

Véronique Fóti

Vision's Invisibles

Philosophical Explorations

but a common power (ka...
exercized equally, and in con...
the various senses. Since Descartes' mechanistic physiology and phis...
nature cannot account for...
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and since his fundamental...
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he is constrained to fracture...
the Aristotelian continuity...
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where does this leave...
between the bodily mechan...
mechanisms...
The dedication of vision's co...
reaches into the invisible dim...
mathematical thought, if...
essentially unfindable." ¹¹ ~~11~~ ~~12~~
sensation of light and color...
takes place according to the "in"

Vision's Invisibles

SUNY series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

Dennis J. Schmidt, editor

Vision's Invisibles

Philosophical Explorations

Véronique M. Fóti

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*In memory of my father, Lajos Főti,
my grandmother, Róza Főti, née Rubinstein,
and other members of the Főti family
who were victims of the Shoah, and
whom it was not my privilege to know.*

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Prospect

And the simple beauty of color comes about by shape and the mastery of the darkness of matter by the presence of light, which is incorporeal and formative power and form. This is why fire itself is more beautiful than all the other bodies, because it has the rank of form in relation to the other elements, being close to the incorporeal. It alone does not admit the others; but the others admit it.

—Plotinus, *Enneads*

Let him who can follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes, and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before. When he sees the beauty in bodies, he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows. . . . Let all these things go, and do not look. Shut your eyes and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.

—Plotinus, *Enneads*

Every visual something, wholly individual though it is, functions also as a dimension, because it gives itself as the result of a dehiscence of being. This means, in the end, that what is proper to the visible is to have a lining of the invisible in the strict sense, which it renders present as a certain absence.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”

Hsü (Wei) Wên-ch'ang . . . liked paintings in which ink had been used freely, yet with control, in which mists and vapor filled the picture, so that their emptiness pervaded the whole sky, and their occupying the space that was earth made the earth a void. . . . All the elements in his compositions served to emphasize the emptiness, that is, the works were filled with the spirit.

—Unattributed, *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*

Since its inception, Western philosophy has not only elaborated metaphoric as well as analytic discourses of vision and configured its own history, as what David Michael Levin calls “a history of visions”;¹ but it also has traced, and variously marked and re-marked, the delicate border that separates and conjoins the visible and the invisible. Given that its historical impetus has been a quest for the invisible, understood as the “pure splendor” of transcendent reality, or as truth envisaged in the light of reason (granting a tacit and gender-bound privilege to form over color, intellect over body, or active imparting over passive reception), it has tended to forget that to trace a border also is to articulate a topology of interconnections. Furthermore, the autonomy, substantiality, and unitary character of the invisible have generally been taken for granted and have informed its idealization, as contrasted to the heteronomy, shadowlike insubstantiality, and multifariousness attributed to the visible. If philosophy today has veered away from a fascination with the transcendent invisible toward critical examinations of social reality and linguistic practices, or toward searching dialogues with its own history, it has nonetheless left the historical articulations of the divide between the visible and invisible largely unexamined. To that extent, it has refused, as it were, to look itself in the eye—a reflective looking that appears to be a necessary propaedeutic to the sensitization, if not the profound transformation, of philosophical sight, as well as to a thoughtful engagement with visuality in other domains, ranging from the theory and practice of the visual arts to a consideration of the ways in which visual encounter informs ethical relationship, including practices of caregiving.

The studies comprised in this book are contributions to this propaedeutic. They explore certain key historical and contemporary articulations of the demarcations and interrelations between visibility and the invisible, from the hermeneutical vantage point afforded by the late-twentieth-century philosophical problematic of difference. In keeping with this vantage point, one needs to note that, although linguistic convention (at least in Indo-European languages) insinuates the unitary character, as well as the singularity, of “the invisible,” and even “the visible,” these purported entities are linguistic fictions. As concerns the visible, the linguistic convention of singularizing it probably has encouraged philosophers to treat it in a summary fashion instead of attentively exploring its complexities, while the heterogeneity of the invisible generally has remained unacknowledged and, therefore, almost entirely uninvestigated.

The interest of this book is not, however, to trace such suppressive moves and their motivations but rather to address certain challenging understandings of visuality and the invisible that have articulated themselves in the texts of key historical thinkers, such as Heraclitus, Plato, and Descartes, and that also respond to the concerns of twentieth-century thinkers, such as Merleau-Ponty

and Heidegger. Whereas poetic (or poietic) language is, for Heidegger, the originary site of the happening of manifestation, Merleau-Ponty privileges the interrogation of “wild being” through the visual exegesis of vision (itself an interrogation), which he takes to be the painter’s quest. Although there are reasons to be critical of his characterization of painting as a “silent science” or a sort of proto-phenomenology (that would resolve the ambivalent casting of vision in classical phenomenology, as being both exemplary and inadequate²), one must appreciate his utterly innovative move of situating painting, and its entrenchment with vision, at the very heart of philosophy. This move still reverberates in certain facets of the thought of Foucault, Nancy, and Derrida.

Except for some research on the visual theory of Democritus,³ the pre-Socratic philosophers largely have been neglected as thinkers who questioned vision and the invisible. This neglect is surprising, given not only the importance of the issue to the philosophical tradition that they inaugurated but also the prominence of visual tropes, or figures of radiance and darkness, in the fragments of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Furthermore, the testimony of sense-perception is questioned pervasively in pre-Socratic thought. Heidegger’s philosophical engagement with certain pre-Socratics, in contrast, is remarkably sensitive to issues concerning visibility and the look, as well as to the ways in which they involve or introduce dimensions of invisibility.

If one turns to Heraclitus as a thinker of vision, one finds that, far from understanding vision as a power of disclosing entities or qualities in their supposed self-identity, he treats it as a power of originary differentiation. It reveals, in a privileged way, the pervasive incursion of alterity or disfiguration into customary identifications, as well as the counterplay of the granting and withdrawal of configurations of presencing. These incursions and complexities do not inspire Heraclitus to recommend any retreat into the invisible which he, in fact, considers deceptive. Even in its unavoidable obscurations, vision bears direct witness to the understanding of reality that the Heraclitean *logos* strives throughout to articulate; but it can do so only for those who are not afflicted by incomprehension, due to their “barbarous souls.”

Although Plato is stereotypically cast as the advocate of the transcendent and transcendental invisible, this stereotype is open to challenge. Plato’s abiding respect for beauty as motivating a quest for philosophical realization, and as supporting a philosophically oriented education, does not allow him to give the visible short shrift. In both the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus*, he presents instead an idealization of the visible that mediates between ordinary visual experience and the transcendent invisible. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates, whose sight is about to be extinguished in death, offers a final *mythos* concerning the “true earth.” The latter is a place of marvelous beauty, resplendent in a profusion of pure, luminous hues that do not compare to the colors seen by mortal eyes (*Phd.* 110 c-d). Mortals, huddled as they are in the Cave or, according to the

topology of the *Phaedo*, in the brine-corroded, subterranean hollows of the true earth that they mistake for its surface, cannot really see the earth as it is, bathed in limpid ether. The true earth is seen only by the virtuous but unphilosophic dead (who are, presumably, still wedded to perceptual or quasi-perceptual experience), whereas those among the dead who have purified themselves through the practice of philosophy pass on to abodes irradiated by a beauty that remains indescribable, given that it has no sensory attributes (*Phd.* 114 c-d). Those who treasure virtue without any inclination to philosophy are then considered both inspired and rewarded by a vision of beauty, whereas for the philosophically gifted, beauty has, as both the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* stress, the further power to motivate and orient the quest for a communion with invisible and transcendent reality.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato emphasizes the anamnetic and quasi-artistic labor by which the lover shapes and perfects an inchoate divine image in the person of his beloved, enabling both of them to achieve a progressively clearer recollection of invisible reality with the help of the “stream of beauty” that circles between their eyes. Their visionary labor, seeking to approximate transcendent truth by an image, mitigates the blinding glare of the Platonic Sun, as characterized in *Republic* VII. Since earthly sight is shadowed or informed throughout by regions of darkness no less than by light, it thrives on the inconstancy of the glance or the glimpse, so that the heliotropic fixation of sight advocated in the earlier dialogue leaves its practitioners unable to take their earthly bearings, as well as irresponsible to the other, whom they cannot genuinely see. They are therefore (at least as long as the *kallipolis* has not been instituted) incapable of educating or otherwise benefiting anyone else, whereas the lovers and votaries of beauty in the *Phaedrus* do achieve joint liberation (and presumably also provide a shining example to others) in virtue of pursuing invisible reality within—and not apart from—visible appearance.

One of the reasons the Platonic philosopher cannot turn his back on visibility is the dependence of recollection (*anamnēsis*) on the mimetic relationship of participation (*methexis*) that interlinks the orders of visible presencing and invisible truth. Plato’s censure of writing in the *Phaedrus* may, at least in part, reflect the dissociation of phonetic (in contrast to ideographic) writing from any sort of resemblance; its system of abstract symbols approximates neither the visual nor the eidetic aspect of things.

In contrast, Descartes, who models vision on the mechanics of touch, strictly repudiates resemblance. The corporeal mechanisms by which visual information is received and ultimately encoded on “the little gland” (the pineal gland) in the brain, which Descartes takes to be the locus of the interaction of body and soul, are analogous, in his analysis, to the mechanisms that enable a blind man to inform himself about his environment by means of his cane. In neither case is there any need for an image characterized by resemblance.

The rational soul is, for Descartes, the decoder of information entranced in the brain, but this information decoding is afflicted by an ineradicable confusion due to “the institution of nature” that mysteriously translates nerve impulses and brain traces into immediate and qualitative sensory experience. Descartes must call on the rational soul to supplement the physiological mechanism and the institution of nature by unthematized reasoning, since they are not, by themselves, able to account for vision’s cognitive reach, such as its apprehension of spatial relationships. Cartesian vision is also stripped of the affective, oneiric, and imaginary invisibles that, for Merleau-Ponty, provide its “interior armature.” These invisibles are manifest in what often is called the individual “vision” of painters and other visual artists—the vision, that is, that an artist must realize and enter into if her work is not to be trivial or, as Chinese aesthetics often puts it, vulgar.

Since Cartesian vision lacks affective resonance, tears are alien to it and constitute merely one of the vicissitudes of the soul’s embodiment, which is to say, its being united with “a machine.” When Descartes’s study of passionate afflictions makes it necessary for him to consider tears (which he ignores in his treatments of vision in *La Dioptrique* and *Traité de l’homme*⁴), he offers a purely mechanistic account: tears originate from the vapors that issue from the eyes more than from other parts of the body. Liquefaction of these vapors results from a narrowing of the pores of the eye which, in sadness, is accompanied by a rush of blood to the heart (ascribed by Descartes to the agitation of love), which increases the output of vapors. Only for children does Descartes attach any significance to the propensity to weep: those who do so readily (rather than blanching with anger or annoyance) are “inclined to love and pity.”⁵ What Descartes offers is an account of *how* weeping comes about and why it escapes voluntary control, but he is incapable of understanding it as anything more than a physiological function. The veiling of sight by tears remains, for him, fatefully disconnected from the humanity and the truth of vision.⁶

Had Descartes pursued the “substantial union” of body and soul (which he considers opaque to intellectual analysis) to the point of no longer blinding himself to the soul’s exposure to suffering through sight, he would have come up against an important challenge to his mechanization of the body and his purely cognitive and volitional understanding of the soul, and this challenge might have proved ethically inspiring, whereas, for all of the high regard he had for ethics (*la morale*), its meaningful formulation continued to elude him.

If visual perception, for Descartes, dispenses with resemblance, so does pictorial representation, which is based on geometric projection and is essentially nonspecular. It is somewhat surprising that Michel Foucault, in choosing a seventeenth-century painting—Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*—to represent as

well as to announce the subversion of the epistemic paradigm of representation, bases his analysis in important ways on the painting's (supposed) perspectival schema, and thus on an essentially Cartesian understanding of representation as well as of painting. Painting does not allow itself to be readily conformed to the Procrustean bed of a philosophical agenda, and its visual meditation exceeds, *ab initio*, any paradigm of representation as well as, ultimately, Merleau-Ponty's casting of it as a "silent science" exploring the upsurge and spontaneous configuration of the perceptual world, or of "wild being."

Nonetheless, it is Merleau-Ponty—enamored as he was of painting—who grapples intimately with both the Cartesian reconstruction of vision and with the ocularcentrism of Husserlian phenomenology, particularly with its exaltation of a transcendental viewpoint and of eidetic intuition. Concerning the reduction (phenomenological, eidetic, and transcendental) that enables one to realize the pure lucidity of the phenomenological gaze, Merleau-Ponty writes, in his Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Perception*,

The entire misunderstanding of Husserl on the part of his interpreters, of his existential "dissidents," and finally by himself, arises from this: Precisely so as to see the world and to grasp it as paradox, we must break with our familiarity with it; and this rupture cannot teach us anything other than the unmotivated upsurge of the world. The greatest lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction.⁷

In his later essay, "Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology," he stresses that Husserl's late philosophy is "no finished product, no fixed possession of the cultural spirit, no house in which one can dwell comfortably," but rather (as he quotes Eugen Fink), "all its paths lead out into the open."⁸

The phenomenological ontology of flesh that Merleau-Ponty strives to articulate in his late thought, in an intimate engagement with visual presence, is an ontology of openness, of originary differentiation, of a pervasive interinvolvement of sentience, sensibility, and ideality, and ultimately of the co-emergence or the fundamental sameness of emptiness and form. The invisible of the visible is, on his understanding, not detached or transcendent but is instead the "nucleus of absence" around which visibility configures itself.

Although Merleau-Ponty (in contrast to Heidegger) rarely alludes to Greek philosophy and does not discuss Heraclitus (given that his chosen philosophical partners in dialogue are the rationalists, Hegel, the existentialists, and Husserl), his late work carries forward Heraclitus's "operant thought" of vision as a power of originary differentiation.

The ontological structure of flesh is one of chiasmatic interconnections that cannot be collapsed into in-different unity. As already noted, one impor-

tant way—stressed by Derrida, though ignored by Merleau-Ponty—in which vision attests to the elemental character of flesh is its proneness to be occluded by tears. For a powerful meditation on liquefaction and inundation, from tears to ablution and to swelled and disintegrating flesh, one can turn to Jean-Luc Nancy's engagement with Caravaggio's painting, *The Death of the Virgin*,⁹ but a concern for the attestation of tears to flesh must look beyond human relationships or the imploration of divinity to consider an actively compassionate realization of the integration of one's flesh with the flesh of nature. This mandate requires other modalities of seeing than the dispassionate lucidity of the philosophical gaze cultivated by the rationalists. It is telling that even Spinoza, notwithstanding the sublimity of his ethical thought, or the fact that he regarded material nature as the body of God, counsels that humans should make use of "beasts or things whose nature is different from human nature" as they please and as best suits them, regardless of the suffering (and, one would have to add today, the environmental devastation) that their actions may cause.¹⁰ As appears clearly from this statement, the vision that blinds itself to animal suffering and to the degradation of nature is one fascinated with sameness rather than attuned to difference.

Heidegger's cognate thought of emptiness as the measure of mortal dwelling (a measure taken "poetically" and bodied forth in significant forms) is unconcerned with tears or flesh, or even with a philosophy of nature, but it opens up ways of understanding the integration of mortal sight into presencing as a whole. Dwelling is responsive to the "mirror-play" of the four dimensions of presencing (the Fourfold) by its readiness to "save" earth, to "receive" heaven, to "await" divinity (without hope or expectation), and to "escort" mortals along the courses of their temporal and final passage. The sight of mortal dwelling is one sensitized to the invisibility of emptiness as what "donates" any coming to appearance, or visible form, through which alone being's emptiness can, as it were, bespeak its absencing withdrawal. Mortal dwelling issues into (rather than following upon) a "building" which, in one of its twin aspects (*aedificare*, the other being a taking into one's care, *colere*), is the creation of forms which, though significant (or even, when achieved as works of art, compelling), do not seek to set themselves up as dominant or legitimating. Rather, they enable a "sparing" (*schonendes*) releasement of what comes to presence to the sheer singularity of its appearing and, more fundamentally, to the spatio-temporalizing dynamics of manifestation. In this manner, the sort of "building" that springs from mortal dwelling reserves an abode for the invisible, understood as being's emptiness, within the familiar visual panorama.

The sight of mortal dwelling contrasts with the one that informs what Heidegger calls the "world-picture," or with the reductive and totalizing understanding at work in technicity. These are inimical to visibility and trained upon invisibles that are not of the nature of emptiness but are, rather,

the structural articulations of a projective schema geared to power and mastery. With an echo of Merleau-Ponty's thought of flesh, Heidegger stresses that the world-picture, or the enframing posit (*Ge-stell*), obstruct visual encounter, not only because they do not allow the glance or the glimpse to solicit singular appearances—this human or animal face turned toward me in trust or anguish, say, or this ephemeral morning glory, with its azure star face on palest blue—but also, and equally, because they do not allow for the seer's self-relinquishment to being seen.

It needs to be stressed that both Merleau-Ponty's and Heidegger's concern for emptiness at the heart of manifestation in no way privileges the invisible over the visible, nor does it encourage any neglect of the created image, form, or other visual configuration. On the contrary, sensitivity to being's emptiness within the plenitude of presencing needs constantly to be nurtured by a fine-tuned, and sophisticated attentiveness to visuality. The traditionally recognized and respected nobility of sight perhaps points to this exigency rather than attesting merely to vision's prefiguration of intellectual distance or the panoramic sweep of thought.

Reductive totalization, in contrast, is empowered by and, in turn, encourages, an impoverished and inattentive mode of seeing that objectifies the visible and is content to identify what its gaze falls upon in a manner subservient to governing codes of desirability and undesirability. It does not allow the visible to adumbrate the invisibles involved in its coming to appearance but flattens out the visible and forces it into the mold of pre-given meanings.

These analyses show that there really is no antithesis between philosophy's fascination with dimensions of invisibility, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, a cherishing of visuality and sensuous presencing. Their traditional but artificial opposition only abets the impoverishment of sight. If both are to be optimally realized, their opposition needs to be crossed out to allow one to understand them more meaningfully and to bring them into an intimate reciprocity.

These considerations still leave an open question concerning the revelatory or even salvific power of art, particularly the arts of image and form. Not only is the pristine and wordless meditation on vision, that Merleau-Ponty takes painting essentially to be, quite remote from the concerns of contemporary visual art, but, as Heidegger himself came to realize, art remains caught up in epochal configurations (including the configuration of technicity), and it has no inherent and reliable power to resist ideological, capitalist, or totalitarian appropriation.

The question of what the modalities of seeing and thought that call for and play themselves out in the visual arts are, and of what their importance is for a refinement of vision that sensitizes it to its powers of differentiation and to the invisibles that are integral to it is one that recurs throughout this book

and is addressed from different vantage points. Since this book is strictly a study in the history and contemporary panorama of philosophy, however, it has not been possible to give any detailed consideration even to the traditional visual arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture, let alone to newer forms, such as photography or conceptual art. The reader is therefore, in the end, entrusted with the challenge of this question rather than relieved of the task by any facile resolution.

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Part I

Greek Philosophy

The philosopher must bear his shadow, which is not simply the factual absence of future light.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
“The Philosopher and His Shadow”

We need what Husserl called “a poetry of the history of philosophy” that would give us access to an operant thought.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
“Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology”

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1

Glimpsing Alterity and Differentiation

Vision and the Heraclitean Logos

It [unconcealedness] belongs to concealment and conceals itself, but in such a manner that, by this self-withdrawal, it leaves to things their tarrying, which appears from out of delimitation.

—Martin Heidegger, “Die Herkunft der Kunst und die Bestimmung des Denkens”

Νυκτιφαῆς περὶ γαῖαν ἀλώμενον ἀλλότριον φῶς

Night-shining, wandering around the earth, an alien light

—Parmenides, *Peri Phuseōs*

Vision, construed throughout much of the history of Western philosophy as the analogue of an intellectual apprehension characterized by full (self-)presence and lucidity, is thought otherwise by Heraclitus of Ephesus. Heraclitus did not, to be sure, just come up with a different understanding of vision and visuality, considered a particular ontic region, but rather his understanding of vision is of a piece with his fundamental insights into what it means to speak and think truthfully and, indeed, to be. To characterize his thought at least roughly at the outset, for Heraclitus, presence and (self-)identity are pervasively eroded by alterity. Jean Bollack and Heinz Wismann, who are among his most perspicacious twentieth-century interpreters, express this point from the (anachronistic) perspective of subjectivity:

[For Heraclitus,] the subject has only a dissociated, abstract, and punctiform existence, since it discovers the Other within itself. . . .

Thus the separation that founds the intelligence of the saying forms the main content of all the fragments.

In reality, the distinction that makes for the *self*, in reproducing the divergence between the saying and its object, enables one to find, by traversing the saying, the divergence that is within the thing, so as to *divide it according to its nature*.¹

In contrast to this unflinching acknowledgment of originary differentiation, the quest for the security of a shared identity that would allow one to integrate oneself seamlessly into relevant communities paradoxically produces alienation, the condition of being uncomprehending (ἀξύνετοι), and thus displaced from genuine community—a displacement that is, to be sure, so subtle as to pass generally almost unnoticed.²

It may seem strange, however, to turn to Heraclitus as a thinker concerned with vision, given that the articulation of his thought is indissociable from the linguistic articulation of his discourse—a *logos* of incomparable refinement that does not situate itself on a meta-level but participates in what it speaks of. The Heraclitean fragments do not offer one, so to speak, a vision of vision, in the sense of a definitive and suitably distant treatment of the subject. This refusal of a “bird’s-eye view” (a loose translation of Merleau-Ponty’s *pensée de survol*) is itself integral to his thematization of vision. What the Heraclitean fragments do offer are entryways into the complexities and paradoxes of vision—which is to say, access to what makes vision provocative for thought, and what prevents it from functioning unproblematically as a model for intellectual adequation.

Given the refinement of the Heraclitean *logos*, it will be necessary to enter into the subtleties of its verbal articulation to avoid the pitfall pointed out by Bollack and Wismann:

One did not go to the words, because one was sure of having understood.³

To pursue the Heraclitean thought of vision will therefore not mean to put forward a theory, to be substantiated and illustrated by interpretations of various fragments, but to trace a way, searchingly and tentatively, through the fragmented landscape of his *logos*. This itinerary will here set out from Fragment B55, which reads:

ὅσων ὄψις ἀκοὴ μάθησις, ταῦτα ἐγὼ προτιμέω.

Those things that are learned by sight [or] by hearing are the ones I esteem above all.⁴

Hippolytus, who transmits the fragment, cites it as supporting his own Christian view of an essential convergence of the seen with the unseen, or of the sensible with the intelligible.⁵ His interpretation not only “reads into” the fragment a doctrine that has no textual basis but also ignores the personal preference emphatically expressed by *ego protimeō* (“I esteem above all”). Charles Kahn’s contemporary reading, in contrast, does justice to the forcible *protimeō*, but Kahn understands the preference voiced as just an endorsement of the commonsensical view that values “ordinary experience” over hearsay or erudite obfuscation.⁶ Both Fragments B56 and B107 call such an interpretation into question, in that they indicate that what is plainly visible (or audible) is not, for all that, apprehended adequately either by highly accomplished individuals or by ordinary people. Fragments B56 and B107 read, respectively:

ἐξηπάτηνται οἱ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς τὴν γνῶσιν τῶν φανερῶν
 παραπλήϊως Ὁμήρω, ὅς ἐγένετο τῶν Ἑλλήνων σοφρώτερος
 πάντων. ἐκεῖνόν τε γὰρ παῖδες φθειρας κατακτείνοντες
 ἐξηπάτησαν εἰπόντες· ὅσα εἶδομεν καὶ κατελάβομεν, ταῦτα
 ἀπολείπομεν, ὅσα δὲ οὔτε εἶδομεν οὔτ' ἐλάβομεν, ταῦτα
 φέρομεν.

Humans are deceived in the recognition of what is most plainly visible, like Homer, wisest of all the Greeks. For he was deceived by boys killing lice, who said: That which we see and catch hold of, we leave behind; but that which we neither see nor seize, we carry away.

Κακοὶ μάρτυρες ἀνθρώποισιν ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ὄτα βαρβάρους
 ψυχὰς ἔχόντων.

For humans, the eyes and ears of those who have barbarous souls are poor witnesses.⁷

It is interesting that, as Bollack and Wismann point out, Heraclitus, in Fragment B56, adds the determinations of seeing or not seeing to the traditional formulation of the riddle. In its overall form, the fragment articulates a variation of the thought pattern of double proportion, which Hermann Fränkel traces throughout the Heraclitean corpus.⁸ This form alone should caution one against trying to make the fragment yield a straightforward, encrypted assertion, as does Uvo Hölscher, who states that the riddle signifies, “In things the absent is present, the invisible visible.”⁹

Homer, the blind poet, certainly is in his element in the invisible, for his surpassing wisdom and skill lie in his way with words and ideas. When he is confronted with the children’s riddle, however, his very wisdom becomes his downfall. Being blind, he is quite unaware of the demands that the banal

delousing scenario makes on the street urchins' eyesight and eye-hand coordination. Instead, he probably follows out the thought of the invisible on an exalted and a theoretical level—if not on the philosophical level of the transcendent invisible, at least on that of a (quasi-Rilkean) invisible distillate of experience that the poet is in quest of.

Homer's humiliating deception¹⁰ nonetheless does not argue for a return to common experience, or to what one can, paradigmatically, see plainly with one's own eyes. Just as Homer is deceived in *his* very element, which is the invisible, so ordinary people are (in keeping with the pattern of the double proportion) deceived in *their* element, the visible, which they seem to apprehend in incontrovertible self-evidence. Hence, as Hölscher points out regarding Fragment B55 (and contrary to Kahn's reading):

The preference for what can be seen, voiced by Heraclitus in B55, is thus not unqualified; his vision is not naïve and immediate, and has nothing to do with Xenophanes's homely empiricism.¹¹

This conclusion, however, still leaves one puzzled as to how to make sense of the emphatic preference voiced by the *protimēō*. Its force is blunted if visual and auditory perception have nothing more distinctive to offer than does the concern for the invisible that led Homer astray.

In their interpretation of Fragment B55, Bollack and Wismann suggest that it is direct perception that attests to "the particular identity of the perceived object, oriented toward the aspect of its contrary and determined by its own negation." Perceptual preference thus "joins up with the rebellion of things," tearing asunder the reassuring bonds of esteem (*timē*, echoed in *protimēō*).¹² Their emphasis is on the singularizing and differentiating power of perception and, beyond that, on the ability of vision to reveal the incursion of alterity into customary identifications.

Heraclitus himself indicates, in Fragments B7 and B98, that the differentiating or discriminating impetus of perception is so strong that it continues to assert itself, even when vision and hearing fail, and when nothing remains any more to be touched or grasped. Fragments B7 and B98 read, respectively:

εἰ πάντα καπνὸς γένοιτο, ῥῖνες ἄν διαγνοῖεν.

Were all things to become smoke, the nostrils would discriminate them.

αἱ ψυχὰὶ ὁσμῶνται καθ' Ἄιδην.

Souls scent in keeping with the invisible.

Smoke, which John Sallis, in his analysis of fragment B98, describes as “the shadow of fire,”¹³ or the dark aspect of its brilliance, is opaque to vision and also stings and incapacitates the eyes; but vision, less sensitive here than the visceral sense of smell, cannot distinguish between the smoke of an altar flame and that of a funeral pyre (to stay with Charles Kahn’s example).¹⁴ Since the *psychai*, being breaths, share the airy nature of smoke,¹⁵ it cannot blunt the keenness of their olfactory “diagnoses.” English translations of Fragment B98 have been at pains to eliminate the ambiguity of “to scent” (which has at least the double meaning of being on the scent of and imparting a scent), and if “to smell” is substituted, then the situation becomes still more tangled. Given that these ambiguities are embedded in Indo-European languages, however, and that they are not foreign to Heraclitus’s customary linguistic artistry, they are best left in place. In keeping with (*kath’, kata*) Hades or *A-idēs*, then, of whom or which there is no sight,¹⁶ the breath-souls sniff out, and perhaps also take on, scents, accomplishing differentiations that bypass the visible. For all that, they do not intimate a transcendent(al) invisible, nor could they do so, since smoke, breath, and scent are formless and ephemeral. Although differentiation remains acute here, the double seduction of vision, toward reifying its own evidences and toward positing transcendent idealizations, does not come into play.

However, the human sense of smell is, as Sallis notes, incapable of making well-informed distinctions and is, of all of the senses, “most subject to the power of concealment.”¹⁷ Smell, moreover, is viscerally bound up with pleasure and disgust, attraction and repulsion, that is, with the blind and inarticulate life of desires and needs. No sooner do its differentiations arise than they stimulate craving or loathing, rather than facilitating understanding. For these reasons, smell, however sensitive, cannot yield the proto-theoretical *mathēsis* for which vision and hearing are renowned. For someone in quest of *mathēsis*, the powers of differentiation proper to the latter two senses are therefore to be preferred. If ordinary people, who do trust their eyes and ears, are nevertheless just as deceived and blinded as was Homer, one reason, if not the key reason, for their predicament is put forward by Fragment B107 (cited above), which states that, as long as humans have barbarous souls, their eyes and ears are poor witnesses.

