

THE OBSTINATE GAZE: Derrida Looking at Pictures

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ABSTRACT

This paper surveys all of Derrida's numerous and occasional discourses on the visual arts with a view to describing both the history of his interest in the visual arts and its relations to visuality. The argument begins with recognition that his responses to art are self-consciously affective. Derrida's early treatment of Kant and his qualified defense of Heidegger on Van Gogh are analyzed in detail, followed by an account of his fascination with Artaud and the significance of the exhibition Derrida curated at the Louvre on drawings and paintings that represent blindness. The argument concludes with the inference that three motifs recur throughout Derrida's writing on the visual arts: the displacement of the gaze by the sense of touch in the structure of experience; the appositional-oppositional relation of the pictorial to the verbal; and the need, in looking (at pictures), to see nothing that is not there, and to keep seeing the nothing that is.

Keywords: Ekphrasis, Derrida, Painting, Heidegger, Van Gogh

INTRODUCTORY

(...) the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Derrida looking (at pictures) is Derrida reading the relation between the sensible and the intelligible, enforcing recognition that there is no visibility before or outside or without discourse, that the other to the visible provides both the enabling and the limiting conditions of the visible; and includes, besides language, the faculties of touch, taste, sound and smell.¹ The visible as the pictural relates to discourse through both 'collision and collusion',² whether we take the notion of a picture to refer to material images, mental images, drawings, paintings, photographs or the entire spectrum from the spectral to the digital. Perhaps the most useful contribution Derrida makes to a discourse of the pictural is in drawing our gaze to that which eludes vision, the permeable membrane where the visible touches its alterities.³ His writing also underlines the pictural as a field of vision open to the force of desire, which animates precisely those elements of the field that simultaneously enable as well as disable the (hopeless and yet heroic) will to structure, which the act of destructuring cannot deny,⁴ although it can put it under probation underneath the sign posted in 'Structure, Sign and Play': 'coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire' (1978: 279).

The 'force of desire' affects looking, and its sedimentation in reading and writing. It also blurs the distinction between the notion of a reading adequate (or apt) to the pictural and one that is supplementary (or excessive). How this can happen is best exemplified from Derrida's own life. In one instance, he alludes to a painting at a time when he was distressed about the health of his aging mother, and found that he kept thinking she had already died from a fall when he knew she was alive (1993: 148). A year later, he found a correlative for that state of mind in an image: not in simply viewing the image, but in putting himself in the picture, placing himself at a burial (with St Augustine standing behind him), inhabiting the role of a boy (perhaps the painter's son, perhaps illegitimate), as figured in El Greco's *The Burial of Count Orgaz* (1586),⁵ with the painter's signature in his pocket.

Later, re-reading a book on the painter, he underlined the following: '(burial is a reverse birth, return to the womb), by assimilating the picture and the child indicating the miracle, the anachronism spreads the present, by presenting simultaneously in one single place four distinct epochs' (1993: 151). Looking at the picture, Derrida wondered why Saint Augustine 'returns at the moment of the burial, hers, mine, and all the characters in the picture ... never crossing a glance, like my readers, the condition for there to be, or not, a world, like the obstinate deformation of a gaze, as the sustained

hallucination of El Greco produces a work ..., the orgy' (151-2). The play on Orgaz/orgasm/orgy links the mourning of the burial and the fear of losing his mother with the dual theme of 'Circonfession': confession and circumcision. The two come together in an account of 'the *mohel*' (ritual circumcizers) performing *fellatio* on little Jewish boys, a practice said to give 'the hallucinating repetition of this enlarged gesture its duration' (152). Without pausing to dwell on the intriguing play of associations stirred up by Derrida, I would like to note how the relation between text and image brings to the viewer's gaze a complex drama of confrontation and complicity between fear, fantasy, history, art and desire.

My second illustration of a very personal approach to an image is the postcard from *The Postcard* (1980), which Derrida came across in 1977 while at Oxford. 'I stumbled across it yesterday, in the Bodleian', he writes, 'I stopped dead with a feeling of hallucination ... and of revelation ... Socrates writing, writing in front of Plato, I always knew it, it has remained like a negative of a photograph to be developed for twenty-five centuries' (1987b: 9).

'Envois', the first section of *The Postcard* (1980), returns again and again to the shock of this image with obsessive specular projections and fantasies which invent a narrative of Socrates writing a postcard to Freud. Brief excerpts will have to suffice here to indicate the interplay between the fantastic and the serious in the obstinate gaze circling the enigmatic image: 'I have not recovered from this revelatory catastrophe: Plato behind Socrates. Behind he has always been, as it is thought, but not like that' (12). 'Watch closely while Socrates signs his death sentence on the order of his jealous son Plato' (1987b: 15). 'How to see to the bottom of all those rectangles between Socrates' legs, if it is *Socrates?*' (16). 'To whom do you think he is writing?' (17). 'For the moment, myself, I tell you that I see Plato getting an erection in Socrates' back and see the insane hubris of his prick, an interminable, disproportionate erection' (18). And so on for many more pages. Under repeated scrutiny, the structure of the image becomes deeply entangled in a continually metamorphosing overflow of desire to produce a phantasm, a surplus affect realized and released in disjointed form as discourse.

