

Embodiments of Shape: Cubes and Lines and Slender Gilded Thongs in Picasso, Duchamp and Robbe-Grillet

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In the drawing *Encore à cet astre* the figure is, of course, mounting the stairs. But while working on it, the idea of the *Nude*, or the title—I do not recall which—first came to my mind.

—Marcel Duchamp (393)

Les Demoiselles d' Avignon—how that title can excite me! It was [André] Salmon who invented it. As you know very well, in the beginning it was called *The Brothel of Avignon*. . . . According to my first idea, there were also going to be men in the painting . . .

—Pablo Picasso (266)

* Nu *

Denuded nude, pure of flesh. In the preface to *Un Coup de dés* (1897), when Stéphane Mallarmé proposes the development of a genre like the symphony, a genre that in contrast to the more personal lyric would be an appropriate embodiment for “pure” imagination and thought, he sees it as occurring “under the influence of music.” Not music as metaphor, but the music “heard in concert” is to be a source of “pure” verbal expression.¹

To achieve the condition of music is also a goal of the Cubist painters, Guillaume Apollinaire reports in *Les Peintres cubistes* (1913):

On s'achemine ainsi vers un art entièrement nouveau, qui sera à la peinture, telle qu'on l'avait envisagée jusqu'ici, ce que la musique est à la littérature.

Ce sera de la peinture pure, de même que la musique est de la littérature pure.

L'amateur de musique éprouve, en entendant un concert, une joie d'un ordre différent de la joie qu'il éprouve en écoutant les bruits naturels . . .

De même, les peintres nouveaux procureront à leurs admirateurs des sensations artistiques uniquement dues à l'harmonie des lumières impaires. (14)

Thus we are moving toward an entirely new art, which will be to painting, as it has heretofore been envisaged, what music is to literature.

It will be pure painting, in the same way that music is pure literature.

The music lover feels, on hearing a concert, a joy that is entirely different from the joy he feels in listening to natural sounds . . .

In the same way, the new painters will obtain for their admirers artistic sensations that are uniquely due to the harmony of uneven lighting.²

Like literature, painting in 1913 is still not as "pure" as music. Indeed, the "pure painting" of the Cubists, Apollinaire continues, is entirely new: "Il n'en est qu'à son commencement et n'est pas encore aussi abstrait qu'il voudrait l'être (15; "It is only at its beginning and it is not yet as abstract as it would like to be"). Since Apollinaire's word "abstract" (at least partly as a result of the developments in painting after Cubism) in contemporary art criticism is strictly differentiated from the term "non-representational," whereas the two terms when applied to music are synonymous, and in the terminology of literature have acquired no precise definition, we adopt temporarily Mallarmé's and Apollinaire's word "pure" to circumvent the shifting significations of the modern terms in the art forms under discussion.

If one conceives of external representation and purity as the two extremes of a continuum, the placement on the continuum of painting, at the time of the development of Cubism, seems comparable to that of literature more than half a century later. To consider the relationship,

let us take as our points of reference three works: Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907), generally considered the first Cubist painting; Marcel Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier* (1912), and Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison de rendez-vous* (1965). Approaching our topic from several perspectives, we restrict our initial focus to the images these works portray, considering the placement of these images on the continuum from representation to purity with reference both to their relationship to an external referent, and to their origin.

Analyzing methods of writing texts, Jean Ricardou uses the terms "production" and "reproduction" to distinguish two sequential patterns in the creation of art works. Reproduction, which in literature is the traditional procedure, incorporating both expression and representation, requires an initial stage in which there is something to be said. In reproduction, the signified is ontologically prior to the signifier. Production, on the other hand, which in literature is the newer procedure, has at its origin the desire to make something, to shape a material. In production, the signifier precedes the signified. Signifiers generate signifiers by sound (i.e., rhyme) or by shape—a rearrangement of the letters or parts of letters of which they are composed (*Nouveaux problèmes* 15–16).

The contrasting sequences in the processes of reproducing and producing texts offer a parallel, we suggest, to the distinction that underlies the definitions of abstract and non-representational painting. A painting can have as its origin or pretext a prior external referent, however far removed from it—or abstracted—the resultant work may be. Or, like a produced text, a non-representational painting may be generated from the materials from which it is made. Nonetheless, while the differentiation between the two possible sequences of the creative process is theoretically precise, from the perspective of the perceiver it is often obscured. The completed work—painting or text—may not offer sufficient information to determine its method of composition. Texts, whether reproduced or produced, signify, as Ricardou emphasizes, because they are made of signifying material: language. Produced texts acquire signification in the process of being made (*Nouveaux problèmes* 16–17). Similarly, in painting, an abstract representation of an external referent may be indistinguishable to the perceiver from a non-representational image produced in the process of applying oil to canvas.