Though *mathēsis* demands a certain independence of mind, it does not thrive in a solipsistic context. One needs others who are willing, as Descartes puts it, “to meditate along with me,” confirming or disconfirming one’s evidences. This can happen only if their sentient life-breaths or souls (*psychai*) are not given to mere babbling (the root sense of “barbarous”), or to comporting themselves, as Heraclitus observes in Fragment B2, as though their intelligence (*phronēsis*) were a private resource. In this condition, humans are incapable of bearing witness for one another, however much they may have seen,

or whatever doctrines they may espouse. As Fragment B34 characterizes them: “Being present, they are absent.” What genuine witnessing requires, and what empowers eyes and ears, is an attunement to the logos that is held in common and articulates the fundamental patterns according to which all things come to pass (compare Fragments B1 and B2). The true eyewitness, then, will not be one whose sight is preternaturally keen but one who holds fast to the logos, the very logos that Heraclitus strives to articulate.¹⁸ The key issue here is how to understand the counterplay of separation and unification within this logos as it bears upon the understanding of vision. In this context, Fragment B57 is relevant:

διδάσκαλος πλείστων Ἡσίοδος· τοῦτον ἐπίστανται πλεῖστα
εἰδέναι, ὅστις ἡμέρην καὶ εὐφρόνην οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν· ἔστι γὰρ ἓν.

The teacher of most is Hesiod; him they know to understand the most—he who does not recognize day and night; for there is [the] one.

Day and night, the radiant clarity that enables visual discrimination, and the opaque darkness that frustrates it, are paradigmatic opposites. Parmenides, whose revelatory journey leads him into the Hesiodic House of Night, where opposites are undivided,¹⁹ names fire and night as the two fundamental thought forms that mortals have set up as they journey along the Way of Semblance.

It may seem surprising, then, that the teacher revered by the multitude does not countenance the pure self-identity and mutual exclusion of these primary opposites. Nonetheless, even the much-maligned multitude shows some awareness that a vision that identifies and fixates upon oppositional constructs may be ill informed, that perhaps the wisdom eye sees differently. Hence, they seek out and are inspired by a teacher who lays claim to another understanding, but in Heraclitus’s judgment, this teacher, Hesiod, does not do justice to the subtle interrelations of the opposites that he seeks to unify. Heraclitus himself can, to be sure, be characterized, as Bollack and Wismann put it, as “making a contribution to a reflection that pursues unity, not separation,” but rather than simply to assimilate opposites, or to unify them at least by filiation, “he makes radical separation itself the condition of identity,” a condition that the logos strives throughout to articulate.²⁰

It is customary but problematic to translate the last clause of the fragment straightforwardly as “for they [day and night] are one.” Kahn accepts this translation, since he takes the unity of day and night to refer to the *nykthēmeron* which, in modern terms, is roughly a period of twenty-four hours.²¹ Dilcher contests such a translation on grammatical grounds, as does Eugen Fink, given the singular verb form ἐστι and the use of ἓν rather than

μία.²² Furthermore, although Bollack and Wismann, as well as Heidegger and Fink, reject the customary reading, they differ among themselves in that the latter two interpreters consider the clause an unconditional assertion, to the effect that there is the One (*es gibt das év*), whereas the former link it to *pleista eidenai* (“to understand the most”). The meaning then becomes that most people judge Hesiod to understand the most, namely, that there is (the) One.

Stepping back from these technicalities of translation to consider the general sense of the fragment, one is led to surmise that, in Heraclitus’s view, the multitude trusts Hesiod’s proclamation of an underlying genealogical unity of day and night, unaware that this postulation, no less than that of sheer opposition, bespeaks both a compromised vision and an artless discourse.

An attentive vision not dulled by babble grasps how singular things are constituted, in their very identity, by oppositional tensions, so that identity becomes indissociable from a play of differences and shows itself to be traversed by alterity. Although in some cases, such as that of the bow and the lyre of Fragment B51, a “backward-turning” or “backstretched” attunement (*palintropos* or *palintonos harmoniē*, following either Hippolytus or Plutarch) leaps to the eye, vision generally must cultivate the probing subtlety that allows it to see a compelling configuration along with its withdrawing undertow. Only presences appear to a “profane vision” (as Merleau-Ponty calls it), but a subtle and discerning vision is attuned to the oppositional play within presencing. Heraclitus pursues further the refinement, as well as the short-fall, of ordinary vision in Fragment B21, and in the enigmatic Fragment B26. Fragment B21 reads:

θάνατός ἐστιν ὀκόσα ἐγερθέντες ὀρέομεν, ὀκόσα δὲ εὐδοντες ὕπνος.

Death are the things that we see waking, those [that we see] sleeping, sleep.

Although it seems self-evident that what appears to waking and attentive sight is the world of living and, if they can be called such, inanimate beings, such as mountains, seas, animals, and plants, someone with an interest in philosophical speculation might conceivably go along with the suggestion that what we “really” see everywhere is death. By the logic of identity and opposition, such a philophile (one imagines him or her as juvenile) would then be led on to conclude that in sleep, in contrast (and most likely in dreams), one must be able to experience genuine life. Heraclitus, however, cuts short any such speculation: what appears in sleep is no more than sleep, so that neither mere somnolence nor the phantoms of dream offer any genuine alternative to the waking vision of death.

This waking vision is more accurately, as well as more comfortingly, a vision of death/life; for “death” is a name for the constitutive alterity of whatever comes to presence, or the despoilment inherent in what appear to be intrinsic realities or truths. In Fragment 36, Heraclitus allows his readers to envisage this alterity or withdrawal concretely, in terms of genesis and perishing. For the breath-souls, it is death to become water (interestingly, the afflictions of the “moist” soul are much commented on in the interpretive literature), whereas water dies in becoming earth. Yet water and earth again engender, respectively, soul and water.

Fragment B26 further elaborates on the chiasmatic linkages of night and light, sleeping and waking, and vision and blindness:

ἄνθρωπος ἐν εὐφρόνῃ φάος ἄπτεται, ἑαυτῷ ἀποθανών,
ἀποσβεσθεὶς ὄψει· ζῶν δὲ, ἄπτεται τεθνεώτος εὐδῶν,
ἀποσβεσθεὶς ὄψει, ἐγρηγορώς ἄπτεται εὐδοντος.

Man in the night grasps a light, having died for himself, his sight extinguished. Living, then, he touches the dead one while asleep, his eyes extinguished; waking, he touches the sleeper.²³

Notwithstanding the clear, antithetical articulation of the fragment, interlinked as it is by the triple *haptetai* (with the accusative and genitive constructions expressing, respectively, grasping and touching), the text remains elusive. Heidegger acknowledges (quite uncharacteristically) that he is baffled by the guiding sense of the fragment, as well as by the specific meanings of *haptesthai* (“to touch, grasp, or kindle”) and *heautōi* (“for himself”) that it draws upon. He also finds himself puzzled as to the basic point of Clement’s citation of it.²⁴ With his customary fine-tuned auscultation of language, he proposes to read it together with Fragment B10, to let the *haptetai* echo the *syllapsēs* or graspings-together of the latter text. He thus brings the interpretation to turn on how, in the midst of the multifarious all (*panta*)²⁵ of presencing, and without negating it, the One that unifies reveals itself.²⁶ In this perceptive reading, nonetheless, the fragment’s preoccupation with the extinguishing of vision is not attended to.

Engulfed by night, a human being must, as though struck blind, gropingly orient herself by touch, letting touch take the place of vision, which depends on light. Although there is no independent evidence that Heraclitus either did or did not hold a version of the “fiery eye” theory of vision (first formulated in antiquity), according to which the eye itself emits fiery rays rather than merely responding to light,²⁷ such a theory could help clarify the sense in which sight can be said to be quenched or extinguished at night, as well as the resonance of “kindles” in the first *haptetai*. Nonetheless, the stress

of the fragment is not on the visual fire (crucial though the element of fire, in both its ordinary and subtle aspects, remains for Heraclitus) but rather on the supplanting of vision by touch (which involves a loss of visual distance and which closely echoes the supplanting of vision by smell in Fragment B98).

Although, whether one lies sleepless, dreams, or sleeps deeply, one's life continues unbroken in the embrace of night, one touches then—with one's eyes blinded to the daylight panorama and one's ties to the lifeworld loosened or cut—upon what it may mean to be dead. Furthermore, through the altered understanding and the illusory experience of dreams, one's naive confidence in the trustworthiness of waking experience is eroded, so that one comes to realize that, for all of its seeming lucidity, it touches upon the sightless condition of sleep. Waking in nocturnal darkness, one may have an intimation not only of the dreamlike character of waking experience but also of the ways in which sleep (now no longer sharply distinguished from waking life) draws near to death. In the natural, cyclical kindling and extinguishing of sight, one is thus exposed, in the immediacy of touch rather than from a theoretical distance, to the absencing withdrawal that permeates, and thereby perhaps unifies, presencing. Sight allows for such exposure through the supplement of touch, which it calls for due to its unavoidable blindings. Since these uncanny intimations unsettle one's customary but illusory idea of the self as an entity that exists in its own right, that excludes what is foreign to it, and that perdures for an allotted time, they have the power to restore one to a more genuine self-understanding.

The fault of ordinary vision is not that it may fall short of transcendent invisibles, but rather, to render it sensitive to the play of shadows, latencies, and reciprocities that always already inform it, what needs to be called into question is its fixation on unambiguous figures delineated against a neutralized ground, along with its tendency to reify its own evidences. Such sensitivity is fostered by a (literal or metaphoric) passage through "night" (euphemistically referred to by Heraclitus as "The Kindly One"), which brings one into intimate contact with disfiguration, ambiguities, and loss. The extinguishings and metamorphoses of vision therefore restore it, ultimately, to its own obscurities and *lacunae*, which tend to be forgotten, as long as one remains spellbound by the brightness, vivid clarity, and sense of incontrovertible presence that it can offer. Being exposed, as they are, to nocturnal blinding (a powerful experience before the availability of electric lighting), humans can, paradoxically, become more clear-sighted concerning vision and its play of appearances. In this way, a human being encompassed by night can be said to touch upon or hold fast to a light (*phaos haptetai*).

To understand more fully why the nocturnal blinding of sight is not merely restorative but (metaphorically and paradoxically) illuminating, the Heraclitean reflections on vision themselves need to be further illuminated by their context, which is the self-articulation of the logos.

Fragment B64, in its terse simplicity, inaugurates the Heidegger–Fink Heraclitus seminar. Heidegger there brings it into relation with Fragments B41 and B50, with a view to emphasizing the unifying character of governance, and to point, “in our situation of need today,”²⁸ to a mode of governance that is released from power and calculation. The fragment will here be read differently and will facilitate the reintegration of Heraclitean vision into the logos. This fragment reads:

τάδε πάντα οἰακίζει κεραυνός.

All the things that are there, the thunderbolt steers.

Keraunos, the thunderbolt, emblem of Zeus and of his cosmic governance, also is thunder and lightning, or the fiery lightning flash. Its sudden brilliance throws all things into compelling but transient phenomenal configurations. The verb *oiakizein*, “to steer,” derives from *oiax*, the tiller or handle of the rudder of a ship, which is an ancient emblem, in maritime cultures, of purposive leadership. A ship steered by thunder and lightning, however, is embarked on a perilous course and is likely to encounter the abyss that subtends human purposes. What is steered by the lightning flash here is not the proverbial ship of state but “all the things that are there,” or the whole of presencing, considered (to speak anachronistically) in its historicity. The governance of the lightning flash is not that of cosmic law but of an enigmatic granting (well expressed by the German *es gibt*) and withdrawal of entire constellations of presencing. To resort to a Heideggerian term, one can speak here of the epochal character of presencing or manifestation. If the logos articulates the imprevisible, differential, and perhaps epochal character of presencing, it is vision, rather than intellection, that first of all offers an intimation of it. Vision can reveal the lightning flash as an emblem of the happening of manifestation, because it is already sensitized (as hearing, in the end, is not, since it does not seek to delimit and define entities) to the play of differences and the incursions of alterity on the microcosmic level of the constitution and undoing of singular beings, or to what it means for them to come to presence spatially and temporally. Vision is, then, the one sensory power adequate to a cosmos that is “fire everliving,” epochally kindled and extinguished (like vision itself) “according to measure” (compare Fragment B30, as well as B31, which concerns the “tropics” or turning points of fire). However, the sight of those whose souls are “barbarous,” or unreceptive to the logos, will remain riveted to the phenomenal surface of whatever the lightning stroke has illumined and thrown into relief. They will perceive seemingly assured spatiotemporal configurations of self-identical things rather than being initiated into the spatIALIZING and temporalizing play of manifestation. For this reason, they will be unreliable witnesses for those who seek genuine insight.

The reading of selected Heraclitean fragments here performed cannot, of course, claim to hold up a mirror to Heraclitus's own meaning. Its hermeneutical displacement is obvious, as is the fact that it is informed by certain decisions concerning textual scholarship and the choice of interpretive literature. Moreover, the need for what might be called an "imaginative supplement" is particularly acute in scholarly work that addresses pre-Socratic philosophy. The effort of this reading has been to explore a facet of Heraclitus's challenging thought, which the prevailing interpretive preoccupation with other facets, such as fire, logos, or the soul, has tended to obscure and marginalize. The challenge can be appreciated when one contrasts Heraclitus's understanding of vision to Plato's. To explore this facet has meant to follow out the thread of a certain questioning of vision that is woven into Heraclitus's philosophically more fundamental questioning of the nature of manifestation—a questioning that also (though Heraclitus himself does not develop this interconnection) has a bearing on the understanding of ethical relationship as informed by alterity. Given that Heraclitean vision has been found to be, in a privileged way, attuned to originary differentiation, the hermeneutical situation just discussed is, in fact, appropriate, for it allows interpretation to acknowledge at the very outset that the text it addresses is not an original presence closed in upon itself and refractory to differentiation. Given their effort to articulate the alterity inherent in presencing—an alterity to which vision attests—the Heraclitean fragments are open to a dialogical engagement with contemporary thought.

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2

Beauty, Eros, and Blindness in the Platonic Education of Vision

We, the late-born, are no longer in a position to take the measure of what it means that Plato dared to use the word *eidos* for that which is the *essential* being of all things and every thing [*was in allem und jedem west*]. For *eidos* means in everyday language the aspect which a visible thing offers to our sensory eye. Plato, however, charged this word with the entirely uncustomary, with naming precisely that which cannot ever be seen with the sensory eye.

—M. Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik”

He [man] does not suspect that his most subtle researches constitute the prolongation, within a given domain, of norms that are ineluctable, although susceptible of numberless variations. Nevertheless, even if he neglects or disdains the general and profound beauty that emanates since the origin from the architecture of the universe, and from which all other [beauty] has issued, he cannot bring about that it should not impose itself on him.

—Roger Caillois, *L'écriture des pierres*

According to Plato's Parable of the Cave in *Republic* VII,¹ the conversion and education of sight, leading it from acquiescence in shadowy illusions to a quest for radiant truth, is violative, painful, and accomplished in utter solitude. The prisoner who is to be freed of his delusions is suddenly (ἐξαιφνής) and forcefully made to rise and to turn toward the fire, in the reflected light of which he had so far made out his supposed realities (*Rep.* 515d). He is so dazzled and

pained by the sudden brilliance that he is unable to discern a thing. Deprived of the familiar structures of visual meaning, he longs only to slip back into his fetters and take up his accustomed place in the half-light.

The unnamed person bent on his liberation, however, drags him bodily up along the steep, rocky slope that leads from the mouth of the Cave into the intense brilliance of the Mediterranean day.² There he simply abandons him, to cope alone with disorientation, blindness, and searing pain. The liberator's compassionate zeal does not, it seems, go beyond this traumatic exposure of an individual (picked quite at random from the deluded crowd) to the sudden light of truth.

The freed captive achieves a gradual empowerment of his sight by working methodically first with nocturnal darkness and then with the gentler radiance of moon and stars, and with shadows and reflections seen in daylight, until he can at last train his eyes not merely on the daylight panorama but on the sun itself as the ultimate source of both light and visibility (see *Rep.* 507a-509c). If initially he had to be blinded, by the dazzlement of his eyes, to the parade of shadows that passed for realities in the Cave, he is now blinded, at the culmination of his vision-quest, to the visible world in its entirety, for what he has learned to envisage is without a trace of shadow and alien to sensory sight. As such, it is appropriately symbolized by the sun, from which one must constantly avert one's eyes, lest they be seared and blinded. What might have impelled the freed man, in his solitude, to follow out this quest for invisible truth rather than delighting in the newly discovered richness of visual experience, or exploring the new forms of relationship and sociality that it might have opened up, remains enigmatic. If one chooses to read the parable in a strictly allegorical manner, so that the visible world stands here, in its entirety, for invisible truth (with the sun representing the ultimate truth of the transcendent Good), whereas the Cave is the realm of ordinary vision and visibility, it remains all the more true that the visible in the ordinary sense is deprived of phenomenal richness, beauty, or power to fascinate. It is reduced to a parade of flat and lusterless shadows, and the prisoners, given that their necks are fettered from childhood, can see even themselves and their comrades in no other way (*Rep.* 514b). One can surmise that such impoverishment of vision makes for a corresponding impoverishment of social relationship.

The freed prisoner's only social bonds remain, in fact, those already formed in the Cave, so that once his vision quest is complete, he returns there as a necessarily unsuccessful liberator. Unlike his own liberator, however, he does not seek to compel any one individual to face the light but seems rather intent on conveying his liberative experience to the collectivity (which prefigures the *polis*) through discourse. Discourse, however, has so far served the prisoners only for their competitive game of identifying shadows before they came into plain view; it has not allowed for richer or more playful dimensions

of sociality that might allow for speculative modalities of interchange. This constriction of discourse is of a piece with the constriction of sociality, and both can be traced to an extreme constriction of sight. Not only must the prisoners see themselves and each other as shadows but, due once again to their neck fetters, they have been forced since childhood to stare straight ahead and are thus deprived of the exploratory motility of the glance.³ They have therefore learned to content themselves with the bare minimum of visual information needed for identifying shadow-images. One wonders, in fact, whether this early and habitual impoverishment of sight may not be the reason for the freed captive's initial readiness to leave the visible behind.

Although the former prisoner finds himself, upon his return, incompetent in the pitifully impoverished modality of sight that prevails in the Cave, his social responsiveness has not been improved by his quick and solitary ascent to the invisible. Since he now can no longer see things from his comrades' point of view, but seems to them to have come back with his eyes spoiled, his liberation cannot bring them any benefit. The impasse that the would-be liberator faces prefigures the situation of the self-educated philosopher who not only owes no debt to the city but who, given his estrangement from it, would be quite incapable of educating and administering it (*Rep.* 520b). Within the *kallipolis*, the ideal city founded only in speech, the philosopher's education does, in the end, comprise concrete political training, but it continues to neglect any refinement of vision, given that his or her long schooling in the various mathematical sciences and in dialectic is intended explicitly to turn the soul away from reliance on visual experience and orient it toward the apprehension of intelligible truth (*Rep.* 522c-535a).

Unlike the *Republic*, Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*⁴ grant central importance to beauty which, within the visual domain, involves the power of appearances to enthrall the eye, as well as to the erotic fascination of desire by beauty, which is brought into a somewhat uneasy alliance with the philosophic quest. These dialogues thereby open up new perspectives on the aletheic education of vision, which will need to be explored.

THE LADDER OF BEAUTY

Socrates' culminating praise of eros in the *Symposium*, presented as a remembered teaching by Diotima, trains the education of sight on the radiance of ultimate and intrinsic beauty, rather than on the transcendent Good. Beauty both compels desire and enables the generativity or creativity which, according to Diotima,⁵ constitutes the artifice or ruse (μηχανή) by which mortal nature seeks to approximate immortality (*Symp.* 208b2). She has, of course, already characterized eros as a consummately inventive sorcerer and "weaver

of snares" (*Symp.* 203d6). The right guidance of desire, enthralled by beauty, and its creative fruition has, in the *Symposium*, superseded the agonized solitude of the *Republic's* vision quest, as well as its purely contemplative fulfillment. According to Diotima, the young person who bears within him the generative potential to achieve discerning intelligence (*phronēsis*) and good judgments (*sōphrosynē*) longs for the beauty that will allow him to bring the "pregnancy" of his soul to fruition. Since such fruition can come to pass only in the presence of beauty, Diotima assigns to Beauty personified the roles of the goddesses Moira and Eleithyia, who watch over childbirth (*Symp.* 206d2). The beauty that initially entrances the young man is the visual beauty of a well-formed body (and, one may surmise, of grace and bearing). Although such beauty powerfully inspires him, it also makes for an absorption and a craving that are restrictive and must be overcome. The young lover does so by turning resolutely away from the visible and toward the invisible, learning to treasure, above all, the beauty of his companion's soul. This move, however, leads him on to abandon the psychophysical presence of the other person altogether, so that he now has "eyes" only for the impersonal panorama of beauty accessible to the mind or soul: the beauty of customs and laws and the vast expanse of knowledge, which now inspire his practice of philosophy (*Symp.* 210e). Thus prepared, the devotee of beauty "all of a sudden" (ἐξαιφνής now marks the culminating intuition, not, as in the *Republic*, the initial shock of conversion) glimpses transcendent beauty with the revelatory force of the *phasmata* shown to the initiate into a mystery cult.⁶ Diotima describes this beauty as absolute and pure, and therefore, not admixed with color (which is a key register of visibility) or with fleshly form (*Symp.* 211e).

Given that this transcendent beauty is characterized as being "itself by itself with itself . . . always one in form" (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ μεθ' αὐτοῦ μονοειδὲς ἓν; *Symp.* 211b1), and that whatever is beautiful is said to share in absolute beauty (211b2–3), most interpreters consider absolute beauty an *eidos* or Platonic "Form." This interpretation, however, makes it difficult to understand why, according to Diotima, the initiate who has glimpsed ultimate beauty still has only "come close to touching upon the final goal" (*Symp.* 211b7). Not only is an intuitive apprehension of the Good apparently still to be attained, but the generativity of the erotic quest also must be fully realized at this exalted stage. Here Diotima points out that one who contemplates this beauty as it must be contemplated (i.e., in its withdrawal from phenomenal appearances) and who unites himself thereto will become capable of bringing forth true excellence (*arētē*), rather than its mere images (*Symp.* 212a). The reason why union with transcendent beauty enables one to realize genuine excellence (presumably in the *polis* as well as in private life) must be that beauty, rather than being a self-contained "Form," is the love-arousing splendor of the ultimate Good.⁷ This self-manifestness of the Good will, of course, exhibit the latter's repudiation of rela-

tivity, time, and change, and from its vantage point, one comes to see that the self-radiance of the Good as beauty is the source of the power of sensuous and intelligible beauty to compel love. Once beauty has granted the initiate access to the Good, he will truly have reached his goal.

Even with Plato's turn to beauty, however, the beauty that meets the eye and invites one's self-immersion in the richness of sensuous appearances has received remarkably short shrift. It is split off from invisible beauty and functions only as an initial enticement which, once it has performed its function, is quickly abandoned. The enrichment of sight that it makes possible even so does bring with it a notable enrichment of sociality in the form of erotic relationships. It is astonishing, however, how readily the lover, as portrayed by Diotima, relinquishes interest in sensuous and sensual attraction, and even in the beloved person, on the basis of a modicum of intellectual progress. Of the beauty of nature, or of that of artistic creations (Eryximachus had mentioned poetry and music as achievements of eros at *Symp.* 187a-d), she offers no glimpse. One might consider that by symbolically transferring to men the power of childbearing, she has in fact restored to them the mythic original wholeness which, according to Aristophanes, humans have lost and are now erotically in quest of (*Symp.* 189e-194e). She has, of course, done so under the aegis of the Good as the motivating object of erotic desire (see *Symp.* 205d10-e3). This has enabled her to give to the lovers who ascend the ladder of beauty an unnatural self-sufficiency that allows them to dissociate their erotic quest from personal bonds. She has drawn the figure of the *daimōn* Eros in the likeness of Socrates the philosopher (*Symp.* 203d) who, as Alcibiades notes bitterly, only mocks beautiful young men by his show of desiring them (*Symp.* 222c).

What makes the *Symposium's* education of vision through the guidance of desire particularly implausible is its disregard for the ambiguity and conflicted emotional intensity that characterize erotic experience. These aspects of eros are only hinted at in her mythical tale of the daimon's mixed parentage, but they erupt with raw force in Alcibiades' drunken yet brilliant final oration. It is only for Alcibiades that the beloved person has not simply vanished from sight. Quite to the contrary, his impassioned depiction of Socrates is visually memorable (and it is clear to everyone present that, far from having ascended the Socratic ladder, he remains in love with Socrates himself).

SENSUOUS BEAUTY, TRUTH, AND THE DIVINE IMAGE

Erotic passion, ambiguity, and turmoil are done justice to in the *Phaedrus*, which grants from the outset that lovers are not merely fascinated but maddened by beauty, so that, in their manic transport (*mania*), they are in no

condition to follow in a docile manner an itinerary of ascent mapped out for them in advance. Rather, they must work out their own path to liberation through a recollective labor that is motivated and sustained throughout by the beloved person's beauty.

Derrida offers a brilliant treatment of the play of the *pharmakon* in the *Phaedrus*.⁸ As both medicine and poison, potion, enchantment, coloring, or dye, the *pharmakon* serves throughout (and in interplay with memory, *mimēsis*, and writing) as a marker of ambiguity. In contrast to the notion of the *pharmakon*, however, the trope, and the implicit figure (of blindness) has been entirely neglected.

The *pharmakon*, to be sure, enters the discussion as early as *Phaedrus* 229c8, where Socrates recalls the legend of Oreithyia, carried off by Boreas, the North Wind, as she played in seeming innocence with Pharmakeia. Blindness, in contrast, is not explicitly mentioned until *Phaedrus* 243a-b, where Socrates notes that the blindness that afflicted Homer and, temporarily, Stesichorus was punishment for their slander of Helen, the bearer of godlike beauty. This entire discussion recalls Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* which not only likens the persuasive power of words to witchcraft and *pharmaka* but also stresses the power of sight over the soul. Sight, according to Gorgias, "engrave[s] on the mind images of things seen" (note the tie to unconscious memory), thus stimulating distress, delight, or a delusional blindness to truth against which humans are defenseless.⁹

A blinding of clear-sighted judgment is already, in fact, the agenda of the first of the three speeches contained within the dialogue, the speech attributed to Lysias (230e-234d). This epideictic speech performs the rhetorical *tour de force* of persuading an intended "beloved" (*erōmenos*) to give his "favors" to a man who professes not to love him, and who makes that very lack of love his selling point. Since the suitor is free from the "insanity" of love, he can, so he claims, devote himself without encumbrance to the pursuit of pleasure and to providing the educational and social benefits that the young man was conventionally led to expect from the relationship. From the viewpoint of this agenda of persuasion, the evident rhetorical shortcomings of the speech—its jumbled logical order, repetitiousness, and coy evasion of the key topic of sex—are in fact effective devices. They blind the naïve listener to the crudeness of the proposal, as well as to the fact that the sanitized pleasure sought and offered by the would-be "lover" (*erastēs*) is likely to trail in its wake a comet's tail of pain.

Socrates delivers his own first speech (237a-241d)—a speech that, by eliminating the obfuscations of the Lysian speech, exposes the latter's shamelessness to the light of day—with a display of both invisibility and blindness. Not only does he claim to speak under compulsion and "with my mouth bewitched" (242e1), but he also insists on speaking with his cloak pulled up to cover his

head. By this rather ludicrous gesture, he not only renders himself symbolically invisible (as one would wish to be when speaking shamefully) but also enacts and calls attention to the utter blindness to the true nature and high benefits of eros that characterize the “non-lover’s” proposal. The gesture also dramatizes the fact that Socrates takes the persona of the non-lover to be a lover’s disguise, as well as the argument’s at once clever and horrid (*deinos*) point, that eros is an inborn hybristic craving, akin to gluttony and drunkenness, which seeks out beautiful bodies for its gratification (238a-c). With his head concealed and his legs, presumably, exposed, Socrates (who habitually prides himself on his expertise in love) cuts the figure of a sightless and heedless motive force.

From the vantage point of his second speech, the central palinode (244a-257b), Socrates has, in fact, wholly identified Lysian eros with the energy of the “black”¹⁰ horse or motive power of the soul, described as a “companion of wild boasts and indecency” (253e3). The “white horse, companion to true glory,” is a model of pliant obedience and cautious restraint, but it lacks all initiative. In Socrates’ first speech (where the figure of the horses of the soul is not yet drawn), the energy that it embodies is described as essentially that of shame: it follows conventional opinion as to which conduct is appropriate and praiseworthy (237d8). Such pliancy to convention obviously is no match for an inborn hybristic craving.¹¹

Both horses of the soul are blind to beauty. The charioteer’s vision of beauty is needed to guide the white horse effectively, but in the Lysian and first Socratic speeches, the charioteer (who represents intelligence, or *nous*) has, so to speak, relinquished the reins. The black horse can, in any case, not be guided by a vision; it merely reacts to the charioteer’s perception of the beloved’s beauty with arousal or, once subdued, with fear (254e8). It is evident that, in the *Phaedrus*, the soul’s blindness is an interpersonally and a socially effective, and therefore dangerous, condition, quite unlike the blindness to reality that afflicts the prisoners in the Cave, whose fetters restrain any action.

Phaedrus, the unerotic “father of speeches,”¹² suffers from a blindness of yet another sort: his infatuation with rhetorical artifice ironically blinds him to what is actually under discussion and being said. The point of Socrates’ first speech is therefore lost on him, so that Socrates is compelled (this time by his *daimonion*) to offer his purifying discourse on eros, beauty, and the cosmic destiny of the soul.