'Structure, sign and play' was one of Derrida's earliest essays that showed how 'the structurality of structures' (1978: 278) might reveal itself, under scrutiny, to be irreparably out of joint.⁶ Extrapolating from its implications, it is possible to describe a recognizable dynamics to Derrida's traversal of

discourses that attempt to structure the visual field of experience under an idea of art, such that the artwork is said to bear a specific (and, as we keep discovering, problematic) relation to language (and specific concepts such as truth or beauty), and their alleged (and volatile) mutual reconcilements. In this context, it is also worth keeping in mind the point made by Andrew Benjamin in his allusion to Derrida's 'De la couleur à la lettre', in *Atlan grand format* (1994), that 'painting as such has its vocation to do without a name, I mean a title' (2004: 37). Keeping these general issues in mind, we can now proceed to some of Derrida's specific arguments, always keeping in mind that he links the sign (as in writing, hieroglyphs, pictograms and pictures) with what he describes through Husserl as the sedimentation of sense,⁷ and as the emancipation of sense from presence.⁸ Following Derrida chronologically, we can trace the path of a trait that is marked by the work of language as it seeks to articulate and annex the pictural into the aesthetic categories of art and beauty or the generic taxonomies of drawing, painting, photography and portraiture.

ECONOMIMESIS (1975)

Derrida's 'Economimesis' focuses on the foundational text of modern aesthetics, Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790), specifically on the separations enacted by Kant in order to arrive at an idea of aesthetics in which the fine arts are said to pursue the disinterested interest of pleasure in the beautiful as a moral interest. Derrida questions every strategic move that Kant makes in order to arrive at his destination in disinterested pleasure as a moral interest: (1) an idea of art that separates itself from nature (yet folds itself back on this distinction in its recognition of Genius as the type in whom nature provides the human with rules for mimetic productions in nature's image);⁹ (2) an idea of art that arrogates the aesthetic to humankind, whose freedom and play is denied the animal world (by homogenizing the notion of the animal in a way that undermines the 'reflexive humanism' [1987: 108] inherent to the enterprise); (3) an art characterized as distinct from science in proposing pleasure rather than knowledge as its ends (as if science had altogether abandoned the origin in pleasure that Kant concedes to science in his Introduction); (4) an art detached from all subjective and economic interests (thus enforcing a political economy that sequesters the fine arts from the crafts, on the basis of the claim that the latter pursue an economic interest in the creation of what is alleged to give mere satisfaction

or enjoyment rather than pure pleasure); and finally, (5) an idea of art that is based on a system of analogies that privilege language and the auto-affectation of hearing-oneself-speak, which places poetry in a privileged position above the other arts for being the most authentic and sincere in its capacity for 'faithful adequation to itself' (18),¹⁰ as distinguished from the 'mediate objective perception' (19) of sight and hearing, which gives rise to the allegedly lesser arts of painting and music respectively.

In Kant's system, sight, in being removed from touch, is claimed to acquire the greatest nobility, because it 'allows itself to be less affected by the object' (19). In consuming less, the beautiful is said to have an essential relation with vision: 'Mourning presupposes sight' (19). Derrida returns many times in his writings to the motif of a mourning that is the consequence of the separation between visibility and tangibility, or between the self and its myths of origin.¹¹ 'Economimesis' concludes with a deliberate effort to startle, through the identification of vomiting (metonymic token for the experience of disgust) as the final element of irreducible heterogeneity that resists Kantian aesthetics, a foreclosure that can be exceeded in irreducibility only by the possibility of replacing this metonymy of disgust by 'some other unrepresentable, unnameable, unintelligible, insensible, unassimilable, obscene other' (25).

PARERGON (1974-78)

'Parergon' demonstrates how Kant's exclusionary attempt to divide the content of artworks into an inside and an outside (thus form rather than color, body rather than clothing, center rather than margin, the alleged universality of heteroaffection dissembled out of the subjectivity and interiority of autoaffection).¹² In the *Analytic of the Beautiful* (§14), Kant claims that 'Even what is called *ornamentation* (*parerga*), i.e. what is only an adjunct, and not an intrinsic constituent in the complete representation of the object, in augmenting the delight of taste does so only by means of its form. Thus it is with the frames of pictures or the drapery on statues, or the colonnades of palaces' (1952: 68). There is some irony to the fact that Derrida makes much, almost gleefully, of what appears marginal in Kant. He argues that Kant's prioritization of form at the expense of the *parerga* is untenable. Pointing to a specific version of Cranach's *Lucretia*, he asks a set of rhetorical questions.¹³

Is the knife in her hand, or the necklace round her neck, or the thin veil that conceals no part of her body to be called a parergon in the Kantian sense? Even though the painting is not an image cited by Kant, nor typical of the many other, undraped, Lucretias painted by Cranach,¹⁴ such examples suffice to show that the parergon does not succeed as a principle of differentiation between what is to be kept in and what is to be kept out of the circle drawn by the Kantian system around its categorization of the ergon (the artwork).

Kant associates the rational with the formal, and the irrational with matter. Derrida regards this formalism as a superimposition on 'the thingness of the thing' (66), which leads to a series of problematic encirclements: a theory of the aesthetic is enclosed in a theory of the beautiful; the theory of the beautiful in a theory of judgment; and the theory of judgment in a theory of taste. Each enframing, argues Derrida, constitutes an act of violence (69), since Kant applies 'an analytic of logical judgments to an analytic of aesthetic judgments at the very moment that he is insisting on the irreducibility of the one kind to the other' (70). Kant is caught in a contradiction when he insists upon the universality of the beautiful while insisting that the faculty of taste does its work without the need of concepts, which Derrida describes as 'the occupation of a nonconceptual field by the grid of a conceptual force' (76).¹⁵

In 'The Colossal' (1978), Derrida turns to Kant's *Analytic of the Sublime*. In this part of the discussion, he is largely expository rather than critical, occasionally elaborating nuances in a new direction. The sublime is designated as the 'superelevated', a form of 'overspilling' (1987: 122). It refers to 'the prodigious' in nature, as opposed 'to works of art and to finite and finalized things of nature' (124). By its size, the sublime 'annihilates and reduces to nothing the end which constitutes its concept' (125). Whereas it is found in objects without form and limit, in contrast, 'the presence of a limit is what gives form to the beautiful' (127). Derrida notes that since the sublime does not belong to the category of a work, it cannot have a parergon. Also, 'the pleasure provoked by the sublime is negative' (128), but it lacks the 'labor of mourning' that is part of 'the experience of the beautiful' (129). Since the sublime is constituted out of the simultaneity of the contrary impulses of attraction and repulsion, it signifies a surplus, an excess, 'which opens an abyss' (129). Derrida reproduces without comment Goya's *The Colossus* (1808-12, The Prado, Madrid, 1987: 141).

