, Philippe de Champagne 1692-1674, Laget, Paris. 1976, pp.147-151, as well as my own study in *Mélanges Mikel Dufrenne*, 10/18, Paris, 1975, pp.409-429.
- 12 On this question, see B. Dorival's analysis of the spatial treatment of the *Ex Voto*, op. cit., p. 149.
- 13 The Latin text reads thus:
*"Christo, Uni medico
animarum et corporum—Soror Catharina de Champagne post febrem 14
mensi
Cun contumacia et magnitudine
Symptomatum medicis formidatam
intercepto motu dimidii fere cor
poris, Natura jam fatiscente medicis
cedentibus, junctis cum Matre
Catharina Agnete precibus puncto
temporis perfectam sanitatem
consecuta, se iterum offert.*
*Philippe de Champagne hana imaginem tanti miraculi et
laetitiae suae testem
apposuit.
Ao 1662".*
- 14 Cf. J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford, 1960; J.R. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, 1969; O. Ducrot, *Dire et de pas dire*, Hermann, Paris, 1972.
- 15 Cf. *Lettre de la Mère Agnès Arnauld, abbesse de Port Royal*, of January 8th 1662, published with an introduction by M.P. Faugere, Vol. II, Paris, 1858, p.31-33. See also the letters X and XI of Mère Angelique de Saint Jean to M. Liverdun (a pseudonym of Antoine Arnauld), June 1662, published by Geniève Delessault in *Bulletin de la Société des Amis de Port-Royal* for 1952, pp. 31-32.
- 16 The typography of the inscription "within" the painting causes a remarkable production of meaning. "*Christ uni medico animarum et corporum*" can be read from the outset as a formula which constitutes Christ as the *destinatory* of the whole painting and subsequently as the complement of attribution of the verbal phrase "se iterum offert." In this sense, he is the

destinatory of the offering of Sister Catherine de Sainte Suzanne de Champagne, a specific figure in the iconic "narrative" engaged in renewing her vows. This remark was suggested to me by Professor Marc Dominici.

17 The structural Greimassian model of the representation can be laid out in the following manner:

1) A destinatory Christ, 2) A subject (the heroine): Sister Catherine, 3) A textual enumeration (within the text) of a series of negative functions: the opponent (the fever, the symptoms, paralysis), 4) Helpers (*adjuvants*) who turn into opponents or traiters (anti-subjects): the physicians, 5) A true helper with a positive function: Mother Catherine Agnes and *prayer*, 6) Victory of the heroine through the final transmission of the valued object: health.

18 Concerning this fundamental operation, a characteristic of what one might call the "economy" of representation, cf. J.L. Schefer, *Scénographie d'un Tableau*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1969; also my own study of Poussin's *The Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert*, in Acta of the Congrès International des Etudes Françaises, Paris, 1971, and my book *Détruire la Peinture*, Galilée, Paris, 1977.

19 Cf. L. Marin, *Critique du Discours*, pp. 365-419 and pp. 359-360.

20 On this subject, see "Ex-Voto ou vout de cire," by V. Guy, in *Glossaire archeologique du Moyen-Age et de la Renaissance*, Paris 1887, and D. Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'Archeologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*, Paris, 1907. The book Lenz-Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Ex-Voto, Zeichen, Bild und Abbild im Christlichen Motivbrauchtum*, Zurich and Freiburg, Atlantis Verlag, 1972, must also be mentioned because of the scope of its analysis and the enormous quantity of material it presents.

When Blake undertook the illustration of the 1790 edition of Thomas Gray's Poems for John Flaxman, he did so with characteristic exuberance, providing both illustration and interpretation. Gray represented a contradiction to Blake: while he was a poet of empire aligned with Blake's aesthetic enemy, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Gray also wrote the radical indictment of empire, "The Bard." Blake's illustrations testify to this conflict; and in the "Ode," Blake's designs offer an other language, a contradiction, that deconstructs Gray's conscious—and liberates his unconscious discourse. Blake's visual language champions desire's expression, specifically feminine desire, and resists the repression of that desire urged by Gray in his own controlled poetic diction. Blake's images define the visual field at the margin of discourse as the realm of the unconscious. Further, he demonstrates a number of concepts later argued by Jacques Lacan.

*The Contra-Diction of Design:
Blake's Illustrations to Gray's "Ode on the
Death of a Favourite Cat"*

Mark Lussier

In 1795, Blake received a commission from Richard Edwards to illustrate Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, and by 1797 he had produced an impressive 537 watercolors and had "engraved forty-three. . . large copper plates" (Grant 304; Keynes 3). However, interest in such projects, like those undertaken by Fuseli and others, to create galleries for English poets (two "Milton Galleries" existed in the last decade of the eighteenth century [Paley 131]), waned with the onset of war against Revolutionary France.

In 1798, the artist John Flaxman, to ease Blake's disappointment as well as to offer his wife a unique gift, commissioned him to produce a volume of watercolor designs to accompany the 1790 edition of Thomas Gray's poetry. In the completed work, Blake renders his aspiration for the volume in a verse and design that concluded his labors. As Richard E. Johnson's recent explication makes clear, "The verses . . . depict in a figurative way the activity that Blake imagined for himself as interpreter of Gray: with his 'divine hands' Blake is to elevate the 'pale little flower' of Gray's poetry to a mountain's brow" (73-74). Blake's designs, from a pietistic point of view, will recover Gray, returning Gray to the peak of poetic prominence, but the last line of the closing verse vibrates with ambiguity, for once placed on the peak, it will be Gray's "fault" if his poetry doesn't "flourish" (1.10).

Does Blake actually seek to elevate Gray's poetry? If one reads the language of the designs, the answer is "no." The language of the designs only recovers Gray, that is, covers the poetry of Gray in Blakean interpretation that overwhelms the meaning of Gray's poems from the margins of the text.

Gray, who died fourteen years before Blake began to publish his own work, represented a contradiction to Blake. Gray, with his privileged social position and politically powerful friends, could be viewed as an artist of empire like the painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, yet just as clearly, Blake felt an affinity for the democratic impulses found in a work like

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Mark Lussier, pp.204-219
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Gray's "The Bard." However, throughout his designs for Gray, Blake illuminates and interprets as well as illustrates, and the nature of Blake's creative process can be traced in his designs for "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat."

Blake's designs provide another language that operates against Gray's, pushing Gray's words into a sterile center through a literal act of destruction worked on the 1790 edition of Gray's poetry:

Blake's method of working was similar to that which he had used for Young. Taking the 1790 edition of Gray's *Poems*, "[Blake] kept the title page. . . . Trimming off the margins, he inlaid each page in a rectangular window cut off-center from a large sheet of Whatman drawing paper" (Keynes 3).

Blake literally deconstructs Gray's text (Johnson 73), and the result is a staggering imbalance of word and design. The physical destruction of the text allows Blake to relegate Gray's poetic voice to a marginal position relative to his own designs, ironically by placing the words in a sterile colorless center. This contra-diction or other language of design inverts and perversely transforms Gray's "Ode" from a cautionary tale for "vain" women with "ardent wishes" into a psychological drama whose images map the birth of the perceiving self, the drive of desire, projection and the cultural inscription of feminine sexuality in what Lacan terms "the Name of the Father." Alone, Gray's words attempt to consciously restrain desire while Blake's illustrations function as the unconscious in relation to Gray's words as they work to liberate desire.

Blake's visual psychodrama can be illuminated by an understanding and application of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. For Lacan, the "I" begins in a visual recognition of and identification in a self outside of self, a mirror stage that creates a split in the perceiver at the moment desire receives its "structuration." This "I" is formulated out of the primary language of the unconscious, then reframes this language into representation, which mediates desire's engagement with the world objects. In Ellie Ragland-Sullivan's words, "unconscious language is altogether different from the same language used for conscious discourse"(xvi). In Gray's case, the secondary language of representation is simultaneously a language of repressed desire; and Blake's designs, by addressing the marginal or repressed subject of the poem, liberate

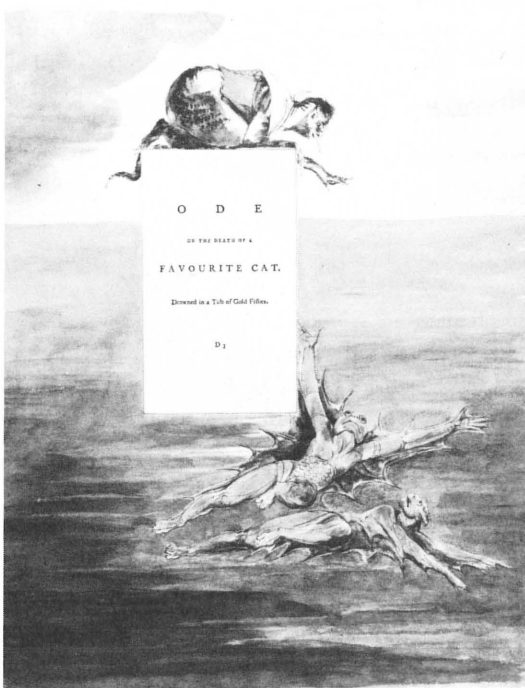
the primary level of Gray's poetic discourse through illustrations that champion desire's expression. Blake's illustrative explosion of color and altered forms functions as counterpoint to Gray's controlled verse. The off-center, rectangular window of the text reserved for Gray is like a tombstone while visionary delight flows around the bound words.¹ The disproportionate space given to illustration, a displacement of Gray's words, testifies to the interpretive nature of Blake's designs, and this interpretive pictorial presence reveals psychological and linguistic processes in conflict within Gray's central metaphor.

"Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat," as Irene Taylor, Richard Johnson, Robert Gleckner and Sir Geoffrey Keynes indicate, links female and feline attributes for amusing effects, with cat as vehicle and woman as tenor. This seemingly trivial poem relates the fall of Selima, Horace Walpole's cat, as she plunges to a watery grave while in pursuit of goldfish. Literally, the poem embodies a fall, a movement Gray reinforces metaphorically. The femme feline's perception of "gold gleam[s]" gives birth to her "ardent wishes" to devour or possess it, for "what female heart can gold despise" (11. 18, 21, 23). The pursuit of such objects of desire leads to the didactic moralizing of the final stanza where "Beauties" should follow "caution," should resist the temptation of "wand'ring eyes and heedless hearts" (11. 37, 39, 40). Why should beauty resist such desire? According to Gray, because all temptations are not "lawful prize" (11. 40-1).

Consciously, Gray's language and central metaphor trope off women's desire for money, a stereotypical projection from within a phallographic discourse, which unconsciously reveals the masculine drive to translate female desire into a commodity within a masculine economy cast in its own image.² Lacan gives voice to such a process, finding that "The father, the Name-of-the-Father, sustains the structure of desire with the structure of law" (Lacan, *FF* 34). Gray's didactic moralizing links repression to moral codes of behavior or the law of society. Blake's interpretive designs empty the money from Gray's poetic materials in an attempt to probe a more universal psychological engagement with materiality itself or what Blake calls vegetative existence. Blake's designs unveil the phallic privileging in Gray's "Ode" to illustrate the drama of feminine desire's drive for satisfaction.

FIGURE 1

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



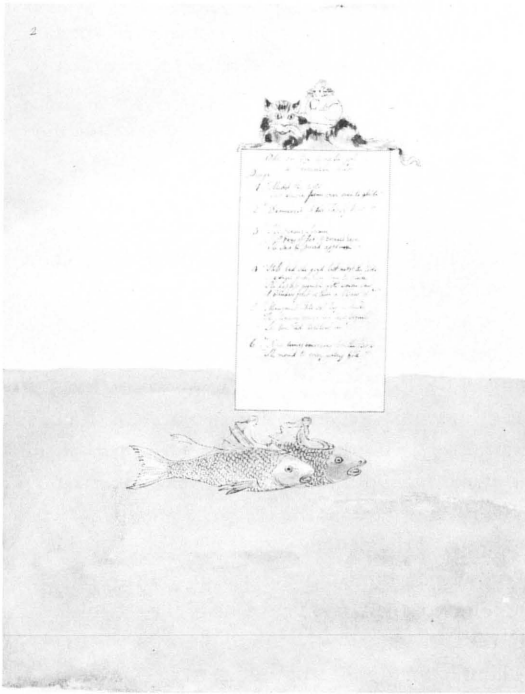
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The first two illustrations have no literal correspondence to Gray's poem as other critics have noted, but they seem to serve at least two distinct functions (figures 1 and 2). The title page universalizes the minute particulars of Gray's verse, and the second design deconstructs Gray's moral allegory. The opening design finds Selima perched atop the rectangular window as she gazes intently down toward the bottom of the page. Selima, a fusion of human and animal qualities, crouches on knees and extends her hand toward the lake below. Unseen by Selima, dark clouds roll onto the design from behind, partially covering the sky and casting shadows over the deep. She wears garments that offer a trace of social attempts to restrict the body's free expression, but the burning eyes, thin smile and reaching hand testify to awakened desire as she seeks objects of satisfaction.

Those objects, Gray's goldfish, also assume figures somewhere between human and the animal as they wear the

FIGURE 2

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



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“amour” alluded to in line sixteen. Here one sees what Nelson Hilton calls Blake’s literal imagination at work; such inspirational counter-trope allows Blake to tap the repressed subject of Gray’s words since “we always mean more than we think and read more than we see. The word has a spirit of its own, more expansive than the individual mind through which it speaks or is read.”⁸ Blake plays with the term “armour,” as shall be seen in the third design where armour is linked to “amour”; yet prior to the term’s appearance, Blake images the sexual division of the sexes, with the male stretched protectively over the female. The male offers himself as a shield for the female, “a masculine protector for the female in what may be a parody of the male-dominant ethic that pervades Gray’s poem” (Johnson 88). Although they are innocent in Gray’s poem, Blake re-forms these “angelic forms”(1.14) into a harmonious vision of love between the sexes and then into the figures that enact the law of the father, the repression of female desire.

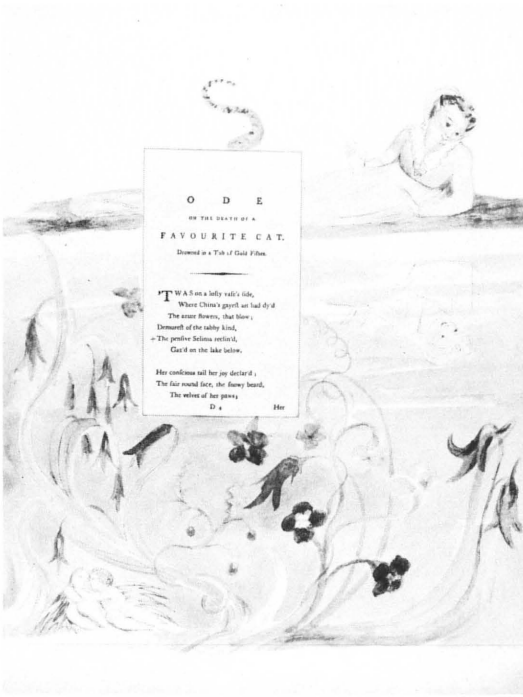
The explosion of color and the altered forms sharply contrast with the colorless window enclosing the poem's title. At the outset, the closed representation of Gray's poem unfolds only through the free play of Blake's imaginative designs. Innocent fish become, first, a pair of lovers and second, figures of guilt and repression. Gray's cat/woman becomes a symbol of female sexuality's clash with what Lacan called "the Name-of-the-Father" as enacted in what Blake called, in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, this "Vegetable Glass of Nature"(555).

The second plate offers an alternate treatment of the same subject as that of the title page. The positions of the poem's participants are virtually unchanged, yet the figures have split, indicating a di-vision at work. This splitting equally traces the deconstruction of Gray's allegorical trope as well as the splitting of the individual psyche discussed by Lacan in relation to the "mirror stage." The first two designs, then, are mirror images of each other, perspectives from either side of a division. Blake again places Selima above the rectangle, where she reclines and stares at the reader. Beneath, two fish swim, unconscious of the danger above. The fish, like the figures above, are split, human qualities riding atop animal qualities. Design two, then, lays bare Gray's allegorical tropes of human and animal, vehicle and tenor, while expanding the conflicting desire and the world of objects, beyond the page and beyond Gray's conscious discourse.

Blake transforms this allegorical trope into an engagement with symbolic and imaginary realms repressed in Gray's poem.³ The subdued coloration, split figures and handwriting point to Blake's acute understanding of Gray's phallic moralism, and he transforms it with tenors literally riding their vehicles toward metaphorical meaning. In other words, Blake, from a Lacanian perspective, forces the imaginary to precede the symbolic and literal, and these, in turn, precede the appearance of the poem. Blake offers two interpretations of the poem before it is present, a strategy of prefiguring that further marginalizes the poetic center of the text in hand. Further, the establishment of the gaze of the text participates in Lacanian notions of the gaze, which offer the reader the sense, in Lacan's words, of being "looked at" and through which Blake can offer a text that gazes at the reader as the reader gazes at the text in hand. Thus Blake, from a Lacanian point of view, anticipates Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological insights that "we are beings who are looked at, in

FIGURE 3

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



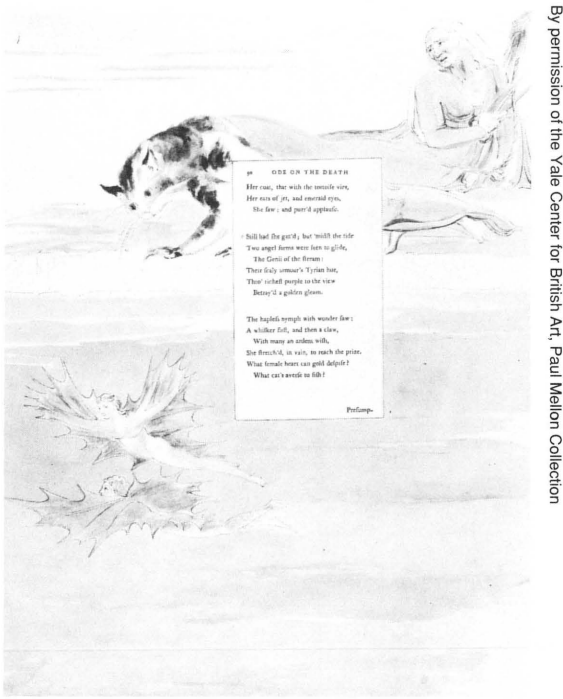
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the spectacle of the world” (Lacan, *FF* 72-5). And it is this understanding of the dynamics of the gaze that allows Blake to craft, what I have called in another essay, transformational texts, that is texts that operate on readers.⁴

Blake’s third design (figure 3), an illustration of lines five, eleven and twelve, is crucial to the development of the psychological processes previously discussed: the birth of desire and of the self, and the self’s (and the reader’s) engagement with the realm of objects. Selima is an attractive human female, with distinct traces of the feline found in whiskers, pointed ears and tail. Against Gray’s description of Selima’s narcissism, Blake depicts “her conscious interest [in] her own image in the water” (Keynes 44). However, the watery mirror, this vegetative glass or mirror of nature, does not yield a true reflection but rather offers an image of Selima emptied of her feline characteristics. The goldfish have become a pair of lovers whose sexual activity, like the uncon-

FIGURE 4

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



scious desire restrained in Gray's poetic language, remains as yet undiscovered by the perceptive Selima.

Blake's illustration demonstrates the first tenet of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, where the birth of desire and the formation of self result from a mirror-stage encounter with an other that is self, a perceptual moment that creates a fissure.⁵ From this developmental moment, the split self must exist between the discourses of the conscious and unconscious elements of being (Ragland-Sullivan 19-20 and 29-36). Selima, at plate three unaware of her own sexual urges, finds her own image pleasing, a primary narcissism which precedes her splitting that occurs in the mirror stage. However, beneath this glassy surface await more active expressions of desire.

The fourth design (figure 4) partially recreates the title page design. Selima crawls along the margins of the lake and stalks

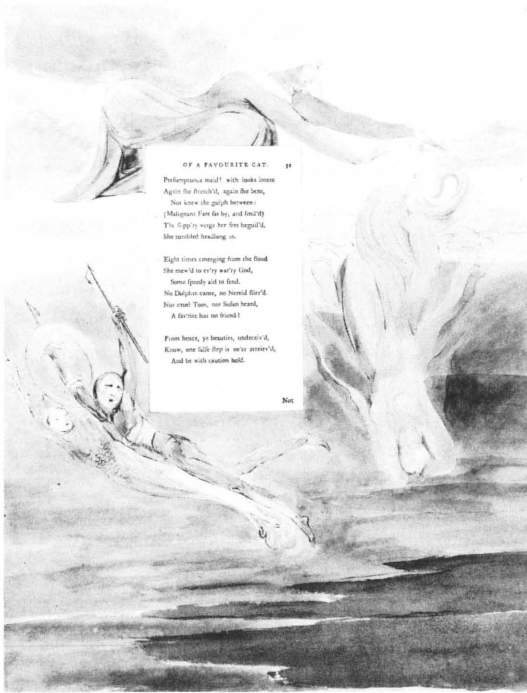
the “angel forms” that glide carefree through the water, having concluded their lovemaking from the previous design. Selima is again a creature of myth, half cat and half woman, but Blake emphasizes the feline. The upper body is a cat whose eyes, in color, mirror the red-gold-yellow of the fish. Gray’s “malignant Fate,” an aged woman, sits behind Selima and splits the threads that restrain Selima’s engagement with the material realm of her desires. Fate supplies an initial impetus and thus structures the sequence of events. For Blake, the birth of desire is a call to action, and to participate in being and becoming is to participate in the fate of life and death.

Here Fate, for Blake, functions as Necessity does for Frederic Jameson: in regard to interpretive activities, “Necessity is not. . . a type of content, but rather the inexorable form of events” (102). Necessity is that which stands outside of or what resists encoding; it governs the form that discourses and events take. The fate of life cuts the strands that maintain disengagement from the material. This splitting initiates a vortexual passage through time and space, and Blake reinforces this structure visually: the designs whirl in a vortex around the static linearity of Gray’s verse; they are forms unnamed in the poetic process and operate against the tyranny of Gray’s male-dominated language.

The fifth design completely breaks symbolic alliance with Gray’s “Ode.” Blake supposedly illustrates line twenty-eight, where “Malignant Fate sat by and smil’d” as Selima stretches her grasp to follow the direction of her gaze (figure 5). Just as the split created by the mirror stage stands, for Lacan, “at the heart of human knowledge” (Ragland-Sullivan 25), so too this split, for Blake and Lacan equally, “constitutes the characteristic dimension of analytic discovery and experience” (*FF* 69). For Selima, as for Thel earlier in Blake’s canon, the split “enables [her] to apprehend the real, in its dialectical effects, as originally unwelcome” (*FF* 69). Fate actively participates in Selima’s fall, thus opposing the passivity described as Fate’s role in Gray’s poem. Selima is visually transformed into a young woman, breaking correspondence with the poem by literalizing the extended association of feline/feminine attributes maintained in all prior designs. Selima, in passing through the mirror, assumes the human figure that floated on its surface; she becomes the floating signifier that she beheld.

FIGURE 5

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



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Selima tumbles “headlong” (1.30) into the arena of her desires, “arms clutching her head [as she falls] into the created world” (Johnson 87). The form that her descent takes is common in Blake’s visual vocabulary, appearing on the title page of Blake’s designs for Blair’s *The Grave*, on the title page of *Milton: Part the Second* and in his fully articulated painting *The Fall of Man*. In fact, according to Janet A. Warner, the posture and gesture seem to signify Blake’s concept of “despair” (113). Selima’s despair is twofold: she fails to realize her desires, and she enters materiality only to discover that it leads to death. However, for Blake, the path that leads through the material world also leads to apocalypse, the deliverance of the individual from psychological tyranny that would translate feminine desire into an image of male desire (the subject of design six).

