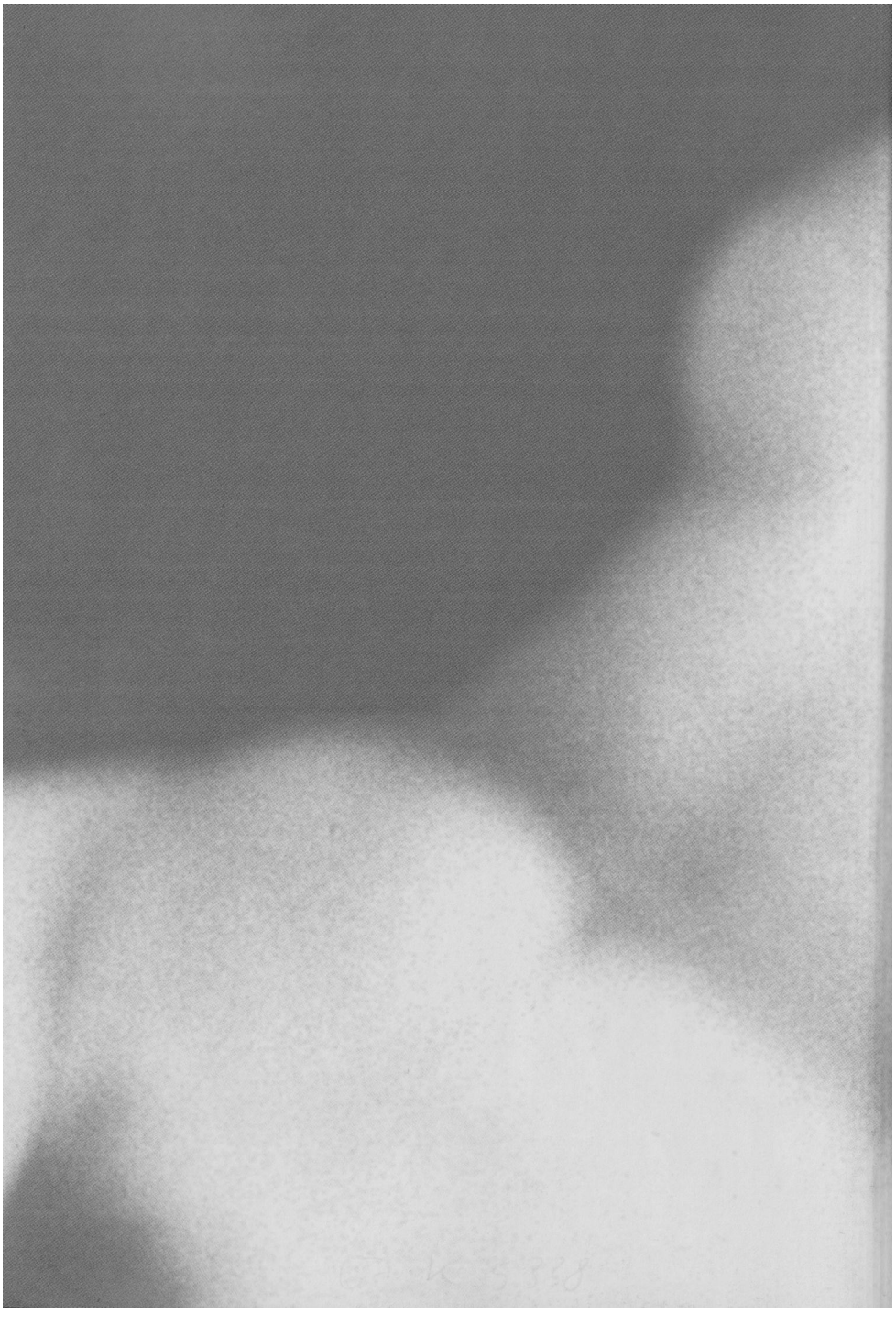

The Impossible Nude

Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics

By François Jullien

Translated by Maev de la Guardia

With photographs by Ralph Gibson

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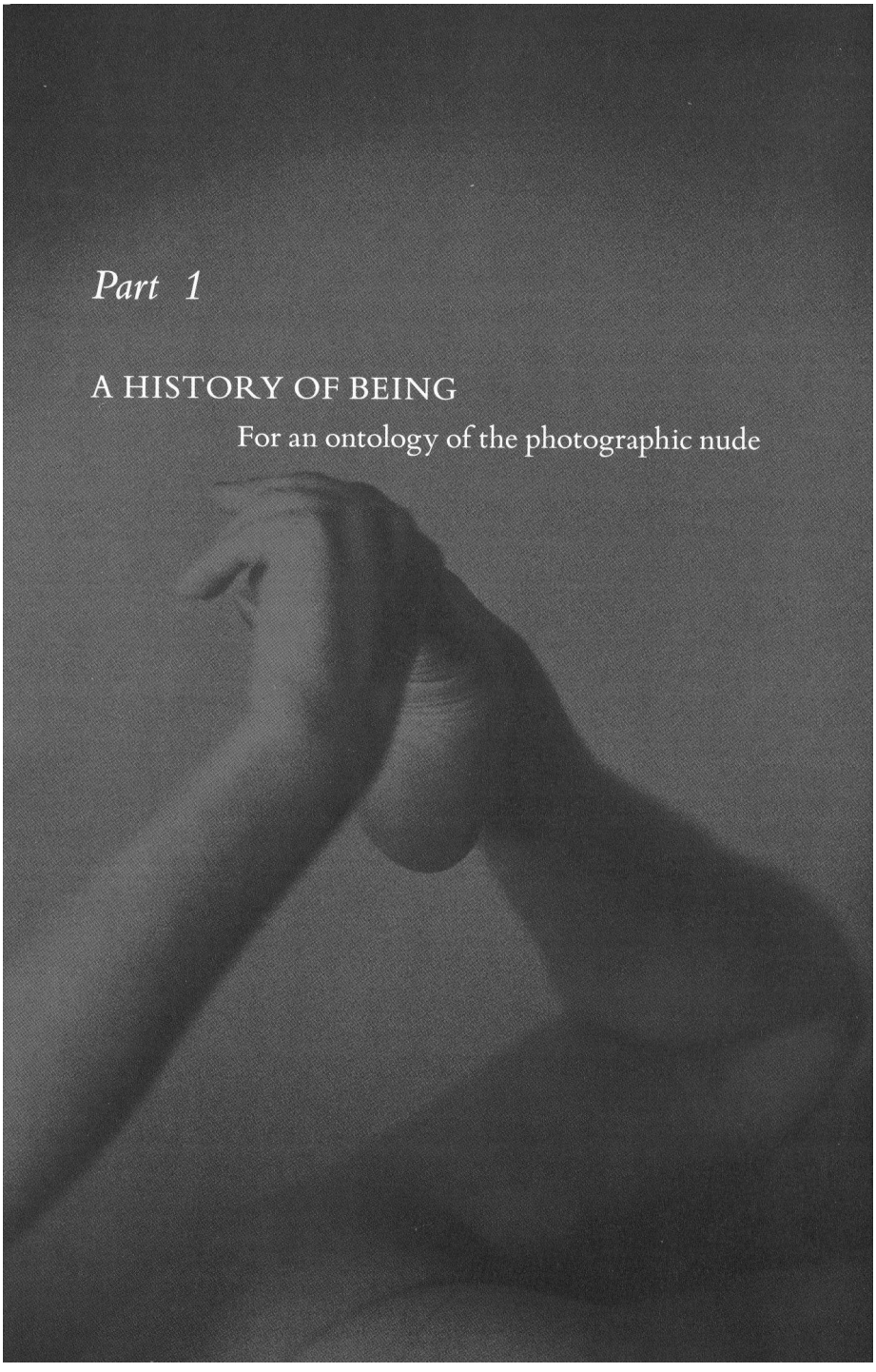
Preface

Yves Guillot came to see me in the little office reserved for the president of the Collège international de philosophie, on the top floor of the former École polytechnique building, with a new collection of photographs by Ralph Gibson in his hand. He had come to ask me if I would write the preface. Somewhat surprised by the suggestion, I leafed through the preparatory copy of the album, and was amazed to see how the nudes scattered among the photographs stood out from the rest of this *Courant continu* (Direct Current), as the book was entitled. This brought me back to what I think is something fundamental to the nude: its power of *effraction*.

The nude's capacity for effraction seems all the more forceful to me because I consider it from the standpoint of my experience as a sinologist. Not only are there no nudes to be found in Chinese tradition, but, more radically, everything about the tradition suggests that the nude is simply an *impossibility*. Set against that tradition, the nude we look at with the museumgoer's jaded eye springs out as a revealing element, illuminating the European tradition of art from the Greeks to our own day, from sculpture to painting and on to photography, and also disclosing how thought