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Painting, Writing and the Time of an Encounter (Félix Fénéon, by way of André du Bouchet)

Sam McAuliffe, *Modernist Art Writing/Writing Modernist Art*, University of Nottingham, 24-25 June 2019

“There is an incapacity, an infirmity, an impossibility inherent to writing about painting, to writing in the face of painting, for which every text on painting must account.”¹ This is the standpoint adopted by Jean-Luc Nancy at the outset of a text which bears the title ‘On Painting (and) Presence.’ As he himself is quick to concede, to say this is to say nothing new. Variations on this theme can be found throughout modern philosophy’s canonical engagements with painting specifically and the visual field generally. To take just one example, the idea is given a formative place by Foucault in his reading of *Las Meninas*: “... [T]he relation of language to painting is an infinite relation.” He writes there. “It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say.”² To say this, then, is to say nothing new, and yet for Nancy it must not remain unsaid. Whenever writing turns to painting, takes up painting as its concern, it finds itself separated from its object by an interval or scission that it cannot draw itself across, and this leaves it lacking any prospective point of contact with what lies on the other side of the divide. In the absence of a common term, the dissociation that characterises their relation cannot be mitigated. Their respective dispositions remain incommensurable with one another, as if writing and painting *were never in relation*, properly speaking. It is in this sense that the position taken up by writing in this context appears necessarily unfounded, which is why, having been deprived of its ground through this encounter, it is left to encounter its own limits in turn. Now, how writing responds to this situation is subject to notable variation across the discursive practices characteristic of modernism. For instance, it is perfectly possible for writing to derive an unexpected advantage from the insufficiency it labours under in this context: if writing must “account” for itself before painting, because of the schism running between them, it is ultimately never called upon to do so, which means there is nothing to stop it from capitalising on its state of permanent default. “It [writing] may also feel authorized to say anything at all,” Nancy suggests: “The absolute gap between painting and writing allows ten incoherent or contradictory texts to be written about the same work, each of which is nonetheless convincing, and none of which is more appropriate than another. This happens all the time, and

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘On Painting (and) Presence,’ in *The Birth to Presence*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993. p. 341.

² Michel Foucault, ‘Las Meninas,’ in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002. p. 10.

it should serve as a lesson.”³ But there remains another path open to writing here, one that entails passing through a “deliberate difficulty”: this would see writing re-imagine and re-configure its own discursive register in response to the “impossibility” that its encounter with painting exposes it to. Writing would receive its orientation from this impossibility, would proceed bearing its imprint. Nancy describes the passage along this path as follows: “We should start with extreme reserve, another and like form of discretion, a deliberate difficulty that lets painting come, approach and dictate the gesture of writing, which it will never dictate. Not dictate it, then, but rather... hinder, hamper as it solicits it, shackle as it touches it, plastify it. [...] I don’t mean to imply that there is a solution. By definition, there is none [...] But perhaps one should measure oneself by this dissatisfaction, perhaps one should disembark there [...]”⁴ Or, to state the matter in Foucault’s terms one more time: “But if one wishes to keep the relation of language to vision open, if one wishes to treat their incompatibility as a starting-point for speech instead of an obstacle to be avoided, so as to stay as close as possible to both, then one must [...] preserve the infinity of the task.”⁵

How, then, would a practice of writing begin to comport itself in recognition of this task, and in recognition of this task as something insoluble, *infinite*? By what kind of ‘gesture’ would it make itself discernible as such? On what techniques would it draw? Through which discursive modes would it pass? And what consequences would this have for the internal coherence of the discourse it places in circulation? It is with these questions in mind that we want to begin to approach some aspects of the body of criticism authored by Félix Fénéon. Undertaken from the early 1880s onwards, up until his sudden and self-imposed silence in 1893, after which he will not write on the visual arts again, and in no small part responsible for framing the initial reception of the significant transformations undergone by painting in this period, his use of language cultivates an eclectic series of stratagems, disparate to the degree that they cannot be said to result in any form of system, but each of which is nevertheless carried forward by the same intuition: that writing on painting must cultivate a syntax specific to the demands made of it by its object, in recognition of fundamental difference-from-itself which painting presents it with.⁶

³ Nancy, p. 346.

