JACQUES DERRIDA

THE TRUTH IN PAINTING

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Passe-Partout

— I —

Someone, not me, comes and says the words: "I am interested in the idiom in painting."

You get the picture: the speaker is impassive, he remained motionless for the duration of his sentence, careful to refrain from any gesture. At the point where you were perhaps expecting it, near the head and around certain words, for example "in painting," he did not imitate the double horns of quotation marks, he did not depict a form of writing with his fingers in the air. He merely comes and announces to you: "I am interested in the idiom in painting."

As he comes and has just come [*vient de venir*], the frame is missing, the edges of any context open out wide. You are not completely in the dark, but what does he mean exactly?

Does he mean that he is interested in the idiom "in painting," in the idiom itself, for its own sake, "in painting" (an expression that is in itself strongly idiomatic; but what is an idiom?)?

That he is interested in the idiomatic expression itself, in the words "in painting"? Interested in words in painting or in the words "in painting"? Or in the words " 'in painting' "?

That he is interested in the idiom in painting, i.e., in what pertains to the idiom, the idiomatic trait or style (that which is singular, proper, inimitable) in the domain of painting, or else—another possible translation—in the singularity or the irreducible

specificity of pictorial art, of that "language" which painting is supposed to be, etc.?

Which makes, if you count them well, at least four hypotheses; but each one divides again, is grafted and contaminated by all the others, and you would never be finished translating them.

Nor will I.

And if you were to bide your time awhile here in these pages, you would discover that I cannot dominate the situation, or translate it, or describe it. I cannot report what is going on in it, or narrate it or depict it, or pronounce it or mimic it, or offer it up to be read or formalized without remainder. I would always have to renew, reproduce, and reintroduce into the formalizing economy of my tale—overloaded each time with some supplement—the very indecision which I was trying to reduce. At the end of the line it would be just as if I had just said: "I am interested in the idiom in painting."

And should I now write it several times, loading the text with quotation marks, with quotation marks within quotation marks, with italics, with square brackets, with pictographed gestures, even if I were to multiply the refinements of punctuation in all the codes, I wager that at the end the initial residue would return. It would have set in train a divided Prime Mover.

And I leave you now with someone who comes and says the words, it is not I: "I am interested in the idiom in painting."

— 2 —

The Truth in Painting is signed Cézanne. It is a saying of Cézanne's.

Resounding in the title of a book, it sounds, then, like a due.

So, to render it to Cézanne; and first of all to Damisch, who cites it before me,[1] I shall acknowledge the debt. I must do that. In order that the trait should return to its rightful owner.

But the truth in painting was always something owed.

Cézanne had promised to pay up: "I OWE YOU THE TRUTH IN PAINTING AND I WILL TELL IT TO YOU" (to Emile Bernard, 23 October 1905).

1. *Huit thèses pour (ou contre?) une sémiologie de la peinture, Macula* 2 (1977). From Damisch I even take the saying "saying" ("following the deliberately ambiguous saying or utterance of Cézanne") even if I were not to take what it says literally, for a reserve as to the limits of deliberation always remains here.

A strange utterance. The speaker is a painter. He is speaking, or rather writing, for this is a letter and this "bon mot" is more easily written than spoken. He is writing, in a language which shows nothing. He causes nothing to be seen, describes nothing, and represents even less. The sentence in no way operates in the mode of the statement/assertion [*constat*], it says nothing that exists outside the event which it constitutes but it commits the signatory with an utterance which the theorists of speech acts would here call "performative," more precisely with that sort of performative which they call "promise." For the moment I am borrowing from them only some convenient approximations, which are really only the names of problems, without knowing if there really are any such things as pure "constatives" and "performatives."

What does Cézanne do? He writes what he could say, but with a saying that does not assert anything. The "I owe you" itself, which could include a descriptive reference (I say, I know, I see that I owe you) is tied to an *acknowledgment* of debt which commits as much as it describes: it subscribes to.