shaped our culture. The nude is a paradigm of what the "West" consists of in cultural terms, and brings to light the stances that originally underpinned *our* philosophy. The question of essence, of the "thing itself," can be addressed through the nude, which also records its history. The nude brings into play that which is most direct—frontal—and most sensible, thus reopening and making us keenly sensitive to the possibility of ontology.



Part 1

A HISTORY OF BEING

For an ontology of the photographic nude

I

I have always felt that what is so often said about sublimation in art is either false or, at best, perfunctory. And this applies first and foremost to what would seem to have the most eminent claim to it: the nude.

On the isle of Cnidus lies that other Cythera. An ancient witness tells us that in the gardens of its sanctuary, Praxiteles' Venus stood surrounded by the rarest of fruit-bearing trees, mingled with clusters of grapes; in the cool air of the shrine, so little detachment did she inspire in her visitors that, as the doxographer relates, one of them leapt onto the pedestal and flung himself upon the statue in close embrace. All of her bounties were freely offered by the goddess, and none was forbidden fruit. *Venus naturalis* taught that there is no such thing as "aesthetic" detachment—the expression is specious, as is also shown in one of Ralph Gibson's photographs, where a man's hand follows the perfect curve of the croup: it skims the flesh with the gentle but authoritative assurance of possession.

