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OCTOBER

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Criticism, or The Scandal of the
Mute Body*

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A New History of the Passions

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Some Functions of Feminist Criticism, or The Scandal of the Mute Body

TANIA MODLESKI

*Reducing the Variables: Feminism,
"Ethnographic" Criticism, and
Romance Readers*

She got off the bus and entered a large restaurant with a noble foyer thronged with people, none of them seeming to know which direction they were going in. They wandered, bewildered, rudderless, in need not only of someone to tell them which of the many separate cafes would supply their immediate material wants, but of a guide to the deeper or higher things of life. While a glance at the menus displayed or a word with an attendant would supply the former, who was to fulfill the latter? The anthropologist, laying bare the structure of society, or the writer of romantic fiction, covering it up? Perhaps neither, Catherine thought. And why should she assume that these people, temporarily confused and wandering, were in greater need of guidance than she was herself?

— Barbara Pym, *Less Than Angels*

At the University of Copenhagen, where I recently visited, the feminists tell an anecdote about a male colleague engaged in big battles with other literary scholars over the value of reception theory in mass culture studies, a theory which in his view is, almost self-evidently, more scientific, rigorous, and democratic than the supposedly impressionistic and elitist pursuits of ivory-tower

"textual" critics. At a conference in which he delivered a paper on the reception of a certain TV program, the scholar began by explaining that he had surveyed sixteen young men about their reactions to the program. Putting aside objections to the paltry number of respondents in a study claiming to possess scientific rigor, one of the feminists protested against the exclusion of women from the survey and demanded to know the man's reasons for limiting it to males. His answer was: "I wanted to reduce the variables as much as possible."

One can't, of course, hold reception theory particularly responsible for neglecting the female viewpoint; the whole history of criticism—as well as of mass culture itself—consists of reducing women either to total absence or to an unthreatening, anorexic, presence. Yet because reception theory, or, to use the current terminology, "ethnographic" criticism, seems to hold a particular attraction for feminists, who are concerned to account for the specificity of women's response to a largely oppressive popular culture, it seems worthwhile to ask whether this particular tool of the "master" can aid us in "dismantling" his house.¹ Some preliminary investigation of the basic presuppositions of the ethnographic approach is in order before feminists pick up their tape recorders and head fearlessly out to, say, the Midwest to begin their fieldwork among the female fans of *Falcon Crest*. Furthermore, a consideration of this approach, which appears to many to possess obvious political authority, since it puts the analyst in direct contact with "the people," is a good place to begin a general discussion of the functions of feminist criticism: just what is it feminists hope to accomplish by examining popular texts—or, for that matter, any text at all?

In its most recent, Marxist, version, ethnographic criticism may be said to have arisen partly in response to the perceived excesses of so-called "textual criticism" and to the pessimism of many culture critics whose negative attitude about mass culture has seemed to contribute to the political paralysis these critics have purported to explain. The approach has been developed in its most sophisticated and highly theorized form in Great Britain, where a strong cultural studies tradition has served as the background against which a growing number of critics are voicing their dissatisfaction with the formalistic analyses associated with the work of the film journal *Screen* in the 1970s. In the dissenters' view, *Screen's* psychoanalytically informed theory, concerned largely with describing the way subjects are "constructed" by popular film texts, tended to ignore actual social subjects, who by virtue of their complex histories and multiple cultural affiliations (educational, religious, vocational, political, etc.) always, it is argued, exceed the subject implied by the text.² In this respect the *Screen* position has

1. Audrey Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Watertown, Massachusetts, Persephone, 1981, p. 98.

2. Paul Willemsen argues this point in general in "Notes on Subjectivity—On Reading 'Subjectivity Under Siege,'" *Screen*, no. 19 (1978), pp. 41–70; as does Annette Kuhn with specific reference to "women's genres" in "Women's Genres," *Screen*, no. 25 (1984), pp. 18–29.

been criticized on the same grounds as that of the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture; both allegedly failed to distinguish between the "inscribed" consumer of mass culture and the actual consumer, who in real life is always caught up in a network of discourses inharmoniously clamoring for the subject's allegiance, an allegiance which the individual, exercising a relative autonomy, may choose either to grant or to withhold. An ethnographic criticism would, its proponents urge, be able to overcome the politically disabling critiques associated with traditional Marxist textual analysis and to ascertain not only how social subjects take up the meanings proffered by a given mass cultural text, but more importantly how and in the name of what *other* system of meanings and values people might come to refuse the dominant or "preferred" readings of that text. Ethnographic criticism takes as its slogan the phrase coined by Stuart Hall that people are not "cultural dupes," and insists that therefore popular texts must somehow "allow . . . audiences to make meanings that connect with *their* social experience."³ The aim of ethnographic criticism is, then, to locate these areas of resistance to the dominant ideology which, once identified, could theoretically be pressed into the service of radical political struggle.

Such an ambition is clearly unimpeachable, though the task of accounting for the way large, multiply determined groups of people interact with a given text — to say nothing of compiling all the information into a coherent account — might seem a little daunting. Moreover, there is a danger that by focusing on the audience member's response to texts, the critic might wind up resubscribing to an apolitical view of the individual as sole producer of meanings and unwittingly endorsing a pluralist, anything-goes kind of criticism. The notion of "subculture" has thus come to be seen as crucial, since it furnishes analysts with a means of categorizing and interpreting data that avoids positing the individual either as totally autonomous in relation to the text or (the Frankfurt School/*Screen* position) as totally determined *by* the text. In the words of one critic: "In order to provide anything like a satisfactory account of the relationship between people's mass media involvements and their overall social situation and meaning system, it is necessary to start from the social setting rather than the individual; to replace the idea of personal needs with the notion of structural contradiction; and to introduce the notion of subculture."⁴ By focusing on subculture and studying the values and beliefs associated with them, the analyst is able to make sense of the ways "messages" are "decoded" according to the shared cultural orientation of particular groups — the contradictions between the decoded messages and the dominant ideology being the points of rupture into which revolutionary ideologies might insert themselves.

3. John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1987, p. 271.

4. Graham Murdock, quoted in David Morley, *The Nationwide Audience*, London, British Film Institute, 1980, p. 14.

One of the most fascinating studies taking an ethnographic approach to a mass cultural text is David Morley's ground-breaking book on the audience for the British news-magazine program *Nationwide*. In *The Nationwide Audience*, Morley examines the responses of over twenty separate groups of people, chosen with regard to education, class background, political affiliation, vocation, and race. The study reveals an astonishing variety of responses among the groups of viewers, ranging from largely uncritical acceptance of the show's messages and ideological presuppositions to criticism of its political bias, its condescending tone, and its superficial treatment of its subjects (often from conservative, well-educated groups), to outright repudiation of its messages and ideological slant (mainly by left-wing trade unionists). Morley's conclusions about the various kinds of social systems that subcultural groups are able to draw upon in resisting the onslaught of mass culture go a long way toward refuting those critics, such as Jean Baudrillard, who have vociferously proclaimed the "death of the social" — killed, it would seem, by the ever encroaching and suffocating web of media simulation. Even so, however, certain basic methodological questions that might temper the optimism with which Morley's work is imbued are never adequately addressed. First, to what extent are the respondents' critical attitudes merely a function of the fact that the ethnographer places them in a situation where they are *required* to be critical? When people are watching television in ordinary situations, as one of Morley's respondents observes, the critical attitude is relaxed. The media's messages might easily slip past the vigilant censor into the viewer's unconscious, an area which is unfortunately neglected by most ethnographers — *Screen's* psychoanalytic emphasis having been the first victim of ethnographic criticism.

Second, to what extent are the responses elicited by the ethnographic critic testimony to the predisposition of the masses to be surveyed and tested, submitting themselves voluntarily and even eagerly to the relentless efforts of the media (and now of the media critics) to know them? Indeed, it seems possible that ethnographers may even be reproducing in their investigative procedures the methods of control they are seeking to undermine. This possibility is strikingly evidenced in a recent study by John Fiske, who has conducted an ethnography of teen-aged female fans of the rock singer Madonna. Fiske explains that, in order to ascertain how young girls find in Madonna's work meanings which allow them to "escape ideological control," the ethnographer should engage in "listening to [the girls], reading the letters they write to fan magazines, or observing their behavior at home or in public."⁵ Without irony, Fiske proceeds to employ these techniques of patriarchal panopticism, which date back at least as far as Samuel Richardson, to show that Madonna and her female fans are engaged in a "sub-

5. Fiske, p. 272. For a brief critique of this essay, see Meaghan Morris, "Banality in Cultural Studies," *Discourse*, no. 10 (1988), pp. 3-29.

version" of male visual power, that they somehow *escape* the control of the male gaze—the ethnographer's gaze being apparently benignly neutral.

Quite obviously, the need for a self-reflexive attitude on the part of the ethnographer acquires a particular urgency when he is male and his subjects women, since he inevitably participates in a power structure he appears to contest. In Morley's case, though, such an admonition might seem irrelevant, since his is less a strategy of male appropriation of women's culture than a simple matter of the usual neglect—of reducing the variables so as to exclude considerations of gender. But Morley does in fact interview several groups of females, some of whom, interestingly, refuse to engage with the program at all. For example, a group of black, mainly West Indian/African women complain that "*Nationwide* or anything like that's too boring." "We're not interested in things like that." "I just didn't think while I was watching it." "I'd have liked a nice film to watch—*Love Story*. . . ." Morley comments: "This cultural distance means that the premise of *Nationwide*—the reflection of the ordinary lives of the members of the dominant white culture, which is what gives the programme 'appeal' for large sections of that audience—is what damns it for this group." The women, says Morley "simply do not possess the appropriate cultural capital to make sense of the programme," and therefore, he concludes, are engaged in a "critique of silence."⁶ But Morley never asks how it is that the group possesses the "cultural capital" to understand the romanticized life of a white male Harvard student and his love affair with a doomed Radcliffe coed. To Morley, the only variables here are race and nationality, despite the fact that the groups that supposedly criticize the program by their very silence happen to consist overwhelmingly of women (who also strongly endorse the British soap opera *Crossroads*.) It does not occur to him that this "critique of silence," which repudiates the culture's dominant representations of political and social events, is readable as a "feminine" critique—and a very old one at that: we might recall, for example, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, who rejects "male" history books as unacceptable alternatives to Gothic and romantic novels.

But it seems possible to go even further and see in the women's preference for romances and for soap operas an implicit judgment not just of the television program in question, but of the ethnographic approach itself. That romance and ethnography *are* opposed in some fundamental way is the point of the quotation from Barbara Pym's novel, *Less Than Angels*, which began this essay—the ethnographer being one who demystifies the social relations glamorized and obfuscated by the romance writer. Pym suggests that these two approaches are strongly gender-linked, and though "neither" may provide adequate guidance for the "confused" and "wandering" multitudes, Pym's sympathies clearly lie with her heroine, the romance writer, rather than with the male anthropologist, whom she treats rather sardonically:

6. Morley, pp. 71–72.

"Your people wait for you," said Catherine. "How soothing it will be to get away from all this complexity of personal relationships to the simplicity of a primitive tribe, whose only complications are in their kinship structure and rules of land tenure, which you can observe with the anthropologist's calm detachment."⁷

Now, if we recall that romances are usually precisely about the way the aloof male loses his "calm detachment," is forced to stop *assessing* the heroine and to admit his emotional involvement with her; and if we take seriously feminist claims that women's popular culture expresses legitimate grievances of women in patriarchy (though at the same time neutralizing these grievances), then a feminist critic might be tempted to see in the formula-story of romances an allegorical lesson for the male ethnographer—a lesson about the necessity of acknowledging his personal investment in his subject(s) and developing more interactive, mutually implicating methods of cultural inquiry. In any case, to a feminist reader of *The Nationwide Audience*, the female viewers' desire for different forms of popular culture and for a "politics" a little "closer to home," as one respondent puts it, may express precisely the kind of resistant, or at least contradictory, relation to the dominant culture (in this case to patriarchy) which Morley seeks, but which his traditionally masculinist-Marxist approach prevents him from discerning. In not heeding the women, Morley effectively guarantees their silence, which he then explains as resulting from a lack of cultural competence.⁸

If it is true, as Pym suggests, that ethnography is a particularly "male" activity, a question arises as to whether it is possible for the methodology to be recuperated by the feminist critic interested in "laying bare" the mystified social relations of popular romances. Is the female feminist critic able to give an authentic voice to the women traditionally silenced by patriarchal culture and sometimes even by that culture's sternest dissidents? A widely admired book on women's romances, *Reading the Romance* by Janice Radway, gives an emphatically affirmative answer to both questions.⁹ In her study, Radway reports and elabo-

7. Barbara Pym, *Less Than Angels*, New York, Harper & Row, 1987, p. 186.

8. Compare Renato Rosaldo's remarks on Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* in which Le Roy Ladurie ruefully notes that the peasant women of Montaillou never spoke to the inquisitor of their feelings about marriage, and explains, "The woman was regarded as an object. . . . The historian finds himself faced with an area of cultural silence on this subject." Rosaldo comments, "What the inquisition record reveals is that peasant women in Montaillou did not tell their interrogators much about their passions in courtship. Whether the issue was skirted because of the women's reluctance to talk about possibly heretical love magic, out of mutual reticence between women and their male inquisitors, or owing to the historian's imputed 'cultural silence,' simply cannot be decided on the basis of available evidence. Nonetheless, Le Roy Ladurie simply declares that the things women fail to tell their inquisitor represent areas of cultural silence" (Renato Rosaldo, "From the Door of His Tent: The Fieldworker and the Inquisitor," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1986, p. 82).

9. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

rates on her "ethnographic" researches into a midwestern community of romance readers (called by the fictitious name of Smithton), headed by "Dot," a woman who writes a newsletter evaluating romances each month. Radway's book is both rich in detail and ambitious (interviewing romance readers, giving a history of the paperback industry, considering the texts in the light of Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic study *The Reproduction of Mothering*, etc.), and it is not my intention here to conduct a detailed critique of it. Rather, I want to analyze a few of the presuppositions of Radway's ethnographic methodology and in particular to examine the viability, for feminist critique, of the intimately linked theories of subcultural formations and what has variously been called the acquisition of "literary competence," the accumulation of "cultural capital," or the development of particular "reading formations."¹⁰

Throughout her study Radway is concerned to justify the superiority of her approach to that of the elitist "professors of English," as she typically calls them, since the latter in her view fail to take into consideration the real women who read romances and who are in the best position to inform scholars about what the women call their reading "habit." According to Radway, there is "no evidence" that we (critics, professors) "know how to read as romance readers do." To support such a position, Radway refers to the work of Stanley Fish, who she says first taught her the importance of studying what "real readers do with texts," for meaning, according to Fish, "is constructed from textual materials by a reader who operates not alone and subjectively but according to assumptions and strategies that he or she has adopted by virtue of prior participation in a specific interpretive community," a term that has certain affinities with the more Marxist notion of "subculture."¹¹ The work of Fish and other theorists of literary competency has in fact appealed strongly to other feminists besides Radway, in part because it provides a way of deconstructing the canon and explaining women's exclusion from it, and in part because it can help explain how women learn to read the writings of other women. Thus, in a feminist critique of the male literary canon, Annette Kolodny approvingly quotes Murray Krieger's narrative of how people come to understand interpretive conventions and hence to acquire literary competency: "Once one had read his [sic] first poem, he turns to his second and to the others that will follow thereafter with an increasing series of preconceptions about the sort of activity in which he is indulging. In matters of

10. For one discussion of literary competence, see Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975; and for a very different one, stressing interpretive communities, see Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class: The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1980. The term *cultural capital* is Bordieu's. See Pierre Bordieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1984. Tony Bennett prefers to speak of "reading formations." See Tony Bennett and Janet Woolcott, *Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero*, London and New York, Methuen, 1987.

11. Radway, note 243.

literary experience, as in other experiences, one is a virgin but once."¹² But surely this is a naive account in a post-Althusserian, post-Derridean literary world; for, as the continental thinkers have taught us, often using similarly unfortunate metaphorical language, in reading as in writing one is always already fucked. Never a virgin, but always a whore.

Given that Radway's "community of romance readers" is, it must be said, an extreme rarity in the world, since reading romances is a perfect example of the serialized activity Jean-Paul Sartre saw as characteristic of mass culture, we need to note that the interpretative conventions enabling us to read romances are not formed in a community or subculture like the one studied by Radway, but are, for *most* of us, set in place from birth. In patriarchal society a female child is born into and simultaneously interpellated by a world where many of the conventions of romance hold powerful sway—in, say, her mother's fantasy life (which in turn shapes her own life at the level of the unconscious), in popular songs and fairy tales, and, later, in novels and movies. These conventions are, then, part of our cultural heritage as women. In short, there is *every* reason to suppose, if we are honest with ourselves, that we know how to read as romance readers do: any woman who has ever responded emotionally to Rhett Butler sweeping Scarlet O'Hara up the stairs knows how to "read" romances (and in fact the Smithsonian women list *Gone With the Wind* among their all-time favorite novels).

The point here is not only that it is questionable from a moral and political point of view to treat romance readers as if they were natives of Bora-Bora rather than middle-class housewives from somewhere around Kansas (though, of course, ethnographic studies of the natives of Bora-Bora are *also* often morally and politically problematic).¹³ But the point is also that romances are the property of us all—and not only of white Anglo-Saxon and American women either: Morley's female West Indian and African subjects, we recall, seemed just as avid for mass-produced female fantasies as Kansas housewives, and, of course, Harlequins and other serial romances are translated into dozens of languages. In this regard, the limits of a "subcultural" approach to women's romances ought to be clear, since the popularity of romances crosses cultures, and romances provide women with a common fantasy structure to ensure their continued psychic investment in their oppression.

Moreover, assuming its total effectiveness, this fantasy, which promises women complete fulfillment through heterosexual love, ensures the impossibility

12. Annette Kolodny, "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism," in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism: Women, Literature, Theory*, New York, Pantheon, 1985.

13. That the huge body of literature contesting the most basic tenets of ethnography is seldom brought to bear self-critically in ethnographic studies of media and mass culture, or even in reviews of these studies, suggests the rudimentary state of these areas of inquiry, for all the lip service paid to them by politically engaged critics.

of women ever *getting together* (as women) to form a "subculture" (if it makes any sense to speak of the majority of the world as a "subculture") and hence to develop a system of values that will effectively challenge and undermine an increasingly hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Because women's experience has been privatized, and because, as Terry Eagleton has argued, criticism always belonged to the bourgeois (male) public sphere, before it became almost wholly academicized, a woman-oriented criticism could only emerge when feminists began to publicize and collectively explore their private experience and, through consciousness-raising, to come to terms with the myriad ramifications of feminism's most basic insight, "the personal is political."¹⁴ Located, until recently, on the margins of the academy, the feminist critic has contributed to the forging of a woman's culture based on this insight and has felt herself to be part of a broader movement of women on whose behalf she could sometimes speak, because, through consciousness-raising, she in fact *did* speak to them—as one of them. Her work is, then, ideally plurivocal, not denying the differences of other women, but learning about them through dialogic exchange, rather than through ethnographies that posit an unbridgeable gap between the critic's subjectivity and the subjectivity of "the others."¹⁵

But because Radway denies the similarity between herself and the women she studies and, like Fiske and Morley, adopts the pose of the disinterested "scientific researcher," she winds up condescending to the very people she wants to rescue from critical scorn—this despite her claims never to have contradicted the women: "I have always worked first from their conscious statements and beliefs about their behavior, accepted them as given, and then posited additional desires, fears, or concerns that complement rather than contradict those beliefs and assertions."¹⁶ For someone who proceeds to utilize a psychoanalytic methodology in analyzing the texts' appeal to their readers, this is quite an extraordinary claim. It flies in the face of the most basic insights of psychoanalysis—that the unconscious is made up of feelings and desires which the conscious mind finds difficult to tolerate (i.e., the unconscious *contradicts* the conscious mind), and that the unconscious is itself, as Freud continually asserted, *characterized* by contradiction. In general, the crucial element missing here is a sense of the various ways a notion of contradiction *must* be brought to bear in any attempt to understand the full complexity of women's relation to culture: contradictions at an intrapsychic level; contradictions between conscious or unconscious fantasies and the

14. But for a discussion that challenges Eagleton's pessimism about the "academicization" of literary criticism, see Tony Bennett, "The Prison-House of Criticism," *New Formations*, no. 2 (1987), pp. 129–144.

15. Recent work on cultural ethnography in general has stressed the point that "culture" is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, *between* subjects in relations of power. See James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1986, p. 15.

16. Radway, p. 10.

discourses that conflict with or discredit these fantasies; and contradictions between competing ideologies and discourses as they are reflected both in popular texts and in the audience's relations to these texts. A recognition that romance readers may be self-contradictory in their attitudes and behavior does not necessarily open up the analyst to the charge of elitism, as Radway seems to fear, *especially* if we are willing to acknowledge how much we ourselves are implicated within those very structures we set out to analyze, how much our own feelings, desires, anxieties, etc., are caught up in contradiction—in short, how much our fantasy lives, for all our cherished feminist ideals, may resemble those of the women we study.

Far from being narcissistic, as it might at first appear, the self-analysis involved in the kind of feminist criticism I would advocate may well provide an antidote to the narcissism I suspect to be at the heart of much reader-oriented popular culture criticism—a criticism that, though claiming a certain objective validity by appealing to the pleasures and tastes of others, often seems to be based on an unspoken syllogism that goes something like this: “I like *Dallas*; I am a feminist; *Dallas* must have progressive potential.”¹⁷ It seemed important at one historical moment to emphasize the way “the people” resist mass culture’s manipulations. Today, we are in danger of forgetting the crucial fact that, like everyone else, even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a “cultural dupe”—which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, of political and cultural domination (even though we are never *only* victims).

All of this is simply to propose a place for the feminist textual critic who recognizes her commonality with other women. Because she is so deeply invested in her methodology, Radway finds it necessary to discredit textual critics entirely—an attack that is curious in light of her decision to accord “Dot” complete authority. For Dot, it turns out, may be as idiosyncratic in her tastes as any other reader and may in fact have imposed these tastes upon the group as a whole: “Therefore,” writes Radway, “while the members of the Smithton group share attitudes about good and bad romances that are similar to Dot’s it is impossible to say whether these opinions were formed by Dot or whether she is simply their most articulate advocate.”¹⁸ But what, finally, is the *feminist* critic but

17. So, for example, Ien Ang gathered reader responses to *Dallas* by placing the following notice in the newspaper: “I like watching the TV serial *Dallas*, but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it: I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis.” See Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination*, trans. Della Cooling, London and New York, Methuen, 1985, p. 10. For those of us who teach popular culture, the responses Ang receives are, not surprisingly, similar to those our students give us at the beginning of the course. The teacher/critic has usually thought it necessary to begin, not end, with these responses and go beyond them to a more politicized understanding of the functions of mass culture.

18. Radway, p. 18.

an articulate advocate of opinions about texts?—opinions which she sometimes shares with other women, and sometimes helps to form.

*At the Crossroads: On the Performative
Aspect of Feminist Criticism*

In *Less Than Angels*, Barbara Pym refers to a newlywed couple who “set out for the field to gather material about the married life of a primitive people, giving in exchange generous information about their own, which filled the natives with delight and astonishment.”¹⁹ In Pym’s comic vision, anthropology is seen as a *form* of gift giving rather than, as has traditionally been the case, the study of such forms. Now, since, as I argued above, feminism can evolve only through a process of dialogue, and since, as I also argued, traditional forms of ethnography militate against this process, I would like, in the spirit of Barbara Pym, to replace the unidirectional, ethnographic notion of feminist criticism with one situated in the realm of symbolic exchange—the realm, that is, of the gift. A view of feminist criticism as symbolic exchange—between the critic and the women to whom she talks and writes—is, I would argue, more egalitarian than much reader-response criticism, which frequently condemns as elitist the very idea that the critic might have anything to give to anyone.²⁰ Thus Robert C. Allen speaks disparagingly of the textual critics’ view of their task as “finding the ‘figure in the carpet’—the meaning of the work that lay hidden in its structure—and relating that meaning to other readers who had not discovered it for themselves (or who did not possess the interpretative gifts of the critic).”²¹

As we have seen, reader response critics have countered textual critics by insisting that meaning resides not in any given text, but in readers as they interact with the text, though this meaning may be determined within a larger context—that of the interpretive community to which the readers belong. I have already discussed some of the limitations of this view for feminist criticism; but now I would like to go further and argue that another problem with such formulations lies in their assumption that an *already-existent* meaning resides *somewhere*, and that the critic’s only job is to locate it (in the text, in the reader, in the interpretive community, or in the relations among the three). On the contrary, a fully politicized feminist criticism has seldom been content to ascertain old meanings and (in the manner of the ethnographers) take the measure of already-consti-

19. Pym, p. 166.

20. Frederic Jameson, of course, speaks of narrative as a “socially symbolic act.” See Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981.

21. Robert C. Allen, “Reader-Oriented Criticism and Television,” in Allen, p. 74. He is here referring to Wolfgang Iser’s critique of textual critics.

tuted subjectivities; it has aimed, rather, at bringing into being *new* meanings and *new* subjectivities, seeking to articulate not only what *is* but “what has never been.”²² In this respect it may be said to have a performative dimension — i.e., to be *doing* something beyond restating already existent ideas and views, wherever these might happen to reside.

The term *performative* has received its fullest elaboration in the philosophy of J. L. Austin, whose work has recently been revived by Jacques Derrida. While Derrida's appreciation/critique of Austin has aroused some controversy and been responded to at length in Shoshana Felman's book, *The Literary Speech Act*, the implications of this work have gone largely unnoticed by feminist criticism.²³ According to Austin, many utterances, or speech acts, are not merely descriptive statements of fact (“constatives”) but expressions whose function is to carry out a performance. As his first example, and one to which he continually returns, Austin cites the act of saying “I do” in a wedding ceremony — words by which the speaker commits him- or herself to another person in a ceremony that makes the promises uttered legal and binding. When judging the success of such an act, Austin says, the criterion we invoke is not the truth or falsity of the claim, but the “felicity” or “infelicity” of the performance: thus, if a man utters the words “I do” when he is already married, the act is an infelicitous one. Generally, for an act to be felicitous, “there must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, the procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances.”²⁴ But, going on to question the term *exist* in this formulation, Austin concedes that there are cases “of procedures which someone is initiating”²⁵ — a concession of great importance to the feminist critic, who, participating in a community whose values she both shares and “helps to form,” is in the process of challenging “accepted conventional procedures” and forging new ones.²⁶

In the broadest sense, feminist critical writing is performative insofar as it embodies a promise. In this respect, Austin's privileging of the promise, involving as it does a commitment to the future, is of special interest to feminism, although the fact that Austin chooses to concentrate on marriage vows is not

22. The phrase is Bonnie Zimmerman's. See Bonnie Zimmerman, “What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Criticism,” in Showalter, pp. 200–224.

23. See the Derrida-Searle exchange in *Glyph*, nos. 1 and 2 (1977). The article by Jacques Derrida is titled “Signature, Event, Context,” no. 1, pp. 172–197; and the response by John R. Searle is titled “Reiterating the Difference: A Reply to Derrida,” no. 1, pp. 198–208. Derrida's reply to Searle appears in “Limited Inc abc . . .,” no. 2, pp. 162–254.

24. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1962, p. 26.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 28. Derrida ignores this point in order to make his case against Austin airtight (see below); he speaks of “the conventionality without which there is no performative” (“Signature, Event, Context,” p. 188).

26. Steven Mailloux, however, speaks of “constitutive hermeneutics,” which seems to me to be getting close to a notion of the “performative” activity of the critic. See Steven Mailloux, *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1982.

without a certain irony. For feminist criticism has, of course, rejected the ideology—purveyed in romances and many other forms of popular and high art—that holds marital commitments to be women's chief goal and greatest desire. It has sought to show how such performatives may be "infelicitous" from the *woman's* point of view and has attempted to redefine our "commitments." Nevertheless, despite the redefinition, it remains importantly the case that feminist critical writing is committed writing, a writing committed to the future of women.

In seeking to answer the question, "Why write?" Jean-Paul Sartre (who was referring to the creative writer, but in terms that suit our purposes as well) proposed a definition of "committed" or "engaged" writing as writing that presupposes the freedom of the other (the reader)—recognizes this freedom, has "confidence in it," and requires of it "an act in its own name, that is, in the name of the confidence that one brings to it." In the final analysis "the end to which [writing] offers itself is the reader's freedom."²⁷ By assuming, to use our old slogan, that people are not (only) cultural dupes, by assuming a degree of freedom in the reader (an assumption ethnography continually works to prove and hence never gets around to building upon) *at the same time that the writer takes this freedom*—woman's liberation—*as a goal*, feminist critical writing is simultaneously performative and utopian, pointing toward the freer world it is in the process of inaugurating. Thus it may be said to contain, as the Frankfurt School would put it (speaking, though, strictly of high art), a *promesse de bonheur*.

According to Sartre, "committed writing" involves the transmission of a dream or a vision to others and hence participates in a

ceremony of the *gift* and the gift alone brings about the metamorphosis. It is something like the transmission of titles and powers in the matriarchate where the mother does not possess the names, but is the indispensable intermediary between uncle and nephew. Since I have captured this illusion in flight, since I lay it out for other men and have disengaged it and rethought it for them, they can consider it with confidence. It has become intentional.²⁸

Obviously feminists cannot accept Sartre's account without revising it significantly, for feminist criticism is involved in a twofold process: first, it reveals the ideological workings of a system in which women, far from being in a position to *give* the gifts, *are* the gifts, "indispensable intermediaries" between men; and, second, by engaging in relationships of reciprocity with other women, it works toward a time when the traditionally mute body, "the mother," will be given the same access to "the names"—language and speech—that men have enjoyed.

27. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York, Washington Square, 1966, p. 29.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

Recent work influenced by continental theory has, however, challenged the very premises on which this project could proceed. The most pertinent of these challenges is contained in Shoshana Felman's book *The Literary Speech Act*—titled in the original French *Le scandale du corps parlant*, or *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*—which represents an attempt to save Austin's work from Derrida's criticism, in part by analyzing it in light of the theories of Jacques Lacan. In this book Felman, who has done important work in the past as a feminist critic, implicitly disavows the Sartrean notion of committed writing and instead frankly celebrates a speech of broken commitments and broken promises, proposing Austin as theorist of a "radically negative" view of language and Molière's Don Juan as exemplar of the literary speech act. For Felman, Don Juan's heroism lies in his refusal to make his speech conform to or refer to anything outside itself, thus engaging solely in performative speech and thus, too, exposing language as purely self-referential: "The trap of seduction . . . consists in producing a *referential illusion* through an utterance that is by its very nature *self-referential*: the illusion of a real or extralinguistic act of commitment [the promise of marriage] created by an utterance that refers only to itself [the act of seduction, which takes place within language]." ²⁹ In a way, Felman seems to be arguing, Don Juan's refusal to keep his commitments to women is analogous to the refusal of writing (whether literary or critical) to honor what Christopher Butler has called "mimetic commitments."³⁰ With the advent of Derrida and Lacan, and the privileging of self-referential writing, the very notion of committed writing seems to become passé.

For both Derrida and Felman, the interest of Austin's work lies in the way it has problematized the notion of the referent. Derrida writes, "As opposed to the classical assertion, to the constative utterance, the performative does not have its referent . . . outside of itself, or, in any event, before and in front of itself."³¹ But Derrida criticizes Austin for subverting the radical nature of this insight when the latter turns to contextual information—information "outside" of the utterance—in judging the felicity of a speech act: for example when Austin notes, "It is hardly a gift if I *say* I give it to you but never hand it over." According to Derrida, by holding fast to the felicity/infelicity opposition and by appealing to a realm beyond the speech act, i.e., "the total context," in order to judge the success of the act, Austin demonstrates a belief in "absolutely meaningful speech master of itself" and falls victim to the usual philosophical error which refuses to see the "irreducible polysemy" of language, the "'dissemination' escaping the horizon of the unity of meaning."³²

29. Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983, p. 31.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

31. Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," p. 186.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

One surely cannot quarrel with Derrida's view that writing does not simply reflect a prior reality, nor with his implication that — to use Austin's example — in literary and critical writing the giving of the gift is in a sense identical with the claim to be giving it: to write is "to hand it over." Neither can it be disputed that claims to take into account "the total context" in analyzing speech acts involve an illusory ideal of mastery. But various critics have argued that, though there will always be elements of language and its contexts which escape our control, and though our contact with the real will always be mediated by language, we are not thereby obliged to abandon all hope of understanding, in limited ways, events "before and in front of" literary and critical speech acts—in other words, all hope of, on the one hand, acknowledging the impact of history (a text's contexts), and, on the other, writing in reference to a (better) future.