The sublime is based on a paradox: it is the presentation of 'the inadequation of presentation' (131), not a property of nature but an affect projected by

the imagination onto nature. Hence the discourse of the sublime may be regarded as an appendix to 'the aesthetic appreciation of natural finality' (132), and it 'must be thought on the basis of the more and not the less, the signified infinity and not the signifying finitude' (133). We have a choice here: to approach the notion of the sublime from the direction of the infinite (as Hegel preferred), or from that of the finite (as Kant preferred) (134). The question Kant did not ask, which Derrida does, is: 'Why does the large absolute (the sublime), which is not a *quantum* since it exceeds all comparison, let itself be presented by a *quantum* which does not manage to present it?' (137).

+R (INTO THE BARGAIN) (1975)

An exhibition of the work of the Paris-based Italian artist Valerio Adami (b.1925) provides Derrida an opportunity for a discussion of specific artworks from the contemporary period. The significance of Adami's theme, *Le voyage du dessin* ('The journey of the drawing'), is the way in which his use of the line enacts the capacity, desire and need of the drawing—the marks, strokes and traces that comprise the drawing as act and event—to remain 'heterogeneous' to language (1987: 155). Why focus on drawing? Line before color, the drawing before the painting, reveals and unveils substratum, intrigue, travail, trait and the stages of a journey, as well as traversal, transformation and transcription (169). Renée Hubert calls it a 'new kind of readable visibility' (1994: 257). Derrida engages with two sets of Adami's drawings, those that engage motifs from his own Glas, and the portrait of Walter Benjamin.

The achievement of the Adami portrait, as celebrated by Derrida, is its capacity to evoke a host of associations about Benjamin's life, predicament, temperament and tragic aura through a drawing that also engages Benjamin's notion of the portrait as a frontier genre, the face of photographic imagery as 'the remainder, the last resistance of ritual' to technological reproducibility (178). Thus Adami's portrait is an allegory of its subject and a hieroglyph of the subject's biography (179). The fragmentation of the linear continuum as practiced in the portrait also constitutes what Derrida calls a denouncement of the photographic mode of portraiture, a deconstructive representation of the photographic image that places photography '*en abyme*' (180).¹⁶ The 'political cartography' of the drawing creates a happening on the limits, a confrontation and a 'differential *trait*' of the line of fictive narration (180).

While Derrida might celebrate the manner in which Adami's portrait of Benjamin brings about a conjunction between drawing (as a form of writing) and the Benjaminian oeuvre (as a sign translatable into an image), the view of language more or less shared between Adami and Derrida differs from that suggested in Benjamin's writing.¹⁷

CARTOUCHES (1978)

Derrida's chapter on Gérard Titus-Carmel's exhibition of 127 Tlingit coffins and their 'model' offers several points of entry. The one I choose here links his earlier meditations on the role of the line in drawing as a frame or an outline with the notion of the line as a form of traversal of the trait, an 'interlacing' of difference (1987: 193). The line as a basic instrument of structure relates to the idea of the paradigm. Derrida describes the relation of a paradigm to a series (for example, a series of drawings) as a paradox: 'From the moment it is constructed, artificially built, it is automatically inscribed into the series, no more and no less than an out-of-series cartouche' (218-19). Derrida argues that the logic of the cartouche is disconcerting: 'If I place the cartouche *outside the work*, as the metalinguistic or metaoperational truth of the work, its untouchable truth falls to ruins: it becomes *external* and I can, considering the inside of the work, displace or reverse the order of the series, calmly *reinsert* the paradigm at any point' (220). It will be evident, without going into further details here, that we are close to the problematic relation of the inside-outside that Kant had tried to stabilize through the notion of the *parerga*.

RESTITUTIONS (1978)

Arranged in the form of a symposium of voices, 'Restitutions' begins with a question: in what sense does painting offer restitution. In Heidegger's 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (1935, 1956), with reference to a painting by van Gogh, restitution is the discharging of a debt, which means—at least in the case of the shoes—the rendering to a rightful owner of the surplus value 'unleashed by the annulment of their use value' (1987: 258). Restitution as a form of attribution is also 'a desire for appropriation' (260). The shoes are mute; it is discourse that speaks through them.¹⁸ Derrida concedes a point to Meyer Schapiro while defending the 'strong necessity' of what Heidegger is about when he undertakes his 'questioning' of 'the traditional philosophy

of art' (262).¹⁹ The question is: 'What is one doing when one attributes a painting or when one identifies a signatory?' (266). One is discharging a form of owing, of the kind Derrida cites from a letter by Cézanne in which he promises his friend that 'I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you' (255).²⁰ Pointing to the open laces in the image, Derrida suggests that they are like an open circle ready to snare the unwary viewer who takes the notion of attribution too literally (by being eager to establish the image of the object-pair as referring to van Gogh's shoes, or a peasant woman's shoes). He cautions that 'the signatory of a picture cannot be identified with the nameable owner of an essentially detachable object represented in the picture' (279).