Desire, then, does not seem to be metamorphosed or converted by some kind of alchemy of art that would make it more acceptable; in other words, the argument of idealization fails. Because here the photograph gives a glimpse of what is most desirable—or better still: of that which is *of* the most desirable. The photograph makes this its object, captures its "in-itself," states its essence; and the strength of the image lies precisely in the fact that the photograph offers it in its entirety and without reserve, *exposing* it completely. It is displayed in

an unsurpassable way in what becomes an absolute mode. In a word, its strength comes from holding up to view an unpassable limit, with nothing possible beyond it; here the sensible, and with it the desirable, reaches its ultimate boundary, its end point, its absolute.

We can imagine a beyond to everything: to a landscape, to the horizon, to the world, to clouds. Ever further, other worlds, hinterlands. But there is no beyond to the nude. "Here is your beginning and here is your end": part of the real stops there, at this curve of the croup, at this skin texture. It is peremptory: after the nude there is nothing more. There is no screen left, every last layer has been removed, nothing remains to be peeled away; perception cannot reach behind it, cannot pluck anything more away from it or take another step further.

An extreme has been reached. Not at the most distant horizon, but right here.

It is the end, *the very point of contact.*

Eroticism has not thereby been dismissed, and still less has it been denied or even put aside; but desire is curtailed at the same time as it is aroused. A definitive "this is it" has been reached, preventing desire from exploring any deeper or advancing further.

II

The dizzying effect of the nude, then, arises first of all from the fact that it condemns us to an inability to move forward, to the fixity of the essences ("heaven," maybe, but suddenly frozen), to there being nothing left to expect, no possibility of onward progress. Everything is there, definitive. In fact it is stated by the word itself, so short but also so final, the plainest but perfect word. "You are nude," a total statement of fact. Or in injunctive mood, hammered out like rapid gunfire: "Je-te-veux-nue"—"I-want-you-nude." No comment—there is nothing more to be said and no way to attenuate the utterance. For it is no secret that phrases like these do not communicate with any of the others, the ordinary phrases (and all others are ordinary), and that there is neither meeting ground nor common measure between them.

This means that when Gibson chose to include nudes in his *Courant continu*, his decision involved bringing about the communication of the incommunicable and linking the unlinkable. For despite his efforts to make them mingle with all the rest, to scatter them among the streets, gestures, things, and faces, his nudes reject his installation. However much it may be mixed into this "current," the nude creates its own impact every time and remains apart from all the rest. Each one presents itself as though it were the first nude ever, impossible to integrate entirely into the image, whether pictured among leaves, in an armchair, against a window, or even on a bed. A nude always enters by effraction. It is either nude or other (anything other). In other photographs, an intention can be discerned, or at least, effects can be identified, the meaning can be investigated, symbols developed, narratives woven. They can be *read*, they are open to appreciation in an infinite variety of ways. Each has its caption: they are signs. The nude, on the other hand, always has the impact of an immutable revelation: the "everything is there," "this is it," with no horizon or receding perspective, no beyond. All the rest is merely allusive: the nude alone confronts desire. There is nothing to be decoded in it, the nude is no longer a sign, the unsurpassable is simply there, before our eyes.

Or again, all other subjects, whether real or invented—streets, clothes, hairstyles, and even landscapes and "nature"—show as much evolution over time as variety among themselves. Whereas the nude does not and cannot change: it is invariable—it is still essence.