Both Duchamp and Picasso, in their comments quoted at the beginning of this essay, suggest that the titles of their two paintings

may have generated what they painted, an origin of an art work that is midway between production and reproduction. In the procedure that the painters propose, to impose an intertext between external scene and painted image is to generate a painting by moving from signifier to signified to image. Robbe-Grillet too, although he only rarely generates passages of text purely by production, apparently uses a text as a source of details in the exotic Oriental scenes described in *La Maison*. In this case the text in question is a list of images, included in the first paragraph of the work, that could have been selected from among what one might see during a walk through the streets of Paris:³

Le fouet de cuir, dans la vitrine d'un sellier parisien, les seins exposés des mannequins de cire, une affiche de spectacle, la réclame pour des jarretelles ou pour un parfum, deux lèvres humides, disjointes, un bracelet de fer, un collier à chien, dressent autour de moi leur décor insistant, provocateur. (11–12)
(The leather whip, in the window of a Parisian saddle-maker, the exposed breasts of wax mannequins, a theater poster, advertisements for garters or a perfume, moist parted lips, an iron manacle, a dog collar, generate around me their provocative insistent setting).

(Richard Howard, trans. 1).

Not only do all three works share the possibility that their origin is in a text; Duchamp's painting refers to the tradition of the nude in painting, and Robbe-Grillet's work to a genre of popular fiction set in the Orient. While none of the three is entirely a produced work (growing solely out of its materials, without even a pretext in external reality), for each work, any prior idea to be reproduced is contaminated by the productive property of the signifiers of each intertext.

The depiction of the images in each work also seems to place them at a middle point on the continuum between external representation and purity. In the two paintings, the human figures are sufficiently recognizable to shift the perceiver's attention to the ways in which they are distorted. Robbe-Grillet creates an equivalent perceptual shift by preceding his text, first with a page carrying a warning from the "author" that any resemblance to Hong Kong "ne serait que l'effet du hasard" ("is merely the effect of chance"), and then, on a second page, by suggesting that readers familiar with Hong Kong who do not recognize the places described should return for a closer look, since things change rapidly in such climates.

At the beginning of the century, as we have seen, the most advanced work both in literature and in painting was described as striving to achieve the purity of music. What conclusions can be drawn from the fact that the texts of recent decades are no closer to that goal than the early Cubist paintings were? Although painting in the intervening years has achieved the freedom from representation characteristic of instrumental music, literature seems to have demonstrated that, in becoming pure, it devolves into music. Moreover, the rare examples of demonstrably pure literature—the phonetic poems of Hugo Ball or Kurt Schwitters, for example, or the sound poems Henri Chopin recorded in the 1960s on as many as twenty-four tracks of tape—fascinating as these works are, suggest that when literature is purified into music, the result if judged as music is of limited interest. At the end of the twentieth century, now that we have seen the works that have been created in the decades since Mallarmé and Apollinaire expressed the aspiration to achieve purity in literature and painting, we can probably rank the three art forms accurately according to their ability to achieve abstraction: 1) music, 2) painting, 3) literature. Nonetheless, even now, we cannot foresee whether there will ever be an absolutely non-representational literary genre which will be considered richly rewarding.

Whatever developments the future may hold for literature, the pattern that painting has followed since the time of Apollinaire, in moving absolutely away from the representational and then returning to a version of it, suggests that if literature ever successfully achieves the purity of music, it will not be soon. But why has painting reverted to portraying recognizable things? What are the present structures of painting that require at least the pretext of a referent? If we assume that the form of an art work—painting, text or piece of music—is an expression of artists' ideas about the structure of the world in which they live, can we draw a correlation between the way the world is presently perceived, and the return to representation in Postmodern painting?

* descendant *

A diachronic account: attitudes toward representation, decomposition and structure.