Heidegger's aim, as Derrida recapitulates it, is the freeing of 'the thing from the metaphysical determinations... which have set upon it' (284). Heidegger claimed that 'as soon as one no longer apprehends the things' as 'the fundamental Greek experience of the Being of beings in general' (287), then 'the ground falls away' (290). When it comes to art such as van Gogh's, what appears or manifests itself in the artwork, 'In its very truth' is not just shoes but the 'being-product' of the product (295). In the Hofstadter version of the Heidegger text, 'being-product' is translated as the 'equipment quality' of the thing, and this is based on its 'usefulness' or 'reliability' (1971: 33-4). Heidegger's discourse, according to Derrida, is based on a schema of double articulation between the thing (shoes as object), the product (shoes as equipment) and the work (the artwork as a representation of shoes), such that the work resembles the thing more than does the product, while the product is situated 'between thing and the work' (297). Derrida then clarifies that 'when Heidegger proposes to turn towards the picture, he is thus not interested in the work, but only in the being-product of which some shoes—any shoes—provide an example' (299). The paradox that subsidizes Derrida's rescue of Heidegger is the declaration that 'the primary motivation of the passage [in question] does not concern painting' (300-1), but refers, instead, to the shoes as product (equipment), and to the remainder of the being-thing when they cease to have value as being-as-product (being-as-equipment).

Derrida notes that there is no correspondence possible between the vocabularies of Heidegger and Kant. The image of the 'naked' shoes, as the focus of the artwork, is equivalent to the *ergon*; but in the sense in which the shoes are empty, they would have to be equated with the *parergon* (302). As product (equipment) the shoes in the image are abandoned,

unlaced, detached from the feet of an owner (whose gender is in contention between Heidegger and Schapiro); but 'qua picture in its frame' (303-4), the shoes raise a different question: 'what has this got to do with aesthetics?' (305). It would appear that 'Heidegger confirms fully that his project was to go beyond the picture as representation' (321). Then we might well ask, 'What is reference in painting?' And the answer is, it is merely 'a semio-linguistics' (322) based on the matter-form couple that Heidegger was intent on shedding as part of old metaphysical baggage.²¹ Heidegger prefers to think of the painting as the being-product (being-equipment) of a thing that speaks, as a work in which truth is unconcealed, and not as a thing on whose behalf the viewer speaks, thus projecting an interpretation onto a mute artwork.

Heidegger may have begun with the reference to a painting as an example, but, Derrida remarks, Heidegger comes 'to entrust the whole truth to the picture, to reconstitute it entirely to the painting which "has spoken"' (327). Moreover, having picked up an instance that belongs to a series (of paintings of shoes), Heidegger then 'abandons it' (328). The significance of this puzzling abandonment of the artwork, according to Derrida, is in Heidegger's intention: 'without the aid of painting, to pose the question ... of that usefulness in which, for the tradition, the being-product of the product seems to reside' (331-2): 'the picture is of no use for acceding ... to the usefulness of the product' (336). Heidegger seems to be saying that the painting is doubly useless: 'Useless for what it gives in painting and because it gives in painting' (341).²² That is how Derrida provides a qualified endorsement for Heidegger, his own act of restitution.

THE SECRET ART OF ANTONIN ARTAUD (1986)

A visit to the Louvre in September 1931 brought Antonin Artaud to a painting titled *Lot and His Daughters*, by the Dutch painter Lucas van Leyden.

Artaud was so struck by the staging of the image that in *The Theatre and its Double* (1931-36) it inspired his demand for a language of the senses distinct from language as words: 'I say that this concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of speech, must first satisfy the senses' (1976: 231). He made a related point in *Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society* (1947), when he described van Gogh as 'more of a painter than other painters, since he is the one for whom the material, painting itself, is of primary importance' (1976: 504). Derrida responds sympathetically to both points. Artaud had

been impressed by what he called the harmony of van Leyden's painting. The aural metaphor resonates with Derrida's approach to Artaud. The van Leyden painting, like theatrical presentation, is as suited to being heard as to be seen. Derrida remarks of this synaesthesia: 'Just as sound penetrates the ear and the mind, just so the pictographic act strikes and bombards, perforates, pierces and forces, digs in and traverses. And the adversary against which this force projects itself is the subjectile' (1998: 85-6).

In 1932 and then again in 1946-7, Artaud reactivated the use of the term subjectile in a manner that fascinates Derrida in the 1980s. In his first use of the term, Artaud reports that the subjectile betrayed one of his drawing projects. This is taken by Derrida to signify the capacity of the subjectile to 'remove oneself from its control, but in so doing to reveal the project as it is thus betrayed' (62). This betrayal leaves its mark on Artaud's work in the form of a characteristic awkwardness (104). What then is the subjectile (whose name seems to hover between subject, subjective, subtle, sublime and also projectile)? Derrida takes it to stand for 'the matter of a painting or a sculpture' as something distinct from meaning, representation or form (64); such that 'the support, the surface or the material, the unique body of the work in its first event' is something foreign to language, untranslatable into discourse (65). In a limited sense, then, and to the degree that the visual field of art remains untranslatable into discourse, it functions like a subjectile (66), although, as we shall see below, this view will quickly need revision. In his second use of the term, Artaud writes of it as a body uncomplaining 'through father or through mother' even when the artist (when he finds his own figures inert and uninspiring) submits it to a violent (though ineffectual) reworking. Artaud's use of the parental reference is interpreted by Derrida to refer to language as mother-tongue, as a parent who must be resisted by the artist working at 'the pictogram that is still resonating with the trace left in it by a projectile' (68). The subjectile is thus neither subject nor object nor motif, but an interposition (71).