Because they are ultimately concerned with altering material reality, most political critics seem to be reluctant to abolish the category of the referent altogether, though, like Christopher Butler in his book *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology*, most do seek to go beyond "simple mimetic theory." Noting the tendency of some contemporary theorists to invoke naive notions of reference and the real, which are then undermined by the theorist as sophisticated deconstructor, Butler proposes that the relation between world and text is not one of exact correspondence "to the facts," but one which always, necessarily, involves the "interpreter's mediating statements."³³ Like Fish and others, Butler says these statements will be produced in relation to the codes, conventions, and ideological presuppositions of the interpreter, who invokes interpretive norms developed from within a given community or institutional framework. "There are," Butler writes, "all sorts of relationships between the text and the world, from the relatively trivial (Betsey Trotwood is just like my Aunt Mabel) to the historically and ideologically significant (as when Goldmann argues that Racinian tragedy reveals the essential structure of the relationship of the *noblesse de la robe* to the Kings of France)."³⁴

Now a feminist critic who believes history and ideology to be important stakes in feminist criticism may well find parts of Butler's argument compelling, but will certainly be inclined to raise an eyebrow at his examples. From a feminist point of view, nothing could be *more* "historically and ideologically significant" than the existence of the single woman in patriarchal society, her (frequently caricatured) representation in patriarchal art, and the relationship between the reality and the representation. This example suggests the limitations of literary theories that restrict themselves to a search for meaning instead of inquiring into the illocutionary force of a text, and it suggests as well the necessity of understanding how performative and referential aspects of texts are interrelated. For

33. Christopher Butler, *Interpretation, Deconstruction, and Ideology: An Introduction to Some Current Issues in Literary Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon, 1984, p. 53.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

feminism, it is not simply a question of affirming or denying the accuracy of patriarchal representations, but of understanding what texts such as *David Copperfield* do, how they *produce* the very resemblances they are then seen to reflect (how they influence our perception of Aunt Mabel and Aunt Mabel's perception of herself).³⁵ I am not arguing for a crude understanding of cause and effect here. Just as Butler argues against "simple mimetic theory," one can claim that texts have all sorts of complicated effects on readers without subscribing to the simplified theories of sociological and ethnographic critics or to the kinds of arguments advanced by, say, some anti-pornography groups—e.g., that pornography leads directly to rape. In a critique of those who ridicule the anti-pornography groups for their oversimplifications, Monique Wittig suggests one way of theorizing pornographic discourse—and by implication, any discourse—as "performative act":

The pornographic discourse is part of the strategies of violence which are exercised upon us: it humiliates, it degrades, it is a crime against our "humanity." As a harassing tactic it has another function, that of a warning. . . . [The] experts in semiotics . . . reproach us for confusing, when we demonstrate against pornography, the discourses with the reality. They do not see that this discourse *is* reality for us, one of the facets of the reality of our oppression. They believe that we are mistaken in our level of analysis.³⁶

As with pornographic discourse, so too with other, more "respectable" discourses, such as Dickens's novels: they not only reflect women's subordinate status, but may actively denigrate and demean women—a process to which Butler contributes in his own small way when, casting about for an example of the trivial, he strikes irresistibly upon the image of the spinster.

In seeking to reevaluate the very criteria by which we judge historical and ideological significance, and to counter the violence of patriarchal rhetoric (and break the vicious cycle whereby the performative and mimetic aspects of texts mutually reinforce each other, representation producing reality and reality affirming representation), feminism must marshal its own illocutionary force to "de-trivialize" women. In doing so we should avoid falling into "the trap of seduction" and reject as an ideological ruse the attempts to render language and literature trivial that often take place in the very name of the feminine. For example, at one point Felman praises Don Juan/Austin for revealing "History" to be "made up of trivialities," since "unlike saying, doing is always trivial: it is that which, by definition cannot be generalized," and she quotes Roland Barthes:

35. Paul Hernadi writes persuasively of the necessity of considering "doing, making and meaning" together, analyzing the "constant interplay of each." See Paul Hernadi, "Doing, Making, Meaning: Toward a Theory of Verbal Practice," *PMLA*, no. 103 (1988), pp. 749–758.

36. Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," *Feminist Issues*, no. 1 (Summer 1980), p. 106.

A writer — by which I mean . . . the subject of a praxis — must have the persistence of the watcher who stands at the crossroads of all other discourses, in a position that is *trivial* in respect to purity of doctrine (*trivialis* is the etymological attribute of the prostitute who waits at the intersection of three roads).³⁷

Notwithstanding the sleight of hand here, by which the *writer* as the speaking body is identified with the “trivial” prostitute, let us not forget that the practice praised by Felman throughout her book is the devaluation of women by Don Juan, who in seducing them relegates them to the status of “mere” bodies.³⁸ It is difficult to see what Felman means in claiming performance to be anti-generalization, since she earlier praises Don Juan for acting according to “the principle of substitutability.”³⁹ But isn’t this to say that Don Juan, the “master of rupture”⁴⁰ treats all women as conquests and deprives them of their uniqueness, fulfilling, in fact, the performative definitions of “generalize” given in the *American Heritage Dictionary*: “to render indefinite or unspecific,” “to reduce to a general form, class or law” — the class being in this case the female gender? In any event, of course, the real, historical scandal to which feminism addresses itself is surely not to be equated with the writer at the center of discourse, but the woman who remains outside of it, not with the “speaking body,” but with the “mute body.”

Not, then, Don Juan, Austin, Kierkegaard, Lacan, or Nietzsche — all of whom are mentioned by Felman as scandalous speaking bodies — but maybe Judith Shakespeare, the woman imagined by Virginia Woolf. We might recall that the crossroads, in addition to being the place where the prostitute waits and the place where, says Felman, the murder of the father occurs, is also the place where Shakespeare’s sister lies buried after having been ruined by the male stage manager who laughed at her “performative” ambitions, her attempts to become a speaking body, and who seduced and abandoned her and drove her to suicide. To him she was just another of the infinitely substitutable female bodies he would encounter in the course of his life.

Woolf’s distinctive accomplishment in *A Room of One’s Own* (an accomplishment ignored by some recent Woolf criticism, which focuses on “the limits of Woolf’s feminism,” meaning, very often, the limits of her socialism) was to have

37. Quoted in Felman, p. 117.

38. Felman does observe that Don Juan breaks his promises to men too. But this is to ignore the obvious point that Don Juan’s reputation rests exclusively on his sexual prowess with women. That his behavior also involves the manipulation of men and may even ultimately aim at mastery over other men in no way mitigates the fact that women are the chief victims in this scheme; rather it suggests that a fully politicized analysis must consider the complex interrelationship between Don Juan’s heterosexual exploits and “homosocial desire” (Eve Sedgwick’s term; see Eve Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1985).

39. Felman, p. 37.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

given a name, a desire, and a history to one of the mute females who lived and died in obscurity.⁴¹ In so doing, Woolf deliberately engaged in "a dynamic movement of the modification" of historical reality,⁴² and realized one of the chief performative and utopian ambitions of feminist criticism. Thus it is arguable that in speaking and writing as women in a world that has always conspired to silence and negate women, Woolf and all feminist writers enact the scandal of the speaking body in a far more profound way than those who are already authorized to speak by virtue of their gender.

"A performative utterance . . . has existence only as an act of authority,"⁴³ writes Felman, quoting Austin, whose "scandalous" words she allows to dominate the second half of her book. To be sure, Felman is concerned primarily with the way the speech of great men undermines its *own* authority, an authority that is, we might add, thereby confirmed, since, as Terry Eagleton has pointed out, it can "immolate itself only because it is always already in place . . . secure . . . and perhaps likely to reinforce that security the more flamboyantly it parades its blindness."⁴⁴ A feminist criticism, by contrast, aims at seizing authority from men at the same time that it seeks to redefine traditional models (like the ethnographic one) of authority, power, and hierarchy. Again, Woolf's distinction is that she accomplished both tasks so brilliantly, laughing at male posturing, deflating (hence, making "trivial") masculine pretensions, while affirming women in prose so striking and so dazzling that it has empowered countless numbers of feminists. Nor will it do to characterize this prose as mere aestheticization, as one critic does when she writes, "What Woolf's texts offer feminist critics is a discursive elision of conflict, a magical transformation of intractable historical realities into elegant and exhilarating prose. But this aestheticization is at heart a suppression, and theories based on suppressions are what feminist criticism cannot afford."⁴⁵ Now, the first point—about Woolf's "discursive elision of conflict"—is, of course, highly debatable, but what concerns me here is the utter dismissal of "elegant and exhilarating prose." Instead of condemning such prose as "aestheticization," we might follow Jacques Derrida in his resuscitation of the concept under the name of "rhetoric," a nice, old-fashioned term

41. In addition to Donna Landry, "Congreve Recovered; or, the Limits of Woolf's Feminism," *The Michigan Academician*, no. 17 (1985), pp. 58–69; see Cora Kaplan, "Pandora's Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism," in *Sea Changes*, London, Verso, 1986. For a rebuttal to Kaplan and other critics who have accused Woolf of elitism, especially those coming from the British Left, see Jane Marcus, "Daughters of Anger/Material Girls: Con/Textualizing Feminist Criticism," in *Last Laughs: Hate and Humor in Women's Writing*, London, Gordon & Breach, forthcoming.

42. Felman, p. 77.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

44. Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism: From the Spectator to Post-Structuralism*, London, Verso, 1984, p. 103.

45. Landry, p. 134.

which it seems to me feminist criticism cannot afford to disdain. And instead of viewing this dimension of speech acts as a suppressive force, we ought probably to view it as a *productive* force, and, most definitely and performatively, as *force*:⁴⁶

I thought of that old gentleman, who is dead now, but was a bishop, I think, who declared that it was impossible for any woman, past, present or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare. He wrote to the papers about it. He also told a lady who applied to him for information that cats do not as a matter of fact go to heaven, though they have, he added, souls of a sort. How much thinking those old gentlemen used to save one! How the borders of ignorance shrank back at their approach! Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare.⁴⁷

Or, again: "Men, of course, are not snobs, I continued, carefully eschewing 'the arrant feminism' of Miss Rebecca West; but they appreciate with sympathy for the most part the efforts of a countess to write verse."⁴⁸ In asserting her writerly authority with a wit, subtlety, and brilliance superior to those she mocks, Woolf enacts a seizure of power that, as many women will understand, is perhaps the most difficult act of all for women to perform, mistresses of the "masquerade" as they may be. It is important, in fact, to distinguish between the concepts of the "performative" and the masquerade, the latter having received much attention from feminist critics in recent years. In Joan Rivière's influential analysis, the masquerade is, precisely, a "feminine" *compensation* on the part of the woman for having usurped what she perceives to be a "masculine" authority and thereby "unsexed" herself.⁴⁹ The term *performative* as I use it contains no such disavowal.

Nor, I think, is Woolf engaged in disavowal, though her writing creates a kind of splitting of the subject that has sometimes been linked to the process of fetishization and disavowal. This aspect of Woolf's writing can perhaps be more usefully related to a notion of "enunciation" as it has recently been described by Homi Bhabha. In an article on what it means to be a committed writer in a post-Derridian, post-Lacanian world, Bhabha discusses this concept of enunciation, which he sees as challenging dominant modes of authority and exposing the foundation of this authority as an "artifice of the archaic":

It is the very authority of culture as a knowledge of referential truth which is at issue in the concept and moment of *enunciation*. The

46. See in this connection Patricia Yaeger's arguments that women refuse to follow Barthes's lead and instead affirm the older "work" over Barthes's preferred term "text" precisely because women's "texts" are engaged in important, though pleasurable, "work." See Patricia Yaeger, *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988.

47. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, New York, Harbinger, 1957, p. 48.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

49. See Joan Rivière, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in Hendrik M. Ruitenbeek, ed., *Psychoanalysis and Female Sexuality*, New Haven, College and University Press, 1966.

enunciative process introduces a split in the performative present, of cultural identification; a split between the traditional culturalist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference—and the necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance. . . . [T]he enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the division of past and present . . . at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address.⁵⁰

In making her poet the sister of Shakespeare, Woolf acknowledges her own indebtedness to male literary traditions, models, and canons at the same time, that, in calling forth a poet who would articulate women's experience, she inevitably contests these traditions and negates the cultural certitude they inspire. For women's writing is, at the very least, bound to constitute a critique of the views of women found in many male texts, and thus it possesses the potential to undermine the "stable system of reference" Butler so confidently invokes, even while he argues for the cultural relativism of such invocations. Interestingly, although Shakespeare's sister is created in response to the felt need of feminism to possess its *own* models and traditions, she is a deliberate "artifice of the archaic," which functions to dislodge male cultural authority from the site of "truth." At one point, for example, Woolf remarks on the way Dr. Johnson—that archetype of the male authority figure whose words are always performatively becoming law—uses the same phrase the stage manager had uttered to Judith Shakespeare. "A woman acting put him in mind of a dog dancing. Johnson repeated the phrase two hundred years later of women preaching. And here, I said, opening a book about music, we have the same words used again in this year of grace, 1928, of women who try to write music. . . . So accurately does history repeat itself." In the very act of appearing to cede the omnipotence of patriarchal authority, Woolf undermines it by claiming prior authority and placing herself at the originary moment. In giving priority to fiction (her own), Woolf suggests the fictiveness, and hence arbitrariness, of the patriarchal cultural tradition, i.e., that its authority does indeed rely on an "artifice of the archaic," on "representational *strategies*," on the "guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory," but a fictive force which gains power through iteration—history repeating itself *inaccurately*.⁵¹ Far from eliding the question of history and avoiding historical conflict, then, Woolf actually stages a conflict *with* the past, complicating the notion of history and simultaneously demonstrating a commitment to its very absences.

Because these *are* absences, however, Woolf must ultimately look to the

50. Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," *New Formations*, no. 2 (1988), p. 19.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 19 (emphases added).

future for a female poet who will "put on the body which she has so often laid down" and give voice to the women who have lead such "infinitely obscure lives" that "no biography or history has a word to say" about them. As she describes the poet's task, Woolf performatively becomes the woman she seeks:

I . . . went on in thought through the streets of London feeling in imagination the pressure of dumbness, the accumulation of unrecorded life, whether from the women at the street corners with their arms akimbo, and the rings embedded in their fat swollen fingers, talking with a gesticulation like the swing of Shakespeare's words; or from the violet-sellers and match-sellers and old crones stationed under doorways; or from drifting girls whose faces, like waves in sun and cloud, signal the coming of men and women and the flickering lights of shop windows. . . . [I]n imagination, I had gone into a shop. . . . And there is the girl behind the counter too—I would as soon have her true history as the hundred and fiftieth life of Napoleon or seventieth study of Keats and his use of Miltonic inversion which old Professor Z and his like are now indicting.⁵²

Not unlike Jane Austen's Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, who found standard history boring because it excluded women, Woolf directs her attention to the lives of the Aunt Mabels rather than to the French kings and emperors, and, in rejecting accepted views of the insignificance of women's lives, begins to put new values and new ideologies into "play" — "getting away with things," so to speak. "Getting away with things is essential, despite the suspicious terminology," observes J. L. Austin, using a typical masculine analogy to illustrate the point, "like, in football, the man who first picked up the ball and ran."⁵³ Mindful of Woolf's revaluations of male and female activities ("football and sport are 'important,' the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'"),⁵⁴ we might prefer to replace Austin's example with a sartorial one and think of feminist performative writing as a sort of "fashion statement," a styling of unconventional femininities. In any case, a speech act, like any act, may sometimes inaugurate whole new forms of play and creativity—and this is the performative point of Woolf's rhetoric, as well as its pleasure.

Colin Mercer writes,

No longer can the contradictory *play* of ideology be reduced to questions of meaning and truth. You can ask whether people "believe" what they hear on the News or on *Nationwide*, but it's by no means clear what people would "believe" in light entertainment or comedy.

52. Woolf, pp. 93–94.

53. Austin, p. 30.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Once enjoyment and pleasure are reintroduced—those jokers in the game—we have to change the rules and go beyond the message.⁵⁵

As these words suggest, ideology is as effective as it is because it bestows pleasure on its subjects rather than simply conveying messages, and so it cannot be combatted only at the level of meaning. For this reason, the theory and practice of the performative are crucial to a politically engaged criticism. Felman points out that the “radical negativity” of the performative philosophers—who are, we remember, concerned with “felicity” and “infelicity” rather than truth and falsity—is intimately related to questions of pleasure and power. Discussing Austin’s humor, she writes, “Humor constitutes not only an assault on knowledge but also an assault on power, on repression in every sense of the word—political or analytical.”⁵⁶ But, of course, as every feminist knows and as Freud so clearly showed, humor is in fact most often an “assault” on the powerless, and hence is part of the material reality of women’s oppression. Feminism has sought to overthrow this oppression by offering alternative pleasures, and through its myriad subtle and deft rhetorical strategies, its scathing and often exhilarating humor, has indeed begun to “transform” the “intractable historical realities” of women’s lives. “Our mothers and grandmothers . . . mov[ed] to music not yet written,” says Alice Walker in one of her critical essays,⁵⁷ again reminding us of the way “the division of past and present” is problematized in the enunciation of cultural difference.

And much more music has yet to be written, by women of every color. Toward the end of *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf considers the kinds of tasks the female writer faces: “She will not need to limit herself any longer to the respectable houses of the upper middle classes. She will go without kindness or condescension, but in the spirit of fellowship into those small, scented rooms where sit the courtesan, the harlot and the lady with the pug dog.”⁵⁸ Though we surely want to go further than Woolf and imagine a time when there will *be* no classes to which the woman writer may restrict herself, we have not come close to realizing the vision which would make the radical struggle possible. Years after Woolf wrote of her hopes, the mute women remain mostly mute, despite the kindly ethnographers and the Lacanian/Barthesian/Austinian critics who embrace the role of prostitute: the real courtesan still sits in her small, scented room, and the prostitute stands at the crossroads, where the fathers continue either to be solicited or murdered. And Woolf’s prophecy of a female “fellowship” in which women speak freely to and of one another remains to some extent a promise—and nothing less.

55. Colin Mercer, “A Poverty of Desire: Pleasure and Popular Politics,” in *Formations of Pleasure*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 85.

56. Felman, p. 118.

57. Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose by Alice Walker*, San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

58. Woolf, p. 92.

Van Gogh, or The Insufficiency of Sacrifice

ERIC MICHAUD

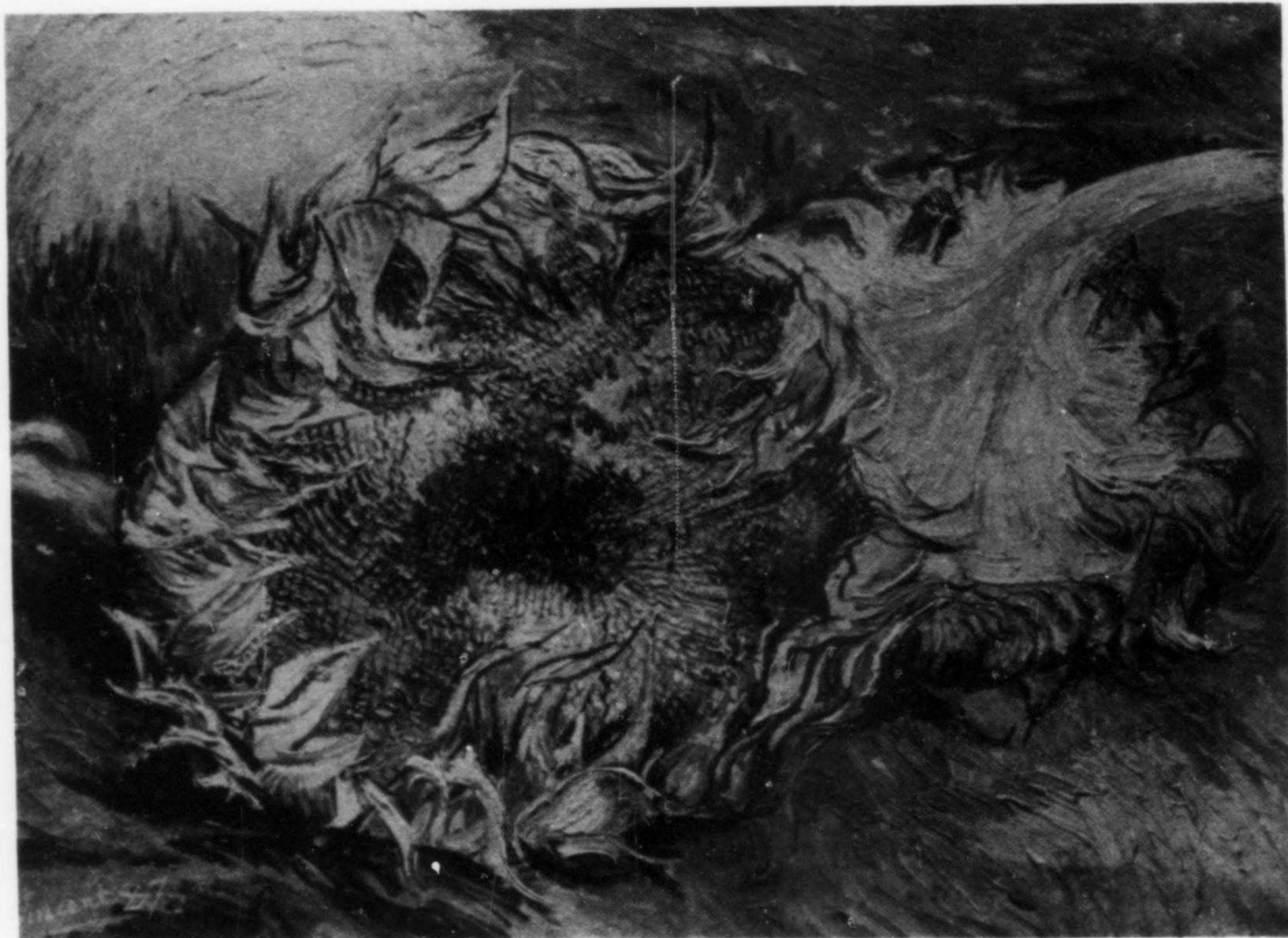
The world only concerns me in so far that I feel a certain debt and duty towards it because I have walked on that earth for thirty years, and, out of gratitude, want to leave some souvenir in the shape of drawings or pictures. . . .

— Van Gogh to his brother Theo, 1883

A seven-year interval separates the two texts Georges Bataille wrote on Van Gogh. "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh" was published in *Documents*, no. 8, in 1930; "Van Gogh as Prometheus" appeared in the first issue of *Verve*, in December 1937. Despite the relatively long lapse between their respective dates of publication, these two texts are successive, the latter developing in three brief, luminous pages what the first had elaborated through a dense network of references: ethnological, mythological, and psychiatric. But in these three pages the effects of "The Notion of Expenditure," a text written in the meantime, can of course be felt, as these effects were already manifest in "The Practice of Joy before Death," which would soon appear in *Acéphale*. Yet my intention here is not to reinscribe Van Gogh's automutilation within the economy of sacrifice as elaborated by Bataille at this moment. I want only to try to inflect his analysis by means of Van Gogh's famous letters to his brother Theo, wherein the painter little by little discovered, with a deep horror, the destructive effects that are attached to artistic activity.

But what exactly does Bataille say? Very simply, first, that "Van Gogh's life was dominated by the overwhelming relations he maintained with the sun"; that his "sun paintings . . . only become intelligible when they are seen as the very expression of the personality (or, as some would say, of the sickness) of the painter"; that although these "sun paintings" appear fairly early on within his production, for the most part they postdate that Christmas night of 1888.¹ That

1. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl, Minneap-



Vincent Van Gogh. Sunflowers. 1886.

night, the tension with Gauguin—who had come to stay with him and to paint at Arles—having reached an extreme pitch, Van Gogh severed his left ear (or rather the lobe, or tip of the ear), wrapped it, all bloody, in a newspaper, and sent this package to the prostitute Rachel in the brothel he frequented on the rue du Bout-d'Arles.

Bataille observed that “in order to show the importance and the development of Van Gogh’s obsession, suns must be linked with sunflowers, whose large disks haloed with short petals recall the disk of the sun, at which they ceaselessly and fixedly stare throughout the day. This flower is also simply known [in French] as ‘the sun’. In the history of painting it is linked to the name of Van Gogh, who wrote that *there was a bit of the sunflower in him* (as the bear is “in” Berne or the she-wolf is “in” Rome)” (VE, 63, trans. modified).

olis, Minnesota University Press, 1985, p. 62. Hereafter citations will be made in the text as VE followed by the page number.

In this way he quickly succeeds in revealing a "double bond uniting the sun-star, the sun-flower, and Van Gogh," a double bond which he characterizes as "a normal psychological theme in which the star is opposed to the withered flower, as are the ideal term and the real term of the ego" (VE, 63). One expects what Bataille, having so strongly marked this double bond or double identification between painter and sun and painter and sunflower, will enlist here in the way of that functional ambivalence that Freud had recognized in all identification. And this all the more so in that he underlines how, in Van Gogh's very painting, the ego ideal and the real ego sometimes exchange their characters: "The sun in its glory is doubtless opposed to the faded sunflower, but no matter how dead 'it may be this sunflower is also a sun, and the sun is in some way deleterious and sick: it is sulfur colored [*il a la couleur du soufre*], the painter himself writes twice in French" (VE, 66).

But it's less this ambivalence that engages Bataille than the *heroic* perspective which he will state in his "Sacrifices" of 1936: the "heroic form of the *me*" is that which, through the revelation that "life's avidity for death" is "pure avidness to be *me*," this *me* identifies itself with "the *god* that dies" (VE, 132). And in 1930 he writes:

The relations between this painter (identifying himself successively with fragile candles and with sometimes fresh, sometimes faded sunflowers) and an ideal, of which the sun is the most dazzling form, appear to be analogous to those that men maintained at one time with their gods, at least so long as these gods stupefied them; mutilation normally intervened in these relations as sacrifice: it would represent the desire to resemble perfectly an ideal term, generally characterized in mythology as a solar god who tears and rips out his own organs. (VE, 66)

This enlistment of Van Gogh in the great heroic lineage of the West, certainly understandable on the part of the author of "The Solar Anus," the one who would write "I AM THE SUN" (VE, 5), such an enlistment is soon reenforced by the pure and simple identification of Van Gogh with Prometheus, an identification established in 1930, providing the 1937 article with its title.

When in the ritual forms of communal sacrifice "an animal is substituted for the victim—a cowardly gesture" then, as Bataille writes, "only a pitiful, substituted victim penetrates the perilous domain of sacrifice," and it dies there while the victim remains protected; by contrast it is the "nightmare creatures, such as gods," who are "charged with accomplishing what ordinary men are happy to dream about." And here Bataille cites the famous "Essay on the Nature and Function of Sacrifice" by Hubert and Mauss:

The god who sacrifices himself gives himself irrevocably. This time all intermediaries have disappeared. The god, who is at the same time the sacrificer, is one with the victim and sometimes even with the sacrificer.

All the differing elements that enter into ordinary sacrifice here enter into each other and become mixed together. But such mixing is possible only for mythical, that is ideal, beings. (VE, 69–70)

But Bataille reproaches Hubert and Mauss for having omitted from their demonstration “examples of the ‘sacrifice of a god’ that they could have taken from cases of automutilation—and through which alone sacrifice loses its character as mere performance” (VE, 70). Thus he explains:

There is, in fact, no reason to separate Van Gogh’s ear . . . from Prometheus’s famous liver. If one accepts the interpretation that identifies the purveying eagle (the *aetos prometheus* of the Greeks) with the god who stole fire from the wheel of the sun, then the tearing out of the liver presents a theme in conformity with the various legends of the ‘sacrifice of the god.’ The roles are normally shared between the human form of a god and his animal avatar; sometimes the man sacrifices the animal, sometimes the animal sacrifices the man, but each time it is a case of automutilation because the animal and the man form but a single being. The eagle-god who is confused with the sun by the ancients, the eagle who alone among all beings can contemplate while staring at ‘the sun in all its glory,’ the Icarian being who goes to seek the fire of the heavens is, however, nothing other than an automutilator, a Vincent Van Gogh. . . . All the wealth he derives from the mythical delirium is limited to the incredible vomiting of the liver, ceaselessly devoured and ceaselessly vomited by the gaping belly of the god. (VE, 70)

This interpretation of Van Gogh, which we could call “going-to-the-bitter-end,” in any event heroic and Promethean, is even more accentuated in the 1937 text (conforming to the extremely seething prewar *Zeitgeist*): there the painter becomes the exemplary figure of the liberator who sacrifices himself while opening for humanity the way to power. Here, “Van Gogh, who decided by 1882 that it was better to be Prometheus than Jupiter, tore from within himself rather than an ear, nothing less than a SUN.² “At that moment all of his painting finally became *radiation, explosion, flame*, and himself, lost in ecstasy before a source of *radiant life, exploding, inflamed*. When this solar dance began, all at once nature itself was shaken, plants burst into flame, and the earth rippled like a swift sea, or burst; of the stability at the foundation of things nothing remained” (VGP, 59). And so, Bataille concludes:

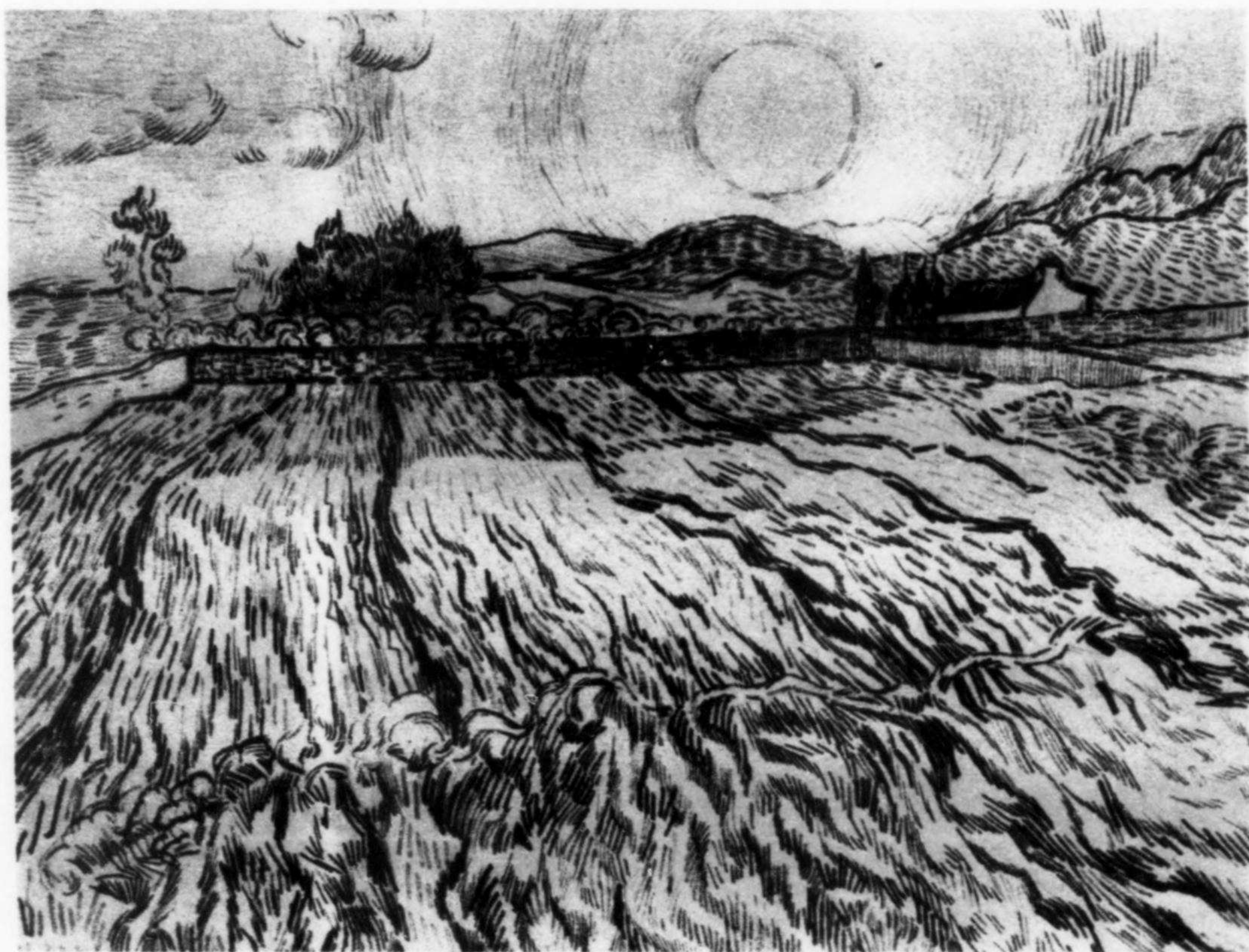
Vincent Van Gogh belongs not to art history, but to the bloody myth of our existence as humans. He is of that rare company who, in a

2. Georges Bataille, “Van Gogh as Prometheus,” trans. Annette Michelson, *October*, no. 36 (Spring 1986), p. 59; hereafter referred to in the text as VGP with the page number.

world spellbound by stability, by sleep, suddenly reached the terrible "boiling point," without which all that claims to endure becomes insipid, intolerable, declines. For this "boiling point" has meaning not only for him who attains it, but for *all*, even though *all* may not yet perceive what binds man's savage destiny to *radiance*, to *explosion*, to *flame*, and only thereby to power." (VGP, 60)

That Bataille obviously identifies himself with Van Gogh—the sun demands it—is of little importance here, given the beauty of these pages. And yet, without necessarily subtracting anything essential from them, we could reproach Bataille for having overlooked all Van Gogh's automutilations that are not of the ear, just as he reproached Hubert and Mauss for having overlooked automutilation itself in their examples of "sacrifice of the god." For it would appear, in the reading of the painter's letters to his brother, that his whole life was nothing but a long series of automutilations of which that of the ear is only the most spectacular and hence the best known. Or perhaps we should say that Van Gogh's entire

Vincent Van Gogh. Wheat Field with Rising Sun. 1889.



life was a constant oscillation between violence committed on the other and automutilation, between the Promethean demands of art and the demand for resignation that is called religion. Bataille grasped the painter's double bond—or perhaps we should say double bind—to radiance and withering, but perhaps he absorbed it too quickly in the sacrificial figure of Prometheus.