In the palinode, Socrates speaks emphatically as a seer, rather than in the guise of a sophistic rhetorician. He not only identifies himself as a prophetic visionary of sorts (*mantis tis*, 242c4) but also as “a lover of wisdom, or a lover of beauty, or someone cultivated in the arts [*mousikos*],” which is to say (according to the myth of the palinode), as someone whose soul has gained an extensive vision of reality in its pre-incarnate life and is therefore privileged in its first incarnation.¹³

Although the soul is, for Socrates, the immortal source of all motion (245c-e), it is not at all self-sufficient but is, rather, in constant need of visionary nourishment. Its sustenance, being discarnate, lacks any such sensory attributes as color, shape, or tactility (247c6ff.). The soul is nourished by truth alone rather than by the beauty of sensuous presencing. Notwithstanding the intrinsic kinship of soul to truth, however, the nondivine souls (handicapped by their unbalanced horse teams and by fierce competition) can, at best, make out the “blessed vision” of the realities situated “in the places beyond the heavens” (247b3) in intermittent and fragmentary glimpses. If a given soul’s charioteer fails to obtain even the merest glimpse of reality in an entire heavenly revolution, then the soul is so starved of its essential nourishment that its “best part,” the wings that cover its entire form, atrophy, causing it to plummet to earth and to become incarnate.

The figure of the wings of the soul is not read perceptively if it is merely taken to indicate its ability to rise to transcendent truth (to which it cannot, in fact, join itself if, indeed, truth lies “beyond the heavens”). Rather, the wings of the soul need to be understood as a figure of memory, or *mnēmē*, which always remains at a certain remove from truth. The soul’s full memory of reality is what enables it, in its perfect or fully winged condition, to soar aloft and administer the entire cosmos (246c1–2), and its memory is sustained by periodic visionary contemplation. In its wingless, fallen condition, however, the soul is in dire need of reminders (*hypomnēmata*) to stimulate and guide its recollection or, figuratively speaking, to enable it to regrow its wings.

If visionary contemplation nourishes the soul’s memory, then visual beauty is the privileged reminder, given that, among the transcendent realities, beauty alone remains resplendent and love arousing, even in its earthly reflections (250d3). Ferrari rightly criticizes interpretations that ascribe the brilliance of earthly beauty to its supposed special likeness to the *eidos*, or its supposed ability to grant privileged access to the latter. Justice and good judgment, he reflects, require a lifetime commitment, but beauty touches one to the quick in the fleeting moment of encounter.¹⁴

These perceptive observations, however, still leave the power of beauty over the soul to be explained. Plato himself offers a cue here by suggesting that, in the drama of memory precariously maintained, lost, or regained, beauty functions as the placeholder of the experience of bliss:

Beauty was radiant to look upon when the souls . . . saw that blessed and spectacular vision and were initiated into the mystery rightly called the most blessed of all. We, the celebrants, were wholly perfect, without experience of the evils awaiting us, gazing in rapture at the revealed sacred objects that were perfect, and simple, and unshakeable, and blissful. (250b5–c3)

Responsiveness to beauty is the trace left in the oblivious soul of whatever measure of blissful realization it had once attained. Any transient encounter with beauty therefore arouses an intimation of and longing for bliss, which the embodied soul, in the dimness of its memory, pursues with confused passion, seeking erotic consummation or turning to the mimetic register (as it is identified in *Rep. X*) of artistic creation, neither of which enables it, in Plato's view, to draw close again to the pure splendor of truth. The soul immersed in these pursuits suffers, rather, an obscuration of its visionary power.

This interpretation agrees with Heidegger's in understanding beauty as a power of transport, or as awakening the most intense *mania*. It is not the case, Heidegger observes (criticizing here the Latinization of Plato's text), that the beautiful itself is what is "clearest and most attractive." Rather, it is "what most draws one elsewhere, the most transporting."¹⁵ Through the eros that it awakens, it works, according to Heidegger, a transport to being. Heidegger, however, does not give full weight to the lethic and, for Plato, the perilous aspects of the erotic (as well as the artistic) response to beauty. He also does not consider that it is not being or manifestation as such that is the focus of the erotic quest, for eros, in the *Phaedrus*, remains entranced by the human beauty that is (as will be discussed shortly) the reflection of a particular divine prototype of beauty. Eros as "wing-thrusting" (*pterophyton*, according to the verses Plato attributes to the Homeridae; 252b8) is, at its best, a restorer of memory, but as a potent remedy it exhibits the ambiguity of *pharmaka*. If erotic entrancement were purely a matter of "being lifted beyond oneself and being attracted by being itself," as Heidegger characterizes it, it would, in contrast, be free of ambiguity.¹⁶

In the *Phaedrus*, erotic fascination is no longer, as was the case in the *Symposium*, quickly overcome and left behind. It gives rise to a sustained labor of desire, which also is an artistic *poiēsis*. The lover strives to perfect, in the person of the beloved, a particular divine image—that of the deity in whose train they both followed in their pre-incarnate lives (see *Phdr.* 252e-253c). The traces of that divine image in the beloved's demeanor and countenance are what the lover initially experienced as his beauty. As long as this beauty remains merely a matter of inchoate traces, however, it cannot bring about any clearer recollection nor restore, through memory, some likeness of the blissful vision that it adumbrates. The lover strives, therefore, to recall the divine image lucidly enough to shape the beloved (who, being young, is malleable) after it, thus bringing it to luminous manifestation. As the image becomes ever clearer and is concretized, the beloved takes on the role of a votive statue (*agalma*) of the divinity, allowing the deity to manifest itself and to be honored and worshipped.¹⁷ The divine image, artistically recreated in the very person of the beloved, functions, as it were, as a gateway to the visionary realization of truth.

This erotic labor is, of course, for mutual benefit, but if the beloved is to be able to regain his own memory through the divine image that he has come to embody, he requires the mediacy of reflection. Reflection in the *Phaedrus* is strictly ocular: the stream of beauty that impinges on the lover and inundates him at last glances off him like an echo and is deflected back to the beloved's eyes (255c5). Like Narcissus, the young man is unaware that this reflected beauty is now his own, for specular reflection lacks the transparent lucidity of its mental counterpart. So the beloved is, in his turn, seized by love (contrary, as Ferrari points out, to the conventions of the day, which required the beloved to remain dispassionate¹⁸). Confused by an affliction that he seems to have caught by sight, "like a disease of the eyes,"¹⁹ he has no name for it, but he can and must now share in the work of harnessing erotic energy to accomplish liberation through the practice of philosophy.

In the *Symposium*, beauty as such is unitary because it is, in its intrinsic reality, the splendor of the absolute Good. If beauty is, in its absolute character, nonphenomenal or invisible, however, it becomes difficult to make sense of its supposed reflection in phenomenal appearances. In the *Phaedrus*, this difficulty is resolved, in that beauty (unlike ultimate reality, *ousia ontōs ousa*, which is apprehended only by mind or *nous*) is not thought of as an absolute but as the pervasive phenomenality of truth. Moreover, beauty here is not unitary but is, rather, inherently differential, given that souls can contemplate it only from the vantage points and under the aspects given to it by one of the major divinities, in whose train they must follow (along with minor divinities and spirits) in their pre-incarnate visionary quest (250b5–c6). The twelve major divinities (of whom Hestia alone remains at the hearth; 247a1–2) each embody a particular modality of sensitivity and creative (or artistic) expression, capable of phenomenализing transcendence and of letting it shine forth as beauty.

SPACING VISUALITY AND THE INVISIBLE

Although this book is not the place to take up the vexed question of the unity of the *Phaedrus*, or, as Kahn sees it, its Janus-faced character,²⁰ a few remarks on how the discussion of writing (embedded, as it is, in the wider context of a discussion of rhetoric) carries forward the main themes of the dialogue are in order. Writing normally is, at least in part, a visual practice (although it has, of course, been adapted for the blind), and Socrates stresses its close kinship to painting (*zōgraphia*, literally "life-writing," or "the writing of living being"; 275c5). The lifelike figures or seemingly living speech entraced in image or writ remain he finds immobile and unresponsive. They are incapable of dialectical interchange or of genuine teaching, which is, for Plato, an interpersonal

endeavor of stimulating and guiding *anamnēsis* (see 275a-276a). In its reliance on graphic marks that are entranced on material surfaces rather than on the soul itself, and that outline the doctrines of others rather than indicating the stages of one's own anamnetic progress (so that they encode information rather than insight), writing contrasts sharply with the erotic-artistic labor of clarifying the divine image in one's own memory and in the very person of the beloved. Socrates thus castigates the *pharmakon* of writing for substituting a reliance on reminders for the development of genuine memory (275a5); and it goes without saying that such reminders cannot begin to rival the power of beauty to awaken eros and stimulate recollection. By trusting this *pharmakon* one actually will induce forgetfulness in the soul; and Plato's description of the pretenders to wisdom (*doxosophoi*), who thus misplace their trust (275b), lends itself uncannily to being read as a satirical description of present-day academic practices.

Given that writing is, at least implicitly, contrasted to fashioning the living *agalma*, it is questionable whether, as Derrida suggests, Plato seeks (in vain) a memory that would be without signs or proliferation of supplements, a memory not infiltrated by "the outside," therefore, free of *hypomnēsis* or *pharmaka*.²¹ The recreation of the divine image is an anamnetic or a hypomnetic (and, notwithstanding *Republic X*, a mimetic) supplement that he welcomes. The *agalma* is, moreover, in league with substitutes, representatives, simulacra, and *pharmaka*, but it results from and serves an erotically motivated quest for philosophical insight and personal transformation. Writing, in contrast, is countenanced in the end (for Plato the writer must countenance it) only as a ludic enterprise. It plants, metaphorically speaking, some "garden of Adonis" (a forced container garden), sown unerotically with pen and ink, for the sake of civilized amusement and to counteract the forgetfulness of old age (276b-d). Furthermore, the artistry of the *agalma* is esoteric, whereas writing indiscriminately addresses all and sundry and does not know when to keep silent (275e).

It is remarkable that Plato countenances a playful, largely aesthetic practice of writing but does not acknowledge the more playful aspects of eros. This disregard for erotic play becomes still more consummate in Heidegger's reading, which understands Platonic eros as an overcoming of the human affliction of being oblivious of being, an overcoming motivated by being itself.²² The banishment of play implicitly negates the wayward play of the glance in the visibility of eros and beauty and introduces a tension (which Heidegger strives to assuage) between an envisagement of the beauty of truth and artistic practice. This tension certainly betrays itself in Plato's suspicion of writing.

Compared to the *Republic* and *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus* countenances sensuous beauty and gives considerable scope to a visual engagement with phenomenal pesencing. It also pays homage, in a philosophically quite

unprecedented manner (although certainly with rich precedent in lyric poetry and tragic drama), to the sensuous beauty of nature—the limpidity and coolness of the Ilisus, the exquisite form and shady canopy of the trees, the lilac haze and fragrance of the flowering chaste tree, the softness of the grass, and the enchanting music of the cicadas in the shimmering heat. Socrates' own eyes are opened to this panorama of loveliness, although he insists that, unlike “people in the city,” places or the countryside (*kbōria*), along with trees, cannot, in their silent sensuous presence, gratify his love for learning (230d3–5). Still, the beauty of nature, like that of the beloved person, bespeaks a presencing of divinity (the lesser divine figures of the nymphs, the river god, the Muses and, in the end, Pan). The locality, furthermore, is replete with statuettes and votive offerings (*korōn te kai agalmatōn*; 230b8) that prefigure the transformation of the beloved into an *agalma* of divinity. In keeping with this expansiveness and sensitization of vision, the love relationship that has become the ideal form of sociality is cultivated with creative sensitivity and is sustained throughout (and even beyond) the lovers' present earthly life.

Does the *Phaedrus* truly succeed in binding visuality and the invisible, or sensuous presencing and nonsensuous truth, into a differential whole? Heidegger, who considers this question, suggests that the look or glance (*Blick*, *θέα*) reaches equally “into the highest and farthest remoteness of being and, at the same time, into the nearest, most luminous closeness of radiant appearing [*Anschein*].”²³ He acknowledges, nevertheless, that if both truth and beauty equally accomplish a revelation of being, then they must still, for Plato, diverge:

Within that, however, wherein they belong together, they must diverge for humans [and] become two; for, since for Plato being is the non-sensuous, the revealedness of being can also be only a non-sensuous luminosity.²⁴

The resulting duality and potential conflict (*Zwiespalt*) remain, he concludes, felicitous for Plato, for whom beauty “has sheltered its being in advance within the truth of being as the supersensuous.” Thereby, however, the conflict is, as he admits, not resolved but avoided, with the avoidance remaining itself concealed.²⁵

John Sallis seeks, beyond the Platonic and Heideggerian texts, to resolve the conflict by recovering a shining forth of being within, and inalienable from, sensuousness—a sensuous *phainesthai* that will, as he stresses, require “a certain spacing” to keep it from being flattened out into sheer presence.²⁶ Although Plato's text cannot articulate such a spacing that could truly unite visuality and the invisible, or phenomenal presencing and being's emptiness, without conflating them, Plato makes at least an inchoate gesture of spacing.

This gesture is his differential account of beauty in the *Phaedrus*, which subsumes its visual aspect under one or the other particular and quasisensuous registers symbolized by the major divinities with their characteristic attributes. Since the gesture remains inchoate (in particular, by setting up types of beauty rather than being fully differential), however, Platonic vision can nonetheless not fully release itself from the fixity of the gaze (trained upon transcendent invisibles), or carry forward Heraclitus's understanding of the subtle incursion of alterity into sight. Despite this limitation, the gesture remains important and deserves the attention of interpreters, which so far it has not received.

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Part II

The Legacy of Descartes

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3

Mechanism, Reasoning, and the Institution of Nature

Questioning Descartes's Reconstruction of Vision

While you seek the world-in-itself in philosophy," he [Claude Monet] said, with his warm smile, "I simply turn my energies to the greatest number of phenomena possible, since these are in strict correlation with the unknown realities. When one is on the plane of harmonious phenomena, one cannot be far from reality, or at least from what we can know of reality. . . . Your error is to seek to reduce the world to your size.

—Georges Clemenceau, *Claude Monet*

Descartes's *Optics* (*La Dioptrique*) is, for Merleau-Ponty, the exemplary effort, within Western philosophy, to exorcize the "spectres" of vision—spectres that haunt painting throughout its history—by reconstructing vision as essentially an operation of thought.¹ The residual obscurities that beset it can then be ascribed to its necessary reliance on information furnished by bodily indices and can thus be relegated to the margins of "a world without equivocity."² Such is, at least, part of Descartes's project in the *Optics*, which also is a treatise on the nature of light and the refraction and reflection of light rays, as well as on the construction of optical instruments.³ Descartes culled the *Optics* from his *Le Monde, ou Traité de la Lumière* after, having learned of Galileo's condemnation in 1633, he decided to leave the latter work unpublished.⁴

The account of light in the *Optics* is presented as a theoretical model that makes no claim to describe actuality but only to explain the observed properties of light in a coherent manner and to allow for the deduction of further properties that experience does not readily reveal. Descartes's favored methodological

analysis is that of heuristic astronomical method, which may rely on presuppositions that are false or uncertain; but since these are formulated to account for the phenomena of experience, they are nonetheless capable of yielding “a number of very true and certain consequences.”⁵ Peter Galison has pointed out that Descartes’s use of such models, or *comparaisons*, particularly prominent in his theory of light and vision, serves to enable the imagination to picture what we cannot see—the behavior of the subvisible particles (in *plenum*) of Cartesian matter. Such picturing is particularly important in Descartes’s early works, where it links sense perception (crucial for scientific experimentation) to the corpuscular micromechanism that he had postulated since 1618 in his physics, while it also provides a basis for abstraction. As Galison observes, the intellect is given more autonomy in Descartes’s later thought, so the use of *comparaisons* diminishes in keeping with a reduced reliance on imagination.⁶

The test of certainty in the *Optics* is not purely theoretical, given that Descartes’s guiding interest is the augmentation of natural vision by optical prostheses designed to extend its range “much farther than the imagination of our fathers has customarily reached.”⁷ The *Optics* thus conjoins, in its ten Discourses, a theory of light (including the law of refraction, sometimes referred to as “Descartes’s law”) with a philosophical analysis and mechanistic physiology of vision, along with a concluding discussion of telescopes, lenses, and methods of lens cutting. The scientific and technical aspects of the work may account for its comparative neglect on the part of Descartes scholarship. Much of the interest it has provoked has focused on the physics of light and on the history and philosophy of science.⁸ Merleau-Ponty’s interrogation of the text, in contrast, detaches the philosophy of vision not only from its scientific context but also from the mechanistic physiology that is integral to it. In the interest of a sophisticated reading of Merleau-Ponty’s own somewhat elliptical text, as well as of tracing the demarcations of and negotiations between the visible and the invisible in Descartes’s thought, the construction of vision in the *Optics* will be closely followed out and analyzed here.

MODELLING VISION

Quite apart from his technical use of *comparaisons* to render the subvisible imaginatively accessible, Descartes’s guiding—and strangely counterintuitive—model of vision in the *Optics* is that of the blind man’s touch, as mediated by a stick or cane. For those born blind, he remarks, the cane functions like “the organ of some sixth sense, given to them in place of sight.”⁹ This model allows him to suggest that motion alone, which reflects the stick’s contact with varied surfaces, and which can be characterized in purely quantitative terms, suffices to account for the communication of visual information, so

that there is no need to invoke phenomenal qualities—let alone such obscure entities as the “intentional species” of Scholastic thought. Descartes states explicitly in the *Principia Philosophiae* that, quite apart from the unintelligibility of sensible species, “different local motions are quite sufficient to produce all the sensations in the soul,” and that we do not find that “anything reaches the brain from the external sense organs except motions of this kind.”¹⁰ The figure of the cane serves to drive home this point, since no one supposes that any entities emanate from bodies at its touch and travel along its length.

Dalia Judovitz notes that Descartes’s reason for privileging touch as “the least deceptive and the most certain” of the senses is its marked disengagement from resemblance (the paradigm on which the notion of intentional species is based).¹¹ One also needs to consider here that Descartes, on the other hand, takes touch to be the least subtle of the senses, so that it is, in this respect, opposed to sight, “the most subtle of all the senses,” which it is nonetheless called upon to model.¹² The certainty he accords to touch is evidently that of apprehensions that are immediate and vivid or clear, without, for all that, being distinct, and pain and pleasure (which he ascribes to touch without any argument) are plainly of this nature. Part of his reasoning in modelling vision on touch seems to be that if the immediacy and certainty of touch (as to which it outstrips vision) require no occult transmission, then the lucid articulation (in which vision excels) is quite unlikely to show a sudden need of such input.

Descartes’s privileging of the certainty of touch carries an echo of Aristotle’s discussion of touch in the *De Anima* as the one sense of which the medium is the sentient body’s own flesh.¹³ In its indistinct but vital immediacy, touch resists integration into the doctrine of intentional species, which is based on Aristotle’s general theory, in the *De Anima*, that in perception the sense takes on the form of the sensible object without its matter. The contemporary interpretation of this theory is controversial, and the competing functionalist, physiological, and other readings cannot here be entered upon; but, in relation to Descartes, the most thought-provoking interpretation is Myles Burnyeat’s. Burnyeat claims that the reception of sensible forms, as discussed in the *De Anima*, *intrinsically* has the character of awareness, so that, for Aristotle, “perception is awareness, articulates awareness, from the start.”¹⁴ He points out that Aristotle’s use of the wax and seal analogy in this context is polemical, marking his disagreement with Plato’s proto-Cartesian argument in the *Theaetetus* (developed with recourse to the analogy) to the effect that there is no awareness but only causal interaction in perception itself.¹⁵ When Descartes makes use of the same analogy in the *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii* to argue that the *sensus communis* imprints the sense-derived, but pure and disembodied, figures or ideas of bodies on the *phantasia* (the bodily basis of imagination),¹⁶ he echoes Aristotle but negates the latter’s polemical point: There is no glimmer of awareness to be found in this mechanistic imprinting.

The power by which we know things is, Descartes writes, “wholly spiritual,” and, as such, utterly distinct from any bodily processes or powers.¹⁷

Modern thought has, as Burnyeat points out, lost access to an Aristotelian understanding of matter or material nature as inherently capable of awareness. He concludes that one cannot, therefore, hope to leave behind Cartesian dualism by taking one’s cue from Aristotle’s subtle analysis of the ensouled living being, for “although Aristotle has a non-Cartesian conception of the soul, we are stuck with a more or less Cartesian conception of the physical.”¹⁸

What is at stake in Descartes’s modelling of vision on touch, and in the abandonment of the Scholastic Aristotelianism that motivates it, is more far-reaching than his foreclosing of a phenomenology of vision. As to this foreclosing, Merleau-Ponty’s point, that this modelling does away at a stroke with the problem, posed by vision, of action at a distance, as well as with “that ubiquity which makes for the whole difficulty of vision (as well as for its entire virtue),”¹⁹ is well taken; he also notes that, whereas Descartes sought to maintain a subtle equilibrium between the artificial clarity of scientific models and the obscurities of sensory experience, or of the “there is,” techno-science has tended toward self-absolutization.²⁰

To dwell first on the foreclosing of a phenomenology of vision: Descartes ignores the ways in which vision characteristically plays across and does not respect prosaically construed entities or locations. In Merleau-Ponty’s own example, one does not really see the water of a pool merely in its tiled enclosure but also in and through its dislocations into shimmering networks of reflections that dance across the cypresses, or as a far-flung play of irradiations and chromatic modulations. As painters as diverse as Cézanne, Monet, and Seurat knew well, such dislocations constitute the very phenomenality of an expanse of water, offered to sight. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty observes, a Cartesian cannot even genuinely see himself in the dislocation of a mirror reflection, which is for him a mere optical effect, mechanically produced and incapable of drawing one’s very flesh into exteriority:

The magic of intentional species, the old idea of efficacious resemblance, imposed by mirrors and pictures, loses its last argument if the whole power of the picture is that of a text proposed for our reading, without any promiscuity of the seer and the seen.²¹

Furthermore, Descartes ignores the basic fact that one always sees from the vantage point of one’s bodily location and has no access to “a being without restrictions,” nor to a perceived space not relative to one’s situation and vantage point. The natal bond that ties the soul to the body it calls its own always locates it in a primary “here.” As Merleau-Ponty writes:

The body that it [the soul] animates is not, for it, an object among objects; and it does not derive from it the whole rest of space by right of an implied premise. It thinks according to it, not according to itself; and in the natural pact which unites it with the body, space, and exterior distance are also stipulated.²²

Over and above this neglect of the phenomenology of vision, Descartes's model also implies and insinuates an understanding of material nature (including the human body) that strips it of any inherent sentience, and certainly of any form of intelligence. For Descartes, sentience and intelligence characterize human beings in virtue of the "substantial union," unique to them, which, enigmatically, as he admits, binds together an immaterial soul and a material body for the duration of this life.²³ What for Descartes was a model or *modus concipiendi* that allowed him to understand sentience in the context of his bold thought experiments has readily lent itself to literalization. One is then left, at best, with an epiphenomenalist alternative to a dualistic understanding of sentience (which is, for Descartes, mitigated by the theory of the substantial union). One begins to discern here the fuller impact of Descartes's reductive modelling of vision, as well as the reasons for Merleau-Ponty's remark that the entire history of modern painting, in its effort to disengage itself from illusionism (and from the reductive modalities of thought that inform illusionism) has "a metaphysical significance."²⁴

IMAGES, SIGNS, AND PERCEPTION

Seeing, for Descartes, involves no sort of picturing (the soul, as he rightly points out, would need eyes of its own to inspect interior images), and depiction itself does not owe its ability to suggest or evoke visual scenes to resemblance. In this respect, it functions like "signs and words that in no way resemble the things they signify."²⁵ Although Descartes does not critically compare perspective construction to natural depth perception, he stresses that perspective deforms the true aspect of things. The fact that he restricts his discussion of visual depiction to copperplate engravings (a restriction of which Merleau-Ponty is critical) reflects this preoccupation: unlike paintings, these engravings are monochromatic, and even though, like all art of the period, they respect the laws of perspective, they consist of little more than "a bit of ink placed here and there upon the paper." With these minimal and highly abstract means, they convey complex visual information.

Descartes was at least somewhat aware that visual depth can be conveyed by color alone (although Merleau-Ponty charges him with ignoring this "other

opening” upon the visible and its characteristic universality without concept²⁶). He remarks that a meadow “painted with an infinity of colors” appears from afar to be just a washed-out white or blue, because its tapestry of hues and forms cannot be seen distinctly. He ascribes this indistinctness to a disproportion between the rich visual information (given the expansive panorama that one can see from afar) and the relative paucity of nerve fibres to register it at the back of the eye.²⁷ Presumably, painting in the tradition of “color space” (which extends at least from Titian to Cézanne) would have appeared to him to adhere imitatively to the imperfections of natural vision instead of instituting an abstract system of signs.

Given his disdain for resemblance, Descartes must face up to the challenge of explaining the role of retinal images. That the eyes function in the manner of the *camera obscura* can, he asserts, be readily verified by experiment. The experiment consists of excising the opaque membranes from the back of the eye of a fresh cadaver or a large animal and replacing them with translucent material, such as paper or eggshell, and then inserting the eye into a closely fitted opening that provides the only source of illumination in a dark room. Provided that the front of the eye faces a brightly lit scene, and its back the dark room in which the experimenter has stationed himself, he will then see, on the translucent surface, a “painting” (*une peinture*) reproducing in natural perspective the scene that confronts the eye. Although this image elicits a certain “wonder and delight,” it is not without “imperfections,” such as its reversal of the image, its peripheral haziness, and its inability to be at once vivid and distinct.²⁸

Descartes theorizes that the retinal images of both eyes are projected as a unitary pattern of motions by the nerves to the brain, to be encoded (without likeness) upon the pineal gland.²⁹ Since light is, for him, a tendency to motion (i.e., energy) manifest in the “subtle matter” that fills seemingly empty space, or the interstices of bodies, and color is mechanistically explained, the encoding of the unified retinal image (which is a configuration of light and color) upon the pineal gland marks the intimate conjunction of his physics of light with his mechanistic physiology.

Vision, however, is not as yet realized by these optical mechanisms, for as he insists, “it is the soul that senses, not the body.”³⁰ The encoded information must, in other words, be decoded and interpreted. The soul (which is *sive mens sive anima*) deciphers the information entranced upon the gland according to a code instituted by nature (or, ultimately, by God). In virtue of the substantial union, the soul is not in conscious possession of this code (which saves Descartes from the pitfall of having to postulate that it contemplates and interprets brain traces), but rather it immediately and confusedly experiences the quantitatively encoded information qualitatively, as sensation. Thus Descartes writes to Regius in 1642:

You could do so [explain the true union between mind and body], however, as I did in my *Metaphysics*, by saying that we perceive that sensations such as pain are not pure thoughts of a mind distinct from a body, but confused perceptions of a mind really united to a body. For, if an angel were in a human body, he would not have sensations as we do, but would simply perceive the motions which are caused by external objects.³¹

In virtue of the substantial union, then, the soul is not, as Descartes puts it in the Sixth Meditation, related to its body like a sailor to his ship, or, as we might put it today, like a computer programmer to information systems, but it shares instead the body's exposure and vulnerability.³² Like the substantial union itself, the "institution of nature" which accounts for sensory experience, remains opaque to intellectual analysis. Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the *Optics* is sensitive to the acknowledged limitations and opacities against which Cartesian metaphysics and science must situate themselves:

Descartes nevertheless would not be Descartes if he thought of *eliminating* the enigma of vision. There is no vision without thought. But it does not *suffice* to think in order to see. . . . The thought of vision functions according to a program or a law which it has not given itself; it is not in possession of its own premisses . . . there is at its center a mystery of passivity.³³

Of the categories of visibility that Descartes recognizes—light, color, location or situation, distance, size, and shape—only the first two (which are qualitative) can be attributed to vision alone, functioning, in Aristotelian language, as its proper objects. In Descartes's view, their mechanistic infrastructure can be accounted for in terms of the force of motion and the patterns of motion in the neurological apparatus of vision (which themselves are determined by both the light reflected or refracted from the objects seen and the physiological apparatus itself). As Wolf-Devine points out, Descartes seems to have been unaware of the perceptual phenomenon of color constancy (the perceived constancy of hue under lighting that alters it).³⁴ Had he been attentive to this phenomenon or to other aspects of color vision, such as the interaction of colors, he would have found it more difficult to treat perceived color as pure sensation reflecting just what is given in the retinal image. It is, of course, true from the outset that the mutual isolation of these visual categories is a fiction; we do not normally see pure light or color, or shapes identified merely by size, location, and distance.

To explain visual perception according to these latter categories, Descartes is constrained to supplement sheer sensation by reasoning. Significantly, the

analogy of the blind man is invoked once again to explain how we see situation and distance, which also account for perceived size and shape, since we “judge” these on the basis of the “knowledge or opinion” we have concerning the location of objects and the disposition of their parts (Descartes here makes reference to size constancy as well as to perspectival distortions).³⁵

The blind man about whom, he acknowledges, “we have already talked so much” can, Descartes asserts, apprehend without any difficulty how the parts of his (objectified) body are “positioned” in space; and, given two sticks, he can apprehend the location of objects as easily as a sighted person. Descartes ascribes one’s awareness of the deployment of one’s body in space to the soul’s registering, in a manner prescribed by the institution of nature, the minute changes that bodily movement brings about in the brain. In order to perceive the location of other bodies, however, vision as well as touch must avail themselves of supplementary geometry. To locate other bodies visually, the soul needs to “transfer its attention” from points on the surface of its body (such as the fingertips) to points connected to the former, and to the bodies to be located, by imagined straight lines (which may be extended to infinity).