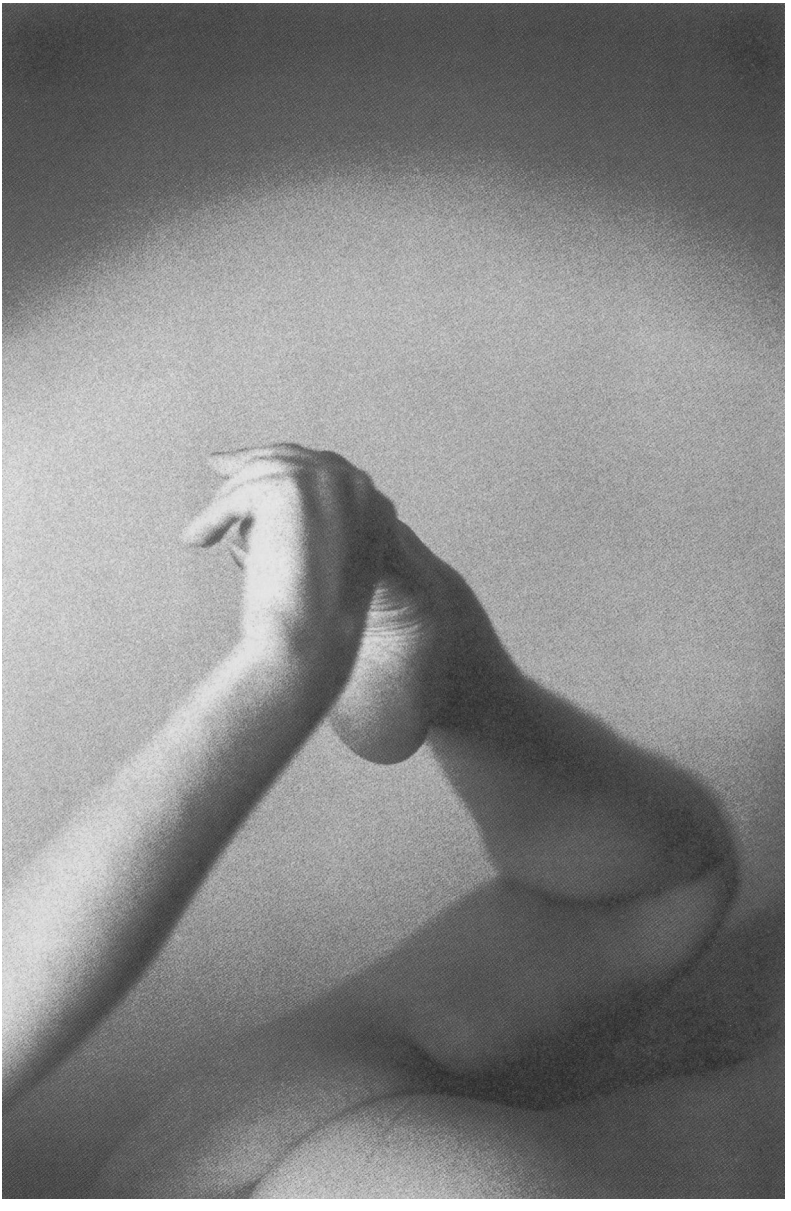
It could of course be argued that, as far as the photographer is concerned at least, the nude is not quite so clearly defined, that it has its edges and margins. Where, in fact, does the nude really begin and end? For the camera lens has the particular power of being able to frame and crop at will. Gibson even seems to enjoy playing with the transitional areas surrounding the nude: a hand, an arm over the face, a back, may be naked, but it does not pertain to the nude, and neither does a body plunged into water. The argument obviously does not hold up, though. Because we know—and the fact that our attention is seized every time is evidence of it—that nudity results from a process of uncovering. Like a great sacrifice or, rather, like a great ritual,

the one and only—it had to be. The Venus of Cnidus still holds in her hand the drapery she has just removed before entering the lustral water. In Gibson's Venus the trace of the last piece of clothing she has just shed lingers in the streaks of light striping the bare skin; or she reveals the span of perfect whiteness that bars the body—the ultimate scrutiny of the nude, where it has never been touched by the sun.

III

Despite being generally recognized, and even though it commonly serves as the point of departure for dealing with the nude, the subtle action operated by language in deriving the nude out of nudity has nonetheless been given little in-depth attention. For although one term arises from the other, the two are nevertheless mutually opposed. Nakedness implies a diminished state, being stripped, laid bare ("stark naked"); it carries with it a concomitant notion of feeling shame or of cause for pity, whereas no such sense is evoked by the nude—the feeling, on the contrary, is one of plenitude; the nude is total presence, offering itself for contemplation. As is confirmed in every instance, simply switching from one term to the other is therefore enough to make the transition from "life" to "art," and the very possibility of the nude's existence—or of access to the nude, rather—suffices to mark the frontier between these two spheres (or makes them separate spheres). The split between the two can be deepened further: whereas nakedness is experienced as being in movement (the blurred flow of life), the nude proceeds from a cessation of momentum and a state of fixity. This makes photography a medium ideally suited to the nude, since every photograph freezes its subject into immobility. Most particularly, in making the transition from nakedness to the nude, there is a departure from the viewpoint of the subject and the conscious awareness of self-nudity (where one sees oneself: "and they saw that they were naked"—Gen. 3:7), and the nude is set up as a distanced object (the one so conveniently captured by the photographic "objective"). In this event, the path follows the opposite direction and proceeds from the *for-itself* to the *in-itself*.

To put it another way: nakedness is me, the nude is someone else—the other. In the case of nakedness, the other is looking at me (or more



precisely, I see the other who is seeing me), whereas the opposite occurs with regard to the nude. If a photograph shows someone whom I see as being in a state of nakedness, that is because I put myself in his place out of sympathy, and transpose my consciousness onto his.