The son of a Calvinist minister, Van Gogh, as we know, vacillated at first between the career of a painter and the path opened by his father. Within one year, 1875, he declared himself fascinated by a sentence by Renan—certainly a *heroic* one—that speaks of “dying to oneself, [of] achieving great things, [of] attaining nobility and transcending the vulgarity within which almost all existence drags along,” but, as he also writes to Theo: “I feel myself attracted to Religion. I want to console the humble folk. I think that the career of the painter or artist is beautiful, but I believe that my father's career is more sacred. I would like to be like him.”³ It is then that he devoted himself to the “most sacred,” that is, to those most marginalized and most excluded. In Belgium, in the Borinage and then in the mining region of Mons, he preached the Gospel; he taught that “God wills that in imitation of Christ, man should live humbly and go through life not reaching for the sky, but adapting himself to the earth below, learning from the Gospel to be meek and simple of heart.”⁴ And that is the first of Van Gogh's automutilations. Convinced that “there is much evil in the world and in ourselves—terrible things” (L. 98, May 30, 1877); that that which he called his “evil ‘self’” tried to distract him from his duty with respect to others, he made himself even more miserable than the miserable miners he wanted to save. He blackened his face, descended to the bottom of the shafts, slept on a straw mattress, and scarcely ate. More excluded than the most excluded, on the verge of collapse, he renounced the religion of his father and began once again to draw and paint. When a second automutilation began with the practice of art, he surveyed his past with the most lucid of gazes: hadn't he been like a “public fountain” (L. 132, October 15, 1879), which gives of itself without ever receiving? “Many people think,” he wrote to Theo, “that they will become good by *doing no harm*; that's a lie” (L. 378, 1884); and elsewhere, “Who is there that is good in these times? . . . I tell you, brother, I am not good from a clergyman's point of view” (L. 326, Fall 1883).

It was then as well that he developed a theory of love, where the self is always threatened by two extreme dangers:

3. Cited by Charles Terrasse, preface to *Van Gogh, Lettres à son frère Théo*, Grasset, Paris, 1937 (1973), p. 9.

4. *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh to His Brother (1872–1886)*, 2 vols., London, Constable & Co., Ltd., Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1927; and *Further Letters of Vincent Van Gogh to His Brother (1886–1889)*, London, Constable & Co., Ltd., Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1927. Letter 127, December 26, 1878. Hereafter the letters will be referred to in the text as L., followed by their number and date.

I wanted only to give, but not to receive. Foolish, wrong, exaggerated, proud, rash—for in love one must not only give, but also take; and, reversing it, one must not only take but also give. Whoever deviates either to the right or to the left falls, there is no help for it. So I feel, but it was a wonder that I got up again.

. . . It is written, Love thy neighbor as thyself. One can deviate to the right or to the left, but both are bad. I think all in exchange for all is the real true thing—that is *it*. And now the two extremes; first, to ask everything without giving, second, to ask nothing but give everything. Two equally fatal, bad things, both damned bad.

Of course there are people who advocate one or the other of these extremes: the first produces those members of society which we call rascals, thieves, and usurers, etc., etc.; the second produces Jesuits and Pharisees, male and female—also rascals, you know! (L. 157, November 12, 1881)

I think that it was this impossible balance that Van Gogh sought, falling sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right; sometimes devouring those close to him with a cannibalistic love, believing that, “proud, rash,” he had the power “to give all” but “to receive nothing”; sometimes automutilating, to the point of giving himself entirely over to the charge of others—and first of all to his brother.

Given this desired balance between a self neither devoured nor devouring, given this utopia of a double bond equal to self-love and to the love of others, it is understandable that the vocation of a pastor would have seemed an insufficient sacrifice to him. For if he more than ever believed in the need for the limitation of the self, that which painting represents now seemed to him purer and truer than this resignation that religion requires: “I never heard a good sermon on resignation, nor can I imagine a good one, except that picture by Mauve and the work of Millet. That is *the* resignation—the real kind, not that of the clergyman” (L. 181, early 1882). And it is at the same moment that he writes of “the clergyman’s god” that he “finds him quite dead”; that one only begins to arrive at an accurate ideal of God in repeating these words to oneself: “Oh! my God, there is no God!”; and that in this way there remains of the dead god nothing but “love.”

It was also at this moment that he who always described himself as a “born melancholic,” proclaimed himself resolved not to “[lose] himself in melancholy” but to cure himself through his work as painter. And if from that time forward painting seemed to offer him the only possible site of inscription for this utopia that obsessed and possessed him, it was because painting seemed to him to achieve this ideal balance between the self’s affirmation and its limitation, between consuming and being consumed, between giving and receiving, between the alteration by others and automutilation. But, soon of course, far from being reabsorbed in painting as a pure balance, this ideal exceeds him.

Vincent Van Gogh. Self-Portrait. 1887.



If he does not yet paint withered sunflowers, he takes as his subjects those same excluded, disinherited creatures that he had tried to assuage through his sermons, and with whom he identified to the point of letting himself waste away. And once more it is the same identification with the most repellent misery that grips him when he now paints the despair of the most sordid *faubourgs*: "Then my ugly face and shabby coat perfectly harmonize with the surroundings and I am myself and work with pleasure" (L. 190, April or May 1882). And this other remark a bit later: "I feel that my work lies in the heart of the people, that I must keep close to the ground, that I must grasp life to the quick, and make progress through many cares and troubles" (L. 197, May 11, 1882).

For two years he lived with a prostitute whom he had met when she was pregnant and whom he had not wanted to abandon to her own solitude. She posed for him, he painted and drew her, sending these works to his brother in exchange for small sums of money that allowed them to live with the baby. Until the day when, his brother no longer succeeding in assuring the subsistence of the "worker's household," Van Gogh resigned himself to abandoning his companion and her child. He then felt more guilty than ever, since he now knew that painting misery is not enough to redeem misery; and even more: this misery, having been painted, sells so badly that it increases his brother Theo's material difficulties even more.

For when Van Gogh writes to Theo that he paints "not only with color, but with self-denial and self-renunciation, and with a broken heart" (L. 514, July 29, 1888), we must understand that this color that is his own life deposited on the canvas is also, and at the same time, that of his brother, who *expends himself* for him, who works to the point of exhaustion in order to get the money necessary to buy his tubes of paint.

All Van Gogh's "madness" is connected to this extreme and painful knowledge that his very existence as a painter requires not only separation from others, but also the sacrifice of others, and above all of those closest to himself. The letters where he avows to him that he loves him as much or more than himself are ever more numerous in the last years. We must cite several passages, where we can see the ego exchanged with the alter-ego, the brother sometimes becoming another self who deserves that one sacrifice oneself for him, sometimes a vile merchant, a usurer who is identified with the most intimate enemy:

And now putting all jesting aside, I really think it would be better if the relation between us became more friendly on both sides. If I really had to think that I were troublesome to you, or to the people at home, or were in your way, of no good to anyone, and if I should be obliged to feel like an intruder or an outcast, so that I had better be dead, and if I should have to try to keep out of your way more and more, — if I thought this really were the case, a feeling of anguish would over-

whelm me, and I should have to struggle against despair. (L. 132, October 15, 1879)

In December 1883, after having told of his obsession to "live without debts":

It is better to be a sheep than a wolf, better to be slain than to slay—better to be Abel than Cain. And, and—I hope, or rather I am sure, that I am no wolf either. Suppose you and I are not only in our imagination, but really like sheep among our fellow-creatures. All right—granting the existence of rather hungry and false wolves, it would not be impossible that we should be devoured some day. Well, this may not be so very agreeable, but I say to myself: In fine, it is, after all, better to be ruined than to ruin somebody else. (L. 344, December 1883)

The same month, he answers his brother, who asks him not to "bother" them, neither him nor his father: "I appreciate this in you, though you are fighting against somebody who is neither father's nor your own enemy; there is in father and in you and in me a desire for peace and reconciliation. And yet we do not seem able to bring about peace. Now, I believe that I am the stumbling-block" (L. 346, December 1883 or January 1884).

But the following month:

I know for myself, that I will not suffer it to degenerate into *protection*—to become your protégé I decidedly refuse, Theo. . . . And it threatens to degenerate more and more into this. . . . A *wife* you cannot give me, a *child* you cannot give me, work you cannot give me. Money, yes. But of what good is it to me, if I must do without the rest; your money remains sterile, because it is not used in the way I always wanted to—a laborer's home if needs be, but if one does not see that one gets a home of one's own, it fares badly with art. (L. 358, beginning of 1884)

In 1884 he describes himself and his brother on opposite sides of the barricades, as if it were 1848. He belongs to Michelet's party, his brother to that of Guizot:

I myself have formerly admired at the same time a book by Guizot and a book by Michelet. But in my case, and I got deeper into it, I found difference and *contrast*, which is stronger still.

In short, that the one comes to a dead end and disappears vaguely, and the other, on the contrary, has something infinite . . . We might have stood as direct enemies opposite each other, for instance on such a barricade, you before it as a soldier of the government, I behind it, as revolutionist or rebel.

. . . we are standing *again* opposite each other, though there

are no barricades now. But minds that cannot agree are certainly still to be found.

. . . No, if we come in each other's neighborhood, we would be within each other's range. My sneers are bullets, not aimed at you who are my brother, but in general at the party to which you once and for all belong. Neither do I consider *your* sneers expressly aimed at me, but *you fire* at the barricade and think to gain merit by it, and I happen to be there. (L. 379, early in 1884)

If it is true, as Bataille says, that the ear he will cut off four years later is a sun torn out of himself, how can we not see Van Gogh definitively registering with this gesture the fact of the impossibility of all reconciliation, that is, of all understanding? Bataille wants to see the fact that his ear was given to a prostitute as testimony of "a love that refused to take anything into account" and as spittle thrown "in the faces of all those who have accepted the elevated and official idea of life that is so well known" (VE, 71). But if we remember that one of his first companions was a whore whom he wanted to save from decay, that he claimed to understand "the words of Jesus when He said to the superficially civilized, the respectable people of His time, 'The harlots go into the Kingdom of God before you'"; if we remember that he wanted to "consider them more as sisters of charity" (L. 326, Autumn 1883), we can then understand that he gave the ear to the whore exactly as he had wanted to give his painting to people in misery: as an unreturnable gift of himself, but not receivable by the very ones to whom he sent it, with no illusion, already aware that all *understanding* is impossible.

Understanding will always be impossible because his debt will always seem to him too large and the price to eradicate it too heavy. Before his automutilation, which itself will seem to him too late and too little to pay off the cost of his own life, he declares himself ready to sacrifice his painting—when he had just before called it his "reason for living": "Do you realize," he writes to Theo, "that I would far rather give up painting than see you killing yourself to make money" (L. 492, May 29, 1888).

Soon, with the most extreme violence, with the greatest "malice," he assimilates Theo's degradation as a dealer to his own decay as an artist, becoming exhausted in the self-sacrifice required by his activity:

Your own work is not only no better paid than his, but it costs you exactly what the painter's costs him, this effacement of the individuality, half-voluntary, half-accidental. That is to say that if you paint *indirectly*, you are more productive than I am for instance. The more hopelessly you become a dealer, the more you become an artist. And in the same way I hope the same thing for myself. The more I am spent, ill, the cracked pot, by so much the more am I the artist—the creative artist—in this great renaissance of art of which we speak. (L. 514, July 29, 1888)



Vincent Van Gogh. Wheat Field with Rising Sun. 1888.

Once Gauguin had arrived to stay with him at Arles, he thought for a fleeting moment that he could escape the feelings of guilt that continually weighed on him: "I have no other desire nor other interest as to money or finance, than first to have no debts. But my dear lad, my debt is so great that when I have paid it, which I hope nevertheless to succeed in doing, the pains of producing pictures will have taken my whole life from me and it will seem to me then that I have not lived" (L. 557, October 20, 1888). After the automutilation, it was once more the desire not to be indebted that haunted him: "You will have gone on being poor all the time in order to support me, but I will give you back the money or give up the ghost" (L. 574, January 28, 1889).

This obsession not to be *in debt* pursued him to the point of suicide, on July 27, 1890. And this final act, this absolute withdrawal of himself, was not only a last, insufficient sacrifice to liquidate his debt; it was, on the contrary, a gulf in which his brother was swallowed up six months later, unable to survive this terrible posthumous accusation.

Vincent was in no way unaware of the cruelty of his violent withdrawal; he who wrote to Theo, starting in the month of May, 1888: "Self-sacrifice, living for other people, is a mistake if it involves suicide, for in that case you actually make your friends into murderers." And he then attested, putting his work and the other's life in balance: "People matter more than things, and the more trouble I take over pictures, the more pictures in themselves leave me cold. *The reason why I try to make them is so as to be among the artists*" (L. 492, May 29, 1888, emphasis added).

But what is that, then — "to be among the artists"?

Bataille constructed — in his own image — a Van Gogh who was half man, half god, shining and exploding himself in his work to the point of the ecstasy of supreme sacrifice or of auto-destruction. But the letters show Van Gogh constantly exchanging his "good" and his "bad" self with his brother, his Abel and his Cain. At the final turning point, through his suicide, Vincent, in extremis, discharged his fault and guilt onto Theo, whom he made into his murderer. Up to the last moment, Vincent had been, with his brother, alternatively sun and sunflower, he who warms the other, dazzling him with his shining, and he who wilts and perishes from this excessive heat that it nonetheless seeks.

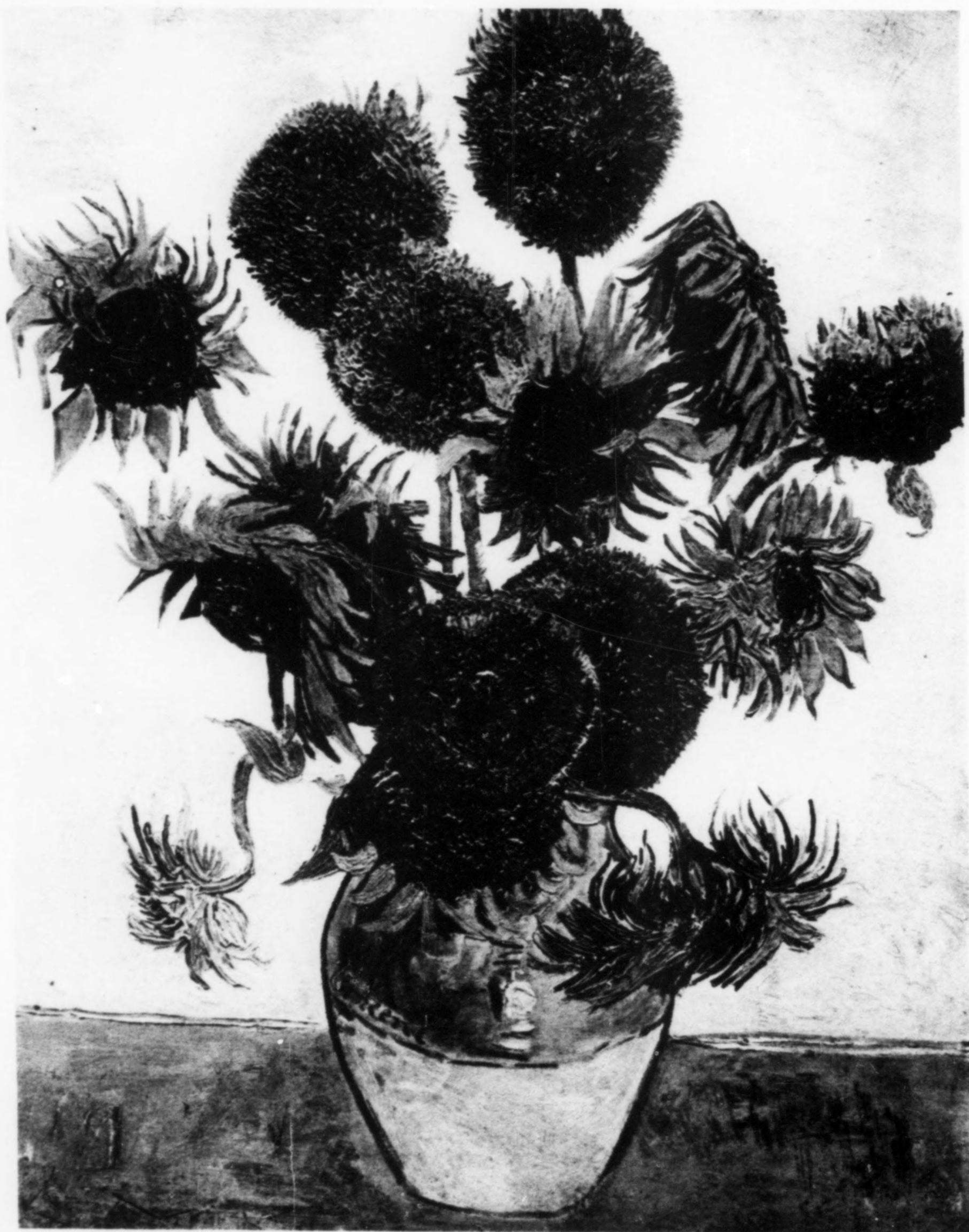
I don't think we can, like Bataille, see this "chain of knots which so surely links ear, asylum, sun, the feast, and death" (VGP, 59–60) as a heroic ascension. Rather one should see in this alternation his simultaneous refusal to be only a sunflower, devoted to withering and death, and his refusal to be the sun, if being the sun means to destroy what gives one life and warmth. To maintain oneself in the in-between, to occupy this untenable position because one is without a possible place — thus literally utopian — it is that which ceaselessly tormented him and made him write on the wall of his Arles studio:

Je suis Saint Esprit
Je suis sain d'esprit⁵

He who, his whole life through, never stopped lamenting his carnal existence and mistreating his own body, recognized himself — far from any Prometheanism — neither in the "good sun god," as he wrote one day (L. 520, August 1888), nor in the sunflower, his Son, made certainly in his image, but attached to the earth and wrapped in a poor mortal body. Between the Creator and his creature, between the sun and the sunflower, or between the absolute Narcissus and his own image, Van Gogh called this state "being struck by death and immortality" (L. 489, May 1888).

5. "I am the Holy Spirit/I am sane"; according to Paul Gauguin, "Natures mortes," *Essais d'art libre* (January 1894), cited in John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1956.

Vincent Van Gogh. Sunflowers. 1888.



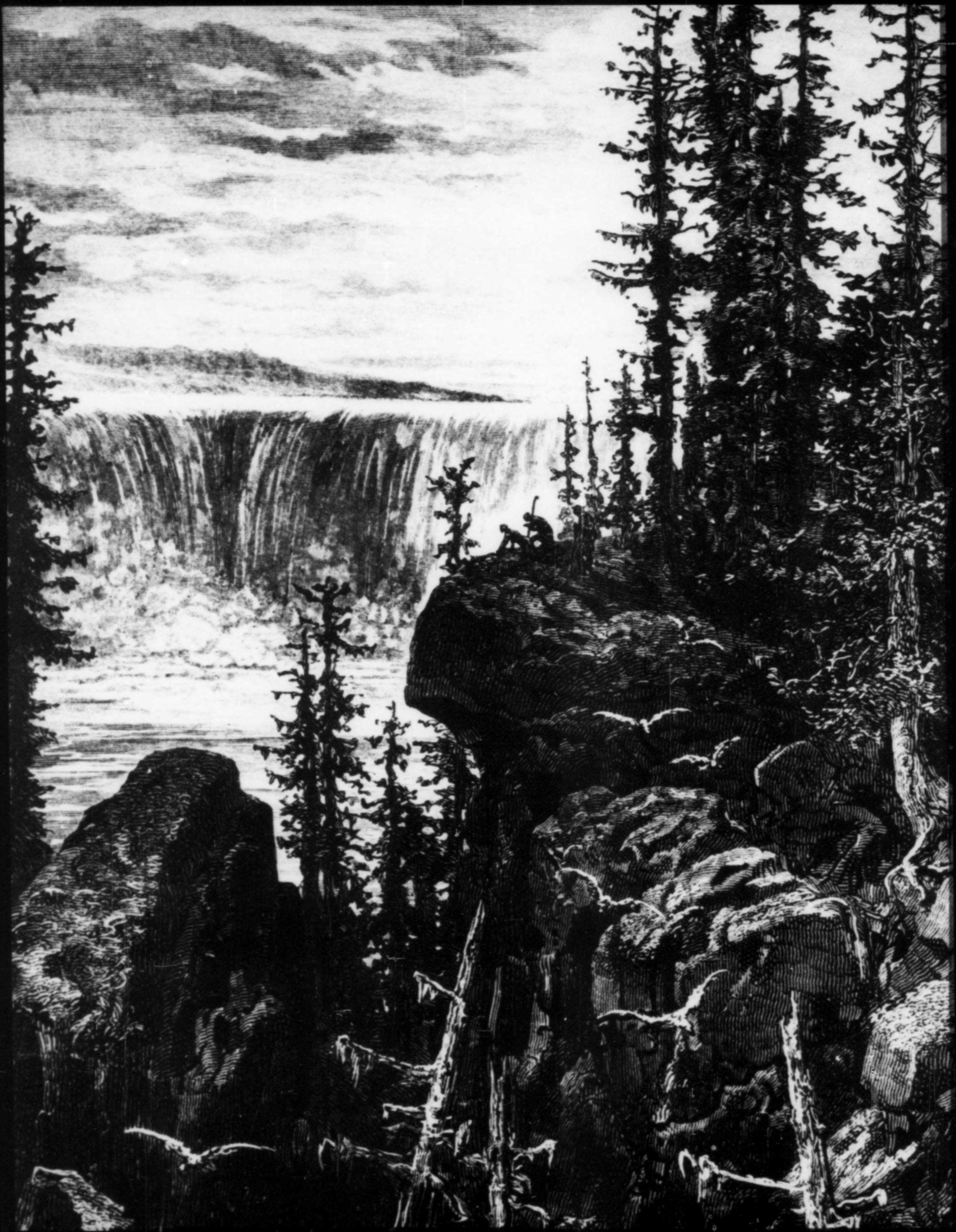
But once again, what is it "to be among the artists"? Despite everything it will remain for Van Gogh a mad rivalry with God, or better: a rivalry with the madness of God, at the time when he would have had to choose to bind the wounds of the others: "What I did say was that I myself should always regret not being a doctor, and that those who think painting is beautiful would do well to see nothing in it but a study from nature" (L. 571, January 17, 1889). Such a thought would doubtless be his last: that painting does not remake the world, and art is a lie if it presents itself as the best of all possible worlds, more beautiful than the creation of the first among artists:

I feel more and more that we must not judge God on this world, it's just a study that didn't come off. . . . This world is evidently botched up in a hurry on one of his bad days, when the artist did not know what he was doing, or hadn't his wits about him. All the same according to what the legend says, this good old God took a terrible lot of trouble over this earth-study of his.

I am inclined to think that the legend is right, but then the study is ruined in so many ways. It is only a master who can make such a muddle and perhaps that is the best consolation we have out of it, since in that case we have a right to hope that we'll see the same creative hand get even with itself. And this life of ours, so much criticized for such good and even exalted reasons, we must not take it for anything but what it is, and go on hoping that in some other life we'll see a better thing than this. (L. 490, May 1888)

"To be among the artists" thus means declining all identification with the Father or the Son, with the sun or the sunflower. But perhaps it means being resigned to the only possible identification, which is not the identification with an object, but rather with the "Holy Spirit," this in-between that alone identifies and binds the Father to the Son; this in-between which is, as Van Gogh would have said, this moment when God "hadn't his wits about him."

"To be among the artists" is to be identification itself, which binds what remains forever separated, what is never present *itself*—neither in the single sun nor in the sunflower. If it is true that this in-between is the very place of the Holy Spirit, we understand that "to be among the artists" would first of all be a wandering, the wandering of him who said he was "stricken with death and with immortality." To be the Holy Spirit demands many sacrifices, but they are always insufficient.



French Customs, Literary Borders*

DENIS HOLLIER

I am not the center of what I don't know.

—Maurice Blanchot,
L'écriture du désastre

Dated "Yellowknife (Northwest Territories)," a New York Times article of October 3, 1987 announced preparations for an upcoming bicentennial in 1989. The Native Americans of the Great North had persuaded the Canadian government to grant that our current year would be marked by a return, on all official maps, to native place-names. It had been, in fact, in 1789 that Sir Alexander Mackenzie, in reaching the Arctic Ocean by an inland route, opened the *terrae incognitae boreales* to penetration by English. But now, after two Anglophonic centuries, the Arctic landscape—its rivers, lakes, rocks, forests, bays—will, de-christened, refind their local linguistic beds, their proper, indigenous, endogenous names, their authentic place-names, home-grown like those that Proust liked to see budding in the French countryside.

Panta rhei, Heraclitus would have said, everything passes; not only the water of the rivers, but also their names. For this bicentenary the Mackenzie River, the river that bears the name of him whom it had borne to the Arctic Ocean, will become once again, as Mackenzie himself, according to the Times, refers to it in his Voyages, the "Big River," but in Slavey language: Deh Cho. It will never have borne the name of Chateaubriand.

Fishing for the Unknown

Mackenzie's expedition lasted from June to September 1789. It was on July 14th that tidal movement against the shore on which he had set up camp apprised him that he had ceased to follow a river. He notes in his journal: "The rising of the water appears to be the tide.¹ Several whales soon appeared as a confirmation

*. I would like to thank Alice Yaeger Kaplan, Nancy K. Miller, and Richard Sieburth for their time and suggestions.

1. Sir Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal on the river St. Lawrence through the Continent*

of this impression. Mackenzie then had a stake set up, on which he engraved the latitude, his name, the number of participants in the expedition, and the date—a gesture that is also registered in the journal: “Erect a post to perpetuate our visit there.”

It is a mere coincidence that July 14, 1789, the day of the storming of the Bastille, was also the very day Mackenzie reached the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Mackenzie had no idea that a revolution was beginning in France, nor in all probability would he have cared. And as far as the French insurgents were concerned, the same holds true: this was a geographical exploit about which they neither heard nor would have cared. These two events belong to two independent series; they are in no way connected and constitute as such a coincidence of the very kind Chateaubriand loved to frame and about which he commented in his *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*: “Des millions d'événements s'accomplissent à la fois” (“Millions of events occur at the same time”). But the same Chateaubriand is also the very one who, as soon as he heard about Mackenzie's discovery, transformed this coincidence into a conjunction. He knew immediately that this American July 14th was a decisive date for both the geography of the French language and the history of French literature.

Before becoming a writer Chateaubriand had wanted to be an explorer. Mourning the territories from which France had been excluded by the 1763 Treaty of Paris, he nourished fantasies of outflanking the English on the American continent. The discovery of a northwest passage—a northern maritime channel between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans—would, in his view, reopen for France “the entire land bounded by the Atlantic at the northeast, the polar sea at the north, the Pacific Ocean and the Russian possessions at the northwest, and the Gulf of Mexico at the south.”² This dream of national revenge and territorial expansion inspired his youthful projects. In April 1791 he embarked from his native city, Saint-Malô, for the New World, determined to reach America's “hyperborean strands” and to christen its icy *terrae incognitae*. “Had I succeeded,” he later wrote, “I would have had the honor of imposing French names on unknown realms.”³ Yet the most important thing about this statement remains its verbal mode, which is in the conditional. Chateaubriand did not succeed; by the time he reached Philadelphia, in July, “people were beginning to talk of Mackenzie's run”;⁴ the unknown realms had just been imprinted with English names.

Chateaubriand himself often presented his literary career as a consequence

of North America to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans, John Garwin, ed., Toronto, The Radison Society of Canada, 1927, p. 175.

2. Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, Maurice Levaillant, ed., 4 vols., Paris, Flammarion, p. 316.

3. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 287.

4. *Ibid.*

of this disappointment. At times, happy about the turn of events that resulted — “If I didn’t find in America what I was looking for: the Polar world; I found a new Muse”⁵ — he was, at other times, longing for the peace of mind this missed opportunity had cost him — “What would have happened to me if I had achieved my journey’s goal, . . . It is probable I would never have had the misfortune to write; my name would have remained unknown.”⁶

But what is at stake in Chateaubriand’s reaction to Mackenzie’s discovery is not simply the destiny of an individual writer. Neither is it for him a matter of merely retreating from history into literature, from action into words. Chateaubriand’s literary career cannot be interpreted simply as the literary compensation for a political defeat, since language here, far from being a cure for Chateaubriand’s nationalist wounds, is precisely where the sore hurts the most. His literary vocation, as it were, is triggered precisely by the fact that what happened to France on the map of the world (its exclusion from America) happened primarily to its language. Romanticism — the “new muse” Chateaubriand was so proud to have brought back from America — is thus the literary expression of a linguistic agony, the aesthetics of a threatened — if not a condemned — language. Chateaubriand’s conversion to literature is rooted in a feeling of the fragility of his native language. It is a paradoxical retreat in a language he feels is losing ground, and this very feeling is at the core of what he experiences as the literary. *Habent sua fata* not only *libelli* but also *linguae*. French romanticism appears at the crossing where language and literature diverge, where they start following opposite paths: French romantic literature thrives on the very shrinking of the geographical grounds of its linguistic support.

After his aborted American attempt, Chateaubriand spent most of the Revolution in London among the émigré monarchists. One of the first pieces he wrote upon his return to Paris was precisely an appraisal of the political and linguistic damage incurred by France as a result of Mackenzie’s Arctic 14th of July. In April 1801, Chateaubriand had published *Atala*, a novel he presented to his French readers as an anecdote extracted from his travels, which instantly cloaked him in a literary glory tinged with the colors of an explorer. At the same time, Mackenzie in London published the account of his own (non-novelistic) explorations. The volume was immediately translated into French. And Chateaubriand, the celebrated author of *Atala*, and celebrated French Americanist, reviewed it — both as an enemy and as a colleague — in the July 1801 issue of the *Mercur de France*. In interpreting Chateaubriand’s review, we must not overlook the international context. On the occasion of the publication of *Atala*, Chateaubriand had just added to his novel a preface that sounded almost like a job application, suggesting in it that, now that the Revolution was over, a strong and stable French government (such as Bonaparte’s) could ask to have Canada

5. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 288.

6. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 244.

back from England. One year earlier, in 1800, Spain had returned Louisiana to France, and it is only two years later, in 1803, that Napoleon would sell it to Jefferson; for two years, the possibility of a French America was thus briefly reopened. In view of this opening, Chateaubriand was offering his American experience to French diplomatic interests. Mackenzie, working for the North-West Company—the Montreal-based competitor of the Hudson's Bay Company—was in no way a literary man. But neither should one overstress Chateaubriand's literary disinterestedness. Future ambassador and even Secretary of State, he was, in 1801, building a political career at the same time as a literary one. And, as often with French writers, these two are not easy to disentangle: it was not simply as a poet but as a politician that he criticized France's lack of interest in a French presence on this continent.

Nevertheless, in the review of Mackenzie's journal, there is something peculiar and significant in the linguistic focus of Chateaubriand's nationalist anxieties. He mentions specific political and economic losses (trade, furs, transportation of criminals, and so on), but his main obsession clearly concerns the French language. Mackenzie, for example, is accused of not mentioning that his team was composed mostly of French trappers. The review also gives Chateaubriand an opportunity for denouncing what he sees as English explorers' common but unscrupulous habit of erasing French place-names from their travel accounts. He thus reminds the scientific community that

All the great discoveries were already made or indicated [by the seventeenth-century missionaries of Nouvelle France] in the interior of the America of the far north before the English became the masters of Canada. . . . In imposing new names on lakes, mountains, rivers, and streams, or in corrupting the old French names, they [the English] have done nothing but sow disorder in geography.⁷

This is a complaint that is no longer about being excluded from the future; it is about being obliterated from the past. But for that very reason it allows the fantasmatic roots of Chateaubriand's feeling of exclusion to appear all the more clearly.