The calculative supplement is more complicated in distance perception. In the simplest case, the institution of nature here allows the soul to apprehend as relative distance the physiological changes involved in focusing one’s eyes on distant vistas or on what is up close. It is interesting to note that the hand’s spontaneous conformance of its manner of touch to the tactile surfaces to be explored—for Merleau-Ponty, an “inspired exegesis”—is Descartes’s chosen example of the soul’s confused awareness of changes in the brain.³⁶ Distance is, however, apprehended more accurately by “the relation that the two eyes have to each other,” much as the blind man, who cannot rely on his eyes, can nonetheless apprehend the distance of an object touched by his sticks (of the lengths of which Descartes supposes him to be ignorant) by measuring the distance between his hands holding them, as well as the angles they form in relation to each other and to the object. Even a single eye will suffice a sighted person for practicing this “natural geometry,” provided that one enlists the aid of the mathematical imagination in “a kind of reasoning very similar to that used by surveyors when they measure inaccessible places by means of two different vantage points.”³⁷ Descartes similarly discusses the perception of distance on the basis of distinctness or indistinctness of shape, considered along with the strength or weakness of the light, or of comparing the known size of the object with its apparent size.

The obvious difficulties with these explanations (insofar as they supplement the institution of nature) concern, first, the soul’s inspection of bodily data in the manner of a detached observer (as though it had freed itself from the bond of the substantial union), and, second, the implausible over-intellectualization of perception. Though the geometrical calculations that the soul

supposedly performs may have seemed natural to the inventor of analytic geometry, most percipients could not hope to accomplish them spontaneously and without any thematic awareness in the very act of vision.³⁸

It is instructive to note Descartes's departure from Aristotle as he gets himself involved in these difficulties. For Aristotle, the "common sensibles" (which become Descartes's "primary qualities") of magnitude, motion, rest, number, and shape are perceived *directly* (without any calculative supplement) by the individual senses, although they are not the proper objects of any one sense. They are perceived in dependence upon the proper objects of the given sense, so that sight, for instance, perceives shape as a configuration of colored light (color being its proper object). Aristotle does not need to resort to the fiction of isolated visual categories. The *koinē aisthēsis* (which becomes the *sensus communis* or "common sense" of Scholastic Aristotelianism) is thus, for him, not a special sense (let alone, as for Descartes, a specialized physiological structure) but a common power (*koinē dynamis*), exercised equally and in concert by the individual senses. Since Descartes's mechanistic physiology and philosophy of nature cannot account for the cognitive reach of sense perception (even in vision, "the noblest of our senses"), and since his fundamental dualism refers all cognition to the rational soul alone, then he must fracture the Aristotelian continuity of the powers of the soul, which range from nutrition and reproduction to sense perception, reflection, and intelligence (leaving out of account here the vexed question of the status of the separated creative intellect or *nous poiētikos* of *De An.* III:v).

Where does this leave vision? It leaves it strung out between blind bodily mechanisms and the dislocation of its cognitive reach into the invisible dimension of mathematical thought, so that it becomes essentially unfindable. One cannot catch hold of it even in the supposedly pristine sensations of light and color that proceed according to the institution of nature; for even if one ignores Merleau-Ponty's exploration of the complex participations involved in seeing a so-called atomic sense datum, such as a patch of red,³⁹ the complexities of color vision alone vitiate any purity. The cognitive supplementation that Descartes invokes cannot rescue a vision that has foundered between sheer blindness and the invisibles of intellectual thought.

THE TRUTH OF VISION

The mechanization and intellectual reconstruction of vision and its refinement and dramatic extension by optical instruments were of considerable importance to Descartes, in that they secured the basis for scientific observation and experimentation. Given that, as he states in the *Discours de la méthode* (to which the *Optics* is appended), he is convinced that experimentation

becomes more and more necessary the further one advances in science,⁴⁰ this basis needed to be secured not only metaphysically (as he seeks to do in the *Meditationes* and in Part IV of the *Discours*) but also empirically. In particular, the science of medicine, identified in the Preface to the French edition of the *Principia* as being (along with ethics) the fruit to be borne by the tree of knowledge,⁴¹ demands painstaking empirical observation, and Descartes concludes the *Discours* with the quite characteristic statement that he intends to devote the remainder of his life to acquiring the sort of knowledge of nature that will yield “rules of medicine.”⁴² What he expected of medicine was not only the cure of diseases and the maintenance of health but also the optimal enhancement of both mental and physical functioning, as well as a dramatic prolongation of life, free from the infirmities of old age.⁴³ Although the mechanization of vision strips it not only of its cognitive reach but also of its affective resonance, which is ethically important, Descartes’s aim in his analysis of vision was ultimately compassionate, for he understood medicine, for which physics and physiology were to provide the basis, as fulfilling the biblical commandment of charity (which also had inspired Francis Bacon’s research).

To secure the visual basis of empirical science requires that the errors to which natural vision is prone, or “the reasons why it sometimes deceives us,”⁴⁴ be pointed out, explained, and compensated for. For Descartes, the fundamental reason vision is prone to error is the rational soul’s dependence on a complicated bodily apparatus for gathering and encoding information that has an inherent lability. As in the First Meditation, Descartes cites madness and dreams as afflictions that menace it, but even when it functions normally in sane and waking life, it is liable to provide misleading data in many situations. Given its inherent passivity in virtue of its being governed by the institution of nature, perceptual thought lacks the ability of rational thought to safeguard itself against error (which is one of the reasons it requires cognitive supplementation). Among the distortions that menace vision, Descartes discusses double vision and various circumstances in which objects are not seen to be in their actual locations, along with the pervasive unreliability of natural or unsupplemented distance perception. Interestingly, he includes here a detailed treatment of the optical phenomenon of light-colored or brilliant bodies appearing to be larger than dark ones of the same size, adding that this phenomenon accounts for our vivid perception of stars which, small though they look, “nevertheless appear much larger than they should, given their extreme distance.”⁴⁵ His concluding mention of perspective representation as bringing home how readily one can be deceived in every visual register is surprisingly summary, given the proliferation of techniques of perceptual illusion, in particular, anamorphosis, at the time. Betsy Newell Decyk observes here that anamorphic art, in its various forms, appears to be closely connected to an interest, widespread in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the encod-

ing and decoding of information, noting that, “it is certainly possible that Descartes was intrigued by cryptography in general.”⁴⁶ For Descartes, however, symbol systems (such as the simple and abstract code of symbolization that he recommends in Rule Sixteen⁴⁷) do not serve to encrypt anything that he has discovered but rather to facilitate and purify the intellect’s grasp of essential truths.

In contrast to an abstract system of symbolization, the sensory encoding of information cannot, by its nature, function as an adequate cognitive instrument. The intellect must understand and appropriate vision if it is to be capable of formulating a science of nature, but it must not allow itself to be captivated by the confusion (due to the institution of nature) and the play of illusions that beset natural vision. Ensclosed as it is in the realm of invisible truth, the intellect seeks to render vision subservient to its purposes, casting it as the familiar figure of a needed, but far from autonomous, *ancilla*.

Given this subservience, Descartes’s consistent and striking use of visual metaphors for intellectual apprehension seems somewhat surprising (even given the general prominence of a metaphysics of vision and light in the discourse of Western philosophy). To recall here just a few memorable examples: in the *Regulae*, he takes the incontrovertible basis of cognition to be the cognitive apprehension that he terms *intuitus*, specifying that the term is to be taken in its literal Latin sense, which is “gazing” or “looking at.” He adds that the indubitable apprehension accomplished by *intuitus* springs “solely from the light of reason” (which, unlike natural vision, is unshaded).⁴⁸ “Clear and distinct perception” by the intellect is the criterion of certainty in the *Meditationes*, granted the metaphysical validation of certainty that relies on “the natural light.” In *Principia* I:45, he defines a “clear [intellectual] perception” as one that is as present and accessible to the attentive mind as “we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye’s gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility.”⁴⁹ Finally, and interestingly, in *Les Passions de l’âme*, the first of the passions is *admiration* which, though conventionally translated as “wonder,” literally means gazing or looking at something. It consists of an at least quasi-visual fascination with an object or matter that arouses one’s interest, and Descartes, who does not consider indifference a passion, remarks that *admiratio* has no opposite.⁵⁰ Unlike other passions, it does not agitate the heart or blood, because it has no concern for good or evil, only for knowledge.⁵¹ One hears, in Descartes’s discussion of *admiratio*, an echo of Aristotle’s assertion that humans desire seeing for its own sake, and that this desire to see is linked to a fundamental desire for knowledge.⁵² Descartes seems to recognize, in *Les Passions de l’âme*, a passionate seeing or a passion for sight and visual contemplation that challenges the ancillary position of sight. This impassioned seeing is not the idealized sight, purged of any phantasms or of the interinvolvement of seer and seen, as well

as of the motility of the glance or the tantalizing incompleteness of the glimpse that inspired his earlier visual metaphors of cognitive apprehension.

Does Descartes, then, at least implicitly recognize a passionate pathway that could lead back to the complexities of sight and restore to vision its full power? There is little textual evidence that could confirm such a conclusion; and he is quick to warn his readers that an excessive inclination to *admiratio* may prevent or pervert the cultivation of reason.⁵³ The underlying opposition between reason and the passions bespeaks his effort to keep reason pure, disengaged, and in an unchallenged position of mastery, which is the very effort that motivates his reconstruction of sight. Once the reconstruction is in place, no strategies of supplementation could restore to vision either its affective resonance (which includes the dimensions of the oneiric and the imaginary) or its complex engagements with idealities that animate visibility and cannot be disengaged from it to be construed, in the manner of the Cartesian understanding of space, as positive entities “beyond any point of view, any latency, any depth, without any true density.”⁵⁴

These invisibles, which are not cognitive supplements but pertain to and inhere in vision as such, make for the expression of the unique visual sensibilities manifest in the work of painters and other visual artists, regardless of whether or not their work is figurative. Cartesian vision is entirely uniform, but the vision of Rembrandt or Leonardo is not the vision of Vermeer, El Greco, Shitao, Cézanne, or Rothko (though they could enter, or could have entered, into each other’s modality of seeing). This active proliferation of ways of seeing contrasts sharply with the static Cartesian redoubling of vision that Merleau-Ponty diagnoses:

There is the vision on which I reflect; I cannot think it otherwise than as thought, inspection by the Mind, judgment, a reading of signs. And there is the vision which takes place, an honorary or instituted thought, weighed down in a body of its own, of which one cannot have an idea except in exercising it, and which introduces, between space and thought, the autonomous order of the composite of body and soul.⁵⁵

Descartes cannot bridge the divide between vision and what is invisible, a divide that opens up in virtue of his fundamental dualism. To undo the resulting impoverishment of vision and to begin to interrogate it as an irreducible and inexhaustible modality of manifestation or *phainesthai*, there is good reason to follow Merleau-Ponty in devoting close attention to those who, in the words of Cézanne, “think in painting.”

4

The Specularity of Representation

Foucault, Velázquez, Descartes

[M]any painters cherished in perspective a newfound key to the rationality of space and a means of restoring man to his place in the universal harmony . . . it is clear, then, that perspective was at the heart of a vast intellectual and moral project.

—Yves Bonnefoy, “Time and the Timeless in Quattrocento Painting”

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault casts Descartes—the early Descartes of the *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii*—as the privileged exponent of the Classical *epistēmē* of representation, as it initially defines itself over against the Renaissance episteme of similitude.¹ The exemplary position accorded to Descartes (a position that is problematic from Foucault’s “archaeological” standpoint, since exemplars themselves belong to the order of representation) is complemented as well as contested by the prominence that Foucault gives to a visual work, Velázquez’s late painting, *Las Meninas*, completed some eight or nine years after Descartes’s death. Foucault understands this painting as both the self-representation and self-problematization of representation, revealing its inner law as well as the fatal absence at its core. Specifically, *Las Meninas* demarcates the empty place of the sovereign that governs the order of representation, a place that will, in the *epistēmē* of modernity, be occupied by the figure of man. Since the place of man, his announced or imminent disappearance, and the character of a thought that can situate itself in the space of this disappearance (the space of language, or *écriture*) are the crucial concerns of

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The Order of Things, the discussion of *Las Meninas* is both inaugural and recurrent. The painting is not placed on a par with the two works of literature, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Sade's *Justine*, which are seen as problematizing, respectively, the Renaissance and Modern epistemic orders.

Foucault maintains a puzzling silence as to why he finds it necessary to turn to a *painting* (rather than perhaps to another work of literature) to find the *epistēmē* of representation both revealed and subverted. The question concerning the relationship between painting and representation gains further urgency since Foucault, who rejects phenomenology, does not concur with Merleau-Ponty's privileging of painting as a visual interrogation of *phainesthai* that challenges Cartesian and post-Cartesian representation by returning to the primordially of "wild being."² Does he then treat painting as simply a special type of "the visible" which, as Deleuze points out, remains for him irreducible to the articulable, without contesting the latter's primacy?³ Does painting belong just to the nondiscursive milieu, or form part of the visual archive, while lacking any power to challenge discursive configurations?

In order to address these questions and to carry forward the dialogue between painting and Classical representation that Foucault initiates, I will first discuss the role of Descartes in relation to the *epistēmē* of representation, moving on to interrogate Foucault's analysis of the self-representation of representation in *Las Meninas*, where I argue that he is not sufficiently attentive to the resistance of painting to discursive configurations but remains, strangely, caught up in an essentially Cartesian understanding of both vision and painting. This will lead to a concluding consideration of the implications of the visuality and materiality of painting for theories of representation, and of the importance of the irreducibility of painting to a theoretical exegesis of vision.

DESCARTES AND THE *EPISTĒMĒ* OF REPRESENTATION

Foucault perceives clearly that, in Classical representation, as inaugurated by Descartes, universal *mathēsis* as a relational science of order and measure takes precedence over the mathematization of nature (which Husserl and Heidegger emphasize as being crucial to modern thought).⁴ Descartes notes in the *Regulae* that mathematics is merely the "outer covering" (*integumentum*) of the pure *mathēsis* that is the hidden source of all scientific disciplines.⁵

For Descartes, the cognitive order of the *mathēsis* is not a representation of any pregiven ontological order but a free construction of the human intellect, or *ingenium*. Since Descartes, in the *Regulae*, leaves his epistemology without a metaphysical basis, the *ingenium*, unlike the *mens* of the *Meditationes*, is not explicitly subordinated to divine creation. Representation does

not function here as a replication, in the order of knowledge, of a reality that is independent of the apprehending mind (a replication that typically seeks to disguise its own secondariness or shortfall). Rather, if Descartes's *mathēsis universalis* can at all be regarded as a certain prototype of representation, then it is one that boldly, if tacitly, reinvents reality in the autonomous order of thought. The *ingenium* is (as its name indicates) a power of invention that reflects and contemplates only itself in the sciences of nature.

Given his constructivism, Descartes insists that the limits of human knowledge must be scrupulously demarcated and respected. He notes, for instance, the futility of postulating occult qualities and new types of entities to account for the phenomenon of magnetism. If one can explain this phenomenon entirely in terms of "simple natures" that are "known in themselves" (because their simplicity is not intrinsic but relative to the apprehending intellect), then one can confidently claim to have discovered the magnet's true nature, *insofar* as it is accessible to the human intellect.⁶ Even in his classical works, where the epistemology of simple natures is superseded by that of innate ideas that are not necessarily comprehensible to the finite mind (the idea of God being a notable example), Descartes continues to regard the limitation of human knowledge as indissociable from whatever certainty it is capable of.

Although Foucault does not explicitly discuss Descartes's strategies of limitation, he does indicate the "archaeological" context in terms of which they can be understood. He points out that the indefinite profusion of resemblances characteristic of the Renaissance *epistēmē* of similitude becomes finitized once similarity and difference are articulated within the order of *mathēsis*. Infinity, which escapes representation, becomes the fundamental problem for Classical thought, and finitude is understood as a privation or shortfall of the unattainable standard of the infinite.⁷ In his exchange with Derrida, Foucault brilliantly analyzes the problem of finitude in Descartes's *Meditationes* with reference to dream and madness as afflictions of the finite mind.⁸ In the *Regulae*, however, the intellect is not situated in relation to the infinite but is, as already indicated, granted autonomy, as long as it can conceal its usurpation of the position of origin.⁹ It translates the experience of its own finitude into bold ventures of methodic construction.

Foucault pays no heed to the anomaly of the *Regulae* in relation to the Classical *epistēmē*, but he discusses two orders within which an effacement of the position of origin (and therefore also its usurpation) can be accomplished: signification and language. He observes that "binary signification" (which conjoins signifier and signified without benefit of a mediating relation, such as resemblance) is so essential to representation as to remain generally unthematized (being taken for granted) within the Classical *epistēmē*.¹⁰ The sign must, however, represent its own representative power within itself, so that the binary

relationship immediately becomes unbalanced, giving primacy to the signifier over the signified. This concentration of representative power in the signifier also tends to obscure the role of the subject as the originator of representation, which is precisely the obscuration or ambiguity that the early Descartes needs in order to efface the implicit displacement of the Creator by subjectivity.

Language, in the context of the Classical *epistēmē*, abets this obscuration, in that it takes on an appearance of transparent neutrality, becoming the diaphanous medium of representation. Discourse interlinks thought (the “I think”) with being (the “I am”) in a manner that hides the speaker’s finite singularity. For this reason, Foucault finds that language, as it functions in Classical representation, precludes the possibility of a science of man.¹¹

The function of Classical discourse is to create a representational table or picture that is schematic and pays no heed to phenomena in their experienced concreteness. It is inimical to a descriptive phenomenology. In the visible, which is at issue here, phenomenal features that resist schematization, such as perceived depth and color, are ascribed to a confused (because body-dependent) apprehension of intelligible relationships and are therefore denied any intrinsic importance. They do not, within this schema, constitute a genuine opening upon reality. For this reason, the Classical *epistēmē* recognizes no significant differences between pure thought and a vision purified of the adventitious confusions that beset it in virtue of the seer’s embodiment. Vision, once purified and reclaimed by thought, is analyzed essentially in terms of geometry and mechanics, as Descartes analyzes it in his *Optics*.

REPRESENTATION SELF-REPRESENTED: FOUCAULT’S *LAS MENINAS*

Foucault analyzes *Las Meninas* as a referential system that organizes mutually exclusive visibilities with reference to a subjectivity or power of representation that remains incapable of representing itself, so that its absence interrupts the cycle of representation. As John Rajchman observes, Foucault was, in the 1960s, practicing a form of *nouvelle critique*, which views the work of art as abysmally self-referential:

In each work, he uncovered a reference to the particular artistic tradition in which the work figured, and thus presented it as the self-referring instance of that tradition. *Las Meninas* is a painting about painting in the tradition of “illusionistic space.”¹²

In *Las Meninas*, the observant gaze of the represented painter reaches out beyond the confines of the picture space to a point at which it converges with

the sight lines of the Infanta, the *menina* Doña Isabel de Velasco, the courtier in the middle ground (thought to be Don Diego Ruiz de Ascona), and the dwarf, Maribárbola.¹³ Foucault takes this point to be the standpoint of the implied spectator, converging with that of the implied actual painter gazing at the scene, as well as with that of the model being painted by the represented artist. The hand of the represented painter is poised in midair, holding a brush that he seems to have, just a moment ago, touched to the palette. It will presently resume its work on a surface invisible to the spectator, to whom the monumental mounted canvas being painted reveals only its dull, indifferent back. The painter's eyes and hands conjoin spatialities that are normally disjoint: the space of the model, excluded de facto from the composition, the space of the spectator, excluded de jure, and, finally, the invisible space of representation. An unstilled oscillation is thus set up between signifier and signified, representative and represented, leaving the one who exercises the power of representation (the painter who, as represented, has momentarily stepped out from behind his canvas, but who, in actuality, remains invisible) both inscribed and concealed within the referential system.

Foucault observes that the source of all visibility in the painting, the window through which pours "the pure volume of light that renders all representation possible,"¹⁴ remains similarly invisible, both by its near exclusion from the composition and by being, in itself, a pure aperture, an empty place. The light that it admits streams across the foreground, where it may cast into relief or dissolve the contours of figures. It kindles pale fires in the Infanta's hair and sharply illumines the jutting vertical edge of the represented canvas. Given that it also must illumine the invisible surface of this canvas turned away from the spectator, as well as the place of the unseen model, it functions as the insubstantial common locus of the representation and, in its interaction with the painter's vision, as the former's enabling source. Somewhat analogously, the Cartesian metaphoric "natural light," the mind's unmediated access to fully evident and indubitable truth, constitutes the unrepresentable origin of the *mathēsis*, an origin that is not a positive *arkhē*.

At the far back wall of the interior that *Las Meninas* represents, the focally placed yet disregarded mirror spectrally reveals, according to Foucault, what the represented painter has taken as his model, and what so fascinates the gaze of the various figures. The reflected image shows the royal couple, King Philip IV and Queen Mariana, seemingly posing for a double portrait (which Velázquez is not, in fact, known to have executed). Their reflected likenesses seem to gaze out at their real selves with the same rapt attention that characterizes the other personages. However, their image is the most "compromised" and ephemeral aspect of the scene. Were the *menina* on the left, Doña Maria Agustina de Sarmiento, whose look remains solicitously trained on the Infanta, to rise from her kneeling position, the ghostly sovereigns

would at once be eclipsed, and the mirror would show only her elegantly coifed wig with its gossamer butterflies. As though to emphasize this fragility further, the superimposition of sight lines, which the mirror reflection allows one to extend in such a way that the entire picture can be regarded as “looking out at a scene for which it is itself a scene,” is, Foucault observes, uncoupled at both lower corners: by the recalcitrant canvas that will not show its face, and by the dog who is content to look at nothing in particular.¹⁵

Whereas the mirror functions as the painting’s effective yet disregarded center, the visual focus is on the head of the young Infanta, situated at the intersection of the main compositional axes, bathed in a flood of golden light, and further emphasized through the positioning of the flanking *meninas*. The lines of her gaze and of the gazes of the mirrored royal couple converge at the standpoint of the implied model/spectator, thereby forming the painting’s sharpest, but unseen, angle. Within the represented scene, however, this unseen convergence remains dissolved into its three organizing components: the painter, the model in reflection, and the spectator in the guise of Don Nieto. Natural vision seems to be incapable of holding together the schema of representation.

Within the cycle or “spiral shell” of representation, which Foucault traces from the window to the gaze and tools of the painter, to the (mirrored) spectacle, the paintings shown above the mirror, the spectator’s gaze, and finally back to the enabling and dissolving light, the preeminent place of the (actual) painter, as well as that of the model who is to recognize himself or herself in the representation (thus the place of origin), is inscribed only negatively, as a locus of absence. *Las Meninas* here indicates, in Foucault’s analysis, the necessary disappearance, within representation, of its own foundation. If one can, with Luca Giordano, praise the work as “the theology of painting,”¹⁶ then it would have to be regarded as articulating a negative theology by focusing its visual resources on what remains invisible and unrepresentable.

For Foucault, the absence here inscribed is essentially that of man, so that the interruption of the cycle of representation reveals the impossibility of developing, within the disclosive space of the Classical *epistēmē*, a science of man. Only with the mutation and eclipse of this *epistēmē* and the ascendancy of analogy and succession over representation can man show himself as both knowing subject and object of knowledge, as “enslaved sovereign” and “observed spectator.” He then appears, as Foucault points out, “in the place of the king, which was assigned to him in advance by *Las Meninas*.”¹⁷

LAS MENINAS IN QUESTION

Foucault’s analysis of the painting is compelling because of its theoretical brilliance and visual sophistication. Subsequent discussion, however, has called

some of its underlying assumptions into question. One can ask, furthermore, whether the analysis does justice to the visual and symbolic complexities of the painting. These controversies and questions call for renewed reflection on the painting, a reflection willing to take up the issues raised in scholarly discussion without being bound thereto.

In response to John R. Searle's construal of the painting as a paradox (and, implicitly, a cryptogram) of visual representation, Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen have shown the incorrectness, in terms of perspectival theory, of both Searle's and Foucault's guiding assumption that the represented scene is viewed from the standpoint of the model, who is reflected in the represented mirror.¹⁸ Since the painting's perspectival vanishing point is at the elbow of the figure of Don Nieto, the point of view must, theoretically, be located directly opposite it. Whoever stands along the axis on which this (not precisely specifiable) point is located, however, could not possibly be reflected in the mirror. Snyder and Cohen agree that, in terms of perspective, the mirror must reflect not the hypothetical model but rather a central portion of the unseen surface of the represented canvas.¹⁹ As Jonathan Brown notes, Antonio Palomino's well-informed discussion in his *El museo pictorio y escala óptica* of 1724 expresses confidence that "the mirror reflects the large canvas on which the artist is working."²⁰ Palomino's testimony (important because he was able to consult most of the represented persons) thus corroborates Snyder's and Cohen's analysis.

The painted mirror image is strangely ambiguous. While its frame assimilates it to the paintings shown hanging on the back wall, the line of light around its edges and the sheen of its surface mark it off from them as an optical artifact. The mirrored image is quite obviously not a slice of life but rather an artistic composition that gives every indication of being shown in reverse. The red curtain in the image, for instance, looks incongruous when placed, as shown, in the upper right corner, but it would be visually effective if placed in the upper left, as similar curtains are placed in other Velázquez paintings, such as *The Rokeby Venus*, *Prince Baltasar Carlos*, or the late *Las Hilanderas*. The relative heights of the king and queen (and the implicit hierarchy) as well as the custom of reading the graphic articulation from left to right suggest, then, a painterly composition shown in reverse, as would be the case if the mirror reflected a portion of the painted face of the canvas.

Art-historical consensus has, as Svetlana Alpers points out, come to see *Las Meninas* as a visual statement concerning the status of painting in seventeenth-century Spain.²¹ Spanish painting was striving, at the time, to emulate the prestige of the Venetian school, and Philip IV, a noted connoisseur and patron of the art, significantly advanced its standing. Madlyn Millner Kahr, who concurs with this interpretation, points out that Velázquez places his own head higher than those of the other foreground figures, and that the paintings

shown on the back wall (which depict the contests between Apollo and Marsyas and, as also in *Las Hilanderas*, between Athena and Arachne) extol human creativity and symbolically place painting on a par with music.²²

Whereas Palomino suggests that Velázquez sought to immortalize his own image by associating it closely with that of the Infanta, the contemporary art historian Jonathan Brown concentrates on the figure of the king. Given that Philip IV had the painting installed in the personal space of his summer office and was its sole intended spectator, he could, whenever he stepped in front of it, see his presence acknowledged and note its galvanizing effect on the courtly gathering. Once he withdrew from it, however, the painting once again gave pride of place to the Infanta, relegating her parents to a ghostly reflected portrait.²³

A key difficulty in both Foucault's analysis and Snyder's and Cohen's is that they construe the painting as perspectively systematic, as though it had never occurred to Velázquez to play with perspective as he saw fit (and as he clearly does, for instance, in *The Rokeby Venus*, where the mirror reflection of Venus's face belies perspectival relationships). Their analyses, moreover, resort unquestioningly to an Albertian understanding of perspective for which, as Norman Bryson points out, "the eye of the viewer is taking up a position in relation to the scene that is identical to the position originally occupied by the painter."²⁴ Bryson notes the inevitable frustration of this ideal system (and of the ideal of *compositio* that governs it) by its inability to allocate to the viewer not merely an axis but a precise standpoint. He points out, however, that the perspectival vanishing point becomes, as it were, by default, "the anchor of a system which incarnates the viewer."²⁵ For all of that, he does not do full justice to what it might mean to incarnate the viewer, which is not merely to give her a determinate standpoint, nor yet a body of labor and desire, but to integrate her into the layered complexities of flesh, such as Merleau-Ponty understands it.²⁶ Unlike perspectival systems, natural vision (in particular, the glance) refuses to be tied to a fixed vantage point. The secret privilege of painting is its ability to do justice to the wayward glance and to enlist the very resources of representation (with which it has all too often been unthinkingly identified) to subvert the representational schema in favor of a visual articulation that is neither systematic nor subservient to a dominant *epistēmē*.

It is not enough to note, as does Brown, that Velázquez followed the restless movement of the eye in creating multiple focal points, leaving perspectival relationships deliberately ambiguous.²⁷ Velázquez does not just allow for undecidability, as though it were a surd of natural vision, but he deliberately and artfully stages it. To begin with the compositional and perspectival aspects of this staging, in Albertian perspective, the viewer is, as noted above, invited to take up the standpoint of the painter, thus seeing her vantage point presupposed by the represented scene, or even acknowledged by its figures. The

viewer's situation in *Las Meninas*, however, is elusive. Yes, she is being seen by the represented figures (and even curtsied to by Doña Isabel), but only because her position seems to coincide with that of the implied model. The latter, however, functions as such only due to the mendacious suggestion of the mirror image. The identities and positions of seer and seen are not fixed, but ambiguous and unstable, and the viewer find herself, in the end, in an indeterminate space of isolation, looking in upon these visual complexities.