By following the flow of action within design five, the reader-viewer’s gaze travels in a circle. Fate, leaning to the

right, pushes Selima into the water, a descent along the right margin. The fish, now warriors clad in the garb of phallic militarism, glide in an upward curve from beneath the squared confinement of Gray's text, to ascend on the left margin. Through my association of the Fate figure with Necessity, in Jameson's sense of the term, the psychological processes under exploration emerge within the horizon of the historical as forces operative within and without the individual. In other words, the process of projection, with its attendant reifications of ideas into ideologies that take on material bodies to perpetuate their own existence, finds the same battles waged in history and within the mind.

In the final design (figure 6), Selima mews "to every watr'y god" (11.31-2). From a Blakean perspective, gods are watery because they are projections onto the "Glass of Nature," as plate eleven of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* makes clear: *The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations, and whatever their enlarged and numerous sense could perceive. . . . Till a system was formed [that] enslaved the vulgar. . . . Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.* (38)

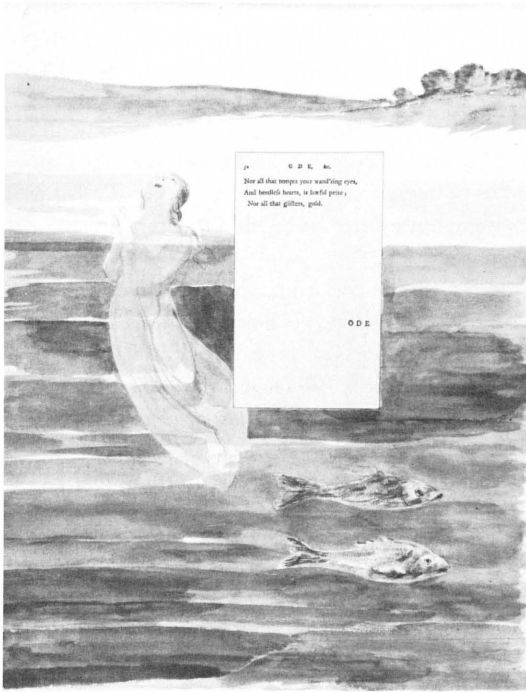
This description of the projective, animating process compares favorably with Lacan's description of a similar process in "God and Jouissance of the Woman," where Lacan attempts to clarify the status of the "other" in his psychoanalytic theories: *The first being of which we are aware is that of our own being, and everything which is for our own good will, by dint of the fact, be jouissance of the supreme Being, that is, of God. In short, in loving God it is ourselves we love, and by first loving ourselves—a convenient charity as they say—we render to God the proper homage.* (FS 142)

As Lacan and Blake's language equally reveal, such projections operate on reflection or mirroring, and Blake continually reinforces the mirrored qualities of his designs for Gray to unveil their projective and prescriptive practices.

Selima's posture mirrors, inversely, her descent from the previous design. She rises, hands clasped in prayer, along the left margin, retaining her fully human form while the fish are reduced to their complete animal state. Selima's mouth is open and her head is raised to heaven as she sings a song to

FIGURE 6

William Blake's presentation of Gray's "Ode to the Death of a Favourite Cat."



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the glory of God. Here we see the completion of a woman's movement from desiring self to a figure inscribed and p(r)aying lip service to the phallogratic, patriarchal discourse that would direct her attention away from material satisfaction. Feminine desire is now inscribed by the masculine, a perversion of desire that directs expectation beyond the material.

My interpretation of Blake's designs for "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat" follows a line of criticism that reads these figures as dramatic visionary forms (Erdman and Grant viii). However, I strongly resist accepted assessments of Blake's intention, where "Gray's conventional moralizing has been transmuted into a barbed allegory of woman's frailty" (Keynes 45). While I agree with Keynes's subject and verb, I believe that the barbed allegory's true object is to demonstrate visually a psychological process that encodes itself within the individual and history, especially as these proc-

esses are enacted upon a figure of female desire. This process leads from the identification of self and the birth of desire through projection and through the perceptual engagement with desire's objects to a new awakening, a dawning realization that desire has been translated into deference for an absent cause. For this reason, I would also resist David Bindman's assessment that "hidden meaning need not be sought in every illustration [because] the illustrations are principally important for their role in Blake's development as a book illustrator"(113-4). Blake's use of visual illustration to liberate unconscious urges repressed by Gray resists the translation of feminine desire into phallocratic discourse by unveiling its operations. Rather, Blake champions desire's expression from the margin as readers pass into a vortex of fluid, flowing signification.

In this regard, while most commentators recognize Blake's designs as a "mythic treatment of young persons on the threshold of sexual and psychological maturity" (Johnson 86) and an examination of "love in the fallen world" (Taylor 302), they neglect the process by which desire is translated into prayer, choosing to read the drama in pietistic terms. However, Gray's poem, in Lacan's words, reasserts the phallus as "the privileged signifier of that mark where. . . logos is wedded to the advent of desire" (*FS* 82). Blake's designs, in Johnson's words, offer "a reversal of the Freudian formula by which intellection results from repressed and sublimated sexuality" (90); and I see the goal of such a reversal of Freud, prior to Freud's writing, to be precisely Lacanian. I see Blake's re-discovery of Gray as parallel to Lacan's inversion of Freud to emphasize the unconscious (Ragland-Sullivan 6), and his textual operations simultaneously recover and uncover Gray's male-dominated aesthetic.

In summary, Blake's illustrations to the opening stanzas present a drama. The subject, Selima, enacts a mirror stage encounter, and the resulting split, pinpointed by Lacan as one of the products of this encounter, can be read in the difference between the subject's appearance and that of its reflected image. The gaze of the subject, linked by Lacan to the formation of self and the origins of desire (Lacan, *FF* 69-73), fixes first on its own image, then passes beneath this "other" to objects of desire lurking beneath the reflections of the mirror. Fate or Necessity drives the subject to act on desirous impulses as the hand follows the direction of the gaze to obtain satisfaction. Once plunged into the matrix of

matter, subject and objects undergo transformations, finally to be revealed as narcissistic projection onto the glass of nature. Blake offers, therefore, not a moral but a psychological message that is also manifest in history as systems of oppression that generate moral codes. Moreover, Blake equally reveals that poetry can reify those projective oppressions.

Blake's psychological, linguistic and historical insights grow in importance in relation to Gray's moral allegory through the techniques of their presentation. The delegation of Gray's verse to a de-centered engraved rectangle, the placement of two designs prior to the actual beginning of Gray's "Ode," the imbalance achieved between bound verse and bounding illustration, and the deconstructive method of production through which Blake approaches the task as a whole support Blake's contradiction of the unconscious as it operates on the margins of Gray's conscious discourse and unveil the phallic privileging of Gray's association of the feline and feminine, which consciously attempts to control feminine sexuality through inner repression and outer oppression.

Endnotes

- 1 The visual affect of the tombstone, in my point of view, is quite close to that described by Thomas A. Vogler in a different context, namely his essay on "Re: Naming MIL/TON," where Vogler approaches Blake's *Milton* through the frame of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In such a conception of the world, to speak or name participates in internal laws of governance that only reifies externality in the name of the father, and to resist this process is to participate in "a rupturing" that allows Blake to intrude "into the Symbolic Order of the patriarchal discourse" (145).
- 2 Such a line of argument follows Luce Irigaray, one of Lacan's students, where she argues that "Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for men." "Women on the Market," *This Sex Which Is Not One*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985) 177.
- 3 This translation from moral allegory, or what Irene Taylor calls fable (following Blake), into a "sublime allegory" is typically Blakean, as Curran and Wittreich indicate in the opening citations for their Blake's *Sublime Allegory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973).
- 4 The essay. "'Vortex' as Philosopher's Stone: Blake's Textual Mirrors and the Transmutation of Audience," *New Orleans Review* 13, 3 [1986]: 40-50, argues that Blake anticipates Lacan's conception of the mirror stage by linking Blake's use of literal and figurative mirroring to bring readers into mirror stage encounters while they read Blakean texts. Through such textual dynamics, Blakean texts create "a situation of exchange. . . where the text transforms the reader as the reader transforms the text" (50).
- 5 Lacan conceives the mirror stage "as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term, namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*"(2). Thus, for the designs at hand, Selima's mirror

stage image of self is emptied of feline characteristics which, within the horizon of the poem, sets identity against identification. Thus, again using Lacan's terms, Blake uses the mirror stage "as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality—or as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*" (E 4).

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During Magritte's "linguistic period," completed in Paris (1927-1930), the first inscriptions of words appear in his paintings. But this period should not be arbitrarily isolated from the rest of the painter's production and from the totality of his preoccupations. Magritte's experiments with words and images are preceded by other experiments with his surrealist friends in Brussels, notably the production of advertising brochures which demanded the association of the name of the product with the image of it. His first inscription of words in a painting, "naked woman" written on a tree trunk, seems to stem from a preoccupation of Magritte and of the male surrealists: How to represent woman? This obsession gives a key to understanding the "inscriptions" series: because they fail to adequately represent women, Magritte treats both images and words as mere representations, subject to an equally radical splitting from the "real" thing they are supposed to represent.

Magritte's Words and Images

Georges Roque

Magritte's attitude concerning words is well known: they are "slogans" that must be considered with some diffidence because they arbitrarily direct the interpretation of the images with which they are juxtaposed. This explains his caution, particularly when dealing with titles.

It is remarkable that this painter, who was accused so many times—in France, particularly—of producing a "literary" sort of painting, always protested that he never painted ideas and toward that end developed a strategy of "unbinding" (*déliation*) in order to dissociate words and images.¹ His objective was to prevent the often mystifying force of his painting from being annihilated by a title making for the easy reassurance of the observer.² This accounts for his claim that "the titles of paintings are not explanations, just as paintings are not illustrations for titles."³ Of course, the same is true concerning the very concept of "illustration" which Magritte abhorred: *Instead of the concept "illustration," I would tend to prefer paintings that would merely accompany texts. Such pictures would not be "triggered" or "inspired" by the text but might encounter it felicitously (le rencontrer heureusement).*⁴

Even a superficial examination of Magritte's work demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between words and images. Although the painter spoke of pictures that would stand independently of words, one is struck by the presence of a number of paintings in which the delineation of actual words within the image itself is the very condition for their poetic effect. Thus in the series entitled *L'art de la conversation* (The Art of Conversation), blocks of stones create the letters of the word *REVE* (dream), or the irregular outlines of a pond delineate the letters of *AMOUR* (love). A starry constellation in the sky is grouped to constitute the word *DESIR* in *Le travail caché* (The Hidden Toil).

Another interesting case is that of the *Séducteur* (*The Seducer*): a painting shows a boat entirely made of water. The rhetorical equivalent for such a procedure might be the

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hypallage, or literally understood antanaclase. (The “ba-tEAU” contains EAU [“water”] alphabetically as well as phonetically.)⁵ This leads to the question of a possible unconscious rhetoric at work in the creative process itself, an idea that the painter himself had briefly evoked when reflecting on the genesis of his own work, despite his aversion to psychoanalysis:

Other images may stem from what one calls “the Unconscious”? L’art de la conversation is linked to the Séducteur through the water which forms the word amour as well as to another picture which is also entitled L’art de la conversation in which two characters are engaged in a discussion in front of a huge heap of stones some of which delineate the word REVE.⁶

It is, therefore, legitimate to ask whether Magritte’s poetic “discoveries,” his figures, do not frequently exist as words or expression taken literally, either consciously or unconsciously.⁷ This preoccupation appears explicitly in a letter Magritte wrote Paul Nougé in May 1930:

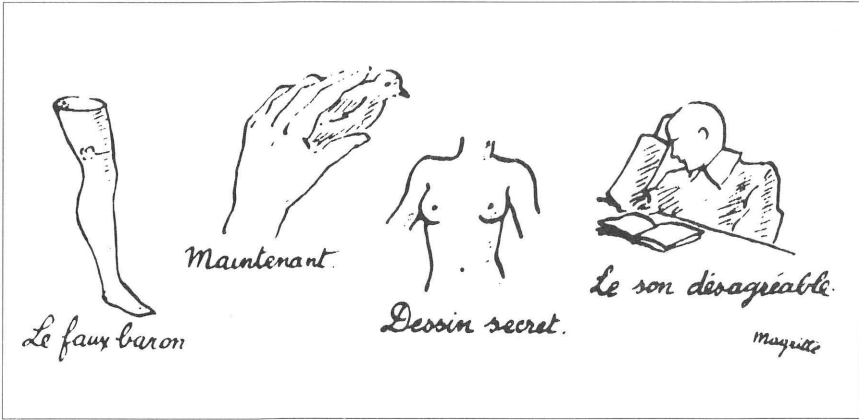
When I have more time, I shall draw a few pictures with a title placed in a visible manner underneath the figures. They will be of the kind: the figure represents the breasts of a woman, the title is the following : Secret Drawing. For another drawing representing a schoolboy bored by the lesson he is studying, the title would be: “the unpleasant sound,” etc. . . .⁸

When Magritte had more time, the two drawings were indeed drafted and were eventually published with two others in the first issue of the journal *L’invention collective* (figure 1).⁹

Though the importance of the letter and the drawing should not be overrated, they, nevertheless, are contrary to the previous attitude adopted by Magritte concerning the relationship between words and images. They also raise a problematic issue: What about the status of the figure? One may observe that the first of these figures associates—precisely—the body of a naked woman to the idea of the hidden representation of this body. Is there not at the heart of the concept of figure—taken literally as “word” or “expression”—something which associates woman and representation, the naked body and its figuration, the words and the pictures, all of them condensed in this “secret drawing” that embodies in itself a great number of the questions raised by Magritte’s images. Moreover, one of the above-mentioned four published drawings shows a hand holding a bird accompanied by

FIGURE 1

René Magritte drawing from *L'invention collective*, no. 1, Fevrier 1940.



a title placed underneath it in a visible manner: *Maintenant* (Now). This title may provide the key for the motif of the hand holding a bird which recurred several times during the turning point of his early work; it is possible to decipher behind it another figure: “catching the motif.”¹⁰

After this brief introduction, I can approach the broader issues of the development of the work—what has been called the “linguistic period” of the painter (1927-1930)—completed during his stay in Paris. Yet this period should not be arbitrarily isolated from the rest of the painter’s production and from the totality of his preoccupations. As I see it, too many studies devoted to the question of the inscriptions in his pictures have ignored the general context within which these works are inscribed.¹¹

It is a fact that Magritte’s experiments with words and images are preceded by other experiments with surrealist friends in Brussels, notably the production of advertising brochures which demanded the association of the name of some product to the image of it. In the case of the catalogues for the furrier Samuel, the totality constituted by the coat and its name was laid out in the midst of poetic texts which subverted its advertisement function. The first text was written by Camille Goemans and the second by Paul Nougé.¹²

It is significant that the second catalogue was completed during the summer of 1927, precisely when Magritte was about to leave Brussels to take up his residence in the Parisian suburbs (at Perreux-sur-Marne). Another significant fact: it was just before this leaving that another brochure was prepared as the result of his collaboration with Nougé, a joint publication published under the name Clarisse Juranville (who had been the author of a grammar primer, *La conjugaison enseignée par la pratique*). This book, *Quelques écrits et quelques dessins* (Some Writings and Some Drawings—whose title reveals the content), associated texts by Nougé which are a parody of grammatical paradigms and drawings by Magritte attributed, like the text itself, to the author of the primer; these drawings are said to “have been recently discovered by Monsieur René Magritte” (figure 2). In the anonymous introduction dated September 1927 and presented as a “Foreword” by the publisher, Nougé writes: *One may observe, further, that these writings and drawings reveal bizarre preoccupations; that current ideas concerning poetry and language seem absent from the text or appear to have been modified in a curious manner. . . . If one stops for a moment to consider this phenomenon a few facile explanations seem to account for it. One passes without difficulty from the life of Clarisse Juranville to her drawings and writings; or from the latter to her more exciting adventures. Some sort of secret resemblance joining gestuality and word (Joignant le geste à la parole) becomes evident.*¹³

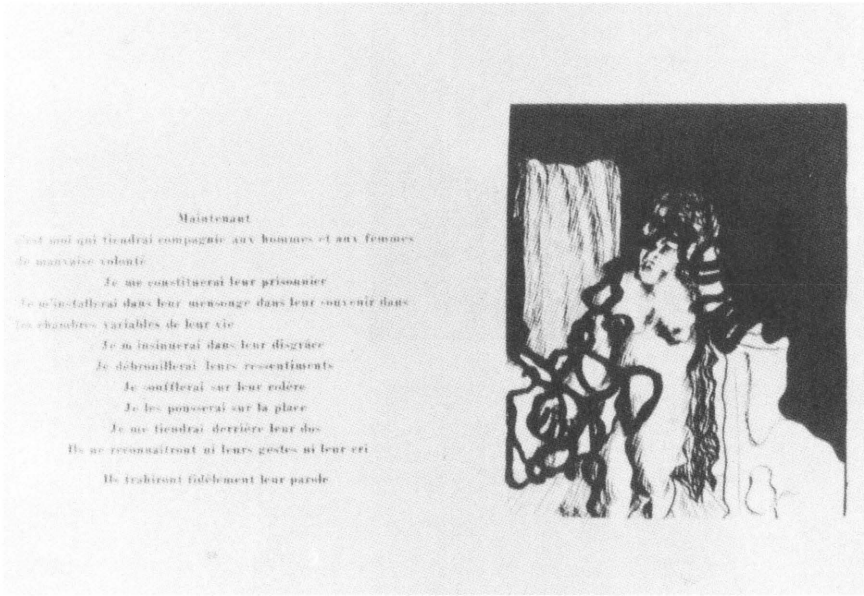
One of these not very well-known texts has something fascinating about it because it condenses the poetical effect resulting from the repetition of one and the same grammatical structure (punctuated by the repetition of the third person plural pronoun), the description of the hypotextual intervention and a metaphor for the sexual act:

*Ils ressemblaient à tout le monde
 Ils forcèrent la serrure
 Ils remplacèrent l'objet perdu
 Ils amorcèrent les fusils
 Ils mêlèrent les liqueurs
 Ils ont semé les questions à pleines mains
 Ils se sont retirés avec modestie
 en effaçant leur signature.*¹⁴

(They looked like everybody
 They forced the lock
 They replaced the lost object

FIGURE 2

Nougé et Magritte, *Quelques écrits et quelques dessins*, 1927.



They cocked the guns
They mixed the liquors
They sowed the questions by the handful
They withdrew modestly
and erased their signatures.)

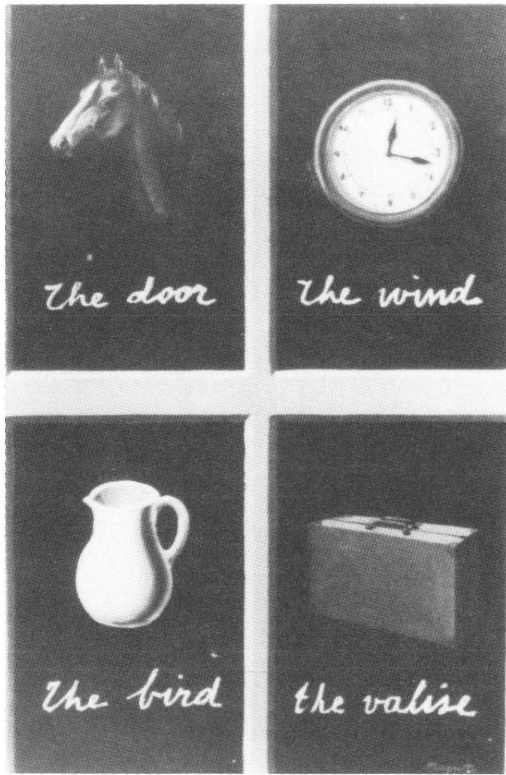
This poem is not only a manifest of the “poetics” of Nougé (based on a minimal distortion of texts with a view to invest them with poetical value, exaltation of anonymity, etc., but it represents also the literary equivalent of pictorial procedures Magritte will use repeatedly in his work: the mutual association not of sentences but of objects, or the modification of the name of specific objects. As to the sexual metaphor, it evokes the drawing *Dessin secret*. This makes it also a metaphor for artistic creation which we will trace in other works.

Words within Images

According to the chronological essay by David Sylvester,¹⁵ the first of the pictures containing words is *La clé des songes* (The Key of Dreams), which was painted in October 1927—that is, at the time when Magritte received his own complimentary copies of *Quelques écrits et quelques dessins*. It is easy

FIGURE 3

René Magritte, *La clé des songes*, 1936.



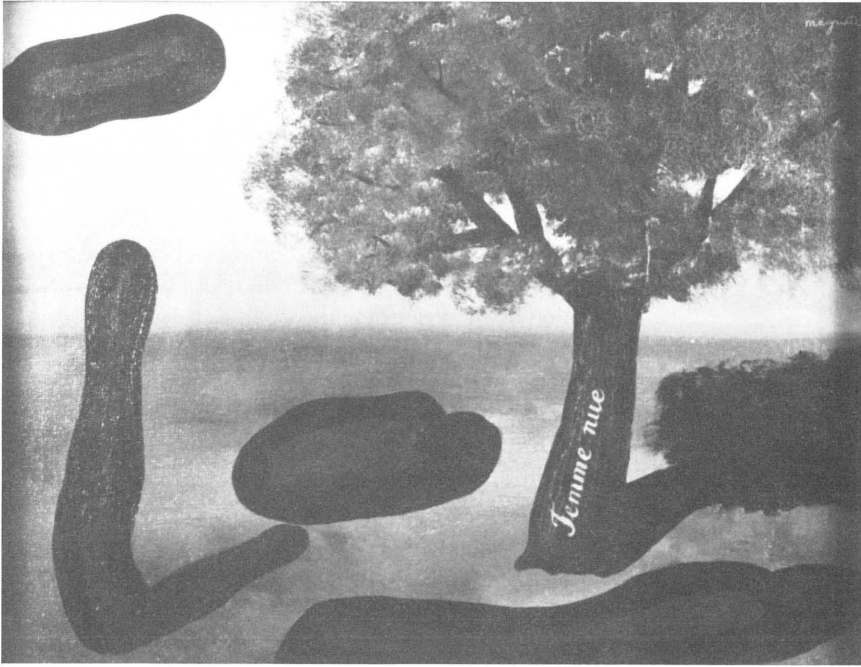
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to recognize the continuity of the poetic relationship of words and images and their association in *Le clé des songes*: a woman's handbag is associated to the word "sky," a penknife to the word "bird," a leaf to "the table"; only the fourth object, the sponge, is related to its "true" name. In a later version of the picture (figure 3), the things painted are a horse associated with the word "the door," a clock to the word "the wind," a pitcher to "the bird"; only the fourth object, a valise is related to its "true" name, just like the first version of the painting.

It is probable that Magritte painted *Les traces vivantes* (The Living Traces) a few months later. This is a picture of "bi-omorphic" forms in a landscape, only one of which is identifiable: a tree bearing on its bark the inscription "naked woman" (figure 4). It has been surmised that this enigmatic canvas was perhaps a caricature of the contemporary ten-

FIGURE 4

René Magritte, *Les traces vivantes*, 1927.



Private collection/courtesy Galerie Brusberg, Berlin.

dency toward abstraction in the work of some surrealist painters; it has been said, also, that this was an iconographic allusion to the metamorphosis of Daphne, who turned into a laurel tree in order to escape the amorous desire of Apollo—and why not.

Actually, the inscription “naked woman” on a tree trunk seems to stem from a more general preoccupation common to Magritte and to the male surrealists: How was one to represent “woman?”¹⁶ Indeed, in a parallel manner to the pictures containing inscriptions, Magritte painted a number of canvases showing a series of distortions affecting the bodies of women: mutilations, extreme elongation of the limbs, metamorphic, teratologic or acephalic creatures. It seems to me that the “inscriptions” series cannot be disconnected from this strictly modern obsession. The whole philosophical question of representation—such as it is made manifest in

pictures and inscriptions—may perhaps be considered as a reflection on the problem of how to turn woman into a *figure*, how to represent her. Hence the necessity not to separate the series of paintings in which a face, a body, is disfigured and the complementary series exposing the powerlessness of representation when it comes to representing exactly woman, naming her, and making her picture and her name coincide.