He reviewed Mackenzie's *Voyages* after reading, not the original work, but its translation, which, of course, gives the place-names in French, without specifying whether or not they have been retranslated. It is true that, at its second mention, "the Rivière des Français" becomes "the French River." But this is an exception. Had Chateaubriand read Mackenzie in the original, however, he would have seen that the Englishman's journal is filled with wonderfully colorful French designations: "Portage de Chaudière," "Portage des chats," "the chan-

7. Chateaubriand, "Sir Alexander Mackenzie," *Mélanges littéraires*, vol. 21 of his *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, Ladvocat, 1826, p. 96.

nels of the grand Calumet."⁸ Next to the "Portage of La Cave" there is the "Portage of Paresseux"; next to "Portage Pin de Musique" is the "dangerous mauvais de Musique";⁹ next to "Portage de Hallier," the "Rapid qui ne parle point, or that never speaks, from its silent whirlpool-motion."¹⁰ And, toward the end of his return journey, when Mackenzie encounters some Indian artifacts (an awl and a paddle), he immediately recognizes their origin: the Chief of the Knisteneaux Indians, "Merde-d'ours and his party" must have left them behind, he says.¹¹ And, with such a compass romantically set for the unknown as was Chateaubriand's, his reaction upon finding this inventory from a day of fishing on the Great Slave Lake can only set us dreaming: "The fish we now caught," Mackenzie notes, "were carp, poisson inconnu, white fish and trout." "Poisson inconnu," in this context, obviously does not name an unknown fish, but a fish that had precisely stopped being unknown at the very moment a French *coureur des bois* gave him the name inconnu. Everyone in Mackenzie's party recognizes it. It pops up again a few days later next to a fish which this time is really unknown, obliging Mackenzie to refer to it by description: "White fish, the poisson inconnu, and another of a round form and greenish color which was about fourteen inches in length."¹²

Commenting on France's situation at the time of the Industrial Revolution, Chateaubriand would later say, "We are excluded from the new world, where the human race starts over."¹³ But this feeling of exclusion is not the logical conclusion of his experience, it is rather the prerequisite for his literary inspiration, a need at the core of his romantic sensibility. One might go as far as suspecting that, even though he blamed the English for having done it and the French for not having prevented it, he so intensely wanted these markers of (French) presence to be erased that he did not even check if they really were.

"As others solicit fortune and repose, I have solicited the honor of carrying, at the peril of my life, French names to unknown seas. . . . At the moment when Mackenzie executed his first voyage, I also traversed the American deserts; but he was seconded in his enterprise, he had behind him happy friends and a tranquil country; I did not have the same luck."¹⁴ "At the moment" is inexact. Two years separated Mackenzie's voyage from Chateaubriand's. But this forced synchrony was meant to indict the Revolution, responsible for having cost America Francophony. And later, in the preface to *Les Natchez*, Mackenzie is no longer accused. "The Revolution," says Chateaubriand, "put an end to all my projects."

8. Mackenzie, *Voyages*, p. lxi.

9. *Ibid.*, p. lxiv.

10. *Ibid.*, p. cxxi.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 202 and 243.

13. Chateaubriand, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, p. 317.

14. Chateaubriand, "Sir Alexander Mackenzie," p. 130.



Anne-Louis Girodet-Trioson. The Burial of Atala. 1808.

Chateaubriand began very early on to practice for the role of the "useless Cassandra," the unrecognized futurologist, the prophet preaching in the desert, the posture he struck after the fall of the Restoration. Yet can one imagine him having been listened to? He regretted having failed; but for the one whom Isidore Ducasse would call the Melancholy Mohican, regretting is what he did best. Can we imagine for a single moment a map of Canada where, instead of the "Mackenzie River," we would read "Chateaubriand, fl."? Who would have written the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*? Nobody listened to me, he complained. But romantic Cassandras, in order to be useless, need to go unheard.

The Sylphide

Chateaubriand was a committed Rousseauist. Among the many motivations (at least *ex post facto*) of his American adventure, he mentions the desire to encounter *in situ* the *bon sauvage* Rousseau had written about. This anthropological concern for the natives of the *terrae incognitae* is reflected, in the review of Mackenzie, by a page in which Chateaubriand imagines an Indian dance. This is a reverie, not a recollection. And it is responsible for an intriguing shift in the connotations associated with the category of the "unknown." The unknown, initially, referred to the *terrae incognitae*, the virgin territories on which Chateaubriand wanted to imprint the stamp of his naming power, an unknown that had to be destroyed as unknown, and replaced by its name. Now it qualifies a human experience, one toward which Chateaubriand feels a strong empathy, bordering on mimicry. This Indian dance appeals to him precisely because it is a—literally—unknown dance. It is a dance no one watched. And nothing survives of its self-consuming performance: no record, no keepsake, no memento. Chateaubriand dreams of the exemplary effacement of a dancer whose life would end up leaving no more trace than his dance itself did. "Born into the world unknown, he dances for a moment in the valleys through which he will never pass again, and soon hides his grave under the mosses of these deserts which have not even retained his foot-prints, *Fuisse quasi non essem!*"¹⁵ Tread lightly mortals; don't insist! Nothing in such a scene recalls the imposition of a name on a place one is (or imagines to be) the first human to see. The desire here is no longer a desire to know the unknown, but rather a desire to identify with its very transitoriness. As if the choice were between knowing the unknown or becoming unknown with it.

In his *Lettre à d'Alembert*, Rousseau had opposed the introduction, in Geneva, of a theater with a stage. The split between stage and seats, Rousseau argued, produces a socially corrupting mixture of display and voyeurism which is the root of social decadence. Chateaubriand's Indian dance is, thus, a sort of

15. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

Lettre à d'Alembert of the wilderness, occurring in a space so remote from the evils of enlightened exhibitionism that one can dance with no fear of being witnessed: the dancers remain so unknown that Chateaubriand himself is able only to imagine them. *Fuisse quasi non essem*. "I should have been as though I had not been." These Latin words come from Chateaubriand's favorite poet, Job, the Biblical poet who was as eloquent as Chateaubriand himself when complaining about having been obliged to exist. "Wherefore then hast thou brought me forth out of the womb? Oh, that I had given up the ghost, and no eye had seen me! I should have been as though I had not been; I should have been carried from the womb to the grave" (10: 18-19). If, indeed, according to Job, to Bishop Berkeley, and to Sartre as well, to be is to be seen, the natives of the *terrae incognitae*, because they exist (and dance) incognito, are endowed with the possibility of being as though they had never been, *quasi non essent*. The opposition here is not simply between being and not being, but between two ways of being, one which condemns you to having been, the other which allows you not to have been. Chateaubriand's Indians will eternally remain pre-Colombians, settled in an absolute reservation which subtracts them from the gaze of the other. And Chateaubriand envies them such a privilege.

We probably have all known (and sometimes even been) Frenchmen who pick through American newspapers, fascinated to discover that no one speaks of them there. Chateaubriand's American journey was an experience of this kind: beyond the discovery of the unknown, the revelation of incognito. In inverting Andy Warhol's slogan, Chateaubriand's literary America guarantees for everyone the possibility, at least once in one's life, of making oneself unknown. This pleasure of incognito lends charm to many a narrative within the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*: forty years after his return from America, the elderly Chateaubriand crosses paths with a German student on the road to Lugano. This young, shadowy figure is not even given an identity. "The student is unaware of my name," comments the memorialist. "He will have met me and will never know it."¹⁶ His Excellency the Viscount effaces himself before the nobody who, in not asking for his autograph, grants him, during the space of a digression, the pleasure of pretending that he had never existed. The paradoxical feeling of glory (of unperceived, unheard glory) such episodes exude is no longer that of a colonizer bestowing names, but of a writer divesting himself of his own.

Chateaubriand's complacent identification with the unknown Indian dancer nevertheless contrasts sharply with his denunciation, in the same article, of the English erasure of French names. He who claimed the honor of imposing French names now envies the nameless Indians and dreams of becoming unknown. As a writer, he clearly felt more attuned to the (partially fantasized) romantic agony of his native language than his nationalist linguistics allowed him

16. Chateaubriand, *Mémoires*, vol. 4, p. 116.

to recognize. This surfaces in what was to become one of his *morceaux de bravoure*, the motif of the death of languages. A whole chapter in the American section of the *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* is devoted to it. The table of contents announces that it will focus on American anthropology (it reads: "The Death of Indian Languages"), but this is scarcely the case: no sooner are the Indian languages invoked than we are returned to Europe. Old Prussian, mentioned first in the list of languages now defunct, is followed by Low Breton, Basque, Gaelic. Chateaubriand continues:

Some Oranoke tribes no longer exist; all that remains of their dialect is a dozen words pronounced at the tops of trees by parrots turned loose, like Agrippina's thrush chirping Greek words on the balustrades of Roman palaces. Sooner or later such will be the outcome of our modern dialects, the rubble of Greek and Latin. Some crow or other, escaped from the cage of the last Franco-Gaulois priest, will, from the summit of a ruined bell tower, say to some foreign people, our successors: "Please accept the accents of a voice that you once knew: it will be the end of all these discourses." Be, then, a Bossuet, so that in the final result your masterpiece will, in a bird's memory, survive your language and your remembrance among men.¹⁷

The Death of Languages

Mr. Crow, on that day, will hold a Bossuet in his beak. Like a television one has forgotten to turn off, a crow, broadcaster of French literature, recites the Eagle of Meaux, saying "You will no longer hear me" to those who already, at present, have stopped listening. Mackenzie's exploit might very well have triggered in Chateaubriand the motif of the death of languages, but competitive nationalism alone cannot be held accountable for the grandiose and somehow grotesque fantasy in which, through the proxy of birds, a dead Bossuet pronounces, in French, the funeral oration of French, where the French language pronounces from beyond the grave its own eulogy.

Chateaubriand intends to speak of the death of languages. But, taken literally, the lesson taught by this scene goes in the opposite direction, since it shows, in an odd way, languages surviving those who speak them. This fable thus introduces an element that doesn't appear in the parable about the Indian dance: there the choreography erased itself without leaving a trace, while here there remains something by Bossuet, something that allows him, according to Chateaubriand's phrase in *La vie de Rancé*, to "outlive his life."¹⁸ His funeral

17. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 315.

18. Chateaubriand, *La vie de Rancé*, Marius-Francois Guyard, ed., Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1966, p. 126.

orations survived him. And the very title of the book in which this parable appears, *Memoirs from beyond the Grave*, implies precisely that a sign survives its utterance: Chateaubriand constantly reminds his readers that they are hearing "the voice of a dead man." Such is precisely the difference between the dancer's footsteps and Western literature. But, however essential, this difference is introduced only to be almost instantly annulled. For if the fable of the birds does indeed announce that something remains by Bossuet, it also shows that no one cares for these remains. Chateaubriand considered Bossuet to be France's greatest writer. He shows him surviving in the midst of general ignorance and indifference—a Bossuet to whom nobody listens. Bossuet's funerary orations in fact not only outlive their author, in accordance with the banal formula of glory, but, more important and more uncannily, they outlive the very language in which they were written. They survive, but are unable to mean anything, to speak to anyone any longer. Literature, where is your victory? What is a recollection without memories? A memory that no one remembers? A glory without a witness? Short-circuited by the theme of the death of languages, glory here is raised to a sublime level: that of unknown glory. No difference remains between leaving no trace and leaving one, when the trace is left for nobody.

Chateaubriand often associated America with this ghostly type of trace, one deprived of reader. In the course of his Atlantic crossing, the fire from a volcano appears above the Azores, like another Cassandra with no audience. "For a long time it dominated the uncharted seas: useless beacon at night, signal with no witness at day."¹⁹ At the shore of the Great Lakes, he imagines another dialogue with no interlocutor: "Uninhabited banks stare at seas without sails."²⁰ In the chapter of the *Essai sur la littérature anglaise* devoted to narratives of exploration, Chateaubriand speaks of the gesture of Captain John Ross, a successor of Mackenzie, who had just spent four years in the Arctic glaciers. Upon leaving the pole, the explorer buries a brief account of his feats under a pile of rocks. He couldn't have done more to please Chateaubriand. "This unknown glory resting under some stones, addressing itself from the depth of an eternal solitude to a posterity that will never be; these written words that will speak not at all in these mute regions, or that will extinguish themselves beneath the sound of glaciers broken up by a storm which no ear will hear."²¹ Each of these evocations is, for Chateaubriand, a way to rejuvenate his passion for what in our days will be called the being of the sign, a passion for utterances that have outlived their destination, that have survived the necessity and even the possibility of meaning, a passion for languages that a contextual mutation has released from the necessity of meaning anything at all, languages that exist without having to make themselves heard.

19. Chateaubriand, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, p. 261.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 321.

21. Chateaubriand, *Essai sur la littérature anglaise*, vol. 2, Paris, Gosselin, 1836, p. 297.

Why wait for silent tomorrows? All one has to do is to leave one's country to see one's language die. Chateaubriand, an explorer, an exile, and a diplomat, has crossed many frontiers. And each time a language expired. The *Essai sur la littérature anglaise* draws the literary consequences of this geographical form of linguistic death in a chapter titled "The Time of Universal Literary Fame Is Over." Chateaubriand deplores the advent of the Romantic after-Babel: "In Vienna, Petersburg, Berlin, London, Lisbon, Madrid, Rome, Paris," he writes, "no one will ever have the same and identical view of a German, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, French poet, in the way we have of Virgil and Homer."²² And with the masochistic bitterness that flavors his most acid sarcasms, he continues: "We great men, we count on filling the world with our fame, but, whatever we do, it will scarcely cross the borders at which our language expires." Reputations, being tied to language, end just where idioms do. The concept of universal fame has become a contradictory concept: since literatures have been nationalized, no nation agrees to ratify the local fame of its competitors.

But unanimity reigns from St. Petersburg to Lisbon, as Chateaubriand points out, with regard to Homer and Virgil. The picture of *Weltliteratur* that the *Essai* paints, in fact, opposes two worlds, that of classicism and that of romanticism. The first is defined by an asymmetrical and hierarchical system of imitation that requires that models and copies belong to two separate worlds; the exemplary status of the model comes precisely from its being beyond competition. Accordingly we call "classics" those works that are imitated in languages different from their original one, or more specifically works written in a language no one writes or speaks any longer, a dead language. But imitation as such is, on the other hand, the very concept in opposition to which romanticism was born: literatures may compete with each other, but they must never imitate each other. This contestation of classical mimesis and of the patriarchal canon associated with it will soon translate into a cultural deregulation in which models and copies become reversible and competing contemporaries. As in René Girard's theory of romanticism, the model has become a rival and, because of this, its exemplary status ceases to be recognized by copies that are now forwarding their own claims to exemplarity. Romanticism substitutes for the imitation of dead languages the competition between living ones.

Chateaubriand's complaints about Mackenzie's purloined America must be interpreted in the light of his ambivalence toward romanticism. Obviously they take their place within the politico-linguistic, Franco-English rivalry. And because of this they sound a typically romantic note of Darwinian competition. But, in Chateaubriand, this note strikingly lacks the will to survive; from his romanticism, the aggressiveness of nationalist self-affirmation is lacking. Chateaubriand,

22. Chateaubriand, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 34, Paris, Pourat Frères, Editeurs, 1837, p. 225.

anticipates, in a trans-historical leap, the transformation of French into a dead language. He starts out a loser. Faced with an Anglophone America, he quits the field and gives up. "We are excluded from the new world, where the human race starts over." But this exclusion, by his own definition, is precisely what makes a literary classic.

If, instead of the romantic competition between living languages, we take the classical imitation of dead languages by living ones as our frame of reference, the historical defeat of French he anticipates assumes a new import: the death of his maternal language can be retranslated in terms of canonization and of a move beyond the vicissitudes of literary history. There is only a dead father, say the psychoanalysts. There is only literature of a dead language. Literature is that through which a language dreams itself dead. It is, in its strict classical sense, a language from beyond the grave, that through which a language experiences the possibility of its own death, a way for a living language to play dead, to live itself as defunct.

The Orthopsychic Subject: Film Theory and the Reception of Lacan

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Through his appearance in *Television*, Lacan parodies the image of himself —of his teaching—that we have, to a large extent, received and accepted. Standing alone behind his desk, hands now supporting him as he leans assertively forward, now thrown upward in some emphatic gesture, Lacan stares directly out at us, as he speaks in a voice that none would call smooth of “quelque chose, n'est-ce pas?” This “quelque chose” is, of course, never made specific, never revealed, and so it comes to stand for a fact or a system of facts that is known, but not by us. This image recalls the one presented to Tabard by the principal in Vigo's *Zero for Conduct*. It is the product of the childish, paranoid notion that all our private thoughts and actions are spied on by and visible within a public world represented by parental figures. In appearing to us, then, by means of the “mass media,”¹ Lacan seems to confirm what we may call our “televisual” fear—that we are perfectly, completely visible to a gaze that observes us from afar (*tele* meaning both “distant” and [from *telos*] “complete”).² That this proffered image is parodic, however, is almost surely to be missed, so strong are our misperceptions of Lacan. And, so, the significance of the words with which he opens his address and by which he immediately calls attention to his self-parody—“I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there's no way to say it all. Saying the whole truth is materially impossible: words fail. Yet it's through this very impossibility that the truth holds onto the real.”³—the significance of these words may also be missed, as they have been generally in our theories of representation, the most sophisticated example of which is film theory.

Let me first, in a kind of establishing shot, summarize what I take to be the

1. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London, The Hogarth Press, 1977, p. 274), Lacan speaks of the “phantasies” of the “mass media,” as he very quickly suggests a critique of the familiar notion of “the society of the spectacle.” This notion is replaced in Lacan by what might be called “the society of (formed from) the nonspecularizable.”

2. *Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*, 1906; all translations of ancient Greek terms are from this source.

3. Jacques Lacan, *Television*, trans. Denis Hollier, Rosalind Krauss, and Annette Michelson, *October*, no. 40 (Spring 1987), p. 7.

central misconception of film theory: believing itself to be following Lacan, it conceives the screen as mirror;⁴ in doing so, however, it operates in ignorance of, and at the expense of, Lacan's more radical insight, whereby the mirror is conceived as screen.

The Screen as Mirror

This misconception is at the base of film theory's formulation of two concepts—the apparatus and the gaze—and of their interrelation. One of the clearest and most succinct descriptions of this interrelation—and I must state here that it is *because* of its clarity, because of the way it responsibly and explicitly articulates assumptions endemic to film theory, that I cite this description, not to impugn it or its authors particularly—is provided by the editors of *Re-vision*, a collection of essays by feminists on film. Although its focus is the special situation of the female spectator, the description outlines the general relations among the terms *gaze*, *apparatus*, and *subject* as they are stated by film theory. After quoting a passage from Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in which Bentham's architectural plan for the panopticon is laid out, the *Re-vision* editors make the following claim:

the dissociation of the see/being seen dyad [which the panoptic arrangement of the central tower and annular arrangement ensures] and the sense of permanent visibility seem perfectly to describe the condition not only of the inmate in Bentham's prison but of the woman as well. For defined in terms of her visibility, she carries her own Panopticon with her wherever she goes, her self-image a function of her being for another. . . . The subjectivity assigned to femininity within patriarchal systems is inevitably bound up with the structure of the look and the localization of the eye as authority.⁵

The panoptic gaze defines *perfectly* the situation of the woman under patriarchy: that is, it is the very image of the structure which obliges the woman to monitor herself with a patriarchal eye. This structure thereby guarantees that even her innermost desire will always be not a transgression, but rather an implantation of the law, that even the "process of theorizing her own untenable situation" can only reflect back to her "as in a mirror," her subjugation to the gaze.

4. Mary Ann Doane points out that it is our very fascination with the model of the screen as mirror that has made it resistant to the kinds of theoretical objections which she herself makes. See Mary Ann Doane, "Misrecognition and Identity," *Ciné-Tracts*, no. 11 (Fall 1980), p. 28.

5. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams, eds., *Re-vision*, Los Angeles, American Film Institute, 1984, p. 14. The introduction to this very useful collection of essays also attempts to detail some of the historical shifts in feminist theories of representation; I am only attempting to argue the need for one more shift, this time away from the panoptic model of cinema.

The panoptic gaze defines, then, the *perfect*, i.e., the total, visibility of the woman under patriarchy, of any subject under any social order, which is to say, of any subject at all. For the very condition and substance of the subject's subjectivity is his or her subjectivization by the law of the society which produces that subject. One only becomes visible—not only to others, but also to oneself—through (by seeing through) the categories constructed by a specific, historically defined society. These categories of visibility are categories of knowledge.

The perfection of vision and knowledge can only be procured at the expense of invisibility and nonknowledge. According to the logic of the panoptic apparatus, these last do not and (in an important sense) cannot exist. One might summarize this logic—thereby revealing it to be more questionable than it is normally taken to be—by stating it thus: since all knowledge (or visibility) is produced by society (that is, all that it is possible to know comes not from reality, but from socially constructed categories of implementable thought), since *all* knowledge is produced, *only* knowledge (or visibility) is produced, or *all* that is produced is knowledge (visible). This is too glaring a nonsequitor—the *then* clauses are too obviously not necessary consequences of the *if* clause—for it ever to be statable as such. And yet this lack of logical consequence is precisely what must be at work and what must go unobserved in the founding of the seeing/being seen dyad which figures the comprehension of the subject by the laws that rule over its construction.

Here—one can already imagine the defensive protestations: I have overstated my argument—there *is* a measure of indetermination available even to the panoptic argument. This indetermination is provided for by the fact that the subject is constructed not by one monolithic discourse but by a multitude of different discourses. What cannot be determined in advance are the articulations that may result from the chance encounter—sometimes on the site of the subject—of these various discourses. A subject of a legal discourse may find itself in conflict with itself as a subject of a religious discourse. The negotiation of this conflict may produce a solution that was anticipated by neither of the contributing discourses. Some film theorists have underlined this part of Foucault's work in an attempt to locate possible sources of resistance to institutional forms of power, to clear a space for a feminist cinema, for example.⁶ I would argue, however, that this simple atomization and multiplication of subject positions and this *partes extra partes* description of conflict does not lead to a radical undermining of knowledge or power. Not only is it the case that at each stage what is *produced* is conceived in Foucauldian theory to be a *determinate* thing or position, but, in addition, knowledge and power are conceived of as the over-all effect of the *relations among* the various conflicting positions and discourses. Differences do not threaten panoptic power; they feed it.

6. See, especially, Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987.

The Lacanian argument is quite different. It states that that which is produced by a signifying system can never be determinate. Conflict in this case does not result from the clash between two different positions, but from the fact that no position defines a resolute identity. Nonknowledge or invisibility is not registered as the wavering and negotiations between two certainties, two meanings or positions, but as the undermining of every certainty, the incompleteness of every meaning and position.⁷ Incapable of articulating this more radical understanding of nonknowledge, the panoptic argument is ultimately *resistant to resistance*, unable to conceive of a discourse that would refuse rather than refuel power.

My purpose here is not simply to point out the crucial differences between Foucault's theory and Lacan's, but also to attempt to explain how the two theories have failed to be perceived *as* different. How a psychoanalytically informed film theory came to see itself as expressible in Foucauldian terms, despite the fact that these very terms aimed at dispensing with psychoanalysis as a method of explanation. In Foucault's work the techniques of disciplinary power (of the construction of the subject) are conceived as capable of "materially penetrat[ing] the body in depth without depending even on the mediation of the subject's own representations. If power takes hold on the body, this isn't through its having first to be interiorized in people's consciousness."⁸ For Foucault, the conscious and the unconscious are categories constructed by psychoanalysis and other discourses (philosophy, literature, law, etc.): like other socially constructed categories, they provide a means of rendering the subject visible, governable, trackable. They are categories through which the modern subject is apprehended and apprehends itself, *rather than* (as psychoanalysis maintains) processes of apprehension; they are not processes which engage or are engaged by social discourses (film texts, for example). What the *Re-vision* editors force us to confront is the fact that in film theory these radical differences have largely gone unnoticed or have been nearly annulled. Thus, though the gaze is conceived as a metapsychological concept central to the description of the subject's psychic engagement with the cinematic apparatus, the concept, as we shall see, is formulated in a way that makes any psychic engagement redundant.

My argument is that film theory performed a kind of "Foucauldization" of Lacanian theory; an early misreading of Lacan turned him into a "spendthrift" Foucault—one who wasted a bit too much theoretical energy on such notions as

7. In "What Is a Question," F.S. Cohen makes this important distinction clearly: "Indetermination or doubt is not, as is often maintained, a wavering between different certainties, but the grasping of an incomplete form" (*The Monist*, no. 38 [1929], p. 354, fn. 4).

8. Michel Foucault, in Colin Gordon, ed., *Power/Knowledge*, New York, Pantheon, p. 186. The interview with Lucette Finas in which this statement occurs was also published in Meaghan Morris and Paul Patton, eds., *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, Sydney, Feral Publications, 1979. The statement is quoted and emphasized in Mark Cousins and Athar Hussain's excellent book, *Michel Foucault*, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1984, p. 244.

the antithetical meaning of words or the repression instituted by parental interdiction. It is the perceived frugality of Foucault (whereby every disavowal is seen to be essentially an avowal of what is being denied), every bit as much as the recent and widely proclaimed interest in history, that has guaranteed Foucault's ascendancy over Lacan in the academy.

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It was through the concept of the apparatus—the economic, technical, ideological institution—of cinema that the break between contemporary film theory and its past was effected.⁹ This break meant that cinematic representation was considered to be not a clear or distorted reflection of a prior and external reality, but one among many social discourses that helped to construct reality and the spectatorial subject. As is well-known, the concept of the apparatus was not original to film theory, but was imported from epistemological studies of science. The actual term *dispositif* (“apparatus”) used in film theory is borrowed from Gaston Bachelard, who employed it to counter the reigning philosophy of phenomenology. Bachelard proposed instead the study of “phenomeno-*technology*,” believing that phenomena are not given to us directly by an independent reality, but are, rather, constructed (cf. the Greek *technē*, “produced by a regular method of making, rather than found in nature”) by a range of practices and techniques that define the field of historical truth. The objects of science are materializable concepts, not natural phenomena.

Even though it borrows his term and the concept it names, film theory does not locate its beginnings in the work of Bachelard, but rather in that of one of his students, Louis Althusser.¹⁰ (This history is by now relatively familiar, but since a number of significant points have been overlooked or misinterpreted, it is necessary to retrace some of the details.) Althusser was judged to have advanced and corrected the theory of Bachelard in a way that foregrounded the *subject* of science. Now, although he had argued that the scientific subject was formed in

9. Although some might claim that it was the introduction of the linguistic model into film studies that initiated the break, it can be more accurately argued that the break was precipitated by a shift in the linguistic model itself—from an exclusive emphasis on the relation between signifiers to an emphasis on the relation between signifiers and the subject, their signifying effect. That is, it was not until the *rhetorical* aspect of language was made visible—by means of the concept of the apparatus—that the field of film studies was definitively reformed. I am arguing, however, that, once this shift was made, some of the lessons introduced by semiology were, unfortunately, forgotten.

To define a *break* (rather than a continuity) between what is often referred to as “two stages,” or the first and second semiology, is analogous to defining a break between Freud's first and second concepts of transference. It was only with the second, the privileging of the analyst/analysand relationship, that psychoanalysis (properly speaking) was begun. Biography rather than theory is the source of the demand for the continuity of these concepts.

10. The best discussion of the relationship between Bachelard and Althusser can be found in Etienne Balibar, “From Bachelard to Althusser: The Concept of ‘Epistemological Break,’” *Economy and Society*, vol. 5, no. 4 (November 1976), pp. 385–411.

and by the field of science, Bachelard had also maintained that the subject was never *fully* formed in this way. One of the reasons for this merely partial success, he theorized, was an obstacle that impeded the subject's development; this obstacle he called the imaginary. But the problem with this imaginary, as Althusser later pointed out, was that it was itself largely untheorized and was thus (that is, almost by default) accepted by Bachelard as a *given*, as external and prior to rather than as an *effect* of historical determinations. The scientific subject was split, then, between two modes of thought: one governed by historically determined scientific forms, the other by forms that were eternal, spontaneous, and almost purely mythical.¹¹

Althusser rethought the category of the imaginary, making it a part of the process of the historical construction of the subject. The imaginary came to name a process necessary for — rather than an impediment to — the ideological founding of the subject: the imaginary provided the form of the subject's lived relation to society. Through this relation, the subject was brought to accept as its own, to recognize itself in, the representations of the social order.

This last statement of Althusser's position is important for our concerns here because it is also a statement of the basic position of film theory as it was developed in the '70s, in France and in England, by Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Comolli, and by the journal *Screen*. In sum: the screen is a mirror. The representations produced by the institution cinema, the images presented on the screen, are accepted by the subject as its own.¹² There is, admittedly, an ambiguity in the notion of the subject's "own image"; it can refer either to an image *of* the subject or an image *belonging to* the subject. Both references are intended by film theory. Whether that which is represented is specularized as an image of the subject's own body or as the subject's image of someone or something else, what remains crucial is the attribution to the image of what Lacan (not film theory, which has never, it seems to me, adequately accounted for the ambiguity) calls "that belong to me aspect so reminiscent of property."¹³ It is this aspect that allows the subject to see in any representation

11. This notion of the scientist discontinuous with him- or herself can be given a precise image, the alchemical image of the Melusines: creatures composed partially of inferior, fossil-like forms that reach back into the distant past (the imaginary) and partially of superior, energetic (scientific) activity. In *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, Beacon, 1969, p. 109), Bachelard, whose notion of the unconscious is more Jungian than Freudian, refers to this image from Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*.

12. The one reservation Metz has to the otherwise operative analogy between mirror and screen is that at the cinema, "the spectator is absent from the screen: contrary to the child in the mirror" (Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 48). Jacqueline Rose clarified the error implied in this reservation by pointing out that "the phenomenon of transitivity demonstrates that the subject's mirror identification can be with another child," that one always locates *one's own image in another* and thus the imaginary identification does not depend on a literal mirror ("The Imaginary," in *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London, Verso, 1986, p. 196). What is most often forgotten, however, is the corollary of this fact: one always locates *the other in one's own image*. The effect of this fact on the constitution of the subject is Lacan's fundamental concern.

13. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 81.

not only a reflection of itself, but a reflection of itself as master of all it surveys. The imaginary relation produces the subject as master of the image. This insight led to film theory's reconception of film's characteristic "impression of reality."¹⁴ No longer conceived as dependent upon a relation of verisimilitude between the image and the real referent, this impression was henceforth attributed to a relation of adequation between the image and the spectator. In other words, the impression of reality results from the fact that the subject takes the image as a full and sufficient representation of itself and its world; the subject is satisfied that it has been adequately reflected on the screen. The "reality effect" and the "subject effect" both name the same constructed impression: that the image makes the subject fully visible to itself.

The imaginary relation is defined as literally a relation of *recognition*. The subject reconceptualized as its own concepts already constructed by the Other. Sometimes the reconstruction of representation is thought to take place secondarily rather than directly, after there has been a primary recognition of the subject as a "pure act of perception." This is Metz's scenario.¹⁵ The subject first recognizes itself by identifying with the gaze and then recognizes the images on the screen. Now, *what* exactly is the gaze, in this context? Why does it emerge in this way from the theory of the apparatus? What does it add—or subtract—from Bachelard's theory, where it does not figure as a term?¹⁶ All these questions will have to be confronted more fully in due course; for now we must begin with the observation that this ideal point can be nothing but *the signified of the image*, the point from which the image *makes sense* to the subject. In taking up its position at this point, the subject sees itself as *supplying* the image with sense. Regardless of whether one or two stages are posited, the gaze is always the point from which identification is conceived by film theory to take place. And because the gaze is always conceptualized as an analogue of that geometrical point of Renaissance perspective at which the picture becomes fully, undistortedly visible, the gaze always retains within film theory the sense of being that point at which sense and being coincide. The subject comes into being by identifying with the image's signified. Sense *founds* the subject—that is the ultimate point of the film theoretical concept of the gaze.

14. It was Jean-Louis Baudry who first formulated this definition of the impression of reality. See his second apparatus essay, "The Apparatus," in *Camera Obscura*, no. 1 (Fall 1976), especially pp. 118–119.

15. Metz's two-stage scenario is critiqued by Geoffrey Nowell-Smith in "A Note on History/Discourse," in *Edinburgh '76*, pp. 26–32; and by Mary Ann Doane in "Misrecognition and Identity."

16. I have elsewhere referred to the gaze as "metempsychotic": although it is a concept abhorrent to feminist reason, the target of constant theoretical sallies, the gaze continues to reemerge, to be reincorporated, as an assumption of one film analysis after another. The argument I am making is that it is because we have not properly determined what the gaze is, whence it has emerged, that we have been unable to eliminate it. It is generally argued that the gaze is dependent on psychoanalytic structures of voyeurism and fetishism, presumed to be male. I am claiming instead that the gaze arises out of *linguistic* assumptions and that these assumptions, in turn, shape (and appear to be naturalized by) the psychoanalytic concepts.

The imaginary relation is not, however, merely a relation of knowledge, of sense and recognition; it is also a relation of love guaranteed by knowledge. The image seems not only perfectly to represent the subject, it seems also to be an image of the subject's perfection. An unexceptional definition of narcissism appears to support this relation: the subject falls in love with its own image as the image of its ideal self. *Except* for the fact that narcissism becomes in this account the structure that facilitates the *harmonious* relation between self and social order (since the subject is made to snuggle happily into the space carved out for it), whereas, in the psychoanalytic account, the subject's narcissistic relation to the self is seen to *conflict with and disrupt* other social relations. I am attempting to pinpoint here no minor point of disagreement between psychoanalysis and the panoptic argument: the opposition between the unbinding force of narcissism and the binding force of social relations is one of the defining tenets of psychoanalysis.¹⁷ It is nevertheless true that Freud himself often ran into difficulty trying to maintain the distinction and that many, from Jung on, have found it easier to merge the two forces into a libidinal monism. But easier is not better; to disregard the distinction is not only to destroy psychoanalysis but also to court determinism.