Cézanne's promise, the promise made by the one whose signature is linked to a certain type of event in the history of painting and which binds more than one person after him, is a singular promise. Its performance does not promise, literally, to *say* in the constative sense, but again to "*do*." It promises another "performative," and the content of the promise is determined, like its form, by the possibility of that other. Performative supplementarity is thus open to infinity. With no descriptive or "constative" reference, the promise makes an event (it "does something" in uttering) provided that this possibility is assured by a certain conventional framing, in other words a context marked by performative fiction. Henceforth the promise does not make an event as does any "speech act": as a supplement to the act which it is or constitutes, it "produces" a singular event which depends on the performative structure of the utterance—a promise. But by way of another supplement, the object of this promise, that which is promised by the promise, is another performative, a "saying" which might well be—we do not yet know this—a "painting" which neither says nor describes anything, etc.

One of the conditions for the performance of such an event, for the unchaining of its chain, would, according to the classical theorists of speech acts, be that Cézanne should mean to say something and that one should be able to understand it. This

condition would be part of the fiction, in other words of the set of conventional protocols, at the moment when someone such as Emile Bernard sets about opening a letter.

Let us suppose that I wrote this book in order to find out whether that condition could ever be fulfilled, whether there was even any sense in defining it—which remains to be seen.

Does speech-act theory have its counterpart in painting? Does it know its way around painting?

Since it always, and necessarily, has recourse to the values of intention, truth, and sincerity, an absolute protocol must immediately stick at this first question: what must truth be in order to be *owed* [*due*], even be *rendered* [*rendue*]? In painting? And if it consisted, in painting, of *rendering*, what would one mean when one promised to render it itself as a due or a sum rendered [*un rendu*]?

What does it mean, to render?

What about restriction? And in painting?

Let us open the letter, after Emile Bernard. So "the truth in painting" would be a characteristic trait of Cézanne.

He supposedly signed it as one signs a shaft of wit. How can this be recognized?

First of all by this: that the event, the doubly uncertain double event contracts, and makes a contract with itself only at the instant when the singularity of the trait divides in order to link itself to the play, the chance, and the economy of a language. If there existed, in full purity, any (quantity of) idiom or dialect, one ought to be able to recognize them, at work, in this trait of Cézanne. They alone would be capable of providing so powerful an economic formalization in the elliptical savings of a natural language, and of saying so many things in so few words, as long as there still remain remainders (*leipsomena*), to exceed and overflow the ellipse in its reserve, to set the economy going by exposing it to its chance.

Let us suppose that I have ventured this book, in its four movements, for the interest—or the grace—of these remainders.

Remains—the untranslatable.

Not that the idiom "of the truth in painting" is simply untranslatable, I mean the idiom of the locution, for the quotation marks are not enough to assure us of it: it could be a matter of the idiom of truth in painting, of that to which this strange locution seems to be able to refer and which can already be understood in a multitude of ways. Untranslatable: this locution is not

absolutely so. In another language, given enough space, time, and endurance, it might be possible for long discourses to propose laborious approaches to it. But untranslatable it remains in its economic performance, in the ellipsis of its trait, the word by word, the word for word, or the trait for trait in which it contracts: as many words, signs, letters, the same quantity or the same expense for the same semantic content, with the same revenue of surplus value. That is what interests me, this "interest," when I say: "I am interested in the idiom of truth in painting."

You can always try to translate.

As for the meaning, for which of its pertinent features [*traits*] should one account in a translation which would no longer have an eye to pedagogical expense? There are at least four of them, supposing, *concesso non dato*, that the unity of each one remains unbroachable.

1. That which pertains to [*a trait à*] *the thing itself*. By reason of the power ascribed to painting (the power of direct reproduction or restitution, adequation or transparency, etc.), "the truth in painting," in the French language which is not a painting, could mean and be understood as: truth itself restored, in person, without mediation, makeup, mask, or veil. In other words the true truth or the truth of the truth, restituted in its power of restitution, truth looking sufficiently like itself to escape any misprision, any illusion; and even any representation—but sufficiently divided already to resemble, produce, or engender itself twice over, in accordance with the two genitives: truth of truth and truth of truth.