La femme introuvable (*The Woman that Cannot be Found*), 1927-1928, shows four hands that have been cut off and are embedded forever in a stone wall beside the naked body of a woman they are unable to seize. *Tentative de l'impossible* (*The Attempt at the Impossible*), 1928, might be construed as a variation on the Pygmalion theme dealing with the plastic properties of the image: the painter has represented himself in the act of painting his model, thereby bringing it to life. Even a much later work of 1937 testifies to the omnipresence of this particular obsession: *La représentation* shows the naked belly of a woman inserted into a frame which follows exactly its outlines.

Curiously, a response to this obsessive question—contemporary of the *Les traces vivantes*—was given by the painting *Découverte* (*Discovery*). If one cannot adequately represent woman through words or pictures, one can at least transform her. Magritte had commented upon this possibility to his friend Nougé in an important letter of November 1927: *I have made an extraordinary discovery concerning painting: . . . I have hit upon a new possibility inherent to things: they are capable of becoming gradually something else: an object may fuse into another object that it is not . . . Through this technique I obtain paintings in which the eye is compelled to "think" in quite another way than usual; things are concretely represented and yet some wooden boards become gradually transparent in specific spots; or else a naked woman is endowed with body parts which change into a different substance.*¹⁷

Yet everything would tend to indicate that this discovery, this "secret drawing," remained for the moment untapped, as though the painter must go to the bottom of all the possibilities before returning to the first evidence, namely that it is only through the transformation and metamorphosis of the body of woman that he may be able to represent her—thereby achieving recognition as a painter, in his own eyes and in that of the other painters.

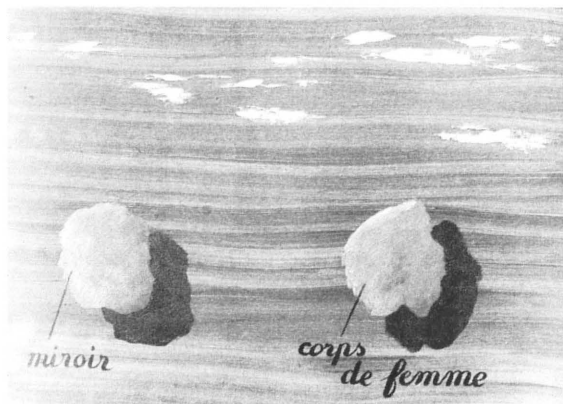
Before proceeding further yet in the direction of this discovery as “uncovered woman” and toward this secret drawing produced by painting a “wooden” woman, Magritte continued his research in associations, linking woman and tree or forest sometimes through the agency of an inscription: “human body (or forest)” located in one of the four “pigeonholes” that make up *Le masque vide* (*The Empty Mask*) of 1928. In another drawing, the word “tree” is projected over the drawing of a naked woman standing beside two other bodies on which are written *ombre portée* (shadowing) and *mur* (wall) a drawing from *Variétés* No. 8, 15 December 1929. Another technique in association is the juxtaposition of figurative elements in contiguous pigeonholes, as in *Les six éléments* (*The Six Elements*). The same juxtaposition appears in *Au seuil de la liberté* (*On the Threshold of Liberty*), 1930.

Let us now go a little backward in order to trace the *traces vivantes* of the inscriptions. Following his associations, Magritte painted, in 1928, a canvas that seems to me of fundamental importance, *L'usage de la parole* (*The Use of Words*), the generic title for a whole series of pictures (figure 5). In it, two blurred shapes with somewhat rounded outlines, and ostensibly painted in an unskillful manner, stand out over a background that seems also overtly botched—and painted in rather dirty hues. Under these shapes are two inscriptions which stand out still more than the rest as they are emphasized by a line which explicitly links the inscription on the left to the word *miroir* and that on the right to the words *corps de femme*.

Again, the dimension of the works should by no means be reduced to a parody of non-figurative abstraction or of portraits in the Picabia manner done some ten years before (for instance, *Voilà la femme* [*Here is the Woman*], 1915). Rather than a parody on abstraction, one should see in them a settling of accounts with representation itself, an intention of rupturing the link between the image and the idea of similarity so that—once this link is abolished—the superior reign of “resemblance” may be established. One may also see in them the echoing of an inner conflict concerning non-figurative abstraction as a possible solution to the harrowing problem of the representation of woman (a solution that may, indeed, have appealed to Magritte as the beginning, as his first works testify).

FIGURE 5

René Magritte, *L'usage de la parole*, 1928.

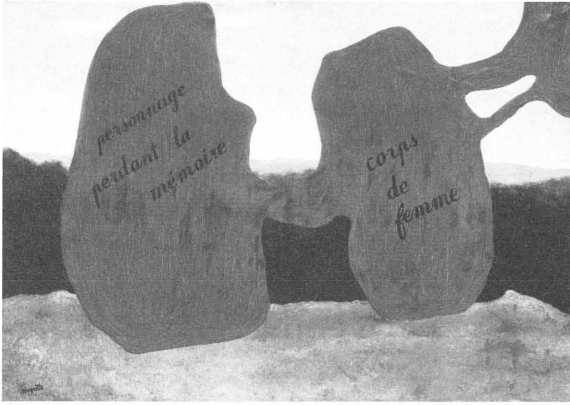


By permission of La Galerie Rudolf Zwirner, Brussels.

One must also observe the humorous rejection both of word and picture as incapable of representing woman adequately. The use of language, here, is less a consecration than a challenge. If various words can designate as well—or as poorly—as they can two shapeless but similar stains, one as “reflection” (mirror) and the other as “picture” (woman’s body), the reason for this is the very functioning of classical representation that is questioned through two of its principal elements: mirror and words. This is not due to chance but to the essential Magrittian dissociation of pictorial and verbal representation—if one bears in mind that for Leonardo (for instance) the mirror is the master of the painter, and the *Logique de Port Royal* illustrates the traditional distinction between natural sign and conventional sign through the paradigm of the mirror as a natural sign, whereas the written work is the paradigm of the conventional sign.¹⁸ Magritte throws discredit on both of them through his rejection of representation. Hence the disintegration that follows.

In *Le monde perdu* (*The Lost World*), 1928, in a situation when there are neither longer words to designate nor mirrors to reflect, the character on the canvas loses his memory, his “living trace,” the memory trace of the body of woman that is lost forever (figure 6). Thus the confrontation between character and the woman, or between painter and model, takes place under the aegis of the selfsame impotency: impotency of words in failing to designate the body, or of memory in failing to remember it or of shapes in failing

René Magritte, *Le monde perdu*, 1928.



By permission of Institut Royale du Patrimoine Artistique, Brussels.

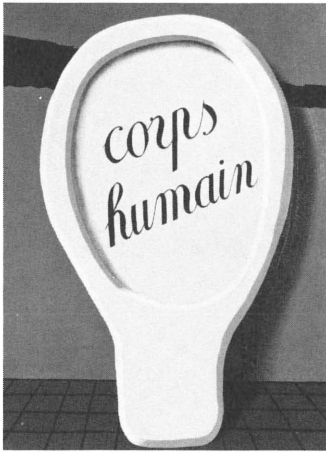
to represent it. What is left is blocks of hollow and empty words—“character in the process of losing his memory,” “woman body”— blocks of words that remind one of sacs, two shapeless word-sacs linked together through a narrow pipe, an echo, perhaps, of the vital cord which seems to link the character to the body of woman.

Similarly, *Le miroir magique* (*The Magic Mirror*) of 1929 shows a body trying to achieve some consistency through a reflected image, an image which might be able to provide it with some solidity or unity through the agency of reflection itself. Yet nothing happens. The human body has disappeared, its reflection has also vanished, and at the very center of this mirror without stain that nobody is holding one reads only these words “human body” (figure 7).

This also explains the famous collage entitled *Je ne vois pas la . . . cachée dans la forêt* (I don’t see the . . . hidden in the forest), at the center of which is the picture of a naked woman surrounded by the photos of sixteen surrealists with closed eyes—an illustration of the collective answer of the group to a “quiz” about love published in *La révolution surréaliste*, No. 12, December 1929. The whole picture embodies a visible paradox: for the observer, the naked woman painted on the canvas is fully visible, but not so the forest which is supposed to conceal her from our gaze. (Incidentally, this picture also represents a recurrence of the association woman/forest, enhanced still further by the symbolic

FIGURE 7

René Magritte, *Le miroir magique*, 1929.



Private collection, by permission of Merrill Foundation, London.

analogy: pubic hair=forest.) And yet, this paradox loses its enigmatic character when all the elements of the game are examined—and especially the Magrittian reflection on representation: one does not see the naked woman precisely because one sees the image of it, and this is the very reason why the naked woman is painted between the two components of the sentence (which are also painted on the canvas). Perhaps we have here the idea that woman can be seen in her true nakedness only through a painting of it (extending the discovery of *The Discovery*), a concept that can only emanate from a true man and a true painter in his meandering meditations on love. Thus, in the same way as the tree hides the forest, the representation of woman hides her so that she may only be captured through imagination, that is the closing of the eyes, through the allegorical blindness of Cupid.

The essential obsession of the painter—to represent the beloved one despite the fact that her idealization, nevertheless, transcends all representation—coincides with the mythicization of woman through André Breton and his friends.¹⁹ It should be noted that at the same time Magritte first contributed to *La révolution surréaliste*, he left Paris and the surrealist group.

In the same issue of *La révolution surréaliste*, Magritte also signed an important manifesto, *Les mots et les images* (*Words and Images*), which summarizes a large part of his Parisian activities during his long stay in this city. As a matter of fact,

René Magritte, *Les mots et les images*, in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, No. 12, décembre, 1929.



our conclusion will be largely a commentary on this latter work and on the propositions it contains (figure 8).

Words and Pictures

An object does not stick to its name to the extent that another and better one cannot be found for it.

This refers us directly to the paintings in the series *La clé des songes* (*The Key of Dreams*), in which the picture and the name of the object are dissociated. (In the 1927 *Clés des songes*, the painted leaf is associated to the word “la table.”) It must be observed, however, that the written propositions are often quoted while the drawings they accompany are ignored even though they are by no means an “illustration” of the texts—unless the word “illustration” is taken, as Magritte himself suggests, as meaning “that which makes one

illustrious.” Ignoring the fact that this manifesto sees itself as its own object would mean neglecting the rich Magrittian reflection on representation: the majority of the images, indeed do not illustrate a sentence but “double” its content through their foregrounding the common denominator between the word and the picture, that is, the fact that both are representations confronting a “reality.” Thus, the sentence “an object does not stick to its name. . .” is illustrated by the *image* of the leaf.

Hence the second proposition: *There are objects which can do without a name.* The corresponding drawing does not represent an object but a *drawing* of a boat. It is precisely because this drawing is recognizable as a figurative representation of the object-boat that it would be meaningless to reinforce it through the verbal representation “boat.” This, in turn, implies a third proposition: *Sometimes a word can be used to designate itself*, which brings to the fore the sort of short circuit by which the word “sky” refers to the drawing of the sky which encompasses it.

Hence the following proposition: *An object encounters its own image, an object encounters its own name. It may happen that the image and the name of this object encounter each other.* It would be difficult to emphasize more strongly the fact that the image and the name are both possibilities of representing the object and that it is only this quality that enables them to encounter each other—by virtue of their belonging to the sphere of representation and their common opposition to the object. Thus, it is not by chance that the picture of the forest is juxtaposed to the word “forest”: one never knows what a forest may hide; a forest may hide another forest, just as it may conceal the body of a naked woman, just as the single unit tree may hide the forest, which is itself hidden through the picture or the word that designates it. . . . In this respect word and image are essentially equal: and the image is liable to lose its privilege (its similarity function), for it is only, like the word, a way of representation.²⁰

A word may stand for (“take the place of”) an object in reality. Reality here, again, is the reality of representation in which, truly, words stand for the objects of which they are signs.

A picture may stand for (“take the place of”) a word in a proposition. . . . doubtlessly, if by “proposition” one means

an artistic proposition made possible only by virtue of the visual possibilities inherent in pictorial space. This implies a double degradation of the object since, 1) the word “takes its place,” and 2) the word itself is hidden by the picture. Yet, contrary to Plato’s paradigm of the three beds, the status of the image is endowed with value by Magritte’s perspective, according to which *the object is hidden by its own image*.

The proposition *the/sun/is hidden by the clouds* enhances the idea that the object is hidden by its own representation so that the sun never appears but as an entity which is hidden behind the clouds—these clouds, being, conversely, the picture of the sun. . . .

It is this sun which “illuminates” the proposition: *I cannot see the. . . hidden in the forest*. It is not that it is impossible to represent woman, but in the same way that the sun would blind anyone who looks at it, woman is in fact hidden by her own image, which is demonstrated by the pictures belonging to the series *La condition humaine* (*The Human Condition*) and *La belle captive* (*The Fair Captive*). All representation, because it becomes opaque, necessarily hides the object it represents.

Everything suggests that there is scarcely any relationship between an object and what stands for it. . . . a proposition immediately contradicted by the accompanying drawing: nothing can differentiate the image of the “real object” from the image of the represented object (a light line on canvas is the only link between the represented object and a drawing of it) for both are images. Indeed, both drawings testify to the gap that has been created between the object and what stands for it insofar as they belong to the space of representation.

Words used to designate two different objects do not reveal what may separate each one from the other. I see here, rightly or wrongly, one of the central propositions of the set: all those that follow are subordinate to it or are merely a development of its implications. What characterizes the bi-dimensionality of represented reality is precisely the impossibility of bringing to the fore “what may separate the objects from each other”: the gap between words will never express that which separates one being from another. Whether this drawing — a “remake” of *Le monde perdu* (*The Lost World*)—is a reminiscence (as has been suggested) of the drama Magritte lived

through in his youth (the suicide of his mother)²¹ or whether the theme is the more general one of the task the painter has taken upon himself (representing woman—or his wife,) this comes to the same thing: we have here the representation of a radical splitting which words are powerless to express and memory too unfaithful to overcome.

As for the image, however much one may exalt its capacity for similarity when confronted with words, this similarity is only a poor privilege which is lost as soon as one brings to the fore what the manifesto implies: that images are just like words—representation subject to an equally radical splitting from the “real” object they are supposed to represent. They hide this object through the very act by which they are supposed to reveal it, whether it is the body of woman hidden by the forest or the sun hidden by the clouds.

Once the difference between words and objects is abolished, the space between their possible interactions becomes wide open. This is a world in which representation has freed itself from all reference to the thing per se and in which, through its becoming opaque, it has left open the possibilities for words and pictures to combine freely so that the figure, now liberated from similarity, may reign supreme under the aegis of resemblance.

- 1 On this point, see Georges Roque, *Ceci n'est pas un Magritte. Essai sur Magritte et la publicité* (Paris, Flammarion, 1983), especially p.47.
- 2 Cf. R. Magritte. *Ecrits complets*, edited by A. Blavier, (Paris, Flammarion, 1979), p.143.
- 3 R. Magritte, "Sur les Titres," in *Ecrits Complets*, op. cit., p.259.
- 4 R. Magritte, letter to Bosmans, 19 July 1961. In *Ecrits Complets*, op. cit., p.485. Concerning the problematic of surrealist illustration, cf. the recently published book by Renée Riese Hubert: *Surrealism and the Book* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988). Concerning the problem of illustration in Magritte's works (especially for the *Chants de Maldoror*), see p.194.
- 5 Cf. *Ceci n'est pas un Magritte*, op. cit., especially p.116.
- 6 R. Magritte, letter to G. Puel, 13 November 1953, in H. Torczyner, *Magritte. Signes et Images* (Paris, Draeger, 1977), p.200.
- 7 O. Kerbrat-Orecchioni wrote the following comment on a visual advertisement: "There is no doubt whatever that even when all verbal context is absent, the silent reading of a picture is achieved for one part through the agency of a conscious or unconscious translation into verbal language. Thus, the linguistic code of the reader may deflect the interpretation of purely iconical (visual) material." "Vive la Vitalité de Vittel! Une annonce publicitaire 'moderne,'" in *Degrés, Le discours publicitaire II*. No. 45, Spring 1973, p.4-5.
- 8 R. Magritte, letter (No.187) to Paul Nougé (May 1930?) in *Lettres Surréalistes*, edited by M. Marien, *Le Fait Accompli*. No.81-95, May-August 1973, p.100.
- 9 *L'invention collective*, No. 1, February 1940. Reproduced in M. Mariën, *L'activité Surréaliste en Belgique*. (Brussels, Lebeer-Hossman, 1979), p.319.
- 10 On this point, cf. Georges Roque, "Le peintre et ses motifs," in *Communications*, No. 46, Variations sur le thème, 1988, p.150.
- 11 An exception is the work of J. Vovelle: "Un surréaliste belge à Paris: Magritte (1927-1930)," in *Revue de l'Art* No. 17, 1971, p.55; and "Magritte à Paris," in the catalogue of the Magritte exhibition in Bordeaux (C.A.P.C., 1977).
- 12 These are reproduced in *Ceci n'est pas un Magritte*, op. cit., p.177ff.
- 13 P. Nougé, *Quelques écrits et quelques dessins*, Brussels, Henriquez, 1927. Nougé's text has been published again (without Magritte's images) in his book *L'expérience continue* (1966), reprinted by L'Age d'homme, 1981, p.367.
- 15 D. Sylvester, "Portraits de Magritte," in catalogue of the retrospective exhibition, *Magritte*. Brussels, Palais des Beaux Arts, 1978, p.58.
- 16 On the surrealist woman, see W. Chadwick, *Les femmes dans le mouvement surréaliste*, French translation, Paris, Chêne, 1986, and the rich catalogue of the exhibition, *La Femme et le Surréalisme*, Lausanne, Musée Cantonal des Beaux Arts, 1987-1988, directed by E. Billeter and J. Pierre.
- 17 R. Magritte, letter to Nougé of November 1927, in *Lettres Surréaliste*, op. cit., letter no. 112, p.57.
- 18 Cf. Louis Marin's article in the present volume, "The Order of Words and the Order of Things in Painting."
- 19 J. Pierre suggests an interpretation "that might be interpreted as malicious," according to which this collage was tantamount to a confession of "the surrealists to the effect that they refused real women and preferred an image of woman that resided in their imagination, the image of a dream woman." Cf. "Le problème de la femme dans le surréalisme," in the catalogue of the exhibition *La femme et le Surréalisme*, op. cit., p.38.
- 20 I agree with A. Blavier's hypothesis in *Ceci n'est pas une pipe. Contribution furtive à l'étude d'un tableau de René Magritte*. Verviers, Temps Mêlés, 1973, p.6: "It might be claimed that Magritte, here, opposes the object not to the words that enunciate it but to its representation, whether visual or verbal."
- 21 Cf. E. Calas, "Magritte's Inaccessible Woman," in *Artforum* XVII No. 7, March 1979, p.25.

Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel La Belle Captive, which employs seventy-seven paintings by the Belgian surrealist René Magritte, is offered as a "collaboration," a playful interchange between word and image. Robbe-Grillet, who used the paintings variously as generative material and companion or counter-text to his written text after Magritte's death, provides in La Belle Captive an occasion to explore the relationships between verbal and visual text. The novel may be understood to demonstrate a fundamental relationship of inequality between word and image, a relationship of violation rather than collaboration between equal partners.

Magritte's Captivity in Robbe-Grillet's La Belle Captive: The Subjugation of the Image by the Word

Leslie Ortquist

René Magritte's painted images have been a source of continual fascination for countless viewers, philosophers and authors, as well as for other image-makers.¹ Michel Foucault's essay, *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, Heiner Müller's recent short text entitled *Bildbeschreibung*,² and even rock star Peter Gabriel's music video "Sledgehammer" rely at least in part upon Magritte's (or Magritte-like) images. Further allusions to the painter's work abound in marketing and advertising: the cover of a recent computer manual sports a large, immobile rock mysteriously suspended in an undefined space above the title; an advertisement for a men's cologne includes a reproduction of a painting which (ironically) is entitled *La reproduction interdite* (Reproduction Forbidden); and according to curator and Magritte scholar Uwe Schneede, an American television network uses *Le faux miroir* as part of its logo while a Belgian airline and a Scottish whisky employ *La Grande Famille* (René Magritte 64). Georges Roque has, in fact, conducted an entire book-length study on the appearance of Magritte images in advertising (*Magritte et la publicité*, Paris 1982).

Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Belle Captive* represents an especially interesting and complex example of an appropriation of the Belgian surrealist's work. Seventy-seven paintings from different periods in Magritte's career are reproduced—out of chronological order—in tandem with text composed by Robbe-Grillet. The relationship between image and verbal text cannot be simply characterized as a clear-cut case of illustration nor of *ekphrasis* (the literary rendering of a work of art), for the text and image are often widely divergent. Yet at times, despite notable tensions, differences or incongruities between text and image, the text seems almost indisputably to describe the paintings, and the paintings appear convincingly to illustrate the text. If these images serve neither purely illustrative purposes nor as the ground for the written text, what is their status in Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Belle Captive*? Do text and image illuminate one another, or on the contrary, do they serve, juxtaposed as they are, each to

limit the other's possible meanings? Do they enter into an exchange, a dialogue, or does one textual "partner" become dominant, shaping and controlling the reader's potential interpretation of the other?

Unlike Robbe-Grillet scholars whose prime concern lies in a careful investigation of the verbal text (thus, whose interest in the painted images of *La Belle Captive* fails to extend very far beyond considering their function as generators for the fiction), I am interested in examining the relationship between the two textual components of *La Belle Captive*, focusing as much on what Robbe-Grillet does for—or rather *to*—Magritte as on his claims about the way the written text be read in relation to the painted images.

Both artists' names appear in bold print on the cover and title page of *La Belle Captive*. However, this implication of co-authorship is misleading, for Magritte, who died before the project was begun, neither illustrated Robbe-Grillet's text, collaborated with him in any way nor authorized the engagement of his images. Robbe-Grillet furnishes no introduction or acknowledgment in the text which might explain how he came to use the images. On the back cover of the novel, he simply encourages readers to take part in a game of reading where meaning circulates between text and image: "*Ainsi le lecteur-spectateur est-il convié à prendre part (créateur à son tour d'un itinéraire) à cette circulation du sens parmi les organisations mouvantes de la phrase qui donne à voir et du tableau qui raconte.*" (back cover, *La Belle Captive*) (Thus the reader-viewer is invited to take part [creating, in turn, his own itinerary] in this circulation of meaning among the roving structures of the sentence, which shows, and the painting which tells.)³

Although Robbe-Grillet seems anxious to understand his project as a dialogue between image and text, or as a game of alternating similarity and difference for which he implies the equality of the members (*la phrase qui donne à voir and le tableau qui raconte*), I believe that the interplay established between image and text constitutes a struggle for power between members that are inevitably unequal.

Only elsewhere does Robbe-Grillet admit to having appropriated Magritte's works in order, he claims, to do two things: first, to present "as a problem those elements that appear in images," and second, "to put the image in a state

of crisis.” It is especially remarkable that Robbe-Grillet goes on to discuss other instances where he worked with visual images as textual generators (he also wrote texts in relation to work by Paul Delvaux, Richard Hamilton, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg), stressing his interest in “dialogue,” in a “game of confronting images and text” (*Generative Literature* 39). Some of these other relationships, in fact, allowed for truer collaboration between writer and artist than did *La Belle Captive*. By admitting his goal of putting Magritte’s images in a state of crisis, Robbe-Grillet, however inadvertently, reveals the power he wields over them.