Why is the representation of the relation of the subject to the social necessarily an imaginary one? This question, posed by Paul Hirst,¹⁸ should have launched a serious critique of film theory. That it did not is attributable, in part, to the fact that the question was perceived to be fundamentally a question about the content of the concept of the imaginary. With only a slightly different emphasis, the question can be seen to ask how the imaginary came to bear, almost exclusively, the burden of the construction of the subject—despite the fact that we always speak of the “symbolic” construction of the subject. One way of answering this is to note that in much contemporary theory the symbolic is itself structured like the imaginary, like Althusser's version of the imaginary. And thus Hirst's criticisms are aimed at our conception of the symbolic construction of the subject, in general. That this is so is made explicit once again by the frugality of Foucault, who exposes to us not only the content, but also the emptiness of some of our concepts. For he successfully demonstrates that the conception of the symbolic on which he (and, implicitly, others) relies makes the imaginary unnecessary. In a move similar to the one that refigured ideology as a positive force of the production rather than falsification of reality, Foucault rethinks symbolic law as a *purely positive* force of the production rather than repression of the subject and its desires. Offering his argument—that the law constructs desire—as a

17. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's extremely interesting book, *The Freudian Subject* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988), grapples with this *necessary* distinction in its final section—with results very different from Lacan's.

18. Paul Hirst, “Althusser's Theory of Ideology,” *Economy and Society*, vol. 5, no. 4 (November 1976), pp. 385–411.

critique of psychoanalysis, Foucault refuses to acknowledge that psychoanalysis has itself never argued any differently.

What is the difference, then, between Foucault's and psychoanalysis's version of the law/desire relation? Simply this: Foucault conceives desire not only as an *effect*, but also as a *realization* of the law, while *psychoanalysis teaches us that this conflation of effect and realization is an error*. To say that the law is only positive, that it does not forbid desire, but rather incites it, causes it to flourish by requiring us to contemplate it, confess it, watch for its various manifestations, is to end up saying simply that the law causes us to *have* a desire — for incest, let us say. While rejecting his moralism, this position recreates the error of the psychiatrist in one of Mel Brooks's routines. In a fit of revulsion, this psychiatrist throws a patient out of his office because she reported having a dream in which she "was kissing her father!" The feeling of disgust is the humorous result of the psychiatrist's failure to differentiate the enunciative position of the dreaming patient from the stated position of the dreamed one. The elision of the difference between these positions — enunciation and statement — causes desire to be thought as realization in two ways. First, desire is conceived as an actual state resulting from a possibility allowed by law. Second, if desire is something one simply and positively has, nothing can prevent its realization except a purely external force. The destiny of desire is realization, unless it is prohibited by some external force.

Psychoanalysis denies the preposterous proposition that society is founded on desire — the desire for incest, let us say once again. Surely, it argues, it is the *repression* of this desire which is crucial. The law does not construct a subject who simply and unequivocally has a desire, but one who *rejects* its desire, one who wants not to desire it. The subject is thus split from its desire, and desire itself is conceived as something — precisely — unrealized; it does not actualize what the law makes possible. Nor is desire committed to realization, barring any external hinderance. For the internal dialectic which makes the being of the subject dependent on the negation of its desire turns the construction of desire into a self-hindering process.

Foucault's definition of the law as positive and nonrepressive implies that the law is both (1) unconditional — that it *must* be obeyed, since only that which it allows can come into existence; *being is*, by definition, *obedience* — and (2) unconditioned — since nothing, i.e., no desire, precedes the law; there is no cause of the law and we must not therefore seek behind the law for its reasons. Law does not exist in order to repress desire.

Now, not only have these claims for the law been made before, they have also been previously contested.¹⁹ For these are precisely the claims of moral

19. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, in "The Law of Psychoanalysis" (*Diacritics* [Summer 1985], pp. 26–36), discusses Freud's argument with Kant in *Totem and Taboo*. This article relies, it appears, on Lacan's work in *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, (Paris, Seuil, 1986) and the unpublished seminar on

conscience which Freud examines in *Totem and Taboo*. There Freud reduces these claims to what he takes to be their absurd consequences: "If we were to admit the claims thus asserted by our conscience [that desire conforms to or always falls within the law], it would follow, on the one hand, that prohibition would be superfluous and, on the other, the fact of conscience would remain unexplained."²⁰ On the one hand, prohibition would be superfluous. Foucault agrees: once the law is conceived as primarily positive, as producing the phenomena it scrutinizes, the concept of a negative, repressive law can be viewed as an excess—of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, the fact of conscience would remain unexplained. That is, there is no longer any reason for conscience to exist; it *should*, like prohibition, be superfluous. What becomes suddenly *inexplicable* is the very *experience* of conscience—which is not only the subjective experience of the compulsion to obey, but also the experience of guilt, of the remorse that follows transgression—once we have accepted the *claims* of conscience that the law cannot fail to impose itself and cannot be caused. Foucault agrees once again: the experience of conscience and the interiorization of the law through representations is made superfluous by his theory of law.

Again: the claims of conscience are used to refute the experience of conscience. This paradox located by Freud will, of course, not appear as such to those who do not ascribe the claims *to* conscience. And yet something of the paradox is manifest in Foucault's description of panoptic power and film theory's description of the relation between the apparatus and the gaze. In both cases the model of self-surveillance implicitly recalls the psychoanalytic model of moral conscience even as the resemblance is being disavowed. The image of self-surveillance, self-correction, is both required to construct the subject and made redundant by the fact that the subject thus constructed is, by definition, absolutely upright, completely correct. The inevitability and completeness of its success renders the orthopedic gesture of surveillance unnecessary. The subject is and can only be inculpable. The relation between apparatus and gaze creates only the mirage of psychoanalysis. There is, in fact, no psychoanalytic subject in sight.

anxiety; see especially the session of December 12, 1962, where Lacan defines obsession as that which covers over the desire in the Other with the Other's demand. This remark relates obsessional neurosis to a certain (Kantian) concept of moral consciousness.

20. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James and Alix Strachey, London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953–1974, vol. 13, pp. 69–70.

Orthopsychism²¹

How, then, to derive a properly psychoanalytic—that is, a split—subject from the premise that the subject is the effect rather than the cause of the social order? Before turning, finally, to Lacan's solution, it will be necessary to pause to review one extraordinary chapter from Bachelard—chapter IV of *Le rationalisme appliqué*, titled “La surveillance intellectuelle de soi”—where we will find some arguments that have been overlooked in more recent theorizations of the apparatus.²²

Although Bachelard pioneered the theory of the institutional construction of the field of science, he also (as we have already said) persistently argued that the protocols of science never fully saturated nor provided the content of this field. The obstacle of the imaginary is only *one* of the reasons given for this. Besides this purely negative resistance *to* the scientific, there is also a positive condition *of* the scientific itself that prevented such a reduction from taking place. Both these reasons together guarantee that the concepts of science are never mere realizations of possibilities historically allowed, and scientific thought is never simply habit, the regulated retracing of possible paths already laid out in advance.

To say that the scientific subject is constructed by the institution of science, Bachelard would reason, is to say that it is always thereby obliged to survey itself, its own thinking, not subjectively, not through a process of introspection to which the subject has privileged access, but *objectively*, from the position of the scientific institution. So far this *orthopsychic* relation may seem no different from the panoptic relation we have been so intent on dislodging. But there is a difference: the orthopsychic relation (unlike the panoptic one) assumes that it is just this objective survey that allows thought to become (not wholly visible, but) *secret*; it allows thought to remain *hidden*, even under the most intense scrutiny. Let us make clear that Bachelard is not attempting to argue that there is an original, private self that happens to find in objectivity a means (among others) of concealing itself. He is arguing, rather, that the very possibility of concealment is only raised by the subject's objective relation to itself. For it is the very act of

21. In order to dissociate his concept of science from that of idealism, conventionalism, and formalism, Bachelard formulated the concept of “applied rationalism”: a scientific concept must integrate within itself the conditions of its realization. (It is on the basis of this injunction that Heisenberg could dismiss as illegitimate any talk of an electron's location that could not also propose an experimental method of locating it.) And in order to dissociate his concept of science from that of the positivists, empiricists, and realists, Bachelard formulated the concept of “technical materialism”: the instruments and the protocols of scientific experiments must be theoretically formulated. The system of checks and balances according to which these two imperatives operate is what Bachelard normally means by *orthopsychism*. He extends the notion in *Le rationalisme appliqué*, however, to include the formation of the scientific subject.

22. Gaston Bachelard, *Le rationalisme appliqué*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1949, pp. 65–81.

surveillance—which makes clear the fact that the subject is external to itself, exists in a relation of “extimacy” (Lacan’s word) with itself—that causes the subject to appear to itself as culpable, as guilty of hiding something. The objective relation to the self, Bachelard informs us, necessarily raises the insidious question that Nietzsche formulated thus: “To everything which a man allows to become visible, one is able to demand: what does he wish to hide?” It does not matter that this “man” is oneself. The ineradicable suspicion of dissimulation raised by the objective relation guarantees that thought will never become totally coincident with the forms of the institution. Thought will be split, rather, between belief in what the institution makes manifest, and suspicion about what it is keeping secret. All objective representations, its very own thought, will be taken by the subject not as true representations of itself or the world, but as fictions: no “impression of reality” will adhere to them. The subject will appear, even to itself, to be no more than an *hypothesis of being*. Belief in the reality of representations will be suspended, projected beyond the representations themselves. And the “impression of reality” will henceforth consist in the “mass of objections to constituted reason,” Bachelard says here; and elsewhere: in the conviction that “what is real but hidden has more content than what is given and obvious.”²³

The suspicion of dissimulation offers the subject a kind of reprieve from the dictates of law, the social superego. These dictates are perceived as hypotheses that must be tested rather than imperatives that must be automatically and unconditionally obeyed. The subject is not only judged by and subjected to social laws; it also judges them by subjecting them to intellectual scrutiny. Self-surveillance, then, conduces to self-correction; one thought or representation always advances another as the former’s judge.

The chapter ends up celebrating a kind of euphoria of free thought. As a result of its orthopsychic relation to itself, i.e., before an image which it *doubts*, the scientific subject is jubilant. Not because its image, its world, its thought reflects its own perfection, but because the subject is thus allowed to imagine that they are all *perfectable*. It is this sense of the perfectibility of things that liberates thought from the totally determining constraints of the social order. Thought is conceived to police, and not merely to be policed by the social/scientific order, and the paranoia of the “Cassandra complex” (Bachelard’s designation for the childish belief that everything is already known in advance, by one’s parents, say) is thereby dispelled.

Curiously, the charge of guilt that is lodged, we were told, by the structure of surveillance, has been dropped somewhere along the way. It is now claimed, on the contrary, that surveillance enables thought to be “morally sincere.” As it turns out, then, it is the very *experience* of moral conscience, the very feeling of guilt, that absolves thought of the *charge* of guilt. How has this absolution been

23. Gaston Bachelard, *The New Scientific Spirit*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1984, p. 32.

secured? By the separation of the act of thinking from the thoughts that it thinks. So that though the thoughts may be guilty, the act of thinking remains innocent. And the subject remains whole, its intentions clear. This is the only way we can understand the apparent contradictions of this chapter. Throughout his work Bachelard maintains that "duplicity is maladroitness in its address" — i.e., that they err who assume they cannot be duped, that no one is spared from deception. As a result, no thought can ever be perfectly penetrable. Yet, in this chapter he simultaneously maintains that the subject can and must penetrate its own act of thinking.

This scenario of surveillance — of the "joy of surveillance" — is consciously delineated in relation to Freud's notion of moral conscience. But Bachelard opposes his notion to the "pessimism" of that of Freud, who, of course, sees moral conscience as cruel and punishing. In Bachelard, surveillance, in seeming to offer the subject a pardon, is construed as primarily a positive or benign force. Bachelard, then, too, like Foucault and film theory, recalls and yet disavows the psychoanalytic model of moral conscience — however differently. Bachelard's orthopsychism, which is informed in the end by a psychologistic argument, cannot really be accepted by film theory as an alternative to panopticonism. Although Bachelard argues that a certain invisibility shelters the subject from what we might call "the gaze" of the institutional apparatus, the subject is nevertheless characterized by an exact legibility on another level. The Bachelardian subject may not locate *in its image* a full and upright being that it jubilantly (but wrongly) takes itself to be, but this subject does locate, *in the process of scrutinizing* this image, the joyous prospect of righting itself. Film theory's correct subject is here replaced by a self-correcting one.

Yet this detour through orthopsychism has not led only to a dead end. What we have forcibly been led to consider is the question of deception, of the suspicion of deception that must *necessarily* be raised if we are to understand the cinematic apparatus as a *signifying* apparatus, which places the subject in an external relationship to itself. Once the permanent possibility of deception is admitted (rather than disregarded, as it is by the theory of the panoptic apparatus), the concept of the gaze undergoes a radical change. For, where in the panoptic apparatus the gaze marks the subject's *visibility*, in Lacan's theory it marks the subject's *culpability*. The gaze stands watch over the *inculcation* — the faulting and splitting — of the subject by the apparatus.

The Mirror as Screen

Film theory introduced the subject into its study, and thereby incorporated Lacanian psychoanalysis, primarily by means of "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the 'I.'" It is to this essay that theorists made reference as they formulated their arguments about the subject's narcissistic relation to the film

and about that relationship's dependence on "the gaze." While it is true that the mirror phase essay does describe the child's narcissistic relation to its mirror image, it is *not* in this essay but in Seminar XI that Lacan himself formulates *his* concept of the gaze. Here, particularly in those sessions collected under the heading "Of the Gaze as *Object Petit a*," Lacan *reformulates* his earlier mirror phase essay and paints a picture very different from the one painted by film theory.

Lacan tells his tale of the relation of the subject to its world in the form of a humorously recondite story about a sardine can. The story is told as a kind of mock Hegelian epic, a send-up of the broadly expansive Hegelian epic form by a deliberately "little story" that takes place in a "small boat" in a "small port" and includes a single named character, Petit-Jean. The entire overt plot consists in the sighting of a "small can." A truly short story of the object small *a*; the proof and sole guarantee of that alterity of the Other which Hegel's sweeping tale, in overlooking, denies.

The story sets Hegelian themes adrift and awash in a sea of bathos. A young (Hegelian) intellectual, identifying himself with the slaving class, embarks on a journey that he expects will pit him in struggle against the raw forces of a pitiless nature. But, alas, the day turns out to be undramatically sunny and fine, and the anticipated event, the meeting and match with the Master, never comes about. It is narratively replaced by what we can accurately describe as a "nonevent," the spotting of the shiny, mirrorlike sardine can—and an attack of anxiety. In the end, however, bathos gives way to tragedy, as we realize that in this little slice-of-life drama there is no sublation of consumption, no transcendence, only the slow dying away, through consumption, of the individual members of the slaving class. The mocking is not merely gentle, but carries in its wake this abrupt statement of consequence; something quite serious is at stake here. If we are to rewrite the tragic ending of this political tale, something will have to be retheorized.

What is it? Plainly, ultimately, it is "I"—the I that takes shape in this revised version of the mirror stage. As if to underline the fact that it is the I, and the narcissistic relation through which it is constructed, that is the point of the discussion, Lacan tells a personal story. It is he, in fact, who is the first-person of the narrative; this portrait of the analyst as a young man is his own. The cameo role in Seminar XI prepares us, then, for the starring role Lacan plays as the narcissistic "televanalyst" in *Television*. "What is at stake in both cases," Lacan says in *Television* about his performance both there and in his seminars, in general, "is a gaze: a gaze to which, in neither case, do I address myself, but in the name of which I speak."²⁴ What is he saying here about the relation between the I and the gaze?

24. Lacan, *Television*, p. 7.

The gaze is that which "determines" the I in the visible; it is "the instrument through which . . . [the] I [is] *photo-graphed*."²⁵ This might be taken to confirm the coincidence of the Foucauldian and Lacanian positions, to indicate that, in both, the gaze determines the complete *visibility* of the I, the mapping of the I on a perceptual grid. Hence the disciplinary monitoring of the subject. But this coincidence can only be produced by a precipitous, "snapshot" reading of Lacan, one that fails to notice the hyphen that splits the term *photo-graph* into *photo*—"light"—and *graph*—among other things, a fragment of the Lacanian phrase "graph of desire"—as it splits the subject that it describes.

Photo. One thing is certain: light does not enter these seminars in a straight line, through the laws of optics. Because, as he says, the geometric laws of the propagation of light map space only, and *not* vision, Lacan does not theorize the visual field in terms of these laws. Thus, the legitimate construction *cannot* figure for him—as it *does* for film theory—the relation of the spectator to the screen. And these seminars cannot be used, as they are used by film theory, to support the argument that the cinematic apparatus, in direct line with the camera obscura, by recreating the space and ideology of Renaissance perspective, produces a centered and transcendent subject.²⁶

This argument is critiqued in the seminars on the gaze as Lacan makes clear why the speaking subject *cannot* ever be totally trapped in the imaginary. Lacan claims, rather, that "I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped."²⁷ Now, film theory, of course, has always claimed that the cinematic apparatus functions *ideologically* to produce a subject that *misrecognizes* itself as source and center of the represented world. But although this claim might seem to imply agreement with Lacan, to suggest, too, that the subject is *not* the punctiform being that Renaissance perspective would have us believe it is, film theory's notion of misrecognition turns out to be different from Lacan's in important ways. Despite the fact that the term *misrecognition* implies an error on the subject's part, a failure properly to recognize its true relation to the visible world, the process by which the subject is installed in its position of misrecognition operates without the hint of failure.

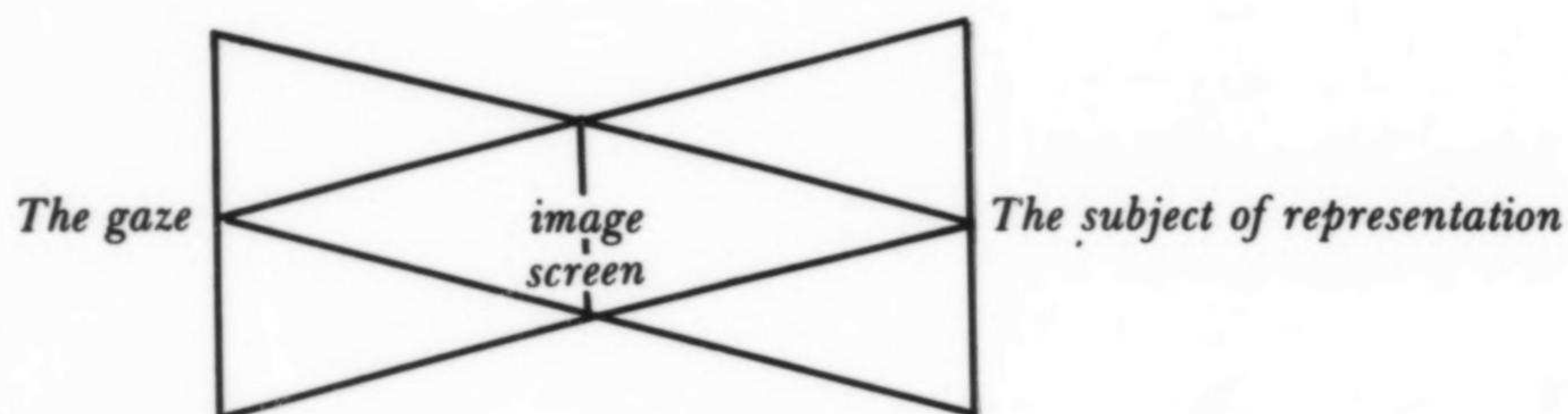
25. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 106.

26. See, especially, Jean-Louis Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus" (first published in *Cinéthique*, nos. 7–8 [1970] and, in English, in *Film Quarterly*, no. 28 [Winter 1974–75]), and Jean-Louis Comolli, "Technique and Ideology: Camera, Perspective, Depth of Field" (first published in *Cahiers du cinéma*, nos. 229, 230, 231, and 233 [1970–71] and, in English, by the British Film Institute). This historical continuity has been taken for granted by film theory generally. For a history of the *noncontinuity* between Renaissance techniques of observation and our own, see Jonathan Crary, "Techniques of the Observer," *October*, no. 45 (Summer 1987). In this essay, Crary differentiates the camera obscura from the physiological models of vision that succeeded it. Lacan, in his seminars on the gaze, refers to both these models as they are represented by the science of optics and the philosophy of phenomenology. He exhibits them as two "ways of being wrong about this function of the subject in the domain of the spectacle."

27. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 96.

The subject unerringly assumes the position perspective bids it to take. Erased from the process of construction, the negative force of error emerges later as a charge directed at the subject. But from where does it come? Film theory has only described the construction of this position of misrecognition. Though it implies that there is another *actual*, nonpunctiform position, film theory has never been able to describe the *construction* of this position.

In Lacan's description, misrecognition retains its negative force in the process of construction. As a result the process is no longer conceived as a purely positive one, but rather one with an internal dialectic. Lacan does not take the single triangle that geometrical perspective draws as an accurate description of its own operation. Instead he *redesigns* this operation by means of *two interpenetrating triangles*. Thus he represents both the way the science of optics figures the emission of light *and* the way its straight lines become refracted, diffused (the way they acquire the "ambiguity of a jewel") once we take into account the way the signifier itself interferes in this figuring. The second triangle cuts through the first, marking the elision or negation that is part of the process of construction. The second triangle diagrams the subject's mistaken belief that there is something behind the space set out by the first. It is this mistaken belief (this misrecognition) that causes the subject to *disbelieve* even those representations shaped according to the scientific laws of optics. The Lacanian subject, who doubts the accuracy of even its most "scientific" representations, is submitted to a *superegoic* law that is radically different from the optical laws to which the film theoretical subject is submitted.



Graph. Semiotics, not optics, is the science that clarifies for us the structure of the visual domain. Because it alone is capable of lending things sense, the signifier alone makes vision possible. There is and can be no brute vision, no vision totally devoid of sense. Painting, drawing, all forms of picture-making, then, are fundamentally graphic arts. And because signifiers are material, that is, because they are opaque rather than translucent, because they refer to other signifiers rather than directly to a signified, the field of vision is neither clear nor easily traversable. It is instead ambiguous and treacherous, full of traps. Lacan's Seminar XI refers constantly, but ambiguously, to these traps. When Lacan says that the subject is trapped in the imaginary, he means that the subject can

imagine nothing outside it; the imaginary cannot itself provide the means that would allow the subject to transcend it. When he says, on the other hand, that a painting, or any other representation, is a "trap for the gaze," he means that the representation *attracts* the gaze, induces us to imagine a gaze outside—and observing—the field of representation. It is this second sense of trapping, whereby representation appears to generate its own beyond (to generate, we might say, recalling Lacan's diagram, the *second* triangle, which the science of optics neglects to consider) that prevents the subject from ever being trapped in the imaginary. Where the film theoretical position has tended to trap the subject in representation (an idealist failing), to conceive of language as constructing the prison walls of the subject's being, Lacan argues that the subject sees these walls as *trompe l'oeil* and is thus constructed by something beyond them.

For, beyond everything that is displayed to the subject, the question is asked: what is being concealed from me? What in this graphic space does not show, does not stop *not* writing itself? This point at which something appears to be *invisible*, this point at which something appears to be missing from representation, some meaning left unrevealed, is the point of the Lacanian gaze. It marks the *absence* of a signified; it is an *unoccupiable* point, the point at which the subject disappears. The image, the visual field, then takes on a terrifying alterity that prohibits the subject from seeing itself in the representation. That "belong to me aspect" is suddenly drained from representation, as the mirror assumes the function of a screen.

Lacan is certainly *not* offering an agnostic description of the way the real object is cut off from the subject's view by language, of the way the real object escapes capture in the network of signifiers. His is not the idealist position of either Plato or Kant, who split the object between its real being and its semblance. Lacan argues, rather, that beyond the signifying network, beyond the visual field, there is, in fact, nothing at all.²⁸ The veil of representation actually conceals nothing. Yet the fact that representation *seems* to hide, to put a screen of aborescent signifiers in front of something hidden beneath, is not treated by Lacan as a simple error which the subject can undo; nor is this deceptiveness of language treated as something which undoes the subject, deconstructs its identity by menacing its boundaries. Rather, language's opacity is taken as the very *cause* of the subject's being, its desire. The fact that it is materially impossible to say the whole truth—that truth always backs away from language, that words always fall short of their goal—*founds* the subject. Contrary to the idealist position that makes *form* the cause of being, Lacan locates the cause of being in the *informe*: the unformed (that which has no signified, no significant shape in the visual field); the inquiry (the question posed to representation's presumed reticence). The

28. The questions Moustapha Safouan poses to Lacan during Seminar XI (*The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 103) force him to be quite clear on this point: "Beyond appearance there is nothing in itself, there is the gaze."

subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation, what the subject, therefore, wants to see. Desire, in other words, the desire of representation, institutes the subject in the visible field.

It should be clear by now how different this description is from that offered by film theory. In film theory the subject identifies with the gaze as the signified of the image and comes into existence as the realization of a possibility. In Lacan, the subject identifies with the gaze as the signifier of the lack that causes the image to languish. The subject comes into existence, then, through a desire which is still considered to be the *effect* of the law, but not its *realization*. Desire cannot be a realization because it fulfills no possibility and has no content; it is, rather, occasioned by impossibility, the impossibility of the subject's ever coinciding with the real being from which representation cuts it off.

Narcissism, too, takes on a different meaning in Lacan, one more in accord with Freud's own. Since something always appears to be missing from any representation, narcissism *cannot* consist in finding satisfaction in one's own visual image. It must, rather, consist in the belief that one's own being exceeds the imperfections of its image. Narcissism, then, seeks the self beyond the self-image, with which the subject constantly finds fault and in which it constantly fails to recognize itself. What one loves in one's image is something *more* than the image ("in you more than you").²⁹ Thus is narcissism the source of the malevolence with which the subject regards its image, the aggressivity it unleashes on all its own representations.³⁰ And thus does the subject come into being as a transgression of, rather than in conformity to, the law. It is not the law, but the fault in the law—the desire that the law cannot ultimately conceal—that is assumed by the subject as its own. The subject, in taking up the burden of the law's guilt, goes beyond the law.

Much of this definition of narcissism I take to be compacted in Lacan's otherwise totally enigmatic sentences: "The effect of mimicry is camouflage in the strictly technical sense. It is not a question of harmonizing with the back-

29. This is the title given to the last session of the seminar published as *The Four Fundamental Concepts*. Although the "you" of the title refers to the analyst, it can refer just as easily to the ideal image in the mirror.

30. Jacqueline Rose's "Paranoia and the Film System" (*Screen*, vol. 17, no. 4 [Winter 1976-77]) is a forceful critique (directed specifically at Raymond Bellour's analyses of Hitchcock, but also at a range of film theoretical assumptions) of that notion of the cinema that sees it as a successful resolution of conflict and a refusal of difference. Rose reminds us that cinema, as "technique of the imaginary" (Metz), necessarily unleashes a conflict, an aggressivity, that is irresolvable. While I am, for the most part, in agreement with her important argument, I am claiming here that Rose is wrong to make this aggressivity dependent on the shot/counter-shot structure of the film (the reversibility of the look), or to define aggressivity as the result of the imaginary relation. The gaze is threatening not because it presents the reverse (the mirror) image of the subject, but because it does not. The gaze deprives the subject of the possibility of ever becoming a fully observable being. Lacan himself says that aggressivity is not a matter of transitive retaliation: "The phenomenon of aggressivity isn't to be explained on the level of imaginary identification" (in *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, New York and London, Norton, 1978, p. 22).

ground, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.”³¹ The effect of representation (“mimicry,” in an older, idealist vocabulary) is not a subject who will harmonize with, or adapt to, its environment (the subject’s narcissistic relation to the representation that constructs it does not place it in happy accord with the reality that the apparatus constructs for it). The effect of representation is, instead, the suspicion that some reality is being camouflaged, that we are being deceived as to the exact nature of some thing-in-itself that lies behind representation. In response to such a representation, against such a background of deception, the subject’s own being breaks up between its unconscious being and its conscious semblance. At war both with its world and with itself, the subject becomes guilty of the very deceit it suspects. This can hardly, however, be called mimicry, in the old sense, since nothing is being mimed.

In sum, the conflictual nature of Lacan’s culpable subject sets it worlds apart from the stable subject of film theory. But neither does the Lacanian subject resemble that of Bachelard. For while, in Bachelard, orthopsychism—in providing an opportunity for the correction of thought’s imperfections—allows the subject to wander from its moorings, constantly to drift from one position to another, in Lacan “orthopsychism”—one wishes to retain the term in order to indicate the subject’s fundamental dependence on the faults it finds in representation and in itself—grounds the subject. The desire that it precipitates *transfixes* the subject, albeit in a conflictual place, so that all the subject’s visions and revisions, all its fantasies, merely circumnavigate the absence that anchors the subject and impedes its progress.³² It is this desire that must be reconstructed if the subject is to be changed.

This paper was presented in Paris at a conference on “The Theory of Cinema and the Crisis in Theory” organized by Michèle Lagny, Marie-Claire Ropars, and Pierre Sorlin and held in June 1988. A translation of the paper, along with other papers from the conference and responses to them, were published in Hors Cadre, no. 7 (Winter 1988–89).

31. Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 99.

32. In “Another Lacan” (*Lacan Study Notes*, vol. 1, no. 3), Jacques-Alain Miller is concerned to underline the clinical dimension of Lacan’s work, particularly his concept of “the pass.” The difference between the “deconstructionist” and the Lacanian notion of fantasy is, thus, also made clear.



Yves Klein. The ritual for a Zone of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility. 1959.

Yves Klein, or The Dead Dealer*

THIERRY DE DUVE

translated by ROSALIND KRAUSS

Yves Klein died on June 6, 1962 of a heart attack. It wasn't his first. Several months before, feeling that his end was near, he had ceremoniously rewritten his will in the presence of his friends, among whom were Arman and Claude Pascal—in whose company, so goes the legend, his career had begun in 1948 with a divvying up of the world. It was to them that he left *immaterial space* as well as the right to make works with *IKB (International Klein Blue)* and to sign his name to them. Two years earlier he had already staged his "burial" in a work titled *Here Lies Space*. This was a *Monogold* lying flat and decorated as a tombstone with a bunch of white roses and a sponge wreath soaked with the famous blue. He had himself photographed lying beneath it.

Just as Joseph Beuys had delivered his tragic testament by means of *Palazzo Regale*, so does Klein with *Here Lies Space*. But it's the differences between them that leap to view. Beuys's double tomb was both royal and wretched, a dramatization of last rites for a vanishing historical type that the artist understood himself as embodying. With a kind of bad taste that one suspects was calculated, Klein's tomb is that of a genteel petit-bourgeois, and it is his alone. At the time of its conception the artist had no premonition of his coming death. The work is at one and the same time the exorcism of a rather general anxiety—a nose thumbed at the Grim Reaper—and the preparation of a publicity stunt with his coming exhibition in Krefeld in mind. It was to produce the nifty effect of showing that the "painter of space" survives the death of space itself, and thus to intimate that if Klein has just disappeared, immaterial space too would have vanished forever.

