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Georges Didi-Huberman

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The art of not describing: Vermeer – the detail and the patch

GEORGES DIDI-HUBERMAN

THE APORIA OF DETAIL

We are repeatedly made aware of the painful fact that painting, though it has no hidden exits and shows everything at once on a single surface, possesses a strange and awesome capacity to dissimulate. Painting will never cease to be there in front of us, like a horizon or a potential act, but never quite like the act itself. To what can this be attributed? As much, doubtless, to its material status – the substance paint itself – as to its temporal or ontological situation. It is also inseparably linked to the inherently defective nature of our gaze. The number of things we do not discern in paintings is damning evidence of this.

One can therefore never learn, heuristically speaking, how to *look at* a picture. That is because knowing and looking have utterly different modes of being. Rather than risk the total collapse of cognitive disciplines that have art as their object, the historian or the semiotician will thus be led, implicitly, to get round the question: he will say about the painting, whose entire meaning ceaselessly evades him, 'I haven't seen it enough; to know something more about it I must now see it in detail.' See it, not look at it, for *seeing* thinks it knows better how to approach, anticipate, or mime the supposedly sovereign act of knowing. Seeing *in detail* would therefore appear to constitute a convenient little organon for all knowledge about art. This may well appear to be perfectly obvious. We shall nevertheless suggest that the question be asked: what does it actually mean, to have a detailed knowledge of a painting?

For common-sense philosophy detail appears to encompass three more or less obvious operations. First, that of *getting closer*: you 'get into the detail' of a

painting the same way you enter into the area of choice offered by an epistemic system you are intimately familiar with. But intimacy does involve a degree of what is undoubtedly a perverse form of violence: you get closer only so as to *cut things up*, divide them into parts and pull them to pieces. This is the basic meaning of 'detail', a word whose etymology involves *cutting*, as in nouns like 'tailor' and 'retail'. Indeed, the first entry in the dictionary under 'detail' involves the division of something into several parts or pieces, a definition which opens up a constellation of meanings including exchange, profit, and the 'retailing' of parts, or details. Finally, by way of a no less perverse extension of meaning, 'detailing' designates the exactly symmetrical, even antithetical operation which consists of sticking all the pieces back together again, or at least *accounting for them* in full: it entails enumerating all the parts of a whole as if the cutting up had merely served to create the conditions of possibility for an account so complete as to leave nothing in the way of a residue – a sum total. So a paradoxical triple operation is at stake here, one which only gets you nearer something the better to cut it up, and which only cuts it up the better to deal with the whole. As if the 'whole' could exist only in piecemeal form, on condition that the parts be totalizable.

However, such a paradox defines an almost ideal situation. As such, with its three operations – proximity, division, and summation – the detail would appear to be indistinguishable from the fragment, in so far as the latter embodies an ideal form of knowledge and of totality. The ideal knowledge which might come with *exhaustive description*. As against the fragment, which relates back to the whole only to question its status, to suggest its absence, or propose it as an enigma or an effaced memory, the detail, considered in this way, obliges us to consider the work *as a whole*: it imposes presence, it creates value by means of a response, and it sets up a point of reference; a form of hegemony is thus legitimized.

The considerable favour enjoyed today by detail in the interpretation of works of art is not solely attributable to the 'common-sense philosophy' according to which, in order to have knowledge of something, you must know about it 'in detail'. The presuppositions this entails are complex ones, of greater strategic importance than one might think. No claims will be made here regarding the analysis of these presuppositions, for that would have to feature as part of a veritable history of art history, but it will be suggested, even so, that the favour in which this methodology has been held bears some connection to the serene connivance existing between what could be termed tacit, taken-for-granted, or 'precomprehended' positivism and 'badly comprehended' Freudianism. Tacit positivism comes to us from afar, postulating that the visible, in its entirety, can be described, cut up into its constitutive elements (like the words in a sentence or the letters in a word), and counted, just like anything else. It also postulates that to describe means to see well, and that to see well means to see the truth. Since everything can be seen and exhaustively described, everything will be known, verified, and legitimized. Thus might we formulate the wilful, indeed the outrageously exaggerated form of optimism an experimental method applied to the visible would involve.

As for badly comprehended Freudianism, it is clearly sanctioned by the royal road opened up by *The Interpretation of Dreams*: interpretation must proceed ‘*en detail*’, wrote Freud, not ‘*en masse*’ (Freud 1900: Standard Edition IV, 104; *translator’s note: the text of the Standard Edition gives both expressions in French*). And the two great rules of the classic analytical contract specify, as we know, ‘saying it all’ – especially, and above all else, the details – and ‘*interpreting everything*’, especially, and before anything else, on the basis of the details (Schor 1980: 3–14). But a misunderstanding has arisen, because whereas Freud interpreted details as links in a chain, a procession, or what I would call a *string* of signifiers, iconographical method is happy to proceed in the other direction, and go on searching for the *last word* or final statement, the signified of the work of art. It will, for example, seek out an attribute that tells everything about the ‘subject’: a key will thus become *the* key, the one capable of unlocking and exhausting the meaning of all that is painted around it, and this body, the one here before us, will therefore be named, by courtesy of the key, ‘Saint Peter’. Or else, to take an extreme case, the presumed self-portrait of the painter will be sought in a doorway reflected in a carafe of water placed right in the darkest corner of a picture, and the question will be asked as to what moment in the painter’s life the self-portrait represents, and what he might be saying to another person situated outside the picture but attested for in some contemporary archive certifying his ‘humanism’ (and therefore his qualifications as a ‘programmer’ of pictures) and his presence in the artist’s studio at the very moment when, in all probability, the picture was painted, and so on. . . . The quest for the ‘last word’ is always a quest *en abyme*, reflecting within itself the critic’s or the historian’s own quest for a definitive critical method, and it makes painting, when seen in this light, into nothing more than a game of attribution, like a novel which invites you to identify real personages behind fictional ones. This genre, the *roman à clef*, is one from which Freud tried to distance himself quite explicitly, at the beginning of his account of ‘Dora’s’ case-history (Freud 1905 [1901]: Standard Edition VII, 9). The picture is always considered to be a ciphered text, and the cipher, like a treasure-chest, or a skeleton hidden in a cupboard, is always there waiting to be found, somehow *behind the painting*, not enclosed within the material density of the paint: it will be the ‘solution’ to the enigma posed by the picture, its ‘motive’, or the ‘admission’ of its secret meaning. In most cases it will be an emblem, a portrait, or some allusion to the ‘events’ of narrative history; in short, what the historian will have the duty of making the painted work ‘confess’ or give up will be a symbol or a referent. This means acting as though the painted work had committed a crime, a single crime (when the fact is that the painted work, pretty as a picture and good as gold, has either committed no crime at all, or, by cunningly exploiting the black magic of sight, is getting away with hundreds of unseen ones).

Where Freud, on the other hand, understood details as the leftovers or cast-offs of observation, the ideal describer conceives of detail as the result of simple observational *skill* or *subtlety*. A subtlety that is supposed to permit, in an

inductive kind of way, the discovery of the same treasure, the treasure of meaning.

PAINTING AND DEPICTING

The whole problem is of course one of ‘counterpoint’. After all, up to now I have only stated the obvious, making what is a perfectly banal point. By saying ‘what painting shows is its material cause, that is to say paint’, I have done no more than produce a kind of tautology, one that must now be worked on, gone into further, filled out. I stress this for one reason only, namely that art history more or less constantly fails to appreciate the consequences of this tautology. Such highly tactical negligence is characteristic of the kind of knowledge which attempts to constitute itself as a ‘clear and distinct’ science, or pretends to do so: it would much prefer its object, painting, to be as clear and distinct, and as divisible, as the words in a sentence or the letters in a word.

As a rule, when looking at a picture, the art historian detests being affected by any troubling effects created by the paint; if not, he talks about them as a ‘connoisseur’, evoking the painter’s ‘handling’ of his medium, its ‘texture’, his ‘manner’, the ‘style’, and so on. It is not a matter of chance, philosophically speaking, if in all art literature the word ‘subject’ continues to be used for its opposite, that is to say, the object of *mimesis*, the ‘motif’, or what is represented. This is precisely what makes it possible to ignore the effects of uttering, or *enunciation* (in a word, the effects of fantasy, emanating from the position of the subject), as well as the ‘thrown’ quality of paint and effects of what I call ‘subjectivity’ (material effects, in short) which are pre-eminently at work in painting – questioning both us and painting itself in the process (Didi-Huberman 1985: 37–9).¹

In his famous methodological introduction to *Studies in Iconology* Panofsky implies that the question has been settled. The word ‘description’ appears in his three-level diagram (Panofsky 1939 [1962]: 14–15) only in order to designate what is said to be the least problematic issue of all, simple pre-iconographical recognition of the ‘primary’, or ‘natural’, subject – as if in every case this recognition arose from a binary logic of identity between *it is* and *it is not*, and as if, for example, the question of *not quite this and not quite that* should not be raised, or required to be resolved or dissolved in advance. ‘It is obvious’, writes Panofsky, ‘that a correct *iconographical analysis, in the narrower sense*, presupposes a correct identification of the *motifs*. If the knife that allows us to identify a St. Bartholomew *is not* a knife but a corkscrew, the character *is not* a St. Bartholomew’ (Panofsky 1939 [1962]: 7).²

I am not suggesting that painting is pure material chaos and that the figurative meanings iconography brings to light are worthless. There are obviously ‘reasonable’ distances from which detail neither collapses nor crumbles away