One can easily understand Robbe-Grillet’s attraction to Magritte. Even a cursory reading of each artist’s work exposes many common preoccupations, including the obsessive repetition and development of object-motifs. One could hardly overlook that the spaces constructed by Magritte and Robbe-Grillet are largely peopled with objects: in Magritte, the bowler hat, the oblong rock, the turned wooden object, the tuba, the statue-like woman (or portion of a woman); in Robbe-Grillet, the eraser, the shoe, the rock, the briefcase, the mannequin, the scalpel, the operating table, etc. These objects are insistently, fetishistically repeated from work to work. Voyeurism and *le regard*—fitting subjective counterparts to worlds portrayed in terms of objects—fascinate both artists. One need only consider, for example, Robbe-Grillet’s *Le Voyeur*, or in *La Belle Captive*, the eyes which repeatedly look through the *judas carré* (spy hole) and the Medusa motif whereby a look petrifies the narrator. Magritte frequently depicts eyes (*L’oeil*, *Le faux miroir*), placing some unexpectedly in the middle of objects (such as the eye in a slice of ham in *Le portrait*); he also repeatedly represents groups of men peering in through open windows (*Le mois des vendages*, *L’assassin menacé*).

Furthermore, through extreme self-reflexivity both artists violate traditional reader/spectator expectations, foiling apparent references in their works to the external world and continually calling attention to their respective media, particularly by means of *mises-en-abyme*. In narrative, the *mise-en-abyme* denotes the presence of “reduced models. . . of the narrative’s subject itself, such as myths or legends, portraits, paintings, inner plays and novels read by one or more of the [work’s] characters” (Morrissette, *Novel and Film* 141). Once a conservative device employed to strengthen the

connection between a work and the world external to it, the *mise-en-abyme* in Robbe-Grillet's work tends to enforce internal reference. The narrator of *La Belle Captive* attends an operatic production, *L'Idole*, whose subject matter becomes blurred with the action of the novel (28). In addition, the black notebook of the "*fausse étudiante*" (the fake student), an object which is itself an element of a main narrative line, proves able to "take up" the story—as we see when the narrator is forced by his captors to continue reading from the notebook (65).

In the visual image, a clear instance of the *mise-en-abyme* is the painting within a painting, a continual fascination for Magritte (e.g. *La belle captive*, *La condition humaine*, *La représentation*). In each case, Magritte includes in the field of his canvas a smaller painting which either re-presents or "continues" the space depicted in the painting surrounding it. The easy movement from primary subject or space of depiction into secondary, as well as the creation of a series which implies the possibility of endless repetition, serves in Magritte's paintings (as it does in Robbe-Grillet's narrative) to break the conventional notion of representation as reference to external reality. The reader/spectator's attention is focused instead on the work's relationship to itself and, intertextually, to other works of art (Foucault 45).

Finally, both Robbe-Grillet and Magritte turn to popular culture for generative material. Magritte's fascination with Feuillade's *Fantômas* series, with detective stories and with 1940s American film noir thrillers is well documented (Schneede, "Befreiende Enthüllungen" 57). And, likewise, as Morrisette puts it, Robbe-Grillet chooses "popular, 'ignoble,' even worn-out fictional situations and 'themes' from pornographic novels, detective stories, exotic action films, and Epinal engravings of sado-erotic tortures. . . ." (Morrisette, *Novel and Film* 9). Magritte's *L'assassin menacé*, the fifth painting reproduced in *La Belle Captive* and itself originally an illustration of a scene from a Feuillade film, serves as the point of departure for the sado-erotic detective mystery which constitutes a main story line of *La Belle Captive*. In the painting *L'assassin menacé*, Magritte allows us to look into a rather barren room where a nude woman lies dead on a divan, blood streaming from her closed mouth. A young and well-dressed man stands in the foreground, near a gramophone horn, with his back to the woman. The only other objects in the room are the table upon which the gramo-

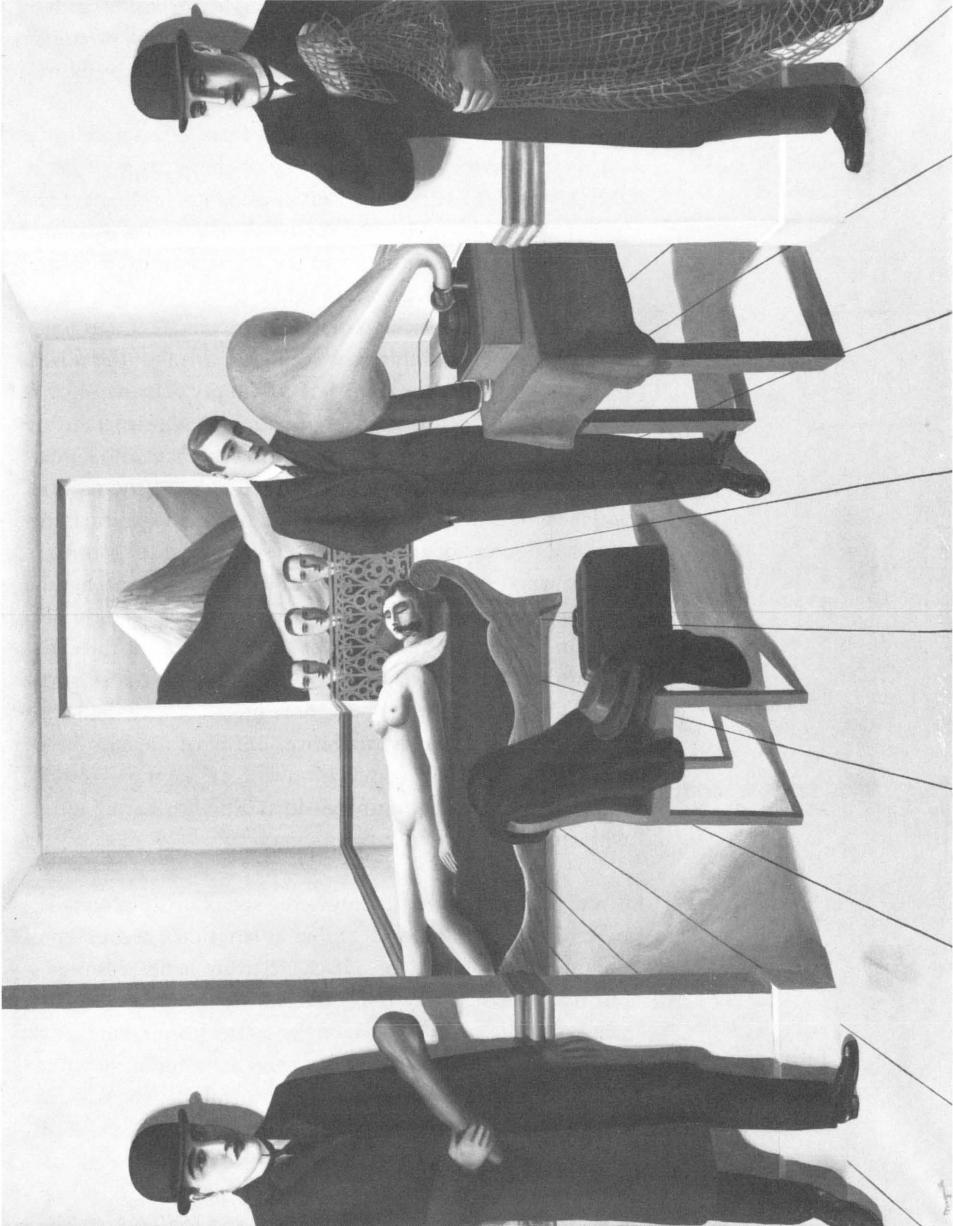
phone sits, the man's briefcase and a chair over which his coat and hat are draped. The far end of the room opens onto a balcony with an iron grate. Three expressionless male faces peer into the room over the edge of the grate. Behind them in the distance, mountains are visible. On either side of the entryway into the room in the extreme foreground stands a man in a suit and a bowler hat—again each with a passionless expression. One carries a large net, the other a club (figure 1).

It is this scene which Robbe-Grillet's first-person narrator comes to describe extensively in the opening pages of *La Belle Captive* (14,17). Many central elements of the narrative, including the abduction and the death of a young woman, a suspected assailant, witnesses to the crime and investigators, are suggested by this painting. While the character of the narrator and the story he narrates are inconsistent and fragmented, elements of this early scene run through the novel, providing it with some thread of continuity. The narrator, it seems, is either many narrators or, alternately, witness to this criminal scene, the deliverer of a young woman who faints at the opera, a captive in a heavily-guarded cell, the sadistic and lecherous abductor (in the guise of a distinguished grey-templed doctor) of a young female student, and a retiring citizen who lives in a deserted area of town and who has, he claims, such modest habits that one might suspect he is an assassin in hiding. Robbe-Grillet's narrative works through intertextual references, redoublings and radical transformations. One may rightly expect more inconsistency than consistency in the narrator and narrative. But what remains constant in *La Belle Captive* is a fascination with sexual transgression, physical violence and captivity—in short, with power and with violation.

These preoccupations are nowhere as striking as in section two, where the narrator describes at length his abduction of the unsuspecting student. He calls her his victim, his prey. She has, he says, a face fit for the shiny pages of an erotic magazine. He pretends to take her to the hospital in his black Cadillac after she has passed out from a drugged cigarette which he calculatingly offered her. Fearful that she will awaken, he undresses her, preparing to give her a syringe of a more potent sedative (in the tender skin of her nipple, he explains, to make certain she is not feigning sleep). In heavily sexual language, he describes her reaction to the shot. The young student is clearly the narrator's "belle captive."

FIGURE 1

René Magritte, *The Menaced Assassin*, 1926
Oil on canvas, 59 1/4 x 6' 4 7/8"



It is also in this section that Robbe-Grillet includes Magritte's painting *La belle captive*, not a depiction of a captive female, as might be expected from the title, but rather one of Magritte's paintings within a painting. *La belle captive* presents a beach framed right and left by heavy, parted drapes. Through the gap between the curtains, we see a cloudy sky, the sea and a continuation of the sand from in front of the curtains. A ball lies in the opening. Partially obstructing the view of the sky "outside" the curtains and partially in front of the curtain on the right, stands a canvas on an easel. It depicts a cloudy sky and, in fact, appears continuous and indistinguishable from the sky to the left of it. What then, for Robbe-Grillet, is the importance and significance of captivity?

The relationship between Magritte's paintings and Robbe-Grillet's text can be more precisely described in terms of violation than collaboration. Admittedly, both artists are interested in violation: violation of readers' expectations and conventions of representation, violations of laws of physical reality, the violation of women, the "look" in the form of voyeurism as violation. But the most striking violation is clear in Magritte's captivity to Robbe-Grillet. By selecting and ordering seventy-seven paintings as well as juxtaposing them to suggest a narrative, Robbe-Grillet creates the illusion of a narrative order in Magritte's work and represses many of Magritte's own very different artistic concerns.

At this point, let us turn to an analysis of the structure of *La Belle Captive* and to a consideration of the way the verbal text guides the reader's apprehension of the images. Superficially, the Magritte paintings seem to be granted positions of power. As the novel both opens and closes with reproductions, the text seems subordinated to, or humbly embedded in, a series of visual images. Robbe-Grillet appears to give the paintings the opening and closing position of power, granting them, as it were, both the first and last "word." Image and text alternate throughout the novel, most often appearing on opposing pages; occasionally, both occupy the same page. Several paintings appear on double-page spreads with no accompanying text. Written text, on the other hand, stands alone only twice. One might be inclined to argue from the structure of the *La Belle Captive* that the image is repeatedly placed in privileged positions and is permitted to be independent of written text more than text is allowed to stand without image. Robbe-Grillet, however, is able to

allow the images this apparent freedom because the words with which he surrounds them strongly direct the reader's apprehension of the image.⁴

The novel is composed of four sections of unequal length. Image and text seem most closely related in sections one, three and four, where one finds indisputable allusions to the paintings included in *La Belle Captive* as well as the development of narrative motifs from the motifs present in the paintings, interpretations of visual elements from the paintings and the inclusion of titles from several paintings in the text of the narrative. The rock, the woman-statue, the rose, the gramophone, the piece of turned wood—all objects from Magritte's work—become key motifs for Robbe-Grillet's fiction. The narrator assigns these motifs definite symbolic values: the rose, which is associated with various women in the narrative (the little girl who sells roses near the bridge, the violated and drowned woman), unsurprisingly comes to stand for Woman: *Inutile de revenir encore une fois sur. . . le viol proprement dit. . . ou sur l'image métaphorique de la fleur saignante.*(24) (Unnecessary to return again to. . . the actual rape. . . or to the metaphorical image of the bleeding flower. . .)

The wooden piece is correspondingly assigned the value of “*un objet de bois phallomorphe*” (a phallic wooden object, 23). A similar case occurs with the painting *Les objets familiers*, in which five men are depicted facing different directions; each stand regarding an object which floats before him at eye-level: a sponge, a pitcher, a seashell, a bow and a lemon. The narrator treats each of these objects as an element belonging to a sacrificial ritual. When the interrogators ask about the objects, he explains:

L'éponge imbibée d'acide est introduite dans l'ouverture du coquillage. . . La table à sacrifices figure depuis longtemps dans l'inventaire, ainsi que le jouet phallique, le cigare du faux voyeur, la bougie, le tampon enflammé, etc. (119)

(The sponge soaked in acid is introduced in the opening of the shell. . . The sacrificial table has long figured in the inventory, along with the phallic toy, the cigar of the fake voyeur, the candle, the burning plug, etc.)

Thus the text reduces objects from Magritte's paintings to the story's *pièces de conviction* (courtroom exhibits) as well as to a crude symbolism which serves the narrative interests.

In section two, the correspondence between image and text is

least clear. This accords with Robbe-Grillet's statement that this portion was written independently of the Magritte images which it contains.⁵ Nevertheless, there are correspondences: soldiers fill the corridor outside the narrator's cell while the painting *La gravitation universelle* depicts a lone man in uniform with a gun; the narrator describes his experience of looking in the mirror in his cell while the painting *La reproduction interdite* presents a man who apparently sees only a reflection of his back in the mirror before him; the narrator, who tries in the café near the beach to catch the attention of the female student, mentions his stiff leg while the painting *Le vieux canonier* depicts a nude woman near the sea with a creature—half man, half fish—who sports a conspicuous peg-leg. In this section, the images have, perhaps, more opportunity than anywhere in the novel to contradict the text and assert their independence. Yet Robbe-Grillet has carefully selected paintings to accompany his text. Furthermore, by section two, the primacy of the written word is so clearly established that the reader is prepared to see even these images as somehow illustrative of the described narrative space.

From the outset, the reader/spectator is confronted with both painted image and linguistic text. In the initial encounter of word and image, the image is free to establish expectations with its visual immediacy. The text, in turn, confirms or denies the original expectations and may establish new ones. In his essay on Magritte, Michel Foucault points out that although plastic representation and linguistic reference may be simultaneously present in a work:

"the two systems can neither merge nor interact. In one way or another, subordination is required. Either the text is ruled by the image (as in those paintings where a book, an inscription, a letter, or the name of a person are represented); or else the image is ruled by the text (as in books where a drawing completes, as if it were merely taking a short cut, the message that words are charged to represent). . . . What is essential is that verbal signs and visual representations are never given at once. An order always hierarchizes them, running from the figure to discourse or from discourse to the figure." (33)

It is over this order that Robbe-Grillet asserts his control.

An examination of the first few pages of *La Belle Captive* will help demonstrate the hierarchy set up between verbal text and visual image. The written text subtly guides the reader's perception and interpretation of the images. The novel

opens thus: on the left, the reader sees the Magritte painting entitled *Le château des Pyrénées*; on the right, the text asserts: “ça commence par une pierre qui tombe, dans le silence, verticalement, immobile. Elle tombe de très haut, aërolithe, bloc rocheux aux formes massives, compact, oblong, comme une sorte d’œuf géant à la surface cabossée.” (9)

(It starts with a rock that falls, in silence, vertically, immobile. It falls from a great height, an aerolith, rocky mass, compact, oblong, like a kind of giant egg with a bashed-in surface.)

Because the text and image are juxtaposed and seem superficially concerned with the same things—a rock which may appear to be both falling and immobile as though captured by a snapshot, also a rock which is oblong like an egg and whose surface is jagged—the reader is teased into adopting the familiar habit, established in childhood, of looking for a relationship of identity between the two members, recognizing the re-presentation of the same material from one medium into another. Compelled by his or her desire to make sense of the narrative, the reader is inclined to overlook incongruities: the incongruity between that which the image would like to assert in spite of the words’ contrary assertions (for example, that the surface of the water in the painting is rippled and wavy although the text asserts that it is “smooth and calm”), omissions or repressions (for example, the text’s omission that this “rock” is capped by a massive stone castle, a fact which is stressed again in the painting’s title), or the incongruity between the capacities of the image alone and those capacities which the words add to or impose upon the image, for example, to clearly invoke senses other than sight (*dans le silence*) or to describe change through time.

The image may contribute to the written text a presence of visual and spatial relationships which have only a partial and suggested presence in the words. (The rock of the painting is firmly planted in its implied spatial context in relation to blue sky, white clouds and water—and is immediately perceivable *in* this relationship.) But the text, moving through time, has the power to suggest change in the relationships of objects to one another and to their environments which tend in the painting to be presented only as if in a frozen instant, reified.⁶ Fixed in its apparent stasis in *Le château des Pyrénées*, the massive, oblong rock with its castle crown seems to defy the law of gravity, demonstrating the capacity of painting to transcend such a law of physical reality by means, in this case,

of its assertive and traditional tromp-l'œil technique.

The written text, however, has the power to place the image back inside the system of traditional representation from which the painter may have allowed it to escape. The text implies that the unnatural frozenness of this presented moment will be succeeded by the motion of other moments, and furthermore, that the laws of physical reality only appear to be disturbed (i.e. that an object which falls into the water causes a displacement—a “splash”—upon impact, that concentric circles will form around the spot where the object entered the water, that the equilibrium and stillness of the water will be provisionally restored):

Il est difficile de dire, en raison de son altitude sans doute considérable, si la pierre va terminer sa chute sur le sable blond, ou bien va crever la nappe liquide où son engloutissement, une fois retombées les gerbes soulevées par l'impact, ne laissera plus qu'une série indéfinie de cercles concentriques, de nouveau suspendue dans une totale fixité provisoire. (9)

(It is difficult to say, because of its altitude which is undoubtedly considerable, if the rock will end its fall on the blond sand, or rather will burst the sheet of liquid where its engulfment [once the spray raised by the impact has fallen back again] will leave no more than an indefinite series of concentric circles, once again suspended in a total provisional fixity.)

Here the written text has the same power over the painted image that a voice-over commentary has on the images of a film to control and guide the reader/spectator's interpretation. The image is forced into silence. It is unable to deny the text's implication that it has been rendered during one moment of a fall and to assert instead, for instance, that it is not in the process of falling but rather is floating mysteriously and defiantly above the surface of the water. From the outset, the text, which pretends to some extent to “describe” the image, instead subtly directs the reader's interpretation of it and establishes the word's ability to place the image in a larger context.

An additional power of the written text lies in its ability to imply the existence of a world—a space and time—outside the frame of the painting. This other space, the text implies, is continuous with the representation of the space of the painting.⁷ Although no “blond sand” is visible in the painting (without the text's suggestion of contiguous beach, we could easily believe the rock was suspended over the open

seas, far from land), the reader may infer that the sand in question lies slightly outside the boundary provided by the frame. The images represented in the painting become merely a portion, a glimpse of a larger world. When the next paragraph abandons the rock and the sea, the reader/spectator is primed to attempt—no matter how difficult it is—to go outside the frame of the painting to find a connection between its space and the next space presented in the written text or represented in the following paintings.

Such an attempt is aided by the repetition of the rock motif in the next two paintings selected by Robbe-Grillet: *Portrait de femme* and *Le monde invisible*. In his reading of *La Belle Captive*, Jean-Pierre Vidal, in fact, connects each of these occurrences of the rock with other appearances of the motif in the novel as he discusses the workings of the narrative (222). The spaces are diverse, but the repetition of the rock in the series of paintings, accompanied by text which connects the spaces, convinces the reader that they are diegetically related. Offered as partial visions of the world of *La Belle Captive*, Magritte's discrete images, unable finally to frame the text, are framed by it.

The philosophical and semiotic concerns of many Magritte paintings—concerns which were certainly not limited to narrative consideration—are ignored in *La Belle Captive*. Robbe-Grillet locates the Magritte paintings firmly in relation to his constructed narrative, so firmly, in fact, that Vidal concludes Robbe-Grillet merely brought a “polyptych”—of which Magritte himself had been unaware—to light:

“Le polyptyque que Magritte ne soupçonnait pas avoir produit se trouve ainsi remis à jour, relancé dans l'espace du discours de Robbe-Grillet dont il devient complice.” (221)

(The polyptych which Magritte did not suspect he had created is thus brought to light, recast in the space of Robbe-Grillet's discourse to which it becomes an accessory.)

Morrisette, too, mentions this apparently natural order, positing Magritte's “premonitory preparations for a future link with Robbe-Grillet” (Morrisette, *Intertextual Assemblage* 35) and asserting Robbe-Grillet's near mystical apprehension of the “presence” of a diegetic series in Magritte's work. Morrisette explains that Robbe-Grillet ordered the paintings not chronologically but referentially:

“in accordance with their visual or verbal relevance to the nearby text. . . [thus] Robbe-Grillet has created within the Magritte works themselves a diegetic order, previously unus-

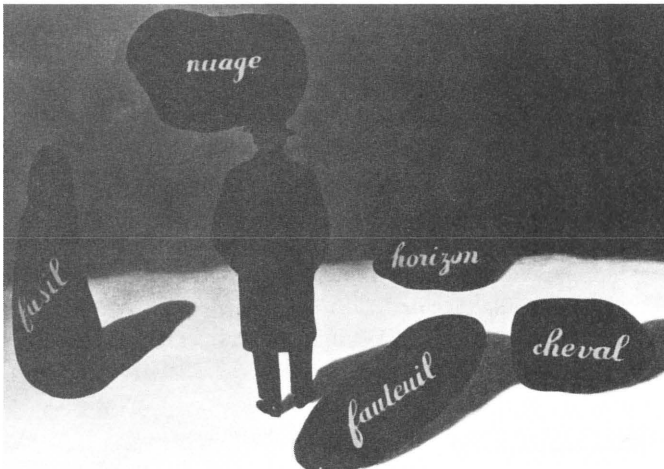
pected, illusionary yet convincing. It is almost as if Magritte, over a period of many years, had continued to develop and extend his early theme of the threatened assassin, or that Magritte had somehow become the illustrator of Robbe-Grillet's fiction." (40)

And finally, Georges Raillard, in expressing his desire to read the series of Magritte's images in *La Belle Captive* as a story of "unmasking" (*dévoilement*), even anticipates the reproach that it was Robbe-Grillet who ordered Magritte's images in such a way that they read like an unmasking (207). Robbe-Grillet's choice and placement of the images in *La Belle Captive* is far from an innocent endeavor.

Remarkable, above all, is the absence of any of Magritte's paintings which explore the tensions and contradictions between linguistic signs and visual images (e.g. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*, *L'homme marchant vers l'horizon*, *La clef des songes*). In some of these works, Magritte exposes the arbitrary nature of the linguistic signs which stand for objects. For example, in *La clef des songes*, he labels the likeness of an egg "acacia"; of a shoe, "moon"; and of a candle, "ceiling." Or in *L'homme marchant vers l'horizon*, several amorphous shapes share the space of the canvas with a lone figure who walks into the space of the painting (figure 2). Each shape is labeled variously "armchair," "rifle," "cloud," "horizon" and "horse."

FIGURE 2

René Magritte, *L'homme marchant vers l'horizon*, 1928/29



By permission of the Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.

The reader/spectator of such a Magritte painting is forced into playing the sort of game Robbe-Grillet had intended for readers of *La Belle Captive*. But Magritte's works, in forcefully disconnecting the relationship of identity between image and linguistic sign, are infinitely more radical in their effect than Robbe-Grillet's narrative, which ultimately attempts to hide the difference between image and written text, subordinating image to text. Foucault locates the power of Magritte's paintings precisely in their play with painted image and contradictory painted word—in their ability to shake highly representational depictions free from an affirmative relationship with arbitrary linguistic signs and with external reality. Robbe-Grillet yokes Magritte's paintings to his narrative, repressing their original interests.