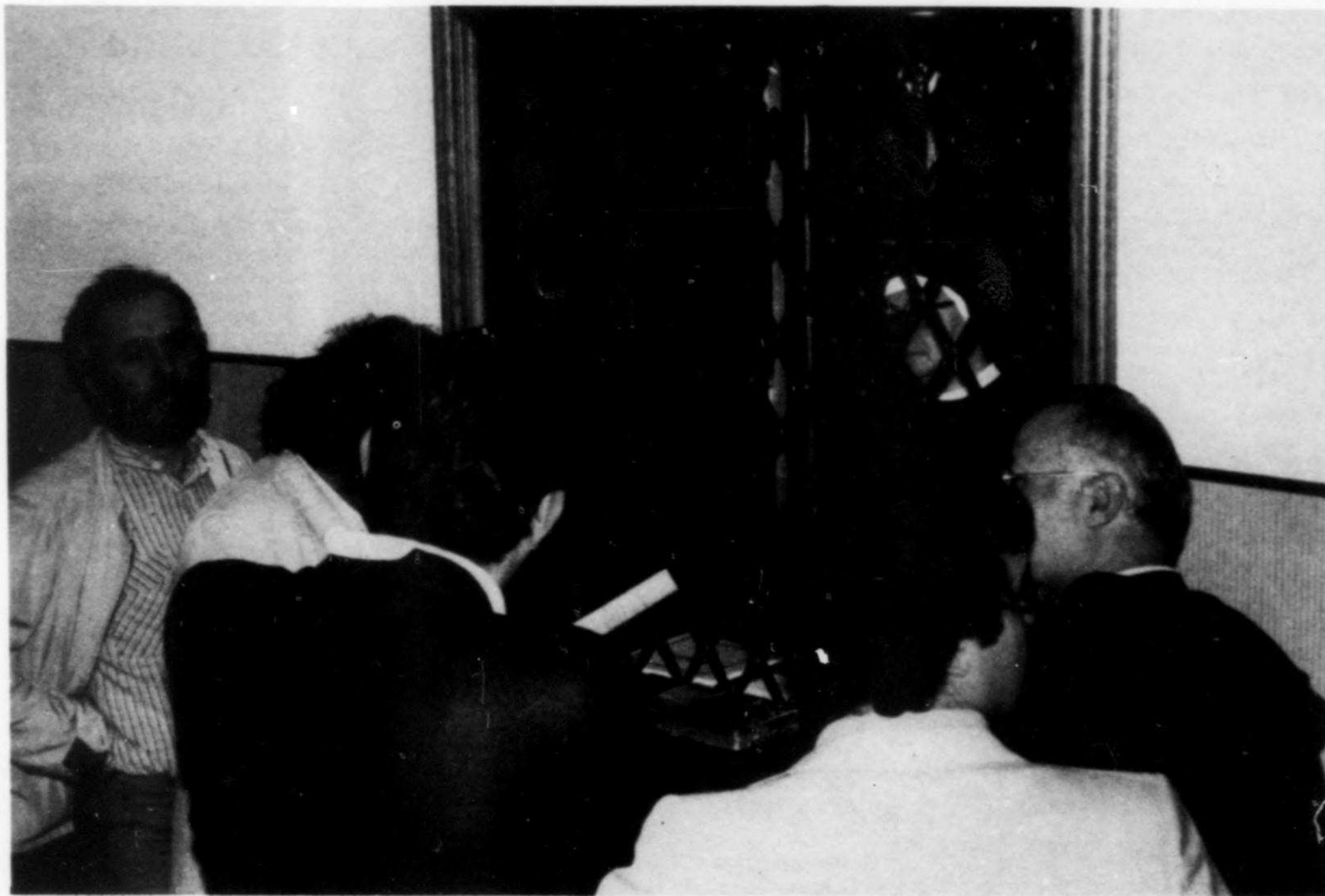
* This text is the third section of a four-part, book-length study of Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Yves Klein, and Marcel Duchamp, titled *Cousus de fil d'or (Sewn with Golden Thread)*. It will be published in September 1989 by Art-Edition, Villeurbanne. Readers of *October* will already have followed the first two stages of the argument in "Joseph Beuys, or The Last of the Proletarians," *October*, no. 45 (Summer 1988), and "Andy Warhol, or The Machine Perfected," *October*, no. 48 (Spring 1989). Here, as in the former two, the aesthetic field is mapped onto the political-economic one and the congruence of the two fields reveals itself as the most recurring epistemological bias having oriented most modernist myths about art.

The generosity with which he leaves the latter to his friends, in his real will, reveals his own claim to ownership. He surely knew, since he himself said so, that the fully material oeuvre he would leave behind him would be scarcely more than "the ashes of his art."

Today it is hard to see much more in it, unless (like Donald Judd in the 1960s) one ignores whole stretches of his work and forces a "formalist" reading upon it—one wholly at variance with its author's intentions, and one that doesn't hold up over time. It is, however, equally difficult to make of Klein a detached and sarcastic ironist, stripped of illusions, as was Piero Manzoni, whose work matches Klein's point-for-point and yet, thirty years later, retains all of its acid freshness. It is, finally, even more difficult to set aside the mountebank in favor of the mystic without sharing beliefs that, once de-sublimated, fall back upon psychological explanations that are embarrassing in their obviousness. Not that Beuys and Andy Warhol, say, are beyond psychology. But this is explained by their works at least as much as it explains them; Klein's work is a symptom.

Despite clearly unequal results, Beuys and Warhol were artists grasping the two ends of a historical contradiction that ran through their work. Even their failure is meaningful and in proportion to their refusal to compromise. Despite and perhaps because of the extremely upsetting nature of his double-headed character—both king and fool—Beuys was an embodiment of history, coming straight out of Shakespeare or Ghelderode. Klein is a creature of history, like the characters in Molière. Despite and perhaps because of his persona's perverse mixture of sadism and compassion, Warhol was a humanist in spite of himself, if we grant that when God withdraws from the world humanism sets in, glowing like a residual image when money is the only God. Klein was a masochist who believed himself to have been cleansed of sin by worshipping an "immaterial" golden calf. What he lacked was Beuys's rectitude, his generosity, and the absolute sincerity of his faith in mankind. Klein was a misanthrope who didn't even have faith in himself. And he lacked Warhol's cold intelligence. He wanted success at least as much as Warhol, but he had neither his flair for the times nor the instinctual narcissism of one who knows that to make himself desired he must appear entirely without desire. He begged for recognition. He couldn't choose between the star's glamour and the hero's glory, and his pride didn't lead him beyond the triumph of a ham actor on opening night. His ambition was merely social. He couldn't understand that hubris is in the expending and can't be capitalized. He wrestled with the demon of "the hypertrophy of the ego," but the demon threw him. He wanted sainthood, but in the way of the falsely devout who purchase their paradise on earth and indulgences in the beyond.

Indulgence will be granted him only if we first translate his religiosity through his psychic economy (something claimed, alas, by all that art today which invokes mystical experience as its true meaning) and then his psychic economy through the political economy. Here, too, it is only the congruence of the aesthetic with the political-economic field—a dated phenomenon for which



Pierre Restany at cloister window, shrine of Saint Rita of Cascia, Italy, with Yves Klein's Ex-Voto (1961). June 18, 1980.

Klein can do nothing, but which can do something for him—that can slightly reanimate the “ashes of his art,” giving them their painful and retrospective meaning. The work that sums up Klein is the one thing he hadn't wanted to be a work, his *Ex-Voto* made as an offering to Saint Rita of Cascia. It's a little reliquary in plexiglas divided into five compartments. The three upper ones form a triptych and from left to right contain: some powdered pink pigment; some *IKB* blue pigment; some gold leaf. The reliquary's lower part is an oblong box containing three little bars of gold resulting from the sale of *Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility*, set on an *IKB* background. The central part, of the same shape and size, holds an accordion-pleated manuscript dedicated to Saint Rita. The *Ex-Voto* dates from February 1961 and was anonymously deposited by Klein in the Monastery of Saint Rita of Cascia in Umbria, immediately after the opening of his Krefeld retrospective. The text, whose first paragraph alone is legible within the casket, was unfurled several years ago by Pierre Restany, Klein's appointed censer-bearer. One can thus overcome one's hesitance to quote a prayer that the artist certainly intended to remain secret. It says a great deal more than a lot of

his public declarations had stated. Here is a first segment, its undoubtedly sincere humility failing to disguise its naive arrogance:

Saint Rita of Cascia, I ask thee to intercede with God the Almighty Father that he may always grant me in the name of the Son Jesus Christ and in the name of the Holy Spirit and of the Blessed Virgin Mary that I may live in my works and that they may become ever more beautiful; and may he grant also that I may discover always continually and regularly new things in art more beautiful every time even though alas I am not always worthy to be a tool to build and create Great Beauty. That everything that comes out of me be Beautiful. Amen.
Y. K.¹

A second extract, almost touching in its childishness, goes: "That my enemies may become my friends, and if that is impossible that all they may attempt against me may never result in anything that touches me, ever — make me, me and all my works, totally invulnerable. Amen."² And a third, of a more than embarrassing megalomania: "That my exhibition at Krefeld may be the greatest success of the century and be recognized by all."³

The three extracts resemble the kettle-argument all too well, as if in order to be the first, we could gamble on the Evangelist's word (the last shall be first), as if true fidelity to oneself did not demand a readiness to endure all reproach, as if it were an act of piety in Job to sit calculating on his dung heap.⁴ Grace, if we believe in it, can be received but never requested. Between Klein the mystic and Klein the mystifier there is no choice. He is not of the same family as Beuys, for he is both of these at once, the first because of the second and the second because of the first, but he incarnates neither. If he is a mystic it's because his greatest talent lies in self-mystification to the point of credulity. And if he is a mystifier, it's because he is wholly sincere in making others believe that he is a mystic and even more so in making them doubt his sincerity. His life and his work abound in ex-votos because everything in them is on the order of vows and wishes, and because the kettle argument is, with a tedious regularity that bespeaks a certain genius, the mainspring of his artistic wishful thinking. When in 1954 Klein published a little monograph titled *Yves Peintures*, supposedly his first "retrospec-

1. Yves Klein, "Prayer to Saint Rita," trans. W. G. Ryan, in *Yves Klein*, Houston, Houston Institute for the Arts, Rice University, and New York, The Arts Publisher, Inc., 1982, p. 257.

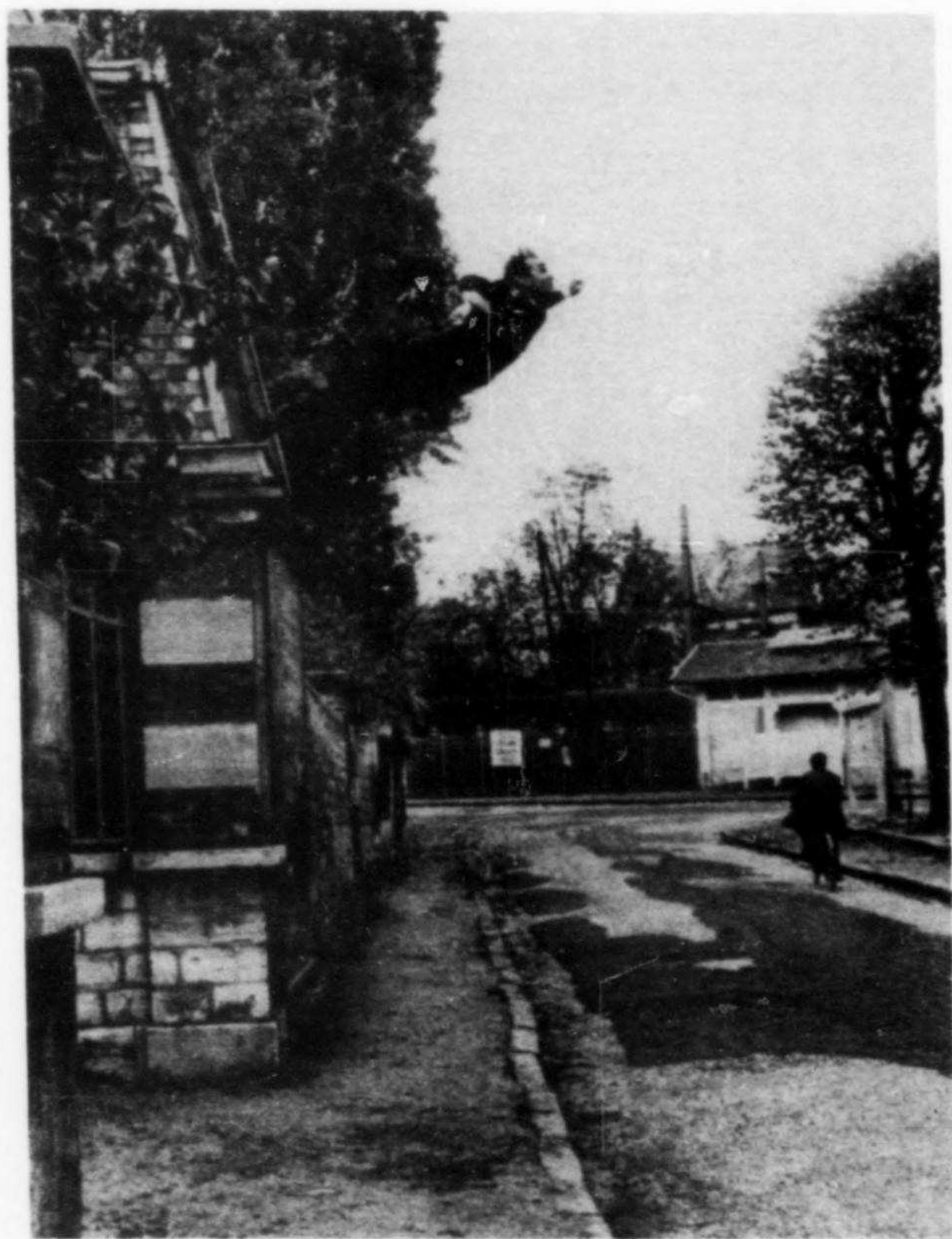
2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. The kettle-argument is used by Freud to describe aspects of dream-logic. "The whole plea — for the dream was nothing else — reminded one vividly of the defence put forwards by the man who was charged by one of his neighbors with having given him back a borrowed kettle in a damaged condition. The defendant asserted first, that he had given it back undamaged; secondly that the kettle had a hole in it when he borrowed it; and thirdly, that he had never borrowed a kettle from his neighbor at all" (Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, New York, Avon Books, p. 153.)

tive," the question as to whether he really painted and exhibited in his hotel rooms in London and Tokyo the monochromes he now reproduced by means of cut papers—whose sizes (reading in millimeters rather than centimeters) referred to themselves rather than to the putative pictures—is a red herring. If he really made them, he demonstrates his precocity and the authenticity of his mystique of the monochrome. If he didn't do them, he shows the clear irony with which he makes fun of *art informel*. If we accuse him of fraudulence, the work retorts that all the hallmarks of fraud were there to be read. And their presence is proof that the artist doesn't cheat. The episode of the cyclist, sometimes present, sometimes absent, from the various publications of the *Painter of Space Jumping into the Void* photograph is out of the same barrel. Either Klein is flying and is gifted with supernatural power, and he makes us believe this; or he jumps and breaks his nose, and we have to admire his courage or his talent at landing, like the good judoist he is. Has he faked the photograph? What's the big deal?

Yves Klein. The Leap into the Void. 1960.



Either he has constructed an image like any other artist, and art has symbolic power and fictive magic; or he wanted us to notice the fakery, and art is in the doubt and the reflection sustained by it. That's the circularity of the kettle argument with Klein, the logic of his "tails I win, heads you lose," which in the final analysis renders him pathetic and distinguishes him from his alter-ego, Manzoni. If one remarks that his ultramarine, despite its undeniable seductiveness and a real, irradiant power, becomes simply an *effect* through repetition, he says that one hasn't really seen it and that all his paintings are different. If, in the grip of this advice, one pays sustained attention to their differences of facture and of size, he jeers and insists that they are all the same. If one returns to the first charge and asks him why, if this is the case, he's made so many of them, he wiggles out of it by saying that pictorial quality is immaterial and invisible, and that between two identical monochromes one can be impregnated with it, the other not. And if one doesn't want to submit to the artist's *fiat*, it's because one is not sensitive enough to see the invisible.

But is Klein aware of the slips of tongue in his circular logic? Here are two which lead — beyond psychology — to economics. Telling about *L'epoca blu*, the Milan exhibition of 1957, in a text that runs the circle described above several times, he gives out this declaration with the artful candor that is his trademark: "Of course the prices were all different." And a little further: "Thus I am looking for the real value of the picture." He is the first to be stunned that the buyers will pay different prices for identical pictures and concludes from this that "it demonstrates that the pictorial quality of each painting was perceivable by means of something else besides the material appearance," and that "those who chose recognized this state of things which I call pictorial sensibility." The buyers paid out unequal sums without caring because they are gifted with a very special feeling for the "real value" and recognize that the prices are fair. *Value* and *price* are conflated in a perfect congruence.

After Beuys, after Warhol, the Klein case shows a third type of congruence between the aesthetic field and that of political economy. With Beuys the congruence is forged by the identification of the artist with the proletariat and the assimilation of labor power to creativity. With Warhol it is forged through the artist's identification with the machine and the assimilation of the work of art to a commodity, but one without value. With Klein it is forged by the assimilation of artistic value to value plain and simple, that is, to exchange-value, and thus by means of the artist's identification with the capitalist, the dealer, with the owner of the means of production. In this equation of values, price is the middle term. For in the aesthetic myth that Klein constructs, the work's price is not what it objectively is, to wit, the measure of scarcity and of monopoly. (If it had been, Klein would not have succeeded in selling identical monochromes at different prices, and even less, the void.) The price is only the expression of exchange-value. No one has succeeded, like Klein, in isolating, under the names of pictorial quality (offering price) or pictorial sensibility (asking price), the pure exchange-

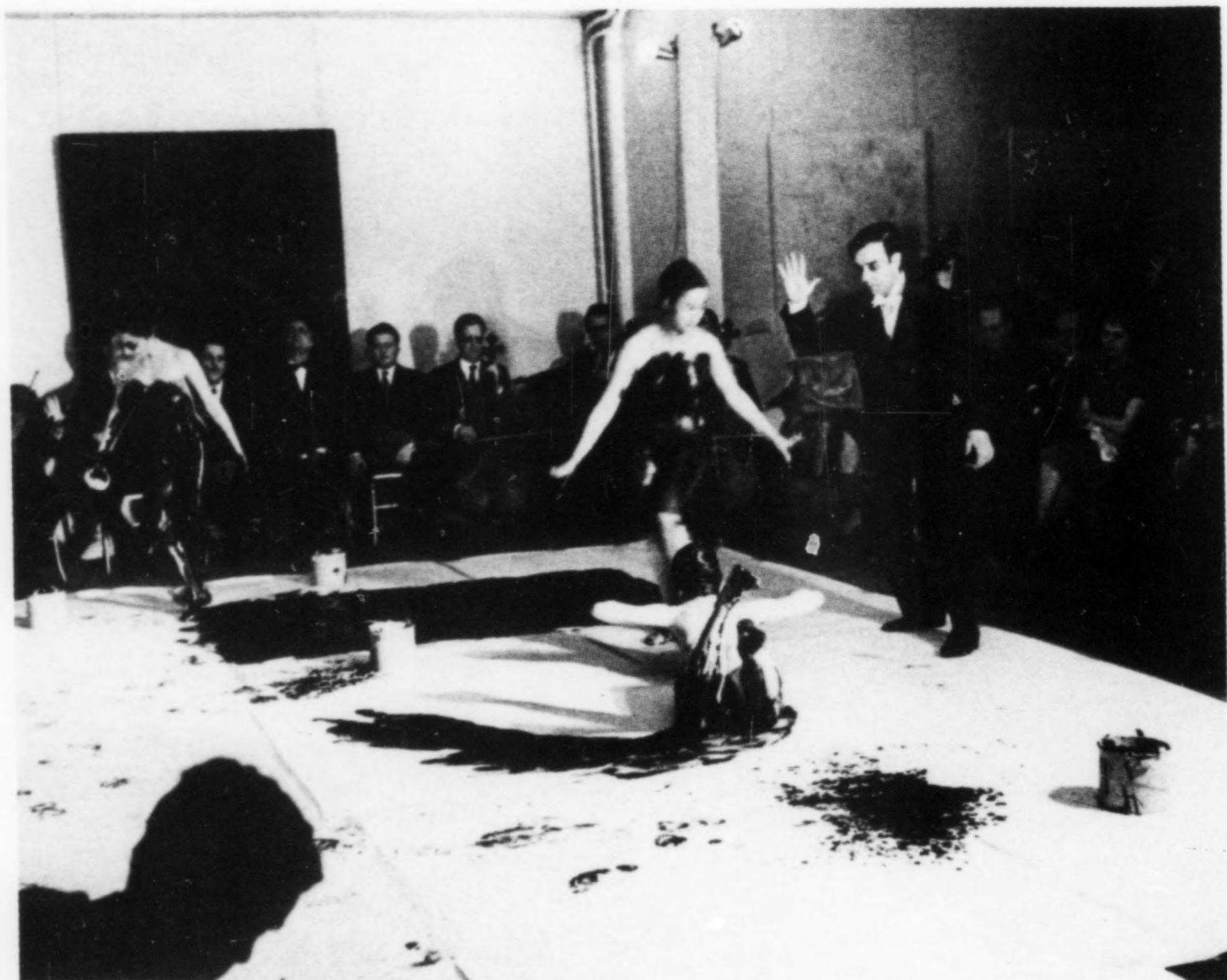
value of a work of art as commodity. That's why he was right to regard the true value of his art as immaterial ("exchange-value as such doesn't contain matter in a natural state," Marx says) and right, as well, to consider that his works, in their materiality, are "the ashes of his art." But it's also why he did a considerable wrong to the avant-gardes (a retroactive wrong, one name of which is "neo-avant-garde"). You can't want to be Malevich and Duchamp both at once while all the time vehemently denying the influence of either. Nothing shows this better than when we place the work of Klein—whose parents were both painters—in its own genealogy, when we compare it to its historical antecedents, and when we try to appreciate him formally, as we have to do. He had his *International Klein Blue* patented and claimed paternity for the monochrome, but not without showing, through the virulence of his denials, that he was aware of Rodchenko and of Strzemiński. He claimed the property rights over the sky's blue, over pictorial space, over the immaterial void, but not without betraying, in his pretention of willing them away, that he had himself received them as a heritage. He hired models whom he used as "living paintbrushes" and actors whom he asked to go about their daily lives considered as a theatrical work signed Yves Klein. He systematically acted as the owner of the means of artistic production, as if such a thing were possible. In reality it was the only path remaining open to him once he had conflated pictorial quality with exchange-value. The wrong he committed against the avant-gardes was committed, above all, against himself.

In the passage of the *Critique of Political Economy* where the future theory of commodity fetishism is sketched, Marx is ironic about the way modern economists believe they have escaped the mystification (his word) of the commodity and "sneer at the illusions of the Monetary System," even while, when they

deal with the more complex economic categories, such as capital, they display the same illusions. This emerges clearly in the confession of naive astonishment when the phenomenon that they have just ponderously described as a thing reappears as a social relation and, a moment later, having been defined as a social relation, teases them once more as a thing.⁵

Mystified mystifier, Klein is, like these economists, the theologian of the artistic commodity, despite himself. The "real value of the picture" is invisible and could only be the hidden social relation that is later to be brutally revealed through its price. The price, in turn, is the expression of the exchange-value that the transaction itself presents as a social relation only to be hidden again in the materiality of the picture. At the very moment when the buyer believes that he or

5. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S. W. Ryazanskaya, New York, International Publishers, 1970, p. 35.



*Yves Klein. Anthropometries of the Blue Period.
Performance at Galerie Internationale d'Art
Contemporain, Paris. March 9, 1960.*

she is acquiring immaterial pictorial value; it is a vulgar monetary quantity that soon returns to sneer at him when it substitutes for a banal painted object in which the seller no longer recognizes anything but the ashes of his art. Like the bourgeois economists, Klein sees only the purely exchangelike nature of this social relation because he conflates value with price. Now price does not incorporate labor, whereas value does. And it's almost by a slip of the tongue that the truth, disguised as "theological quibbles," comes out, while his work is pervaded with the "metaphysical subtleties" of the fetish. The value in question, he says, resides in the incommensurable difference between two identical objects, "one of them, however, painted by a painter and the other by a skilled technician, an artisan." The price difference is supposed to measure the incommensurable and



Spectators at Yves Klein's Anthropometries of the Blue Period performance. March 9, 1960.

to prove that "one of the two objects is a picture, the other not." There's where the trap of wishful thinking closes over Yves-the-monochrome. While Beuys instantiates art in will and Warhol in desire, Klein instantiates it in the avowal or the claim, or, on the auto-proclamation of the artist. He whose only tangible contribution to the history of painting is the chemical formula that allowed him to fix powdered pigment without diminishing its glow, asks us to take him at his word when he pronounces himself a painter instead of judging him on his works, even when the pictures are beautiful. He who was above all a skilled technician and a tireless artisan proclaims himself a painter through the force of wishful thinking. How do we know if he is one? The artisan works, the painter doesn't: "I will be a painter. They will say about me: there's the painter. And I will feel

myself to be a painter, a true one precisely because I won't paint, or at least to all appearances. The fact that I exist as a painter will be the most powerful pictorial work of this age."

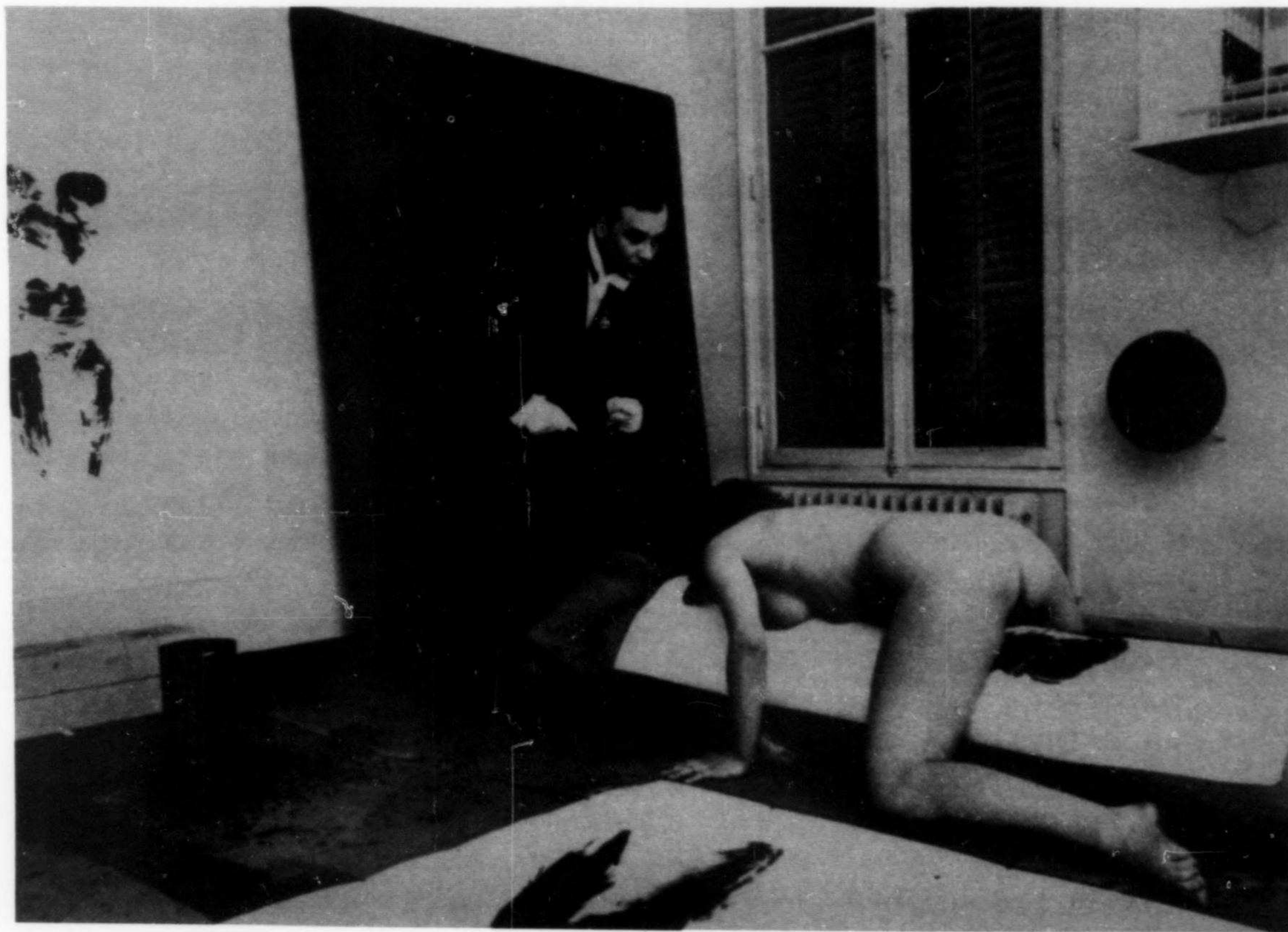
Beuys worked and wanted, in working, to actualize a creative potential present in every human being, not to produce exchange-value. That his work had a price would have to disappear with the coming of his economic system. His artistic fame, far from being a privileged status, was meant to point the way of liberation for all to become fully what they already were. Warhol worked but, in wanting to act like a machine, revealed the fact that in reality no artist works (in the sense of producing exchange value), and the status of all artists is that of existence as prized commodities but without value, that their fame, far from being a proof of personal talent or the emergence of a universal creativity, is the price that their signatures will fetch when their work, over which their dealer has a monopoly, is in demand. Klein worked but wanted it to be his existence and not his activity to which both value and price would be attached; he wanted his status as artist to justify his fame and prove his talent, to have the monopoly over creativity, and the buyer (not the viewer) to have the monopoly over aesthetic pleasure. When he claims not to work, it is not, like Warhol, in order to signify that no painter produces exchange-value; quite to the contrary, it's to assert that he is the only one to be able to produce exchange-value without working. And when he claims that his existence as a painter "will be the most powerful pictorial work of this time," it is not, like Beuys, in order to signify that all human existence, because it is creative in essence, can actualize itself in an artwork; to the contrary, it is in order to appropriate human essence, that is, creativity or labor power, in not actualizing it. He also interprets the Beuysian equation "creativity = capital," but it's capital as accumulation and creativity as private property.

We can see the retroactive wrong Klein commits against the avant-gardes who believed in the liberating power of creativity and wanted to give art its use-value: he claims to appropriate the universal for himself and to sell it by the piece; and the only thing he calls art is nothing but exchange-value. We also see what wrong he committed against himself: the universal isn't divisible and is not for sale. To believe that one could possess it is worse than wishful thinking, it is a sin against humankind; and to believe that exchange-value is *sui generis* is the error of a theologian-economist. Klein the painter who doesn't work, is forced to exploit Klein the working artisan, to alienate his labor power and to reify his production. He deserves to have his Tartuffe-like piety turned round against him, to have all his work reduced to an *ex-voto*; he deserves to be taken at his word with a refusal to judge the "ashes of his art" aesthetically, even when they are beautiful.

Whence might he receive indulgence? Perhaps from the fact that the wrong he committed against both himself and the avant-gardes is one that he has suffered at the hands of these same avant-gardes: from the very fact that they

were demanding reparations for a wrong that can't be proved. Klein's mystical *Schwärmerei* are perhaps not his alone, and he was perhaps more lucid about the avant-garde's liberating utopias than he seemed. Creativity is, after all, only a myth, and Klein lets this be understood by systematically repeating himself, by denying originality, by inviting accusations of fraudulence. The alliance of art and utility in order to achieve a happy society was, after all, nothing but another myth, and in saluting "the functionalists, martyrs of the most beautiful of myths: the equation of happiness," Klein showed he was not the dupe of this alliance. Now creativity is *labor power* and utility is *use-value*. It's Marx's text that articulates, with the strongest rational conviction, concepts which echo throughout all of artistic modernity—this mythical fabric woven in a hundred ways by a warp thread pulled from economics and a woof thread from aesthetics. To it we must therefore return, crossing youthful writings with those of his maturity and recalling that in the latter the two key concepts of labor power and of use-value are introduced precisely to restore the meaning of the abandoned concept of alien-

*Yves Klein and a model making a Shroud
Anthropometry, Paris, February 17, 1960.*



ation. They serve, as well, to justify, politically, that the wrongs committed against producers and consumers through alienation and reification must always be redressed. Labor power and use-value represent the debt of the "scientific" Marx to the "romantic" and Hegelian Marx. It is thus his conception of labor that most clearly reveals wrong done by Marx's anthropology—which defined man as *homo faber* and social ties as relations of production—to the utopias of those many righters of wrongs who would not even have recognized him as one of their own.

What then is labor for Marx? On the one hand, it is the actualization of labor power, the passage of the productive force that defines human essence into deed, the qualitative movement through which mankind appropriates or reappropriates this essence for himself. On the other hand, it is the substance of all exchange-value, the quantitative *Dasein* of human productivity when it is measured by time, which is the quantum of the "*wertbildende Substanz*" incorporated in a commodity. In both cases, labor is general or generic. But not for the same reasons. Labor power is universal, existing "before" division of labor and traversing all social forms, and its actualization fuses generically with the advent of humankind and of the individual as *Gattungswesen*. We are, in a certain way, on that side of the divide where nothing is yet commodity, where, *de jure* if not *de facto*, usage is master, and where, even alienated, the acting-out of labor power is potentially dis-alienated, for it is exactly this potential for dis-alienation that labor actualizes. With labor as substance creative of exchange-value, we are, on the contrary, on the other side of the divide. Here, everything is already commodity, use is deferred, time equalizes what it measures because it is subsequent to the division of labor, making concrete labor an abstraction. Monetary exchange, not human nature, is the universal.