2. That which pertains, therefore, to adequate *representation*, in the order of fiction or in the *relief* of its effigy. In the French language, if such a one exists and is not a painting, "the truth in painting" could mean and be understood as: the truth faithfully represented, trait for trait, in its portrait. And this can go from reflection to allegory. The truth, then, is no longer itself in that which represents it in painting, it is merely its double, however good a likeness it is and precisely other by reason of the likeness. Truth of truth still, with the two genitives, but this time the value of adequation has *pushed aside* that of unveiling. The painting of the truth can be adequate to its model, in representing it, but it does not manifest it *itself*, in presenting it. But since the model here is truth, i.e., that value of presentation or representation, of unveiling or adequation, Cézanne's stroke [*trait*] opens up the abyss. (Heidegger in *The Origin of the Work of Art* names

the "stroke" [*Riss*] which not only opens above the gulf but also holds together the opposite edges of it.) If we are to understand Cézanne's sentence, the truth (presentation *or* representation, unveiling *or* adequation) must be rendered "in painting" either by presentation or by representation, according to the two models of truth. Truth, the painter's model, must be rendered in painting according to the two models of truth. Henceforth, the abyssal expression "truth of the truth," which will have made it be said that the truth is the nontruth, can be crossed with itself according to all sort of chiasmi, according as one determines the model as presentation or as representation. Presentation of the representation, presentation of the presentation, representation of the representation, representation of the presentation. Have I counted them correctly? That makes at least four possibilities.

3. That which pertains to the *picturality,* in the "proper" sense, of the presentation or of the representation. Truth could be presented or represented quite otherwise, according to other modes. Here it is done *in painting:* and not in discourse (as is commonly the case), in literature, poetry, theater; nor is it done in the time of music or in other spaces (architecture or sculpture). Thus we retain here that which is proper to an art, the art of the signatory, of Cézanne the painter. That which is proper to an art and an art understood in the proper sense this time, in the expression "in painting." We did not do this in the two previous cases: "painting" was there to figure the presentation or representation of a model, which happened to be the truth. But this troping figuration was valid for the logic of any other art of presentation or representation. In the French language, if there is one that is one and if it is not a painting, "the truth in painting" could mean and be understood as: the truth, as shown, presented or represented in the field of the pictural properly speaking, in the pictural, properly pictural mode, even if this mode is tropological with respect to truth itself. To understand the expression "truth in painting" in this way, no doubt one has to move away a little from the greater force of usage (assuming that there are any rigorous criteria for evaluating it), while nevertheless maintaining grammatical and syntactical and even semantic normality. But that's what an idiom is, if there is any such thing. It does not merely fix the economic propriety of a "focus," but regulates the possibility of play, of divergences, of the equivocal—a whole economy, precisely, of the trait. This economy parasitizes itself.

4. That which pertains to truth in the order of painting, then, and *on the subject of* painting, not only as regards the pictorial presentation or representation of truth. The parasitizing of the expression "in painting" by itself allows it to harbor a new sense: the truth as regards painting, that which is *true on* that art which is called pictural. If one now defines that art by its truth-value, in one sense or the other, one will understand here the true on the true. In the French language, if there is one that is one and which is not painting, and if nonetheless it can open its system up to its own parasitism, "the truth in painting" can mean and be understood as: truth in the domain of painting and on the subject of it, *in painting*, as in the saying "to be knowledgeable in painting." I owe you the truth on painting and I will tell it to you, and as painting ought to be the truth, I owe you the truth about the truth and I will tell it to you. In letting itself be parasitized, the system of language as a system of the idiom has perhaps parasitized the system of painting; more precisely, it will have shown up, by analogy, the essential parasitizing which opens every system to its outside and divides the unity of the line [*trait*] which purports to mark its edges. This partition of the edge is perhaps what is inscribed and occurs everywhere [*se passe partout*] in this book; and the protocol-frame is endlessly multiplied in it, from *lemmata* to *parerga*, from *exergues* to *cartouches*. Starting with the idiom of the *passe-partout*. One is always tempted by this faith in the idiom: it supposedly says only one thing, properly speaking, and says it only in linking form and meaning too strictly to lend itself to translation. But if the idiom were this, were it what it is thought it must be, it would not be that, but it would lose all strength and would not make a language. It would be deprived of that which in it plays with truth-effects. If the phrase "the truth in painting" has the force of "truth" and in its play opens onto the abyss, then perhaps what is at stake in painting is truth, and in truth what is at stake (that idiom) is the abyss.