The only concession Robbe-Grillet makes to Magritte's concern with the juxtaposition of image and linguistic sign is the inclusion of the paintings' titles next to the reproductions. Magritte's titling provided an additional way to explore the relation and tension between image and linguistic sign. But even in including the titles, Robbe-Grillet eases the tension between image and sign, bringing both under his control by integrating many titles into the body of his text. For example, *L'Idole*, the name of the opera production which the narrator attends, comes from the title of the Magritte painting which faces the corresponding text. The positioning, in this instance, causes the painted image of the bird of *L'Idole* no longer to be read as a work in its own right but as an illustration of a scene from this opera. Even the final words in the novel, *à la rencontre du plaisir* (toward pleasure), stem from a Magritte title.

If the paintings found in *La Belle Captive* in any way "illustrate" the written text, one can only look to Robbe-Grillet, who chose the paintings, ordered them and composed text in or out of relation to them. An unequal partnership is clearly established from the outset; Robbe-Grillet is free to manipulate Magritte without recourse or even response from him. (Just as the assailant/narrator of section two is able to abduct and investigate his drugged female captive, who cannot resist him.) The silent image with its potential proliferation of meanings is subjugated by the written word which directs interpretation and tries jealously to control the image's play of meaning outside the narrative world of the written text. Regardless of Robbe-Grillet's stated intentions, a hierarchy is established between image and language.

Endnotes

- 1 I wish to thank Claudia Gorbman and Claude Gandelman for their encouragement and their helpful suggestions for the revision of this paper.
- 2 I am indebted to Ingeborg Hoesterey for this connection.
- 3 All translations given in the text are mine.
- 4 Both Roland Barthes (*Image, Music, Text*) and John Berger (*Ways of Seeing*) discuss the relationship between image and text demonstrating that their juxtaposition often produces a new meaning for the image, limiting it, making it subservient and anchoring it to the authority of the words which surround it.
- 5 Although the visual images existed prior to the written text, Robbe-Grillet maintains that only some portions of the text were generated in relation to the images: all of section two of *La Belle Captive*, for example, was composed before he had even conceived of the project with the paintings and contains no explicit references to Magritte's images or titles (Morrissette, *Intertextual Assemblages* 9).
- 6 A painting may, of course, attempt to present more than a single moment as is clear in the case of much of the work of cubism or futurism, or in a painting such as Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*.
- 7 The space the narrative creates outside the frame of the painting is analogous to offscreen space in the cinema. We understand that the spatial world in a film extends beyond the boundaries of the image visible to us on the screen. Presented with a series of discrete images onscreen, we "reconstruct" in our minds a sense of a whole and continuous space (which comprises both on- and offscreen space).

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Léger evolves from the early La fin du monde (where he imaginatively appropriates Cendrars's text) to his picture-poems in Les illuminations (where he merely selects passages from Rimbaud's text) to his own created text in Le Cirque, freely calligraphed and lithographed. He avoids the mimetic use of literary elements in order to subvert the conventions of the illustrated book and he subordinates meaning to a graphic interplay where word and image can, on occasion, become interchangeable. Already in La fin du monde, movement, especially of a circular nature, endows his book with a dynamics of its own. In Le Cirque, certain repetitive motifs develop mobility on a more structural level. Léger has thus subverted the borderline between readable and non-readable, lyric and painterly. The scene of representation, verbal and visual, has undergone so drastic a transformation that the poetic and painterly signatures of the artist have become undistinguishable.

The Books of Fernand Léger: Illustration and Inscription

Renée Riese Hubert

*Ecrire, c'est prendre la peinture au mot. La peinture ne
serait-elle pas une forme particulière de l'inscription?*

Michel Sicard¹

(Writing consists in taking painting at its word. Isn't painting a particular kind of inscription?)

Numbers, letters and words, as Michel Butor has shown in his *Les mots dans la peinture*, belong to the visual arts simply by being inscribed in artifacts.² Butor raised the fundamental problem. Others have made searching studies on more specific areas of investigation, for instance Louis Marin's "Toward a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*," Jacques Derrida's "+ R" and Roland Barthes' "Erte ou A la lettre."³

Ever since the cubists first introduced letters, words and numbers in their *papiers collés* and canvases, new problems have arisen at each radical use.⁴ These signs tend to be integrated into the composition of the art work and have as much or as little autonomy as other elements, such as an object's stylized contours or lines denoting musical instruments, or the geometrical shape of the table. These shapes, whether they pertain to the alphabet or to still-life objects, become, in a sense, interchangeable in cubist artworks. Directly or indirectly, they refer to a reality which they serve to undermine: such is the role of newspapers, wine bottle labels and even more painterly objects, for instance guitar strings and vases. Projected onto a two dimensional surface, fragmented as far as referentiality is concerned, integrated into new patterns somehow related to the forms produced by juxtaposing material objects, letters and numerals can hardly lay claim to any other function than that of their formal presence within the pictorial surface. This typical practice of the cubists in dealing with letters and numerals is not, however, regularly followed by other avant-garde artists, even in the early days of the present century.

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Visible Language XXIII, 2/3
Renée Riese Hubert pp.254-279
© *Visible Language*, 1989
Rhode Island School of Design
Providence, RI 02903

Stuart Davis, Paul Klee, Sonia Delaunay and Fernand Léger, related in one way or another to cubism, have inserted in their canvases parts of the alphabet, ranging from fragments of letters to meaningful sentences. We need only place these artists in a single category to realize how widely they differ in their experimentation. We can actually measure the full range of these differences by exploring in each of these artists the function of the letter and the manner of its inscription. Davis, and more occasionally Léger, take as their implicit model the poster, a blatantly public text that automatically excludes intimacy and that is spatially structured for visual impact, usually at the expense of verbal subtlety. While Davis and Léger give their canvases qualities found in posters, they avoid narrow imitation of them. Their paintings radically undercut realism by two dimensionality, sectionalization and stylization—and by deconstructing the outer world and reconstructing it, thanks in part to the inclusion and participation of writing, into a pictorial surface embodying conflicting lines, shapes and colors. The letters in such paintings as *The City* (1919) provide, along with other elements, a response to the impact of contemporary culture, its transformation of the cityscape, its proclamation of a new vision.

Letters in Klee's paintings such as *Villa R* (1919) and *The Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber* (1922) are put to a far different pictorial use. Klee's frame of reference involves humor as well as childish playfulness: a world where analogies to music and poetry play a far more important part than graphic statements endorsing a modernist perception. His titles, rarely descriptive, often inscribed in elegant handwriting within the painting itself, require a double deciphering on the part of the viewer/reader. The "R" in *Villa R* and the letters in *The Vocal Fabric of the Singer Rosa Silber* belong to a world of signs and signals, and the presence of the alphabet deliberately makes this aspect of Klee's art recognizable.⁵ Delaunay's alphabetical presence can be usefully linked to, if not determined by, her long experience with textiles and fashion, which enabled her to discover some of the fundamental properties of everyday objects. She stresses the shapes of letters and endows them with luminous qualities. By illuminating the entire alphabet, she has personified it.⁶

Answering the question of whether the painter's inscriptions come from the impact of modern life or, as in Klee's the *Song of Songs* (*Er küsse mich mit seines Mundes Kuss*, (1921),

from fantasy would hardly, in the context of our study, solve the problem with which we are mainly concerned: inscription as communication. Does the painter emulate the printed word of the newspaper or the book? Will she or he, in order to show that these letters belong to the the world of painting, blur to a certain extent their textual origins?

If we return for a moment to Stuart Davis, we will soon discover the variable nature of the letters used and the inventiveness of his alphabetical transcriptions, measured by the standards of conventional typography. Their shapes, colors and sizes vary not only from canvas to canvas, but within a single painting. *Blips and Ifs* (1963-4) or *OWH! in Sao Paolo* (1951) include several fragments of text. Although one might find a horizontally or vertically inscribed line conveying, in the manner of a street sign, some kind of message, the bulk of the textual information does not follow the directions to which we are accustomed. By reversals of letters as well as cut-offs, in which the accustomed order is respected within the same canvas, Davis privileges the pictorial domain, showing that it is not reducible to a single point of view or perceptive vantage point.⁷ Although the shaping of some letters would make us believe that Davis has merely copied a street sign or a traffic signal, other letters, within the same canvas, initiate, so to speak, a typographical transfiguration, substituting a harmony of curves and interlacings for the stylized geometrical contours and discreteness of conventional lettering. Nevertheless, these alphabetical inscriptions always remain within clearly defined spatial confines. "*Ecrire dans un tableau,*" as Michel Sicard so appropriately remarks, "*pour mettre la peinture en mouvement. L'écriture est un branlement.*"⁸ (Writing in a canvas so as to set painting in motion. Writing is pulsation.) Davis' lettering may be transfigurative; but it is certainly not transgressive, for its most daring aspect is none other than his signature, his handwriting, never twice the same, which he situates, according to the demands of composition, in various areas of the painting, often craftily undermining its legibility.

Davis' painterly example may serve to introduce some of the complexities of the problems raised by inscription in the visual arts, particularly their dual nature in relation to origin as well as shape. Fernand Léger, who only occasionally introduced single letters, words and numbers into his canvases: *The Red Statuette*, 1930; *The City, The Disks*, 1918, more frequently includes handwriting in his book illustrations.

Most of the relevant documentation is contained in Saphire's interpretive study, which actually opens up the field for an investigation dealing with Léger's use of lettering in his illustrations.⁹ A prolific illustrator, Léger has provided graphic commentaries on a great variety of texts by such writers as Malraux, Rimbaud, Cendrars, Eluard and Frénaud.¹⁰ Over the years, he collaborated with prestigious bookmakers as diverse as Kahnweiler and Tériade.¹¹

As illustrator, Léger has produced a number of plates (pochoir, drawings, lithographs) featuring textual elements. Within these illustrations, he intermittently inscribes single letters as well as words, either alone or grouped, providing either a direct transcription of an author's actual text or an addition, tantamount to a commentary. Words may also have an essentially decorative role. Most of these practices occur in *La fin du monde*, in some of the plates of *Les illuminations*, and in *Le cirque*, for which Léger composed his own text.¹²

Although Léger's art, as we have suggested, can be considered a cultural response to social, political and intellectual necessities of the time (a contention which we could easily support by quoting several texts from *Fonctions de la peinture*), as a book illustrator he becomes a critic of texts whose poetic and narrative qualities he has carefully taken into account.¹³ His graphic interpretations, unlike those of the prolific Picasso, stem directly from his close readings. In the previously mentioned books, drawings or lithographs pertaining to a particular section of the volume illuminate, amplify or undercut the text, compounding the expected verbal/visual confrontations by allowing verbal elements to invade the territory of the visual or, conversely, to be held in bondage by the pictorial.¹⁴

To varying degrees, Léger practices transgressions of a spatial nature which have repercussions on other aspects of the work. In *La fin du monde*, letters and words are borrowed from the text and inscribed in the drawings, stressing and subverting meaning. In *Les illuminations*, as I have shown in "Graphisme poétique et poésie graphique, *Les Illuminations* de Fernand Léger," illustrations include painterly plates, hardly differing from Léger's paintings, as well as mere transcriptions of the text by means of handwriting or hand-printing or a combination of both.¹⁵ By this device, the same letters can function equally as text and image. Unity results

from the act of transcription. *Cirque*, faithful in this respect to Tériade's policy, does not include letterpress but exclusively a handwritten text composed by the artist/author. Handwriting serves to heighten the gestural qualities featured in the figures. The book evolves different types of inscription as it dynamically moves toward a consolidating unification and integration of its components. The unity of the artifact arises mainly from a system of graphic and verbal analogies.

The illustrations for *La fin du monde* are regarded as a landmark in book illustration because of Léger's inventiveness in providing graphic novelty in each plate and in completely renewing the relationship between image and text. The vitality of Cendrars' scenario, with its staccato sentences, its breathtaking peripeteia, its undercutting of descriptive lingerings, its unbelievable humor, could only have provided an irresistible challenge to Léger. How can a painter represent a tale which steadily accelerates so as to compete with, and even become the equivalent of, a movie?¹⁶ How can he possibly deal with its narrator and scenarist, a sculptured gothic angel capable of sounding a definitive trumpet while expertly handling a movie camera? Admittedly, the very first illustration hardly offers a one-on-one relation to the text. But if we consider that the latter tells a story, presents a character—God the Father—busily engaged in specific actions taking place at a specific time, nothing will prevent us from discerning echoes of these elements in the plates.

So far, we have pointed to conventional or narrative elements of the text which, curiously enough, are by no means overlooked by the painter. God the Father, with his cigar and its smoke, emerge on the two-dimensional pictorial surface. We may also detect other objects, such as a cash register. They do not, however, constitute a sustained representation, for they are displaced, disrupted by other outlines, often geometrical, projecting their patterns in various directions. This is a pertinent reaction to Cendrars, who, when he seemingly tells us an amusing story at once bourgeois and cosmic, Parisian and cosmopolitan, constantly undermines his promised realism. From Cendrars' narrative emanates an extraordinary incentive toward movement, a constant thrust forward by which he subverts hierarchical and institutional conventions, including those of writing, of story telling. Léger focuses on this particular aspect and inscribes by various devices Cendrars' departure from, and transformation of,

conventional narrative. In his illustration he studiously avoids sustained mimesis.

It has been said that Léger's illustrations belong to both cubism and dadaism. While analytically proposing outlines subservient to traditional perceptions of the outer world and reconstructing them according to a new pictorial order, he embraces disruptive, even tumultuous borrowings from a modern urban vision reminiscent of posters and street signs. These aspects, present without being predominant in the first illustration, correspond to some of Cendrars' textual innovations. The multiple use of lettering in the pochoir provides a rather unique example of text and image relationship. On the lower left, the beginning of Cendrars' text is reproduced and, thus, becomes a page within a page (figure 1). As it displays the image of the page, it initiates the first step toward a new image-making process within the text itself instead of complying with standard mimetic rendition. The first sentence, in large print, detached and separated from the rest of the image, shows this transformation by the inscription, *Le 31 Décembre*, seemingly reproducing the final page of a calendar. As the viewer's eye moves from the bottom left to the top right, he perceives a fragment of

FIGURE 1

Fernand Léger from *La fin du monde*.



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Cendrars' text identified, so to speak, with a commercial enterprise. The demonstrative *C'est le* marks an effort toward identification; and with these spatial displacements, pictorial time is introduced, for the end of the year coincides with the beginning of the text.

Within the complex interplay of geometrical black shapes, rows, stripes, dots and circles showing multiple directions, suggesting even the possibility of other shapes surging, growing, overlapping, we can detect a quotation from the text, not inscribed as letterpress, but as gestural, handprinted letters: *Il se lève allume son gros cigare*. (He stands up, lights his thick cigar.) This intrusive text, equivalent to a caption or a stage direction, provides a running commentary while suggesting still another perspective; for, by being broken up differently and slanted diagonally, it frustrates our reading habits and helps destroy the order of the standard page. In pink, regularly shaped letters, each however consisting of several components also running diagonally across the page, we can decipher the partially obliterated words English spoken, occupying two by no means parallel lines. Léger makes the viewer hover between a recognizable order and its perturbation. These English words are not present in the French text: added by the painter, they imply that God and, perhaps, capitalistic authoritarianism are American. Dwarfed by the smoke columns that he puffs, God is recognizable, for his own name, printed in modest letters, appears on his shirt front. This paradoxical world cannot survive without labels, inscriptions and other forms of designation.

The straight outline depicting God holding his cigar as well as his name tag is interrupted by the word *RIEZ* (laugh) slanting over toward the inscription of the word *DIEU* (God). Once again, the painter has added to the Cendrars text, which he usually quotes and displays verbatim. *Riez Dieu* (Laugh at God) introduces an ambiguity, for this truncated rendition of *Priez Dieu* (Pray God), produced by intersecting and overlapping elements, overtly points to the mockery inherent in Cendrars' text, in which God turns into an American businessman. The words simultaneously imply an encouragement to God to smile instead of showing his nervousness, and a possible curtailing of riez de Dieu. By enhancing the humor of the text and assuming the function of commentary, these words point to the modification that spatial displacement can bring to language and particularly to its semantic shifting. To the black and white colors of the

page Léger not only adds *English spoken* in pink letters, but *cais[sse]* in yellow letters: a fragment not present in Cendrars' text, alluding to the capitalism of God the father not only by its lettering, but by the dispersion of golden tones over various sections of the page.

It would, however, be wrong to separate arbitrarily letters from other outlines and to distinguish too narrowly between the readable and non-readable elements of the illustration. Curved and undulating lines, swinging and dancing here and there, evoke shifting constellations capable of producing more writing, more letters, more numbers, all of them seeking new shapes. Indeed, these constellations suggest lines in the process of being drawn or written. Their imprecisely circumscribed letters appear mobile on the page and in their relation to other words, other inscriptions participating in this decentered image which defies closure.

In other illustrations, Léger assembles words and images in other ways. Throughout, he inscribes words taken from Cendrars: single words and expressions alternate with schematized structures. In the sixth illustration, which merely displays the name of the chapter, *cinéma accéléré et cinéma ralenti* (accelerated movie and slowed down movie), Léger is content to inscribe letters. The page provides no other references, anecdotal, fractured or disruptive to the text, no other words, letters or figures. Instead of a linear verbal arrangement in parallel lines with standard typography, Léger displays letters in the primary colors he so often favors— red, yellow, blue—arranged according to a circular or spiral motion (figure 2). In the second illustration, he had already introduced in a manifest but not exclusive manner round contours alluding to wheels and to the rosace of Notre-Dame, which circularizes and to a certain extent centralizes the multifaceted image of Paris.

Throughout the series, Léger subverts the conventional image of the page. Horizontality, its governing principle, is steadily contested by other directions in the various inscriptions. On the cover page, the artist builds, so to speak, his cathedral of word and image. And his arrangement of Cendrars' words makes the title the equivalent of an architectural unit. By assembling letters so as to simulate the outline of a Gothic cathedral and, above all, its tower, verticality becomes a dominantly phallic factor.

FIGURE 2

Fernard Léger from *La fin du monde*.



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In the sixth plate, a blue vertical stripe dividing the page introduces an element of continuity and stability contrasting with the dancing letters inscribing *cinéma accéléré et cinéma ralenti*. In illustrating the title, Léger achieves a sense of balance by combining static elements with rotary movement or, more precisely, with rotary devices showing a penchant for

aimée?, most relevant to the problem of inscription. Both contain, simultaneously, Rimbaud's text in Léger's handwriting and pictorial elements. In one case, text and image are juxtaposed; in the other, they overlap within the same space. Similar use of inscriptions prevails in "H," a poem I have previously discussed in "Graphisme poétique et poésie graphique."

Like "H," *Est-elle aimée?* (as Léger believes) or *almée* (as several others prefer) is a poem concerning mystery and enigma.¹⁷ The poem conveys the impression of a reality distant yet powerful, a vision, threatened by obliteration, that the poet wants to retain and express. The passage from night to day increases evanescence. Beauty of space, of pure elements, of light, of festivity constitute a dream powerful in its impact but bound to turn rapidly from presence into absence and to transform present into past. Appearing as masks replacing faces never seen before, they fade into the night. Yet through intertextual allusions, proposing affinities with the fisherwoman's and the corsair's song, the poem suggests a resurgence, a continuity rather than a plunge into the void. A new poem will be born from and to mystery or enigma; a poetic force will replace vanishing festivities.

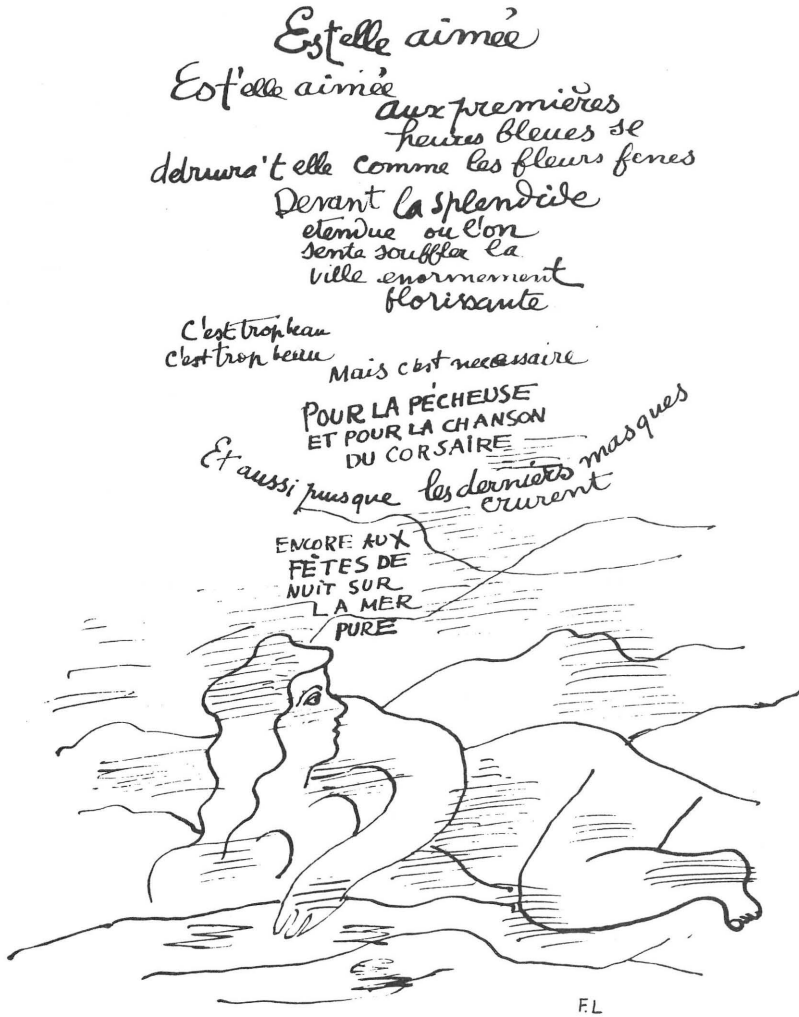
Our purpose is, of course, not so much to provide a commentary on a Rimbaud poem as to indicate that the text in itself does not have the obvious characteristics that would invite visual interpretations. A painter seeking to appropriate this text could continue the poem's thrust toward the retention of a vision rather than seek to parallel it. Léger's illustration consists, in its upper part, of a handwritten inscription of the text; in its lower part, of the figure of the swimmer breasting the waves (figure 3). Calligraphy and graphic representation merge into one another by the passage from straight-lined calligraphy to curves, by the presence of short and curved lines within the pictorial part and by a certain amount of spatial overlapping. The calligraphed and the drawn part of the illustration are more gestural than those of the pochoirs of *La fin du monde*.

Léger by no means transcribes the text as it might have appeared in any printed version he might have seen. Moreover, in transcribing it into his own calligraphy, he changes the printed text by suppressing all punctuation signs. Exclamation marks, question marks and dots play a significant role in the text, stressing its enigmatic qualities as well as hesitation and

FIGURE 3

Fernand Léger from *Les Illuminations*.

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poetic invocation. Punctuation in this poem contributes to the establishment of rhythmic patterns emphasized within a system of rhymed verses. The musicality of the poem is enhanced by the very punctuation that Léger suppresses, substituting for these standard signs and the recognizable, but free, system of versification his own arrangement on the

page: short lines which are not dictated by the meaning of the poem and do not correspond to Rimbaud's verse alignments. They begin at different places on the page, directed, perhaps, by the movement of the hand, the visual equivalent of poetic inspiration.