It is useful to compare her position here with that of the spectator in Vermeer's *The Art of Painting*, which breaks, according to Bryson (who refers to it as *The Painter in His Studio*), in a decisive way with "the privileged focus of the spectacular moment."²⁸ Here the spectator stumbles, as it were, inadvertently upon the scene, glimpsing the represented painter, who has eyes only for his work, from the back, while the model, strangely diminutive and apparitional in the compressed space, seems not to notice him. Although the spectator here is excluded or at least marginalized, his position is not ambiguous, whereas *Las Meninas* employs all of the resources of representation to render the viewer's position aporetic. It is, moreover, the latter painting that genuinely renounces the syncretic fixity of the gaze, as Bryson describes it, to engage the saccadic rhythm of the glance.²⁹

Leo Steinberg notes that sight lines sustain the painting's compositional structure, but also that the diaphaneity emphasized by the apertures and mirror serves to open up opaque matter to the incursion of light.³⁰ The study of how light functions in the painting (which also is important to Foucault) transcends any conceptual schema. The light, streaming in from the hidden window and the open back door, diffuses from the foreground plane into the hall's lofty spaces. On the lighted foreground plane, the billowing forms of the ladies' crinolines create an undulation that folds in on itself with the sleeping dog and retreats along the axis of the figures grouped in the middle ground, its wave pattern contrasting throughout with the austere, rectilinear geometry of the pictorial space. Color follows this wave pattern, in particular in the procession of reds that moves from the cross of Santiago on the painter's chest to the red curtain, to Doña Maria's cheek and proffered *búcaro*, to the crimson glaze washed over the Infanta's dress, and finally to the muted crimson outfit of Nicolasito Pertusato.

These relationships of light, form, and color reveal no univocal meaning; they are aspects of visibility that resist being subsumed under any dominant *epistēmē*—markers, as it were, of vision's escape from cognitive archetypes.

They are, however, no less crucial to the painting's organization and visual power than the compositional and perspectival relationships that Foucault analyzes.

There is, furthermore, as Yve-Alain Bois points out in *Painting as Model*, a technical model of painting that remains irreducible to the perceptual

model.³¹ This means not only that, as Bois notes, the image, so prominent in philosophical aesthetics, is little more than a surface effect, but also that a theory of representation informed mainly by perspectival geometry leaves the technicality and materiality of painting out of account. *Las Meninas*, somewhat paradoxically, foregrounds its own materiality by dissolving the seeming solidity of worldly existence into pigment and trace. No sooner do these evoke the likenesses of things than they dissolve again, upon closer scrutiny, into a play of marks. Velázquez's brushwork is, in fact, sketchiest at the painting's visual focus: the head and torso of the Infanta. Such freedom of the brush, fleetingly evoking form, light, and the emotion-fraught semblance of life out of the foregrounded materiality of mark-making, emphasizes the fragility and insubstantiality of visual configurations as well as solicits the viewer's creative participation. It is interesting to consider that, according to recent scholarship, there was, indeed, in seventeenth-century Spain, a sophisticated tradition of interpreting the seemingly accidental mark:

In addition to seeing a *borrón* (stain, or mark) from the proper distance and in the correct light, the viewer needed learning, experience, and sensitivity to decipher the painted code. To the initiate, the successfully decoded message carried a sense of heightened reality, of profound and near-divine truth.³²

For Velázquez, however, there is no univocal revelation of truth in painting. He deploys the tradition of the *borrón* much as he does the rules of Albertian perspective: to effect a *mise en abîme* that brings the viewer up against the differential and anarchic obverse of visual coherence. For all of its readability and quasi-"theological" serenity, the painting confronts the viewer with the indissociability of significant form from accidental marks, of seemingly assured meaning from a play of simulacra, and of the wayward trajectories of the glance from the supposed reliability of visual information. It does so in the double register of exploring vision and thematizing its own resources in a manner that is at least inchoately autofigurative.

VISION AND PICTORIAL THOUGHT

Foucault's selection of a painting to problematize the *epistēmē* of representation reflects his understanding of that *epistēmē* in terms of order, simultaneity, tabulation, and taxonomy, an order that calls for a spatial mode of expression. In contrast, he characterizes the epistemic paradigm that begins to assert itself at the close of the eighteenth century as informed by an awareness of time, genesis, and destruction. When things begin to escape from the

order of representation, they reveal “the force that brought them into being and that remains in them,” so that the static order of representation is robbed of its power to unite thought with reality.³³ The way is opened for the Hegelian system and for the philosophies of insurmountable finitude that challenge it. Whereas for Foucault the arts of language are suited to expressing epistemic orders that are temporal and dynamic, it is painting that does justice to the order of representation, since it is thought of as an essentially spatial art, or even an art based on spatial projection. As soon as this point is made, however, the advantage gained—namely, that Foucault’s analysis of *Las Meninas* reveals its logic—is offset by a serious difficulty: if painting is cast as an art of spatial projection (and not as an art that engages with a lived and fluid spatiality, with place-scapes, or *khōra*), then it has already been, from the outset, conformed to the procrustean bed of Classical representation. Not only is it then deprived of autonomy and contemporary vitality, but its very history becomes obscure and problematic. If, for instance, one accepts Yve-Alain Bois’s characterization of abstract expressionism as an effort “to bring forth the pure *parousia* of [painting’s] own essence,”³⁴ then this essence (however questionable the notion) cannot possibly be exhausted by spatial schemata, to say nothing of the importance of temporality in much of abstract expressionist painting. Bois’s further suggestion, that Mondrian sought to accomplish a deconstruction of painting that would respond to the “economic abstraction” of capitalism by analyzing the elements that ground its symbolic order,³⁵ likewise could not be followed out interpretively on the basis of Foucault’s implicitly reductive understanding of the art.

Foucault himself addresses the history of Western painting in his study of René Magritte’s painting, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. He characterizes that history as governed, from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries, by two principles, the first of which mandates a dissociation of depiction from linguistic reference, along with establishing a hierarchical relation between them, while the second makes “resemblance” the criterion of representation. He goes on to trace the subversion of these principles, respectively, to Klee and Kandinsky.³⁶ One needs to note that “resemblance” is not understood here as likeness, in terms of the mimetic order that Foucault calls “similitude,” but is contrasted with it. Although, as Magritte notes in a letter, and as Foucault agrees, ordinary language does not distinguish between resemblance and similitude, they are distinguished for him in that resemblance is instituted by thought, whereas likeness is experientially encountered.³⁷

Foucault’s characterization of resemblance is strikingly Cartesian, given that Descartes strives to eliminate natural and spontaneous likeness (which he himself—not to confuse matters—calls *ressemblance*) from representation. As was indicated in chapter 3 of this book, he argues in the *Optics* that *ressemblance* is useless to representation:

... [T]he perfection of images often depends on their not resembling their objects as much as they might. You can see this in the case of engravings, consisting only of a little ink placed here and there on the paper. . . . It is only in relationship to shape that there is any real likeness. And even this likeness is very imperfect, since engravings represent to us bodies varying in relief on a surface that is entirely flat.³⁸

For Descartes, painting essentially is colored drawing, and drawing is a practice of representation that does not rely on likenesses. What underlies this conception is his understanding of vision as a form of mathematically analyzable thought that is confused and obscured by embodiment. Its fascination with likenesses is part and parcel of this obscuration. Given his assimilation of painting to drawing, and of both to vision, which is in turn cast as mathematical thought, he regards the codes that govern representation as universal and timeless rather than as historically conditioned.

Although Foucault does, of course, historicize representation, his analysis, unlike Merleau-Ponty's, does not critically engage with Descartes's understanding of vision, nor does it seek to trace what one might call a "choreographic articulation" of space, place, and depth. Furthermore, it does not seek to clarify the relationship between vision and pictorial thought.

It is indeed curious that a tacit assimilation of pictorial thought to vision continues to be accepted by theorists as diverse as Merleau-Ponty and Snyder. Even though Merleau-Ponty sharply distinguishes the painterly interrogation of vision from Cartesian representation, he does so on the premise that painting is fundamentally a visual exegesis of vision. Snyder, for his part, points out the inseparability of the perspectival rendering of spatial relationships from a rationalization and schematization of vision.³⁹ In his view, the perspectival system offers vision, as it were, a mirror in which to contemplate itself, provided it is willing to accept its own schematization.

What remains lacking here is not only a richer sense of perceived space and depth but specifically an exploration of what Bois calls "the mode of thought for which painting is the stake."⁴⁰ This mode of thought is not straightforwardly assimilable to visual thinking, nor, of course, to the mathematical invisibles of perspectival representation. Merleau-Ponty's "silent science" of a visual interrogation of vision likewise fails to do it justice. Although a study of *Las Meninas* alone does not enable one to respond to this question—which will have to be left open here—the painting calls attention to it by its solicitation of the glance, its aporetic relationships, its foregrounding of its own materiality, and the prominence it gives to the monumental and enigmatic canvas. If Velázquez sought, indeed, to claim for painting the status of music and poetry, then he certainly could show that its inalienable materiality and technicality are of another order than those of the crafts to which it had

been assimilated. However, he could not divest it of its opacities, for, as Hubert Damisch writes in his searching study of Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, painting, unlike literature, cannot *say* the indescribable, while also declaring it to be such (and, once one abjures "profane vision"—as Merleau-Ponty calls it—the most quotidian of visual scenes can become indescribable). Painting can only produce the indescribable in its own visual register, without clarifying its opacity.⁴¹

The invisibles that the work of painting is in quest of are at least as much of the nature of shadow as of light. Foucault's analysis, however, keeps to the light, for a configuration of shadows can scarcely be looked upon as a governing *epistēmē*. Even though the very name of phenomenology links it to light, it is, in contrast, singularly responsive to shadows and thus also to what John Sallis calls "the shades of painting."⁴² To develop further the phenomenological exploration of the delicate junctures or intercrossings of the visibility and the invisibles of painting inaugurated by Merleau-Ponty may mean to deepen the shadows, to the limit of letting withdrawals from sight announce themselves within sight.

Part III

Post-Phenomenological Perspectives

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5

The Gravity and (In)visibility of Flesh

Merleau-Ponty, Nancy, Derrida

Painting is capable of suggesting time in a more intimate way through its most celebrated but also most equivocal feature, often rather hastily called *depth*. . . . What the indication of depth can contribute is the dimensionality of matter, the obscurity of the tangible world. It replaces proof by doubt and substitutes the existential dimension for the divine.

—Yves Bonnefoy, “Time and the Timeless in Quattrocento Painting”

So that a man can be blind, he must first, in his *essential* being, remain one who sees.

—Martin Heidegger, “. . . dichterisch wohnet der Mensch . . .”

In his late fragmentary work, *The Visible and the Invisible*,¹ Merleau-Ponty, having offered penetrating critiques of reflection, dialectics, and intuition as modalities of philosophical interrogation, undertakes to outline an ontology of flesh, noting that what he calls “flesh” has not, so far, received a name in any philosophy.² Flesh opposes its material density and its obscurities to the ideal light of phenomenology (the φῶς of its φαίνεσθαι). Although Merleau-Ponty cautions that flesh must not be literally assimilated to matter, any more than to substance or mind, and that the only philosophical notion that could begin to do it justice is the ancient notion of an element as “a sort of incarnate principle” or “style of being,”³ the very name he chose for it seems to have discouraged ontological investigation. Instead, it has fostered either a certain literalization and Dionysian license, or else consignment to obscurity.

If flesh has remained, on the whole, foreign to the discourse of philosophy, its ghosts have nonetheless continued to haunt it, in the form, for instance, of “the traces of an absolute invisibility,” of imperception or an absence of light at the very heart of perception, which indicate, for Derrida, “a program for an entire re-reading of the late Merleau-Ponty.”⁴ Another haunting can be discerned in Nancy’s thematics of “weight” or “gravity,” in what has been called his “mineralogy” and “meteorology” of being.⁵ Given that flesh, for Merleau-Ponty, is interrogated chiefly through vision, both of these refigurations of flesh are interlinked, as are Merleau-Ponty’s own analyses, with philosophical reflections on the visual arts, particularly painting and drawing. The thought of flesh can therefore no longer be followed out or carried forward by a rereading and reinterpretation of Merleau-Ponty’s texts alone; rather, it requires excursions into complex intertextualities. In this way, it will remain true to Merleau-Ponty’s own sense of “a mutation in the interrelations of man and being” that comes to pass when one confronts classical thought with the researches of modern painting.⁶

Access to these intertextualities nonetheless presupposes a careful retracing of Merleau-Ponty’s own articulation of the chiasmatic structure of flesh, and of the way it informs painting. Such a retracing will therefore be undertaken first.

FLESH, CHIASM

Flesh becomes accessible in appearing or in sensory experience, such as vision. It there effects an intercrossing (*entrelacs*) or a crossing out of philosophically sanctioned hierarchical oppositions, such as that of immanence to transcendence, the sensible to the supersensible, or the visible to the invisible. The figure of the intercrossing is that of the chiasm, as distinct from the figure of polarity or diremption.

Vision refuses to be wholly taken up into an essential intuition or *Wesensschau*, for it is shaped by the peculiarities of one’s embodiment, as well as by one’s locality and history. It cannot divest the visible of its ambiguities and veilings, as Descartes sought to strip his piece of wax down to its pure intelligibility. Rather, it shows forth the visible only by clothing it “in its own flesh.”⁷ The supposed contaminations of pure essentiality, which have long rendered perception philosophically suspect (while also giving vision its traditional relative privilege as a distance sense responsive to sheer light, rather than bound to matter) are precisely, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes, what allows things to be revealed as such, in their “sovereign being.” In virtue of a phenomenological interrogation of vision, the familiar oppositional notions become paleonyms that philosophy must deconstruct and reinscribe into a paleography of the

uncharted “wild region,” or into “untamed thought” (*la pensée sauvage*). Fundamentally, the seer must take her place within the visible, becoming part of its very fabric. If she is genuinely to see, she herself will be exposed to the glance or gaze, linked by “intercorporeity” to other human and nonhuman seers. In the primary “sensory reflection” that Merleau-Ponty recognizes (such as looking oneself in the eye in an effort to capture oneself seeing), reflective closure is therefore unattainable. Rather than achieving reflective closure, the gaze moves eccentrically, and this very deflection allows it to be imbued with invisibilities by participating, for instance, in the imaginary, oneiric, or memorial dimensions, or in the life of desire.

Just as there is neither any closure of sensory reflection nor any transcendence of the lacunary “style” established by perception, there also is no atomic perceptual given, no sense datum or sheer *quale*, such as, to keep to Merleau-Ponty’s own example, a patch of red or yellow. Color, for instance, manifests itself in virtue of complex and unthematized “participations” that range from the interaction of colors to the depth strata of affectivity and transpersonal memory. It shows itself, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, as “a concretion of visibility that adheres with every fibre to invisible being.”⁸ The visible, and more generally the sensory phenomenon, is a strait effracted between exterior and interior horizons, an ephemeral modulation within a dynamic, differential field. “Flesh” is the name given to this dynamic and to the tissue of latencies that it activates.

What supervenes upon the crossed-out opposition of immanence to transcendence is the “density” of flesh, along with the unbroken, ascending movement toward higher reaches of complexity and ideality, which Merleau-Ponty calls a “vertical genesis” or a surpassing in place. The fact that this movement is unbroken allows ideality, or the invisible, to maintain the participatory and elliptical “style” characteristic of vision, as well as of perception generally.

The seer is enraptured by exteriority which, as just explained, also is an exposition of interiority. The narcissism involved in vision therefore is not superficial but profound. If Narcissus had merely seen his own love-arousing image as pure exteriority, he could have safely retreated from it into the interiority of consciousness, or taken refuge in transcendence. His predicament was that of being invaded and put under a spell by the image, of “being seen by it, existing within it, being seduced, captivated, alienated by the phantasm.”⁹ His tragic fate marks the shadow side of vision’s extradition from either pure subjectivity or objectivity, immanence or transcendence. Alterity infiltrates the self that is caught up in the anonymity and in the differential proliferation that characterize flesh. Subjectivity cannot here constitute an ultimate origin of meaning, but rather, as Merleau-Ponty puts it:

[T]he originary is not of one sole kind . . . the appeal to the originary goes into several directions: the originary bursts forth; and philosophy must accompany this bursting forth, this non-coincidence, this differentiation.¹⁰

Merleau-Ponty's unique insight lies in tracing an ontology of flesh as originary differentiation, as interlinked orders of participation, or as a proliferation of expression (a rationalist concept, which he himself translates into the Leibnizian terminology of "total parts") in the infrastructure of vision and of perception generally. To articulate the vertical genesis, Merleau-Ponty reflects here on the prefiguration of intercorporeity in synergic corporeity, on the generality already inherent in flesh, the deflected cycle of phonation and hearing, the silences that sustain language, and the chiasmatic bonds between essence and existence. However, given the truncation of *The Visible and the Invisible* by his sudden death, the vertical genesis is not developed beyond the level of a sketch. It will therefore be more helpful here to seek a richer characterization of the ontological style that the genesis pivots on, rather than to examine the latter.

This style, as already indicated, is prolix as well as elliptical and lacunary, for ellipsis (*l'écart*) is, as Merleau-Ponty stresses, itself an opening upon things and upon the past, so that it "enters into their definition."¹¹ The gap of nonclosure is not a mere surd or void but a dense region teeming with potentialities and configurations. Rather than having access to solid and luminous "glaciers of being," experience and thought bear, and bend under, "the weight of space, of time, of the very being that they think."¹² In comparison with this stratified and treacherous density of flesh, glaciers are ethereal. One can here follow out, in Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh, an implicit thematics of weight or gravity. This thematics marks a juncture between his ontology of flesh and Nancy's concern with what he calls the "gravity of thought." Before interrogating this juncture, however, it will be necessary to ask how and why Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh leads him to formulate a philosophy of painting.

PAINTING, FLESH

Flesh in the ordinary sense, as the flesh of the gendered body, is certainly a watchword of much of Western painting, but for Merleau-Ponty, painting has the unique power of guiding thought back to flesh in a sharply different sense. Perception, as he understands it, is a lethic opening upon the world, forgetful "of its own premises," and goaded on by the "perceptual faith" toward reification and absolutization. Painting can function here as an antidote, encouraging an *anamnēsis*, not of transcendent Forms, but of the polymorphous

upsurge of the “there is,” of the “brute and existent world.”¹³ Its privilege derives from the fact that it is a visual interrogation of vision (itself a primary modality of interrogation), bound neither to concepts nor to the responsibilities associated with discourse. It is not called upon to name, assess, interpret, declare a stand, prescribe, exhort, or advise, but it is free to immerse itself in its specular meditation. It can accept the seeming paradoxes of a universality without concept, or of motion that is arrested like “a Zenonian reverie” if broken down into its constituent instants, but that lets itself be captured by a simultaneous conjunction of temporally impossible dynamic moments. Similarly, depth is not done justice to by perspectival representation (which is one means of expression among others, a cultural or symbolic form). A fuller exploration of depth involves paradox, for as Merleau-Ponty writes:

[I] see things in their place precisely because they eclipse one another . . . they are rivals before my look precisely because each one is in its place. This is their exteriority known in their envelopment, and their mutual dependence known in their autonomy.¹⁴

The “aesthetic world” (flesh as revealed in a primary way by sentience, and as thematized by art) is, according to a working note of November 1959, a domain that escapes logical order and is governed instead by the explosive “dehiscence” of being.¹⁵

Merleau-Ponty explores this realization along two lines of thought. First, the graphic trait, or the brush stroke with its flow of paint or ink, is not an effort at mimetic representation. It seeks to give form to the “internal equivalents” evoked in the painter’s sensitivity by visual experience. This thought is taken up and developed further by Derrida in *Memoirs of the Blind*, to emphasize that the trait is in quest of phantoms that elude it, rather than of “spectacular objectivity.”¹⁶ Since the graphic or painterly trait is intrinsically nonrepresentational, it enables the viewer to see along the avenues opened up by the visual configuration, to see, that is, in a way that is new and challenging, rather than to see the reassuring representation of what he already was assured of.

Second, what the trait and the entire visual work ultimately reveal is the invisible of the visible—an invisible that is at the heart of visibility, rather than being understood as a transcendent ideality toward which the visible would be oriented as toward an eclipsed Platonic Sun. The invisible of the visible can, of course, be thought of in the more or less prosaic sense of what is only potentially visible, such as the Husserlian *Abschattungen* or, for Merleau-Ponty, the play of light, shadow, color, or formal relationships out of which the visible scene constitutes itself. Thus he speaks of painting’s giving visual existence to what “profane” or ordinary vision passes over, to the visual means, say, by which Mont Ste. Victoire “makes itself a mountain before our eyes,”¹⁷

doing so in a way that is quite different from other ways of “mountain-making,” such as that of Marsden Hartley’s obsessively painted Mt. Katahdin.

The invisible also can be thought of, however, as the “axes and dimensions” that organize and configure visibility, as the oneiric, imaginative, or memorial investiture of the visible, or as nascent ideality. Merleau-Ponty stresses that one cannot hope to subsume these various aspects of invisibility under some encompassing category of “the invisible.” They are heterogeneous, for the visible, as the sheer deflagration of being, lacks both positivity and unity, and the invisible cannot be opposed to it as a negative counterpart.

The deeper thought of the invisible of the visible, for which Merleau-Ponty gropes in the late Working Notes to his posthumous book, is the thought of a “nucleus of absence” that all presencing circumscribes, so that the latter brings into “unconcealment” (to use a Heideggerian term) what remains incapable of being revealed in ordinary presence.¹⁸ In the Husserlian terminology that haunts Merleau-Ponty, the invisible remains *nicht urpräsentierbar*. As he writes in a Working Note of May 1960:

The sensible, the visible, must be for me the occasion to say what is Nothingness (*le néant*). Nothingness is no more (nor less) than the invisible.¹⁹

The “wild region” to which painting grants access is ultimately the indissociable conjunction or, indeed, the sameness (if, following Heidegger, one distinguishes sameness from identity) of the visible and the invisible as manifestation (or phenomenalization) and emptiness. This conjunction is the basic reason for Merleau-Ponty’s insistence that one can rejoin being only through creation, which is to say, in differential proliferation, not in identity. It also is the deeper reason, why in the painter’s visual meditation, activity and passivity, or seer and seen, become indiscernible; they are permutations in dehiscence emptiness. In both “Cézanne’s Doubt” of 1945, and in “Eye and Mind,” the last work he prepared for publication, Merleau-Ponty thematizes these permutations as natality, pointing out that birth initiates the exchanges between seeing and being seen, and that the painter’s vision is “a continual birth.”²⁰ In “Eye and Mind,” moreover, he considers the metamorphosis of seer and seen the very definition of flesh, and its exegesis the painter’s vocation.²¹ If painting, then, guides thought back to flesh, it guides it to the threshold of ordinary emptiness.

THE WEIGHT OF FLESH

One might think that if flesh is dehiscence emptiness, it could not weigh—that even the body might then be miraculously relieved of its heaviness, or that one

could be initiated into and repose in the sheer lightness of being. Such thinking, however, is misguided, for it is precisely in emptiness without support, foundation, or legitimation that things weigh. Historically, this insight was well expressed by the existentialist radicalization of freedom, along with its concomitant responsibility. Since existentialism understood consciousness as sheer transcendence, however, it refused to weigh freedom down with its situation. Merleau-Ponty, who is critical of this understanding of freedom,²² takes care to embed all meaning (and existentialist freedom is the freedom to give meaning) in the “vertical genesis” arising from perception, which is always situated. However, the quasi-transcendental position that he thus grants to perception does not allow him to embrace fully a “transcendental aesthetics” of weight in Nancy’s sense.

There is, Nancy holds, no origin or provenance of meaning; it simply presents itself, and one’s existence is borne by it as by its element. When Merleau-Ponty seeks to trace the perceptual origination of meaning by privileging and following the painter’s visual interrogation, he does not ask himself Nancy’s question as to how to interpret the “singular plurality” of the arts—the fact that art is neither unitary nor simply heterogeneous.²³ As Nancy shows, this question cannot be answered in a simplistic way by pointing to the plurality of the senses, for it will only repeat itself at the level of the senses, to say nothing of the fact that the diversity of the senses and of the forms of art are not parallel (or, to take the disanalogy still further, that the forms of art are not fixed or universal).²⁴ The question of the “singular plurality” of the arts thus renders Merleau-Ponty’s acceptance of the guidance of painting in tracing the origination of meaning out of “wild being” highly questionable.

Meaning, in its elemental character, crosses out the oppositions between immanence and transcendence, passivity and activity, or finitude and infinity, in an even more radical manner than Merleau-Ponty’s flesh. As Nancy writes:

[The] element of meaning is given to us; we are posited, placed, or thrown into it as our inmost possibility, one that distinguishes the idea of a significant world and the fact of this world from any other . . . since the element of meaning is a reality that is undiscernably and simultaneously empirical and transcendental, material and ideational, physical and spiritual . . . [manifesting] simultaneously the bare outlines of a logic and the thickness of a flesh.²⁵

Whereas transcendence is not a sheer surpassing but a continual passing further (recalling here the *surpassement sur place* of the vertical genesis), immanence is not pristine but is always already despoiled by the event of meaning that involves both exposure and relatedness. One neither constitutes nor simply receives meaning; one is exposed to it and welcomes its upheaval in the “passible” activity that is thought. The finitude of meaning is the very

singularity of appearing, the opening of manifestation, or “the gap between places that constitutes place,” thus articulating the topology of manifestation.²⁶ Finitude itself is the mark of exposure, of being thrown into exteriority and having to appear for the other—of a failure of commonality that is, paradoxically, the very condition of Nancy’s “inoperative community.”²⁷

Nancy has no need to postulate a Merleau-Pontyan intercorporeity that would take the place of intersubjectivity. Intercorporeity (even though its model is synergic rather than mimetic) effaces alterity and is, to that extent, in tension with an ontology of flesh as the differential proliferation of being. An ontology of flesh resists the pull of an ontology of the Same in Levinas’s sense, and one can agree with Merleau-Ponty that vision functions here as a safeguard.

To mark the limits of signification in its finitude is to seek out what is inappropriable, and what thereby renders thought weighty and ponderous, for all of its agile immateriality. Weight and thought are in dissonance, yet, Nancy writes, it is dissonance that makes for the whole weight of a thought, for it is the exceeding of any form that weighs in meaning.²⁸

In what sense, then, does gravity yield an aesthetics? To remain receptive to the inappropriable, which is without form, thought must let it weigh by figuration. Nancy regards the figure as a sketch or an “exposition” of the inappropriable gravity of meaning.²⁹ Indeed, figuration (in literature or visual art, understanding visual figuration here simply as the creation of forms) tends, at this point in history, to body forth “the unidentifiable, the figures of opacity, and of resistant consistency as such.” “Art” is no longer an adequate name for such a practice of figuration, since it not only resonates with the whole history of aesthetics but also since it has long encouraged (and, in Nancy’s view, continues to encourage) the creation of “sublime, exalted, exquisite figures.”³⁰

Nancy’s position here certainly gives rise to the question of whether, if what he calls “sublime or exquisite” connotes the beautiful, artistic beauty (or, in the case of the pure sublime, a certain exaltation) is incompatible with a figuration of opacity. There appears to be no compelling reason to think so, provided that beauty is not trivialized, and it would be instructive (though this line of investigation cannot be pursued here) to seek to trace the conjunction of sublimity or beauty with the figuration of opacity in the painting of Cézanne, which so profoundly fascinates Merleau-Ponty.

Although Nancy is an astute and a sensitive commentator on images, he gives no pride of place to the visual arts. Indeed, he prefers to speak of figuration as an “ex-scription” which suspends and displaces meaning in the “odd materiality” of language and of the written trait:

[W]riting exscribes meaning every bit as much as it inscribes signification . . . it shows that what matters is outside the text—is the infinite withdrawal of meaning by which each existence exists.³¹

This outside is no inaugural stratum, such as Merleau-Ponty's wild being, or "being in indivision." There is, for Nancy, no such layering of ontological strata, because meaning is already everywhere both patent and inappropriate. An aesthetic of gravity turns on this very recalcitrance of meaning to let itself be traced to any origin. However, if Merleau-Ponty's wild being is ultimately phenomenalization as indissociable from emptiness, he himself seeks really to think this recalcitrance, to which his language does not always do justice. Merleau-Ponty himself is in quest of an aesthetics of gravity.

(IN)VISIBILITY AND THE TRAIT

"I weave, using traits, lines, staffs, and letters," writes Derrida, "a tunic of writing wherein to capture the body of drawing at its very birth."³² This substitution of traits, or modalities of *graphein* for the drawing skills that, as Derrida confesses, have always eluded him, seeks to rival the ability of drawing to evoke the invisible of the visible. Although Derrida here takes up Merleau-Ponty's guiding concern, he does not occupy himself with painting but strictly with drawing in a classical mode. This choice is, of course, in keeping with the Louvre's exhibition series, *Parti Pris*, for the inauguration of which the text was written,³³ but it also recalls Descartes's privileging of drawing (in the form of copperplate engravings) in his *Optics*, which Merleau-Ponty discusses critically.³⁴ Derrida provisionally delineates two great "logics" of the invisible at the origin of drawing: the transcendental logic of the invisible conditions of the trait that renders visible, and the sacrificial logic of the transgressive event of rendering the invisible visible, at the cost of compensatory afflictions, such as blindness or castration. The duality of these logics is provisional, because they inextricably contaminate and "supplement" one another. Merleau-Ponty's exclusive focus on a transcendental questioning reveals itself as problematic, if indeed neither logic is capable of self-containment.