1. Charles Baudelaire (1859):

[L'imagination] décompose toute la création, et, avec les matériaux amassés et disposés suivant des règles dont on ne peut

trouver l'origine que dans le plus profond de l'âme, elle crée un monde nouveau, elle produit la sensation du neuf. ("La Reine des facultés" 773)

([The imagination] decomposes all creation and, with the materials collected and ordered according to rules whose origin can be found only in the depths of the soul, it creates a new world, it produces the sensation of the new).

2. Stéphane Mallarmé (1896):

L'oeuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots, par le heurt de leur inégalité mobilisés; ils s'allument de reflets réciproques comme une virtuelle traînée de feux sur des pierreries . . . ("Crise de vers" 366)

(The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who cedes the initiative to the words, mobilized by the shock of their inequality; they illuminate each other by reciprocal reflections like a virtual trail of fire above jewels . . .).

3. Eadweard Muybridge (1880s), stop-action photography.

On Photography: Photography reinforces a nominalist view of social reality as consisting of small units of an apparently infinite number—as the number of photographs that could be taken of anything is unlimited. Through photographs, the world becomes a series of unrelated, freestanding particles . . .

(Susan Sontag 22–23)

4. Guillaume Apollinaire (1912):

Le cubisme est l'art de peindre des ensembles nouveaux avec des éléments empruntés non à la réalité de vision, mais à la réalité de conception. (Quoted by Gamwell, 48)

(Cubism is the art of painting new ensembles with elements borrowed not from the reality of vision, but from the reality of conception).

5. Apollinaire (1913):

Les grands poètes et les grands artistes ont pour fonction sociale de renouveler sans cesse l'apparence que revêt la nature aux yeux des hommes.

Sans les poètes, sans les artistes . . . l'ordre qui paraît dans la nature et qui n'est qu'un effet de l'art s'évanouirait aussitôt. Tout se déferait dans le chaos. . . .

Les poètes et les artistes déterminent de concert la figure de leur époque et docilement l'avenir se range à leur avis. (21)

(The social function of great poets and great artists is unceasingly

to renew the appearance that nature assumes in the eyes of men.

Without poets, without artists . . . the apparent order of nature, which is only an effect of art, would immediately vanish. Everything would break apart into chaos. . . .

Poets and artists acting in harmony determine the form of their epoch and the future docilely agrees with their opinion).

6. Apollinaire (1913), on Picasso:

La grande révolution des arts qu'il a accomplie presque seul, c'est que le monde est sa nouvelle représentation. (38)

(The great revolution in the arts, which [Picasso] accomplished almost alone, is that the world *is* his new representation).

7. Marcel Duchamp (1946):

Chronophotography was at the time in vogue. Studies of horses in movement and of fencers in different positions as in Muybridge's albums were well known to me. But my interest in painting the *Nude* was closer to the cubists' interest in decomposing forms than to the futurists' interest in suggesting movement. . . . (393)

8. Alain Robbe-Grillet (1970):

Chaque société, chaque époque a vu s'épanouir une forme romanesque qui, en fait, définissait un ordre, c'est-à-dire une façon particulière de penser le monde, et d'y vivre. . . . Après la faillite de l'ordre divin (de la société bourgeoise) et, à la suite, de l'ordre rationaliste (du socialisme bureaucratique), il faut pourtant comprendre que seules des organisations ludiques demeurent désormais possibles. (*Prière*)

(Every society, every epoch has seen the blossoming of a form of the novel that in fact defined an order, that is, a particular way of construing the world, and of living in it. . . . After the collapse of the divine order [of bourgeois society] and, in its wake, of the rationalist order [of bureaucratic socialism], it must be understood that only ludic organizations henceforth remain possible).

* un *

Article, unit, piece. To "star" the text, "separating, in the manner of a minor earthquake, the blocks of signification" (Roland Barthes, 13). To "star" the world, decomposing it into its elements.

* *Picasso* (according to Apollinaire): L'objet réel ou en trompe-l'oeil est appelé sans doute à jouer un rôle de plus en plus important. . . . Imitant les plans pour représenter les volumes, Picasso

donne des divers éléments qui composent les objets une énumération si complète et si aiguë qu'ils ne prennent point figure d'objet. . . . (36)

(The object—real or trompe-l'oeil—is doubtlessly called upon to play an increasingly important role. . . . Imitating planes to represent volumes, Picasso gives the several elements of which objects are composed an enumeration so complete and so acute that they no longer take the shape of an object. . . .)