The first stanza produces the outlines of a wavelike cluster. Its spontaneous quality is enhanced by irregularities in the handwriting, unevenness of letters and thickness of ink. Before writing *la splendide*, the painter could hardly avoid dipping his pen. Corrections, for instance in the word *nécessaire*, are included. Apparently capricious in the inclusion or omission of accents, he replaces hyphens by apostrophes. The second stanza in no way repeats the first in regard to calligraphic transcription. Nor does the stanza convey the same impression as the first, that of an unevenly outlined but tight-knit cluster, for it merges gradually into the image of the sea and the swimmer. One line, consisting of handwriting that ties the letters together and printed sections that keep them separate, culminates in a wave-building curve which almost reverses the direction of the others. The printed sections establish a close contact with the image; and Léger turns certain verses into descriptive words, into a reality differing from that of the rest of the poem, thus providing a transition between Rimbaud's dream, his longing, his questioning, on the one hand, and concretization and visualization on the other. The outlines of the landscape reach the upper printed words whereas the concluding line (Rimbaud's last line, divided into five parallel parts, constituting an island), sinks, so to speak, under the waves, thus partially obliterating the barrier between text and image.

Although text and image are linked by the nature of the lines, by the fact that contours are not filled out or solidified, and by their undular, sketchlike characteristics indicative of fluctuation rather than closure, the outline of a female figure (dancer—*almée*—or swimmer) provides a strange response to Rimbaud's poem. We may wonder to what extent this way of consolidating the poet's vision represents a move away from an unfathomable beauty, from an impression too powerful to be voiced. By making the words of the poet his own through writing, through graphic gestures, Léger's delineation ultimately gives birth to an image where all elements are intricately linked. He adds a visual dedication to the poetic text he has selected, a page that he transforms, in the viewer's presence, into a canvas. The painter, in this illustra-

tion as in others of *Les illuminations*, creates a picture poem.

Pierre Restany's definition of a *poème-objet* becomes relevant in this context. The *poème-objet* is not bound to the restrictions of the traditional illustration, which is merely an accessory to literature:

*Le poème-objet est essentiellement un, l'expression de la cohérence interne de ses divers éléments. Il restitue dans un champ visuel qui est sien une totalité concrète particulière. Il existe en soi, fruit d'une expérience rigoureusement inscrite dans le développement spatial du texte, ce tout surgit soudain du prolongement sans rupture de la phrase et du trait.*¹⁸

(The poem-object forms an essential unity, expressing the inner coherence of its varied elements. Within a visual field of its own making, it restitutes a particular concrete totality. It exists in itself, the result of an experience rigorously inscribed in the spatial development of the text, this totality that has suddenly emerged from the interrupted extension of the sentence and the line.)

The distinction that we make between the *tableau-poème* (subservient to the two dimensionality of the page) and the *tableau-objet* (which can be three dimensional) does not play a part in Restany's discussion.

The painter selects one section of the illumination *Phrases*. This poem, like the previous one, alludes to festivity and, even more clearly, to a form of transgression. By means of well-established festivities, chains rise from elevated regions to the stars while the poet detaches himself from his earth-bound life and becomes weightless, his physical existence being hence-forth synonymous with poetic creation. Léger again transcribes a poetic text in handwriting (figure 4). Here the handwriting corresponds, even more closely than in the previous text, to a kind of image making. From the ordering of words emerge chains that are invoked in the poem. Especially at the beginning, convoluted letters, rich in loops and spirals, allude once again to spatial ties which decrease in the course of the text until the final *DANSE*. This word is printed so that all letters remain separate, as if to signify liberation.

Even more than in the previous poem, the painter modifies the text. He has repeated words, *fenêtre à fenêtre* (and pluralized them) and *des chaînes d'or*. He has omitted *d'étoile à*

literally trusses together words which seemingly reappear on the other side of the chain. The absence of *étoile à étoile* does not really curtail the text, as these words remain present in the depiction of stars. Léger frees himself from the word, from the terrestrial, as Rimbaud's persona has liberated itself from physical confinement. The stars are not the only visible image in Léger's illustration of *Phrases*. Red and blue cone-shaped steeples point upward in a landscape produced by curving lines, dancing stars, ropes and chains as well as by poetic inscriptions. These steeples also reach for the stars and contribute to the upward thrust which characterizes the poetic text. Two chains complementing each other in their directions, in their patterns, consolidate the representation of a text which aspires toward unification and creativity.

In *Cirque*, the painter, in quite different ways, transgresses the conventions of the illustrated book and the assigned role of typography. This 109-page folio volume includes 63 lithographs plus 22 illuminations and decorations of a text composed by Léger himself and inscribed in his own lively handwriting. In addition to vividly colored and black and white full-page lithographs, propagating the same themes and formal motifs, rapidly traced vignettes occupy here and there a section of the written page, emulating at once the lithographs that faces them and the writing that accompanies them as though to modulate the rhythmic pattern of the page. Contrary to the illustrations of *La fin du monde* and to an important group of *Les illuminations*, the lithographs of *Cirque* only incidentally include lettering (for instance a lottery wheel displaying numbers), and their presence is always thematically justified. Although the disposition of the numbers is integrated into the very structure of the plate, it does not have to be accounted for in the manner of his previous illustrations as a special intrusion or as a pictorialization of letters replacing an absent figure, for it does not create semantic ambiguities or mysteries. We shall discuss briefly the recurrent structural motifs of the lithographs, discern the echoes in the writing which we consider a visual rather than a textual or poetic presence.

The text names the protagonists appearing in the lithographs. It seeks by the repetition of diegetic words, such as *cela*, *c'est*, *voilà*, to rival the visual in order to make them visible to the reader. Repetition seeks to increase numerically the tribe of participants and to intensify gestures. Colors play a subordinate role, whereas light, allusions to sun, stars and

moon abound. The bicycle, an active participant in the words and in the lithographs, is transformed into a sunlight figure. In the verbal as well as in the visual, the bicycle generates energy and creates a link with other objects; it repeatedly transforms and disguises itself. For these reasons, each sentence offers surprises, exceeds expectations. Without ever lingering, they jump and dance. Lightness of touch characterizes the poetic style rich in metaphors such as *faire la roue* (Peacock displaying its plumage—equating bird and acrobat) while multiplying the many scenes of the spectacle. Léger, who signs the book as author, is present in the text, which includes many autobiographical elements as well as allusions to the painter's egalitarian dream. This egalitarianism not only includes performers but also animals, and it even extends to objects. This humanitarian ideal performs a role reminiscent of the word and image of the wheel.

As Léger invariably introduces by circular contours the scene of acrobatic performance, "circus" refers both to the scene and to the performers. Such staging by no means inserts a stasis in order to counteract acrobatic movement since the participants often appear within a dynamic natural setting rather than in the ring. Among nature's repeated forms, clouds play the most significant role, mainly because their fluctuating circular forms prevail in compositions where straight lines are relatively rare. Since an acrobat's arms or legs are never straight, but always bent or partially eclipsed by various devices, they too contribute mimetically, semantically, formally and structurally to the circular mobility omnipresent in the book. Leaves, however, by outlining predominantly meandering and intertwined lines, promote the multiple interconnections and relations that recur in the combined visual aspects of *Cirque*. They modulate the rhythmic pattern of the page's interloping lines and thus discourage us from viewing performers, circus numbers, and landscapes separately. By their circumvolved outlines, leaves lend support to acrobatic gestures. The triumphant teamwork of circular and spiral lines liberates all elements from their given context and, thus, implicitly declares the artist's freedom. An acrobat riding on the front wheel of a bicycle holds the other wheel on his shoulders so that it, too, can participate, but as an obstacle, in the acrobatic act. The two wheels are thus given almost incompatible functions.

In the entire succession of pages, nothing recurs mechanically. Text and lithographs alternate in an ever-changing

rhythm. This unstable alternation, where writing and image are often allotted more than a single page at a time, does not, however, foster discontinuity, for text and image ceaselessly give impetus to each other, propagating, on another level, the undulating lines, the dancelike rhythm, the celerity of acrobatic performance. The letters are penned irregularly, particularly from the standpoint of thickness. Some letters seem to float; others prolong themselves until spiral, curled animal tails, floral patterns can be induced to invade the writing. The upper part of a *d* twists like a snail; the *v* of the word *vélo* evokes zigzagging paths its rider has followed. The lines of both lithographs and writing seem to have been subjected to a common, though my no means morbid, contagion produced by the same gesture. Any regular form of typography would have produced a far greater cleavage between text and image.

The image also invades the text in other ways. The incipit *C* evokes simultaneously a moon crescent and a caterpillar. It links the upper and lower parts of the sky to the earth. When images of acrobats and dancers multiply (in either Léger's words or visual representations), the strokes of writing seem to thrust themselves forward or upward. They do not seem to be transfixed on the page like printed words. Letters never follow what appears to be a prescribed or a foreseeable course. Although he refrains from creating poetically recognizable rhymes or rhythms, Léger's spatial arrangement of the page is designed to suggest versification. Compensatory displacement prevails, for the painter transforms incipits into landscapes or beasts and, conversely, insets frontispieces, *culs de lampe*, in the very midst of a written page. He also inserts capitals in the middle of sentences or even words. By such techniques and devices, he succeeds in interlocking the different aspects and modalities of the book. And thus a landscape, reduced to its essential outlines, displays its affinity with writing, while writing constantly verges on figuration.

The first and last pages feature in a very special way the system of exchange between writing and image, between illustration and text. The title page belongs essentially to writing in so far as it provides the name of the author, the title of the book and the necessary indications concerning the nature of the illustrations (figure 5). Graphic spontaneity prevails, however, over information. Far from putting his effort into forming regular, well-spaced, carefully aligned letters, Léger lets a dynamic system of performative circles

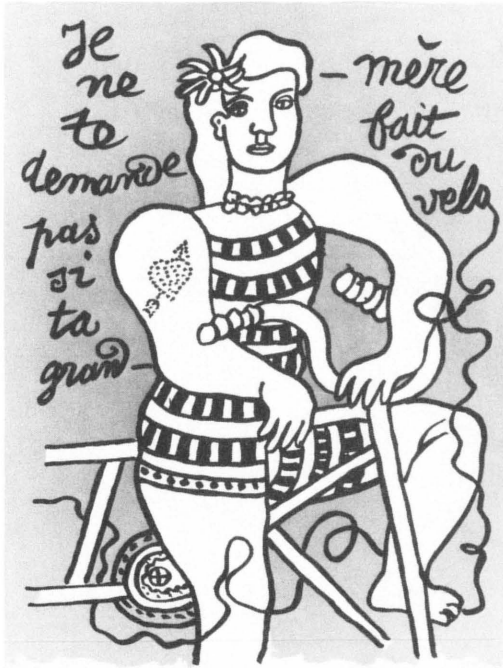
Fernand Léger from *Le Cirque*

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and spirals unleash the energy required for setting the entire spectacle in motion. The signature of the painter, linking Fernand to Léger, ends in an ambiguous tail which almost animalizes the writing while evoking the ringmaster's whip. It blends into the open circular lines dancing around the word *Cirque*, written in very thick letters bent so as to suggest an acrobatic number. They conform even less to the linearity characteristic of ordinary letterpress than the equally informative words that follow. Circularity, as already noted, constitutes a predominant force in the book. The *C* insists on bending down, the *R* on outlining a step, the *U* on contorting itself. The letter has already initiated its metamorphosis into a graphic sign, a figure. This parade of six letters also programs the spectacle which will begin as soon as we turn the page. Léger's alphabet functions as a constellation in a landscape composed of a network of half-circles directionally forming a spiral. Indeed, they outline the first of a

FIGURE 6

Fernand Léger from *Le Cirque*



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series of clouds. Spectacle and landscape, letters and drawings, disport together on the title page, which already functions as a first illustration, where visibility does its best to disclaim immobility.

The last page of the book represents a cyclist who, unlike the others, substitutes a pose for the gestures of incipient action (figure 6). She leans on a bicycle where a metonymic chain represents two wheels. The book ends with schematization and deconstruction of the bicycle, which, as we have pointed out, has set the world in motion. The dominant color is yellow, final echo of the sun and star whose multicolored design is featured in many other plates. The cyclist wears a flower in her hair, the last appearance and final bow of the flora blooming all over the book. This last page is not merely the final variation of a manifold series, the last turn of the bicycle and lottery wheels, for the woman's figure is sur-

rounded by a calligraphed text that requires a vertical reading. As each line is composed of a single word, horizontality is reduced to a minimum. Replacing ambiguous verbal and visual landscapes, this last page brings us back once again to the domain of textuality, for the inscribed words, unlike all other calligraphed signs, appear nowhere else. Relating only to the figure of the cyclist, they assume the functions of both text and image.

We may of course ponder the purpose of the cyclist's provocatively inviting question: *Je ne te demande pas si ta grand-mère fait du velo.* (I am not asking you if your grandmother is a cyclist.) It may, of course, be reducible to an entertaining bit of everyday prose. But nothing prevents it from functioning besides as the only proposal worthy of accompanying (in both senses of the word) the cyclist pausing for a moment on the road to freedom. The quip should show the way, at least implicitly, to the unknown rather than fall back on everyday existence. Léger has composed a text that raises a question or rather a non-question, even though it lets the reader supply an answer of sorts. Its negative thrust and its utter reduction of discursive language leave the door wide open, particularly for a youthful poetic response. Suggestions of freedom and companionship are, thus, conveyed here by both text and image, which intimately share the same lithographic space. In this final plate, Léger produces, as in "H" and in *Phrases*, a picture-poem; but this time the text belongs to him, or rather, to his provocative cyclist.

The painter's attempt at integrating both text and image actually goes full circle, for the lithograph also fully functions as a page in the book. Not only does the writing, by its loose ends, its chains, its loops, promise further messages or verbalizations, but it promises to participate in the generation of new outlines and figures. Conversely, the lady cyclist, because of the stripes on her costume and the love-sign on her arm, has inscribed herself in the manner of a printed or typographed page. The chain of the unfinished letters, akin to that of the bicycle, merges in this final plate so as to propose an alluring and clearly sexy path to freedom, all of which had been programmed in the frontispiece, for Léger had inscribed his characteristic signature as painter in a place usually reserved for the printed name of an author.

In 1953 Léger completed a cover design with pochoir illumination for a new edition of Paul Eluard's *Liberté*.¹⁹ Lucien

Schéler rightfully calls the illustration a *poème-objet*.²⁰

Eluard's poem is printed in four vertical columns, none of them outlined with mechanical regularity (figure 7). The linear arrangement, stressing the rhythmicity of the text, is further enhanced by curved, fluctuating green, blue and red zones. They replace the straight white space which would normally separate the columns of verse. The text is thus presented as simultaneous to the reader, enabling him to see it in its entirety without having to turn pages.

The spatial arrangement with its encroaching color zones suggests that Léger presents it for public view as a poster. This in itself provides a valid interpretation of Eluard's poem which had become at the end of World War II a text known by and belonging to all. Poetry has finally given up the privacy and mystery which had characterized it during the surrealist period. Devoid of any pronounced surrealist qualities, *Liberté* embodies the theme that *la poésie est faite par tous* (poetry is made by everybody). The poetic text itself suggests a form of display, for Eluard writes the word "freedom" everywhere and all the time. He repeats, hyperbolizes and perpetuates this act of nomination, proof of his poetic presence and his function as bard. To sing the word "freedom" manifests the power of the word together with the spell of the song. By declaring the ubiquity and timelessness of freedom, the poet transgresses the narrow confines of the everyday. Freedom needs the appropriation of the ordinary as well as of the imaginary, the language of clichés as well as that of sublimity and sophistication. By writing her name (*La Liberté*) everywhere, the poet equates liberty with both a traditional muse and a modern inspiration. The message that her presence asserts is that of a sustained act of writing and inscription. Every time the pen names liberty, it renews the meaning of life. Eluard's long inventory banishes silence and invisible words. This unusually repetitious way of writing—naming, giving face and identity to words—shows that public lyricism cannot arise from a momentary personal impulse but must be sustained.

Léger has participated lyrically and visually in the poet's verbal display. On the left and on the right, Léger has added two colored panels with figures and lettering differing in size, and of course coloring, from Eluard's printed text. He has thus prolonged the formulation of the word "liberty" by the ingenious device of substituting a colored equivalent for the poetic voice. He does not at all render the anecdotal side

FIGURE 7

Fernand Léger, *Liberté*.



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of the poem and its strong emotional impact. He transcribes visually and in essence the poem's lyric appeal and the force of its communication. The painter joins in the celebration, responding by means of a ritualized inscription. Although the poster-like structure of the poem invites simultaneous viewing and presents a total spectacle, reading can proceed only in the usual way because of the poem's spatial arrangement. It would, therefore, hardly increase ambiguity if we consider the left panel as the beginning and the right one as the end of the poem-object. The face of freedom is represented at the onset together with the fingers of the writer. The transformation of the verbal into the visual constitutes an initial step and would point to a rather standard form of illustration: the representation of key elements capable of putting it into context. The presence of colored sections and stripes, all monotonous, all separate, illuminate in a literal sense, enlighten physically and spiritually, the poem. And this presence displays all the visibility with which the painter can endow it. The most essential words, *Liberté, j'écris ton nom*, form separate entities. They are not united in a single line; they are not printed in the same way as the rest, and, unlike the printed poem with its regularly designed shapes, they do not remain transfixed on the page. The words *j'écris* belong to the hand, *ton nom* to the face, so that at this initial stage the verbal and visual supports depend on each other.

On the right hand panel, the face and the words *j'écris* are no longer present. *Ton nom* is inscribed in blue large-sized letters, suggesting rhythmic patterns, musicality, aspiration. They formulate a songlike invocation. Beneath these words, *Liberté* is handwritten, making *j'écris* superfluous. The verbal and visual are united by the same signs in the same inscription. The names of both the painter and the poet, one on the right, the other on the left, are both present, printed, and not signed, to indicate collaboration rather than separate identities. They have formulated the same word, which becomes synonymous with artistic creation. They have transformed the universe into a most meaningfully inscribed page.

- 1 Michel Sicard, "L'Esprit de la lettre," in *Écritures dans la peinture*, Villa Arson Nice, April-June, 1984, p.108.
- 2 Michel Butor, *Les Mots dans la peinture*, Genève, Skira, 1969.
- 3 Louis Marin, "Toward a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's *The Arcadian Shepherds*," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman, Princeton University Press, 1980, pp.293-324; Jacques Derrida, "+R" in *La vérité dans la peinture*, Paris, Flammarion, 1978, pp.169-211; Roland Barthes, "Érté ou A la lettre" in *L'obvie ou l'obtus*, Paris Seuil, 1982, pp.99-122.
- 4 Susan Marcus, "The Typographic Element in Cubism, 1911-15: Its Formal and Semantic Implications," *Visible Language*, vol. VI, 1972, pp.32-40.
- 5 cf. Renée Riese Hubert, "Paul Klee: Modernism in Art and Literature," in *Modernism: Challenges and Perspectives*, ed. by Monique Chefdor, Ricardo Quinones and Albert Wachtel, Urbana, Illinois, University of Illinois Press, 1986, pp.212-238.
- 6 Sonia Delaunay, *Alphabet*, New York, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1972.
- 7 Karen Wilkin, *Stuart Davis*, New York, Abbeyville Press, 1987.
- 8 Michel Sicard, op. cit., p.110.
- 9 Lawrence Saphire, *Fernand Léger: His Complete Graphic Work*, New York, Blue Moon Press, 1978.
- 10 Blaise Cendrars, *J'ai tué*, with pochoirs by Fernand Léger. Paris, La Belle Edition, 1918; Blaise Cendrars, *La fin du monde filmée par l'ange N-D*, with pochoirs by Fernand Léger, Paris, Editions de la Sirène, 1919; André Malraux, *Lunes en papier*, with woodcuts by Fernand Léger, Paris, Galerie Simon, 1921; Arthur Rimbaud, *Les illuminations*, with lithographs by Fernand Léger, Lausanne, Grosclaude, 1949; Paul Eluard, *Liberté*, with colored illuminations by Fernand Léger, Paris Seghers, 1953.
- 11 cf. *Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, marchand, éditeur, écrivain*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1984; *Hommage à Tériade*, Paris, Grand Palais, May 16-September 3, 1973.
- 12 cf. note 10; Fernand Léger, *Cirque*, handwritten text and lithographs, Paris, Tériade, 1950.
- 13 Fernand Léger, *Fonctions de la peinture*, Paris, Denoël-Gonthier, 1965.
- 14 Léger provides illustrations for each chapter of *La fin du monde*; he illustrates a selection of poems, some from *Les illuminations*, in the volume that bears this name.
- 15 Renée Riese Hubert, "Graphisme poétique graphique, *Les illuminations* de Fernand Léger" in *Rimbaud maintenant*, Paris, Sedes, 1984, pp.149-59.
- 16 cf. Renée Riese Hubert, "Cendrars et Léger," in *Blaise Cendrars*, Sud, 1988, pp.103-23.
- 17 For instance, Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres*, ed. by Suzanne Bernard, Paris, Editions Garnier, 1961.
- 18 Pierre Restany, "Écriture-peinture: un vieux collage qui a la vie dure," in *Écritures dans la peinture*, p.96.
- 19 cf. note 10.
- 20 Paul Eluard, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Lucien Schéler, Paris, Editions de la Pléiade, vol. 1, 1968, p.1, 639.

The painted words in Jasper Johns' art act in two different capacities. First, by being concealed beneath opaque layers of encaustic or oil paint, they partake in the artist's interrogation of visual perception. Second, by being repeatedly set against images, the painted words, this time visible, question classical representation. The questioning of sight is directed against the modernist limitation of painting to pure opticality as well as against the privileged position of sight in Western culture. Words are Johns' means of critiquing modernism; and the different relationships that he establishes between signifiers and signified, either verbal or pictorial, and between signs and things contradict the system of representation, both substitutional and repetitional.

Jasper Johns' Painted Words

Esther Levinger

There is general agreement that Jasper John's fragmented words, which are barely visible and often almost illegible, relate to the painting of "objects the mind already knows"—namely flags, targets, numbers, alphabets and maps. Both the words, hidden under layers of encaustic or oil paint, and the common objects induce an investigation of the gaps of ordinary visual perception. The motive behind his veiling of words coincides with that of painting well-known objects: it was, Johns explained, an interest in "what was seen, and what was not seen. . . And then one could deal with the question of when you see it, when you don't see it, what you do see. What do you think it is, how do you change what you see, and what differences do these changes make to what you see, and what differences do these changes make to what you see and to what you think."¹

Given the privileged position of sight in Western culture, its interrogation no doubt goes beyond a personal, solitary game of hide and seek. In the immediate context of modernist art in New York in the early 1950s, the very questioning of ocular certainty challenges the foundation of the Greenbergian confinement of painting to pure opticality. Further, the relationship between Johns' hidden words and his particular subject matter points to still other correspondences that operate in terms of the shift from the isolated self to the activities of a collection of subjects. Both Johns choice of an impersonal art consisting of public objects (flags, targets, etc.) and his use of language are posited against self-centered abstract expressionism, which is concerned with the subject, the "artist author." Joan Carpenter's investigation of the "Infra Iconography" of *Flag* (1955)² and Moira Roth's study of "Aesthetic of Indifference"³ make amply clear that Johns' "dream" about painting a flag cannot be dissociated from American political and cultural life in the early 1950s and, thus, presents a break with Clement Greenberg's advocacy of an elitist art unsoiled by history, unless the history of art. Johns refutes the subjective statements epitomized by "action painting," and he uses words that are always public.

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Esther Levinger, pp.280-295
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Concentrating on the “impurity” of Johns’ work—namely, the inclusion of words, whether veiled or unveiled, legible or illegible, (and other objects of no immediate concern to us here), will disclose an additional aspect of the anti-modernist stand. Johns explored and exploded the limits of different modes of communication, visual and verbal, by reversing their accepted relationship in much of abstract art. The understanding of abstract geometric and abstract expressionistic art depended on verbal explanations, but both excluded words from the iconic field. By contrast, Johns’ paintings exclude verbal explanations (Johns never explained his work as Newman or Rothko did) and incorporate the word. That is, the set word/image is transferred from writing on paintings to writing *in* paintings.