To these general or generic forms there correspond specialized or specific forms. On the one hand, without stopping the actualization of labor force in general, labor as the creator of use-values is always the exercise of a specialized trade or a specific skill, producing a given product for a given use. This labor is concrete, Marx says, and immanent to the social relations of production, which are themselves concrete, to a division of labor that Marx goes so far as to call natural, resulting from the needs of the community and from the customs and skills of its members. It is this labor and these specific relations of production that Marx projects hypothetically into primitive communism and utopically into the communism of the future. On the other hand, while still remaining the labor that Marx calls undifferentiated, common, simple, homogeneous, general, and abstract, labor as creator of exchange-value only takes on these characterizations in contrast with what it must be, with what it would be if it weren't alienated, and with what it potentially is anyway, as creator of use-value, even though use-value is deferred through and for exchange. Alienation is the specific mode of existence of labor, and reification constitutes the specific relations of production in the conditions—themselves specific—of capitalism and the market economy. In

Rose Raymond, Yves Klein, and Marie Raymond at the opening of the Gelsenkirchen city theater. December 15, 1959.



vain did the "scientific," mature Marx abandon the concept of alienation (or via Steuart give it a non-Hegelian content). It nonetheless remains that the constant of his work lies in the attribution to the dialectical contradiction between the generality and the specificity of labor the task of theoretical justification of the possibility of surpassing capitalism and the practical necessity of so doing. How, in fact, can we justify the class struggle, armed revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat, if the still-to-be-invented specificity of the future communist society doesn't promise to hold equally for all, to emancipate, not a particular social class, but humankind as a whole? And how are we to prove that the universality of the commodity and of capitalist exchange is surpassable without first demonstrating that it is only relative to a particular historical situation and to the domination of a specific social class? It falls to labor power—postulated as generic, that is, as transcendent to individual and social classes—to justify in practice the specificity of the emancipated society. And it falls to use-value—postulated as specific, that is, immanent to the customs and to the needs of individuals within society—to justify in theory the possibility of general or generic emancipation.

Labor power and use-value are postulates, Ideas, or transcendentals, and as such undemonstrable. That each person be gifted with creativity, that labor emancipate him or her, and that emancipation in return free labor, is a practical, or "praxical," or political postulate. It's a generous postulate, but nonetheless a postulate. That labor have the satisfaction of a need as its purpose, and that in return the quest for utility guide labor, is a theoretical, or scientific, or ideological postulate. It's a rational postulate, but nonetheless a postulate. They could have remained independent of each other. It was not necessary that the actualization of labor power aim for utility; Bataille, for example, focused it on expenditure. It was not necessary that needs (or desires) find the prime mover of satisfaction in labor; Freud, for example, looked for it in sexuality. But with Marx, the dialectic of the specific and the general insists that one of the two postulates entails the other, and this mutual entailment means in return that the theoretical flows dialectically into the practical and the practical into the theoretical. And it is there that the postulates, undemonstrable as they should remain, make a claim to be demonstrable and harden into dogma and doctrines. "Dialectic" is the name of the wrong directly or indirectly caused by Marx, by Marxism or the Marxisms, and by other parallel emancipatory utopias. We have seen too many historically confirmed examples, including the caricature summed up by the maxim: without a correct theory no just practice, without just practice no correct theory. Who cannot but see a particularly tragic form there—and on what a scale!—of circular wishful thinking?

Psychology doesn't explain everything. Klein surely had, psychologically, just what it took to be this illusionist who deluded himself through wishful thinking. But, like Beuys and Warhol, he too testified. His personal wishful thinking emerges at a precise moment in history (one of those moments that

Marx — him again — had characterized as the return of tragedy in the guise of farce), in this case, the repetition of the “historical” avant-gardes in the parodic disguise of the postwar neo-avant-gardes. (Beuys’s effort seems all the more heroic in comparison, but just as vain, in having tried to give farce the dignity of tragedy again.) It is this historical moment that gives a single, exclusively economic, hue to the palette of Yves-the-monochrome and forces him to recycle unconsciously and in parody a wishful thinking that was not his alone but also that of the “historical” avant-gardes, and, perhaps, that of many a brand of Marxism. Klein, ironically, testified to the failure of the avant-gardist utopias; he unwittingly volunteered to shoulder the wrong that they had in fact done to themselves with the presumption that only identification with the proletariat was just and liberating. It’s not that he was lacking in utopias — the blue revolution, universal levitation — but they were already mere parodies of utopia. His pathos borders on the tragic insofar as the debacle of utopia left him no choice but to embody parodically all the wrongdoers and thus to see, ironically, all the wrongs turn round against him. In identifying himself with the owners of the means of production, he unknowingly assumed the sins of the capitalist. He embodied that which causes the alienation of the proletarian, the reification of commodities, capital, and even capital in its “ultimate” stage, that of monopoly state capitalism. It was unjust — no one has the right of ownership over the artistic means of production — but true. It was, however, only insofar as ownership of the artistic means of production was possible; otherwise it’s merely ridiculous. In other words: if it is true that mankind is defined in its essence by creativity and that it is robbed by the regime of private property; if it is true that we resist exchange-value only by holding fast to use-value; if it is true that alienation and reification are wrongs; if it is true that Beuys and the artistic lineage he embodies are right. Or again, if the Marxist utopia is just and Marxist theory correct; if it is both just and true that a circular dialectic between the specific and the generic “proves” practice by means of theory and vice-versa.

For modern art, one of the names of the specific is *painting*, and the name of the generic is *art*. Their circular dialectic turns to parody in the work and behavior of Yves Klein. Klein’s dilemma lay in his inability to choose between “being a painter” and “playing the artist,” and his wishful-thinking solution was to prove that he was the one because he played the other, and vice-versa. To be a painter he had to paint, to practice a specific trade as an artisan. But Klein wanted the price of his pictures to measure their exchange-value, exclusively, and exchange-value is general. Thus he posed as an artist and exhibited the void. What could be more general? He played the card of art’s social ritual in the context of a commercial gallery where ordinarily what gets exchanged is painting for money, specific aesthetic value for a general equivalent. He still had to establish that exchange actually barter the specific against the general. He titled the exhibition *The Specialization of Sensibility in the State of Primary Matter as Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility*. He thus worked, like a specialized artisan (and in



*Yves Klein, Leonor Fini, and Rotraut Uecker at the
Galerie Rive Droite, Paris. October 11, 1960.*

fact he repainted the gallery white). Yet he still had to cash in the general in order to prove that an exchange had occurred. Therefore he forced the visitors who didn't have an invitation card to pay: "Although all the pictorial sensibility is for sale in shards or in a single block, through impregnation, visitors, consciously or not, will be able to rob me of a certain degree of intensity, despite myself. And that, that above all, that must be paid for." If aesthetic value is exchange-value, only the buyers have the right to it. In return, only the purchase proves that *stabilized pictorial sensibility* has value and that Klein is a painter. He probably thought, however, after the exhibition of the "void" at Iris Clert's in 1958, that the process was inelegant, and incoherent in the bargain: why shouldn't visitors with cards also have to recognize their debt to this artist who calls himself a painter because he possesses pictorial sensibility and doesn't use it to make pictures? With the *Ritual Rules for the Transfer of Zones of Immaterial Pictorial Sensibility* he would refine the demonstration. This time pictorial sensibility is called *immaterial* rather than *specialized* reckoning from a *state of raw material*. Klein no longer paints (not even the gallery white), he is a painter. He no longer sells anything specific but transfers the purely general exchange-value. How will we know that it is *pictorial*? Specificity shifts onto the side of money: no more payment in currency, but in gold. How will we know that exchange has really taken place? Klein delivers a receipt to the buyer. But the receipt is nothing but "ashes": "Every future buyer of a zone of immaterial pictorial sensibility should know that the simple fact of accepting a receipt for the price he has paid deprives him of all authentic immaterial value of the work, even though he is the possessor of it." It is then necessary to reduce the receipt to ashes for the allegiance of the buyer to the *fiat* of the artist to be complete. Then the artist throws half the gold into the sea or the river. "From this moment on, the zone of immaterial pictorial sensibility belongs in an absolute and intrinsic manner to the buyer."

"Klein Sells Wind!" runs the headline of a newspaper. A fool's bargain? Not really. Neither side is wronged. Nothing has been reified, no one is alienated. Klein has pocketed half the gold, but after all it's the painter-artist in him who exploits the artist-painter. Without the "ashes," "the art" would not have found a buyer. The latter has nothing? He has received grace, and that's a lot to a believer. Nothing remains to him but to associate his prayer to that of Yves Klein and to slide it, like the gold of the sale, into the *Ex-Voto* that the artist is ready to deposit at the feet of Saint Rita. But who is Saint Rita? The *transfer* is null and void if it didn't take place "in the presence of a museum director, or a known art dealer, or an art critic, plus two witnesses." Behold Saint Rita. When the mapping of the aesthetic field onto that of political economy attains perfect congruence, Saint Rita takes the form of the representatives of art-as-commerce. These are the owners of the means of production, the possessors of the monopoly of the sensibility for artistic exchange-value. The dealer in wind is dead, and he didn't want his material work to survive him, preferring that his estate be handled by other merchants of the immaterial as devout as he. But when the

mapping of the aesthetic and the economic is so perfectly congruent, its historical dialectic is over, and the dialectic itself turns to parody. When applied to art, the struggle of (specific) use-value and (generic) exchange-value reveals itself to be a concept biased with economism. The modern concept of value, even of aesthetic value, is an economic concept, and it is dated. Perhaps it took Klein's false devoutness and real economism to demonstrate that the judgment by which something is called art (or good art, or significant art) has no more—and no less—to do with values than it had to do with piety and devotion in the days when the field of aesthetics was congruent with the field of religion. Klein shows this despite himself, and it's the only indulgence his ex-votos will have gained him.

The reception history of Klein's work in America is very instructive. His first American show (Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, April 11–29, 1961) was met with indifference and skepticism. He had to come to America to spread the "blue revolution," only to be sneered at as another Mathieu, and the experience left him quite distressed. Then, with his posthumous retrospective at the Jewish Museum in 1967 (*Yves Klein*, Jewish Museum, New York, January 25–March 12, 1967), he was hailed by many as a French precursor of minimalism, and a formalist reading was forced onto the work, neglecting his theatrical activities and his mystical claims. Only Dore Ashton's severe review took them into account and demystified them ("Art as Spectacle," *Arts Magazine* [March 1967], p. 44). Finally, in the "postminimalist" '80s, a certain rehabilitation took place, which, not by chance, had to delve into Klein's peculiar psychology in order to regain indulgence for the work. In a long and honest essay, Thomas McEvilley ("Yves Klein: Conquistador of the Void," in *Yves Klein*, pp. 19–88) handled Klein's case almost as a psychiatrist, probably feeling that this was the only way not to strip the work of the artist's intentions while remaining critical vis-à-vis the mystique underlying it. And Nan Rosenthal, in an equally interesting essay ("Assisted Levitation: The Art of Yves Klein," *ibid.*, pp. 89–135), layed great stress on the circular "logic" by which Klein alternatively claimed and undermined adhesion to his belief system. But whereas she sees redeeming qualities in this "logic," I don't, as I hope my own essay makes clear. Indulgence cannot come from psychology alone, yet indulgence is needed. For Klein is not a negligible artist, and his failure is symptomatic of the fact that he suffered a wrong at the hand of the avant-garde, or of a certain view of the avant-garde. Dore Ashton's arguments against Klein—or those of Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, who took them over and elaborated on them ("Formalism and Historicity," in *Europe in the Seventies*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, 1977, pp. 83–111)—are more truthful to history than those of the formalists who hailed the work, but they are equally unfair. McEvilley's and Rosenthal's readings are fair but condescending in the end. How to find a way out of this alternative is partly what motivated me in writing this essay.

Sontag's Urbanity

D. A. MILLER

AIDS and Its Metaphors, by Susan Sontag, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

In the promotion of *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag has expressed irritation, disappointment, and even hurt that her book has been reviewed by experts on science and AIDS rather than as "writing." This is "a literary performance," she insists in one interview, that "has more to do with Emerson than Randy Shilts."¹ "Imagine," she invites us in another, "M. F. K. Fisher just reviewed for her recipes. First of all M. F. K. Fisher is a writer. Her subject just happens to be food."² The plausibility of such statements depends on assuming a difference, sharp enough to amount to an opposition, between one entity called writing and another called AIDS. It is not the derisory oyster that secretes the pearl of M. F. K. Fisher's prose, or that can help us estimate its luster. Likewise, the comparison implies, AIDS "just happens to be" the most recent incitement to what should more properly, or "first of all," engage our attention: Susan Sontag's ongoing writing project. The claim for the precession and superiority of form over a content whose main function is to justify the elaboration of artistic or literary devices is of course a familiar one, from Wilde, the Russian formalists, even Sontag's own early manifesto "Against Interpretation." As the case of Wilde best illustrates, however, the argument for the secondariness of content typically surfaces in contexts where the content in question, far from being trivial, enjoys a particular volatility whose ignition would catastrophically overwhelm both personal and public spheres together, obliterating whatever barriers had allowed, or required, them to be kept separate. The intellectually

1. Kenny Fries, "AIDS and Its Metaphors: A Conversation with Susan Sontag," *Coming Up!*, March 1989, p. 49.

2. Leah Garchik, "Susan Sontag's Appetite for Life," *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 3, 1989, p. E1.

fatuous, politically repellent desire to scale AIDS down to the import of what one might cook for dinner ("one man's meat . . .") is only comprehensible, therefore, if we recognize how thoroughly it is determined by the dominant cultural reception of AIDS and grasp the continuity of this desire with what elsewhere Sontag herself is capable of recognizing as "practices of decontamination."³ Accordingly, both Sontag's aggressive valorization of writing and her anxious defense of the distance writing must assume vis-à-vis its subject matter bespeak AIDS panic in its looniest form to date: a fear that the epidemic might breach—whether through the "one-dimensional reading"⁴ of unlettered experts or perhaps even the undated importunity of persons with the disease—the all-but-ontological *cordon sanitaire* that protects literary essay writing, as a genre or form. Sontag's insistence on inhabiting and maintaining the boundaries of this category—as, explicitly, against the discourse on AIDS (she is more Emerson than Shilts, and her book, she stresses, is "not another book on AIDS"⁵)—thus inadvertently tends to situate her writing, from its general conception down to the grain of its prose, in the same irrationally phobic relation to AIDS that she alleges an interest in demystifying. In what follows, I will be suggesting that the most serious limitations of Sontag's consideration of AIDS and its metaphors inhere in what enters that consideration mainly tacitly, as the structuring frame of its rhetoric. The trouble—trouble, at any rate, for those engaged in what, against the express wish of Sontag's text, let me persist in calling the *fight* against AIDS—lies not in Sontag's "views" on AIDS (which are, to the admitted confusion of almost every reviewer, strangely hard to come by in any case), so much as in the *attitude of her writing*—by which I mean the unexamined and, I assume, largely unconscious complex of positionings, protocols, and poses that determine her deployment of language.

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Near the end of her "Notes on 'Camp,'" the essay that did most to make her early reputation, Sontag addresses the "peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality": "Homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard—and the most articulate audience—of Camp," whose playfulness, Sontag contends, by dissolving the moral indignation that might otherwise oppress them, promotes their integration into society.⁶ On this account, Camp is a primordially gay phenomenon, emerging within the formation of a specifically gay subculture, at the interface of that subculture with the homophobic culture at large. But when once Sontag has evoked the gay lineage of Camp, she proceeds to deny it

3. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978, p. 6.

4. Quoted in Garchik, p. E1.

5. Quoted in Fries, p. 49.

6. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation*, New York, Delta, 1979, p. 290.

any necessity: "Camp taste is much more than homosexual taste. Obviously, its metaphor of life as theater is peculiarly suited as a justification and projection of a certain aspect of the situation of homosexuals. (The Camp insistence on not being 'serious,' on playing, also connects with the homosexual's desire to remain youthful.) Yet one feels that if homosexuals hadn't more or less invented Camp, someone else would."⁷ That unblinking embrace of counterfactuality can only be understood as not just expressing, but also fulfilling, a wish for a Camp theoretically detachable—and therefore already detached—from gay men (all of whom are parenthetically assumed to be clones of that familiar figure of psychopathology, "the" homosexual, with his self-evident desire to remain youthful, and the rest). The act of severance thus performed, the claim to Camp's origination goes up for grabs—someone else could invent Camp, and who better than the author of this manifestly inventive and authoritative essay? As early as her first page, this author has justified her phobic de-homosexualization of Camp as the necessary condition for any intelligent discourse on the subject. "I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can. For no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intentions, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion." In a memorably lapidary, lapidating conclusion, "To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it."⁸

Twenty-five years later, twenty years "after Stonewall," the same revulsion modifies—almost to the point of elision—Sontag's treatment of gay men in *AIDS and its Metaphors*.⁹ On the mere handful of occasions when they are mentioned, gay men are still called "homosexual men" (25, 76), even "male homosexuals" (76), as though such a term, variously redolent of psychiatry, the police, and social science, and historically assisting in the attempt of such discourses to stigmatize those so named (as sick, criminal, or just "other"), could be—in this context, at this date—at all neutral. The sexual practices of gay men disappear into soft-focus names suitable for (continuing to mystify, refusing to educate) a "general population": such as the "deviance" of sociology (64), the "perversity" of psychoanalysis (26), or the "sodomy" of morality and law (65). (What Sontag calls "specifically the practice of sodomy" [65] is probably the least specific practice in the whole history of sexuality.) In Sontag's idiom, the sadly rich, even fundamental link between gay men and AIDS metaphors vanishes into wider categories ("groups at risk" [91], "despised and feared minorities" [54]) or broader questions. Thus, "denunciations of 'the gay plague' are part of a much larger complaint . . . about contemporary permissiveness" (63); "what moves

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 290–291.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 275–276.

9. Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989. Page references to this book appear in parentheses in the text.

[the neoconservatives' demagogic use of AIDS] is not just, or even principally, homophobia" (63); "risk-free sexuality" is "hardly an invention of the male homosexual subculture" (77); and "'the general population' may be as much a code phrase for whites as it is for heterosexuals" (82). One recalls all those advice columnists and student counselors who routinely offer the reassurance that just because something—a fantasy, a feeling, even an act—looks gay, this "does not necessarily mean" that it is. It is not that Sontag's statements, as such, are untrue; what is disingenuous is rather the pattern in which they are all made, a pattern that consists of denying, in the form of an invitation to move beyond, the specifically gay bearings of AIDS metaphors. A lexicon that not only prefers "homosexual" and "sodomy," say, to "gay" and "anal intercourse," but also, in the definitively heterosexist manner, lets its preference go without saying, puts writing in the service of the homophobic oppression that is exacerbated by AIDS and that underpins the stigmatization of those with AIDS, gay or not. Similarly, the compulsively repeated claim that homosexuality is not the only or even the main topic of AIDS metaphors, *when homosexuality hasn't been elaborated as a topic at all*, becomes a way of actively avoiding the question, of positively preventing its availability for discussion.

Inevitably, such homophobia "of omission" comes to betray its collusion with more active forms of abuse:

An infectious disease whose principal means of transmission is sexual necessarily puts at greater risk those who are sexually more active—and *is easy to view as* a punishment for that activity. True of syphilis, this is even truer of AIDS, since not just promiscuity but a specific sexual "practice" *regarded as unnatural is named as* more endangering. Getting the disease through a sexual practice *is thought to be* more willful, therefore deserves more blame. Addicts who get the illness by sharing contaminated needles *are seen as* committing (or completing) a kind of inadvertent suicide. Promiscuous homosexual men practicing their vehement sexual customs under the illusory conviction, fostered by medical ideology with its cure-all antibiotics, of the relative innocuousness of all sexually transmitted diseases, *could be viewed as* dedicated hedonists—though it's now clear that their behavior was no less suicidal. (26, emphases added)

One needn't be an expert on AIDS to notice how, in this passage, the qualification of every view as *idée reçue*, contingent and hence modifiable cultural fantasy, abruptly ceases in the last sentence, where contestable doxa ("regarded, seen, viewed as") becomes immovable fact: "it's now clear" that the behavior of sexually active gay men "was no less suicidal." Yet insofar as a notion of suicide is inseparable from an intention to kill oneself, then one's infection by a life-threatening virus of whose existence and means of transmission one was entirely ignorant can hardly be considered suicidal outside the punitive fantasy about

male homosexuality—in its blanched New Age form, that such men “chose” their disease—to which Sontag, meaning to demystify it, unwittingly surrenders.

The ethnological perspective, fixing those “promiscuous homosexual men” who practice “their vehement sexual customs” in an alterity without appeal, sparks a similarly uncontrolled backfire in the argument Sontag may believe she is making. If one form of the homophobia in Sontag's text takes the high ground of opposition to racism, by urging us to consider, instead of the gay men implied to be monopolizing all our unstintingly expended concern and resources, those who are sick or infected with AIDS in West Africa (“were AIDS only an African disease . . . few outside of Africa would be concerned with it” [83], “people are being told that heterosexual transmission is extremely rare, and unlikely—as if Africa did not exist”[26]), another form is by no means above relying on that very racism, however unintentionally, by inscribing gay men in the most abusive stereotypes of our popular anthropology of the African “tribe” (e.g., “in the 1970s . . . many male homosexuals reconstituted themselves as something like an ethnic group, one whose distinctive folkloric custom was sexual voracity”[76]). Equally, the moralism that insinuates notions of sexual “promiscuity,” “vehemence,” and “voracity” must also render Sontag's dismissal of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Norman Podhoretz, and their like as “specialists in ugly feelings” (63) merely gestural.

Neither the epidemic's changed demographics nor the changes in our awareness of them have much altered its poetics. As the vehicle of metaphor, the point of reference in what Paula Treichler has called “an epidemic of signification,”¹⁰ AIDS remains centrally a gay disease, the disease of gayness itself. It is amazing that Sontag could imagine setting us free from the tyranny of AIDS metaphors without acknowledging the large and specific extent to which that tyranny, though exercised *over* every person or group sick, infected, at risk, or merely panicstricken, is exercised *through* activating and justifying homophobia against gay men; or without feeling therefore obliged to interrogate those metaphors as the precipitate of deep-seated and widespread cultural fantasies attaching to gay men, as intimately and forcibly as the tattoo that, in this sense, William F. Buckley, Jr.'s monstrous proposal allows us to recognize *has already been inscribed* on the “private” parts—say, for instance, on the fucking assholes—of their bodies.

It is, of course, the peculiar status of such fantasies that their relatively candid expression, as by Buckley, incurs a manifest risk. As anyone adept in the *bon usage* of homophobia knows, too much of it is as apt to be thought to betray homosexual desire as too little; becoming a fully entitled man in our society—not the usual fate of teenage gaybashers, who more likely grow up, for instance,

10. See Paula Treichler, “AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,” *October*, no. 43 (Winter 1987), pp. 31–70.

pumping Buckley's gas — means not just learning homophobia, but also learning to acquire the calculation-become-intuition that would moderate it, or rather silence its expression just short of the point where it might start to show. It is homophobia, not homosexuality, that requires a closet, whence it characteristically makes its sorties only as a multiply coded allusion, or an unprovable, if not improbable, connotation. Such featherweight pressure, however, is all that is required to activate — via a chain of displacements to rival a Freudian dream — fantasy positions and defenses whose cumulative effect on gay men and on gay desire has been thus almost inarticulably harmful. (News still deemed fit to print: the *New York Times* speaks of the "limp blond hair" of Rock Hudson's lover, not to mention his wrist; and as it quotes John Tower apologetically saying, "I don't usually wear pink shirts," it notices "his powder-pink cuff" as a way of unpacking his own implicit evocation of the powderpuffs who usually affect this color.)

All this is why a sustained understanding of homophobia matters crucially to an attempt to intervene in the social construction of AIDS, and why the failure to offer such an understanding must compromise the integrity — I mean the coherence as well as the honesty — of any account of this construction. (Purporting to advance beyond mere homophobia, for instance, Sontag finds AIDS offering a reference to fantasies of apocalypse, as though such fantasies, starting from Sodom and Gomorrah, were at all extricable from the decor of a homosexualized decadence.) This is also why the operational effects of homophobia cannot be dismissed as self-evident, as Sontag's bored preteritions are apt (and anxious) to imply, for reading the homophobic social text in the sinuous process of its condensation-and-displacement into AIDS metaphors, as Simon Watney for example does in *Policing Desire*, requires no less deft or detailed attention than an analyst might give to a dream, a literary critic to a poem, or M.F.K. Fisher to her menus. (Sontag's valorization of writing would be more persuasive if it were accompanied by a valorization of the act of *reading* that any writing worthy of the name performs.) And this is why the call for an analysis along these lines will sound tendentious, shrill, "one-dimensional," while the various forms of denegation — it's not (just, mainly, at all) homophobia — retain the plausibility of urbanity itself.

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Although Sontag perfectly sees through the notion of "the general population" in AIDS discourse, where it means (by seeming to not just mean) a white, heterosexual middle class, and where its use therefore reaffirms the agenda of this class at its most invisibly oppressive, her own writing on AIDS is nonetheless determined through and through by its imagined address to, and on behalf of, an analogously pseudo-universal and -unified entity she at one point calls, without apology or explanation, "general consciousness" (72). Such an address obliges the writing to simulate a disinterestedness that must be "proven" not just by the

arrogant silence it keeps about whatever interests thereby retain all the power of presumption, but also by the anxious spectacle it always makes of itself—in those feats of keeping proper balance or distance, whose treachery is supposed to edify, or in that ever and evenly shifting attention, whose shortness of span can pass for an exhilarating breadth. The writer is—but must also be shown to be—unsituated in any noticeably peculiar and hence “partial” relation to her subject; her language is—but must also be shown to be—as impeccably detached as the thought whose motions it transcribes. In this sense Sontag's closing recommendation that military metaphors of illness be “retired” (94)—as though there were no violence in forced retirement—only reveals how high above the fray of competing interests and meanings she imagines situating what in fact can't help being her intervention, no less contentious than any other, in that struggle. (Even Sontag's one powerfully “personal” gesture—a resonant unsentimental account of the cancer that spurred her to write *Illness as Metaphor*—is doubly dislocated by the exactions of impersonality. In the first place, she is only able to confess her private interest in that “little book” [13] now that the interest, no longer current, has evolved into a story whose adventure is complete, and long after the book has consolidated a considerable reputation—as “a classic essay,” the jacket reminds us—without benefit of such confession; and secondly, in the new little book where the story is interpolated, it necessarily acquires a new meaning—if Sontag wrote about cancer metaphors because she had cancer, then she writes about AIDS metaphors because . . . she had cancer = does not have AIDS—that reinforces her separateness from the epidemic, and makes the question of her relation to it all the more inscrutable, all the more urgent to pose.)

The pacification to which Sontag thinks to subject her writing finds its clearest articulation in the notion of metaphor that in various guises has long presided over her work. For Sontag, metaphor, or its earlier stand-in “interpretation,” designates a dimension of discourse that is largely, if not entirely, dispensable—dispensable in principle, or cognitively, and dispensable as a matter of principle, or ethically, too. As she puts it in *Illness as Metaphor*, “The most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is the one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking.”¹¹ Her consequent aim, in *AIDS and its Metaphors* as well, is to liberate illness from the metaphors deforming it into the literality that is, she argues, the only state propitious for understanding and cure. As for the language employed on the rescue mission, it must imagine itself, as Peter Brooks has seen, inhabiting “a Platonic dream,” where it “would give direct access to realities rather than the displaced symbols of realities.”¹² It will do anything to remain in this dream, if necessary even feign to awaken from it. “Of course I know, say, with Emerson, that language is ‘fossil poetry’ and, with Nietzsche, that truth is ‘a mobile army of metaphors’ merely

11. Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 3.

12. Peter Brooks, “Death of/As Metaphor,” *Partisan Review*, vol. XLVI, no. 3 (1979), p. 443.

too worn out for us to recognize them as such. But because I know it, because I've said I know it, please let me be permitted to go on as though I *don't* know it." Thus, at the start of *AIDS and its Metaphors*: "Of course, one cannot think without metaphors. But that does not mean there aren't some metaphors we might well abstain from or try to retire. As, of course, all thinking is interpretation. But that does not mean it isn't sometimes correct to be 'against' interpretation" (5). The only interventions Sontag conceives making in the world of metaphor, even as she acknowledges that a speaking or writing subject can dwell in no other, involve retiring or abstaining from metaphor—and not, for instance, choosing, inventing, or modifying it. (Likewise, the purpose of the strategy she calls "against interpretation" is "not to confer meaning . . . but to deprive something of meaning" [14].) And the slide from abstaining from some metaphors to opposing interpretation *en bloc* is telling of the all-encompassing drift of her aversion. If *Illness as Metaphor* figures metaphor as illness—unhealthy, unhygienic, a kind of germ that thinking must resist and language needs to sterilize, *AIDS and its Metaphors* carries abhorrence still further and disgustedly construes metaphor as a kind of sexual transmission of disease. Sontag urges us to "abstain" from the "seductiveness" (5) of metaphor, as passionately as the legionnaires of the new decency counsel "abstinence as the best way of safeguarding against AIDS" (75). Just as for them truly safe sex means no sex at all, so for her the only secure practice of metaphor must avoid the practice—or rather, must assume it can. Through identifying writing with an ideal of its own neutrality, this untenable but tenacious attitude dispenses Sontag from ever having to consider the complicities of her language in any way that she can't meet with the perfunctoriness of disavowal. Such constant inattention accounts for why *AIDS and its Metaphors* is so often and variously to be found retracting its author's ostensible arguments, and why the book is positively haunted by metaphors and myths that, by no means having given up the ghost, contradict her values far more emphatically than she knows how to profess them. But it also explains why Sontag appears to enjoy an obviously good conscience even as her language continues to ratify the prejudice, oppression, and violence that gay people and people with AIDS daily encounter. She is doubtless blissfully ignorant, for instance, about what packs the punch in so striking—I mean so assaultive—a phrase as "promiscuous homosexual men practicing their vehement sexual customs," where a kind of excess associated with gay male *sex* (promiscuity) and a kind of excess usually linked to *rhetoric* (vehemence) mutually provide the altogether phobic metaphors for describing one another and for inciting a desire to "retire" them both. The only good metaphor—whoever thought this belief would come so near to enacting the savagery of an AIDS joke?—is a dead one.

"General consciousness," moreover, has an unconscious whose cathexes belie (and hence necessitate keeping up) the appearances of neutrality: what this consciousness doesn't want to think, but determines nonetheless how it does

think, is its smitten identification with the priorities of a transatlantic intelligentsia (white, heterosexual, and "generalist" in every other way as well), as these are manufactured and managed for the readership of the *New York Review of Books*, say, where a shortened version of *AIDS and its Metaphors* first appeared. It is the complaisant assumption of this readership, who may find reflected in Sontag's mandarin aloofness the fantasy of its own distance from the epidemic, that entails her unrelenting intellectualization of AIDS (via a rhetoric of cognitive advantage in which everything is "predictable" and nothing is "surprising" — except to readers who are therefore, as it used to be said of sailors, impressed) as well as her no less insistent colonization of AIDS for high culture (high on the order of whose business-as-usual is deciding where to situate the epidemic in relation to "modernity"). The particularity, not to speak of the urgency, of the epidemic is eclipsed in the need to show oneself "smart" about it — or just "smart," period. "Plague, from the Latin *plaga* (stroke, wound), has long been used metaphorically as the highest standard of collective calamity, evil, scourge. Procopius . . ." (44), and away we go, as in a certain kind of term paper that seems to have no point beyond its conspicuously consumable deftness in maneuvering among the monuments of culture. Yet though it is bad enough that AIDS is diminished to an occasion for a *son et lumières* of such monuments (Camus, Defoe, Donne, Manzoni, Poe, "but where is Boccaccio? and who is Čapek?"), it is perhaps worse when AIDS is taken to reaffirm the rightness of a whole mystified relation to them. With Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Sontag suggests that "the theory [of miasma] inspired at least one great work of art" (42), and goes on to write a program note for the next major production. It is as though the erroneousness of the theory were to this extent redeemed, or, in general, as though the entelechy of everything were the great work of art that at once justifies and consoles us for the conditions of its making. In the treatment of AIDS that this piety must impose, whatever about the epidemic can't be banalized by being encoded in a network of cultural citations serves to legitimate the proliferation of such citations by vouching for their relevance. AIDS is thus transformed from a disease into a wonder drug — desperate times requiring desperate measures — applied to the agonies of a "traditional culture" imagined to be in critical condition, perhaps even in extremis. Sontag is right when she says that *AIDS and its Metaphors* is "not another book about AIDS"; rather it is another book (to be set next to Allan Bloom's or E. D. Hirsch's) that defends this culture, whose value ("these fragments I have shored against my ruins") the epidemic provides a usefully extreme opportunity for once again recommending.