If the painter is to avoid a stagnating stability to his visual creations, the process of birth must be forced: hence Derrida describes the subjectile as 'the place and context of birth', 'the hymen between the inside and the outside, the upper and the lower' (75), 'force before form' (76), the in-between that links the intransitivity of being thrown down and the transitivity of throwing: a 'critical but precarious difference, unstable and reversible' (77). Derrida now attempts a provisional definition: 'the subjectile is a figure of the other toward which we should give up projecting anything at

all' (78). That brings us to the revision mentioned above. Are drawing and painting opposed to the discursive text? Derrida's answer is 'yes-and-no'. At this point Derrida introduces another term, 'pictogram' (78), in which painting, drawing and writing (i.e. all forms of graphic inscription) 'do not tolerate the wall of any division' (78), either between genres, 'supports or substances' (78). The pictogram 'is literally understood to cross the border between painting and drawing, drawing and verbal writing, and, still more generally, the arts of space and the others, between space and time' (78). The subjectile thus activates 'the synergy of the visible and the invisible' (79) while it destabilizes the conventional boundary that separates words from images.

The pictogram has to be heard, like a language, or be listened to, like music. It is projected into space, and 'the adversary against which this force projects itself is the subjectile' (86); its function is 'to tear or rend in order to manifest' (88). What Artaud contributes to Derrida's idea of painting is the sense of 'its spilling over', a truth that is literally excessive (89). For Artaud, 'the genius of a drawing is not in its art, but in the action of forces that presided over the calculation of forms' (91). Such forces can survive the destruction of forms and the material substance or body on or in or through which they are drawn. Matter and the subjectile are thus forced beyond the opposition between subject and object (103), beyond issues of technique to an awkwardness that Artaud recognized as a compound of the maladroit and the adroit (108). Artaud's *La maladresse sexuelle de dieu* ('The sexual awkwardness of god') substantiates this dual feature.

If the idea of art is made to require representation and restitution, then Derrida is willing to regard Artaud's drawings as not art, as a form of expression that 'has the excremental violence of a new writing of the body that perforates the surface and attacks the subject' (116). Artaud in his late years arrived at a condition of work in which writing and drawing became inseparable (124), an incompleteness and mastery that were at once both mad and sovereign (125). Artaud's third and final use of the word, in 1947, provides an opportunity for a final description of the subjectile: it 'remains a stranger to the space of representation which however invests it and institutes it' (146).

MEMOIRS OF THE BLIND (1990)

Derrida chose the theme of blindness for an exhibition for which he was

invited to select material at the Louvre in 1990, proffering his text 'as a sort of prosthesis for the drawings—a kind of blind man's cane', according to his translator.²³ Derrida's theme had an occasional stimulus in a partial paralysis of the face that he suffered during the summer of 1989.²⁴ The contingent thus drew attention to the historically prevalent: the fascination of sight with blindness, the inverse link between blindness and the visionary aspect of the prophet and seer, for whom blindness is 'a sign that one must know how to recognize in oneself, the privilege of a destination' (33). The contingent also drew attention to the manner in which blindness inheres in the act of drawing and writing, not simply as a special case, as when we write or draw in the dark, but in how every routine act of inscribing the presence of a sign, mark or trait is enabled by a retrait, a withdrawal into blindness, whether in the blink of an eye, or the movement of the eye from object via memory and anticipation to the blank space of drawing. Thus drawing the blind, leading them by the hand, and drawing them by the hand all become part of an allegory of the possibility of drawing, a self-portrait of drawing as possibility.

Drawing blindly and drawing the blind (by means of the hand) also thematizes the hand, and hence the point of contact between drawing and touch, or between seeing and touching (the hand sees, the eye touches).²⁵ The hand, in its action of pointing, can draw attention to a theme and to itself as it creates that theme. The blind man pointing to his eyes in *Christ Healing a Blind Man* represents 'A silent auto-affection, a return to oneself, a sort of soul-searching or self-relation without sight or contact. It is as if the blind man were referring to himself with his arm folded back, there where a blind Narcissus, inventing a mirror without image, lets it be seen that he does not see' (1993b: 12).

Derrida follows up on the implications of two kinds of European legacy to a symbology of the blind: the Greek and the Judaic. In the Platonic inheritance, if 'Idein, eidos, idea: the whole history, the whole semantics of the European idea, in its Greek genealogy ... relates seeing to knowing' (12), then blindness becomes a sin, a fault or a flaw in Nature.²⁶ The Greek and the Biblical traditions are both replete with blind men (but not blind women). The Biblical type implies: 'It is always the other who did not yet see'. Two kinds of blindness are entailed: 'Blindness of the letter and by the letter' (18). The specific genealogy that is next followed up is that of the Biblical witness, the third one, who 'attests that he has clearly seen' and intervenes 'in the scene, to trick or to play with blindness', in scenes where

the blind are always 'beings of the fall' (21). In this genealogy, 'The son is the light, the supplementary or excessive eye of the father, the blind man's guide' (28).

The central claim of *Memoirs*, that the invisible is inscribed at the origin of drawing, is developed through the notions of transcendental and sacrificial blindness, whose fold is said to produce the event whose speech gives drawing all its thematic material of figures, events, narratives and myths. Transcendental blindness is described as 'the invisible condition of the possibility of drawing'; something that is not the representable object of a drawing' (41). Sacrificial blindness (the narrative, spectacle or representation of the blind) 'in becoming the theme of the first', is said to 'represent this unrepresentable' (41). Derrida then identifies three aspects to the invisible 'visibility of the visible' (45): (a) at the moment of drawing, of putting hand to paper, as the hand moves and makes contact with the surface through the instrument of drawing, 'in the tracing of the trait' (53), 'the inscription of the inscribable is not seen' (45); (b) 'the trait once traced', 'Nothing belongs to the trait', in the sense that the trait is self-eclipsing, like the withdrawing god of negative theology (54); (c) 'the rhetoric of the trait', which ensues with the retrace (withdrawal) of the line, 'forbids separating drawing from the discursive murmur whose trembling transfixes it' (56). Derrida then focuses on the genre of the self-portrait, which is both enjoined as well as forbidden by the withdrawal of the transcendental trait.