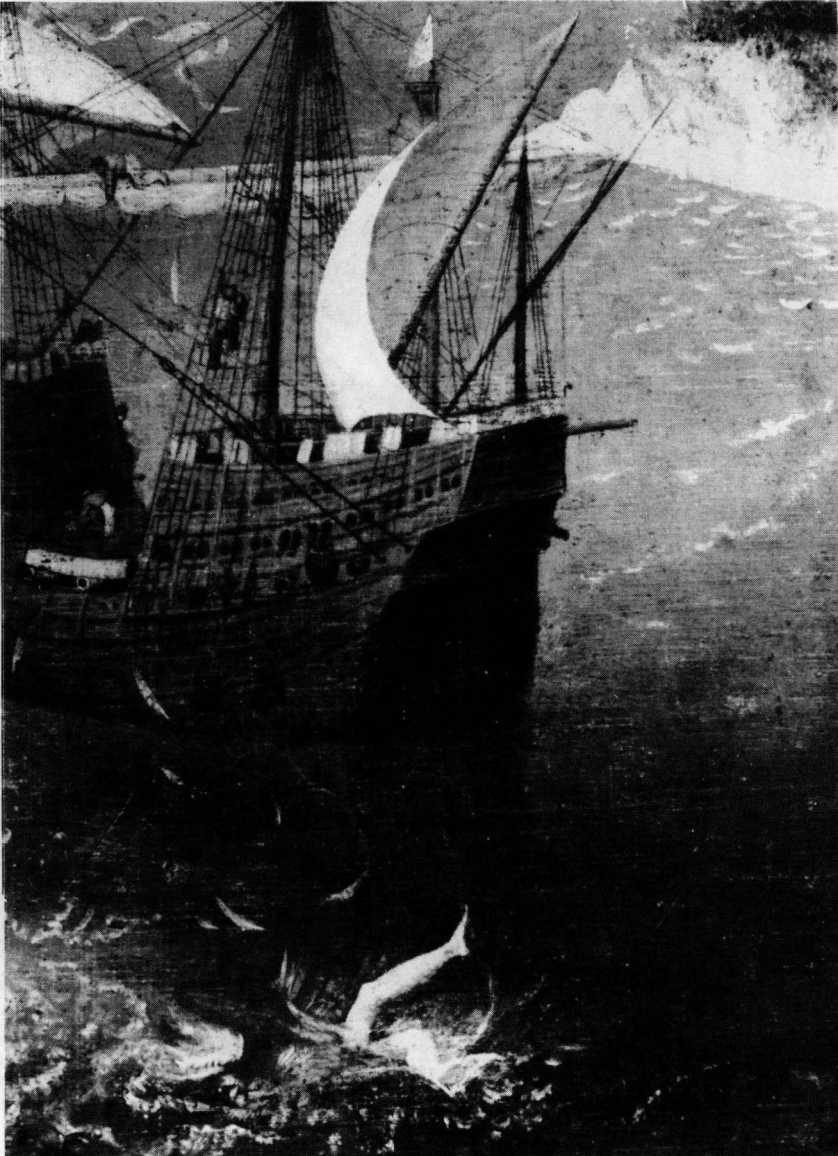


Figure 1a. P. Breughel, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts, Brussels): details of falling area.

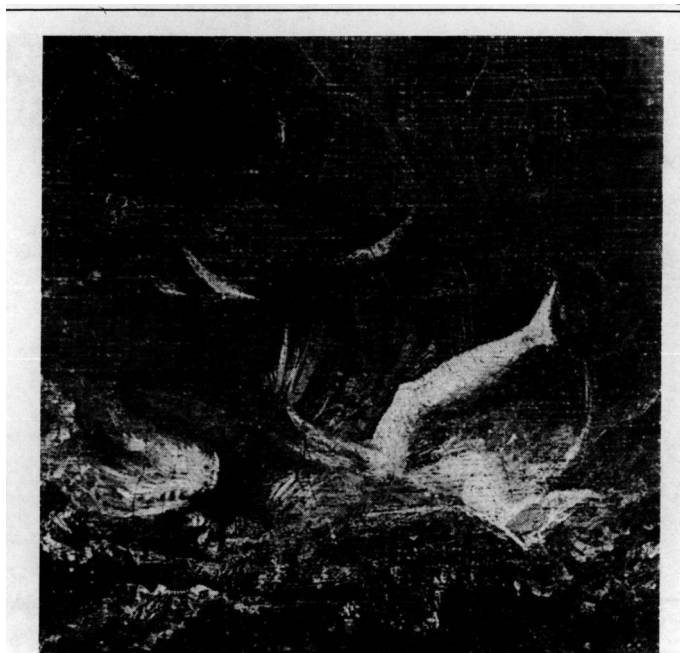


Figure 1b. P. Brueghel, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*: detail.

into a pure froth of colour. There are obviously very numerous and meaningful knives and corkscrews clearly identifiable in a great many figurative paintings.³ But one must also constantly problematize the *dichiarazione* of a painted figure, to use Ripa's term. We must ask ourselves, with each declarative utterance (it is/is not), whether it is a question of *not quite this and not quite that*.

This is because every detail in painting is overdetermined. Let us take the celebrated example of *The Fall of Icarus* by Brueghel (Figure 1a). Here, the quintessential detail must be the little feathers we see fluttering down, still flying around the body swallowed up by the waves. Except that it has not quite been swallowed up, for how could we see that it *had been* swallowed up? A *not quite* is necessary here in order to make visible the signified. Whatever the case may be, the feathers seem at first to be accounted for by a highly developed descriptive sense which requires a painting of the fall of Icarus to include even the famous feathers unstuck by the heat of the sun. The feathers fall more slowly than the body, in a discreet silky rain that directs one's gaze to the trajectory of the fall. Even if the body had completely disappeared the fall would nevertheless have been 'described' thanks to the feathers, thanks to this descriptive supplement. But at the same time the little feathers in Brueghel's painting are an indication, the only indication in fact, of the *storia*, the only sign of narrativity: these concomitant features – a body dropping into the sea (an anonymous 'man



Figure 1c. P. Brueghel, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*: detail.

overboard') and some humble feathers – alone release the meaning 'Icarus'. To this extent the feathers are an iconographical attribute necessary to the representation of the mythological scene.

Now if one examines the *as if* or the *not quite*, paying attention to the materiality of the paint, one takes note of the fact that the details we have called 'feathers' have no determining distinctive feature which might 'separate' them completely from the foam the falling body produces in the sea. They are marks of whitish paint, surface scansions above the background (the water) and all around the 'figure' (the two bits of a human body entering the sea) (Figure 1b). It's just like foam, and yet it is not, not completely. Nothing, in fact, is there 'completely'. Everything is *almost* or *not quite* 'there'. It is neither descriptive nor narrative; it is what lies between the pale, purely pictorial signified 'feather' and a signified 'foam'; in other words, it is not a semiotically stable entity. But if that is so, why does one see feathers *in spite of everything*? It is because the same mark is repeated in a constellation of marks, and sets itself off against a background other than the sea, with the result that one cannot any longer declare that it is foam. The mark individualizes itself in this way 'in front of' a boat (Figure 1c). And it is therefore the difference in background (sea/boat) which will 'make the difference', decide on, and figure forth the meaning. *Decidedly*, borne by these white paint marks, we will have read 'falling feathers', rather than 'surging foam'.

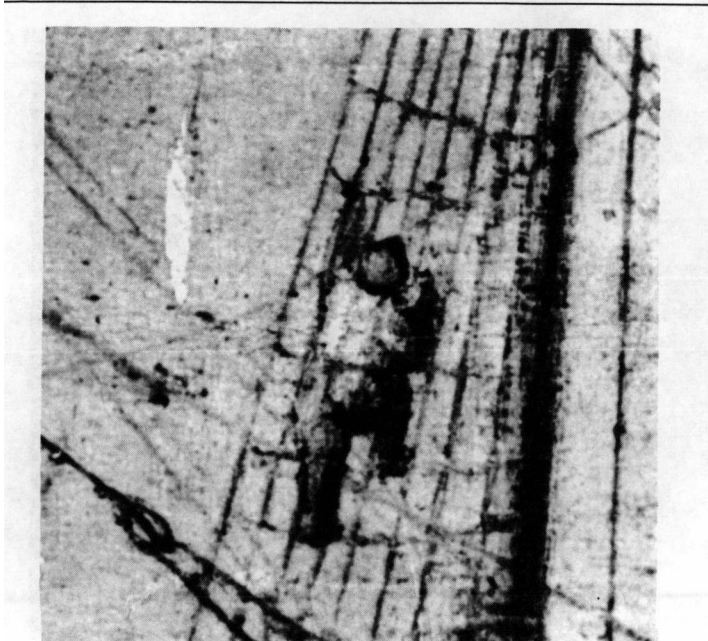


Figure 1d. P. Brueghel, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*: detail.

But can one not retrieve, even so, the descriptive evidence and the figurative stability? The answer is no, and that is the point, for what allows one to decide here on ‘feather’ – to wit the differential play between the background and the paint mark – occurs through a kind of panic or figural vertigo, albeit a vertigo which would seem to correspond to the flattening out of the picture. Look at the feather painted – or placed – next to the sailor hanging on to the rigging (Figure 1d): suddenly it is a feather without meaning, having completely changed in scale, now immense, the size of a man. One tries to evoke an illusion of depth, without much success – for it is admittedly hard to ‘legitimize’ an isolated feather in an atmospheric perspective. And besides, the whole of Brueghel’s painting operates, in its very rigour, in terms of an outrageous bending of space. In short, the distinctive feature of detail will be seen to correspond, here, to a plurality of functions: it disappoints any expectation of a univocal *dichiarazione*.

Panofsky’s example of the knife and the corkscrew therefore confirms its limitations. Not only does it suppose (in defiance of the indeterminacy of the material constituents of painting) that the pictorial signifiers are discrete, allowing themselves to be cut up and isolated like the letters in a word or the words in a sentence. It also supposes, in defiance of the overdetermined character of notions like ‘subject’ and ‘significance’ [*translator’s note: sliding meanings in the signifier*] that a pictorial signifier represents a ‘subject’ (a motif, a signified) for

its own sake, as if all pictures functioned like texts, and as if all texts were readable and wholly decipherable. To sum up, the notion of the detail in painting is meaningful only for art history founded on this kind of iconography, where *transparency of the mimetic sign* is assumed.

As it happens, this transparency is constantly up against paint's opaque materiality, for there is something other than iconic detail in pictures (even figurative ones) and even in Flemish or Dutch ones. In a book heralded both as a thought-provoking work representing the last word in the methodology of art history, and as the realization of precepts – however dated – invoking the authority and the paternity of Ernst Gombrich, Svetlana Alpers has relativized the scope of any iconographical method linked to the Panofskyian inheritance and the specific field of the history of Italian art. What Alpers questions is the idea that painting is underpinned, universally, by some form of semantic and narrative reflection. There are pictures that tell no story, she declares – quite rightly. And one might add that the strength of conviction carried through the whole book is already present in this single proposition (Alpers 1983: xiv).