In nakedness, and in the sense of shortcoming it provokes (which the Greeks also undoubtedly felt: *ta aidoia*, perfect naturalism—naturism—is nonexistent), I experience the fact that my being is not confined to that body, and that my feelings, my mind, and my possibilities extend beyond it. I am not limited to the visible, and even less so to that particular manifestation of it. Cornered into denial, all I can say to you (and here is the voice of shame)[1] is that I am more than this—more than the apparent "everything is here," "this is how it is." Or rather, you know very well that this is not "me," but that through me it is the being itself that is suddenly found wanting (*alias*, whose negative becomes apparent). Consequently, we hasten to make good the deficit that arises within being and is manifested in our closest intimacy (and even reveals our "intimacy")—a deficit of which consciousness is both the measure and the product. Or at least, being unable to redeem that deficit, we all tacitly agree to cover it up and conceal it. A crevice has opened up and our body is a stigma—something to be hidden from sight.

Now, what cannot be achieved by any effort of dialectics, whether of thought or of the real, is attained by the nude. Straightaway. The nude reveals a body that naturally envelops the being in its entirety, seamlessly, with no gaps or fissures. There is no severance either: this nude contains the "soul" within the *nature* that it is. Indeed, it is in this form of the body, within the boundary of this "everything is here," that the being reaches its plenitude—the plenitude conventionally referred to as "beauty."

From nakedness to the nude: this could epitomize the tension inherent in existence. Nakedness is "animal," or rather, it is not some-

1. The French here is *pudeur*, whose multiple connotations in English encompass any or all of the notions of shame, embarrassment, modesty, reserve, demureness, and so on. While the author incorporates the full semantic spectrum of the word, he gives slight emphasis to the feeling of "shame" (close to *honte*), which has therefore been used throughout the text.—Trans.

thing that "is" but something that is experienced, in a measure that even increases in proportion to our rejection of the animality that lies within us, mercilessly barring the way to our desire to escape it. Or even worse, it forces us to watch with our own eyes the spectacle of our own failing attempts to escape from it. As for the nude, it tends toward the Ideal and serves as the "image" (*eikôn*) for the Idea. Although it retains something of the intimacy revealed by nakedness (to an even greater degree in photographic art), far from making it felt as an infirmity, the nude *objectifies* it to the point of revealing infinity within this finite. It turns toward the "divine."

IV

But from what nakedness is the nude to be derived, like a statue is hewn from marble? After some hesitation lingering from the days when it was still a tool in the service of painters, photography seems to have settled the question: whether Eve or Venus, the answer is woman. Yet Greek nude statuary began with Apollo, and the male nude dominated European painting until the seventeenth century. Does this reflect a change of mores or of medium? Could it be that photography is more closely related to the idea of desire and the depiction of woman as a sexual object? Or is it that the body of Eve is more perfect than Adam's—in other words, that hers is closer to "Form" than his? From the photographic standpoint at least, the male genital apparatus in particular seems to have barely progressed beyond the inchoate, as though left over from some earlier era. It might perhaps lend itself to sculpture, and it may even be paintable, but it is not photographable, unless with the express design of underlining its nakedness. This would be borne out by its opposite, the female breast, which is at once plenitude and pure curve, the perfect conjunction—the Greeks would say—of "matter" and "form." Or could it be that on film, the contrast between skin texture and tufted hair, the infinitely smooth and the hirsute, makes the female nude more unadulteratedly nude than that of the male, a kind of superlative nude even more nude than he would be?

What we are dealing with here, then, is Woman, as opposed to *a* woman: otherwise we would be liable to fall into the category of

photographic memorabilia and the anecdotic (even if the photographer's subject is the same woman—and even if it is "his" woman). The photographer is Don Juan. Not out of pleasure, but out of logic and therefore out of duty (as was the case with Don Juan): his interest lies in "woman" purely as an object of eidetic variation. Or perhaps I should say that which is "*of* woman" in the same way as I referred earlier to that which is *of* the nude or *of* the desirable, using the *of* in its double sense as a preposition meaning "about" and [in French] as a partitive article,[2] as in *du marbre* (this is marble) or *du sucre* (this is sugar). For "of woman" or "of the nude" means first of all that each will have to be considered in its essence, as one does with love or beauty. This "on the subject of" sets woman an infinite distance away, presented as a mythical subject that from then onward we will make unending attempts to approach from every possible angle and pose: it is the final limit against which all our endeavors will crash, like waves against a breakwater.

But "of woman" is also a glaring statement of the fact that the photographer has arrogated the right to slice her up at will. It is indeed much easier for a photographer to frame and crop than it is for a painter or a sculptor. Head, body, legs are clipped off, while the face, most notably, would always present a risk of our relapsing into a sense of the particular. It would have specific features, an expression; it would "remind us of something" and therefore distract us from the essential (unless that were also cut up to make another landscape out of it). This is why preferably only "that" would be retained: the point where the laying bare is complete, which is emblematic of the event—the transition from smooth to downy, from light to dark, from meadow to forest. Here begins and there ends. This fragment is not merely taken to signify the whole, like rhetorical synecdoche: the fragment *is* the whole—it has ontological value. Further still, in order to appropriate the essence more completely the photographer not only fragments the body but disintegrates it as well: in this photograph the

2. The French partitive article denotes a quantitatively indefinite part. The English equivalent would be the absence of any article, as in, for example, "The lake contains water."—Trans.