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It is then precisely its *refusal* to take itself as writing, with writing's constitutive metaphors and metaphors' constitutive social implication and reverberation, that allows this book to reinforce the very tendencies in the figuration of AIDS

—the homophobia, racism, and cultural conservatism — that it otherwise might have more successfully challenged. AIDS anxiety, we learn, for a last instance, “inevitably” communicates a fear of polluting people (73); the end-of-the-world rhetoric that AIDS has evoked “inevitably” builds a case for repression (86); in the countdown to a millennium, a rise in apocalyptic thinking may be “inevitable” (87); and so on. What sort of “liberation” can be effected by an analysis whose terms make it thus consonant with “the standard plague story . . . of inexorability, inescapability” (53)? So thoroughly does that story come to take Sontag herself prisoner that by the end she gives up even pretending to be doing something besides retelling it: “AIDS” — not its metaphors — “may be extending the propensity for being inured to vistas of global annihilation which the stocking and brandishing of nuclear arms has already promoted” (87). “Like the effects of industrial pollution and the new system of global financial markets, the AIDS crisis is” — just is — “evidence of a world in which nothing important is regional, local, limited; in which everything that can circulate does, and every problem is, or is destined to become, worldwide” (92). “AIDS is” — not, a myth of AIDS makes it — “one of the dystopian harbingers of the global village, that future which is already here and always before us, which no one knows how to refuse” (93). Just as what was identified as a variety of views about sexually transmissible diseases suddenly yielded to the plain “truth” that large numbers of gay men have lately taken to committing suicide, so, following a similar warp, Sontag’s overall project of critically examining AIDS myths ends by uncritically exemplifying what she has herself said is the most disabling of them. AIDS makes its last fading appearance in her pages as just another figure of a world that pollution, nuclear armament, mass communications, and international capitalism have already brought to the verge of apocalypse, whose imminence, it is maintained, is now permanent. Having only further generalized the *fin-de-siècle*, *fin du monde* spell of futility she said she wanted to break, Sontag must give to her original project this holy-minded twist, when she comes to sum it up: the effort to detach AIDS from its meanings and metaphors is no longer just “liberating,” but now also “even consoling” (94). Consolation has to be “even” higher on Sontag’s scale of values than liberation because it is meant to make up for a liberation whose worse than inanity can no longer be hidden — except, of course, as “consolation.” Consolation for whom? for people with AIDS, many of whom cannot even get treatment, whose disease has just been demeaned as one more sign to the well and well off of their cultural competence? for those who, in exchange for their dead, have just received a reading list of plague classics and some survey course schemas to help them not have to get through it?

But consolation may in fact be all that is left to readers willing to follow Sontag’s modest proposal, in her next paragraph, that the military imagery around illness be “retired” (94). Unwilling to specify which war metaphors are particularly demoralizing to people with AIDS, Sontag characteristically rejects them all, as all contributing equally powerfully to “the excommunication and

stigmatizing of the ill" (94). In doing so, she forgets how well one such military metaphor—the one conveyed in the word "polemic" (15) (from the Greek *polemos* [war])—served her as a cancer patient, beset by debilitating myths of "responsibility" and "predisposition." She also overlooks how vital another such metaphor—the one conveyed in the word *militancy* (from the Latin *miles* [soldier])—is proving to people with AIDS and to the AIDS activism of which they stand at the center. "Fight back, fight AIDS," is a chant of this activism, one of whose many organizations calls itself Mobilization Against AIDS. It is almost unspeakably insulting to suggest that "fighting AIDS" sooner or later means fighting people with AIDS in a context where the notion has authorized the pursuit, by people with AIDS, first among others, of such very different goals as increased research funding, expanded medical resources, greater access to them, humane drug trials, safe sex education, and housing and legal protection for the sick. Under these circumstances, Sontag's silence about people with AIDS—with self-representations and agendas, too—amounts to a kind of silencing. Acknowledging no duty to speak of them, her text makes a last recommendation that would deny them the right to speak of themselves—polemically, militantly, in any voice but that of victims who now have something else they need "consoling" for. No doubt that recommendation, like much else in *AIDS and its Metaphors*, was drafted in ignorance; but how can a writing so frequently allowing for no better defense achieve any relation to AIDS that is not merely—to make use of an AIDS metaphor—opportunistic?

A New History of the Passions

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. . . and you, madame, draw yours near
that I may handle it . . . that I may so-
cratize it . . .

—D.A.F. Sade,
Philosophy in the Bedroom

On June 30, 1986, the Supreme Court of the United States upheld a Georgia law which makes sodomy a criminal offense. In a concurring opinion, Chief Justice Burger explained that the court's decision was motivated in part by the traditional Judaeo-Christian condemnation of homosexual sodomy, which is stigmatized by quotation from Blackstone's *Commentaries*. In accordance with English common law, which became the received law of colonial Georgia, sodomy is characterized as, "the infamous crime against nature,' as an offense of 'deeper malignity' than rape, an heinous act 'the very mention of which is a disgrace to human nature,' and 'a crime not fit to be named.'"¹ Yet, if there is to

1. *New York Times*, July 1, 1986, p. A18. If there is anything "heinous" in this matter, it is the Supreme Court ruling itself, which is blatantly anti-homosexual. Briefly stated, this ruling results in the fact that there is now no constitutionally protected right to engage in homosexual activity, and the protections afforded heterosexual sexual activity (including sodomy), shielded by a "zone of privacy," are not extended to homosexuals. Thus, not only is this a flagrant invasion of privacy, but, even more distressing, it gives a clear sign to lower courts to rule against homosexual rights in other matters, such as cases of job discrimination, child custody, etc. This ruling—superficial, illogical, insensitive, and based on a distorted use of historical precedents—must be carefully examined for what it is: an outrightly prejudicial act. Such a study is beyond the scope of this article, which is instead concerned with some considerations of a genealogical analysis of the symbolic structure of sodomy, and its particular utilization in Sade's text. Though the notion of sodomy in Sade is not directly related to issues of homosexuality, I nevertheless hope that this study will suggest a new facet of a critique of current prejudices.

be any civilization whatsoever, the cultural field must be rigorously separated from the natural domain; the term *human nature* is an oxymoron, since it is precisely the unnatural which is particularly human. Thus the incest prohibition, as the very founding structure of human community, entails the suppression of the natural act of incest, and establishes society by means of simultaneous inauguration and exclusion of a perverse domain. (It is the incest prohibition, rather than incest itself, that is a "crime against nature.") The discourse of transgression is the basis of legalism; as Deleuze and Guattari tell us, "The law is inscribed in a pornographic book." We are therefore compelled to ask why, in this recent court ruling, an act such as sodomy is deemed literally unspeakable, and, further, to examine the implications of its symbolic efficacy.

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Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, the tale of Eugénie's initiation into libertinage—signaled by her defloration—is a *Bildungsroman* whose denouement reveals the very conditions of the possibility of narrative; it reveals the institution of that utopian autofiguration where the subject shows itself to be without origins, unnatural, acivil, sovereign.

The seventh and final dialogue of this tale begins with the arrival of Eugénie's mother, Madame de Mistival, who demands the return of her young, innocent daughter from the libertines. Eugénie is astounded by the impertinence of her mother, who dares hint that her daughter may be in bad company, insisting upon her daughter's awareness of "the rights I have over her." The remainder of the narrative is a discourse on the absurdity of these "rights" and an account of their destruction. Madame de Mistival is summarily raped, sodomized, and tortured both by those libertine "monsters" who surround her and by her very own daughter, who exalts in their actions. "Here I am: at one stroke incestuous, adulteress, sodomite, and all that in a girl who lost her maidenhead only today! . . . What progress, my friends!"² This concludes with the torture of Eugénie's mother by having her sex sewn up; Eugénie finds this an "excellent idea! Quickly, quickly, fetch me needle and thread! . . . Spread your thighs, Mama, so I can stitch you together—so that you'll give me no more little brothers and sisters."³ Eugénie gains her autonomy and sovereignty by excluding herself from all possible kinship relations; she rejects all responsibility to any family structure (denying her mother's rule over her) and eliminates any possibility of continuing her lineage. Her mother's womb, out of which she was delivered to life, is sewn up, and she herself learns of techniques to regain her virginity, her primal "innocence," by sewing herself up. "A pretty girl should concern herself only with *fucking* and never with engendering."

2. D. A. F. de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, trans. Richard Seaver and Austin Wainhouse, New York, Grove Press, 1966, p. 359.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 363.

This scandalous narrative is interspersed with, and justified by, the usual Sadian treatise, here expounded by Dolmancé, one of Eugénie's libertine initiators. When asked if the aim of such acts is simultaneously to outrage nature, God, and humanity, he replies:

I've told you a thousand times over that Nature, who for the perfect maintenance of the laws of her general equilibrium, has sometimes need of vices and sometimes of virtues, inspires now this impulse, now that one, in accordance with what she requires; hence, we do no kind of evil in surrendering ourselves to these impulses, of whatever sort you may suppose them to be.⁴

Here is the source of Sade's paradox, his central contradiction: in order to institute the human realm, each person—*in imitatio naturalis*—must aspire to the greatest destructive evil precisely to contest an overbearing, suffocating nature that thwarts one's pleasures at every moment, all the while creating desires beyond the bounds of human possibility. And yet, every possible human act is duly authorized by that very same nature, which is the one cause—efficient, material, formal, and final—of every action. Nature is that which must be transgressed in order to affirm one's humanity, one's sovereignty; yet that nature can never be transgressed, since we are part of it—an impossible dialectic.

Structuralist anthropology teaches us that myth entails the dissimulation of the contradictions of human existence, that myth is a logical model for overcoming such contradictions. In *Structural Anthropology*, Claude Lévi-Strauss shows how communication is a function of the exchange of complimentary values; what is exchanged may be objects, women, words. The originary guarantee of exchange is the negative injunction of the incest prohibition, which is the zero-degree syntax of the nature/culture, cosmic/human differentiation. This negative injunction/positive disjunction entails the fluidity of exchange in a restricted reciprocity between social systems, all the while creating an exclusionary zone of prohibitions—the family or tribe. The exogamous move, by means of the incest prohibition, from a closed to an open (yet limited) system entails the structuring of subjectivity around the overrating of blood relations, and the consequent denial of individual autonomy in favor of the exigencies of community. The central figure within such a system of exchange is the woman, who plays the paradoxical role of being the object of personal desire (the husband's) and the object of the other's desire. (Parallel to the originary use of words, she is both a sign and a value; yet she is a very special sign, because she, too, speaks. She is a sign and a creator of signs.) This split in the symbolic function is the paradoxical constitution of femininity; the "resolution" of this contradiction is established by

4. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

the social exchange of complimentary values, whereby a certain amount of pleasure taken in women is renounced for a certain amount of family stability and tribal expansion.

Yet no reciprocity is possible in pure pleasure: nature is the absence of prohibitions. Hence, in the concluding lines of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, Lévi-Strauss evokes an Andaman myth which describes utopia as that situation which avoids all exchange: "The bliss of the hereafter as a heaven where women will no longer be exchanged, i.e. removing to an equally unattainable past or future the joys, eternally denied to social man, of a world in which one might *keep to oneself*."⁵ Such a utopia is the total denial of alliances for the sake of the pure exertion of personal autonomy and the sexual instincts. But this would be a "misuse" of women-as-signs, since signs are destined for communication: the origins of the symbolic are tied to the origins of legality, which find their metaphysical justification in the belief that there is no such thing as a "private language."

It is therefore perhaps not so surprising that the dissenting opinion against the Supreme Court decision, written by Justice Blackmun, was in part argued on the basis of the Fourth Amendment guarantee of the right to privacy and the integrity of the home. Extrapolated from these rights is "the right of an individual to conduct intimate relationships in the intimacy of his or her own home," and ultimately the right to be *different*. In short, this is the utopian right to *keep to oneself* in attaining one's pleasures, and thus to avoid social exchange. The difference between the majority and dissenting opinions in this case thus reveals the central aporia upon which the United States Constitution is based: the contradictions between public and private life. And it is precisely the limit of this logic which maintains the restrictions upon those very pleasures which may be sought in the privacy of the home: incest is still deemed monstrous. The Sadian libertine utopia—symbolized by the isolation of the chateau and its secret chambers—is founded on incest as a truly universalizing factor. The legalistic constitutional utopia—symbolized by the inviolable privacy of the home—is founded, however, on the prohibition of incest as an ultimate guarantee of community and exchange, that is, as the guarantee of legalism's efficacy. Thus in the case of sodomy, the Sadian text serves as a panopticon, permitting a total expression of the deed. On the contrary, the Supreme Court is divided on this issue: the majority deems sodomy an "unspeakably heinous" crime *not fit to be named*, while the minority deems it an act *not fit to be seen*. The former would have sodomites incarcerated, while the latter would have them sequestered, hidden in the home. Curious, this severe limitation on the space of utopia.

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5. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Belle, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969, p. 497.

The formation of any epistemological model will largely depend on what mode of consciousness is taken as its paradigmatic instance (neurosis, psychosis, or perversion). If, as is the case for Sade, perversion is taken to be an emblematic sign which organizes the discursive system, then the specificity of the perversion will determine the communicative and critical functions of the discourse.

Pierre Klossowski wrote, along with Georges Bataille (in protest against the surrealists), the "dissenting opinion" on Sade, correctly seeing sodomy as the perverse phantasm at the center of Sade's work.⁶ The act of sodomy is emblematic of the libertine's struggle against the natural order. While incest contests the cultural order, it nevertheless remains a natural, productive act—even though it may produce monsters, as popular tradition insists. Sodomy, on the contrary, is an unproductive act, a wasteful expenditure of energy and life whereby the species is put to death in the individual, and "natural" sexual differentiation is denied in an act of sexual indifferenciation. (For the Sadian sodomite, the vagina is merely an inferior anus.) This inmixing of life and death, of sperm and shit, denotes an amoral categorical imperative through which the differentiation between nature and culture may be effected on the eroticized body. Yet this entry into culture does not entail an implementation of, or insertion into, the symbolic; rather, the sodomite passion and phantasm create a confusion of genders which short-circuits the symbolic. It collapses the representational order by means of the very contestation of the normative system, induced by the deeds of those sovereign, libertine, "integral monstrosities" depicted by Sade.

Klossowski's analysis of the cultural realm, via Sade, depends upon the differentiation between institutional norms and libertine anomalies, as these differences are played out on the phantasmatic scenario of the body: (1) The world of institutional norms is organized by the procreative law of the species, the logical structure of language, and the universal codes of quotidian existence. It maintains a determinate system of values that governs exchange; hence the commercialization of voluptuousness, where the circulation of wealth is a pretext for the circulation of bodies in the interest of institutions.⁷ (2) The closed world of the Sadian libertine is governed by the anomalies of the singular passions (though these passions are always rigorously ordered in the erotic scenarios). This is an order characterized by the domain of the incommunicable, unexchangeable phantasms, which exclude the libertine from gregarious existence. Here, "the only authentic universal communication is through the exchange of

6. For Pierre Klossowski's analysis of Sade, see *Sade mon prochain*, Paris, Seuil, 1967; *La monnaie vivante*, Paris, Losfeld, 1970; and "The Phantasms of Perversion: Sade and Fourier," trans. Paul Foss and Paul Patton, *Art & Text*, no. 18 (July 1985), pp. 22–34. For some current readings of Klossowski on Sade, see Paul Foss, "On the 'Difficulty' of Picturing the Emotions of Pierre Klossowski"; Alphonso Lingis, "The Incommunicable"; Chantal Thomas, "The Indiscreet Gaze"; and Allen S. Weiss, "A Logic of the Simulacrum," all in *Art & Text*, no. 18.

7. Klossowski, "The Phantasms of Perversion," p. 31. As all Madison Avenue advertising agencies know, simulacra can be used to *create* such phantasms, as well as being their external sign.

bodies by the secret language of body signs."⁸ The value of the perverse phantasm, because unique, is indeterminate: it can only be established in relation to the emotions it produces. Hence the extreme, monomaniacal claim of one Sadian hero, who would be perfectly willing, indeed thrilled, to sacrifice an entire population in exchange for a single brief pleasure.

Mediating between these two worlds is that strange oxymoron, the "unique sign." This sign—a simulacrum of the incommunicable phantasm—is structured like a myth, mediating the contradiction between autonomy and gregariousness, between libertine and "normative" modes of exchange. Within the institutional world the unique sign is empty of determinate exchange, operating in a sublimable system of communication. Within the libertine world, the unique sign is full of the passions, a mark of perverse desublimation. These dual possibilities of valorization entail the following dilemma: "either communication through the exchange of bodies, or prostitution under the sign of Money."⁹ Thus what seems to be Klossowski's absurd resolution of this problem—the "postulate of a universal prostitution" and payments in "living money"—is in fact an inverted, perverse instance of Lévi-Strauss's Andaman utopia. One may keep to oneself only by eliminating all structures of exchange, and this can be accomplished only by dissolving the incest taboo, that is, by truly universalizing erotic possibility, by permitting erotic encounter within the family. For Lévi-Strauss, this universalization serves the Andamans as an ultimate contraction of the erotic world; for Sade, the incestuous universalization is, rather, an expansion of libertine possibility within the world of the sealed chateau. The body is completely devalorized for the Andaman, while it is fully valorized for the Sadian. In both cases, utopia is achieved in a closed system which contests both nature and culture, hence the "danger" of its rules and the unspeakable character of its deeds.

*

We are currently in the midst of a reconsideration of Sade's work, this time centered on Jean-Jacques Pauvert's republication of the *Complete Works*. The development of Sade scholarship in this century is intimately linked with the surrealist movement. The first major critical texts which treat Sade's oeuvre as a total coherent system of thought—studies by Maurice Heine and Gilbert Lély—were published in surrealist journals, and the surrealists themselves considered Sade as one of their major precursors. But the prime import of Sade's role in this history appears around 1930, the time of the rupture in the surrealist movement, and in the ensuing polemic between Breton and Bataille, much of which was centered on Sade.¹⁰

8. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

9. *Ibid.*

10. On the André Breton/Georges Bataille debate, see especially Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*; and Bataille's "The Use Value of D. A. F. Sade," in *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl,

Breton's tautological claim in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* — "Sade is Surrealist in sadism" — may be understood according to the following motivations: (1) the polemical shock value of Sade's name as a weapon in the revolutionary attempt to upset given cultural values, to *épater la bourgeoisie*; (2) the psychoanalytically oriented attempt to develop a theory of sadism as part of the epistemological foundations of surrealist aesthetics; (3) a hyperbolic exemplification of the marvelous, the surreal. Yet this tautology is also a generality which hides a certain moralistic embarrassment; it dissimulates the specifics of the Sadian text in which sodomy, murder, coprophilia, incest, and the other perversions play a central rhetorical role. In fact, we find a combination of moral outrage and visceral disgust in Breton's response to questions posed in a series of discussions on sexuality, "Recherches sur la sexualité," in *La révolution surréaliste*, no. 11 (1928). Once the discussion turned to the topic of sodomy, Breton quickly intervened: "I am absolutely opposed to pursuing the discussion on this subject. If it turns to the defense of pederasty, I'll abandon it immediately." And just afterwards, when asked what sorts of perversions he wouldn't condemn, Breton replied: "All of the perversions except those of which we have just spoken at too great length." Breton's homophobia appears to have been a central factor (though quite misplaced) in his estimation of Sade, and it might indeed provide a clue to his failure to produce any close examination of Sade's writings, despite his valorization of Sade's name. These timidities are the source of Bataille's critique of Breton and the surrealists; it was their "utopian blindness" and "utopian sentimentalism" which caused Bataille to accuse them of being mere apologists for Sade. Bataille insisted that Sade's works — rather than being appropriated by a poetic dialectic — must be accepted for what they really were: the most unbearable works ever written. These writings are a heterogeneous element rejected, excreted, from the social and literary order — as Bataille was ejected from the surrealist movement — hence the very impossibility of reading the Sadian text.

Bataille opposes a base nondialectical materialism to Breton's dialectical idealism. While surrealism established the myth of a poetic dialectic which could effect the reconciliation of opposites in a surreal domain, Bataille dealt with the fundamental contradictions of human existence by means of a heterology, through which we live the following paradox: the founding cultural act is a mythical enunciation which excludes (heterogeneous) violence; yet ultimately, violence cannot be spoken, and speech cannot master violence. Hence the dis-

Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1985; for some current theoretical studies of the history and aesthetics of surrealism in regard to Bataille's exclusion from the movement and his subsequent influence, see especially Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti," *October*, no. 33 (Summer 1985); and "Antivision," *October*, no. 36 (Spring 1986); see also Paul Foss, "Eyes, Fetishism, and the Gaze," and Allen S. Weiss, "L'Amour fou/L'Amour unique," both in *Art & Text*, no. 20 (February-April 1986); on the theoretical paradigms behind Bataille's position, see Annette Michelson, "Heterology and the Critique of Instrumental Reason," *October*, no. 36, (Spring 1986).

quietude and frustration which results from reading Sade, and the very impossibility of reading his texts.

If, indeed, Sade's work serves as an investigation into the inaugural conditions of civilization, its discontents, its utopias, and to any possible protest, then we must pay careful attention to every renewal of this discourse, to every nuance, in order to examine precisely what is deemed central and what is excluded from the Sadian project.

*

The recent republication of Sade's *Complete Works* is prefaced by a new, book-length introduction by Annie Le Brun, *Soudain un bloc d'abîme, Sade*.¹¹ This text has replaced the now classic essays that previously prefaced Sade's texts in the earlier Pauvert edition. These texts—by Lacan, Klossowski, Blanchot, Heine, Paulhan, and Robbe-Grillet, among others—will perhaps be published as an appendix to the *Complete Works*. In a sense, the differences between these prefatory texts and Le Brun's work renews the half-century-old Breton/Bataille polemic, later central to *Tel Quel's* valorization of Bataille and Artaud.

Le Brun—allied to the surrealist circle during the period of its expiration—devoted a chapter of a recent book, *Les châteaux de la subversion*, to Sade. Relying on a decidedly surrealist epistemology, Le Brun explains that Sade had succeeded in creating "the greatest poetic machine" ever known, by means of "the rapprochement of those two distant realities which are philosophy and pornography."¹² These are manifest in the Sadian text in the intertwining of treatise and narrative, where the poetic image is created not by their simple

11. This project will be followed by another publication in six volumes forthcoming from Fayard, edited by Thibault de Sade (a descendent of the "Divine Marquis") and Maurice Lever, consisting of Sade's previously unpublished tales, poetry, theater, letters, and essays. Also, the first volume, titled *Une Innocence Sauvage: 1740-1777*, of Pauvert's biography of Sade under the general title *Sade Vivant*, has already appeared (Paris, Laffont, 1986); a second volume and another biography by Sade/Lever are forthcoming. Finally, Sade's literary canonization will be complete with the publication of the three-volume critical edition of Sade in *La Pléiade*, scheduled for this year. All of this was deemed of sufficient interest for the Parisian daily *Libération* to publish a sixteen-page dossier on Sade (May 23, 1986). In English, an anthology of critical writings on Sade (edited by David B. Allison, Mark S. Roberts, and Allen S. Weiss) is forthcoming and will contain articles by Georges Bataille, Pierre Klossowski, Jane Gallop, Phillippe Roger, and Chantal Thomas, among others.

It is certainly interesting to note that the publication of Le Brun and Sade coincided, in France, with three major exhibitions of surrealist art: (1) *André Breton et l'art surréaliste* at Artcurial gallery in Paris; (2) *La planète affolée* in Marseilles; (3) *Explosante fixe* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (this latter was the Paris manifestation of the exhibition *L'Amour fou*, organized by Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, which originated at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C. Only *L'Amour fou/Explosante fixe* took into account the critical role played by Bataille in relation to surrealism. The other exhibitions were organized according to the stereotyped, "official" history of surrealism, in which Bataille et al. are excluded and the 1930 rupture discounted for the sake of a continuous, homogeneous history.

12. Annie Le Brun, *Les Châteaux de la subversion*, Paris, Pauvert, 1982, p. 70.

juxtaposition, but by means of "their brutal superposition, their unforeseeable concentration on a single object, which, by offending the very order of things, by dismantling the order of representation, violently unveils the infinitude of the imaginary space."¹³ The space of the surrealist imaginary manifests the marvelous, where the objectivity of the body and discourse are metamorphosed into a self-contradictory "concrete irreality." Hence the imaginary, for Le Brun, is that realm of appearances where reality is torn from the laws of value—"Derealization goes hand in hand with devalorization."¹⁴ Do we not have here the hyperbolic instance of those very "pretentious idealist aberrations" for which Bataille castigated Breton? Does this myth not parallel that of the Andaman utopia, whose space of the imaginary is constituted precisely by the devalorization of the body? If derealization—a function of the absolute isolation of the imagination—is characteristic of poetry, then what effect can such poetry have upon our bodies? How can poetic subversion effect anything other than a purely textual play—that very *écriture* which Le Brun will take such great pains to contest—destined to the archive?

In this same essay, Le Brun asks, "Why does Sade in effect continue to elude the most serious interpretations as well as the most brilliant commentaries?"¹⁵ This in 1982! In her recent *Soudain un bloc d'abîme, Sade*¹⁶ (which, we note again, replaces all of those celebrated commentaries and prefaces whose existence Le Brun had previously denied, and which in fact previously appeared in Pauvert's own edition of Sade), the polemical exaggerations of her earlier statement give way to the critical exaggerations of her present text. Here, the fascination with Sade is attributed to an "indetermination between monstrosity and banality" (157), such that the monstrous lies at the very root of the marvelous (295). The discursive organization of the Sadian text is thus still understood according to the surrealist paradigm of the reconciliation of, or indetermination between, opposites. Yet curiously enough, within this poetics of ambiguity, Le Brun insists upon the necessity of reading Sade literally (17), in opposition to what she sees as the reduction and neutralization of Sade's work to *écriture* by practically the entire interpretive tradition after surrealism (276). Her position bespeaks a metaphysical naive realism—or rather a *naive surrealism*—in contradistinction to what she sees as the major modernist error of believing that words live independently of things, and beings live independently of words (28).

Le Brun claims that Sade's genius was to have achieved an "integral literalness" (213) based on the materiality and singularity at the source of eroticism. Yet she also insists that the strength and strangeness of Sade's work lies in a "metaphoric excess" (279), which, unlike metaphor in traditional rhetoric, is "an

13. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

16. The pages of all quotations from this book appear in parentheses in the text.

excess which is metaphoric of the movements of desire" (279). Thus Sade is portrayed as a writer of *pure literalness*, who nevertheless institutes a *metaphoric excess*; we are to read Sade completely literally, yet we must constantly beware of any attempt to de-metaphorize Sade (277). What are we to make of these contradictions? What would it mean to read a metaphor literally?

The *monster* may be deemed a metaphor for metaphor—a hybrid reality where incongruous beings are combined, where irreconcilable realities are reconciled in an uncanny linguistic object, in a disquieting imaginative variation. Indeed, any trope may create monsters. Yet if, as Le Brun claims, "the imaginary is indissociable from concrete reality" (290) and "only this physical excess can unleash the imaginary excess" (309), then this new poetics of singularity which she proposes—a reductionist "science of the concrete"—would be nothing but an epiphenomenon, where nature cannot be escaped, and where the imagination is but a powerless doubling of monstrosities. As such, there is no violence, no excess, no poetry—just a tragic mimesis of nature within an all too lengthy text.

This reduction to materiality and textual literalness ironically produces the same devalorization/surrealization as that proposed in Le Brun's earlier text on Sade. We find ourselves once again in that utopian closure of the Sadian chateau, "as if the absolute of solitude necessitated infinite desire in order to make of freedom a desperate quest for form" (128). There seems to be a confusion here of the physical enclosure of Sade's incarceration with the textual closure of his works. But the Bastille is not Silling! And ultimately, is not the libertine quest a desire for bodies rather than forms? For base materiality rather than poetic effects? We must not demand forms where there is only monstrous deformation.

*

The erotic or pornographic scenario depends upon a charting of discursive possibilities onto the body, which serves as a semiotic/syntactic paradigm. We cannot but be aware of the emblematic monstrosity of Sade's pun on the word *socratize*—meaning both "philosophize" and "sodomize." This conflation of mouth and anus is a semiological nightmare and an erotic joy. (Oral eroticism, which culture sublimates into discourse and textuality, and anal eroticism, which culture sublimates into sculptural production and concern with money, are both de-sublimated in this confusion of organs.) We find a parallel conflation in the Georgia antisodomy law's definition of sodomy: "A person commits the offense of sodomy when he performs or submits to any sexual act involving the sex organ of one person and the mouth or anus of another."¹⁷ This confusion determines what in fact constitutes a "philosophy in the bedroom"—signifying the central aporia of our culture—where the intertwining of treatise and narrative entails

17. *New York Times*, July 1, 1986, p. A18.

that perpetually renewed crime so desired by one Sadian libertine, a crime which is none other than the crime of writing. This is the crime which is a fortiori Sade's own.

Such confusion of erotic topoi seems to lead to an antilegalistic utopia in Sade, and a legalistic dystopia in Georgia. To work through the erotic heterogeneity disclosed in this "philosophical" pun, however, is to reveal a *heterotopia*, an inconsistent spatial configuration which undermines any possible textual coherence. (This would, in fact, reveal the structural conditions of the impossibility of reading Sade.) The perfect erotic condition of such a heterotopia is perhaps that described by Ernest Jones in *On the Nightmare*:

The minutest attention was devoted in the Middle Ages to the sexual attributes of the Devil, and particularly to the organ concerned. This was generally sinuous, pointed and snake-like, made sometimes of half-iron and half-flesh, at other times wholly of horn, and was commonly forked like a serpent's tongue; he customarily performed both coitus and pederastia at once, while sometimes a third prong reached to his leman's mouth.¹⁸

The Devil's monstrousness resides in a totalization of possibilities within the erotic combinatory—the antinatural act par excellence. The Devil is not simply the avatar of base materiality, but rather of that very erotic self-sufficiency which leaves no place for God or nature in human "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

If the origin of our own narratives is the impossible fulfillment of our perverse phantasms, we must savor all the more those other tales which give rise to the incubi and succubi that trouble our sleep, and to those demons that invade our homes in a night beyond reason.

18. Ernest Jones, *On the Nightmare*, New York, Liveright, 1971, p. 172.

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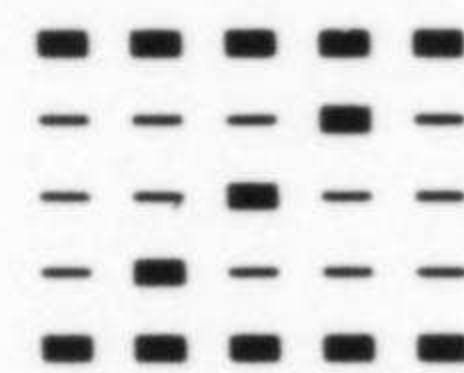
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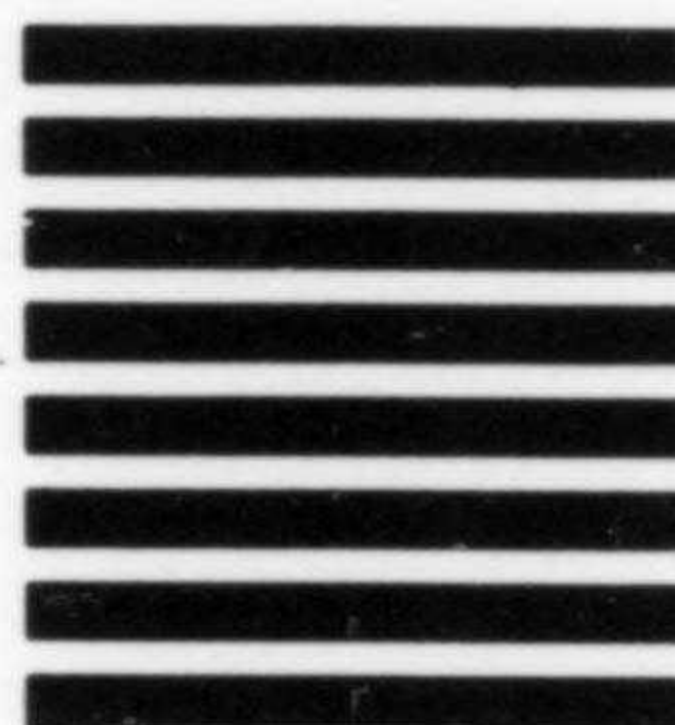
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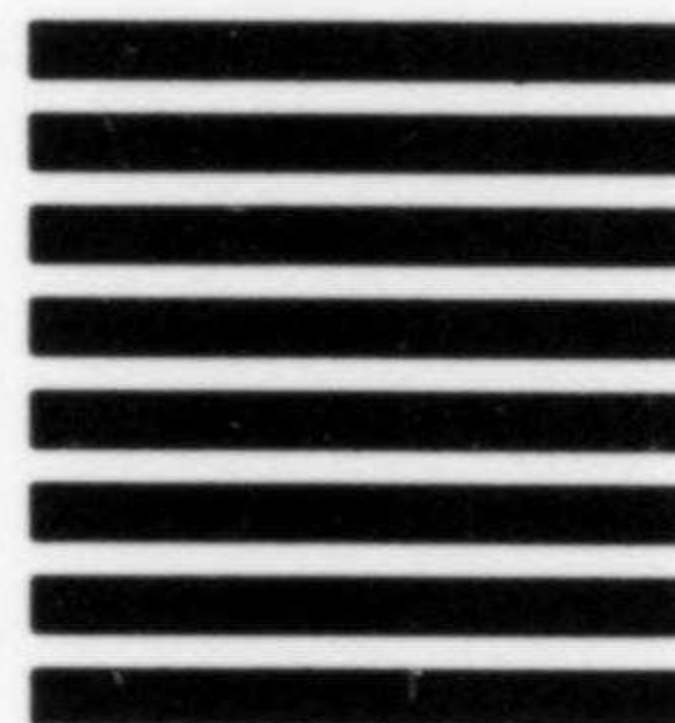
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