The pictures that tell no stories are from the seventeenth-century Dutch school. Thus we have Vermeer's *View of Delft*: it is neither the iconography nor the emblem of anything, referring to no narrative programme and to no pre-existing text whose image might be charged with composing, visually, a supposed historical, anecdotal, mythological, or metaphorical value. There is none of that. The *View of Delft* is quite simply a view. The pertinence of Alpers's argument consists here in the way it very firmly indicates the limits of the *ut pictura poesis* tradition: 'Albertian' idealism and the prevalence of narrativity do not exhaust all there is to say about western figurative painting (Alpers 1983: xix–xx). Painters do not paint in order to write narratives or stories by some means other than writing. That much we can agree on.

So what is painting for? It is *for describing*, says Alpers. Painting – Dutch painting – is a way of proving that the image of 'a world that continues beyond the canvas' has spread itself out on the canvas 'staining the surface with colour and light, impressing itself upon it'. The *View of Delft* is a 'consummate example' of this, for 'Delft is hardly grasped or taken in – it is just there for the looking' (Alpers 1983: 27). This, then, is what painting's vocation is supposed to be: a way of *viewing* the world. The perceived world is *spread out* just as it is – exactly as it is perceived – and deposited, as pigments, on a canvas.

Now this points to a singularly restrictive conception both of looking (by which I mean the phenomenological relationship between the eye and the gaze) and the 'depositing' process (by which I mean the no less complex relationship between the 'jet' [see translator's note, 1], the 'project' and the 'subject', as well as that between vision and brush, pigment and what it is deposited upon, and so on). It is noticeable that Alpers's argumentation amounts to substituting for the myth of pure *semantic* reflection a myth of pure, *visual* (or perceptual) reflection

which Dutch painting, with the help of certain 'technical skills', provides with a locus, instrumentalizes, and socializes. Such is indeed the central motif of the book: *ut pictura, ita visio*. The *ut-ita*, unlike the *not quite*, aims at reconstructing a new logic of identity: what is painted in seventeenth-century Dutch pictures *is* what was seen in the so-called 'visual culture' of the time (the term is borrowed from Baxandall [Alpers 1983: xxv]); it *is* what was seen, exactly what was seen, via the techniques available for describing and scientifically recording the perceptible world. Such a logic of identity is not of course possible without reducing to insignificance those effects of indeterminacy and opacity which can nevertheless be correctly assumed to be at work when any change in perceptual scale occurs – as when one shifts from the seen world to the recorded world and from the recorded world to the painted world. The instrument of such a reduction is the claim for exactness: the proverbial 'technical skill' of the Dutch painters, their 'Sincere Hand and . . . Faithful Eye' (Alpers 1983: 72–118). And this is how 'the world', the visible world, comes to function as an absolute model and as an origin: the primacy of the signified gives way, henceforth, to the primacy of the referent.

That there is an epistemic viewpoint in seventeenth-century Dutch painting implying a degree of participation in the structures of knowledge is no longer debatable – and it is no longer debatable, as it happens, because of the existence of Alpers's book, which unveils for us, in this way, a significant proportion of what we could call the 'final cause' of a whole artistic epoch. But a viewpoint does not tell us all we may wish to know about vision, or about looking, and tells us even less about painting. The methodological drawback consists in having immediately downgraded the idea of a final cause in favour of a formal cause on the one hand (the *eidōs* of seventeenth-century Dutch painting is the *epistēmē* of the seventeenth century in general; pictures cut up the visible world according to the way seventeenth-century science exhaustively attempts to describe it), and a material cause on the other. As if an opaque form of matter, paint, could 'restore' the visible, providing it with the same kind of transparency that a well-polished lens can achieve. As if the techniques of painting aimed at exactness, in the epistemological sense of the term, which has never been the case: painting is rigorous or accurate, but never exact.

Fundamentally, Alpers's argumentation involves prejudging painting, even in the title of her book, in terms of an equation between *painting and depicting*. Hence the extreme valorization of what Alpers calls 'descriptive surfaces' (Alpers 1983: xxiv). As if the visible world were a surface. As if paint had no density. As if a flow of pigment had the legitimacy of a topographical projection: such is the hidden ideal underlying the notion of technical skill, which requires that the hand itself be turned into a 'Faithful Eye'; that is to say an organ independent of a human subject. As if the only conceivable type of density were that of a totally diaphanous telescope lens or an ideal retina.

But above all, Alpers's argumentation foregrounds two instruments of

visibility whose historical role – their actual use in the seventeenth century – is doubly reinforced by a paradigmatic value in which a *meaning* is voiced, amounting to a global evaluation of Dutch painting. One of these instruments is the *camera obscura*, the other the map. The former, provided with theoretical input by the prestige of photography in our own time, seems to guarantee exactness, or, better, the authenticity of the referent projected on to the picture (Alpers 1983: 11, 13, 27–33, 50–1, 73–4, 239–41). The other seems to guarantee to us that any gap between ‘the surface of the world’ and the ‘representing surface’ is in fact the fruit of a carefully regulated transformation. Epistemologically legitimized in the process, it therefore also appears exact and authentic (Alpers 1983: 119–68).

Alpers will thus say that Vermeer’s *View of Delft* is ‘like a map’, that the picture fits into the non-pictorial generic paradigm of urban topography, and that in the last analysis exactly the same things are there on the picture as were in the minds of seventeenth-century geographers. The poet and the non-professional lover of painting will of course protest at such an *episteme*-centred vision, arguing on behalf of ‘painting as such’ or the ‘vibrant colours’ characteristic of Vermeer’s pictures. But Alpers counters this with two heterogeneous arguments. Where colour is concerned, she still puts forward an epistemological argument: maps, in the seventeenth century, were coloured, and – given their specific skills – painters were commonly employed to colour them. What is more, says Alpers, the maps represented in Vermeer’s pictures – given that they were maps (or was it because painters painted them?) – are themselves ‘in colour’. The undoubtedly pictorial quality of seventeenth-century maps would thus suggest something corresponding exactly to a ‘geographical’ and therefore explicitly *graphic* concept of painting, whether we are dealing with coloured maps or not. When it comes to *vibrancy*, that is to say, the awesome, supplementary task of thinking about Vermeer not purely and simply as a cartographer but as an incomparable genius of painting, Alpers will put forward a curious argument which this time smacks of what could be called ordinary, even trivial metaphysics: all that is ‘common’ in the *View of Delft*, meaning the community, or the everyday world where painting and mapping come together, is ‘endowed with an uncommonly seen and felt presence’, for it all suggests the intimacy of human habitation, and ‘human experience’ in general, to the extent that Alpers ends up writing that in the *View of Delft* ‘mapping itself becomes a mode of praise’ (Alpers 1983: 152–9, 222–3); it is a paean: a celebration of the World.

The supposed equivalence between painting and depiction has thus brought together two contrasting arguments, an epistemological one whose starting-point is that painting is a graphic description of the world – in the sense that the *View of Delft* is understood as a map recording something observed, in this case a *detail* of the town of Delft – and a metaphysical one postulating painting as a celebration of the world. It is the same world, but now, by being granted vague emotional tonalities, it is supplemented, for its glorification, by ‘human

experience'. The first argument, based upon technical *exactness*, entails foreclosing the problem of the subject of painting. The second argument, invoking metaphysical *authenticity*, entails imagining a transcendental subject of painting. The apparent contrast between them is illusory, however, for the two arguments represent, in reality, extreme versions of a position affirming the primacy of the referent, which acts here as an absolute model and origin. The critique of Panofsky's iconology and its semantic bias is turned inside out, revealing not its contrary, but its hidden assumptions, thereby affirming the all-powerful role of the *iconic* function and of perceptual transparency (what I would call a referential prejudice), whilst reinforcing the rejection, already implied by any emphasis on iconicity, of painting's quintessential material element: coloured pigments.

ACCIDENTAL EFFECTS: THE FRAGMENT OF MATTER

It is not by chance that when discussing the *View of Delft* and pondering on Vermeer's use of the *camera obscura*, Svetlana Alpers should have found herself penning, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, part of a famous quotation from Paul Claudel in which the two extreme forms of the referential prejudice – technical exactness and metaphysical authenticity – are clearly invoked and associated, or, better, come together in the same refusal to question the work of colour and the projection of subjective elements in painting. Here is the passage from which her quotation comes:

But I have no desire to speak to you of colours here, despite their quality and the way they work together in a pattern so exact and so frigid that it seems to have not so much been obtained by the brush as directly realized by the intelligence. What fascinates me is the pure, stark, sterilized gaze, rinsed clean of all matter, with its almost mathematical, angelic, or simply photographic candour (but what photography!), by means of which this painter, shut away inside his lens, captures the external world. One can only compare the result to the marvellous, delicate wonders of the darkroom and to the first appearances on the daguerreotype of figures drawn with a surer and sharper pencil than Holbein's, by which I mean a ray of sunlight. The canvas, like a magical retina, applies a kind of intellectual silver to the lines thus drawn. By means of this act of purification, by arresting time through the action of the glass and its silvery backing, the external world we see laid out before us is drawn into a paradise of necessity. (Claudel 1964: 32)

When discussing this painting Claudel thus invokes pencils and sharply defined lines (and thereby drawing) as well as delicacy (and thereby detail), a delicacy not just 'rinsed clean of all matter' but purified of all temporality:

Vermeer's painting is claimed to offer itself to our gaze like 'arrested time', rather the way one talks of a frozen cinematographic image. And it is finally a matter of a 'paradise of necessity', by which Claudel means something giving sovereignty to the metaphysical requirement of an *eidos* of the visible world. In a way, Alpers follows the lead provided by such idealizations when she posits a Vermeer-style 'subject' of the gaze which would have to be absolute and inhuman: what is at stake, she repeats, still apropos of the *View of Delft*, 'is the eye, not a human observer' (Alpers 1983: 35). As if that eye were 'pure' – an organ lacking drives or desires. And as if the 'purity' of its gaze entailed the act of observing everything, capturing everything, and retracing everything, or, to put it another way, *detailing*, describing, and depicting the visible, making of it an aspectual sum-total with no residue.