The self-portrait has the mark of 'a fascinated hunter'; its staring eye resembles the blind eye; in looking at itself seeing, 'it also sees itself disappear right at the moment when the drawing tries desperately to recapture it' (57). The self-portrait is enabled by a hypothesis: that the draftsman sits himself before both mirror and paper, and then draws the draftsman drawing a self-portrait. The draftsman as image stares at a point where we the spectator are placed; in that sense, we, the other to the draftsman, are needed to occupy the face-to-face position from which the self-portrait can be said to be truly so. 'The spectator replaces and then obscures the mirror', 'we are the condition of his sight ... and of his own image ... but it is also the case ... that we rub out his eyes in order instantly to replace them: we are his eyes or the double of his eyes' (62-3). Because one can always dissociate 'the "signatory" from the "subject" of the self-portrait', the self-portrait retains 'a hypothetical character' that 'always depends on the juridical effect of the title, on this verbal event that does not belong to the inside of the work but only to its parergonal border' (64). Derrida thus drives home two related

points: the verbal outside cannot be separated from the pictorial inside; and the concept of the origin of the artwork is never separable from the presence of the ruin: 'Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze' (68). The self-portrait always acknowledges the inability of the draftsman's gaze to catch itself looking in a mirror, or to catch itself looking at itself, because it ends up looking empty at us ('the loss of direct intuition ... is the very condition or hypothesis of the gaze' [70]). Without a crime, there is yet a confession (69), and fear (70).²⁷

Of self-portraits by Chardin, in which the subject-object is often clothed in supplements such as glasses, eye-shades or a cap, Derrida comments that 'The face does not show itself naked ... and this, of course, unmasks nakedness itself', a disclosing that is 'nothing without modesty'; an alternative approach, in which the eyes are drawn closed, is said to produce the effect of surprising 'that which does not let itself be surprised' (72), as in Courbet's self-portrait, titled *The Wounded Man*.

The closed eye, like the 'oblique or indirect gaze' is a ruse to avert the 'death' brought about in the self-portrait by the 'specular crossing of gazes' (87). Such pictures suggest the possibility of showing how one might accomplish a 'transfer' or a 'translation' between the transcendental and the sacrificial aspects of thought involved in the drawing of the blind (i.e. between a thought of the condition of the possibility and a thought of the event). The sacrificial thought implies violence at the origin of that narrative or revelation which will 'open one's eyes' and make one go from the sensible to the intelligible (92). The transfer between the transcendental and the sacrificial is said to produce an exchange or a conversion between blindness and clairvoyance (93). The blind man as one subject to being mistaken (Isaac), and as one subject to being punished (Samson), pays the price of finally opening 'some eyes, his own or another's' (103-4). Thus Derrida arrives again at the vocabulary of restitution, 'of restoring what one should have seen to it not to lose' (104).²⁸

ECHOGRAPHIES OF TELEVISION (1993-96)

Addressing various forms of teletechnology, Derrida endorses the recognition enjoined by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, that in the photographic experience, 'the tactile effect or affect is violently summoned by its very frustration, summoned to come back, like a ghost, in the places haunted by its absence' (115). This spectral aspect of the image has to do with 'the

visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood', of a body that is not 'tangible' (115). Therefore, "as soon as there is a technology of the image, visibility brings night' (115), and the logic of the specter, as something that 'exceeds all the oppositions between visible and invisible, sensible and insensible', since it is 'both visible and invisible, both phenomenal and nonphenomenal: a trace that marks the present with its absence in advance' (2002: 116).

The gaze of the spectral (emanating from the eyes of the human subject captured as object by the camera), when it looks at the viewing subject, looks with an illusory gaze that exceeds sight, because it does not actually see (though it enacts seeing), and because its seeing cannot be met (though it can be simulated) by the eyes of the living subject looking at the image. This non-meeting that is also a meeting produces the effect of 'the wholly other', 'the heteronomic figure of the law' (120). Alluding to Hamlet, Derrida calls this the 'visor effect': 'I can't meet the gaze of the other, whereas I am in his sight' (121). The visor effect makes of the other a figure of the law because he enjoys 'the right of absolute inspection': 'someone who watches or concerns me without any possible reciprocity, and who therefore makes the law when I am blind, blind by situation' (121).

SPECTERS OF MARX (1993)

What is a specter? And how does a discourse about the spectral relate to the pictorial? For Derrida, the notion underlines the unreal and the irreal aspects of that which inhabits the realm between an unrealized image and its phantasmagoric realizations. 'Specter' and 'spirit' might seem almost synonymous, and their connotations might appear to slide into one another, but they relate to one another through a *différance*. 'Specter' belongs to the family of conjurations, 'spirit' to the hope of their realization. The specter is 'the phenomenal body of the spirit' (135). A third member joins this family in the shape of 'ghost', which blurs the distinction between spirit and specter, and represents the materialization of spirit in a body, but a body that is abstract, artifactual and prosthetic, neither perceptible nor visible. A fourth member joins the family when the materialization of spirit or specter becomes hallucinatory and we get *phantasma* (as in the *Phaedo*), which, like the *eidola* (as in the *Timaeus*), the root word in the notion of ideology, haunts the Marxian project and its incipient utopianism with emanations of the dead, and a ritual of mourning that cannot be exorcized. Thus, for

example, 'When one has negated or destroyed the fantastic or phantomatic form of the fatherland, one has yet not touched upon the "actual relations" that constitute it' (131). The discourse of the spectral gives Derrida an opportunity to show how Marx would like to, but cannot, dispel the specters of the past that he has conjured up from his own repressed Platonic affiliations. It is thus possible to re-describe the relationship between spirit, specter and ghost: 'The specter is not only the carnal apparition of the spirit, its phenomenal body, its fallen and guilty body, it is also the impatient and nostalgic waiting for a redemption, namely once again, for a spirit, the promise or a calculation of expiation' (136). The hunter is thus haunted.