Besides the negatory aspect of the presence of words in Johns’ work—namely the repudiation of abstract expressionism—there is also a positive aspect: the language-games. It is well known that Johns started to read Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* in 1961, two years after meeting Duchamp. The result of the encounter with Duchamp, it has been suggested, were works such as *False Start* (1959), “which reflect Johns’ interest in Duchamp’s moving away from work incorporating simply retinal boundaries ‘into a field where language, thought and vision acted upon one another.’”⁴ Two years later, *By the Sea* (1961)—especially the lower panel in which the three words, “red,” “yellow” and “blue” are superimposed—follows Wittgenstein to the letter according to one critic. The reason is that Johns here referred directly to the philosopher’s questioning of the relationship between a color and its label—or more generally, to the philosopher’s theory that the meaning of a word depends on its use.

At best, this and similar readings of Johns transform the artist into an illustrator both of Duchamp and of Wittgenstein; at worst, they fail to notice that Johns’ “Wittgensteinian” language-games started prior to the artist’s study of the *Philosophical Investigations* and, hence, independently of it. In fact, the division of the referent “red” (the patch of red color on the canvas), for example, from the sign “red” in *False Start* and also in *Out the Window* (1959), both completed before Johns had even heard of Wittgenstein, was already directed at an interrogation of the relationship among signifiers, signified and referents. Moreover, Johns’ games with signs and objects started in 1955 with the very

first words he painted on the canvas. He must have been greatly surprised to learn that research into language was shared by others and his empirical experimentations had a philosophical base that formed the subject of study by a philosopher of whom he had never heard.

The works this paper proposes to study have already been subject to various decodings. The present analysis will concentrate on the words themselves as objects and on the different relationships that Johns examined between signs (verbal and visual) and referents.

By disrupting the connection between the written word and the visual image on the same canvas, Johns obstructed the transparency between signifier and signified, thereby subverting the classical system of representation. *Tango* (1955) consists of an overall monochrome of blue, an opaque and blind color field which refuses to carry its own meaning; except for the word “tango” written in the upper left-hand corner, there is nothing in the image to suggest a dance. Further, if blue evokes any dance, it would be a waltz, the viewer’s recalling Strauss’ *Blue Danube*. That is to say, the word written on the canvas in this painting clarifies an intentional theme not implied by the image alone; thus Johns annuls both the symbolical and imitational modes of representation. Similarly in *The Critic Smiles* (1959), the spectator might never suspect without the written words that a bronze toothbrush signifies a smiling critic (although here the toothbrush, as is well known, substitutes for the absent teeth of the smiling critic).

Names identifying persons, mostly dancers and poets, form an integral part of the image in Johns paintings. In these works, he relied entirely on the written word to identify the person and, therefore, the theme of the painting; without the name written on the iconic field, the pictorial language would be open to different decodings. Sometimes the dedicatee is named overtly, as in *In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O’Hara* (1961), although the artist could be referring to his own feelings and memories.⁵ *Portrait—Viola Farber* (1961-62) identifies this dancer from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company only by her name, which is printed twice in superimposed letters of different sizes and different shades of gray. The hinged stretcher, where one would have expected to find the painted portrait, is empty.

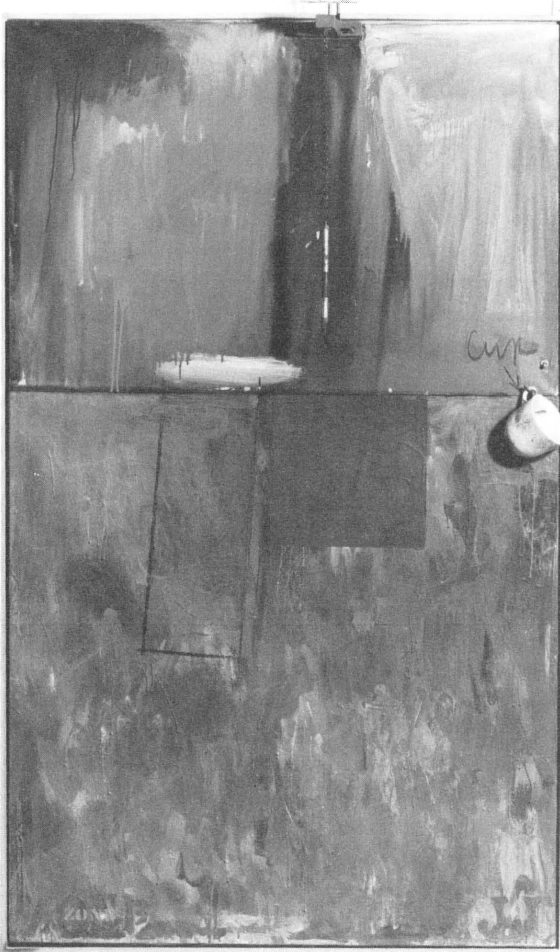
The division between signifiers and signified in the paintings discussed leaves both intact, each existing as a separate entity. In the alphabet paintings, however, Johns proceeded to nullify the signifier. The letters, repeated on the same canvas or on different canvases, in *Gray Alphabet* (1956), for instance, never add up to signifiers; on the contrary, they form a never-ending chain of signifiers. Johns' next step was to render reading materials, the accepted vehicle of knowledge, illegible. Thus the declared theme of three paintings were objects to be read: *Book* (1957), *Newspaper* (1957), and *Tennyson* (1958); in all three, however, not a single word is legible except for the name of the poet in the last work. The book is open, but the pages cannot be turned, and the words are veiled by paint. The newspaper is spread out in its natural size, but the news cannot be read; indeed, scholarly efforts directed at deciphering the text have mostly gone unrewarded since the single words uncoded did not add up to an overall meaning.⁶

Johns' language-games became more complex when he affixed an object to the canvas and proceeded to either transfer the same paintings into prints or to make drawings after them. In the different "Device" paintings, such as *Device Circle* (1959), *Device* (1961-62), and *Device* (1962), or in *Painting with Two Balls* (1960), the written signs relate to things (namely to the corporeal "devices," the wooden sticks or the two balls) that are themselves present. It is as though the signifier, the signified and the referent have reacquired their unity. In the drawings and lithographs of the same works, though, the objects are missing. Johns went back in these versions to the classical system of representation in which the signifier (in this case, both verbal and pictorial) compensates for an absence. Johns, however, is far from building a coherent system of language or a theory of representation. On the contrary, his is an open-ended game in which he moves in different directions according to rules he himself sets up while playing each separate move.

Although the language-games in works such as *Fool's House* (1962) and *Zone* (1962) depend to a large extent on his newly acquired knowledge from the writings of Wittgenstein, since he was obviously referring to the insufficiency of ostensive definition to promote meaning,⁷ Johns continued his independent explorations into the relationship between signs and referents and between signifiers and signified by devising his own language-games as he went along.⁸ Thus

FIGURE 1

Jasper Johns, *Zone*, 1962
Oil, encaustic and collage on canvas with objects, 60 x 36".



By permission of Kunsthaus, Zurich.

the word "Zone," written twice in the lower left of the canvas (figure 1), attracts one's attention to the visual differences between the two separate panels, establishing thereby a unity of word and image. In the upper "zone," painted with translucent oil, Johns affixed an "A" made of neon tubing to enhance its luminosity; there is also a wooden "T" with a magnet from which a chain with a paintbrush hangs freely; and at the border between the two zones, there is a simple

white cup. In contrast, the lower “zone,” painted with opaque encaustic over collage, is empty except for two sub-zones—one defined by a black contour and the other, smaller than the first, painted over and more opaque than the background.

Unlike what happens in *Zone*, the signifier in other works has lost its signified and thereby been transformed, following Frederic Jameson’s analysis of postmodern practices, into a material tactile reality. Examples are *THE* (1957), *NO* (1961), and *LIAR* (1961).⁹ Johns himself considered the isolated signifier in terms of an object, claiming that the signifier thus isolated could then be treated as an object: “I thought that one thing to do with the written word was to pretend that it was an object that could be bent, turned upside down and I began more or less folding words. . . .”¹⁰ Further, the re-use of an object and of a word/object on canvas in sculpture and in print—indeed Johns’ entire practice expressed in the oft quoted entry from his sketchbook: “Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it. . . .” Or an earlier entry: “It and its use and its action. . . . (do what I do, do what I say)”¹¹—could be considered an exact counterpart to later poststructuralist modes of “mime” derived from Wittgenstein. Hence Gregory L. Ulmer’s presentation of post-criticism applies directly to Johns: *The implication of textual mime for post-criticism. . . . is that knowledge of an object of study may be obtained without conceptualization or explanation. Rather, as if following Wittgenstein’s admonition that “the meaning is the use,” Derrida enacts or performs (mimes) the compositional structuration of the referent, resulting in another text of the same “kind”. . . . Post-criticism, then, functions with an “epistemology” of performance—knowing as making, producing, doing, acting, as in Wittgenstein’s account of the relation of knowing to the “mastery of a technique.”*¹²

The isolated signifier could also be transformed into an image, as in *Voice 2* (1971). In a first version, *Voice* (1964-67), the word was barely visible, and the wooden stick attached to the canvas threatened to block it out entirely. The word not only was a small part of an image, it also was involved with other objects. In *Voice 2* (figure 2), the word itself constitutes the image. The theme was repeated because, in Johns’ words, “there was something left over, some kind of anxiety, some question about the use of the word in the first painting. Perhaps its smallness in relation to the size of

FIGURE 2

Jasper Johns, *Voice 2*, 1971
Oil and collage on canvas, three panels, each 72 x 50".



Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel, Kunstmuseum.

the painting led me to use the word in another way, to make it big, to distort it, bend it about a bit, split it up.”¹³ The theme of the two paintings is “voice,” whether the small voice that vanishes unheard and unnoticed in the almost uniform gray field or the large, dissected voice, echoing itself. The word is taken out of its context, broken up, fragmented and repeated until it becomes a mere sound; until “VOICE” turns into “NOISE.” The noise becomes more intense and disturbing in the numerous lithographs in which the voice is echoed again and again as it circles around itself.

Voice 2 is also about the surplus of exact meaning—or the spilling over and diffusing of meaning. Originally the meaning of the indication, “fork should be 7” long,” was literal since Johns wished to instruct the printer that the length of the fork in *Screen Piece* (1967) should be its normal size in the print.¹⁴ Later, however, the artist incorporated that sentence in *Voice 2* in which “everything was very much enlarged, [thus] making the instruction suggest that everything should be reduced.”¹⁵ Johns seemed to delight in the alternate or contradictory meaning a sign acquires in the different chains of signifiers, whether verbal or pictorial since he deliberately annulled the identity of the sign with itself. Thus “should be” has still other uses. Johns explained that when he started to work on *Voice 2*, he hoped that the three panels might be shifted around, “might accomodate any order or

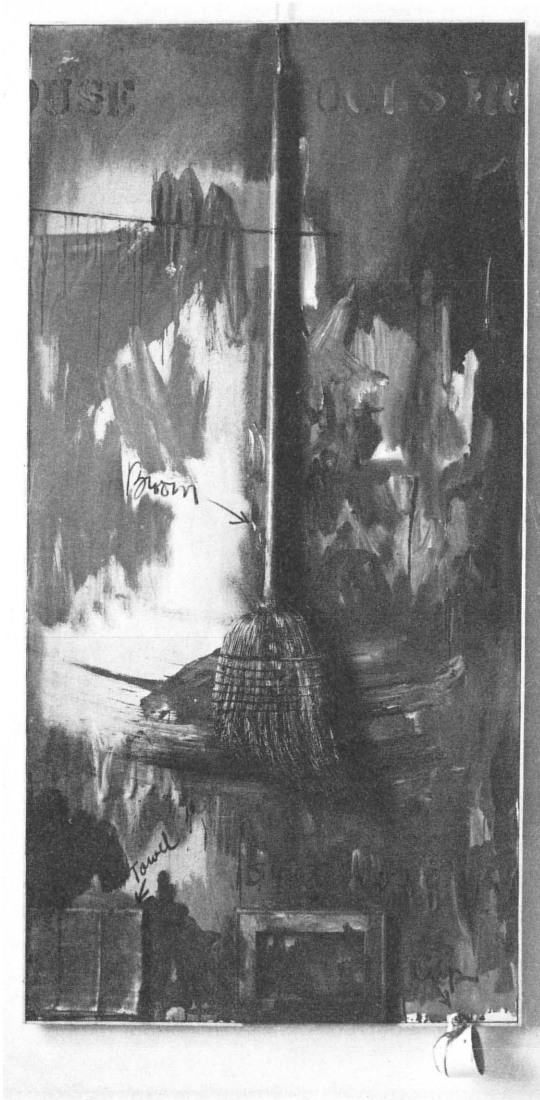
disorder. . . . While working in this way, trying to make the painting have 'no should be'. . . , the 'should be' seemed amusing."¹⁶ Johns' words/objects, then, have no exact or unique meanings. Pertinent examples are works such as *Field Painting* (1963-64) and *Passage II* (1966), in which the letters are corporeal substances, and the spectator is seemingly invited to form different words. (In *Passage II*, the letters forming the names of three colors—red, orange and yellow—may be arranged to form different words, as one pleases.)

Examples of surplus and diffused meanings abound in Johns' work. The signifier "GRAY" in *Painting with Ruler and "Gray"* (1960) could be a "found object"; but it could also designate the dominant gray color of the painting. In *Fool's House* (1962), pictorial representation is restricted to a painted background—a large surface of monochrome grayish blue (figure 3). Instead of painting an object, Johns affixed the real object to the canvas and then proceeded to question that object or/and its name: each object is repeated by having its name written next to it and referred to by an arrow. Although the reference to Wittgenstein in the latter work is clear, Johns also pursued here his own, independent investigation into the polysemous meanings of words and the things the words name: a broom which might serve as a paintbrush; a towel which might serve to wipe one's hand but also, like the broom, to wipe out the whole painting; a cup from which one drinks but also in which one cleans brushes, and a stretcher which frames an insignificant part of the canvas. This is not only an exercise in the insufficiency of ostensive definition to promote meaning, it is a tenacious questioning of the painter's occupation and a deconstruction of the logic of representation. Everything in this canvas may just as well be itself and, at the same time be something else.

Diffused meaning is also the subject of the 1966 lithograph, *Pinion*, in which the pictorial and verbal signs contradict one another. Although this work shows the imprints of two feet, a knee and two hands in a position ready for running, its title, "Pinion," contradicts the visual image. It suggests, instead, that the runner's legs have been tied down, thus obviating flight forever. At the top of this lithograph, Johns added a photographic reproduction of a section of the painting *Eddingsville* (1965), showing a collection of old cracked objects related to the artist's life and work in that town by the sea: a shell, an ice tray, a paintbrush and a hook, two

FIGURE 3

Jasper Johns, *Fool's House*, 1962
Oil on canvas with objects, 72 x 36"



Collection Jean Christoph. Photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

cans, a bottle, a sponge and a fork, all of which are bolted together between a ruler and a wax cast of an arm. These objects could be the trophies offered to a runner who at the last instant refuses to join the race or, conversely, who joins the race without being aware of its total absurdity.¹⁷

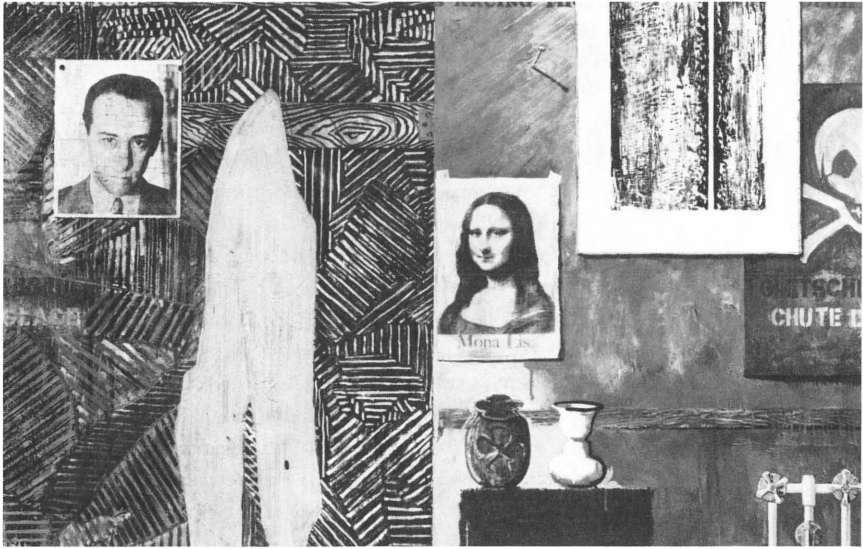
Unlike his early works up to the 1970s, during which period Johns quoted his own works from one painting and one medium to the other, the years since find him repeatedly quoting from other artists' works, which he then appropriates and re-uses in different contexts—that is to say, in varying chains of meanings. *Racing Thoughts* (1983), for example, consists in large part of a sort of collage, an assemblage of various paintings with different techniques (figure 4). On the left, an upturned, veiled image of the dying St. Anthony is taken from Grünewald's *Temptation of St. Anthony*;¹⁸ above that is a photographic jigsaw puzzle of Leo Castelli. On the right, the assemblage consists of a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* (a reference to both Leonardo and Duchamp), a Barnett Newman print and an avalanche-warning sign. Below there are still other images: faucets, and a linen basket on top of which Johns placed a George Ohr pot and a German porcelain vase with the profiles of Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip.¹⁹

Johns used these same images, together or separately, elsewhere; but in this particular work, the inscription, "Racing Thoughts," provides the viewer with a clue to the relationship among the signs, all of which by themselves are pregnant with diffused meanings. Johns associates here the world of art (Leo Castelli), works of art in general (one should also mention the nail painted in trompe-l'œil) and his own private world with death: the death of St. Anthony and a large, white skull on the extreme right of the canvas—the Swiss avalanche-warning sign—containing the words, *gletscherabbruch* and *chute de glace*. The collage, as a whole, presents an allegory of vanity and, in fact, a game on the subject of earlier works (the absurdity and futility of the artist's occupation or any achievement), such as *Fool's House* and *Pinion*.

Johns' critique of modernist art—that is, his questioning of visual perception and classical representation—aims at undermining the limitation of art to sight in an attempt to open it to the experience of all five senses. That Johns was referring to the sound potency of the written word on the iconic field is confirmed by his repeated references to the auditive (*Tango*, which is a singing picture: a music box behind the canvas may be operated by the spectator by winding the key protruding from the canvas), supported by the semantic value of words (*Voice*, *Voice 2*). Further, the effort involved in deciphering the word whether hidden under paint, fragmented or reversed—results in one's saying it aloud.²⁰ Johns

FIGURE 4

Jasper Johns, *Racing Thoughts*, 1983
Encaustic and collage on canvas, 48 x 75 1/8



Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

thereby imparts to the written word its sound potency although print culture had reduced it to the visual. Pictorial representation ceases to be the privilege or property of one organ—the eye—and becomes the shared property of the eye and the ear.

Hence, Johns defies the traditional acceptance of the separation between the senses. More specifically, he challenges the ascendancy of the visual in art. He is engaged, in fact, in an anti-visual discourse. First, Johns denies the relationship of transparency between signifiers and signified. Second, art for this artist is never a unidimensional optical sensation; on the contrary, his paintings declare, at times physically and at other times intellectually, a new cohesion of human faculties and a renewal of the interplay among all the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.²¹ The integration of the visual and auditive, then, explains the frequent presence of eating utensils—forks and spoons—in Johns' paintings. (*In Memory of My Feelings—Frank O'Hara* and *Portrait—Viola Farber* are two notable examples.) Marshall McLuhan tells us

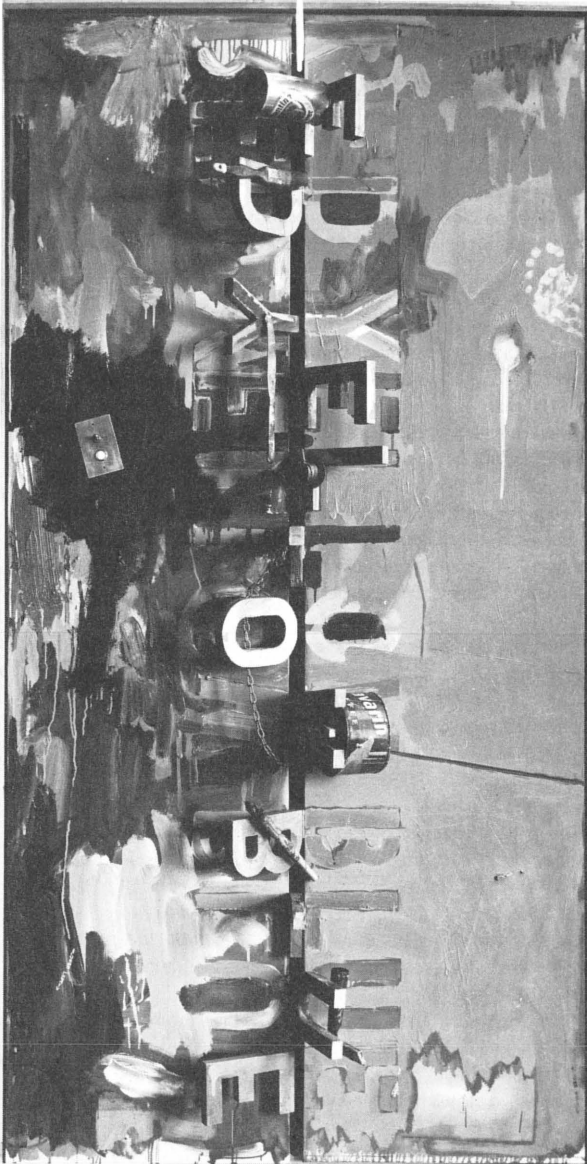
that reading by pronouncing each word was sometimes referred to as rumination: “the repeated mastication of the divine words is sometimes described by use of the theme of spiritual nutrition. The vocabulary is borrowed from eating, from digestion.²² Johns’ reference to eating, or the sense of taste, is also rendered more directly in *Painting Bitten by a Man* (1961): here food is the painting itself.

The modernist project of negating Renaissance perspective reaches unprecedented heights in Johns’ work—and in a manner that contradicts previous bi-dimensionality. Again and again, Johns invites the spectator to approach the work—that is, to overcome the necessary ocular distance required by perspective—for the semi-visible words tempt the viewer to look from close up. Moreover, since the first “target” paintings (*Target with Four Faces* and *Target with Plaster Casts*), the spectator of a Johns work is stimulated to manipulate the different three-dimensional devices attached to the canvas. Johns’ words, too, involve the sense of touch. The letters of the alphabet in *Gray Alphabets* (1956) are tactile; each letter is made of newspaper cuttings painted over with encaustic, thus contrasting the tangible, protruding letters with the flat canvas that serves as their background and also with the accepted, black, uniformly flat print. In *Passage II, Field Painting* and other paintings, the letters are made of neon tubing, wood or metal and the spectator is invited to approach the work, to touch, to act and to do. Johns thus creates a real physical contact between the spectator and the work because of the painting’s pronounced tactility, which induces the impulse to touch.

Field Painting (figure 5) integrates in a single painting all the different senses: vision—the colorful brush strokes; hearing—the need to pronounce aloud the words written with very small, barely visible letters: “lower left,” “upper left,” etc.; taste—the Ballantine Ale can, the Savarin Coffee can and the two spoons on the right; touch—the tangible letters but also the light switch on the left that must be operated. Smell may be evoked by the odor of the paint itself and by the imaginary smell of coffee or of turpentine—if, indeed, the coffee can is a studio feature that serves to hold the liquid to clean the painter’s brushes.²³ Johns’ painting is a constant exploration and questioning of the accepted unidimensionality of man when it comes to art.