In the intricacies of the transcendental logic, Derrida indicates a spectrum of important moments, only some of which will be mentioned here. First, it is precisely insofar as one draws, letting the trait energize a blank space that one does not strictly see (however much artists like to claim, and have reason to claim, that drawing develops their vision). Blindness enshrouds the origin of the trait, which obeys memory and is kinetically effracted or brushed on, hastening to recapture, not some actual spectacle, but a visual configuration that allows for the presencing of invisibles that were fleetingly apperceived in an eclipsing of profane vision. The trait, moreover, compensates by its shadow writing, or *skiagraphia*, for absence and unavailability; it is, one might say, always already a work of mourning. One could muse here on the ghosts that always haunt both writing and drawing, as well as on the circumstance that

drawing is, according to the legend of Butades (which Derrida plays on), described as being, at its mythic origin, a woman's art.³⁵ The trait skims over what is visually given in quest of an apperception or extracted synthesis configured in a momentary glimpse, in the *Augenblick* or *clin d'œil*, which is not the revelatory instant that it often is taken to be but a momentary eclipse of sight, a punctuation in an ecliptic rhythm. Its differential energy or work of spacing (*espacement*) renders the trait nonpresent and ungraspable, so that it is neither ideal nor sensible, belonging to the spectral dimension rather than to specularity. The transcendental logic veers away, in the end, from any positive conditions to intimate what Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida himself variously call "unconcealment," "donation," "dehiscence," "deflagration," or "differential spacing."

According to the sacrificial logic, blindness strikes one who lays eyes on what must not be seen, or who seeks to represent the nonrepresentable. Yet the sacrificial logic also is a logic of the ruse that allows one to glimpse the forbidden sight furtively, out of the corner of one's eye, or perhaps in a mirror reflection, or else by recourse to masks. Masks, quite apart from their mortuary aspect, or from the "Medusa effect" that Derrida discusses,³⁶ are themselves placeholders of the invisible. The power of a mask often is felt to be so intense that the mask itself (and not only the invisible presence for which it may be a placeholder) must not be seen but is kept veiled and hidden away. For instance, the silver mask through which the goddess presences in a small mountain temple in Himachal Pradesh is not revealed to worshippers but remains wrapped in opaque layers of cloth. Through such revelation in concealment, masking allows something to be shown forth in its lethic aspect, its withdrawal from sight, without violating this withdrawal.

In the supplementary interchanges between the transcendental and the sacrificial logics, Derrida focuses on the "economic" modalities of compensation or restitution, according to which being struck blind (at least for a time) can be the condition of a conversion to the true spiritual light (as in the narrative of Saul/Paul at Damascus), the dawning of genuine insight (as in the legend of Stesichorus's slander of Helen),³⁷ or one's becoming a chosen witness. Strictly speaking, the witness can attest only to what she does not see and cannot show, so that, as Derrida puts it, "the interest of the attestation, like that of the testament, stems from this dissociation."³⁸

In contrast to such "sunflower [*tournesol*] blindness" that "twists the light and turns it on itself,"³⁹ blacking out the visionary like the dark heart of the flower, Derrida calls attention to yet another, and philosophically neglected, veiling of sight: the tears that may blur or efface vision, being themselves often hidden away. Tears confound the distinction between vision and blindness on which "sunflower blindness" turns, for one whose sight is clouded by tears neither sees nor does not see, being indifferent to the light. Or perhaps, rather

than being simply indifferent, she feels assaulted by the clarity and beauty of the light. Liquefaction and inundation, in all of their elemental, sexual, and mortuary ambiguities, come to extinguish the relentless fire of the Platonic Sun, along with the dazzlement of a vision trained thereon. An upswell of tears responds appropriately to sights that one cannot bear to see, yet to which one also cannot close one's eyes. In their distressed refusal of both vision and blindness, tears mark, perhaps, the deeper dissociation involved in bearing witness.

Apart from Derrida, the one contemporary philosopher attentive to tears is David Michael Levin who, in the context of his studies of vision and blindness in the history of thought, and of tears in contemporary culture, asserts that "crying, the confession and seal of our belonging, is the *root* of vision," so that genuine vision, as contrasted with the nihilistic stare, or with a sight so seared by what it has had to witness as to have become incapable of tears, "begins with crying."⁴⁰

Merleau-Ponty disregards the tears that are, as Derrida writes, "the truth of the eyes," or at least of human eyes. Yet their truth most certainly attests to flesh, to the chiasmatic interlacings that render seer and seen inextricable, as well as to the "intercorporeity" that cannot merely take the place of intersubjectivity, but that ultimately must link the seer with the "flesh" of all that is conventionally called "nature." The seer's indifferent self-dissociation from the visible, so that it loses its power to wound her, would belie or betray her integration into the flesh of the world. Insofar as the transcendental focus and the insistent specularity of Merleau-Ponty's analyses render him oblivious of tears, he fails to do full justice to his own understanding of flesh.

Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind* is resonant with biblical narratives culled from both the Old Testament and the New Testament, including those of Tobit, Eli and Samson, Christ healing the blind, and the conversion of Paul. One striking narrative of tears nevertheless escapes his attention: the story, as told by John, of Christ at the death of Lazarus. When he whom John calls "the Word made flesh" asked the mourners where Lazarus had been laid and was invited to "come and see," he could not, for all his power to restore the dead man to life, restrain an upsurge of tears.⁴¹

Although Derrida allows tears to attest to flesh, the absolute invisibility that fascinates him in Merleau-Ponty's thought threatens to become a withdrawn absolute, rather than remaining bound to flesh. Yet as Derrida himself acknowledges, this absolute invisibility must remain at the heart of the visible:

In order to be absolutely foreign to the visible and even to the potentially visible . . . this invisibility would still inhabit the visible, or rather, it would come to haunt it to the point of being confused with it, in order to assure, from the specter of this impossibility, its most proper resource. The visible as such would be invisible.⁴²

Derrida endeavors to think this challenging interinvolvement through a study of the drawn trait with its differential spacing. The trait, however, can hardly be said to give access to phenomenization as such (even if, in the spirit of traditional Chinese art and culture, one grants preeminent status to the written trait while also undoing any strict separation of writing from drawing, and of both from painting). It is telling that Derrida does not hesitate to speak of the trait, with its burden of the invisible, in the language of negative theology which, however negative, remains oriented toward transcendence. An absolute, crypto-transcendent invisible negates flesh along with its ethical mandate to encounter beings otherwise than by the distanced gaze. The very gravity of flesh stems from this mandate. If one must allow for a theology, it would need to be one of a *Deus sive Natura*, with the ontology of flesh opening upon a philosophy of nature. It is worthy of note here that the late Merleau-Ponty had begun to formulate a philosophy of nature, though he did not live to develop it beyond a rich lecture course.⁴³ By returning to the flesh of nature and carrying such a philosophy forward, those inspired by his legacy can begin to honor the gravity of flesh.

6

Imaging Invisibles Heidegger's Meditation

Because art, as *technē*, resides in a knowing, because such knowing is a looking ahead into that which shows the form and gives the measure, but which is still the invisible, and which must first be brought to visibility and to the perceptibility of the work—for these reasons, such a looking ahead into what has not as yet been given to see requires, in a singular way, vision and clarity.

—M. Heidegger, “Die Herkunft der Kunst und die Bestimmung des Denkens”

With a view to [its *essence*], art is a consecration and a stronghold, wherein that which is actual [*das Wirkliche*] each time anew makes a gift to man of its heretofore hidden splendor, so that he may, amidst such brightness, see more purely and hear more clearly.

—M. Heidegger, “Wissenschaft und Besinnung”

In his 1938 essay, “The Time of the World Picture” (“Die Zeit des Weltbildes”),¹ Heidegger singles out the emergence of a world picture as the mark of modernity. The world picture, as he understands it, is not a spontaneous, or culturally specific, symbolic image that one might form of the world (such as, for instance, a mandala) but rather the sort of picture that allows one to “get the picture” (*im Bilde zu sein*) and to use it for the purpose of installing oneself in the world understood as the totality of beings. The picture at stake here is not visual in any significant sense; rather, what visibility it may possess is schematic or diagrammatic and serves to facilitate human self-orientation,

with a view to technological, or technologically inspired, productivity and mastery. It functions as the quasi-visual encoding of the parameters of a legitimating projective conception that is, as such, of the order of the invisible.

The loss of visibility involved is not merely a loss of seeing but also a loss of being looked at and seen. Taking his cue from Parmenides's saying that τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι ("For it is the same to think and to be"),² Heidegger contrasts with such picturing a receptive openness to beings as they in turn lay themselves open in their presencing (*Anwesen*) and regard her who is prepared to receive them:

Beings do not become such because man, to begin with, looks at them—let alone in the sense of representing them in the manner of subjective perception. Rather, man is the one who is looked at by beings, who is gathered into presencing close unto and by that which opens itself. To be looked at by beings and kept within their openness, and thus to be borne by them, to be driven about by their contradictions and marked by their schism: That is the *essence* [*Wesen*] of man in the great Greek time of history.³

The Parmenidean verse motivates this train of thought by suggesting that thinking, far from being representation geared to mastery, is a receptive attunement to beings in their presencing, and that such receptive attunement (which Heidegger terms *Vernehmen*) responds to the very being of beings.

Heidegger develops the speculative reaches of these thoughts more fully and more daringly in his lecture course on Parmenides, offered in 1942–43.⁴ Given that Parmenides refers to the unnamed goddess of his philosophical poem as both *daimōn* and *thea*, Heidegger links his own meditation on the look or the glance to these two designations. He interprets the *daimones*, or spirits, as those who both envisage and glance into whatever comes to presence, so that their look entraces the uncanniness of presencing into the aspect of familiar presences. The close similarity of the Greek terms θεῶα ("look") and θεῶα ("goddess") attests for him, similarly, to an *essential* Greek understanding of divinity as an appearance that looks or glances into presencing (*hereinblickende Erscheinung*). The human glance itself is not an intentionality issuing from a subject; rather, in soliciting appearance, it also relinquishes itself to appearance, and to being encountered by the other. As Heidegger writes:

If man, rather, experiences the look, by allowing for an encounter without reflection, as the looking-at-him of the human being who comes toward him, then it is evident that the look of the human being encountered shows itself as that, wherein the human being itself waits toward the other, that is, appears and is.⁵

A similarly telling formulation is the following:

We need here, to be sure, to understand looking in the original and Greek way as the manner in which we encounter a human being, in that he looks at us and, in looking, gathers himself into this disclosive arising wherein, offering up his *essence* without reserving a remainder, he lets himself “arise.”⁶

Although the Levinasian resonance of these formulations is obvious (and there also is a subtle resonance of the reciprocity between seer and seen in Merleau-Ponty’s late thought), the regard (*Anblick*) by which the other solicits one’s glance is not, for Heidegger, the “face,” but the specularity of presencing, which, despite his customary privileging of language, remains an important way by which human beings are initiated into the openness of manifestation. In contrast, the ascendancy of the world picture, which is characterized by systematicity, not only suppresses the intense visuality of a receptive attunement to presencing, along with the rich interplay of the soliciting and the encountered glance, but it also occludes the aspect of the invisible, of being’s enigma and emptiness, glimpsed in such presencing without, of course, ever becoming a presence. This invisible, glimpsed within the visible, yet absolutely withdrawn, is of a different order than the invisible that holds sway in the world picture and that is inimical to visuality.

One must guard, however, against a facile rejection of the picture or image.⁷ Such a rejection not only could not be justified by independent reflection (and even cultures that observe an interdiction against picturing man or living beings have continued to treasure the image), but it also is in no way countenanced by Heidegger. He writes, to be sure, that a questioning thinking seeks the truth of being in “the imageless saying of the word [*im bildlosen Sagen des Wortes*],” and he likes to point out that what unconceals and stands unconcealed (*ἀληθές*) has a privileged relationship to the word. Thus he states in *Parmenides* that “the essential relation to the *φαίνόμενον*, to that which shows itself in unconcealment, is saying and to say [*die Sage und das Sagen*].”⁸ However, the lyric, epic, or dramatic word of the poets with which Heidegger’s thinking sustains an essential dialogue—the word of Homer, Pindar, Sophocles, Hölderlin, Trakl, or George—is far from being “imageless.” Heidegger’s thinking, moreover, also engages importantly with the visual arts that are arts of the image and of form. His intense engagement with the painting of Cézanne and Klee constitutes a further link between his own mature thought and Merleau-Ponty’s.⁹ One might speculate that the inclusive scope of the term *bilden* (given that the visual arts are, in German, *die bildenden Künste*), along with its connotation of shaping and constructing, facilitates Heidegger’s ready passage, in his discussions of visual art, from painting to sculpture and architecture.

The importance of the artistically created image or form is brought out in Heidegger's 1935–1936 essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art” (“Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes”), where he asserts that for there to be the open or openness, a being must take up its stand and steadfastness within the open, whereby “it keeps the latter open and endures it.”¹⁰ Something that is created or “brought forth” specifically to bring about “the openness of beings” or to bring truth to pass is, he adds, a genuine work (an art work), and the work constitutes an essential manner in which truth orients and “arranges” or configures (*einrichtet*) itself within the open. Whereas the world picture occludes the enigma of the granting or refusal of presencing (which Heidegger, in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” calls “Earth”),¹¹ the work sets its own articulation back into the sheltering impenetrability of Earth, which juts out into the open. Where the essential strife between Earth and “World” (understanding the latter here as a historical configuration of unconcealment) informs the dis-severing draft (*Riss*) that defines artistic form in such a way as to set it back into Earth, that created form is what Heidegger terms a *Gestalt*.¹² This *Gestalt* is closely akin to the artistically created image or plastic form.

One needs then to ask—beyond the indications already given—how such a *Gestalt* or image differs essentially from the totalizing world picture and, specifically, what are the constellations of the visible and the invisible that mark this difference. Furthermore, one needs at least to broach the question (a question too complex for ready resolution) of whether and in what ways the artistically configured image can, at least sometimes, or even vestigially, safeguard its power of unconcealment against the totalizing constraints that mandate the world picture—the constraints of the reductive and self-absolutizing posit that Heidegger terms *Ge-stell*.¹³

THE IMAGE THAT RENDERS VISIBLE

The invisible that informs the world picture is inimical to the visible. As a reductive and totalizing projective representation (inspired by technicity), the world picture keeps vision and the visible in abeyance. Since vision, in its solicitation of the visible, is inherently differential and unpredictable, it resists the yoke of representation geared to uniformity and must, from the latter's perspective, be subjugated. Reductive totalization, and the ideal of mastery to which it is subservient, does not allow for an open encounter. Given that vision is a key arena of encounter, the totalizing world picture renders the other (whether human or nonhuman) essentially invisible. The other can, to be sure, still be seen in a certain way (and her or its visual aspect may even be glamorized by the advertising image), but this seeing is utterly bound to the framework of a legitimizing preinterpretation (which may

allow, at its fringes, for the “picturesque”). Such captive and constrained seeing is not genuine vision.

If the reductive totalization that informs the world picture cannot abide the otherness of the other, then neither can it tolerate any challenge to comprehensibility and predictability—the challenge posed ceaselessly by manifestation as such. The world picture repudiates the glance of the *daimones* or the goddess that affects the familiar with strangeness, and it also seeks to minimize and regulate the play of the inconstant human glance, subordinating it to the level gaze. It displaces the shadow play of presencing in favor of a daylight panorama of presences.

In contrast, the image or *Gestalt* created in and as the work of art renders visible; it allows one to glimpse what otherwise tends to remain inapparent, since it is not straightforwardly phenomenal.¹⁴ In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger’s most telling discussion of how the work does so is perhaps not his foregrounded if somewhat problematic discussion of one of Van Gogh’s paintings of peasant shoes, but rather his reflection (fraught with Hegelian allusions) of an unnamed Greek temple.¹⁵

Representational depiction is not, of course, the issue in Heidegger’s meditation on the Van Gogh painting, or even on C. F. Meyer’s thing-poem (*Dinggedicht*), “The Roman Fountain.”¹⁶ However, the temple as an architectural work, and as a ruin, allows him to dissociate the revelatory power of the work of art more decisively from depiction. The temple “simply stands there” on the rocky ground, despoiled perhaps of whatever statuary or friezes may once have adorned it. Yet, as a work, it brings a World-configuration to stand forth. World as such remains invisible and withdrawn from contemplation; it is, as Heidegger puts it, “the ever non-objective that holds sway over us, so long as the courses of birth and death, blessing and curse, keep us transported into being.”¹⁷ Where World holds sway, the essential decisions of history are made, and things take on the aspect that they offer to the encountering glance. In configuring the openness or disclosive dimensionality of World, the artwork also keeps it open, and out of this dynamic openness, the work (here the temple) “first gives to things their face [*Gesicht*], and to humans a perspective [*Ansicht*] upon themselves.”¹⁸ In contrast, to canonize or absolutize a schematic perspective, in the manner of the static world picture, would foreclose openness. Far from encouraging absolutization or totalization, the *Gestalt* or image defined by the work relinquishes itself to the enigma of presencing or, in Heidegger’s wording, sets itself back upon the self-concealing Earth. By doing so, it brings Earth itself into proximity, letting it, as it were, be glimpsed in its inviolate self-concealment, its infrangible withdrawal from presencing.

Heidegger emphasizes that the setting up of World as well as the bringing close of Earth are accomplished, so to speak, in the beings, that is, in what presences.¹⁹ The invisible dimensions of Earth and world are thus brought to

show themselves as the invisible of the visible. His discussion of the bringing close of Earth puts into play both the ordinary and literal meanings of *herstellen*, which are, respectively, “to produce” or “to manufacture” and “to put into proximity.” He suggests that, whereas things of use (*das Zeug*) do not foreground their materiality but let it be absorbed into their serviceability, the work (which is nontelic) brings its materiality to the fore. It does so, for Heidegger, by setting itself back into what it works with, such as the massiveness of stone, the special characteristics of different kinds of wood, the hardness and luster of metals, the qualities of different pigments, or, in another register, “the naming power of the word.” Although this argument is not entirely convincing, given its reliance on a sharp distinction between the traditional “fine” and “applied” arts, its implicit denial to the latter of sensitivity to their materials, and its tacit assimilation of the work’s materiality to its Earth aspect (which suggests a literalization of Earth), Heidegger’s point, that the radical invisibility of Earth presences in and through the visible, is important. He complements it with a discussion of how the work, in setting up World and bringing Earth close, lets beings be genuinely seen:

The glimmer and luster of the stone, itself apparent [*anscheinend*] only by the grace of the sun, first brings the luminosity of day, the vastness of the sky, or the darkness of night to shine forth [*zum Vorschein*]. The secure uprightness [of the temple] first renders visible the invisible realm of the air. The unshaken [firmness] of the work stands over against the surge of the sea and lets its turbulence appear out of its own calm. Tree and grass, eagle and bull, snake and cricket first enter into their defined form and thus come to shine forth [*kommen zum Vorschein*] as what they are.²⁰

The created image or *Gestalt* primordially enables visual encounter. The truth that it brings to pass is, it must be emphasized, always a shadowed truth. Every being that stands out into the openness of the clearing of manifestation is marked by the “uncanniness” of presencing, an uncanniness that is easily disregarded but that is brought home with almost shocking forcefulness by the work. Since the work is compelling but repudiates explanation in terms of final or efficient causality, it confronts one with the sheer astonishment of its being.²¹ Furthermore, Heidegger points out, any being that is encountered occludes, displaces, or disguises (*verstellt*) other beings or modalities and configurations of presencing. In keeping with the double meaning of the German *scheinen* or *Schein* as both shining and semblance, it shines forth with the beguiling and deceptive power proper to appearance. Since the work, however, has, as one might put it, the character of free play (rather than of telic determination), it minimizes the occlusive aspect of semblance.

Truth involves the counterplay of luminous appearing with two modalities of concealment that are inextricable and do not reveal themselves for what they are, so that concealment “hides and disguises itself.”²² In contrast, the concealment brought about by the world picture is not a play of shadows but rather a deliberate effacement of shadows and a consequent flattening out of dimensionality that allow for no ambiguities or surprises. What is seen is not allowed to configure itself otherwise. The concealment characteristic of the world picture springs from a willful exclusion and occlusion, not from the inevitable incursions of *essential* untruth (although it is itself a modality of *verstellen*). Its force is that of blinding one to the other, as well as to the happening of manifestation.

REVEALING RADICAL CONCEALMENT

A reflection that contrasts the created image or *Gestalt* with the world picture of technicity or the information age (which Heidegger discerned on the horizon) might lead one to suppose that these are alternative modalities of unconcealment, or of negotiating the visible and the invisible, between which one might choose. Such is not the case—as becomes evident if one considers the blinding power of the reductive totalization that gives rise to the world picture. In “The Question Concerning Technology” of 1953–1954,²³ where Heidegger no longer speaks of the world picture but characterizes the *essence* of technicity as the encompassing posit or *Ge-stell*, he stresses its radically occlusive character. Every destiny (*Geschick*)²⁴ of unconcealment will, to be sure, tend to render one preoccupied with what, within its compass, is unconcealed and correspondingly oblivious of the *essential* character of the given modality of unconcealment, and certainly of unconcealment or manifestation as such. In this sense, Heidegger writes that a destiny of unconcealment “is as such, in each of its modalities, and therefore necessarily, *danger*.”²⁵

In the configuration of unconcealment that Heidegger terms *Ge-stell*, however, this danger escalates and reaches its extremity. Humans can no longer see themselves as anything other than manipulators of the system of the posit (*Besteller des Bestandes*), in terms of which they have come to understand themselves, thus losing sight of their own *essence*.²⁶ By its inherent totalization, moreover, *Ge-stell* also occludes any alternative modalities of unconcealment and, in particular, the modality that “in the manner of *poiēsis*, allows [*lässt*] what presences to come forth in the manner of appearing,”²⁷ that is, through the creation of an image or a form that can bring to pass what Heidegger calls a “happening of truth.” This occlusion also obscures unconcealment as such and hides its own occlusive power. The threatening extremity of danger is a blinding so complete that it passes without self-awareness and motivates no quest for a visionary renewal.

Danger, however extreme, is nevertheless not doom. The configuration of *Ge-stell* consummates *verstellen*, the second form of *essential* untruth, so that “all the splendor of all unconcealment, all the shining of truth” is covered over and disguised.²⁸ Yet it remains a destiny of unconcealment and can be revealed as such, rather than blindly submitted to. Its very *essence* will then be brought into “its proper shining.” Such a “free relationship” to technicity cannot, to be sure, be accomplished by human ingenuity; rather, it must spring from technicity itself. The seeming paradox of this crucial thought resolves itself once one is mindful of the *essential* ambiguity of technicity (which attests to the more fundamental ambiguity between truth and *essential* untruth):

Unconcealment is that destiny which, each time and abruptly, and in a manner inexplicable to all thinking, divides itself into unconcealment that brings forth and [unconcealment] that challenges forth, and apportions itself to humans. The unconcealment that challenges forth has its destinal provenance in the unconcealment that brings forth.²⁹

This ambiguity bespeaks itself, for Heidegger, above all in the Greek notion of *technē*, which names at once the technological ingenuity and power of man and artistic *poiēsis*—the art of the sculptor, the architect, or the painter, as well as of the musician and the poet—which is released from power. Both of these, moreover, are understood as ways of letting beings be manifest or revealed.³⁰ *Technē*, then, conjoins productive ingenuity with “a bringing forth of the true into the beautiful.” In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger characterizes beauty as a self-consignment of the “shining” of the open or the clearing to the work.³¹ Art, given both its *essential* kinship to technicity and the profound difference that sets it apart therefrom, has the *essential* possibility (which is its highest possibility) of awakening a thoughtful questioning of technicity, capable of revealing “the constellation in which unconcealment and concealment, in which the *essential* being [*das Wesende*] of truth passes into its own [*sich ereignet*].”³²

If art, however, grants access to *Ge-stell* as a destiny of unconcealment, it cannot do so in the same way in which it brings Earth and World into their counterplay. Earth and World are the invisible of the visible, whereas technicity, giving rise to the world picture and consummating itself as *Ge-stell*, suppresses and negates the visible, as well as occludes the invisible of the visible. The image or *Gestalt* created in the work of art therefore could not illuminate, or let itself be irradiated by, the configuration of technicity as a destinal sending, in the manner in which it lets the enigma of presencing shine into what presences.

Heidegger is strangely reticent concerning this difficulty, which seems to call for a tracing out of the indirect path by which the work of art in its sen-

suous form could possibly enable one to enter into a free relationship with technicity. Based on the suggestions he offers in relevant texts, a sketch of such a tracing out will be attempted here.

The work of art is compelling: it has the power to fascinate, to enthrall, to disturb, or to haunt (a power that opens up another approach—although one that, for Heidegger, is probably too “subject-centered”—to thinking the continuing importance of what is called “beauty”). It has that power precisely because its consummate form does not and cannot subordinate itself to what Heidegger, in the Athens lecture of 1967, describes as the “circle of the rule” (*der Regelkreis*), or the “victory of method.” He is referring to “the cybernetic world projection” that makes for universal calculability and that, with the aid of genetic engineering, has come to encompass man. Given its fundamental character of reductive totalization, its key trait is the erasure of any significant differences, or of the otherness of the other, and of the delimitations that set things apart and thereby enable presencing. Such differences are “neutralized down to the in-different processing of information.”³³

The artwork, however, has its very being in the differential delimitation that issues into its unique *Gestalt*. It demands encounter, repudiating the neutralization that permits nothing to be encountered or genuinely seen. It shocks one into an awareness of the event-character of manifestation, the *Ereignis*, which Heidegger, in an untranslatable wordplay, also likes to hear as *Eräugnis*, literally “eneyement.”³⁴ What such an awareness gives one eyes for is the differential arising into presences that is *physis*, along with its interrelation with *technē*. One needs to realize here that Heidegger’s sharp distinction between technicity, which is totalizing, and traditional technologies, which are not, is not motivated by nostalgia for windmills or farm implements. It is motivated by the fact that such technologies, unlike technicity, presuppose a careful study of the properties and possibilities of what it is they work with, so that they run counter to a reductive totalization. They presuppose, in other words, an attunement to the differential character of presencing that may, to be sure, remain below the threshold of the explicit awareness made possible by the work of art.

This awareness provides, as it were, the ground against which the featureless circle of the rule can delineate itself, so that it can now be envisaged. Given that the shock (the manifold *Stoss*³⁵) worked by the work of art already has transposed awareness into the openness of unconcealment, the way is now open for a mindful reflection (*Besinnung*) that could come to understand the circle of the rule as a destinal configuration, thus allowing one to break free of its stranglehold. Such a realization differs from the initial awareness of the opening of manifestation, of the clearing, or of *Ereignis*, in that it cannot happen in the immediacy of encountering the work of art but requires the mediacy of reflection. Thought alone—and not the sheer glance—can gain access

to the in-different invisible that holds sway in technicity. Perhaps this is why Heidegger, in the Athens lecture, emphasizes that the goddess, who is now Athena, is not only clear eyed (*glaukōpis*) but also clever in her manifold resourcefulness (*polymētis*) and is “the meditative one” (*die Sinnende*, for *skeptomēnē*, “she of the penetrating, or reflective look”).³⁶ Inventiveness and reflection (which point, respectively, to *technē* and to *essential* questioning) go far beyond the immediacy of the glance in terms of which Heidegger had earlier characterized the Parmenidean goddess.

THE SIGHT OF MORTAL DWELLING

Heidegger explores the deeper sense of the creation of a significant image or form in his essays “Building Dwelling Thinking,” “The Thing,” and “Poetically Man Dwells,” dating from 1950 and 1951.³⁷ In these essays his focus has shifted from the “atelic” perfection of the work of art to the form and aspect of the humble and familiar things of everyday use: the bridge, the jug, or the traditional Black Forest homestead. Artistic creation has yielded its place to a more encompassing “making” or *poiēsis* that is not of the nature of *Machenschaft* or machinations attesting to human power and subservient to *Ge-stell*³⁸ but is *the essential* modality of human dwelling. Dwelling in this sense is not just a matter of making oneself at home in one’s house or apartment but is, rather, the fundamental trait of mortal existence in its temporalizing and spatializing character. Heidegger limns the structure of dwelling in terms of the polarities of the Fourfold (and with a resonance of the figures of heaven and earth in Chinese thought³⁹) as a “saving” of the earth that releases it to its own *essence* rather than seeking to master it, a “receiving” of heaven (with its astral courses of the times of life, of history, or of the seasons), an “awaiting” of divinity or of the holy that persists, without expectation, in its fail, and an “escorting” of mortals into the mystery of death.⁴⁰ Building springs from this structure of dwelling in both of its modalities of cultivating (*colere*) and of setting up edifices (*aedificare*), which are the twin senses of the German verb *bauen* (“to build”). Such building and dwelling has, for Heidegger, the pervasive character of a “sparing” (*schonen*) that is not a matter of preserving something against wear and tear, but of releasing it to abide, freely and at peace, in its *essentiality*, or its very being.

Although Heidegger, in these essays, stresses a poetic responsiveness to the self-articulation of language over visibility, a “sparing” releasement of what presences could not come about without a differential seeing that turns a blind eye on reductive totalization. Differential seeing is not only sensitive to each being’s *essentiality* but also, and fundamentally, to the invisible that is here thought as being’s emptiness.