CONCLUSION

By now it should be evident that Derrida keeps returning to several questions and motifs that displace centered by marginal vision, the pictural by the verbal, the visible by the spectral. One question in particular acquires new resonance with each reiteration: 'Why are the system and the hierarchy of the fine arts constituted on the analogical model of human language?' (1987: 102). At least two other motifs imply a form of involuntary coherence to Derrida's thinking on the pictural. The first is crystallized in his insistence on the need for existence to resist the closure of concept or system,²⁹ while recognizing the inextricable involvement of the one in the other. In the second, he keeps returning to the need, in looking (at pictures), to see nothing that is not there, and to keep seeing the nothing that is: 'One must see, at first sight, what does not let itself be seen. And this is invisibility itself. The flaw, the error of first sight is to see, and not notice the invisible (1994: 149).³⁰ This imperative could be said to apply to all the interactions between the gaze and its objects.

ENDNOTES

¹Derrida refers to 'the spatial arts' as a preferred locution, 'for it is within a certain experience of spacing, of space, that resistance to philosophical authority can be produced' (1994b: 10).

²Hubert (1994: 254).

³This alterity is signaled early (1967) in Derrida's career: 'the presence of the perceived present can appear as such only inasmuch as it is continuously compounded with a nonpresence and nonperception, with primary memory and expectation (retention and protention). These nonperceptions ... are essentially and indispensably involved' in the possibility of the 'actually perceived now' (1973: 64).

⁴Cf. 'there is an injunction to the system that I have never renounced, and never wished to' (2001: 3).

⁵Oil on canvas, 460cm × 360cm (180in × 140in), Santo Tomé, Toledo, Spain.

⁶Cf. 'time "out of joint" is time outside itself, beside itself, unhinged' (2001: 6). In the same context, Derrida describes the notion of the system as both enabled and disabled by a third element (the imagination, as in Kant): 'It is at the same time, the place where the system constitutes itself, and where this constitution is threatened by the heterogeneous' (5).

⁷'To constitute an ideal object is to put it at the permanent disposition of a pure gaze... linguistic ideality is the milieu in which the ideal object settles as what is sedimented or deposited' (1989: 78).

⁸'The possibility of writing will assure the absolute traditionalization of the object ... by emancipating sense from its actually present evidence for a real subject' (1989: 87).

⁹A later address (2003), celebrating Hélène Cixous as genius and friend, speaks of 'genius' as the name for 'an event that, far from fitting into the series, into the homogeneous ... sequence or ongoing filiation of a genesis, a genealogy or a genre, brings about the absolute mutation and discontinuity of all others' (2006: 70).

¹⁰Kant and Heidegger are said to show the same tendency: 'the subordination of all the arts to speech' (1987: 23).

¹¹On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) is unequivocal in its slightly different emphasis on the lack of self-presence in vision: 'Husserl designates what is denied us, and thus missing in seeing compared to touching. To wit, the eye is not seen by the eye This difference between the two senses lies in the self-relation of touch ... which is immediate, spontaneous, direct, intuitive' (2005: 170-1).

¹²'As this affect of the pleasing-onself-in remains subjective through and through, one could here speak of an autoaffection... And yet ... the in of the pleasing-oneself also indicates that this autoaffection immediately goes outside its inside' (1987: 47).

¹³Cranach the Elder, Lucretia, 1533, oil on red beechwood, 14 1/2 x 9 3/16 in. (37.3 x 23.9 cm) Gemaeldegalerie, Berlin.

¹⁴Cf. Shaffer (1990: 144).

¹⁵There are other problems faced by any general aesthetic theory: 'Beauty is always beautiful once, even if judgment classifies it and drags that once into the series or into the objective generality of the concept. This is the paradox ... of the third Critique and any discourse on the beautiful: it must deal only with singularities which must give rise only to universalizable judgments' (93). As for Derrida's own personal response to beauty, in an interview, he says that for him the experience of beauty is inseparable from the experience of the body, and desire. It is always libidinalized; and when it is inaccessible, not consumable, only then does he regard it as arising from a work of art (1994b: 23).

¹⁶Cf. Renée Hubert: 'Adami's reductive system of lines, his sectionalizations, which eclipse content, narrative, and depth, entrap in, and reduce these thinkers' lifelong meditations to a single, philosophically negligible, incident. They are on their way and caught on the move, so to speak, at an insuperable remove from the ineffable graphic pattern that might en-capsulate their writings in both senses of the term.' (1994: 253).

¹⁷The point is tangential to a consideration of Derrida, and can be summarized through James McBride: 'poststructuralist assumptions lead to a philosophical agnosticism in which knowledge is limited to the figure, the metaphor, the "empty" sign. Even the self as exemplified by the *Ritratto di Walter Benjamin* is a figure, an imago of substance, but is not substantial itself.

Yet, it is exactly this sort of linguistic theory that Benjamin attacked in his 1916 essay on language. The world is infused by language, but not as a barrier between consciousness and "actual reality". Based upon the Kabbalistic notion of the "breaking of the vessels", creation is an expression of the divine language which is "enfleshed" in the material community of existence. "This use of the word language' is in no way metaphorical" [emphasis added] (1978: 314). There is an implicit link between humanity and creation, between consciousness and material reality, in that human language mirrors the divine' (1989: 259).