Now it is perhaps not a matter of chance either if it happens that the author Alpers never quotes – one nevertheless more famous than any other where the critical fortunes of Vermeer are concerned, particularly with regard to the *View of Delft* – is Marcel Proust. For Proust was far from seeking some spurious 'photographic freezing of time' in the visible; on the contrary, he sought in it the tremor of duration itself, what Blanchot called ecstatic moments, or 'temporal ecstasy' (Blanchot 1959: 23). Correlatively, Proust did not seek arguments for *description* in the visible, he sought there a sudden blaze of *relationships*: '[The writer] can describe a scene by describing one after another the innumerable objects which at a given moment were present at a particular place, but truth will be attained . . . only when he takes two different objects, states the connection between them . . . and encloses them in the necessary links of a well-wrought style' (Proust 1927 [1954]: III: 889; *translation*, 1981: III: 924–5). Proust's statement, like his practice as a writer, drives home the lesson that writing is the opposite of describing. But it appears no less clear, from the famous passage of *La prisonnière* [*The Captive*] dealing with Vermeer's picture, that *painting is the contrary of depicting*. The *View of Delft* is presented there neither as a description of the world as it was in the seventeenth century – in terms of an inveigling topographic 'descriptive surface', as Alpers calls it – nor as a 'paradise of necessity', visually speaking. On the contrary, Proust is concerned on the one hand with *matter* and *layers of paint* – at which point we are led back to the bedrock of colours from which all representation in painting springs, or on whose reserves it draws (the metaphor is unimportant) – and on the other with a commotion that becomes a fatal tremor, something we might call a trauma or a shock: a *sudden burst of colour*. Let us reread the passage:

At last he came to the Vermeer . . . and, finally, the precious substance of the tiny patch of yellow wall. His dizziness increased; he fixed his gaze, like a child upon a yellow butterfly that it wants to catch, on the precious little patch of wall. 'That's how I ought to have written', he said. 'My last books are too dry, I ought to have gone over them with a few layers of colour,

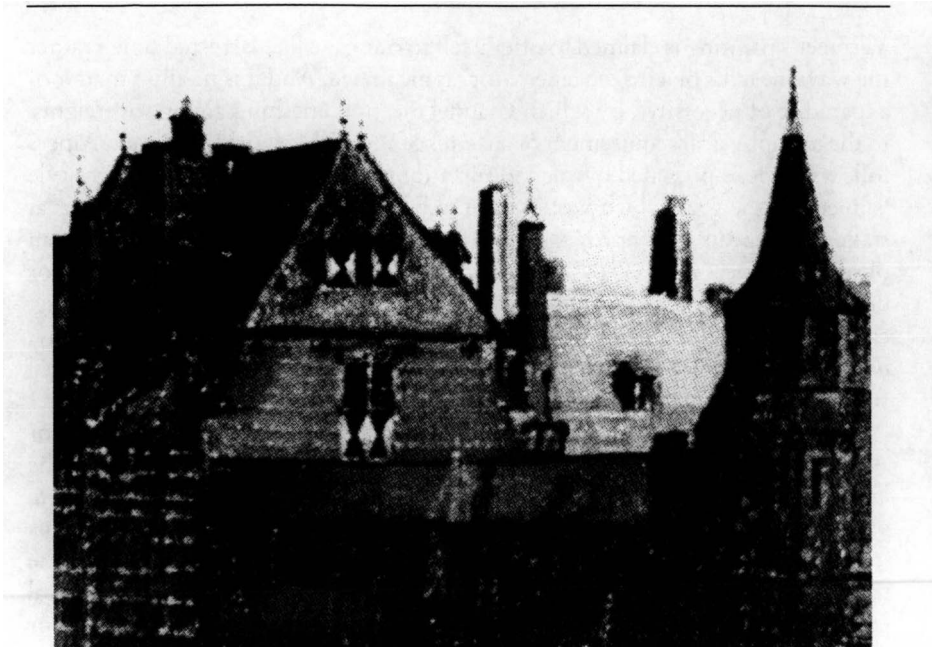


Figure 2. J. Vermeer, *View of Delft* (Mauritshuis, The Hague): detail of the 'little patch of yellow wall'.

made my language precious in itself, like this little patch of yellow wall.' Meanwhile he was not unconscious of the gravity of his condition. . . . He repeated to himself: 'Little patch of yellow wall with a sloping roof, little patch of yellow wall.' Meanwhile he sank down on to a circular sofa; . . . a fresh attack struck him down. . . . He was dead. (Proust, 1923 [1954]: III: 187; *translation*, 1981: III: 185–6)

'*Petit pan de mur jaune*' (Figure 2): one may ask – and I can imagine a translator hesitating over this – which word the adjective '*jaune*' is in fact qualifying here. But the ambiguity of the syntactical relationship plants the seeds of a genuine conceptual distinction which the text as a whole, by its dramatic content, brings to fruition, a distinction intimately connected to the problem we are investigating here: what I have called a 'close-up knowledge' of painting. For someone who *sees* Vermeer's painting, by which I mean someone who apprehends the representational element in terms of the phenomenology of recognition and identification, someone who might have been to Delft to see 'if it's the same' or, like Svetlana Alpers, might have sought out all the topographical views of Delft from 1658 to 1660 so as to make comparisons, identify the exact viewpoint on the canal bank, and so on – all in order to rediscover the referent –

for this person, '*jaune*' qualifies '*mur*'. For the painter Vermeer's gaze, the world and the wall were yellow that day, probably between 1658 and 1660, on the canal bank. And now, in the painting, the yellow continues to refer to a wall belonging to a moment of 'arrested time', speaking to us of Delft in the seventeenth century. It has therefore, in a way, been 'rinsed clean' of all pictorial matter and gone from the canvas, becoming exact and 'delicate', to use Claudel's word. For this person, therefore, it is the wall which is yellow and, in so far as it is a wall *it is a detail*, a circumscribed piece of a much larger topographical ensemble called Delft.⁴

For someone who, on the contrary, *looks at the picture*, for example, someone who, like Bergotte, might 'fix' his eye to the canvas – to the point of being fascinated and stupefied, ultimately dying before it in the way imagined by Proust – for that person '*jaune*' qualifies '*pan*': it is the patch that is yellow. It is just a *particolare* of the picture, but an effective one, electively and enigmatically efficacious, not 'rinsed clean of all matter', but on the contrary envisaged as a 'precious substance' and as a 'layer of paint'. Not being elicited by a 'photographic arresting' of time past, it brings about a sudden, catastrophic commotion in present time, causing the body of the onlooker, Bergotte, to 'collapse'. For such a person, the yellow in Vermeer's painting, as a colour, is a '*pan*'. More than just a 'patch', it is a *slab* of paint that has an almost explosive power; it is paint considered as a 'precious' and traumatic material cause.⁵

Literary as it may be, the distinction suggested by the passage from *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is informed by a profound intellectual rigour. True, it fictionalizes the efficacy of painting, and it is of course rare for a picture to cause the death of someone looking at it . . . but the way the *relationship* between the 'subjects' is handled, in this coincidence of fictional effects, bears an incontestable quality of truth, because such efficacy – the dramatic outcome, a kind of negative miracle – indicates the existence of something very real *at work* in painting, almost a form of dazzlement. Obvious, luminous, and perceptible, it is at the same time obscure, enigmatic, and difficult to analyse, notably in semantic or iconic terms, for it is an effect of paint at work not as a descriptive sign but as coloured matter. We shall therefore borrow the sublime and simple word '*pan*' from *La Recherche* and try to polish up its meaning (the way mirrors have to be burnished before they reflect clearly), with a view to tightening up its conceptual rigour and establishing some degree of differentiation with respect to the category of the *detail* (Didi-Huberman 1985: 43–61, 92–3). We shall confine ourselves for the moment to the work of Vermeer, and in particular to a very well-known picture, one that is excessively simple, to the extent of appearing a 'commonplace' product, not just as a consequence of the banality of the 'subject' (the 'genre' of the intimate scene), but also because of the obvious way the light comes, as so often, from the right, and because of the 'sameness' of the near-identical woman who, in other pictures, is reading a letter, and in this one is simply doing her lacework.



Figure 3. J. Vermeer, *The Lacemaker* (Louvre, Paris).

It is the Louvre's *The Lacemaker* (Figure 3), a work which has the advantage of posing the problem and showing what is at stake in absolute terms, if only because its dimensions (21×24 cm) do not simply permit a close-up form of knowledge, but require it. There is a self-evident quality to the picture, primarily

because the motif is obvious and unproblematic, having no ‘story’ to tell: it does not require one to undo some tangled iconographical web (or so it would appear). The picture is also self-evident because the eye does not have to sweep so narrow a field of view, and because recognition of the subject – so-called pre-iconographical recognition – seems to pose no problem: woman, thread, material, and lace all add up to a lacemaker. One might not expect, perusing the ‘descriptive surface’ of such a clear and distinct picture – such a little one, moreover – to be gratified by anything other than equally clear and distinct ‘details’. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Claudel is as sharp-eyed as they come, but what does he see? He sees details, and his deictic – ‘Look!’ – calls only for confidence in their exactness and authenticity:

Look at the lacemaker (in the Louvre) applying herself to her embroidery frame, a picture where everything – the shoulders, the head, the hands and the double row of busy fingers – ends up on the point of that needle. Or on that pupil in the centre of a blue eye, the point where a whole face and a whole being converge on a kind of spiritual co-ordinate, a shaft of light shot forth from the soul. (Claudel 1964: 34)

By looking at it more closely – that is, by searching the picture for what the text is talking about – one notices that the Claudelian *ekphrasis* carries to an extreme what I have called the aporia of detail (Figure 4). Indeed, if one is looking for referentiality in description, what does one actually find? An embroidery frame, yes; shoulders, a head, and hands with a ‘double row of busy fingers’, without a doubt. But I cannot for my part see what it all ‘ends up on’, according to Claudel. I cannot see any pupil at all, not even a blue eye in whose centre it might be found. As for the lacemaker’s eyes, I can see only eyelids, and in all honesty this prevents me from declaring whether the eyes are open or closed. . . . Nor can I see the needle point noted by Claudel: however close I get I can see only two white brushstrokes – less than 0.5 mm thick – marks which everything leads me to construe as iconic signs representing a detail: two threads attached to two little wooden bobbins on either side of the bent index finger. Did Claudel see a needle where I can see a thread, and the pupil of a blue eye where I see two almost closed eyelids? It would be hard to find a better way of expressing the precariousness of visual recognition where the ‘delicate’ matter of detail is concerned. Unless of course we read Claudel’s text on quite another level, without reference to any kind of ‘delicate’ photographic precision or exactness, keeping a safe distance from the visual ‘paradise of necessity’ for which he nevertheless makes Vermeer accountable. In which case we are meant to hear, in his ‘*Look!*’ an injunction to *imagine* a needle behind the lacemaker’s four closed fingers,⁶ and to *metaphorically* conjure up an eye, a pupil, and a quality of pure ‘blueness’ in the coloured, mobile surface on which the hand lies. Whatever else happens, the detail as such, together with its descriptive vocation, enters the realm of aporia in both readings. Either its identification is highly debatable or it is presented as invisible.