FIGURE 5

Jasper Johns, *Field Painting*, 1963-64
Oil on canvas with objects, 72 x 36 3/4"



Private collection. Photo courtesy of Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.

- 1 P. Fuller, "Jasper Johns Interviewed, Part 1," *Art Monthly* XVIII (July-August 1978), pp.6-12. *Art Monthly* XIX (September 1978), pp.5-7. Quoted in *Jasper Johns, A Print Retrospective* (Exhibition catalogue). (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1986), p.19.
- 2 J. Carpenter, "The Infra-Iconography of Jasper Johns," *Art Journal*, XXXVI (Spring 1977), pp.221-227.
- 3 M. Roth, "The Aesthetic of Indifference," *Artforum*, XVI (November 1977), pp.47-53.
- 4 P. Higginson, "Jasper's Non-Dilemma, A Wittgensteinian Approach," *New Lugano Review*, 10, 1976, p.53. For a detailed study of Duchampian themes and objects in Johns' work, see Roni Feinstein, "New Thoughts for Jasper Johns' Sculpture," *Art Magazine*, LIV (April 1980), pp.139-145.
- 5 For one such interpretation, see C. Harrison and F. Orton, "Jasper Johns: 'Meaning What You See,'" *Art History*, VII (March 1984), pp.94-95.
- 6 For notable exceptions, see J. Carpenter, "The Infra-Iconography of Jasper Johns."
- 7 Higginson, pp.53-54.
- 8 This, of course, accords with Wittgenstein's theory of language: language is a game, the rules of which we have to make up as we go along. See *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), #83.
- 9 Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic, Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), p.120.
- 10 A.R. Solomon, director and L. Slate, producer, *U.S.A. Artists #8: Jasper Johns*, 1966. Quoted in *Jasper Johns, A Print Retrospective*, p.18
- 11 Quote taken from *Jasper Johns, A Print Retrospective*, p.23 and p.21.
- 12 Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Object of Post-Criticism," *The Anti-Aesthetic*. . . , p.94.
- 13 Christian Geelhar, *Jasper Johns Working Proofs* (Exhibition Catalogue), Basel, 1980, p.52.
- 14 On the history of "fork should be. . ." see M. Crichton, *Jasper Johns* (exhibition catalogue), (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1977), p.56.
- 15 Geelhar, p.50.
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 The idea of "futile racing" was suggested by Roberta Bernstein's reading of *Cup We All Race 4*, in *Jasper Johns' Paintings and Sculptures 1954-1974: "The Changing Focus of the Eye"* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), p.85.
- 18 On the presence of Grünewald's *Temptation of St. Anthony* in Johns' paintings after 1984, see J. Johnston, "Tracking the Shadow," *Art in America*, LXXV (October 1987), pp.138-140.
- 19 According to R. Francis, "Johns offers us the view from his bath. Some elements in [the] painting (faucets, linen basket, door, and a Barnett Newman print) are correctly disposed: this is the view you would get while taking a bath in his tub." *Jasper Johns* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), p.103.
- 20 On this subject, see M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), especially the chapter, "In antiquity and the Middle Ages reading was necessarily reading aloud," pp.82-84.
- 21 Johns' denial of the monopoly of vision joins the questioning of the primacy of sight in much of twentieth-century French philosophy. On French philosophy, see Martin Jay, "In the Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in 20th Century French Thought," *Postmoder-*

nism, ICA Documents 4, London, 1986, pp.19-26.

22 McLuhan, pp.89-90.

23 The coffee can as a container of turpentine is suggested by *Painted Bronze* (1960).

Jules Kirschenbaum, a modern American artist whose work integrates inscriptions and figurative painting, studied in New York under masters belonging to the abstract expressionist and to the purely abstract school, yet he exhibited at the Whitney Museum with Cadmus and other protagonists of "magic realism." Later, his work took a wholly different turn; it became an art about meaning and about the 'meaning of meaning.' Kirschenbaum writes: "One contemporary concept is 'what you see is what you see.' In contrast to that, I am for an art in which what you see is only the beginning of an endless chain of illusions. . . ."

On the Verbal Art of a Modern Painter: the Work of Jules Kirschenbaum

Claude Gandelman

Biographical crumbs.¹

Jules Kirschenbaum was born in New York City in 1930, the son of an art dealer in rare books and prints. He studied at the Brooklyn Museum Art School, where his principal teacher was the figurative painter, Xavier Gonzales. In this period of aggressive avant-garde modernism, paradoxically, Kirschenbaum was drawn to figurative art, to "old art," primarily the art of the Italian quattrocento, that of Mantegna, Uccello and Piero della Francesca.

Yet there was no element of reactionary conservatism in his attitude. Through another master, Hans Hoffman, Kirschenbaum became intimately acquainted with the experiments of the abstract expressionists. During the mid-1950s, Kirschenbaum exhibited several times in the "Whitney Annuals" and found himself classified under the heading of "magic realism" together with painters such as George Tooker and Paul Cadmus. Indeed, Kirschenbaum shared these artists' fascination with existentialism and, like them, read Sartre, Camus and Kirkegaard, as well as Dostoyevsky and Kafka, their common "ancestors." With them he shared also an affection for a very specific painting technique—egg tempera. It had been used widely by pre-Renaissance and Renaissance artists, and it remained Kirschenbaum's favorite medium during the late fifties.

It was at the end of this period, that is, at the beginning of the 1960s, that Kirschenbaum and his wife, fellow painter Cornelia Ruthenberg, moved to Meshoppen, Pennsylvania, a small town near Wilkes-Barre. There, they found a ramshackle old church which they bought and repaired. It was in this church that they lived in "productive seclusion" at the beginning of the 1960s. Yet, in 1963, they had to leave Pennsylvania, Kirschenbaum was appointed artist-in-residence at the Des Moines Art Center, a position he held until 1967 when he was offered another teaching position at Drake University.

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In 1983, the Des Moines Art Center organized a Jules Kirschenbaum retrospective exhibition.² This was followed by another showing of his art, in February 1985, at the Forum Gallery on Madison Avenue, in New York City. Recently, the Jewish Museum in that city also commissioned a work on a cabalistic subject.

Now that figurative painting is making a “comeback” on the international scene and the craze for minimal abstraction has subsided, the work of a great representational painter like Jules Kirschenbaum is also coming back, to be viewed and appreciated.

Painting Words

I have mentioned the importance of the literary background behind the paintings of Kirschenbaum. I should also add that this literary aspect comes to the fore in the textuality which characterizes many of his paintings. A great number of canvases, indeed, not only represent objects or people, but also integrate texts within the representation. Usually, these texts are significant quotations culled from the work of great authors, authors whose work is dear to the painter’s heart. Kirkegaard, mentioned above, is a case in point. But writers who wrote about the creative process itself, such as Paul Valéry or Stéphane Mallarmé are also frequently quoted, so that inscriptions are of primary importance for an understanding of Kirschenbaum’s work. Thus, the series of pictures entitled *Meditation of Death: Paul Valéry* actually reproduces a typescript that is the English translation of Valéry’s reflection on art in *Monsieur Teste*. Similarly, the painting entitled *Skull* incorporates a quotation from a letter by Mallarmé concerning artistic creation. Inscriptions (Hebrew inscriptions) are also significant in *Our Ancestors the Alchemists*, *Dream of the Golem* and in the first picture in the series *Auto-da-Fe*, subtitled *Søren Kirkegaard*.

Cabalistic Reflections

Before discussing individual paintings and the inscriptions they contain, it is proper that Kirschenbaum himself should present his own thoughts on the subject.³

“The first painting I exhibited when I was nineteen years old contained a long quotation and writing has remained an important part of my work ever since. The way I use writing has changed but it remained a significant source of imagery for me. I have no theories about it; each painting evolves in its own

way and words appear as a figure or still life object appears and are altered or done away with as the design begins to take shape. It sometimes happens that a text is so important for me that it is the first thing I put down, as in the Tomb for Antonio Machado. Often however, a word or text only seems necessary late in the process. It is all very subjective and ambiguous.

A lot of my work comes from literature. Words conjure up images not necessarily related to the text. I do not try to illustrate, and the text might not seem to have much to do with the objects. I use words to add another dimension to the painting just as carefully painted details can do. A painting makes an impression from a distance but when viewed up close the paint itself and details that were not visible when seen far off, provoke new responses.

Reading a sentence or word can intensify the metaphorical aspect of a painting. I like the idea of many-layered meanings. Art is not one thing like so-called minimalist structures, those deadly forms of modernism. One contemporary concept is that 'what you see is what you see.' In contrast to that, I am for an art in which what you see is only the beginning of an endless chain of illusions. I like works which allow you the freedom to do whatever comes to mind, the ideal being early Christian crucifixes. Although they might seem confined to rigid limits, they use shaped panels (in the form of a cross), collage (raised and carved gesso), foreign material (gold leaf), free use of scale (large figure of Christ, small figures of saints), distorted drawing of figure, modeled forms against flat patterns, decorative color and the significant use of letters which are both meaningful literally and important to the design.

As a formal device, letters or words reinforce the two-dimensionality of the surface and push forward any modeled forms seen against them. They also serve as a means for introducing flat patterns of color. But there is a more important factor for me, especially with the paintings that deal with cabala and certain mystical ideas that have interested me for some time now. The Hebrew language is considered sacred, 'God-given' not the meaning, but the letters themselves. It is said that the proper combining of letters made up the heavens and the earth, and the combining and forming of letters is a traditional mystical exercise. In a recent painting of mine in which the permutations of the tetragrammaton YHVH is used as in some ancient texts, the mere writing of it seems charged with significance.

*Any writing seems to give a work more than just personal significance. Unfortunately, there is no way to know for sure that what we do is in any way significant. I don't know what my work means. I only know how to do it.*³

It is proper that the end should recall the beginning. “In my beginning is my end,” perhaps the most significant Christian “inscription,” is also full of significance for this special issue of *Visible Language*, which began with some summary reflections of mine concerning the meanings of *letters* for the cabalist. Those reflections were written at a time when I had not received any response from Kirschenbaum and did not know whether he would answer me at all. Though I knew some of his paintings, I did not know then how deeply he had been influenced by cabalist writings on the question of language.

When I received his response, I realized that the problematic put forward in this whole issue was somewhat brought into question by the statements of this painter. I have placed this issue on “Inscriptions in Paintings” under the aegis of “subversion,” “contrast,” “discordia concors,” etc. Yet, can we say that the paintings of Kirschenbaum represent a corpus of works in which there exists a fundamental split and contradiction between inscriptions and representation?

His art seems to be based on a harmonic relationship between the texts he quotes and the images in which they are integrated—unless it is the images, the pictures, that are integrated into the painted texts. At this juncture, a survey of the inscriptions themselves seems necessary.

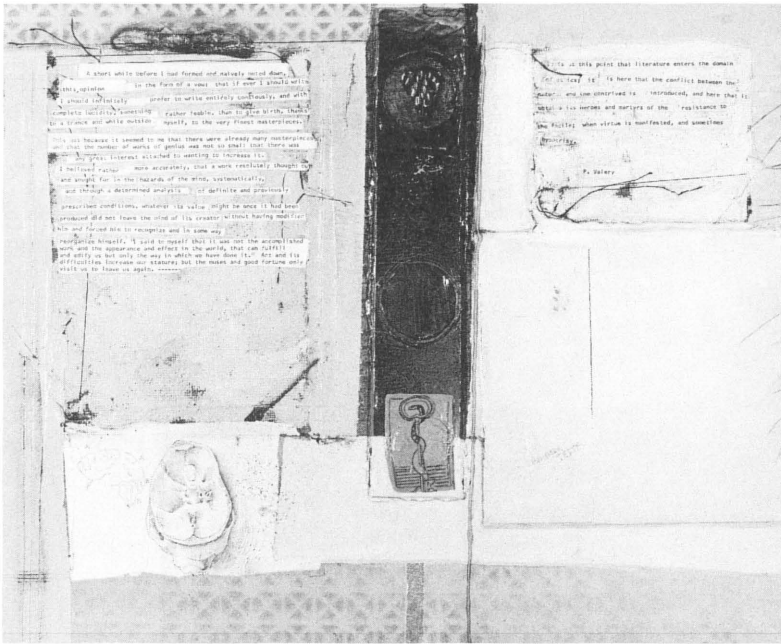
An Art of Quotation

Here is the full text of the Paul Valéry “mediation” in the first painting in the *Meditation of Death* series (figure 1):

A short while before, I formed and naively noted down this opinion in the form of a vow: that if I ever should write, I should infinitely prefer to write entirely consciously, and with complete lucidity, something rather feeble, than to give birth, thanks to a trance and while outside myself, to the very finest masterpieces. This was because it seemed to me that there were already many masterpieces, and that the number of works of genius was not so small that there was any great unrest attached to wanting to increase it. I believe rather more accurately, that a work resolutely thought out and sought for in the

FIGURE 1

Jules Kirschenbaum, *Meditations on Death*, 1972



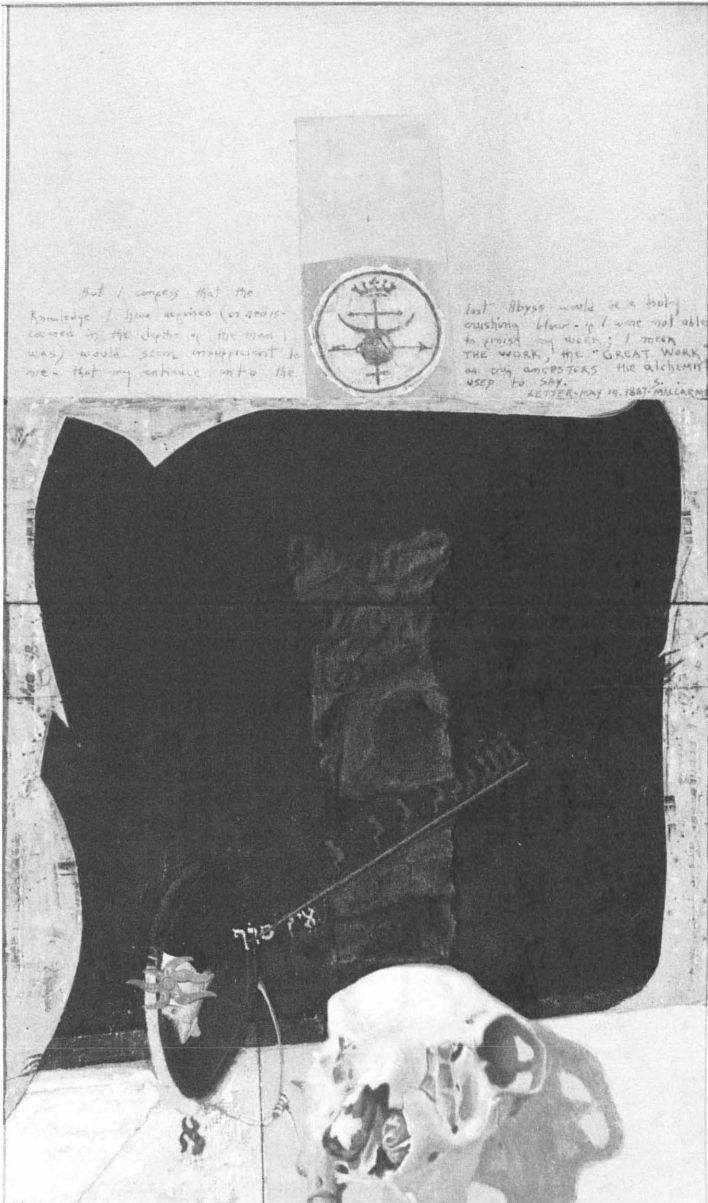
By permission of the artist.

hazards of the mind, systematically and through a determined analysis of definite and previously prescribed conditions, whatever its value might be once it had been produced did not leave the mind of its creator without having modified him and forced him to recognize and in some way reorganize himself. I said to myself that it was not the accomplished work and the appearance and effect in the world, that can fulfill and edify us but only the way in which we have done it. Art and its difficulties increase our stature, but the muses and good fortune only visit us to leave us again. . . It is here that the conflict between the natural and the contrived is introduced and here that it obtains its heroes and martyrs of the resistance to the facile, when virtue is manifested, and sometimes hypocrisy."⁴

This is an extremely long and complex quotation. Reading the painting in a proper manner means submitting this quote to a veritable *explication de texte*. I shall be content with bringing forward the basic objective of the quotation, namely, that it is essentially directed against the facility of the abstract expressionist “dance and trance,” against the surreal-

FIGURE 2

Jules Kirschenbaum, *Skull*, 1976



By permission of the artist.

istic dogma that it is the unconscious in us—that is the artist. Kirschenbaum is for an art in which everything is controlled, if not by reason, at least by aesthetic intention; he is against chance or “noise” in the work of art.

And yet, artists are far from dry rationalists; *painters are alchemists or cabalists* in their own very specific way. *Skull*, 1976 (figure 2), is inscribed in the following manner:

“But I confess that the knowledge I have acquired (or rediscovered in the depths of the man I was) would seem insufficient to me—that my entrance into the last Abyss would be a truly crushing blow if I were not able to finish my work; I mean THE WORK, the “great work” as our ancestor the alchemists used to say.” Stephane Mallarmé ⁶

Painting is a means for describing infinity and, perhaps, also an object for infinite contemplation. But this achieving of a vision of infinity has nothing to do with random creation or the pure gesture of action painting. It is the result of patient work and of the patient craft of draftsmanship seen as an “alchemy of vision.”

I shall conclude this presentation of the work of a modern “inscription master” with the painting, *A Tomb for Antonio Machado* (figure 3), which contains a long quotation from a poem by the Spanish poet. The inscription is an excerpt from the poem “Commentary,” written after the fall of the Spanish Republic, in 1939, when the poet, ill and without any means of support, had set out on the long road of his French exile:

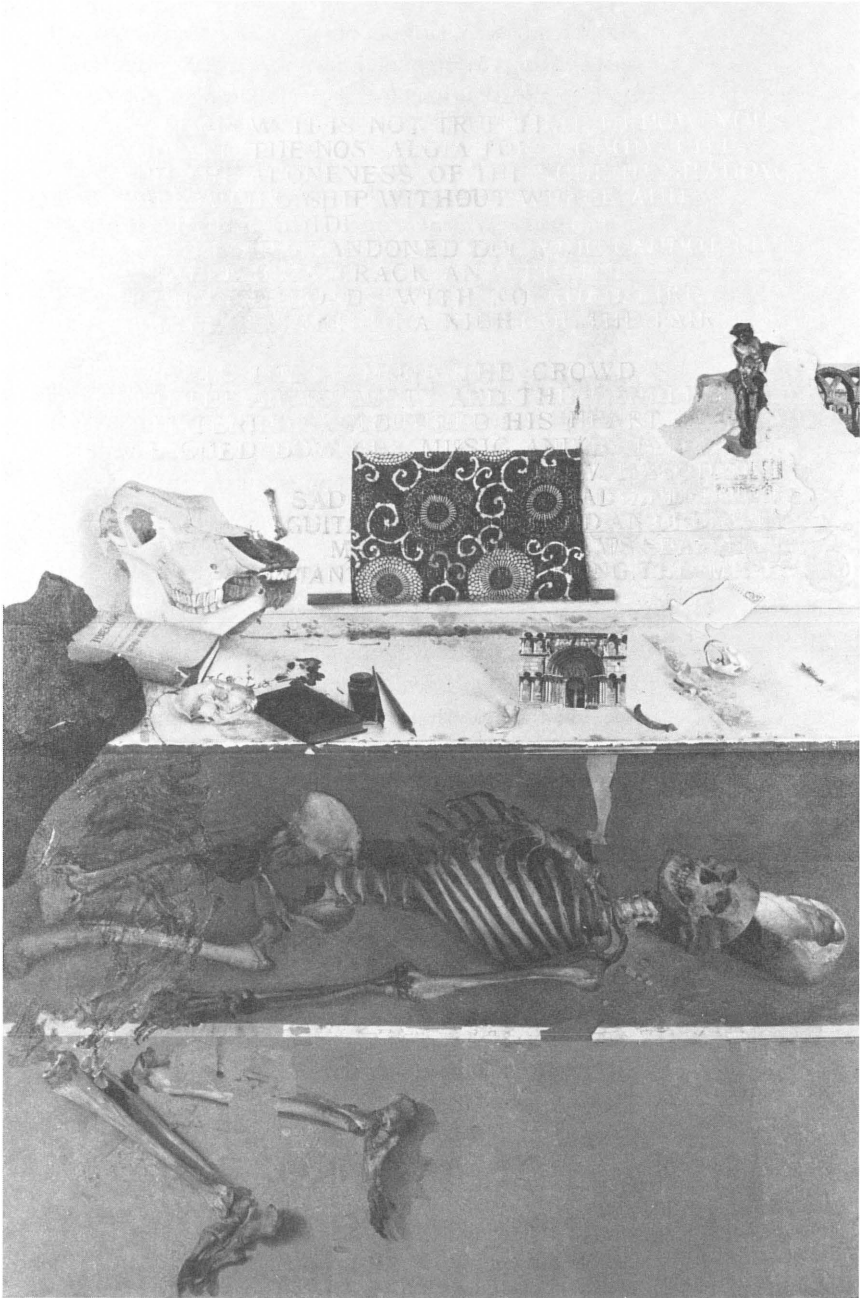
*Sorrow, it is not true that I know you:
you are the nostalgia for a good life,
and the aloneness of the soul in shadow,
the sailing ship without guide.*

*Like an abandoned dog who cannot find
a smell or a track roams
along the roads with no road, like
the child who in a night of the fair*

*gets lost among the crowd,
and the air is dusty, and the candles
fluttering—astounded, his heart
weighed down by music and pain:*

FIGURE 3

Jules Kirschenbaum, *A Tomb for Antonio Machado*, 1986



By permission of the artist.

*That's how I am, drunk, sad by nature,
a mad and lunar guitarist, a poet,
and an ordinary man lost in dreams,
searching constantly for God among the mists.*⁷

In the work of Kirschenbaum, the subversion is directed against modern trendiness, against the assumption that a work of art “should not *mean* but be.” The paintings of Kirschenbaum represent a reversal of this sentence. They show us how pictorial works can be literary without losing their pictoriality and how pictures can be beautiful through their very readability.

Endnotes

1 I chose a somewhat Kirkegaardian subtitle because of the painter's love for this author.

2 *Jules Kirschenbaum, Painting Survey: 1950-1983* (Des Moines Art Center Publication, January 17 - March 18, 1984).

3 Letter to author from Jules Kirchenbaum, October 1988.

4 Item No. 13 in the Des Moines Art Center *Catalogue*, entitled *Meditations on Death. Paul Valery*, 1972. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas. 37" x 45" (94 x 114, 3 cm.).

5 The *Catalogue* of the Des Moines Art Center adds the reference: Paul Valery, *Analects*, n.d.

6. Des Moines Art Center *Catalogue*, *ibid.*, No. 19. Acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 71 1/2 x 71 1/4 (50,8 x 30, 5 cm.).

7. The Spanish original reads thus:

Y no es verdad dolor, yo te conozco,
tu eres nostalgia de la vida buena
y soledad de corazón sombrío,
de barco sin naufragio y sin estrella.

Como perro olvidado que no tiene
huella ni olfato y yerra
por los caminos, sin camino, como
el niño que en la noche de una fiesta

se pierde entre le gentío
y el aire polvoriento y las candelas
chispeantes, atónito y asombra
su corazón de música y de pena.

asi voy yo, borracho melancólico,
guitarrista lunático, poeta,
y pobre humbre en sueños,
siempre buscando a Dios entre la niebla.

Moshe Barasch is the founder of the art history department at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and the author of numerous books, including: *Crusader Figural Sculpture in the Holy Land*; *Gestures of Despair*; *Light and Color in Renaissance Theory of Art*; *Theories of Art from Plato to Winckelmann, and Giotto and the Language of Gesture*.

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