With an echo of chapter 11 of the *Dao de Jing*, Heidegger points out that the vessel or jug (an example of “the thing” that facilitates his showing what he wants to show) is what it is, not so much in virtue of its formal configuration (which is quite variable) as its constitutive emptiness. The potter who made it, he notes, gave form to emptiness. Even though visible form is alien to invisible emptiness, emptiness can reveal its permeation of all presencing only insofar as things (or events, which Heidegger does not mention here) are delimited, formed, and differentiated. Limits, as he likes to point out, do not so much close something off as they enable its presencing. His remark that the thing cannot be experienced as what it is in terms of its look or appearance (*Aussehen*), or its *idea* in the Platonic sense,⁴¹ does not indicate that visual appearance is dispensable, but that it must not be regarded as representing an original presence that would, as such, occlude emptiness.

Conversely, while the emptiness of the jug is receptive and containing, it must not be thought of as a void that would swallow up appearance and form, ultimately dissolving them into the formless. The emptiness of the vessel is rather, Heidegger stresses, *essentially* gathered into a donation (*Schenken*)⁴² that offers a way of abiding or a temporal “while” to the Fourfold in such a manner as to bring earth and heaven, divinities and mortals, into the easeful reciprocity of their mirrorplay, which Heidegger now calls “world”:

The thing whiles [*verweilt*] the Fourfold. The thing things world.
Each thing whiles the Fourfold into something that has its while [*ein je Weiliges*] with the simplicity [*Einfalt*] of world.⁴³

Emptiness donates appearance and visible form, through which alone it can bespeak itself *as* emptiness (and not as a withdrawn or blinding primordial presence to be approximated by representation). It should be obvious that the thing in its inconspicuous slightness⁴⁴ is not thought of here as some object that perdures for a span of measurable time, but that both things and the disowning and enowning (*enteignend, ereignend*) mirrorplay of the Fourfold are facets of a temporalizing dynamic that cannot be adequately understood in terms of ordinary conceptions of time.

In keeping with the topological emphasis of his late thought and with his concern for dwelling, however, Heidegger focuses here on the spatializing and place-granting character of this dynamic. The kind of building that springs from *essential* human dwelling allows the polarities of the Fourfold to be held together in such a way as to let the terrain or surroundings come to significant appearance. The bridge of Heidegger’s example lets the banks or shores appear as such by spanning the stream or strait; it lets the configurations of earth, water, and skies be seen as a landscape; it maps out pathways for the peregrinations of mortals; and it holds up to them a visual figure of their ultimate

passage. Unfortunately, Heidegger offers no help to the reader who would like to understand how such a gathering into significant appearance can equally characterize the rural bridge that he seems to have in mind and technological achievements such as the Brooklyn Bridge that inspired Hart Crane—or, to remain on the European continent, Robert Maillart's Salginatobel Bridge of 1930, which lets consummate structural engineering function equally as environmental sculpture. An exclusive reference to traditional examples is characteristic of Heidegger's discussion throughout. One may wish that, for instance, he had complemented his reflections on the Greek temple or the Black Forest homestead with a consideration of how poetic dwelling is articulated by a more nearly contemporary architectural work, such as Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavillion (dating from 1928–1929), an aesthetically compelling work that the architect himself described as conjoining industrial technology with thought and culture.

Building in Heidegger's sense is not, however, the prerogative of architecture or city planning; it encompasses craft and design, and one may be tempted to extend it further to encompass, say, ceremony and ritual. Edifices as well as the things in the compass of which humans lead their lives have, for Heidegger, the fundamental nature of place (*Ort*) rather than being simply put into places that would be available quite apart from them. Through such places and constellations of place (*Ortschaften, Gegenden*), spaces (*Räume*) are opened up and rendered available for human dwelling. Heidegger's thought here is similar to the thought he voiced in "The Origin of the Work of Art" concerning the need for some being—a work or, here, a thing—to be set into the open, so as to let its openness be revealed. In the 1969 text *Die Kunst und der Raum (Art and Space)*, which Heidegger wrote on lithographic stone to accompany an edition of seven litho-collages by the sculptor Eduardo Chillida, he understands the "freeing up" of space to involve not only the sort of orienting configuration (*einrichten*) that allows things to belong somewhere and to belong together, but also letting openness hold sway in such a manner as to allow for appearing (*das Erscheinen*).⁴⁵ Lest his concern for things, regions, places, and place-scapes encourage an undue preoccupation with positivity (with the "solid" and the "real"), his meditation, in *Art and Space*, focuses, in the end, on emptiness:

Presumably, however, emptiness is closely related to what is proper to place and is therefore not a lacking but a bringing forth. . . . Emptiness is not nothing. It is not a deficiency. In plastic embodiment emptiness plays in the manner of a searching-projective instituting of places.⁴⁶

What Heidegger is striving for in these sometimes tortuous texts is to think the close interrelation of location or place, region, orientation, things,

experience, and modes of spatiality, as well as to show the derivative and impoverished character of the abstract, featureless, schematic spatial grid that he calls “the technical-scientific conquest of space” and describes as an “apartness that is not perceptible by the senses.”⁴⁷ The world picture is marked out exclusively in schematic space, which now can be seen to bear much of the responsibility for the former’s visually occlusive character. Schematic space, unlike the open and regioned space to which the created or built form or image grants access, is inimical to appearance, along with the dimensions of invisibility that are proper to it. If building, in Heidegger’s sense, cannot come about without the sight of mortal dwelling, which is fine-tuned to the differential character of presencing, then it also enables and gives free scope to such a seeing.

The trait of the image, the enchantment of its colors or gradations of ink, the modelling of form, or the visual aspect of the river or mountain that the temple, the pagoda, the travelers’ lodge, or the stone steps of the *ghat* reveal, letting river or mountain be seen as regions of mortal dwelling (even though they may be forbidding, unnavigable, or uninhabited), grants an abode to the invisible within the familiar. In keeping with his thought of the Fourfold, Heidegger likes to speak of the invisible that is here allowed to show itself in its infrangible occultation as “divinity” (*die Gottheit*). This term, however, is somewhat misleading because of its connotation, in this context, of a negative theology, which is incompatible with the guiding thought of emptiness at the core of the temporalizing and spatializing dynamics of manifestation. This emptiness is what Heidegger, in “Poetically Man Dwells,” calls the “measure” of mortal dwelling, a measure that *poiēsis*, and especially poetic saying (*das Dichten*), “takes” without seeking to make it graspable:

The poet calls forth in the visual aspects [*Anblicken*] of the sky that which, in unveiling itself, lets appear precisely what conceals itself, namely *as* the self-concealing. In familiar appearances the poet calls forth the alien as that to which the invisible consigns itself, so as to remain what it is: unknowable.⁴⁸

Such calling forth is essential *poiēsis* that issues into images and imaginal formations (*Ein-Bildungen*). Heidegger characterizes these as “envisageable inclusions of the alien into the aspect of the familiar.”⁴⁹ This incursion of the alien counteracts the reductive sort of seeing, wedded to positivity, that conjures up the world picture.

Sight can reach out to the invisible (whereas touch simply fails in coming up against the intangible or ungraspable), because it is, even in its most ordinary employment, a distance sense. Its very arena is the open span of distance, the in-between. Human beings, according to Heidegger, stand out into and

endure (*stehen aus*) the open dimension (opened up, importantly, by sight), so that human dwelling “resides in the measuring out [*Vermessen*] of the dimension into which heaven belongs, no less than earth.”⁷⁵⁰ The measure of mortal dwelling is therefore not earthbound, nor does it flee the earth.

Precisely because such measuring moves through an open dimension, however, it lacks stability and is inherently ambiguous. Heidegger’s term *vermessen* (along with its cognates, *sich vermessen* and *Vermessenheit*) is an almost uncanny marker of this ambiguity, for while it can mean simply “to take the measure,” or “to measure out” (the senses that Heidegger privileges), it readily veers to mean “to measure wrongly,” or “to transgress measure” in the manner of hybriatic excess. “Thus,” Heidegger remarks, “it could be that our unpoetic dwelling, our inability to take the measure, might spring from a strange excess of measure [*Übermass*] due to a frenzied measuring and calculating.”⁷⁵¹ In other words, the world picture, though inimical to imaged dwelling and destructive of its sight, is not simply foreign to it, so that it could safely be excluded. It constitutes, rather, its always imminent perversion. Its danger is one that man’s limit walking and standing out into the open has no assured protection from.

WORK AND THING

It may seem puzzling that Heidegger, who looked to the work of art as a happening of truth in 1935–1936, should have moved on, in the essays of 1950–1951, to allow things rather than the work of art to configure the disclosive image—only to reaffirm the privilege of art (if not of the work) in “The Question Concerning Technology” and in the Athens lecture. Fundamentally, however, there need be no puzzlement, given that art, work, and thing are held together within the compass of *technē*, understood as the knowing that “sustains and guides all human ventures amidst beings.”⁷⁵² Nevertheless, the fact that Heidegger, in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” distinguishes the artwork sharply from the thing of use and the mere thing (to both of which it grants *essential* access), whereas he carries on a sustained questioning of art and work in *Besinnung* (1938–1939) and moves on from there to efface his earlier setting apart of art, work, and thing call for reflection and comment.

In *Besinnung*, Heidegger asserts that the disappearance of the work of art is a sign of the imminent consummation (*Vollendung*), “in this historical age” (which is, of course, the age of the world picture), of art’s *essence*, insofar as that *essence* has so far remained metaphysical.⁵³ More fundamentally, this is the consummation of the reign of machinations (*Machenschaft*). As concerns the understanding of art, the key task, Heidegger notes, is not to overcome

philosophical aesthetics but to put up for decision a change in the very *essence* of art, which means also to change human self-understanding, and which constitutes, ultimately, “a decision for being [*zum Seyn*].” The work of art here plays a crucial role:

The question within the history of being concerning the work takes on a completely different sense, as soon as the work is seen in its *essence* together with being itself and with the founding of its truth. The work itself now fulfills the *essential* mandate of contributing to the unfolding of such a decision for being.⁵⁴

Why, then, is the work endangered to the point of being threatened with disappearance? Heidegger’s discussion in *Besinnung*, which repays a close reading, and sometimes a reading between the lines, reveals that he was deeply disturbed by the National Socialist appropriation of the arts as instruments of ideological propaganda and of the consolidation of power—an appropriation that enlisted the appeal of lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and of beauty. Beauty, Heidegger remarks, has become “what pleases and must please the power-*essence* [*dem Machtwesen*] of the beast of prey man.” He offers a graphic description of the prevailing ideal of male beauty as consisting in “giant muscles and sexual parts, and vacant faces intent only on brutality.”⁵⁵ The contrast to the Greek ideal of male beauty requires no comment, and it also is clear that art subservient to ideology and propaganda is incapable of awakening genuine vision.

Sub rosa, Heidegger decries the passion of the regime for an imposing but banal monumentality, and for comprehensive and megalomaniac urban planning, as well as its fostering of sentimentality in art, which is to say, of *kitsch*. *Kitsch*, he writes, “is not ‘bad’ art [*Kunst*], but best expertise [*können*]—however, of the empty and inessential [*des Unwesens*], which then calls for the aid of public propaganda, so as to assure itself of significance.”⁵⁶ Although Heidegger did not valorize *kitsch*, the issue of sentimentality in art may have been a particularly touchy one for him, since he could not readily dissociate himself from the National Socialist show of respect for supposedly indigenous traditions, concerning which the architectural historian William J. R. Curtis writes perceptively:

A persistent theme . . . was the reinforcement of nationalist sentiments by appeal to earlier national architectural traditions. Allied to this was a nostalgia for supposedly indigenous virtues which were to be reclaimed from the onslaught of modern fragmentation. It was necessary for totalitarian regimes to foster the impression that their right to rule was embedded in the deepest aspirations of the people.⁵⁷

What is at issue here is not, however, Heidegger's complex relationship to National Socialism, in its interrelation with his understanding of technicity, but rather his realization that the work of art cannot be secured against an annexation by the sinister forces of the times. Art is too closely integrated with the thought-structures of a particular epoch, as well as with political, cultural, and sociological formations, to remain an infrangible preserve wherein truth can set itself into a work. The images that it offers can readily become the reflections of transient human concerns rather than allowing for a coming to appearance of *essential* truth. It is questionable, however, to what extent Heidegger was willing to countenance this realization.

H. W. Petzet reports some interesting personal exchanges with Heidegger concerning the rise of abstract art in postwar Europe. He quotes the philosopher's comments on an essay of his that focused on an abstract painting, to the effect that the hidden question is whether there still exists a genuine artwork, or whether art has become untenable along with metaphysics:

Is there, perhaps, behind the uneasiness brought about by nonobjective art, a much deeper shock? Is that the end of art? The arrival of something for which we do not have a name?⁵⁸

Although this questioning arises on the occasion of considering a quite innocuous nonfigurative work, a gouache by the painter Mathias Goeritz, it points ahead to the far more radical challenges that art, and the understanding of the work of art, was soon to face. These challenges have prompted Jean-Luc Nancy to seek to trace the bare vestige of art, given that the vestige is what holds out against destruction, so that what is *essential* to art might be understood to be of the order of the vestige.⁵⁹ Heidegger, however, does not undertake such a meditation; rather, he seeks to reintegrate art more fully into the essential domain of *technē*, so that his thought comes to oscillate, as already noted, between the challenging work of art and the relative gentleness of the thing. The thing's gentleness is, of course, precarious as well as relative, as becomes apparent once one turns from Heidegger's somewhat purist examples of the clay jug or the chalice to consider the tide of heavily advertised consumer goods that today engulfs even young children. Things of this sort can hardly be said to make possible a presencing of the invisible within the aspect of the familiar.

Nevertheless, insofar as it brings out what it may mean to live, not in thrall to things but in the manner of a "be-thinged" dwelling, Heidegger's meditation is far reaching. In the Athens lecture, he reflects on the position of art within (post)industrial society, which is "enclosed within its own configuration of power [*Gemächt*]." It would be *hybris* (*Vermessenheit*) for humans to think that they could force open this closure, which nonetheless cannot begin

to open up unless they prepare for its opening. Heidegger reflects on thinking and on the artwork as modalities of such preparation, asking whether the work must not as such point toward what conceals itself and withdraws from human deployment. The question is left open, partly because self-concealing unconcealment (manifestation, or, as Heidegger here calls it, *alētheia*) is too inconspicuous and disregarded to allow a work attuned to it to function as such in a world governed by power, technicity, or a market economy that marginalizes what cannot be commodified.

Given that the things of daily use, such as the lamp, the mat, or the bowl, are themselves often inconspicuous and aspire to no prominence, it seems easier to extricate them, at least now and then, from the banalization or the meretriciousness that tend to despoil their intrinsically revelatory character. What they fundamentally reveal is the ungroundedness and interdependent character of human dwelling, as well as the enigma that announces itself in one's exposure to birth and death, health and sickness, or the rhythms of care and relinquishment.

However, neither work nor thing is uniquely capable of bringing about an openness that could be called "visionary." It is not a question of turning from one to the other. Within the wider compass of Heidegger's thought, this realization bespeaks itself with particular clarity, not in his solitary reflection but in dialogue. The partner in dialogue is Hoseki Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, and the occasion is the Freiburg colloquium on "Art and Thinking" of May 18, 1958.⁶⁰ In answer to Heidegger's question as to how art was experienced in Japan before being designated by a term (*gei-jitsu*) that reflects its Western understanding, Hisamatsu indicates the two pathways of "the way of art" (*gei-dō*). The first pathway leads one, perhaps with suddenness, from the "real" in the sense of what is visible, tangible, or otherwise present to the non-present "origin," while the second leads back from the origin to what comes to presence. The origin, Hisamatsu stresses, is not something eidetic but is empty, which allows for its dynamic freedom, or for the infinite and spontaneous surging forth of manifestation (so that emptiness and form are not severed). Since originary emptiness must nevertheless be brought to show itself (which it cannot do as such), the return movement from the empty origin to what presences is of key importance. At this point, Hisamatsu notes, artistic (re)presentation (*Darstellung*) or the image in no way obstructs the self-appearing of the empty origin (as Heidegger had briefly supposed): "Making the eidetic visible is then no longer an obstacle; it is the appearing of originary truth itself."⁶¹

Letting something eidetic become visible does not mean primarily or exclusively to create a work of art. If beauty is (as Hisamatsu understands it) the unconstrained movement of the originary that animates something formed or eidetic, then it can irradiate the tea bowl or the gesture no less than the

painting or calligraphic work. In Hisamatsu's words, "this motion can come to appearance [*zum Vorschein*] everywhere";⁶² it does not even require what one colloquium participant refers to with some misgivings as "arts which we do not consider such," for instance, the tea ceremony or flower arrangement. The placement of a stone or the folding of a sheet of paper may suffice. If so, there is no need for thinking to entrench itself in what Heidegger had called "the imageless word." It is significant that, in a 1959 letter to Alcopley, he expresses his excitement as to "the interconnection (identity?) of image and writ" in classical Chinese art, noting the unsatisfactoriness of the metaphysically derived conceptuality that dissevers them.⁶³ A thinking that has freed itself from the constraints of this system of concepts can open itself and grant access to invisibles that will in no way diminish or negate the richness of visuality.

Retrospect

The *aperspective* thus obliges us to consider the objective definition, the anatomico-physiology or ophthalmology of the *punctum caecum*, as itself a mere image, an analogical index of vision itself . . . of that which seeing itself see, is nevertheless not reflected, cannot be “thought” in the specular or speculative mode—and thus is blinded because of this, blinded at the point of “narcissism,” at that very point where it sees itself looking.

—Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*

The time painted in the [Monet’s] *Wheatstacks* is the time of earth and sky . . . it is the time of the elements. It is a time inseparable from space, that very inseparability being announced in the massive spatiality of the very wheatstacks around which the temporal shining comes to be gathered . . . Monet paints this elemental time of the sensible.

—John Sallis, *Shades: Of Painting at the Limit*

Πάν πλέον ἔστιν ὁμοῦ φαέος καὶ νυκτὸς ἀφάτου.

All is full of light and lightless night together.

—Parmenides, *Peri Physeōs*

Retrospect enjoys, in a special way, the freedom of the glance, for it can alight upon configurations of thought and text without a concern for argumentative or narrative continuity or closure, and it can examine them from novel vantage points to bring to the fore aspects that may have remained implicit and unexplored.

The issues that my retrospective glance will alight on and will highlight for the reader’s continued consideration are those of the salutary shading of sight, as contrasted with its heliotropic fixation and searing, of an absolute invisibility (as Merleau-Ponty called it) that inhabits the visible and does not withdraw from it, and, finally, of the ethical bearing of a sensitization of sight.

This book has stressed throughout the shadowings of sight or, to speak with Parmenides, the “night-shining” light that informs it, against a strand of

philosophical thought that seeks to bring earthly sight to surpass itself in a blinding brilliance that effaces all shadows. If indeed, as John Sallis puts it, painting is “determined by the absolute imperative of shading,”¹ it will be appropriate to consider a painting here, or actually two paintings: Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Virgin of the Rocks* in both its earlier version, in the collection of the Louvre, and in the later version, in London’s National Gallery.

Plato’s Cave of the *Republic* or the brine-corroded hollows of the true earth that he speaks of in the *Phaedo* are prisons of darkness in which sight is obscured, distorted, and deprived of reflective self-awareness. In the massive Cave of the Apocalypse on Patmos, in contrast, the dimming of ordinary vision allowed for the awakening of an extraordinary spiritual and visionary sight. Leonardo’s cave or grotto conforms to neither of these instantiations of the Cave (nor yet to the medieval conception of it as an opening to a hellish netherworld of evil). Its sheltering enclosure embraces the sacred figures and opens upon a mysterious, primeval landscape of rock formations and water courses. It filters the light of day in such a manner as to veil both figures and landscape in what could be called, oxymoronicly, a “luminous darkness.” This atmospheric veiling or *sfumato* (quite other than the blinding smoke of Heraclitus’s Fragment B98) gives an inner glow and depth to the colors—a depth that can, to begin with, only be achieved with the inherently shaded pigmentary colors that the painter must work with, and not with the pure radiance of the spectral hues (which Plato seems to have in mind in the *Phaedo*). Although the earlier version shows a soft, golden-toned light that diffuses contours, whereas the cooler light of the second version casts the figures themselves into rocklike relief, in both the darkening of the light gives the figures a luminosity and presence appropriate to their sacred identities. Rather than setting them against the landscape as a mere background, however, Leonardo’s shadowed light allows them to be held within the obscure and intimate embrace of nature. It alights alike on the stratifications of rock or on the plants that cling to them in the foreground and on the bodies of the infant Christ and St. John. True to the theology of the Incarnation, the veiling of the light has fully integrated sacred reality, or the dimension of spirit, with the flesh of the world. Jean-Claude Frère observes that Leonardo’s recourse to *sfumato* could be interpreted as indicating that “the Veil of Truth is most readily lifted at dusk, when the bright light of day begins to fade”;² but one needs to add to this that what the lifting of this veil reveals is itself a shadowed truth, rather than the pure splendor, as Plato called it, of a realm “beyond being.”

Merleau-Ponty’s concern for the “participations” that haunt every visual *quale* and do not allow it to be closed in upon itself, as well as for the indissoluble bond between ideality and flesh that incarnates and diffuses essences, withdrawing them from the eidetic gaze, is a meditation on the darkenings or shadings that enable sight. The same can be said concerning Heidegger’s



thought of the strangely oppositional character (*Gegnerschaft*) of presencing, in virtue of which every being that is encountered (*das begegnet und mitgegnet*) retreats, in its very appearing, into a certain concealment.³ Heraclitus thematizes the obscurations indissociable from visual presencing with reference to the “kindlings” and “extinguishings” that interlink wakeful lucidity with the shadow-worlds of sleep and death. It is altogether too facile to criticize the visual metaphoric and discourse of Western philosophy as a discourse of light, ignoring both light’s multihued radiance and the shadings that allow sight to articulate itself.

In a searching essay on Levinas’s understanding of sensibility, particularly of sight, Paul Davies writes:

Vision always discerns and receives beings in and from an illuminated space and against the backdrop of a horizon, a horizon that rules out the thought of beings as coming from elsewhere. . . . [Vision] thus serves as the successful metaphor for a consciousness incapable of conceiving anywhere else a being would come from save the illuminated space across which the accumulating and illuminating gaze streaks.⁴

Contrary to this statement, this book has argued that, although a certain philosophical idealization of vision answers to Davies’ characterization, a subtler understanding of vision delineates itself throughout much of Western philosophy. The restriction of vision to a figure/ground schema or to gazing into an “illuminated space” cannot, moreover, be affirmed by a philosophical thought attentive to painting. For instance, the figures in a painting by Rembrandt, such as his *Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph*, come from out of, and again recede into, a sometimes opaque and sometimes half-luminous darkness that invests and haunts them. To shift from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, what “beings” are to be discerned across what “illuminated space” or against what “horizon” in the intense, even ecstatic, orchestrations of color, gestural marks, and drips of Joan Mitchell’s *La Grande Vallée* series of paintings? These works, in fact, sensitize one to the enigma of where they themselves can be said to “come from,” or, as Heidegger puts it in “The Origin of the Work of Art”:

The more essentially the work opens itself, the more radiant becomes the singularity of this: that it is and not, rather, is not.⁵

The time has come to abandon the caricature of vision that casts it as staring unblinkingly either at presences in an illuminated space or at the blinding light that illumines the space and presences, so as to restore it to its

natal domain: on the one hand, the half-light or *chiaroscuro* of presencing, and on the other (instead of the blinding light), the infinite play of an energy of manifestation that is at one with emptiness (which could be given the Merleau-Pontyan name of “absolute invisibility”).

Apart from this absolute invisibility at the core of the visible, Merleau-Ponty stresses that visibility throughout and as such involves nonvisibility, or that certain dimensions of invisibility (such as meaning) inhabit the visible and become accessible only within it (or within a broader spectrum of sentience):

When I say, then, that every visible is invisible, that perception is imperception, that consciousness has a *punctum caecum*, that to see is always to see more than one sees—one must not understand this in the sense of a *contradiction*—One must not imagine that I add to the visible, perfectly defined as In-itself, a non-visible (which would only be objective absence, which is to say objective presence *elsewhere*, in another in-itself).⁶

The sort of hypostatization here criticized is precisely what has yielded the philosophical discourses of a transcendent invisible which vision can at best adumbrate, and before which it is enjoined to efface itself. The less one appreciates that vision itself is conversant with invisibles that may be unique to it, the less capable one becomes of a responsive seeing that does not let itself be reduced to a mere practice of identification and a search for self-gratification.

A responsive seeing that solicits the otherness of the human and non-human other needs to take the place of the in-different envisagement of the other that supports exploitation, violence, and totalization. Such a seeing is both celebratory and compassionate—celebratory of the exquisiteness, the inexhaustible variety and refinement of the visual aspect of beings, offered to the eyes as a constant and priceless gift, and compassionate in allowing itself to share their vulnerability, or their exposure to violation.

If the eyes are proverbially the windows of the soul, then it is time to cease thinking of these windows as lookouts for the gaze of surveillance, dissecting analysis, or distanced contemplation—lookouts behind which one can remain protected and invisible, and on which one can always draw the curtains. Instead, the windows need to become exits through which the self is drawn out, expropriated, and dislocated into exteriority, to be invaded by the splendor of the other and pierced, beyond endurance, by its violation and pain.

The suggestion here is not, *nota bene*, that visual contemplation—let alone the aesthetization of horror—should substitute for action. It scarcely needs to be pointed out that aesthetic accomplishment has proved to be compatible with brutality. Heidegger liked to reiterate that thinking already *is* action and does not merely prepare the ground for action (although he seems

not to have been sensitive to the fact that, by reluctance from action, this conviction problematized his own thinking). If one's modalities of understanding form the true locus of action, then one's modalities of envisagement or visual encounter similarly find expression in one's understanding and hence will become manifest in action. In a certain sense, to repeat Heidegger's phrasing, envisagement *is* already understanding, and one touches here perhaps on the deeper reason for the insistently visual metaphors of intellectual examination and apprehension. One also begins to understand that vision (unlike the proverbial windows of the soul) cannot be a pristine opening unto the world, inviting a Merleau-Pontyan "silent science" that would explore it, but that it is historically and culturally formed and also has its critical powers, which give it the possibility of education, refinement, and transformation.⁷

Finally, and partly due to the intimate interinvolvement of envisagement, understanding, and action, the compassionate vision spoken of here is not a vision that revels in the sort of impotent pity that philosophers such as Spinoza and Nietzsche condemn. Tears need not be the mark of a passive and disempowered (or "womanish," as the cited philosophers tellingly call it) emotional self-indulgence. They can instead be the mark of an active compassion unconcerned with self—the compassion indissociable from what in Buddhist thought is called "all-accomplishing wisdom" (a wisdom fully realized only by enlightened awareness) or, to return to the Judeo-Christian religious thought touched upon in chapter 5, a compassion so intolerant of the sight of suffering as to find the power even to restore a dead man to life.

Notes

PROSPECT

1. David Michael Levin, ed., *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 3. This work will henceforward be referred to as SV.

2. See here Mary C. Rawlinson, "Perspectives and Horizons: Husserl on Seeing the Truth," in SV, 265–92.

3. See Richard W. Baldes, "Democritus on Visual Perception: Two Theories or One?," *Phronesis* 20 (1975): 93–105; "Democritus on the Perception of 'Black' and 'White'," *Phronesis* 23 (1978): 87–100.

4. Descartes's works are referred to in the standard edition by Chs. Adam and P. Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 3rd ed., 12 vols. (Paris: Vrin, 1996), and in the English translation by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (and, for the third volume, Anthony Kenny), *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985–1991). These works will be referred to as AT and as CSM and CSMK, respectively. I have modified the translations. See AT VI, 81–228; CSM I, 152–75 (abbreviated) and AT XI, 119–202; CSM I, 99–108.

5. Descartes, *Les Passions de l'âme*, Part II, AT XI, 423–27; CSM I, 373–75.

6. See the discussion of Jacques Derrida's and David Michael Levin's meditations on tears in chapter 5.

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), viii. My translation.

8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology," in *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. J. Wild, J. Edie, and J. O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 189.

9. Jean-Luc Nancy, "On the Threshold," in *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 57–67.

10. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part IV: Proposition 37, Scholium 1.

CHAPTER 1

1. Jean Bollack and Heinz Wismann, *Héraclite ou la séparation* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972), 12–14. This work will henceforth be cited as BW. Translations from it are my own. The allusion of the italicized phrase is to Heraclitus, Fragment B1 (in all numbering systems).

2. See Heraclitus, Fragment B34. The fragments are cited here by their Diels-Kranz numbering, that is, according to H. Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed. revised by W. Kranz (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951; main earlier editions 1903, 1934). This numbering system, though arbitrary (alphabetic by citing author), is standard and does justice to the fact that it remains impossible to reconstruct the original order of the texts.

3. BW, 38.

4. I follow the Greek text as critically established by Bollack and Wismann. My translations of the fragments are indebted both to Bollack's and Wismann's French translation and to the English translations by Charles H. Kahn in his *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). This work will be referred to as Kahn.

5. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, IX, 9, 15. For bibliographic information concerning the sources of the fragments, see BW, "Index des Sources," 365–70.

6. Kahn, 106.

7. The grammatical disjunction between the dative *anthrōpoisin* ("for humans") and the genitive *ekbontōn* ("of those who have") renders the more customary translation of the fragment implausible. That translation is some version of "Eyes and ears are poor witnesses for men who have barbarian souls." To maintain such a reading, one must, as Bollack and Wismann point out, "invoke the autonomy of participial constructions in epic language," only to find one's effort checked by the fact that "this [stylistic] turn is attested only with a participle and pronoun" (BW, 302). See the discussion in BW of the influence that Stobaeus's version of the fragment (cited by Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, VIII, 133) has exercised on later interpretations (BW, 303). Stobaeus's version translates as "Eyes and ears turn bad for unintelligent people having barbarian souls." Roman Dilcher comments: "Stobaeus is certainly no unrespectable source, but with the other gnomologia he shares a certain tendency to banalize the thought. The single example where we can compare his text with the version of another source [Fragment 107] seems to be representative." See Roman Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, "Spudasmata," vol. 59 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1959), 21, n. 30.