⁴ Nancy, pp. 346; 347.

⁵ Foucault, pp. 9-10.

⁶ For a detailed survey of these stratagems, and their place within the canon of Nineteenth Century art writing, see Joan Ungersma Halperin, *Félix Fénéon and the Language of Art Criticism*, Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980. It would be wrong to suggest that Fénéon always proceeds in recognition of this difference-from-itself: it is certainly the case, for example, that he can place the word in an imitative relation to its referent, this being, Nancy suggests, ‘the temptation’ that writing is always on the point of giving way to when broaching the visual field. “Another temptation may offer itself at the same time: to imitate painting, to ‘render’ the pictorial by word choice (grain. spot, puddle, flow, trail, mass, crust, glaze, crest, filament, flattening, etc.), by the will of a language that would make itself, materially, into its object. This is undoubtedly a necessary extremity of language, but an

Now, in one way or another, a practice of writing that submits to this imperative finds itself compelled to address the question of time. The disjunction between writing and painting, word and image, is also temporal in nature. Writing develops sequentially, according to a process whereby at any one moment a particular phase of a given sequence requires the latency of others in order to be legible. In this way it establishes a discursive form that extends across time. Painting, on the other hand, will have made all of itself available instantaneously, and will have done so from the first; whether or not the gaze is capable of grasping this presentation, in principle nothing has been withheld from it (a painting is, so Nancy suggests, “dealt out all at once... each time the entirety of its own discretion” (347)). At stake here are two distinct modalities of temporality, two ways of being in time, which cannot be brought to coincidence. In fact they mutually exclude one another. It is in this sense that Nancy refers to what he calls “the painting-event” as a “cut [in] the thread of discourse”:

“This cut is not only, nor perhaps above all, that of a figurality slicing into a discursivity... [T]he cut is perhaps first that of the ‘each time’: each time, this, this drawing, this stroke, this splash, this colour. Each time unique, irrepeatable, irreplaceable: what the signs of discourse cannot be.”⁷

The cut that painting’s manifestation is expressed through here, and the instant that its manifestation is concentrated upon, cannot be represented discursively. Its singularity means it is unable to cohere as an element of discourse. That is to say, the cut does not take place in the same way twice. Each time it takes place, the time through which it takes place brings before the system of discourse tasked with its representation something that cannot be registered through this system’s own terms. In this sense, time dissociates writing and painting as much as anything else. Now, the consequences of this disjunction are also a central concern of a remarkable article written by André du Bouchet, which appears in the 1949 issue of the Paris based modernist journal *Transition*.⁸ Entitled ‘Félix Fénéon or The Mute Critic,’ it is written in the wake of the publication of Fénéon’s *Oeuvres* the previous year, a collection edited by Jean Paulhan, this being the first attempt to gather together his criticism, until then scattered across the magazines and reviews of the period, in a single place. For du Bouchet too, writing on painting is characterised as an undertaking which must grapple with the fact that its own temporal structure tends to set it at odds with that of the visual field it seeks alignment with. But it is also reproached for responding to this situation with a sleight of hand which sees it transpose its own structural features across

extremity where language loses itself. And if it doesn’t lose itself, it contorts itself” (346). This will is no doubt one of the distinguishing traits of his corpus.

⁷ Nancy, p. 343.

⁸ This edition contains contributions from, among others, Mallarmé, Degas, Eluard, Ponge, Picasso, Beckett and René Char, each of which is concerned, in one way or another, with how one art makes contact with another. See Adorno’s ‘Art and the Arts’ for an account of this aesthetic tendency within modernism and its historical conditions.

the divide and impose them on the object in question, exploiting the liberty that the absolute gap between itself and painting affords it. Singling out the criticism characteristic of Diderot's *Salons*, and the latter's propensity to extrapolate a narrative from the visual field that it itself has projected there, he writes the following:

It is here that others cheat. Thus Diderot interpolates, between illusory past and future, what he calls the *moment of the picture*. It is a story whose point of departure he reconstitutes, whose vicissitudes he takes it upon him to relate, and which he suddenly cuts short halfway through with feigned astonishment—don't move!—so as to bring the picture, abruptly conjured heaven knows whence, before our eyes. And as in a film, when the spools are stopped, we see the characters and apples petrified in full flight, absurdly suspended between earth and sky. He who wastes his time trying to hedge round the refractory picture with the language of time (as well try and take a handful of water) finds himself obliged to resort to magical assimilation, alchemy and other stratagems.⁹

This conceit on the part of writing – which is indeed taken to extraordinary lengths by Diderot, it can even see him staging imaginary dialogues with the figures represented on the canvas¹⁰ – this conceit treats painting as a scene unfolding in time, in which writing can intervene at will, all the while ensuring that the painting is viewed through a frame that is not its own, one that remains extrinsic to its own dimensions and modalities. Now if du Bouchet invokes this convention here, it is simply to show the degree to which Fénéon's work has broken with it, and has done so, moreover, not on theoretical grounds, but on the plane of discourse itself. “He pronounces no judgement, expresses no opinion, commits himself to no philosophy, no esthetic other than that relevant to the picture he describes. All that can be said is that he describes some pictures in preference to others. But he confines himself to describing them.”¹¹ It is this self-imposed constraint, reducing discourse to a single function, that of description, which allows Fénéon to develop a syntactical idiom that concedes as little as possible to the “language of time.” This is how du Bouchet understands this gesture:

[A] sentence is composed, among other things, of a subject and an object whose relationship is determined by time (the verb). Verbs are conjugated, but not a picture's, and therein lies the whole significance of composition. This dense cipher, eternally fixed in its manifold radiance, casts no more than a gleam in the turbulent waters of discourse and time. So do not be surprised if Fénéon often leaves out the verb. “The sky, the peak, simply; the peak charred red against the cold white and blue sky”—a Hokusai print. “The maid, to one side, upright”—a segment of Gauguin. Fénéon refuses to transgress the limits of reason. [...] He attains the unreal and substantial plane on which the crystal of time dehisces.”¹²

Since the operation of the verb necessarily confers upon each sentence a temporal qualification, once it is excised, or “numbed,” as du Bouchet also says here, then whatever the sentence makes reference to on the visual plane is no longer situated in time, at least not in accordance with the modes of temporality characteristic of this side of the divide. Of course, by doing this, Fénéon

⁹ André du Bouchet, ‘Félix Fénéon or The Mute Critic,’ in *Transition*, no. 5, 1949, pp. 76-77.

¹⁰ ‘Soon one is surprised to find oneself conversing with this child and consoling her. This is so true, that I'll recount some of the remarks I've made to her on different occasions. Poor little one...’ (*Salon of 1765, Greuze's Young Girl Crying over her Dead Bird*, 98).

¹¹ Du Bouchet, p. 78.

¹² Du Bouchet, p. 76.

appears to impose a restriction on the efficacy of description, depriving it of one of its capacities, rendering one of its key functions inoperative. But is this not precisely what Nancy means when he insists that writing should let painting “hinder,” “hamper” or “shackle” it? “The sky, the peak - simply” is a fragment of *ekphrasis* which draws its force from the disruption to which it itself subjects its own form. The absence of the verb acts as a cut in the thread of discourse.

At the close of his article, du Bouchet suggests that Fénéon’s use of description is subject to a paradox, one which inverts the distribution of values on which the art of description is conventionally thought to rest.

The mind at grips with Fénéon’s flawless phrase, its baffling solicitations, is conscious at least, if not of the object from which it proceeds, of a verbal presence. For the words have ceased to be transparent, which is a serious matter. [...] Between us and the without stretches an opaque phrase, exacerbating, immovable. The window is barred. But from our bewilderment at last a picture springs, fully armed.¹³

If writing manages to disclose something of the painting it refers to, this is only insofar as it itself clouds over, becoming, finally, opaque, or “gritty” as du Bouchet suggests earlier (and this is the paradox: this is achieved not through obfuscation but precision). Here is a form of description for which the word is not a point of view onto the visual plane. “The window is barred.” And as such its premise is the fundamentally dissociative relation between writing and painting: only when darkness falls on one side does light shine on the other.

¹³ p. 79.