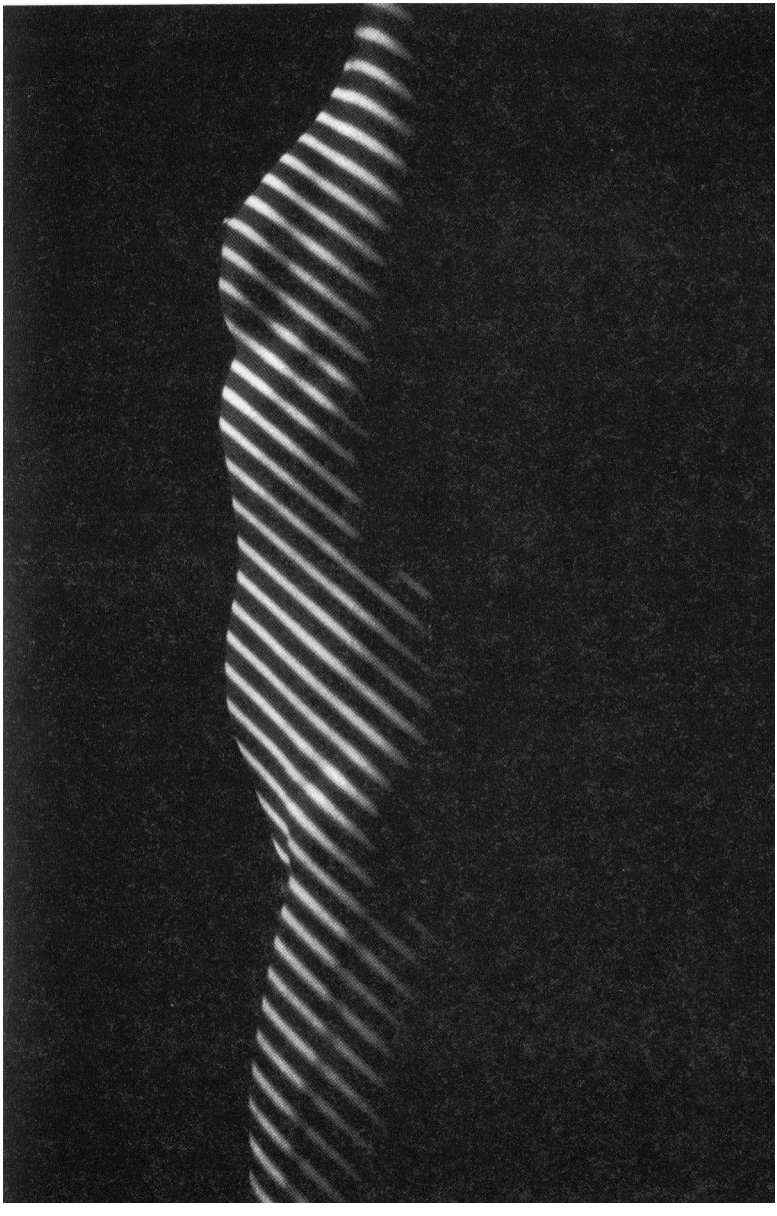
window blind stripes it as though seen through a prism. In short, there is always too much for the eye to take in: the female body can never be contemplated with a single gaze, never be encompassed in its entirety by one look. The gaze would be dispersed, torn between vying targets, would wander from lips to breasts, to the swell of the belly, one distracting from the other. To grasp the essence of the whole, it is better to crop.

The photographer may celebrate woman—she the powerful goddess, he her acolyte—but he nonetheless handles her like an object. The nude comes into being at his command, and the personal *you* is deliberately stripped of all consciousness. One way as good as another of making the declaration (repeated by all artists to their models), I need to make you my object in order to gain access to your infinity.

V

I think that without falling into unwarranted generalities, it can for once be said that if there is a single revealing trait of the Western intellectual adventure, both aesthetic and theoretical, one that is characteristic in terms of its own natural choices (and by virtue of which one can speak of Europe or of "the West"), it is certainly the nude. This choice is, of course, implicit, and *buried* out of sight, and therefore has to be brought up into the light for it to become clear.

What we would at last see in front of us is something it is most unusual to find in cultural anthropology: a specificity. The nude is found throughout the whole of Europe, from its southern regions to the north, from its eastern confines (Pergamum) to the western areas (the work of Zurbarán at the religious-minded court of Philip II included nudes, as did that of Dürer). That nudes appear in sculpture, painting, and photography undeniably denotes the existence of a tradition, for attempts to explore the nude have been continuously relayed not only from one artist or country to another, or from one era to another, but also from one form of artistic expression to another. Even if Foucault cast doubt on the legitimacy of the term, we can indeed speak of "tradition" here, so much does it appear that—contrary to what can be observed in other fields, such as science—in this particular case what we have before us is unquestionably the same



coherence of thought and the same outlook that have been handed down to us from the Greeks to the present day. It is as though the Greeks established a cultural fold from which we have never since broken away or made any further advance. In solitary opposition to the "everything changes" of life and thought, the nude stands like an erratic block, as unaffected by progress as it is by the erosion of time: "man" may be dead, but, as we know, his Nude remains very much alive.