Cézanne's trait is easily freed from an immediate context. Is it even necessary to know that it was signed by a painter? Its force even depends on this capacity to play with the determinations of the context without making itself indeterminate. No doubt the trait acts as a passe-partout. It circulates very quickly among its possibilities. With disconcerting agility it displaces its accents or its hidden punctuation, it potentializes and formalizes and economizes on enormous discourses, it multiplies the deal-

ings and transactions, the contraband and graft and parasitizing among them. But it only *acts as* a passe-partout, this is only an appearance: it does not mean everything and anything. And besides, like every passe-partout (in the strictest sense!), it must formally, i.e., by its forms, answer to a finite system of constraints.

What does a passe-partout do? What does it cause to be done or shown?

— 3 —

The painter does not promise to *paint* these four truths in painting, to render what he owes. Literally, at least, he commits himself to *saying* them: "I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you." If we understand him literally, he swears an oath to *speak;* he does not only speak, he promises to do so, he commits himself to speak. He swears an oath to say, by speech, the truth in painting, and the four truths in painting. The act of speech—the promise—gives itself out as true, or in any case truthful and sincere, and it veritably does promise to say truly the truth. In painting, don't forget.

But must we take a painter literally, once he starts to speak? Coming from a Cézanne, "I will tell it to you" can be understood figuratively: he could have promised to tell the truth, in painting, to tell these four truths according to the pictorial metaphor of discourse or as a discourse silently working the space of painting. And since he promises to tell them "in painting," one does not even need to know of the signatory, for this hypothesis, that he is a painter.

This connection [*trait*] between the letter, discourse, painting is perhaps all that happens in or all that threads its way through *The Truth in Painting.*

The signatory promises, it seems, to "say" in painting, by painting, the truth and even, if you like, the truth in painting. "I owe you the truth in painting" can easily be understood as: "I must render the truth to you in painting," in the form of painting and by acting as a painter myself. We have not got to the end of this *speech act* promising perhaps a *painting act.* With this verbal promise, this performative which does not describe anything, Cézanne *does* something, as much as and more than he says. But in doing so, he promises that he will *say* the truth in painting. What he does is to commit himself to say something. But that saying could well be a doing, or a discursive doing, another performative

saying, producing a truth which was not already there, or a pictorial doing which, by reason of some occupancy of painting by speech, would have the value of saying. In the performance of this performative promising another performative saying nothing that will be *there*, the allegory of truth in painting is far from offering itself completely naked on a canvas.

Thus one dreams of a painting without truth, which, without debt and running the risk of no longer saying anything to anyone [of not interesting anyone: *ne plus rien dire à personne*—TRANS.], would still not give up painting. And this "without," for example in the phrase "without debt" or "without truth," forms one of the lightweight imports of this book.

What happens everywhere where these supplements of unchained performatives interlace their simulacra and the most serious quality of their literality? What happens in a game so perverse but also so necessary? One wonders what is left of it when the idiom-effect joins the party, the trait scarcely leaving the initiative to the so-called signatory of the promise. Did Cézanne *promise, truly* promise, promise to *say,* to say *the truth,* to say *in painting* the truth *in painting*?

And me?

— 4 —

I write four times here, *around* painting.