- * *Duchamp*: The reduction of a head in movement to a bare line seemed to me defensible. A form passing through space would traverse a line; and as the form moved the line it traversed would be replaced by another line—and another and another. Therefore I felt justified in reducing a figure in movement to a line rather than to a skeleton. (393)

- * *Robbe-Grillet* (from *La Maison*):

Une fille en robe d'été qui offre sa nuque courbée—elle rattache sa sandale. . . . (11)

Elle s'est maintenant retirée, un peu à l'écart, pour rattacher la boucle de sa fine chaussure à brides, faite de minces lanières dorées qui barrent de plusieurs croix le pied nu. (13)

. . . la promeneuse, qui s'est arrêtée devant une vitrine, a tourné la tête et le buste vers la paroi de glace, où, immobile, le pied gauche ne reposant sur le sol que par la pointe d'un soulier à très haut talon, prêt à reprendre sa marche au milieu du pas interrompu. . . . (13–14)

Le pied droit de celle-ci, qui s'avance presque jusqu'au niveau de la patte arrière du chien, ne repose sur le sol que par la pointe d'un soulier à très haut talon, dont le cuir doré recouvre seulement d'un triangle exigu l'extrémité des orteils, tandis que de fines lanières barrent de trois croix le cou-de-pied et enserrant la cheville par-dessus un bas très fin, à peine visible. . . . (14–15)

Le corps souple se tord, de droite et de gauche, pour essayer de se libérer des minces liens de cuir qui enserrant les chevilles et les poignets; mais c'est en vain, naturellement. (15)

Fines chaussures à talons pointus, dont les lanières de cuir barrent le pied très petit de trois croix dorées. (33)

(A girl in a summer dress exposing the nape of her bent neck—she is fastening her sandal. . . . [Howard, trans. 1])

Now she has stepped back, a little to one side, to fasten the buckle of her sandal, made of slender gold straps which crisscross

several times around the bare foot. [Howard, trans. 2]

. . . the stroller, who has stopped in front of a shop window, has turned her head and bust toward the pane of glass where, motionless, her left foot touching the ground only with the toe of a very high-heeled shoe, ready to continue walking in the middle of the interrupted stride. . . . [Howard, trans. 3]

Her right foot, advancing almost even with the dog's hindmost paw, is touching the ground with only the toe of a very high-heeled shoe whose gilded leather covers only a narrow triangle at the tip of the toe, while slender thongs crisscross the rest of the foot three times and encircle the ankle over a very sheer stocking. . . . [Howard, trans. 3-4]

The supple body twists from right to left, attempting to free itself from the slender leather thongs which bind ankles and wrists; but to no purpose, of course. [Howard, trans. 4]

Delicate spike-heel shoes whose gilded leather thongs crisscross three times around the tiny foot. [Howard, trans. 18])

- * *Les Demoiselles* (according to Kahnweiler): The nudes . . . stand rigid, like mannequins. (252)

Leather straps, lines, cubes: the detached pieces of things to which the referent is reduced. All three works have been considered shocking, described as "anti-humanist."

Both in certain avant-garde works early in the century and again in the present, the encroachment of elements of popular culture into aesthetic objects has often been noted. Pieces of newspaper, snatches of songs, advertising posters, stamps, bits of string or wire, chips of wood—all found a place in works early in the century. Marjorie Perloff, for whom it is "this straining of the artwork to assimilate and respond to that which is not art that characterizes the Futurist moment," recognizes that the tendency's "extraordinary interest for us is as the climactic moment of rupture, the moment when the integrity of the medium, of genre, of categories such as 'prose' and 'verse,' and, most important, of 'art' and 'life' were questioned" (38).

The understanding of the purpose at the time, from the perspective of Apollinaire writing in 1913, was that "Picasso and Braque incorporated letters from signs and other inscriptions, because the inscription, the sign and the advertisement play a very important aesthetic role in the modern city and are well-suited for incorporation into works of art" (quoted by Gamwell, 58). Similarly, Robbe-Grillet

turns to the popular culture of the contemporary city to choose his images: covers of popular novels, billboards, pornographic pictures, glossy advertisements in fashion magazines, comic strips ("Sur le choix des générateurs" 161). Like a number of the artists of his own time,⁴ Robbe-Grillet treats popular culture as if it were his language:

pour reprendre la célèbre opposition de Saussure, je ne travaille pas sur la *langue* (ce français du xx^e siècle que j'utilise tel que je l'ai reçu) mais sur la *parole* d'une société (ce discours que me tient le monde où je vis). Seulement, la parole en question, je me refuse à mon tour, je m'en sers comme d'un matériau, ce qui revient à la faire rétrograder en position de langue, afin de développer à partir d'elle mon propre discours. ("Sur le choix des Générateurs" 160)

