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Therese Oulton, *Southern Cross*, 1985.
Oil on canvas, 234 x 213.5 cm. Courtesy Gimpel Fils Gallery, London. Collection J. Gessel

Louis Marin

Painting and theory, semiology and representation, postmodernism and quotation, deconstruction and invention: an interview on art from Renaissance to the present day.

V i a n a C o n t i

You've asked me to describe myself and to write what painters would call a self-portrait. I don't know of anything more difficult to do. Two years ago, I wrote a book concerned with the idea of autobiography, *La voix excommuniée; essais de mémoire* (The Excommunicated Voice: A Trial of Memory), and it attempts to give an idea of the paradoxes one inevitably encounters in trying to write about oneself. You might say that this book was my attempt at doing a self-portrait, but with the assistance of a few of the writers I admire, like Stendahl, Saint Augustine, Montaigne, Leiris, and Rousseau. And even more recently, I wrote an article—it's a piece I'm very fond of, which means it must have some special sort of relationship to my life history—in which I attempted to tell the extremely curious story of two self-portraits by Poussin that are extremely different from one another, but painted in more or less the same period. Writing about yourself is a different kind of paradox, but it still pertains to the field of painting (and as well to the history of painting), even though it's also clear that a self-portrait isn't quite the same thing as an autobiography. Painting a painting of yourself follows different rules and presents different problems; it's not at all the same as turning your life into a story, or as writing or telling the story of your life the way it is in any particular moment.

Biography

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1950-54 Ecole Normale Supérieure: élève stagiaire.
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1955-57 Professeur, Lycée de Saint-Quentin.
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1958-61 Chargé de mission, Ministère des Af-

aires Etrangères - Direction des Affaires Culturelles.
1961-64 Conseiller Culturel in Turkey, Affaires Etrangères.
1964-67 Directeur adjoint, Institut Français, London.
1967-69 Maître assistant, Université de Paris Nanterre and chargé de Conférences, E.N.S. rue d'Ulm.
1969-70 Directeur d'Etudes suppléant, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes - 6ème section.
1970-71 Visiting Professor of French Literature, University of California at San Diego.
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1972-74 Professor of French Literature, U.C.S.D.
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1979-81 Jones Professor, S.U.N.Y. Buffalo, N.Y. 1977 Directeur d'Etudes, Ecole des Hautes Etudes, Paris.

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Licence ès lettres
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Publications

I - *Anthologies and Translations*
1 - Radcliffe-Brown: *Structure et Fonction dans la société primitive*, translation in collaboration with Françoise Marin, introduction, index and notes. Editions de Minuit, Paris 1968. Réédition le Seuil, coll. Point, 1972.
2 - Pascal: *Pensées* (introduction and notes), éditions Didier, 1969.

3 - *Logique de Port-Royal*, (introduction), éditions Flammarion, Paris, 1970.

II - Books

1 - *Etudes sémiologiques*, collection Esthétique et Philosophie, éditions Klincksieck, Paris, 1971, 326 p.
2 - *Sémiotique de la Passion - Topiques et figures*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1971, 251 p. (Spanish, German, American translations).
3 - *Le Récit évangélique*, with C. Chabrol, éditions Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1974, 255 p. (Spanish German, American translations).
4 - *Utopiques, jeux, d'espace*, éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1973, 358 p. (American translation, 1984).
5 - *La critique du discours: études sur la Logique de Port-Royal et les Pensées de Pascal*, éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1975, 450 p.
6 - *Détruire la peinture*, Galilée, Paris, 1977, 203 p.
7 - *Le récit est un piège*, éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1978, 145 p.
8 - *La voix excommuniée; essais de mémoire*, Galilée, Paris, 1979, 196 p.
9 - *Le portrait du Roi*, éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1981, 304 p.

Forthcoming

10 - *La parole mangée. Essais théologico-politiques*, Paris.