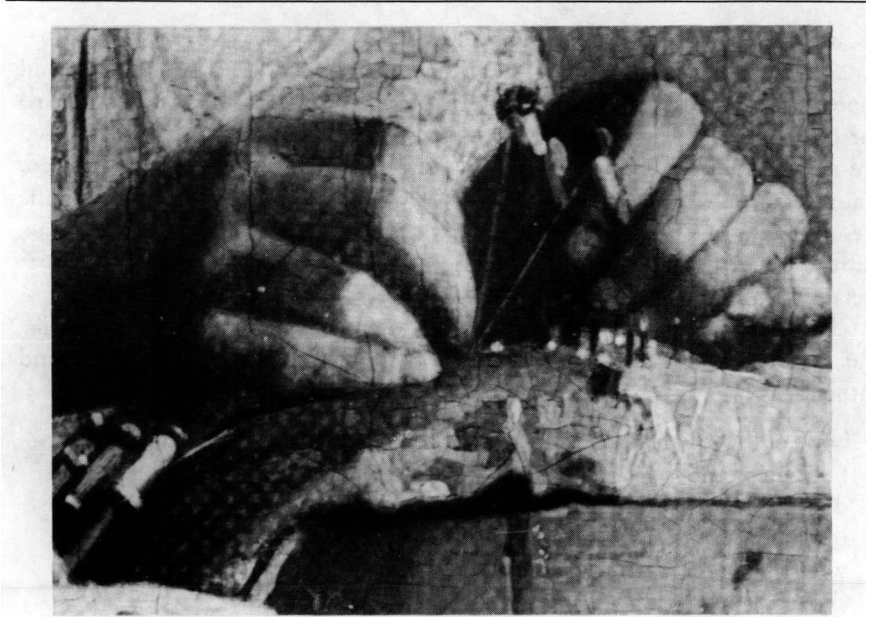


Figure 4. *The Lacemaker*: detail.

This much can nevertheless be conceded, so as not to remain locked in a purely aporetic mode: whether it is a question of ‘finding the needle’ in the picture-cum-haystack, or whether it is a case of ‘finding the thread’ in a labyrinth of shapes, it is indeed, in both cases, a *detail* that we are seeking and a detail that we shall find, not just because the visual element there is flimsy or delicate but because such delicacy is there in order to resolve a difficulty and to *decide on a meaning* that can be seen. That way, all detail is linked, to a greater or a lesser extent, to the act of *drawing a line*, this being the act that constitutes stable differences, the act of making graphic decisions and distinctions. It is also associated with the act of mimetic recognition, and therefore with meaning. It is generally through operations involving line – threads, needles, even knives and corkscrews – that images turn themselves into signs, and that signs become iconic.

In Vermeer’s little picture there is a zone altogether closer to us and more *salient* than all the details to be found or looked for between the lacemaker’s fingers (Figure 5a). Claudel does not look at this zone, not even noticing it. Yet it creates a burst of colour in the foreground of the work, occupying an area so noticeable and so extensive that one is caught granting it some strange power to dazzle and blind. Besides, it is more difficult to speak about this zone than about a detail, for

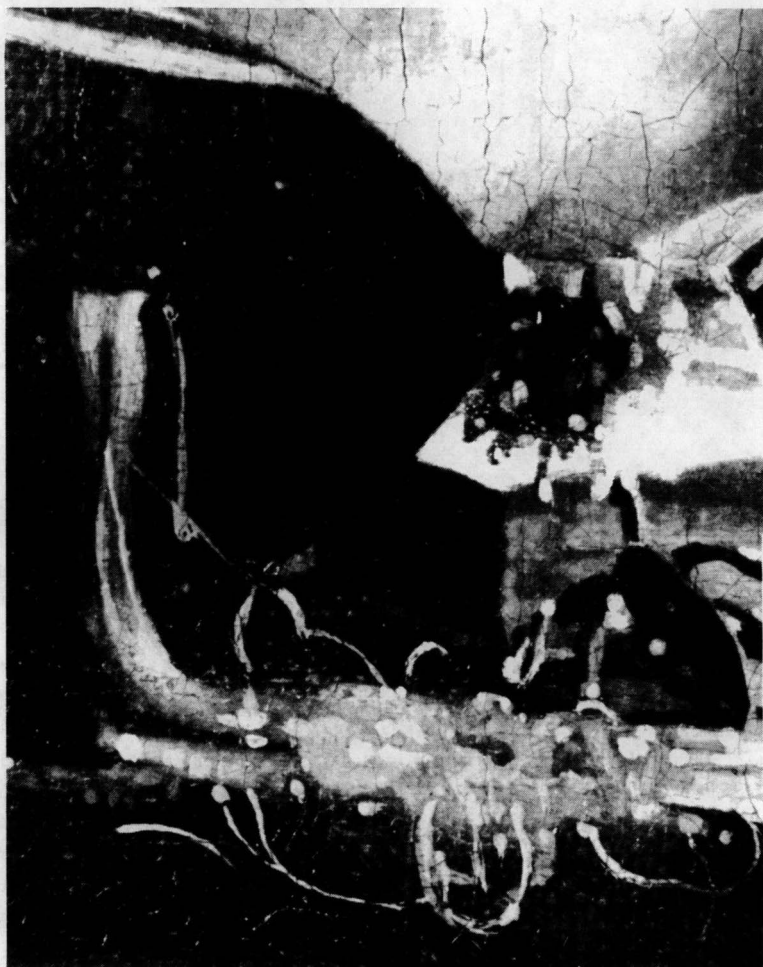


Figure 5a. *The Lacemaker*: detail.

a detail brings about discourse, helping to tell a story or describe an object, and whereas a detail can contain itself within its delicate outline, such a zone may on the contrary suddenly spread out, causing a virtual explosion in the picture. Whereas a detail can be thought of as 'rinsed clean of all matter', such a zone offers, obliquely to its representational function, the blazing flash of a substance and a colour without a well-defined limit; it confronts us with its material opacity and, tempted as we may be to plunge through it, opposes any *mimesis* likely to be thought of in terms of a 'product of the glass lens'. Ultimately, it is something like an accident: it could never take us into the 'paradise of necessity' of which

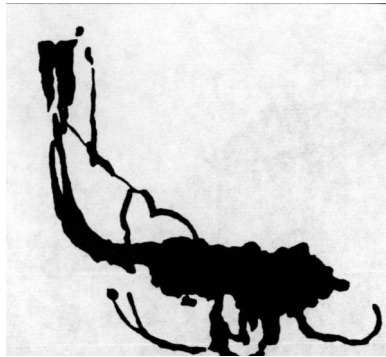


Figure 5b. Patch.

Claudel spoke. As an accident it is disturbing – a real nuisance in its way – but it is an accident in its own right, a *sovereign product of chance*.

What exactly does it consist of? It is a run of red paint. Joined by another, white this time, and less convoluted, but no less stupefying. It springs out from the cushion, to the left of the lacemaker. It frays out unreasonably, *right in front of our eyes*, like a sudden affirmation – in no way calculated, apparently – of the vertical, frontal existence of the canvas. The outline seems to wander, causing the pattern it makes to spread (Figure 5b).

The thick layers of paint and the modulations in colour values, though subtle, seem to be offered as the product of chance. Liquid paint appears to have been somehow left to itself, while the erratic play of a brush that might now and then have left the surface of the canvas suggests the loss of the capacity for exactness and formal control apparent in the detail just opposite, the two threads between the lacemaker's fingers. Because of the intrusiveness of its colours this pictorial 'moment' therefore makes us see a small area of paint that functions as a clue or signal rather than as a mimetic form or an icon in Peirce's sense. A material and accidental cause rather than a formal and final cause. A vermilion fragment deposited, even thrown, almost blindly projected on to the picture, confronting us there, insisting that it is a '*pan*', a *patch* of paint.

It is quite true that Vermeer's work functions, overall, within the general order of *mimesis*. To the extent that the zone of the picture concerned is made visible to us *we can see perfectly well* that there is in fact nothing there to see other than a meaningless, ragged-edged run of paint – the material substance, paint – but *even so* we will see something, and give shape to that substance, thanks to the mimetic context from which it springs.⁷ So we will believe, in spite of everything, that we understand what we see: almost without thinking about it, we will recognize thread, red thread spilling out of a sewing-box. This does not alter the fact, however, that while Vermeer may not push visual recognition and the attribution

of mimetic meaning in general into aporia, he leaves it in a critical state at the very least, in antithesis with meaninglessness, for he certainly shows us, in the same little picture, *The Lacemaker*, two antithetical pieces of thread. First of all a mimetically *legitimized* piece of thread, as fine in the picture – less than 0.5 mm thick – as a thread would be in the world of visible reality; a thread delineated by the tip of the finest brush; an *exact* piece of thread, stretched between the lacemaker's fingers, a thread that allows us to see the painter's competence in what is commonly called *the rendering of detail*, in short, a 'successful' piece of thread. And then, opposite, there is the other thread, which, if it imitates anything, imitates an accident: as if Vermeer were interested only in the process – the ragged-edged patch of paint running down the canvas – and not in its appearance; from the 'aspectual' or descriptive point of view, it is here a question of an *inexact* piece of thread, which simply gives the painting the opportunity to *cause a patch of vermilion to spring into view*. There is a moment of crisis, of aporia even (but not failure), to the extent that the existence of the first thread, the exact and detailed thread, will place us in a perilous situation should we wish to recognize 'the same thing' in the second thread, the inexact, coloured thread. At that moment the run of vermilion becomes, strictly speaking, *unidentifiable*, other than to say it is painting in action. Its form is dominated by its matter, and its representational status, being dominated by the dimension of the *not quite*, is precarious in this respect. Neither distinct nor clear, it perhaps imitates 'a piece of thread', but it is not depicted 'like a piece of thread'. It is therefore painted, painted like paint, not thread.