(to go back to Saussure's famous opposition, what I manipulate is not the *langue* [this 20th-century French that I utilize just as I have received it] but the *parole* of a society [this discourse that the world in which I live holds with me]. Only I refuse in my turn the *parole* in question; I use it as a material, which amounts to moving it back into the position of *langue*, to develop on the basis of it my own discourse).

The world of popular culture—the world in which he lives—is what Robbe-Grillet decomposes, or takes apart, to make it *his* world that he represents in his texts. Additionally, the gap between the popular and the aesthetic, as Marjorie Perloff points out, draws attention to the rupture, to the individual units, the pieces, of which all these works are composed. It is possible, moreover, that the choice of the popular is related to its being so eminently cuttable; for lack of a higher purpose it offers itself unreservedly to be decomposed, while retaining in its fragments sufficient identity not to merge inextricably with the adjacent piece, in the new work in which it is being placed. Whether drawing upon popular culture (as Robbe-Grillet and a number of avant-garde artists do) or not (Picasso and Duchamp, in the two works we are considering here), all three artists represent pieces of things as independent units, in structures that call attention to their status as an assemblage of separate and separable parts.

* *escalier* *

Riser and tread, Derridean fold, constellation's negative: ink on virgin page. The gilded leather straps in Robbe-Grillet's *La Maison* wrap the feet of Lauren (Lorraine?)—or of one of a pair of Eurasian twins. A white dress if bouffant is worn by L. (*elle*); if straight, with a slit, by a twin. Or if straight and slit and black, is it the other twin? The same twin? Are there two twins, or one who changes clothes? Four women? Two? Or one foot and ankle, carefully wrapped in a crisscrossing pattern with a slender gilded leather thong?

Writing about *La Maison* and similar works, Jean Ricardou describes the assemblage of their parts:

Ce qui est communément *unique* (tel personnage, tel événement) essuie la *dislocation* de variantes contradictoires; ce qui est ordinairement *divers* (plusieurs personnages, plusieurs événements) subit l'*assimilation* d'étranges ressemblances. La fiction exclut singularité parfaite comme pluralité absolue. Bref, elle est partout investie de miroirs. Miroirs déformants pour la dislocation de l'unique; miroirs "formants" pour l'assimilation du divers. (*Pour une théorie* 262)

(What is commonly *unique* [a certain character, or event] is subjected to the *dislocation* of contradictory variants; what is ordinarily *diverse* [several characters, or events] is subjected to the *assimilation* of odd resemblances. The fiction excludes perfect singularity like absolute plurality. In short, it is invested on all sides with mirrors. Deforming mirrors to dislocate the unique; "forming" mirrors to assimilate the diverse).

How many *demoiselles* does Picasso paint? In the words of Gleizes and Metzinger, the Cubist endeavor is described as "moving around an object to seize several successive appearances, which [are] fused in a single image" (216). *Les Demoiselles*, like *La Maison*, dislocates the unique and assimilates the diverse; neither work quite portrays just one woman, yet the individuality of the several women in each work is tainted by disturbing resemblances. Similarly in Duchamp's *Nude*—he calls it "a static composition of indications of various positions taken by a form in movement" (393)—the figure is simultaneously single and plural.

Robbe-Grillet's methods too are like those of the Cubists and (in

the *Nude*) Duchamp. *La Maison* is the novel that introduces a new perspective which is at once single and multiple, a technique Bruce Morrisette has named the “floating I” (250). The “I” who narrates has as its referent sometimes one character, sometimes another—unifying in a single pronoun the multiple spatial and temporal perspectives portrayed in the text. In a related technique that can be seen in Robbe-Grillet’s earlier fiction but which is highly developed in *La Maison*, one that we might refer to as “mediated perception,” the narrating “I” repeatedly describes nearly identical scenes perceived through the open drapes of a window, through the open curtains of a stage, in set pieces of statuary, through the camera’s eye of a photograph—as well as in the “real” action he or she observes as simultaneous spectator and participant.