You've asked me what line of research I follow and about the relationships I establish in "painting" between the past and the present. I have the feeling that it's a question of a confusion of odds and ends, or of a ball of twine gone all awry. It's true that I've written primarily of the painting of the past (to make use of an expression that I find myself ever more frequently forced to use), but what I'm talking about might also be termed modern painting, which is the painting that was born out of the Renaissance. Such painting can be classified as representative painting, but I don't feel the problems approached by this form of painting to be totally different, or even of a different nature, with respect to the problems of what we call contemporary painting.

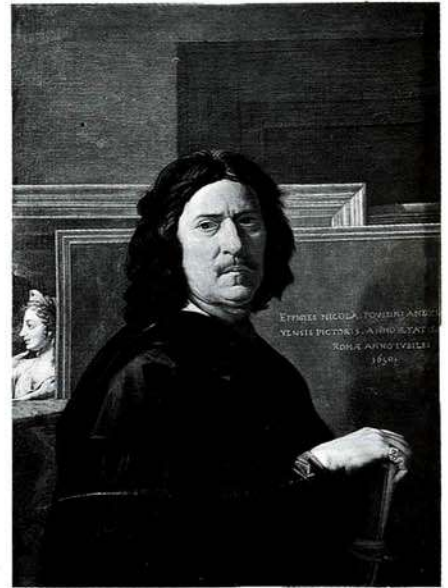
The great difference is to be found in the fact that the proposed solutions offered by the "modern" painters have successfully

hidden the problems that they faced and in some way solved. Such problems have remained hidden to critical consciousness, and they have never had the chance to enter the discourse of art history, nor even to find their way into that brand of public chatter that Roland Barthes was in the habit of calling *doxa*: a kind of mixture of received ideas, ideological refrains, and fashionable impressions. On the other hand, what seems to me to be most characteristic of “contemporary” painting (as opposed to “modern” painting) is that its notion of pictorial practice, or, more generally, of artistic practice, is based upon the assumption that direct experimentation with the theoretical problems of painting can in fact become “the subject of painting.” In much the same way that the term might be used in the physical or the biological sciences, it is effectively involved in conducting experiments on the very conditions that make paintings or pictorial representations possible, including such questions as the ways in which they are seen by spectators, and even the positions of the spectators. I’m therefore willing to make the admission—and to concede that it’s a somewhat provocative admission—that “contemporary” painting (in the large and general sense I have outlined above) is the vehicle most suited to conducting critical awareness to an understanding, appreciation, and interpretation of the painting of the past. In the past, the painter (or the “critic”) elaborated a theoretical discourse on pictorial procedures. In the “present,” the painter makes a work, or a painting, that gives pictorial embodiment to his theory of painting. In the past, there was a kind of division of roles and tasks: on the one hand was the person who painted (which is what I term the practice of painting), and on the other hand was the person who elaborated a discourse on the theory of painting (even though they were at times one and the same person). But having recourse to language, discourse, and the esthetic and cultural categories that were dominant in the discourse of the moment had the effect of quite literally displacing the work of the painter and of forcing it into a locus that lay outside of the domain of language; and it’s clear that such a displacement entailed a whole series of distortions, concealments, disclaimers, and superimpositions of interpretation. This, in fact, is what the theory of the practice of painting amounted to, and the practice of painting wasn’t a pure and simple application of theory, which isn’t though to say that this always and inevitably had to be the case. There are times at which a painting can be seen as having been didactic as a result of having dealt more or less mechanically with a theoretical problem: it becomes something on the order of a lesson for well-cultivated students. Painterly practice, in the most creative sense of

the term—and this is something on which I would insist—is an experimentation of the theory of painting, a way of testing it against the verification of the tenability or untenability of specifically invoked conditions that are understood to make the making of paintings possible. The possible thus becomes the very reality of the work.