The first time I am occupied with folding the great philosophical question of the tradition ("What is art?" "the beautiful?" "representation?" "the origin of the work of art?" etc.) on to the insistent atopics of the *parergon:* neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [*hors d'oeuvre*], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work. It is no longer merely around the work. That which it puts in place—the instances of the frame, the title, the signature, the legend, etc.—does not stop disturbing the *internal* order of discourse on painting, its works, its commerce, its evaluations, its surplus-values, its speculation, its law, and its hierarchies. On what conditions, if it's even possible, can one exceed, dismantle, or displace the heritage of the great philosophies of art which still dominate this whole problematic, above all those of Kant, Hegel, and, in another respect, that of Heidegger? These prolegomena of *The Truth in Painting,* themselves the *parergon* of this book, are ringed together by a circle.

The second time, more attentive to the ring [*cerne*] itself, I attempt to decrypt or unseal a singular contract, the one that can link the phonic trait to the so-called *graphic* trait, even prior to the existence of the word (e.g., GL, or TR, or +R). Invisible and inaudible, this contract follows other paths, through different point-changes: it has to do with the letter and the proper name *in painting*, with narration, technical reproduction, ideology, the phoneme, the biographeme, and politics, among other things and still in painting. The opportunity will be given by *The Journey of the Drawing* by Valerio Adami.

The third time, putting in question again the trait as a signature, whether this signature passes via the proper name known as *patronymic* or via the idiom of the draftsman sometimes called *ductus*, I explore in its logical consistency the system of *duction* (production, reproduction, induction, reduction, etc.). This amounts to treating the trait, its unity and divisibility, otherwise, and it goes without saying that this has to do with the initial, as in "someone's initials," and with repetition and number, the model and paradigm, the series, the date, the event (the time, the chance, the throw, the turn), above all with genealogy and remainders, in the work of mourning: *in painting. Cartouches* gives its name—proper and common, masculine and feminine[2]—to the opportunity furnished by *The Pocket Size Tlingit Coffin*, by Gérard Titus-Carmel.

The fourth time, I interweave all these threads through a polylogue of n + 1 voices, which happens to be that of a woman. What happens (and of what? and of whom?) wherever shoelaces are presented? Present themselves and disappear (*da/fort*), pass over and under, inside and outside, from left to right and vice versa? And what happens with (does without) shoelaces when they are more or less undone? What takes place when they are unlaced in painting? One looks for the revenue (return on investment) or the ghost [*revenant*], that which has just come back [*vient de revenir*], in these steps without steps, in these shoes of which nothing assures us that they make a pair. Thus the question of the *interlace* [*l'entrelacs*] and the *disparate* resounds. To whom and to what do the "shoes of Van Gogh" return in their truth of painting? What is a desire of *restitution* if it pertains to [*a trait à*] the truth in painting? The opportunity here was given by a sort of duel between Heidegger and Schapiro. A third party (more than a third party, nothing *less* than witnesses) feigned death while the

2. *Le cartouche* means a cartouche, *la cartouche* a cartridge.—TRANS.

two of them fenced, for the sake of giving back [*rendre*] these shoes, properly, honestly, and lawfully, to their true addressee.

Four times, then, *around* painting, to turn merely around it, in the neighboring regions which one authorizes oneself to enter, that's the whole story, to recognize and contain, like the surrounds of the work of art, or at most its outskirts: frame, title, signature, museum, archive, reproduction, discourse, market, in short: everywhere where one legislates on *the right to painting* by marking the limit, with a slash marking an opposition [*d'un trait d'opposition*] which one would like to be indivisible. Four times around color, too, which is thought to be extraneous to the trait, as if chromatic difference did not count. Now a *parergon* and some *cartouches* leave no assurance as to the right of such an approach. We have to approach things otherwise.

The common feature [*trait*] of these four times is perhaps the trait. Insofar as it is never common, nor even one, with and without itself. Its divisibility founds text, traces and remains.

Discourses on painting are perhaps destined to reproduce the limit which constitutes them, whatever they do and whatever they say: there is for them an inside and an outside of the work as soon as there is work. A series of oppositions comes in the train of this one, which, incidentally, is not necessarily primary (for it belongs to a system whose edging itself reintroduces the problem). And there the trait is always determined as an opposition-slash.