The nude: there is, and can only be, one nude—precisely because it is *nude*, in its "naked" state, with no adjuncts, stripped totally bare. Proportions and poses can be tirelessly and methodically changed—the cleavage between the breasts reduced to a narrow line or spread wide as a plain; the figures themselves ascetic and bony as Gothic vaults, or plump, Rubenesque—but they are all nudes. The nude maintains its coherence and its autonomy, not through the aesthetic or plastic treatment it undergoes, since this can vary in the extreme, but by virtue of what has always been sought in it—which I call here the essence. This is why the nude can only be an object of "tradition" (or antitradition, as in the case of Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*), not history (can there in fact be any such thing as a "History of the Nude"?—even Kenneth Clark preferred to divide the subject into thematic sections). Despite immense efforts in this regard, we are condemned to be confined to *variations* rather than innovation; and in what is perhaps a unique case, our standpoint falls in line with that of the Greeks and overlaps it: we are directly linked to them, irrespective of the tremendous distance in our sensitivities and the thick layers of History that separate us from them. In targeting the nude, our means are depleted and visions eroded, but the flame of fascination is revived, the *gaze* is turned upward with the astonishing innocence of the first day of discovery. Because it is the closest and the most circumscribed of all subjects, and the only one that is totally *given*, it is revealed as the only infinite one, to which we inevitably have to return.

Photography confirms this. After the eventual academization of the nude in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century painting and its subsequent dearticulation (with Cézanne), photography appeared almost

miraculously to take up the challenge that painting was no longer able to sustain (or perhaps this new technique was what had caused the latter to take a different course in the first place). Its excessive realism may at first have made photography seem inappropriate for this purpose, being seen as useful only for the strict reproduction of nudity and therefore relegated merely to providing a source of more detailed and less costly material for painters. However, any such idea was quickly corrected: photography had a natural vocation for the nude, and it too had ambitions in that direction.

So whatever new developments may occur in genre, style, or medium, they are all measured against the nude; and in European history our conception of "humanism" (which, despite everything we now know about it, can still be salvaged) undoubtedly draws its pertinence from the nude and from what it implicitly, but therefore all the more radically, brings into play at the juncture between the natural and the ideological. This pertinence derives from the idea of making (of *choosing* to make) man's only reality—that is to say, his reality isolated and reduced to itself and nothing more, his totally desirable form and flesh—the model of reality itself (of all reality) in its most extreme perfection. Through the nude, "Man" has rediscovered an essence and become timeless. Whence European culture's continued attachment to the nude: European art was fixated on the nude, just as its philosophy was fixated on the true. The nude was held to be formative in the teaching of art in the same way that logic was in philosophy; and in Europe's art academies, rendering the nude was an exercise practiced in the same way that demonstrating truth (the naked truth) was in theoretical teaching. This was always the case, despite the extreme differences of attitudes toward the human body from one epoch to another. It is easy to understand that the nude should have emanated from Greece, where gymnastics were glorified, but far less so that the Church, with its rejection of the body and condemnation of nakedness, should nevertheless have made a place for the nude in the greatest pages of the biblical narrative: Adam and Eve in Paradise, the Pietà, and the Last Judgment. Here, instead of being exalted, the human body is made harrowing

by its pathos; it no longer reflects the harmony of the model but is now abruptly schematized, and it could even be a depiction of nakedness (to put nature to shame)—but the nude nonetheless remains, refusing to be uprooted. Antinudes they may be, but they are still nudes, and the artists of the Middle Ages lost little time in recalling the lessons of antiquity. Stranger yet is the fact that the Doctors of the Church should have preferred the version of Antioch to that of Jerusalem and elected for the crucified Christ to be unclothed rather than draped: this nude stands on our altars.

VI

It would be impossible to understand the uninterrupted predominance of the constantly recast nude in European culture without seeing it as the focal point where the tensions that engendered this culture converge and reach their greatest intensity. Between its poles of the sensible and the abstract, the physical and the Idea, or the erotic and the spiritual, and finally, of nature and art (all of these terms are, of course, to be put in quotation marks; I cite them here as the labels that language puts at our disposal), the nude is the crucible where these opposites have effervesced and combined, where each both intensifies and cancels out the other. For it would be naive to think, as—such is the weight of philosophical clichés—it is still often said, that the "West" has been dualist (the dualism of body and soul, and so on). For the deeper the West splits these dualities and becomes engulfed in the cleft between them, the more they call out for their limits to be overstepped and have thereby stimulated Western thought. The emergence of the nude resulted from the collision and collusion of these extremes.