Here, I’ll give an example—among many possible examples—that refers to a painter whose work is of particular importance to me, and whose lessons I have studied for quite some time. There are cases where Paul Klee worked on paper that he then relined onto canvas, and where he wrote the title of the work, the signature, and sometimes even an evaluation in the space between the paper and the frame, which is to say on the canvas that served as the secondary support to which the paper was glued. With such a “technical” experiment, the artist is asking the viewer to look at something quite particular: he is giving him a *description* of some of the fundamental conditions that make painterly description possible. He is speaking of the frame of the work, of the frame’s complex semiotic function as a limit, of the distinction between the material support of the work and its painted surface, and, as well, of the “exergonal” position (outside of description—“ex-ergon”—and yet within the work) of the double name that necessarily belongs to a painting, which is to speak of its title and the name of the painter. Frank Stella can offer another example. He has made paintings where the total shape of the canvas combines a rectangle with a quarter of a circle and where the shapes painted on the canvas have a relationship of harmony with the overall shape to which they have been applied. This again is an experiment: *pictorial investigation* of something that may have seemed for centuries to be simply one of the givens of pictorial description. He’s addressing himself to the geometrically simple forms of the easel painting, and he demonstrates that they rank by no means as a given, but rather as what I have termed a theoretical condition that determines the possibilities of painterly representation.

In looking at the works of the past, the art historian, the art theoretician, and the “student of esthetics” will find it extremely fruitful to abandon themselves to a kind of “mental” experimentation that finds its starting point in the experiments proposed by contemporary art. They’ll discover that certain works of the past contain similar researches or related proposals to which the painter, however, attributed entirely different meanings. I mean to say that the effects of such proposals will be discovered to have been a part of entirely different cultural, historical, and ideological contexts. We can look, for example, at the frescoes in the Bacci Chapel of the church



Nicolas Poussin, Self-Portrait, 1649

of San Francesco in Arezzo, and take notice of Piero della Francesca’s representation of the death of the son of Chosroe at the hands of Heracles, which is depicted on the lower part of the left wall. One will see that the cross in the background of the space described by the painter seems to issue from the mouth of the son of Chosroe even though it was supposed to stand behind him. This is a *planar effect*, and it’s to be found in a fresco where Piero, one of the Renaissance’s greatest theoreticians of perspective, made use of some of the most powerful resources that can possibly be employed in the construction of a sense of depth. There’s no doubt, of course, that this planar effect almost immediately assumes a religious meaning, and very precisely so, from historical and ideological points of view. But from a purely plastic point of view, this all takes place as though the painter were experimenting with one of the theoretical conditions for the possibility of representation in modern painting: he has constructed depth within a plane and presented it to the view of the spectator. But this *planar effect within a depth*, as a purely plastic effect, was in some way hidden to the painter himself, as his attention to his painting (to the painting of his painting) was distracted, with respect to the story he was telling, the image represented, the arrangement of the figures, the literary references, and so forth. He was distracted because of the entirety of a discourse *on* painting or *on the subject* of painting.

You’ve asked me to tell you about *my* notion of the painting, and about *my* concept of painting in general. After what I’ve already said, and even though I may have said it too abstractly or fragmentarily, I can only add that I aspire, in approaching painting or a painting, only to the concepts that the painters would have about it, since

it's the painters who actually "practice" painting. A painting can be defined as a particular field of painterly experimentation. And I say "particular" because a painting—in the sense of a piece of wood or canvas cut into a specific form, or in the sense of a movable object that can be transported, taken from place to place, or substituted—represents no more than one among many sectors of painterly experimentation. The wall of the chapel of San Francesco, for example, represents another such sector: it is a nonmovable object that can't be transported; it is a part of an architectural structure with windows, sources of light, and the possibility of permitting a spectator to take up a variety of positions within its volume. In the *Annunciation*, in Arezzo, Piero in fact abandoned himself to an entirely extraordinary experiment both with circumambient light and with the light within the painting itself: within the "painting" he gives us the painting of the shadow of a bar of wood, which is likewise painted, but this shadow, which falls upon the wall that represents the home of the Virgin, would appear to be cast by the light that comes from the exterior of the building by passing through a "real" window in the walls of the church! Even a body or a face can be a part of this field of experimentation. But in this case, we find a shift in obligations (in the rules that govern the experiment): we find an immediate questioning and elaboration of one of the theoretical conditions that determine the possibilities of representation: the condition concerned with the smoothness or flatness of the painting's supporting plane. And don't we have works in which Cézanne lets us see the weave of the canvas? To be more precise, we even have to say that he *offers* the weave of the canvas to our vision, calling attention to it with the direction of his brush strokes and with a paint-covering so thin as to be virtually transparent.