What does Svetlana Alpers see in this area of the painting? She sees some thread, of course, but says that the thread is unclearly defined and 'unfocused'. She writes of 'small globules of paint' and seeks to find for them, beyond Lawrence Gowing's simple dialectical formula ('Life surprises us with the face of optical abstractions') a more instrumental justification (Gowing 1952: 56, and Alpers 1983: 31). The spots of paint, in what she sees as an area that is not properly focused, appear to her as 'painted equivalents of the circles of confusion, diffused circles of light, that form around unfocused specular highlights in the camera obscura image' (Alpers 1983: 31–2). The run of vermilion paint in *The Lacemaker* is thus an error of adjustment originating in the lens and, like all the other luminous streaks in the picture, it is once again attributed to a purely optical, instrumental process. Even if Alpers eventually concludes that the question of Vermeer's use of the *camera obscura* is a highly debatable one,⁸ the optical and referential character of her interpretation is still very much in evidence: the run of vermilion signals, at the very least, a failure of description, if not the decline of 'the art of description' itself and 'the end of an old kind of painting' (Alpers 1983: 118); whatever else, it is a descriptive lapse.

Even so, I must repeat that it is a sovereign lapse. This is to be understood under two headings, first, syntagmatically, at the level of the picture itself, where this patch of red paint unsettles and even tyrannizes representation. For the patch

has been bestowed with an unusual power of expansion and diffusion: it *infects* the whole picture, or affects it, as it were, by means of a phantasmatic, *uncanny* effect. With the result that the obviously mimetic features begin, one by one, to become unstable: the green carpet sprinkled with little globules of paint liquefies; the tassel on the left becomes diaphanous; the grey 'bouquet' (the other tassel) placed on the small light-coloured box threatens us with its lack of certainty; and finally – this an extreme hypothesis – one might say that if Vermeer had wanted to paint some black bird clasping the lacemaker's neck with its wings he would not have done otherwise, having already dared to introduce into his 'subject' this enigmatic, anthracite-black slab of paint.

It is a sovereign accident also because it emerges, paradigmatically, in all Vermeer's work: indeed, his painting never ceases to find space for these intrusive flashes of colour. They are *partial intensities* in which the usual relationships between local and global elements are overturned: local features can no longer be counted as part of global ones, as in the case of detail; on the contrary, the local element invests and infects the whole canvas. If we take just one paradigm in Vermeer's painting, the colour red, we straightaway find a whole series of examples.

First, to begin on the smallest scale, there are the *accentuated* zones one often notices round the figures: discreet but insistent little commas and frayed edges. In the *Lady Seated at the Virginals* (National Gallery, London), the whole network of loops, knots, and reticulations in red seems to penetrate the figure progressively, adhering to it just near the arm, to the point of merging totally with the chignon, like a material streaked with veins. In the *Soldier and Laughing Girl* (Frick Collection, New York), the intensity of colour in the *supplementary* area of red, seen against the dark background of the man's hat, both catches and disappoints the eye, because it goes beyond the 'necessary', as far as depicting a ribbon is concerned. It is so intense that it is turned into something else, becoming a fictional object made out of a newly invented form of matter, an oddly incandescent ring of blood-red petals.⁹ Even the famous map which figures in *The Allegory of the Art of Painting* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) presents, just beneath the inscription '*descriptio*', an archipelago of rhythmic, carmine strokes whose exact mimetic function one would be hard put to define precisely.¹⁰

Intense representational voids are frequent in Vermeer's work, where surfaces are *folded*, gathered up, and bunched: the detail of a piece of material will be obscured and changed by being left at the 'not quite' stage, until a sense of perspective is lost and the paint exists as pure colour in its flat, functional state. Such is the case with the almost unmodulated red of the artist's stockings in *The Allegory of the Art of Painting*; similarly, there are the folds in the women's clothes in *Christ at the House of Mary and Martha* (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh). In other pictures, ermine-bordered capes open discreetly to reveal the bellies of pregnant women (as in the *Woman Weighing Pearls* in

Washington DC); at the precise point where the material is gathered a veritable *stream* of red gushes out, liquid paint applied as though it were never meant to dry, the effect of this being particularly fascinating in the case of the girl in the picture from the Frick Collection, no less intense in the way it pours down the canvas than are the sinuous streams of blood running over the veined marble of the *Allegory of Faith*.¹¹ And finally, within the same order of associations as folds and fluidity, one cannot help thinking of Vermeer's lips: half-opened lips that are so many auras of redness diluting and literally imbibing their own contours: the *Girl with a Red Hat* and the *Girl with a Flute* (both in the National Gallery in Washington DC), and above all the *Head of a Girl* (the Mauritius, The Hague).¹²

In a general way, moreover, Vermeer's treatment of what the Italians called *panni*, that is, materials or fabrics, produces brilliant occurrences of *self-presentation* by painting itself (reminding us that, with a sole exception, all Vermeer's works are executed on canvas). Just keeping to the colour red, one thinks of all the dresses, those of the *Procuress*, for example, or the *Woman with a Water Jug*, or the *Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman Watching* (Buckingham Palace); nor can we forget the great mass of red opposite the wineglass in the *Music Lesson* in the Frick Collection.¹³ And then there are all the table-cloths, carpets, and curtains in the Dresden pictures and, above all, in the extraordinary *Girl Asleep at a Table* in the Metropolitan, New York, where the opacity and the sheer *mass* of the reds tend to *come to the fore*, take over and tyrannize the whole of the represented space.¹⁴

There is no doubt that it is in the *Girl with a Red Hat* (Figure 6) that the expansive force of the local within the global element is most remarkably demonstrated: nobody doubts that the mass of vermilion looming over the girl's face is a hat.¹⁵ As such, it could be understood as a detail. And yet it is problematic in its delineation, since it should be possible to isolate a detail, cut it away from the whole: the inner area tends to become confused with the mass of hair, and above all *becomes a shadow* while the outer contour is traced with such a trembling movement that an effect of materiality is produced in which the soft quality of cotton wool, tiny flickering flames, and jets of liquid all combine. The modelling is unusual: on the left it is centripetal, while on the right it is frontal and centrifugal. This extreme degree of modelling goes as far as to include some flowing, lacteous passages in its mass of blazing colour. With the result that pictorial intensity tends to undo mimetic coherence and it no longer exactly 'resembles' a hat but something like a huge lip, or a wing, or simply a deluge of colour on a few square centimetres of vertically stretched canvas, there in front of us.

Shadow, cotton wool, flame or milk, lip or jet of liquid, wing or deluge of colour: not one of these images means anything by itself; they have no descriptive and even less interpretative pertinence with regard to the 'hat'; they partake of what one might call a form of 'floating' visibility (the way we speak of



Figure 6. J. Vermeer, *The Girl with a Red Hat* (National Gallery of Art, Washington: Andrew W. Mellon Collection).

'floating' attention in the analytical situation), though in this sense a choice only tells us about the person looking. Nevertheless, it is the aporia engendered by the co-presence of these images which tends to *problematize the pictorial object*, and which thus makes it possible to grasp something about the painting in terms of the very fact of raising the question of antithetical elements. When a painting

suggests a comparison (*It is like such and such . . .*) it is not long before others contradict it (*But it is also like such and such . . .*). It will not therefore be the system of comparisons or the ‘resemblances’ themselves, but the system of their differences, that will have a real chance of saying something about the painting, of making us feel how the detail becomes a patch, imposing itself in the picture in terms of an accident of representation – representation given up to the riskiness of paint as matter. It is in this sense that *the patch of paint* imposes itself in the picture, both as an accident of representation (*Vorstellung*) and an example of the sovereignty of presentation (*Darstellung*).

THE SYMPTOM: DEPOSITS OF MEANING

A sovereign accident, strictly speaking, is called a *symptom*: a word to be understood wholly in terms of the extended meaning and semiological rigour Freud bestowed on it. To point up such a use of the word ‘symptom’ let us select an example of a trope particularly relevant to the domain that concerns us, that of visibility. We could consider the unforeseeable and immediate *passage* of a body to the aberrant, critical state of an hysterical convulsion involving an uncontrolled excess of movements and attitudes. Gestures have suddenly lost their ‘representational’ aspect and no longer obey any code; members are contorted and entangled; deformed, the face is stricken with an expression of horror; relaxation is indistinguishable from contraction: no ‘message’ or ‘communication’ can any longer emanate from such a body. In short, such a body *no longer resembles itself*, or anything else for that matter: it is little more than a bellowing paroxystic mask – in Bataille’s words, it is ‘chaos become flesh’.¹⁶ Remaining in the nosological field of hysteria, we can note that the classic alienists, up to and including Charcot, called this condition bodily ‘cynicism’ or ‘clowning’, and referred to ‘illogical movements’ and even ‘demoniacal crises’, wishing to insist with these words on the disfigured, deformed, and above all *meaningless* character that such accidents of the body offer to the eye, that is, to observation and clinical description (Charcot and Richer 1877 [1984]: 91–106, 149–56).

Freud, on the contrary, when confronted by the culminating moments of such attacks of hysteria, conjectured that the *accident* – the meaningless, formless, incomprehensible, ‘non-iconic’ gesture – was well and truly ‘sovereign’: not just by virtue of what we might call syntagmatic sovereignty – for example, because in such a moment the accident dominates everything and tyrannizes the whole body – but, more importantly, by virtue of a kind of ‘paradigmatic’ sovereignty: because such a movement delivers up a real meaning by being connected to an originating fantasy, therefore putting a structure to work. But it is a *dissimulated* structure. Such is the figurative paradox admirably elucidated by Freud when, before an hysterical woman’s incomprehensible and contradictory movements,

he manages to undo the very articulation of this antithetical image, thus also undoing its deeper meaning:

In one case which I observed, for instance, the patient pressed her dress up against her body with one hand (as the woman), while she tried to tear it off with the other (as the man). This simultaneity of contradictory actions serves to a large extent to obscure the situation, which is otherwise so plastically portrayed in the attack, and thus it is well suited to conceal the unconscious fantasy that is at work. (Freud 1908: Standard Edition IX: 166).

This single sentence gets us to the very nub of the problem, in so far as it gives us a clear insight into the semiotic specificity of the concept of the symptom: the symptom is a critical event, something unique, an intrusion, but is at the same time the putting into action of a signifying structure, a system that the event has the task of bringing forth. It does so in *partial* and *contradictory* ways, however, so that meaning emerges only as an enigma or *phenomenon-cum-clue*,¹⁷ not as a stable ensemble of meanings. This is why the symptom is characterized both by its visual intensity – its *impact* value – and by what Freud calls here the *concealment* of the symptom that is at work. The symptom is thus a double-sided semiotic entity displaying and dissimulating either sovereign or accidental meanings that may correspond to either events or structures. This is why it displays itself as an ‘incomprehensible sign’, as Freud also puts it, whereas it is ‘so plastically portrayed’ and whereas its visual existence imposes itself with such impact, obviousness, and even violence. This is what we mean by a sovereign accident.