The resultant mingling of reality and representation, and of multiplied temporal and spatial perspectives, is further complicated by the combined depiction of surface and of what is beneath, and the frequent merging of figure and ground (in Picasso at least by 1910 in his *Portrait of Kahnweiler*, in Robbe-Grillet in the transitions between the scenes that are depicted as frozen and the otherwise identical scenes in which movement occurs).⁵ These are the techniques that, in Ricardou’s words, dislocate the unique and assimilate the diverse, in *La Maison*, in Cubism, and in the *Nude*.

To create such structures requires identifiable pieces that can be manipulated according to these techniques. Without a material to be shaped there can be no shape. As Umberto Eco describes the *Livre* Mallarmé struggled for decades to write, “one of Mallarmé’s projects for a pluridimensional deconstructible book, envisaged the breaking down of the initial unit into sections which could be reformulated and which could express new perspectives by being deconstructed into correspondingly smaller units which were also mobile and reducible” (58). From the manuscripts edited by Jacques Scherer as *Le “Livre” de Mallarmé*, we know that Mallarmé made more than two hundred pages of sketches about how the work might be assembled, to be able to be reassembled in different orders for multiple performances, but that few notes exist about the contents of such a work. Without content, the book could not be written.

Mallarmé’s project, Eco adds, “obviously suggests the universe as it is conceived by modern, non-Euclidean geometries” (58)—the same geometries that have been associated with Cubism. According to Apollinaire:

Jusqu'à présent, les trois dimensions de la géométrie euclidienne suffisaient aux inquiétudes que le sentiment de l'infini met dans l'âme des grands artistes.

Les nouveaux peintres, pas plus que leurs anciens ne se sont proposés d'être des géomètres. Mais on peut dire que la géométrie est aux arts plastiques ce que la grammaire est à l'art de l'écrivain. (17)

(Until now, the three dimensions of Euclidean geometry were sufficient unto the restlessness that the feeling of the infinite puts into the soul of great artists.

The new painters did not propose to be geometers, any more than their predecessors did. But it can be said that geometry is to the plastic arts what grammar is to the writer's art).

Although Apollinaire speaks elsewhere of the "fourth dimension," it is generally agreed that the Cubist painters did not know the work of Einstein. Their acquaintance with non-Euclidean geometries, however, informed their ideas about the structure of the world in which they lived, just as later developments in mathematics and science, without necessarily being understood in detail, influence our contemporary painters and writers including Robbe-Grillet, creating ideas about the world that we can expect to find expressed in the structures of art works.

But let us return to Apollinaire's last sentence, to the relationship he draws between what geometry is to the plastic arts and what grammar is to literature. "Grammar," after Saussure, is the syntagm, a hypothetical pattern which can be perceived only through its embodiment: to learn about *langue* we study *parole*. As we move from the pieces of things in Cubism, in the *Nude*, in *La Maison*, we discover the syntagmatic pattern these works share, whether the paradigms from which they draw are cubes, lines, or slender gilded leather straps.

In many works, one aspect predominates. There are novels, we say, in which plot is more important than character development; paintings in which color has priority over line. In the works with which we are concerned here, syntagm takes precedence over paradigm. The decomposition of objects to their pieces, as we have seen, shifts interest from content to shape, while retaining sufficient content to embody shape, to make structure perceptible.

What distinguishes our three works from simpler collections of

pieces is the sheer quantity of spatio-temporal planes each portrays, along with the subversion of hierarchy in their assemblage. Michel Foucault, in his preface to *The Order of Things*, quotes a delightful passage from Borges to illustrate his definition of what he calls a “heterotopia”—a structure that may be the single most precise way of defining Postmodern art works. The passage by Borges quotes:

‘a certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies’. (xv)

In his commentary Foucault explains why we respond as we do to such a list. Whereas the elements of the juxtaposition the Surrealists adopted from Lautréamont and made famous—an umbrella and a sewing-machine on an operating table—exist on a common locus, what is impossible about the elements of “Borges’ enumeration . . . is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible” (xvi). Developing his definition of the heterotopia, Foucault describes a

disorder in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclit*; and that word should be taken in its most literal, etymological sense: in such a state, things are ‘laid’, ‘placed’, ‘arranged’ in sites so very different from one another that it is impossible . . . to define a *common locus* beneath them all. (xvii–xviii)

Cubist paintings, Duchamp’s *Nude*, and Robbe-Grillet’s *La Maison* are heterotopias in which the many spatio-temporal perspectives each portrays are assembled in a single structure, without the hierarchy that traditionally has been imposed by perspective or chronology.