You also ask me for my definition of the word "representation," which is a term I've used quite frequently in our conversation. I think it would be mistaken, in the field of painting, immediately to reduce the idea of representation to the notion of figuration. Figuration is a question of the way representation refers to empirical external objects or beings, and it places primary value on the imitation or copying of "reality." We have to recognize that "representation" implies something active and has the character of an operation: representation mustn't be confused with the represented things that it represents, and even when it's thought of as an operation it mustn't be taken for the act of a subject or for a trajectory that reveals subjective intentions and subjective meanings. A painting can contain a figure without forcing the spectator to remark, "It's a tree, it's a woman, it's an apple." A figure is a certain *form of organi-*

zation or articulation of a continuum, and such organization can be anterior (both semantically and logically) to any synthesis of identification of the subject, as Kant would have put it. None of this, though, will change the fact that common speech and ordinary trains of thought reduce representation to a question of mimetic reference. But this is a question of mental and social perception, and it contains the risk, especially in the field of painting, of obscuring these forms of articulation and organization of lines and colors on a surface: it obscures what seems to me to constitute the very essence of the work of a painter.

The fact nonetheless remains that the spectator, when faced with a painting, will always experience an impulse toward "recognition," which is an expression, among other things, of a desire to *speak* the work and to make it assume a meaning within a discourse on the work. I see this as the expression of an uneasiness, or even of an anxiety, that's cursed by the autonomy of the work, or by its autonomous capacity for the elaboration of a fiction. The discourse that recounts a recognition of a series of objects is a source of reassurance, because it reintegrates the work into a common environment, a coherent and "normal" world of notions and perceptions; it makes it dependent upon such a world, and places it more or less in continuity with such a world.

I'd make a similar set of observations on the attribution of every representation to a subject endowed with thought and will, which is to say to a maker of syntheses or to a source of meaningful intentions.

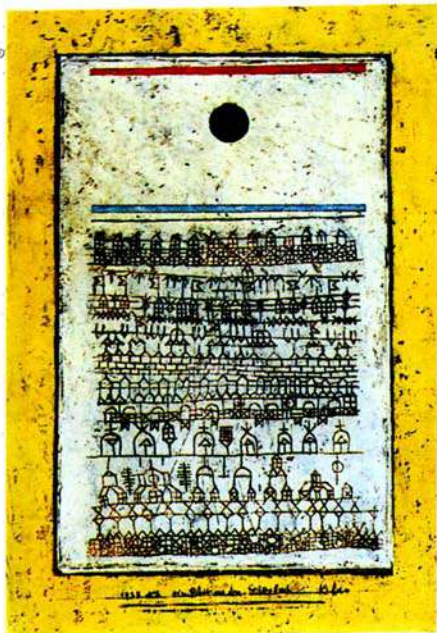
For representation to be an operation doesn't at all imply that it has to be the act of a subject. Just as I've said that the forms for the structuring or organization of a surface have an effect of relationship and of objectivity, I'd say that this operation has an *effect of a subject*. These effects are undoubtedly inevitable, but our awareness as theoreticians still requires that we criticize them: first of all, we have to bring them to light, and we then have to be careful not to accept them as having objective or substantive value. Here again, the means, instruments, and theoretical knowledge needed by "students of esthetics" or of "semiotics" for the study of the works of representation of the past are to be found to a decisive degree in the practical and theoretical work of our contemporary painters.