We can find here, moreover, a way of formulating the notion of the ‘patch’ of paint: *it is the symptom of painting within the picture*, painting understood here in the sense of a material cause, and matter in the sense Aristotle gave it, namely something which does not correspond to a logic of contraries but rather to a logic of desire and protension (the *epiethai* of the *Physics*). One could even go so far as to say that when the patch occurs painting becomes hysterical, whereas with detail it fetishizes itself. So long as we make it clear – given that we are up against a kind of art history that even today still either denies and short-sightedly rejects psychoanalysis or ‘uses’ blindly its most adulterated form, which is to say psychobiography – that such borrowing from the conceptual world of psychoanalysis is meaningful only with regard to the theory of *figurability* Freud was engaged in building all along, from dream images and hysterical conversion, to the metapsychological model of the unconscious fantasy.

So to talk of the *symptom* in the field of the history of painting is not to go looking for illnesses, more or less conscious motives, or repressed desires somewhere behind the picture – so-called ‘key images’, akin to what used to be known as the keys for unlocking dreams – instead, it simply consists of looking for a way of assessing the element of figurability at work in a painting, on the

understanding that any pictorial figure presupposes a process of ‘figuration’, just as any utterance presupposes an act of uttering. Now it so happens that the relationship between the figure and its own ‘figuration’ is never a simple one: this relationship – the process at work, rather – consists in fact of a tangled skein of paradoxes. As it happens, this is why the Aristotelian sub-logic of the ‘material cause’ can be seen to correspond, to a certain extent, to the Freudian sub-logic of the fantasy as ‘unconscious cause’.¹⁸ I use the term ‘sub-logic’ because in both cases the relationship of contradiction, and thus of identity, is subverted once and for all; indeed, the image is capable of representing both itself and its opposite: it is *not aware of contradiction*, which is why we have to keep starting again from this point (Freud 1900: Standard Edition IV: 318–19, 326–9). Similarly, the example of the hysterical symptom shows us how the link between event and structure, dramatic impact and dissimulation, accident and system of meanings is precisely situated in the *paradox of visibility* supposed by such a ‘simultaneity of contradictory actions . . . so plastically portrayed’.

It is perhaps when images are at their most intensely contradictory that they are the most authentically symptomatic. So it is with the run of paint or the red hats in Vermeer, for they bind together, paradoxically but intimately, the work of the mimetic and the non-mimetic. As for the word ‘*pan*’, we should note that it belongs to the select category of what we call ‘antithetical’ words since, in the sense of a ‘slab of masonry’, it denotes equally well the surface of a wall and what it contains: both the texture and the wall itself, and local as well as global (or containing) features; it is the word for both the ‘flap-end’ of a garment and a strip torn from a piece of material. It thus connotes both structures and the tearing away of parts of structures, or their partial collapse.¹⁹

The methodological interest of expressing this pictorial notion of the patch in terms of a symptom lies above all in the fact that the symptom, being a double-sided concept, is itself situated at the extreme limit of two theoretical fields: a field of a *phenomenological* kind, and one of a *semiological* kind. Now the whole problem of a theory of art resides in the articulation of these two fields, or these two points of view: by shutting oneself away within the phenomenological attitude one will risk never being able to say anything again, exhausted by effusive reactions to beauty; one will never be able to get beyond ‘affective tonalities’ or ‘the celebration of the world’, and will therefore also risk being estranged by empathy and losing oneself in immanence, inspired, but speechless or stupefied. By putting only semiological functions to work one will risk talking too much and silencing all that does not have direct relevance to the mechanism in question; at which point one ends up thinking louder than the painting, thus also risking getting lost in a transcendental eidetic model – a set of abstract universals of meaning – something no less restricting than the idealism of the referential model. One of the most obvious theoretical problems posed by painting is that the treasure of the signifier is neither something really universal

nor something that really pre-exists utterance, as in the case of language and literature. Minimal units are not *given* but *produced*, and besides, not actually being discrete, like, for example, the letters in a word, they can be related back neither to a syntax nor to a vocabulary in the strict sense of the term. And yet the treasures, structures, and layers of meaning are there. It would therefore seem necessary to propose a phenomenology of not just the empathetic relationship to the visual world, but one dealing with the ways meanings relate to the workings of specific structures (which presupposes a semiology). This would make it possible to propose a semiology, not of symbolic mechanisms alone, but of events, accidents, and singular features of the pictorial image (which presupposes a phenomenology). Here, then, is the likely orientation of an aesthetics of the symptom; that is to say, an aesthetics of the sovereign accidents of painting.

In order to make all these borderlines clearer, one could cross-refer the idea of the patch to two quite closely related notions, ones to which it even owes its existence. It distinguishes itself from them, however, because of the risky way it plays the two sides of the picture off against each other, as it were, the two sides where the symptom, in the Freudian sense, finds its theoretical pertinence and its efficacy. Close to the patch would be the *punctum*, the admirable theoretical 'point' that Barthes directed towards the visible. We may recall that he did this while dedicating his whole theoretical venture to Sartre's *L'Imaginaire*, something which provides the clearest possible evidence of the fact that any self-respecting analysis of the visible has to take cognizance of phenomenological demands. This is why Barthes did not hesitate to adopt the point of view of a 'vague' or 'causal' kind of phenomenology, so qualified because inevitably comprised by affect and expressible, in any case, in terms not of structure but of *existence* only (Barthes 1980: 7, 40–1, 44).

The theoretical difference between the patch and the *punctum* does not lie, fundamentally, in the fact that one of the two notions originates in the field of painting and the other in photography, any more than it lies in the difference between the semantic constellations carried with them by the two words, the one going by way of zones towards frontal expansion, the other towards the 'point' by way of 'tapering' focalization. Barthes stressed, moreover, the 'force of expansion' of the *punctum* (Barthes 1980: 74). The problem is that the notion of the *punctum* seems to lose in semiological pertinence what it gains in phenomenological pertinence: one grasps well enough the sovereignty of the *visible accident*, its dimension as an event, but at the price of both 'affective tonality' and the 'celebration of the world'. Once more, without assistance, the world comes and deposits itself on the image, mediated by its *details* – the very term used by Barthes – and by its worldly *temporality*: 'It is not I who go to look for it . . . it is the detail that shoots from the scene like an arrow, and comes to pierce me' (Barthes 1980: 48–9). At which moment there remains no imaging substance to interrogate, only the relationship between a detail of the scene from the world and the affect that receives it 'like an arrow'. In this sense the *punctum*

ought to be envisaged, not as a symptom of the image, but as a symptom of the world itself, that is to say a symptom of time and the presence of the referent: ‘it was once there’ – ‘the object itself was there – absolutely, irrecusably present’ (Barthes 1980: 120–1).

Perhaps one could say that *La Chambre claire* is a book about the tortured conscience of the semiologist: by the very choice of its object, photography, it is a book in which the *intractable* part of theory (Barthes 1980: 120), in other words, basically, the actual object of any reflection on the visible, comes down on the side of the referent and the affect. Whereas the image – even the photographic image – is able to become an event and appear to come into being before us without any *it-was-or-has-been*. Thus, for example, the auras and the blurring due to the ‘accidents’, deliberate or otherwise, of photographic development, or the fictitious scratches, made on the negative with a black pencil, in certain calotypes by Victor Régnault, for example. And if *La Chambre claire* reads like a text dictated by a tortured conscience, it is perhaps that Barthes, basically, either did not wish or did not dare to go any further than the semiotic alternative of the coded and the non-coded (we may recall here his definition of the photographic image as a ‘message without a code’). Now this alternative is a trivial one, in a way; in particular, we should note that it is in terms of neither code nor non-code that the symptom, on a body or in an image, will make sense or non-sense. A semiology of images, of their material causes and their sovereign accidents, can exist only if it slides between ‘the world’, uncoded, dominated by empathy, and ‘meaning’ dominated by a narrow concept of the code.

The other concept in relation to which the patch would doubtless have to be situated is that of *the non-mimetic elements of the iconic sign*, as developed by Meyer Schapiro in an important and justly famous article (Schapiro [in French translation, 1980]: 7–34). We shall simply note that the notion of the *field* is there given the very general value of a parameter, in the last resort a geometrical one, and one within which the very organization of the picture could be thought out. Field, frame, ‘smooth or prepared’ background, orientation, format – all this, it is certainly true, allows us to grasp the regular structural features of the image, its fundamental articulations. But, even as regular features, the mimetic elements of the iconic sign are looked at as belonging on the side of the *less-accidental*, if we can put it that way. And when Meyer Schapiro talks of the *material vehicle*, or the ‘imaging substance’ – that is, ‘the lines or the spots of ink or of paint’ (Schapiro [1980]: 28) – he suggests a change of a nosological order arising out of the confrontation with the work, rather than an accident or a material peculiarity exhibited by the work itself.²⁰ In short, he is especially anxious to maintain the universality of parameters that vary with any modification of point of view and with more or less acute ‘finesse of observation’ on the part of the perceiver.

Now the patch of paint does not designate the painting seen from another angle – seen from close to, for example. In so far as it is a symptom, it really designates *another state of painting* within the representational system of the

picture: a precarious, partial, accidental state – which is why we will again talk in terms of the *passage* from one state to another. The patch is not a global parameter, but a peculiarity which nevertheless has value as a paradigm, or even as a paragram. It is an accident: it surprises us with its essential capacity to intrude; in the picture it draws attention to itself; but it is insistent also because it is an accident that repeats itself, passes from picture to picture, and, as a troubling symptom, creates its own paradigm. This is insistence, or sovereignty; a solitary bearer of meaning, or rather something causing *fragments* to appear now and then, in an aleatory fashion, the way seams and veins spring from geological *faults* on the surface of the landscape, showing up a whole *stratum* or deposit of meaning (a metaphor made almost obligatory by the thickness and material depth of paint).

The patch could therefore be defined as that part of a painting which ostensibly interrupts, here or there, the continuity of the representational system of the picture. It is the accidental and sovereign surfacing of a stratum or a coloured seam: it makes sense, violently and equivocally, the way a wound on an area of white skin gives a surge of meaning to the blood that beats beneath it. It auto-presents its material and its accidental causes, namely the gesture itself, the *touch*, the intrusion of paint. Because it is an event too singular to propose a stable set of meanings, the pictorial patch makes sense the way a symptom does, and symptoms never have a transparent infrastructure. Which is why they wander around the body, disappearing from one place only to appear in another, where they are not expected, thus rendering enigmatic both their location and their trajectories as well as their meaning. As an accident or a peculiarity *in praesentia*, the patch is therefore not just the sign-cum-clue of a dissimulated paradigm, a paradigm *in absentia*; more importantly, it is the sign-cum-clue of a labile, *unstable paradigm*. This is why it is somehow twice removed from the order of rationality.