8. Hermann Fränkel, "A Thought Pattern in Heraclitus," in *The Pre-Socratics: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. Alexander P. D. Mourelatos (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 214–28. This collection will be referred to as Mourelatos.

9. Uvo Hölscher, "Paradox, Simile, and Gnomic Utterance in Heraclitus," in Mourelatos, 229–38 (231).

10. Kahn points out that, in antiquity, the riddle was associated with Homer's death: So great was his grief at being deceived that he supposedly died of it (Kahn, 11, and n. 76). Kahn here considers Bollack's and Wismann's observation that the Greek word for "louse," *ptheir*, is at least phonologically identical to *phtheirō*, "to destroy," "to kill," so that the boys are "killing the killers" (see BW, 194). He concludes from this play of language that "it is natural to understand the recognition of what is apparent, in which men are deceived, by Homer's perplexity in the face of his own death" (Kahn, 112). Be that as it may, it is evident that Homer's deception, though originating from lowly street urchins and vermin, had a hurtful force far in excess of that of a mere prank. Similarly, the deception in which ordinary people, according to the fragment, spend their lives is no trivial matter.

11. Hölscher, "Paradox . . .," 232.

12. BW, 194.

13. John Sallis, "Hades: Heraclitus, Fragment B98," in *Heraclitean Fragments: A Companion Volume to the Heidegger/Fink Seminar on Heraclitus*, ed. John Sallis and Kenneth Maly (University: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 61–67.

14. Kahn, 109.

15. Although both are airy, smoke arises from combustion, whereas the *psychai* are exhaled from moisture (see Fragment B12). In contrast to this notion of the breath-soul, Kahn finds in Heraclitus an "intellectual conception of the soul," which, he charges, has been overlooked. See his comments on Fragment B45 (XXXV in his numbering system; Kahn, 126–30).

16. The "popular" or "mythic" etymology (as Kahn and BW, respectively, call it) of the name of Hades, god or realm of the dead, as deriving from *A-idēs*, "the Unseen," generally is accepted by commentators. Kahn points out, moreover, that in Heraclitus's Ionian dialect, the initial aspirate does not occur, which makes the etymological allusion still more likely (Kahn, 257).

17. Sallis, "Hades," 65.

18. I wish to keep intact the unitary character of the Heraclitean *logos*, avoiding the temptation to redouble it by positing a cosmic *logos* as the subject of Heraclitus's own *logos* or discourse. Dilcher points out, furthermore, that no sense of the word *logos* "which goes beyond the sphere of ordinary human speech" is attested prior to the fifth century B.C.E. (Dilcher, *Studies*, 30).

19. Parmenides, *Peri Physēōs*, 8:53–59. On the House of Night, see David J. Furley, "Notes on Parmenides," in *Exegesis and Argument: Studies in Greek Philosophy, Presented to Gregory Vlastos, Phronesis*, supp. vol. 1, ed. E. N. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. Rorty (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1973), 1–15.

20. BW, 197.

21. Kahn, 107–10.

22. Dilcher, *Studies*, 109; Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *Heraklit: Seminar Wintersemester 1966/67* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1970), 73.

23. Bollack and Wismann opt for the full wording of the fragment, as cited by Clement, whereas Kahn brackets *apothanōn* as a commentator's gloss and also strikes the repetition of *aposthēis opseis*. Concerning the scholarly history of this reading, see his note 289. See also his preceding note concerning the translation of the middle voice in *baptēsthai*. Kahn's construal of the text enables him to translate the initial clause as "Man strikes a light for himself in the night."

24. Heidegger and Fink, *Heraklit*, 210ff.

25. Bollack and Wismann point out that Heraclitus repeatedly uses *panta* without an article to mean "all things," whereas he uses *hapanta* to indicate "the all of things" (BW, 214).

26. Heidegger and Fink, *Heraklit*, 217.

27. Plato presents this theory in the *Timaeus*, 45b–46a. At night, he surmises, the fire streaming forth from the eyes is extinguished in the prevailing alien element, but closing the eyes in sleep preserves their fire.

28. Heidegger and Fink, *Heraklit*, 25.

CHAPTER 2

1. Plato, *Republic*, Loeb Classical Library, vols. 5 and 6 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980). I also have consulted the English translation by G. M. A. Grube, trans. rev. by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), and Martin Heidegger's German translation of the Myth of the Cave in "Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit," *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1967), 109–44. The translations from the Greek given in this chapter stay close to the respective translations cited but show occasional modifications of my own.

2. On Luce Irigaray's reading of this speleological structure as the "forgotten vagina" in her *Speculum of the Other Woman*, see Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light* (London: Routledge, 1998), 8.

3. The glance has been, and continues to be, explored in innovative ways by Edward S. Casey. I draw here on two unpublished manuscripts: a commentary delivered in the capacity of session organizer at the 1998 conference of the International Society for Philosophy and Literature, and a paper entitled, "The World at a Glance," delivered at Pennsylvania State University in November 1998.

4. Plato, *Symposium*, ed. and textual comm. Kenneth Dover (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Plato, *Phaidros: Platonis Opera Omnia*; Oxford Classical Texts," vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1957). I have consulted the English translations of both dialogues by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989, and 1995, respectively), as well as J. R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus: Translated with an Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1993 [1982]). I also have consulted G. J. A. De Vries, *A Commentary on the Phaedrus of Plato* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1969). I am not committing myself, by the chosen order of discussion, to any chronology of Plato's dialogues, except for agreeing with Nehamas, Woodruff, and de Vries in considering the *Phaedrus* a late dialogue.

5. I shall henceforth refer the Socrates/Diotima speech simply to Diotima.

6. Diotima uses the language of initiation into the Mysteries at *Symp.* 210a. See Nehamas's and Woodruff's discussion of the *phasmata* in note 94 to their translation of the *Phaedrus*.

7. G. R. F. Ferrari, "Platonic Love," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 248–76, advances a kindred interpretation. He writes: "Admittedly what he [the initiate] communes with at the summit is the beautiful itself, not the good itself; and the relationship between the beautiful and the good, here as elsewhere in Plato, is problematic. In light of such passages as 201c and *Phaedrus* 250c–d, let us say that the beautiful is thought of as the quality by which the good shines and shows itself to us" (260). I have translated Plato's τὸ καλόν both literally as "the beautiful" and "beauty."

8. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Disseminations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61–171.

9. Gorgias, *Encomium of Helen*, trans. George A. Kennedy, in *Aristotle on Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, G. A. Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 283–87. The exoneration of Helen was an important concern of Sophistic rhetoricians such as Gorgias and Isocrates. For the former, it functioned in the context of his advocacy of pan-Hellenic unity. On Isocrates' *Helen*, and on his marked presence in the *Phaedrus*, see Ronna Burger's Appendix, "Isocrates the Beautiful," to her *Plato's Phaedrus: A Defense of the Philosophic Art of Writing* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1980).

10. I do not accept the Western traditional equation of whiteness with positive values and blackness with negative values, which Plato seems ready to countenance.

11. See here Plato's fanciful etymology linking *erōs* to *rhomē*, "strength," at 238c3–4.

12. At *Symp.* 177d5, Phaedrus is called *patēr tou logou*, and in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates remarks at 242b that Phaedrus has brought into being (either as author or facilitator) the majority of speeches given during his lifetime.

13. See Sorates' outline of the hierarchy of incarnations at 248d–e.

14. G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990 [1987]), 149.

15. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (Pfullingen: Neske, 1961), 229.

16. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. I, 226.

17. Liddell's and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* lists, among the meanings of *agalma*, glory, delight, and ornament, as well as a statue honoring a divinity, a divine image to be worshipped, or a statue or an image in general. See also De Vries' comments in *A Commentary*, on *Phdr.* 230b6.

18. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas*, 178.

19. The simile is based, as Nehamas and Woodruff point out in their note 116, on the ancient belief that eye diseases could be visually communicated.

20. Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 12.

21. Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 109.

22. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, 226.

23. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, 228.

24. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, 230.

25. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, 230ff.

26. John Sallis, "Twisting Free: Being to an Extent Sensible," *Research in Phenomenology* 18 (1987): 16–27. Reprinted in J. Sallis, *Double Truth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 75–96. For a fuller discussion, see David Michael Levin, *The Philosopher's Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), ch. 10, section v.

CHAPTER 3

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 36. Hereafter referred to as OE; English translation by Michael B. Smith in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 130. Hereafter referred to as EM.

2. OE, 51; EM, 135.

3. For Descartes's relationship to Jean Ferrier, an accomplished maker of optical instruments, see Pierre Costabel, "La Réfraction de la lumière et la dioptrique de Descartes," in his *Démarches de Descartes savant*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1982), 63–76.

4. See Descartes to [Mersenne], June or July 1635 (AT I, 322; CSMK III, 324).

5. AT XI, 83ff; CSM I, 152ff.

6. Peter Galison, "Descartes's Comparisons: From the Invisible to the Visible," *Isis* 75 (1984): 311–26.

7. AT VI, 81; CSM I, 152.

8. For scholarship on Descartes's theory of vision, see Celia Wolf-Devine, *Descartes on Seeing: Epistemology and Visual Perception* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), and some of the contributions to Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster, and John Sutton, eds., *Descartes' Natural Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000). See also Nancy J. Maull, "Descartes's Optics and the Geometrization of Nature," *Review of Metaphysics* 32 (1978–1979): 253–73; Gary Hatfield, "Descartes's Physiology and Psychology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 286–334; Dalia Judovitz,

“Vision, Representation, and Technology in Descartes,” in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 63–86. This work will be cited as MHV. See further Peter Galison, “Model and Reality in Descartes’s Theory of Light,” *Synthesis* 4:4 (1979): 2–23.

9. AT VI, 84; CSM I, 153.

10. Descartes, *Principia Philosophiae*, IV:197, 198; AT VIII, 321ff; CSM I, 284ff.

11. Dalia Judovitz, “Vision, Representation, and Technology in Descartes,” MHV, 72. The Cartesian reference is to *Le Monde*, AT XI, 5ff; CSM I, 81.

12. Descartes, *Princ.* IV:191ff; AT VIII, 318f; CSM I, 282ff.

13. *De An.*, II:xi, 422b17–424a15.

14. Myles Burnyeat, “Is an Aristotelian Philosophy of Mind Still Credible? A Draft,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima*, ed. Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 15–26.

15. *Theaet.* 191c.

16. See Rule Twelve, AT X, 414; CSM I, 41.

17. AT X, 415; CSM I, 41.

18. Burnyeat, “Is an Aristotelian . . .,” 26.

19. OE, 37; EM, 131.

20. OE 56ff.

21. OE, 40; EM, 132.

22. OE, 53.

23. See Descartes to Elizabeth, June 28, 1643 (AT III, 690–95; CSM I, 226–29).

24. OE, 61; EM, 139.

25. AT VI, 112; CSM I, 165.

26. OE, 43; EM, 133.

27. AT VI, 134; CSM I, 169.

28. AT VI, 115; CSM I, 166.

29. Concerning Descartes’s rather problematic accounts of the unification and projection of the retinal image in *La Dioptrique* and the *Traité de l’homme*, see Celia Wolf-Devine’s discussion in ch. 3 of her *Descartes on Seeing*.

30. AT VI, 109; CSM I, 164.

31. Descartes to Regius, January 1642 (AT III, 493; CSMK III, 206).

32. AT VII, 81; CSM II, 56.

33. OE, 52; EM, 135ff.

34. Wolf-Devine, *Descartes on Seeing*, 64.

35. AT VI, 140; CSM I, 172.

36. AT VI, 137; CSM I, 170.

37. AT VI, 138; CSM I, 170.

38. Wolf-Devine comments on Descartes's use of the verbs *connaître* and *savoir* in this context in her "Descartes's Theory of Visual Spatial Perception," in *Descartes' Natural Philosophy*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster, and John Sutton (London: Routledge, 2000), 506–23, 153 and passim.

39. For a fuller discussion, see chapter 5.

40. AT VI, 63; CSM I, 143.

41. AT IXb, 14; CSM I, 186.

42. AT VI, 78; CSM I, 151.

43. See the text immediately preceding the passage cited in note 38, above, as well as *Descartes to Huygens*, December 14, 1637 (AT I, 649; CSM III, 76). These statements are not unique in the Cartesian corpus.

44. Descartes's wording here is strikingly similar to that of the First Meditation, where he writes about having noticed that the senses "sometimes deceive us" (*interdum fallere deprehendi*; AT VII, 9; CSM II, 12). There also are other parallels between the discussions of error in the Sixth Discourse of the *Optics* and in the First Meditation.

45. For the entire discussion, see AT VI, 141–47; CSM I, 172–75. Here, as elsewhere, the English translation in CSM is abbreviated.

46. Betsy Newell Decyk, "Cartesian Imagination and Perspectival Art," in *Descartes' Natural Philosophy*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger, John Schuster, and John Sutton (London: Routledge, 2000), 447–86 (474). Judovitz also discusses anamorphosis in her cited article.

47. AT X, 455; CSM I, 67.

48. Rule Three, AT X, 368; CSM I, 14.

49. AT VIII, 21; CSM I, 107.

50. *Les Passions*, II:53; AT XI, 373; CSM I, 350.

51. *Les Passions*, II:71; AT XI, 381; CSM I, 353.

52. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I:1, 980a.

53. *Les Passions*, II:76; AT XI, 385; CSM I, 355.

54. OE, 48; EM, 000.

55. OE, 54; EM, 000.

CHAPTER 4

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1970). Cited hereafter as OT.

2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *L'œil et l'esprit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). English translation by Michael B. Smith, "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 121–49. I have modified Smith's translation.

3. Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 48–69.

4. See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1980), part II, sections 9–10 (which address the thought of Galileo); Martin Heidegger, *Die Frage nach dem Ding* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1975 [1962]).

5. AT X, 373–78; CSM I, 17–19.

6. AT X, 427; CSM I, 49ff.

7. OT, 318.

8. Michel Foucault, "Mon corps, ce papier, ce feu," Appendix to *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 582–603. There is no English translation of this Appendix, which constitutes a reply to Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and the History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 31–63.

9. See Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Vrin, 1981).

10. OT, 65.

11. OT, 311.

12. John Rajchman, *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 15.

13. Foucault argues that, in talking about painting, one needs to erase proper names to keep open the relationship of language to vision (OT, 9ff.). I do not agree that proper names foreclose this relationship, so I continue to use them.

14. OT, 6.

15. OT, 14.

16. Jonathan Brown, *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 260.

17. OT, 312.

18. See Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen, "Reflections on *Las Meninas*: Paradox Lost," *Critical Inquiry* 7:2 (Winter 1980): 429–47, which responds to John R. Searle, "*Las Meninas* and the Paradoxes of Visual Representation," *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 1980): 429–47.

19. Snyder and Cohen, "Reflections," 441.

20. Brown, *Velázquez*, 257.

21. Svetlana Alpers, "Interpretation without Representation, or the Viewing of *Las Meninas*," *Representations* I:1 (February 1983): 31–57.

22. Madlyn Millner Kahr, *Velázquez: The Art of Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 172–85.
23. See Brown, *Velázquez*, 259.
24. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 104. This work will hereafter be cited as VP.
25. VP, 106.
26. See here chapter 5.
27. Brown, *Velázquez*, 260.
28. “The Gaze and the Glance,” VP, 87–103.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Leo Steinberg, “Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*,” *October* 19 (1981): 45–54.
31. See the title essay of Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 45–257.
32. G. McKim Smith, G. Andersen-Bergdoll, and R. Newman, *Examining Velázquez* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 23.
33. OT, 312.
34. Bois, *Painting as Model*, 230.
35. *Ibid.*, 240.
36. Michel Foucault, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1973), ch. 3.
37. Magritte to Foucault, May 23, 1966, in *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*, 83–85.
38. Descartes, *Optics*, AT VI, 113; CSM I, 165.
39. Joel Snyder, “Picturing Vision,” *Critical Inquiry* 6:3 (Spring/Summer 1980): 499–526.
40. Bois, *Painting as Model*, 245.
41. Hubert Damisch, *Fenêtre jaune-cadmium, ou le dessous de la peinture* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984). See the chapter “L’Eveil du regard.”
42. John Sallis, *Shades: Of Painting at the Limit* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

CHAPTER 5

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). English translation by Alphonso Lingis, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). This work will be referred to as VI, with the French pagination preceding the English. I have modified Lingis’s translation.
2. VI, 183, 139.
3. VI, 184, 139.

4. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 52ff. This work will be referred to as MB.

5. François Raffoul, “Translator’s Preface” to Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, trans. François Raffoul and Gregory Recco (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1993), xxviii. This work will be referred to as GT.

6. OE, 68; EM, 139.

7. VI, 173, 131.

8. Working Note (June 1959?), VI, 250ff., 197.

9. VI, 183, 139. David Michael Levin, in *The Philosopher’s Gaze: Modernity in the Shadows of Enlightenment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), has a more negative reading of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of narcissism. For him, it still binds vision to a logic of identity rather than allowing it to open upon ethical alterity. See pp. 220, 228. In contrast, I see Narcissus as a figure of the erosion of self-identity by alterity.

10. VI, 165, 124.

11. VI, 166, 124.

12. VI, 155, 115.

13. See OE, 12; EM, 128.

14. OE, 64; M, 140.

15. Working Note of November 1959, VI, 269ff., 216.

16. MB, 45.

17. OE, 35; EM, 140; OE, 91; EM, 149.

18. Working Note of January 1960, VI, 283, 228.

19. Working Note of May 1960, VI, 311, 258.

20. See Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, trans. Michael B. Smith, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 59–75; OE, 32; EM, 129.

21. OE, 34; EM, 130.

22. See the final chapter, “La Liberté” (“Freedom”) in Merleau-Ponty, *La Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), 426–520. English translation by Colin Smith, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), 434–56.

23. Jean-Luc Nancy, “Why Are There Several Arts?,” in *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1–39.

24. Nancy, *The Muses*, 10–13.

25. GT, 60.

26. Compare Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of infinity as the openness of the life-world in his Working Note of January 17, 1959; VI, 223, 169.

27. See J.-L. Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), as well as Raffoul's discussion in his Introduction to GT.

28. GT, 76.

29. GT, 82.

30. GT, 84.

31. J.-L. Nancy, "Exscription," in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 338.

32. MB, 37.

33. The idea of the exhibition series was to commission notable intellectuals to coorganize with the curators exhibitions of drawings, drawn mostly from the Louvre's collections and focused on a theme of their choice, which they would then treat in a theoretical text complementing the exhibition. The inaugural exhibition, co-organized by Derrida, was held from October 26, 1990, to January 21, 1991.

34. OE, 42; EM, 132ff.

35. MB, 51ff.

36. MB, 73.

37. See Plato, *Phdr.* 243a-b.

38. MB, 104.

39. MB, 117.

40. Levin, *The Philosopher's Gaze*, 57; Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 177.

41. John II:26.

42. MB, 51.

43. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Nature: Notes. Cours du Collège de France; Suivi des Résumés de Cours Correspondants*, ed. Dominique Ségлар (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990).

CHAPTER 6

1. Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," *Holzwege*; "Martin Heidegger Gesamtausgabe," vol. 5 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1978), 75–113. The *Heidegger Gesamtausgabe* (1976–) will be referred to as GA, followed by the volume number. Translations from the German are my own.

2. Parmenides, Fr. 3. English translations vary, since most translators find it necessary to insert explanatory words or phrases. See David Gallop, *Parmenides of Elea: Fragments* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 57. In keeping with my usual practice, I translate Heidegger's *Wesen*, a word for "the being of beings" as *essence*, italicizing *esse* ("to be").

3. GA 5, 89ff.

4. Heidegger, *Parmenides*, GA 54.

5. GA 54, 153.

6. GA 54, 158.

7. The distinction between picture and image has no German counterpart, but the German *Bild*, encompassing both, has a connotation of form-giving that is lacking in the English equivalents of the term.

8. See Heidegger, *Besinnung*, GA 66, 23; GA 54, 212.

9. See here Heinrich W. Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger, 1926–1976*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), ch. 6.

10. GA 5, 48.

11. I capitalize this usage of “Earth” and “World” to distinguish it from other Heideggerian usages of these terms, none of which carry just their ordinary meanings.

12. GA 5, 51.

13. In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger writes that *Gestalt* is to be thought here “aus *jenem* Stellen und Ge-stell . . . als welches das *Werk* west . . .” (“out of *that* positing and encompassing posit . . . as which the *work* essences . . .”; GA 5, 51). He comments on this passage in the Addendum, pointing out that while *Ge-stell* is thought of here in a manner that clarifies the Greek understanding of *morphē* (shape or form), rather than as characterizing the *essence* of technicity, there is an *essential* connection between the two senses. The connection concerns the historical provenance of the *essence* of technicity (see GA 5, 72).

14. Compare here Merleau-Ponty’s meditation on how the red dress evoked by a patch of red “holds with all its fibres unto the fabric of the visible, and thereby unto a fabric of invisible being,” and of how this “lining” of the visible is not any sort of thing (or *eidos*), “but a possibility, a latency, and a *flesh* of things” (VI, 174; 132ff.).

15. Concerning the temple, see John Sallis, *Stone* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), ch. 4. Concerning the peasant shoes, see Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), ch. 4, English translation by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Derrida’s chapter builds on an earlier interchange between Meyer Shapiro and Heidegger.

16. See GA 5, 23. The *Dinggedicht* is a poetic genre.

17. GA 5, 30ff.

18. GA 5, 29.

19. In the Addendum (*Zusatz*, written in 1957), Heidegger remarks tellingly that what he calls the “self-configuration” (*das Sicheinrichten*) of truth, or of being, in beings “touches upon the questionableness of the ontological difference” (GA 5, 73).

20. GA 5, 28.

21. GA 5, 52.

22. GA 5, 40. Heidegger here builds on his 1933 essay “Vom Wesen der Wahrheit,” *Wegmarken*, GA 9, 73–98.

23. Martin Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (Pfullingen: Neske, 1967), 5–37. To be referred to hereafter as FT.

24. *Geschick*, for Heidegger, is a sending of unconcealment which is, as such, not within human power but which needs to be dissociated from any notion of fate. Thus Heidegger writes that, “Freedom is the domain of *Geschick*” (FT, 25).

25. FT, 26.

26. Merleau-Ponty voices the same thought in his discussion of techno-science in the opening section of “Eye and Mind,” where he writes that, “since man truly becomes the *manipulandum* that he thinks he is, one enters into . . . a sleep or a nightmare from which nothing could reawaken him” (OE, 12; EM, 122). In keeping with Merleau-Ponty’s extensive discussion of Descartes in this text, the figure of sleep or nightmare is Cartesian.

27. FT, 27. Heidegger remarks that the *stellen* of *Ge-stell* is not to be understood as just the challenging forth of things to show themselves in keeping with the configuration of the posit (i.e., as *Bestand*), but that it “guards the resonance of another ‘stellen’ from which it is derived, namely of that *Her-stellen* [manufacturing, and literally, setting into proximity] and *Dar-stellen* [presenting] which, in the sense of *poiēsis*, lets what presences come forth into unconcealment” (FT, 20). Concerning this resonance of *stellen*, compare note 10 above.

In his insightful (unpublished) commentary on this chapter, presented at the 2001 Heidegger Conference at Fordham University, Krysztof Ziarek rightly stresses the crucial importance, for Heidegger, of the paradigm of letting or *lassen*, not only against positing or *stellen*, but also as an alternative “to making, production, and power.” Ziarek characterizes art as a “force-work” or a dynamic redistribution of the forces governing praxis and production, which undoes the closure of power. Such is certainly Heidegger’s challenging perspective, yet the question remains whether art can unfailingly protect itself against the sway of power or of *Machenschaft*.

28. FT, 28.

29. FT, 30.

30. See here Heidegger’s meditation on the first *stasimon* of Sophocles’ *Antigone*, which exalts and problematizes man’s technical ingenuity, in his lecture course on *Hölderlins Hymne “Der Ister,”* GA 53, part II, section 10.

Plato emphatically denies the poet’s claim to be a practitioner of *tekhne*. In the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus*, he identifies inspiration or transport (*enthousiasmos, mania*) as the chief source of poetic creativity.

31. GA 5, 43.

32. FT, 33.

33. Martin Heidegger, “La Provenance de l’art,” section II, 370–75.

34. See here Thomas Sheehan's detailed etymological discussion in "A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," *Continental Philosophy Review*, forthcoming (pagination not available at the time of this writing).

35. GA 5, 54.

36. Heidegger, "La Provenance de l'art," 376ff.

37. Heidegger, "Bauen Wohnen Denken," "Das Ding," and ". . . dichterisch wohnet der Mensch . . .," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, vol. 2, 19–36, 37–55, 61–78.

38. In *Besinnung* (1938), Heidegger characterizes *Machenschaft* as "the arranging of things with a view to the makeability of everything, namely in such a way as to pre-arrange the irresistibility of the unconditional calculation [*Verrechnung*] of each thing (GA 66, 16). See also ". . . dichterisch wohnet der Mensch," 64, and *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, GA 65, sections 64–68.

39. Concerning Heidegger's relationship to Daoism, *chan*, or Zen thought, see Reinhard May, *Heidegger's Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on His Work*, trans. Graham Parkes (London: Routledge, 1989); Graham Parkes, ed., *Heidegger and Asian Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989); Otto Pöggeler, *The Paths of Heidegger's Life and Thought*, trans. John Bailiff (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996), ch. 4.I. See also my "Heidegger and the Way of Art: The Empty Origin and Contemporary Abstraction," *Continental Philosophy Review* 31:4 (October 1998): 337–51. (Note: in the printing of this article, some of the notes unfortunately were omitted.)

In Heidegger's notion of the Fourfold, there is, in particular, a resonance of Zhuangzi's view of the pure or free human being as relating himself or herself to Heaven, Earth, and spirit (without turning his or her back on the world).

40. Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, II (Pfullingen: Neske, 1967), 19–36, 24ff.

41. Heidegger, "Das Ding," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, vol. 2, 40.

42. *Schenken*, modified with various prefixes, means both "to donate" and "to pour," so that here again the example of the jug is felicitous.

43 Heidegger, "Das Ding," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 53.

44. Heidegger's play on *Ring*, *ringen*, and *ring* engages Allemannic dialect (and the resonance in it of older forms of the German language), which lets *ring* mean "slight," "easeful," or, more figuratively, "pliant," allowing him to interweave these meanings with the figures of the ring and the round-dance, as well as with *ringen* in the sense of "to wrestle," which recalls the strife of Earth and World.

45. Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum/L'art et l'espace* (St. Gallen: Erker Verlag, 1983), 9. This text also appears in *Aus der Erfahrung des Denkens*, GA 13, 203–10. My references are to the Erker volume.

46. Heidegger, *Die Kunst und der Raum*, 12.

47. *Ibid.*, 6.

48. Heidegger, "dichterisch wohnet der Mensch," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, vol. 2, 74.

49. *Ibid.*, 75.

50. Ibid., 69.
51. Ibid., 77.
52. Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 1, 4th ed. (Pfullingen: Neske, 1961), 97. Heidegger presented his Nietzsche lectures between 1936 and 1940.
53. GA 66, 30.
54. GA 66, 37.
55. GA 66, 30, 34.
56. GA 66, 31.
57. William J. R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*, 4th rev. ed. (London: Phaidon, 1966), 351.
58. Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues*, 153.
59. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Vestige of Art," in *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 81.
60. L. Alcopley, *Listening to Heidegger and Hisamatsu* (Kyoto: Bokubi Press, 1963). This is a limited edition with trilingual text, calligraphy, and Alcopley's artwork. The bare record of the colloquium can also be found as "Die Kunst und das Denken," in *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges*, GA 16, 552–57. My references are to the Bokubi Press edition; given the shortness of the text, I have not given cross-references. See also "Wechselseitige Spiegelungen," the parting conversation of Heidegger and Hisamatsu on May 19, 1958, GA 16, 776–80. I have given Hisamatsu's name according to Western convention, that is, surname last.
61. *Listening*, 56.
62. Ibid., 80.
63. This letter appears in facsimile, typescript, and translations in the Bokubi Press volume and also can be found in GA 16, 562.

RETROSPECT

1. John Sallis, *Shades: Of Painting at the Limit* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 7.
2. Jean-Claude Frère, *Leonardo: Painter, Inventor, Visionary, Mathematician, Philosopher, Engineer* (Paris: Terrail, 1995), 108.
3. Heidegger, "Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes," in *Holzwege*, 42. Heidegger is not speaking exclusively of visual encounter in this passage.
4. Paul Davies, "The Face and the Caress: Levinas's Ethical Alterations of Sensibility," in *MHV*, 252–72 (264).
5. Heidegger, *Holzwege*, 54.
6. Working Note of May 1960, VI, 300, 247.
7. See here David Michael Levin's Introduction to *SV*, 18.

Selected Bibliography

This bibliography is limited to titles that have been significant to the writing of this book. It does not attempt to fully document any one author or subject area, nor does it include all of the literature cited in the Notes section. Titles are cited here in the language in which they were consulted. References to translations can, where available or consulted, be found in the Notes section.

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