Here are two conflicting examples. The entirety of a Jungian school of criticism has attempted to recognize the figure of the Devouring Mother in the rhythms of Jackson Pollock's first drippings and all-over paintings: the figure of a woman with monstrous breasts, legs spread apart, and an openly proffered vagina. It's certainly clear that some sort of figure is to be found in

these works—either this figure or another—but only as the "object effect" of a certain way of articulating their surfaces as a nexus of lines and colors projected onto the canvas by the entirety of the artist's sense of gesture. This line of criticism, following much the same impulse, has also attributed this maternal figure to a search for meaning (unconsciously, to be sure) on the part of Jackson Pollock as subject. Thus we have another effect—the "subject effect"—and they stand immediately adjacent to one another, simultaneously visible. Here again, it can't be denied that Jackson Pollock was in psychoanalysis or analytic psychotherapy with a Jungian analyst. And it's certainly possible that he may have had an analytic problem with his mother. But his work, as work in painting, is neither understood nor explained by such a form of criticism that mistakes effects for their causes.

The other example is a classical painting: Poussin's *Landscape of Pyramus and Thisbe*, at the Frankfurt Museum. It's a work in which the artist transforms Ovid's tale of Pyramus and Thisbe into images and figures. It's a perfectly "representational" painting, and its referential effects (which are literary, figurative, and finally an imitation of "reality") are all the more suggestive because of the way the painter himself made a point of speaking about them in a letter: "My attempt at representation is based upon endeavoring to achieve the best possible imitation, etc." But we have to be careful, because Ovid's story is about the metamorphosis of the fruit of the mulberry tree, passing from white to black through the red of blood. This is a prodigious problem of pure painting, and it's proposed not by Poussin, but by the work of Poussin. How is it possible to make a painting in which purely pictorial fact will show us a passage? How can a painting use *representation* itself (with figures, a represented space, etc.) as a means of *presenting* a passage from white, which is the universal color of light and thus the color of the means that has absolute control of visibility, to black, which is noncolor and nonvisibility? Painting, in short, is asked to operate within itself and to use the means of pictorial representation to present the very destruction of painting. In order to see how this can be achieved, one has to make a trip to Frankfurt: you have to look at this painting from very close if you want to discover the color "structure" of the work; it's a structure in white, red, and black, and it's constructed into the representative figuration of the work, but it's a question as well of something that stands both before and beyond this figuration.

You've asked me how my researches have served me as a point of departure for an understanding of what's now called "the postmodern," which, to put it very briefly,



Paul Klee, A sheet from the book of the city, 1928.

is an abandonment of abstraction (if abstraction is understood as anti- or nonrepresentational) and a return to figuration. It's a very vast problem and it ought to be looked at from a variety of points of view, and I'm not at all sure that I'm sufficiently competent to talk about it. But all the same, I think that the term itself, "postmodernism," isn't a very good term: it's an ill-conceived and poorly-constructed idea, because it indulges in a confusion between a reference to a chronological or historical period on the one hand ("postmodernism" indicates the period that comes *after* modernism, but why, then, should the "new" take the name of the "old" with the addition of the prefix "post" to say it comes *after*?), and on the other hand a structural value. Every artistic creation can be called postmodern to the extent that it implies or presupposes what I've just now been calling a practical experimentation of the theoretical conditions for the possibility of the work of art. It's of course only natural for the rules that govern such experimentation to be variable both historically and culturally, as well as variable from the work of one artist to the work of another, and variable as well from one "painting" to another. And if that's the way things stand, one has to admit that the term, postmodern, can't be of any great interest from an operative point of view. J.F. Lyotard has said a few very interesting things in this regard in an article first published in Italy and later reprinted in the magazine *Critique*.