We will now attempt to recapitulate more systematically, to discover where we have got to with the notion of the patch regarding its difference from detail. As far as the relationship between the part and the whole is concerned, we can say that the detail or the part may be subtracted from the whole, whereas in the patch the part devours the whole. The detail is a thread, for example, that is to say a perfectly locatable circumscription of the figurative space; it has *extension*, even if it is minimal – and a well-defined size; it partakes of a measurable space. On the contrary, the patch comes across like a zone of coloured *intensity*; it has, as such, an ‘unmeasurable’ capacity of *expansion* and not of extension in the picture; it will not consist of a detail of a coloured thread, but a run of red, for example; that is to say, an event rather than an object. Detail is defined; its contour delimits a represented object, something that is taking place or rather *has its place* in the mimetic space; its existence within the *topos* of the picture is thus specifiable and localizable, like an *inclusion*. The patch, on the other hand, rather than delimiting an object, produces a potentiality: something *happens*, passes, wanders around in

the space of representation and resists being ‘included’ in the picture because it creates a detonation or an *intrusion*.

This phenomenology already implicates, as an absolutely unavoidable side-effect, the semiological status of the two categories. The detail is discernable, and can thus be cut off from the ‘remainder’. As such, it is nameable: whether thread, needle, knife, corkscrew, or navel, it partakes of the descriptive finesse which slices up and names the visible. The discovery of detail consists in *seeing* well something that is ‘hidden’, because minuscule, and in *naming* well what one sees. The patch, on the other hand, exists only as a result of not seeing well; it demands only *to look*, to look at something ‘hidden’, because it is obvious, there in front of us, dazzling, but difficult to name. The patch does not ‘detach itself’ properly speaking, like the detail; it shows up like a blot or a stain. The detail makes possible the declaration that *it is* a needle – and therefore lets itself be mastered, the way the pervert knows how to master a fetishized object (which shows how strong the phantasmatic element is in the detail). The patch has links with the *intractable* part of theory Barthes spoke of, and it is therefore what tyrannizes the eye and the senses, the way a symptom tyrannizes and invades a body, or a fire invests a town. One seeks out detail in order to find it, whereas one comes across the patch as a consequence of an unexpected encounter. The detail is a piece of the visible which was hiding and which, once uncovered, displays itself discreetly and allows itself to be definitively identified (in idealist terms): the detail is thus looked at as the *last word* on the subject of the visible. On the contrary, the patch *stares you in the face*, mostly in the foreground of the picture, frontally, indiscreetly; but for all that it does not let itself be identified or enclosed: once uncovered it remains problematic.

Translated by Anthony Cheal Pugh (Durham)

NOTES

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1 *Translator’s note*: the author refers here to his book (Didi-Huberman 1985) on Balzac’s short story ‘Le Chef d’oeuvre inconnu’ [‘The Unknown Masterpiece’]. In this study of painting and fantasy Didi-Huberman develops the notion of the ‘*pan*’ (see below, note 19), and uses a series of terms that play on the Latin verb ‘*subiectare*’ and associated words that give, in French, ‘*jeter*’ [to throw], ‘*le jet*’ [the throwing, but also the jet, in the sense of a gush of energy], and ‘*le sujet*’ [the subject]. Didi-Huberman

adds to this list his own term '*le subjectile*' (see below) constructed by analogy with '*projet*' [project] and '*projectile*' [missile, projectile]. In seeking to problematize the notion of the 'surface' Didi-Huberman plays extensively on the common root of these terms in order to suggest that paint, 'thrown' on to its material support (the canvas), is 'subjected' to an intentional act of seeing. Painting also 'throws itself' before the onlooker's gaze (but also 'under' it, since the onlooker misses so much), and, because paintings are not reducible to a simple surface, but involve layers, interwoven textures, folds, and gaps, and because the 'flicker' effect can allow a background to come to the fore and vice versa, all such phenomena function in terms of what Didi-Huberman calls an 'aporia of projection'. This means that the 'project' (consisting of intentions or identifications projected by the spectator) always comes up against the material density of paint, but is 'sent back', or rebuffed. Didi-Huberman thus qualifies the painted surface as 'inductive', rather than 'projective': its implied depth is 'a structure of concealment, effacement . . . upheavals and echoes', while contradictions and tensions, concealed by the unquestioned concept of the 'surface', become visible. With the destabilization of the signifier (the pigment), otherwise invisible 'symptoms' also became readable.

- 2 *Translator's note*: Didi-Huberman has added both emphases on 'is not', for reasons that he clarifies later in his discussion of Freud's analysis of the 'symptom', as well as in the quotation from Heidegger's discussion of the concept of phenomenon in *Being and Time* (note 17), and in the reference (note 18) to Lacan's reversal of the logic of cause and effect with regard to conscious and unconscious 'knowledge'.
- 3 See Arasse 1981: 365–82, for a highly pertinent discussion of a 'cork-screw', in this case a worrying detail in Lorenzo Lotto's *Nativity* in Siena: 'The new-born child still has its umbilical cord attached to its belly, and with a knot clearly visible in it.' Arasse shows that the iconographical *unicum* has meaning with respect to three series: evenemential (the sack of Rome), cultural (the Christ child's umbilical cord), and theological (the notion of virginity).
- 4 To my knowledge nobody except a painter, Martin Barré, has noticed that the famous yellow 'wall' is actually a roof: this too can be attributed to the aporia of detail. But if one sees a 'wall' where there is the sloping plane of a roof, it is perhaps precisely because the colour yellow, in so far as it is a 'patch', tends to come to the fore of the picture, that is to say, it obscures and confuses the iconic 'transparency' of the representational 'sloping plane'.
- 5 *Translator's note*: see below, note 19, for definitions and translations of '*le pan*'. cf. also, Philippe Boyer (1986) *Le petit pan de mur jaune: sur Proust*, Paris: Seuil.
- 6 This refers to a lacemaking technique in which the threads are placed on little bobbins and unrolled on to a 'pillow' where they cross and interweave in a rotating motion controlled by the lacemaker who pins each stitch, moving the pins as the work proceeds.
- 7 That the visible should be the elective arena of the process of denial (Freud's *Verleugnung*) is what we learn, going beyond Claudel, from reading the profusion of texts (always contradictory) produced by the history of painting. On the 'visual' logic of denial see 'Je sais bien, mais grand même', in Mannoni 1969: 9–33.
- 8 The hypothesis of Vermeer's use of the *camera obscura* was put forward in 'Vermeer's use of the camera obscura: a comparative study', Fink 1971: 493–505. It was challenged in Wheelock Jrn 1977: 283–301 (see 291–2 regarding *The Lacemaker*).

- 9 cf. P. Bianconi and G. Ungaretti (1967) *L'opera completa di Vermeer* ['The Complete Works of Vermeer'], Milan: Rizzoli, cat. nos 40 (plate LX) and 9 (plates VII–IX).
- 10 *ibid.*, no. 30 (plate L).
- 11 *ibid.*, no. 24 (plate XXXIX), no. 33 (plate LV), and no. 42 (plate LXI).
- 12 *ibid.*, no. 21 (plate XXXV), no. 31 (plate XLI), and no. 32 (plate XL).
- 13 *ibid.*, no. 14 (plates XIX–XXI), no. 15 (plate XXII), no. 18 (plates XI–XII), and no. 20 (plate XXIII).
- 14 *ibid.*, no. 5 (plates V–VI), no. 7 (plate XIII), and no. 8 (plate X).
- 15 *ibid.*, no. 32 (plate XL).
- 16 Bataille 1970–9: vol. II, 403–4. On the paroxysm and the hysterical fit, see Didi-Huberman 1984: 150–68, 253–9.
- 17 'This is what one is talking about when one speaks of the "symptoms of a disease" . . . one has in mind certain occurrences in the body which show themselves and which, in showing themselves, "indicate" . . . something which does *not* show itself. The emergence . . . of such occurrences, their showing-themselves, goes together with the Being-present-at-hand of disturbances which do not show themselves. Thus appearance, as the appearance "of something", does *not* mean showing-itself; it means rather the announcing-itself by . . . something which does not show itself, but which announces itself through something which does show itself. Appearing is a *not-showing-itself*. But the "not" we find here is by no means to be confused with the private "not" which we used in defining the structure of semblance' (Heidegger 1927 [1962]: 52).
- 18 We should recall here that the *cause* is not to be confused with either the 'motive' or the 'repressed desire' as such. The cause, said Lacan, 'is what is amiss' (*'ce qui cloche'*), and it is what the 'object a' shows up as waiting to appear, in so far as it is the object-cause of desire. [*Translator's note*: the 'object a' is Lacan's formula for substitutes for repressed desire (language is one of the first such substitutes). The painted mark is thus regarded in terms of the psychic structure it partially reveals: as a 'symptom', it partakes in a process that is not causal in the logical sense since the symptom is what 'causes' the unconscious cause to appear.]
- 19 The Littré dictionary gives the following: '*Pan*, masculine noun. 1. A substantial part of a garment such as a dress, a cloak or a dress coat. 2. A hunting term. A kind of net that is stretched around a wood, for catching large animals. . . . 7. "*A pan*", "*à tout pan*", a provincial expression meaning "full up to the brim".' The etymology is not *pagina*, as Furetière thought, but *pannus*, meaning a torn or tattered part of a surface. [*Translator's note*: the word is variously translated, in Harrap's, as 'flap-end', 'game-net', 'side', 'section', 'piece', and 'partition'. '*Pan de mur*' is translated as 'bare wall', and 'piece of wall'. It should also be noted that in popular speech the word can be used for a detonation, such as 'bang!', and that Didi-Huberman, in exploiting the polysemous potential of the word, clearly alludes to this 'explosive' quality.]
- 20 In a recent book, Jean-Claude Bonne has extended greatly the scope of 'non-mimetic elements in the iconic sign' and analysed them with great precision, using the example of the tympanum of Conques to show how they function, and how they 'set the parameters' for the smallest units of a figurative ensemble. cf. Bonne 1984.

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