¹⁸In an interview, Derrida distinguishes between taciturn and mute: 'Taciturnity is the silence of something that can speak, whereas we call mutism the silence of a thing that can't speak' (1994b: 12). Further, 'that a spatial work of art doesn't speak can be interpreted in two ways: On the one hand ...it is completely foreign or heterogeneous to words ... But on the other hand ... these silent works are in fact already talkative, full of virtual discourses ... Thus it can be said that the greatest logocentric power resides in a work's silence' (13).

¹⁹Heidegger attributes the shoes to 'the world of the peasant woman', in which she is alleged to be privy 'to the silent call of the earth' (1971: 34). Schapiro, writing in 1965, makes much of his claim that the shoes are 'the artist's own shoes, not the shoes of a peasant' (1998: 427). Derrida concedes that Heidegger has 'loaded these shoes ... compulsively laced them around peasant ankles, when nothing in the picture expressly authorizes this' (338), but then argues that Schapiro stands for a notion of 'truth as adequation' (between image and referent), while Heidegger stands for the notion of 'the truth of unveiled presence' (318): the two notions are incommensurate.

²⁰In 'Passe-Partout' (the introduction to *The Truth in Painting*), Derrida parses Cézanne's claim as having four possible interpretations, from the most sweeping to the more specific: [1] 'truth itself restored ... without mediation' (5); [2] truth 'no longer itself' but as 'a likeness' (5); [3] truth as a trope, 'presented or represented in the field of the pictorial' (6); and [4] the truth 'as regards painting' (7). It could be said that *Truth in Painting* shows how all the derivations of that ever-so-hopeful claim fall short of fulfillment, although the latter two interpretations are obviously less problematic.

²¹In trying to answer the question, 'What in truth is the thing, so far as it is a thing?', Heidegger weighs in against such baggage in the form of three traditional answers based on a distinction between form and matter ('the thing as a bearer of traits, as the unity of a manifold of sensations, as formed matter' (1971: 30). His recommendation is 'to leave the thing to rest in its own self, in its thing-being' (31).

²²Derrida discovers another nuance or significance in the picture: the unlaced aspect of the shoes makes the painting self-reflexive; the laces 'form the "frame" of the picture which appeared to frame them' (343), they constitute 'the interminable overflowing of the whole by the part' (344). We are back to the work of turning the Kantian vocabulary inside out. Their emptiness waits as if for feet. The painter could be taken to re-sacralize the mundane; the nakedness of the (missing) feet could be taken as 'a negative mark of indignity (captivity) or a sign of mourning' (351). The reliability that Heidegger reads into their product-being could also be treated as 'a sort of originary wedding-ring' (351). Derrida ends by returning to the issue of projection: has Heidegger attributed wrongly? Derrida's answer: maybe not; or maybe, with cause. The ideology Heidegger is accused of projecting onto van Gogh may not, after all, be all that alien to the painter (367); they may share 'a community of pathos' (368); the shoes might well be seen as 'the face of Vincent' (370).

²³Naas (2003: 123).

²⁴Cf. 1993: 100; 1993b: 32. The personal element goes further: in childhood, his brother was adept at drawing, he was not; and the failure in drawing led to the feeling of being deprived and also of being chosen for 'another trait, this graphics of invisible words' (37). Likewise, 'my investment in language is stronger, older, and gives me more enjoyment than my investment in the plastic, visual, or spatial arts' (1994b: 19-20).

²⁵'If two gazes look into each other's eyes, can one then say that they are touching?' (2005: 2). Cf. the 'becoming-haptical of the optical' (2005: 123).

²⁶However, as Plato's allegory of the Cave reminds us, the issue is not so simple, since the visible world might be a kind of 'phenomenal prison'. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates uses metaphors to indicate how he avoids the blindness that might result from staring at the dazzling sun (the truth of things as they are) towards the 'invisible forms that the *logoi* in fact are (ideas, words, discourses, reasons, calculations)' (15). For Plato, 'the absolute Good, the intelligible father who begets being as well as the visibility of being' remains 'as invisible as the condition of sight—as visibility itself—can be' (16).

²⁷In 2000, Derrida returns to the inadequacy of the mirror: 'Husserl dismisses any mediation by mirrors' because the mediation of the mirror which 'does not belong

to my body proper, becomes technical by reason properly of the indirection it introduces' (2005: 170).

²⁸*Memoirs* comes to a close with meditations on conversion, in which blindness is the mark of election, in which 'the blind become witness to the faith' (112), as pictured by a host of artists through the figure of St. Paul, whose confession 'will have come to represent the model of the self-portrait, the one that concerns us here in its very ruin' (117). The self-portrait is declared as leading not to knowledge but to a fault and a need for 'forgiveness' (117). Finally, the eyes that had been reviewed for their sight and blindness, are viewed for their capacity for tears: in weeping as a form of imploring and deploring (5), the tears veiling sight in order to open up the self to something more important than sight: feeling, compassion; not to the call to knowledge but towards the call of ethics, which is aptly summarized by Andrew Marvell in his poem 'Eyes and Tears' which ends on the line 'These weeping eyes, those seeing tears' (129).

²⁹'It is Kierkegaard to whom I have been most faithful and who interests me most: absolute existence, the meaning he gives to the word subjectivity, the resistance of existence to the concept or the system – this is something I attach great importance to and feel very deeply, something I am always ready to stand up for' (2001: 40).

³⁰Cf Orhan Pamuk, in *My Name is Red* (1998): 'To know is to remember that you've seen. To see is to know without remembering. Thus, painting is remembering the blackness' (2002: 92).

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