You also ask me what my work leads me to think of "quotations from the masters." I feel that "quotations" in art in general and in painting in particular are a permanent characteristic of art, and I refer to both the art of the past and the art of the

present. It seems to me that quotations depend upon what contemporary literary criticism has called "intertextuality." Gérard Genette, in a recent work, has done a good deal to give greater precision to this term, and also to give it greater operational value. Starting from the notion of intertextuality, he goes on to distinguish the paratext, the hypertext, the archtext, the metatext, and so forth. And when they're applied to painting, all of these terms are extremely useful for analyzing the various "rules" of quotation as well as the different levels of coherence and cohesion of a work. I've recently seen the Prepublications of the Center of Linguistics and Semiotics at the University of Urbino, which has printed a very beautiful text in which Omar Calabrese discusses Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, and he seems to me to put all of this into practice with considerable force and with a great elegance both of thought and of method.

But it's also true that a certain "regime" of quotation is particularly characteristic of pictorial, sculptural, and architectural works that we define as "postmodern." And it might be interesting to subject it to a rigorous analysis that follows the principles, concepts, and methods that I brought up in our conversation. Here, though, I'll limit myself to underlining a single aspect of the problem and to pointing out the symptomatic value of the regime of the postmodern and of intertextuality in general: it's a symptom of a universalization of culture in which the effects are not the "classical" effects of unity, universality, and homogeneity, but rather the effects of a cosmopolitanism that has generalized itself in both space and time: it's a symptom of what can in a certain way be called a "quantitative" uneasiness of history, of societies, and of cultures.

You've asked me if my researches have anything in common with the work of Derrida, as you know that I took part in the seminar *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* and that Derrida himself would have liked, at the end of the seminar, to deliver the paper that I delivered. And I'd say that we have quite a good deal in common, and not only for the reason that Derrida's work and thought are among the most important and decisive of our time. It's rather that his work takes a very long and a very sharp look at the bases of culture and the human sciences, which of course include the history and the semiology of art, which are the fields in which I myself am at work.

The notion of deconstruction, the method that it presupposes (if we've already reached the point of being able to talk about the method of deconstruction), and, beyond that, the attitude or perhaps even the philosophic sensibility that it implies, have all been frequently misun-

derstood, and they seem to me to have been, as well, the subject of any number of reductions or abusive deformations that have to be spoken out against.

Everything I have said to you about the research in which I've been involved for the past twenty years—and referring most particularly to my work on the effects of the mechanism of representation and on the notions of experimentation, the practice of theory, and so forth—all of that is a demonstration of the connections between my own work and the work of Derrida.

You refer to the seminar on deconstruction, and I would call attention to a passage of the paper I delivered on that occasion. It has to be admitted that the passage referred to is far too abstract as well as insufficiently developed, but it nonetheless contains an attempt to demonstrate that the very construction of the notion of representation on the part of the classical logicians was in a certain sense contemporaneous with its deconstruction. This is an idea, moreover, that I've attempted to put into practice with respect to two painters who stand at the two extremes of the modern era and both of whom are "marginal" with respect to the schools, traditions, and changes within the painting of their time: Paul Klee and Carlo Crivelli. In the work of both of these painters it seems clear to me that the very construction of painterly representation both contains and serves as a vehicle for an experiment with the deconstruction of some of the conditions that made their representations possible in the first place. Klee was concerned with the notions of the edge, frame, limit, and closure of the mechanism of representation; Crivelli was concerned with the notions of plane, surface, and depth.

In much the same way, even though implicitly, I demonstrated that deconstruction is more than simply a critical *method* for the study of works and texts. To think otherwise would be completely to "shift" or to "falsify" the philosophical potency of the *invention* of the idea and to deny the breadth and epistemological import of its *discovery*. I demonstrated that it is also one of the constituent moments of representation: one of the moments of its historical and epistemological constitution. Schematic as it is, this then is the answer I would give to your two extremely important questions on the *advent* of deconstruction, which you rightly see as arising from the "context that resulted from the positive philosophy of the Renaissance," and on the legitimacy of the mechanism of deconstruction when applied to texts of which the esthetic is historically antecedent to the theory of the mechanism as developed by Derrida.

(Translated from Italian by Henry Martin)