But what happens *before* the difference becomes opposition in the trait, or *without* its doing so? And what if there were not even a *becoming* here? For *becoming* has perhaps always had as its concept this determination of difference as opposition.

So the question would no longer be "What is a trait?" or "What does a trait become?" or "What pertains to such a trait?" but "How does the trait treat itself? Does it contract in its retreat?" A trait never appears, never itself, because it marks the difference between the forms or the contents of the appearing. A trait never appears, never itself, never for a first time. It begins by retrac(t)ing [*se retirer*]. I follow here the logical succession of what I long ago called, before getting around to the turn of painting, the *broaching* [*entame*] of the origin: that which opens, with a trace, without initiating anything.

One space remains to be broached in order to give place to the truth in painting. Neither inside nor outside, it spaces itself without letting itself be framed but it does not stand outside

the frame. It works the frame, makes it work, lets it work, gives it work to do (let, make, and give will be my most misunderstood words in this book). The trait is attracted and retrac(t)ed there by itself, attracts and dispenses with itself there [*il s'y attire et s'y passe, de lui-même*]. It is situated. It situates between the visible edging and the phantom in the center, from which we *fascinate.* I propose to use this word intransitively, as one would say "we hallucinate," "I salivate," "you expire," "she has a hard-on," or "the boat lies at anchor" [*le bâteau mouille*]. *Between* the outside and the inside, between the external and the internal edge-line, the framer and the framed, the figure and the ground, form and content, signifier and signified, and *so on* for any two-faced opposition. The trait thus divides in this place where it takes place. The emblem for this *topos* seems undiscoverable; I shall borrow it from the nomenclature of framing: the *passe-partout.*

The passe-partout which here creates an event must not pass for a master key. You will not be able to pass it from hand to hand like a convenient instrument, a short treatise, a viaticum or even an organon or pocket canon, in short a transcendental pass, a password to open all doors, decipher all texts and keep their chains under surveillance. If you rushed to understand it in this way, I would have to issue a warning [*avertissement*]: this forward [*avertissement*] is not a passe-partout.

I write right on the passe-partout well known to picture-framers. And in order to broach it, right on this supposedly virgin surface, generally cut out of a square of cardboard and open in its "middle" to let the work appear. The latter can, moreover, be replaced by another which thus slides into the passe-partout as an "example." To that extent, the passe-partout remains a structure with a movable base; but although it lets something appear, it does not form a frame in the strict sense, rather a frame within the frame. Without ceasing (that goes without saying) to space itself out, it plays its card or its cardboard *between* the frame, in what is properly speaking its internal edge, and the external edge of what it gives us to see, lets or makes appear in its empty enclosure: the picture, the painting, the figure, the form, the system of strokes [*traits*] and of colors.

What appears, then, and generally under glass, only appears to do without the passe-partout on which it banks [*fait fonds*].

This would be almost the place for a preface or a foreward, *between,* on the one hand, the cover that bears the names (au-

thor and publisher) and the titles (work and series or field), the copyright, the fly leaf, and, on the other hand, the first word of the book, here the first line of *Lemmata,* with which one ought to "begin."

Passe-partout, the word and the thing, has other uses, but what would be the point of listing them? They can be found easily [*ils se trouvent tout seuls*]. And if I were to put them all in a table [*tableau: also "picture"*—TRANS.], there would always be one that would play among the others, one taken out of the series in order to surround it, with yet one more turn.

Passe-partout nevertheless cannot be written in the plural, by reason of grammatical law. This derives from its idiomatic makeup and the grammatical invariability of the adverb. But it can be understood in the plural: "Curiosities of all sorts, plaster casts, molds, sketches, copies, passe-partout containing engravings" (Théophile Gautier). In a word, it is written in the singular but the law of its agreements may require the plural.

The internal edges of a passe-partout are often beveled.