Foucault too, we note, speaks of geometry. The developments in science and mathematics in the twentieth century have changed the way we perceive the world, and changed the structures in which artists

portray their perception of it. The Cubists painters, however, seem to have created the first heterotopic works.

* Coda *

Perception: For Roland Barthes, “starring” is a method of reading, a technique to interrupt the readerly (*lisible*) text, to draw attention to its limited plural. The works under consideration here are already starred.

Apollinaire (on Picasso): . . . des spectateurs . . . perçoivent la simultanéité, mais en raison même de leur arrangement. (36)
. . . spectators . . . perceive the simultaneity, but in proportion to their arrangement.

Duchamp: Dans le “*Nu descendant un escalier*” j’ai voulu créer une image statique du mouvement: le mouvement est une abstraction, une déduction articulée à l’intérieur du tableau sans qu’on ait à savoir si un personnage réel descend ou non un escalier également réel. Au fond, le mouvement c’est l’oeil du spectateur qui l’incorpore au tableau. (Cabanne, 49)

(In the *Nu descendant un escalier* I wanted to create a static image of movement: the movement is an abstraction, a deduction articulated in the interior of the painting without one’s having to know whether or not a real character descends an equally real staircase. Fundamentally, the movement is the eye of the spectator who incorporates the movement into the painting).

The movement of the *Nude*, the perspectives of Cubism, the times and the angles of vision narrated by the “I” in *La Maison*: we perceive them all, in all their multiplicity.

Our experience with these works is primarily an experience of perceiving structure, just as it is when we listen to instrumental music. Painting, we know, has achieved both the purity of non-representation and, in works such as these, yet another procedure for emphasizing structure over content. For literature, however, the emphasis of structure over content still requires, paradoxically, the retention of the external referent, in slender gilded thongs and other pieces. Yet texts like *La Maison* do succeed in offering the perception of structure as a primary experience, and they offer it in a form nearly as pure as music does.⁶

NOTES

1. “[L]a tentative participe, avec imprévu, de poursuites particulières et chères à notre temps, le vers libre et le poème en prose. Leur réunion s’accomplit sous une influence, je sais, étrangère, celle de la Musique entendue au concert; on en retrouve plusieurs moyens m’ayant semblé appartenir aux Lettres, je les reprends. Le genre, que c’en devienne un comme la symphonie, peu à peu, à côté du chant personnel, laisse intact l’antique vers . . . tandis que ce serait le cas de traiter, de préférence (ainsi qu’il suit) tels sujets d’imagination pure et complexe ou intellect: que ne reste aucune raison d’exclure de la Poésie—unique source.” (456)
2. Translations for which no reference is given are mine.
3. Robbe-Grillet’s text which engenders *La Maison* may have been engendered by yet another text. The image in the shop window at the beginning of the cited passage recalls Mallarmé’s prose poem on poetic creation, “Le Démon de l’analogie,” which culminates in a scene in which the poet stands in front of such a window, his hand reflected on it, in a position in which he would be plucking the strings of an instrument inside the shop, were the glass not there. Additionally, according to Franklin J. Matthews (*Obliques* 16–17), Robbe-Grillet has said in an interview that the character Edouard Manneret in this novel “n’était que le tableau d’Edouard Manet représentant Mallarmé à sa table de travail” (“was only Edouard Manet’s painting of Mallarmé at his desk”).
4. See Marguerite K. Garstin, “Alain Robbe-Grillet and Pop Art: Technique and Iconography in ‘Dans les couloirs du métropolitain,’ *La Maison de rendez-vous*, and *Projet pour une révolution à New York*.”
5. In an excellent study on the similarities between Cubism and Robbe-Grillet’s early works published prior to *La Maison*, Elly Jaffé-Freem calls attention to descriptions in Robbe-Grillet’s *La Jalousie* (1957) of a painted surface that at the moment of the description is invisible (49). Although Jaffé-Freem raises the question of why two such similar manifestations in painting and in literature are separated by fifty years (158), she leaves even tentative answers to later studies.
6. An earlier version of this essay was written for Washington University’s 1988 faculty seminar, directed by Lucian Krukowski, on the topic of the philosophical roots of the avant-garde.

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