The art of photography bears this out. Photography captures what is most immediate: not just the skin, but also its texture; not only this texture, but also its innumerable asperities and even the indentation left on the skin by the removed clothing, the fleeting trace of the event. But elusive though this concrete is, we are also aware that it is composed by the photographer, who *constructs* it (through the selection of the film, lighting, framing, editing, and so on). In the same

way, of course, as what philosophy shows us is always done by the perceiving mind, but in this instance it is made explicit and exemplified in the most infinitely studied manner. Just as painters or sculptors look for the right pose, seek the proportions of the body, and reconstruct them in geometrical terms, the photographer *operates*: he draws an ideal landscape out of the perceived body. He extracts a pure design from the object and sets it up as essence.

In the nude itself, the same occurs in the confrontation between what is customarily represented as "desire" and "Form," the "erotic" and the "Idea." As I stated at the outset, there is no renunciation of desire in the photographic nude: on the contrary, it uses it, but in the face of the unsurpassable, it makes it evasive. Which has to be explained.

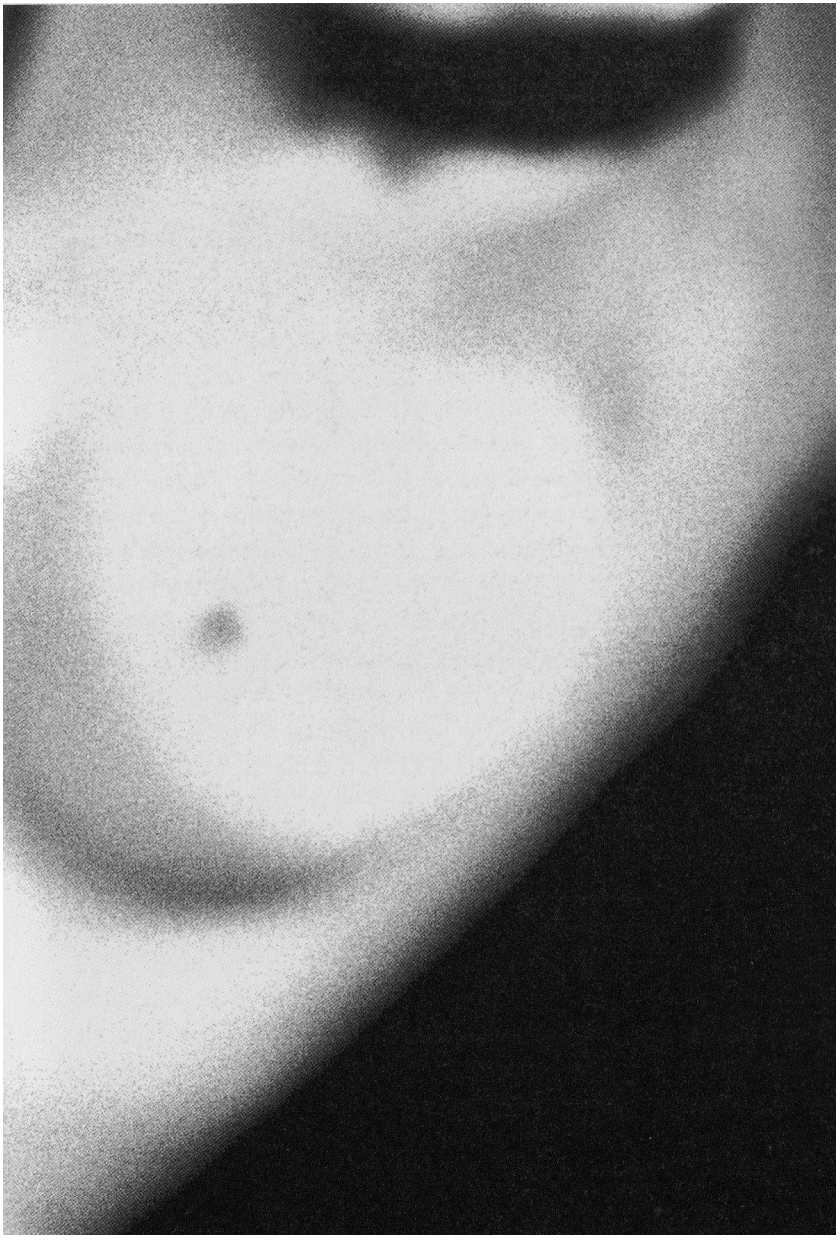
For a start, at least, we should put this in guarded terms. For when we consider Gibson's nudes and reflect on the experience they construct, it becomes difficult to fall back on commonplace notions or to tread yet again all the usual signposted paths of the ascetic version of Plato-Plotinism: it is commonly said that where the nude is concerned, eroticism is left behind, transcended, sublimated . . . I hesitate to use these terms, not so much because they are strictly speaking false, as because I am afraid that they may prematurely effect facile reconciliations and flounder in what would then risk being nothing more than a convenient means of representation (as well as an impregnable tendency to moralization). I also fear that they might trade off what actually happens in the presence of the nude—which may perhaps remain diverse, noncoherent, and not totally absorbable—against an overefficient concept that would spare the mind any thought-provoking discomfort (as, for example, the use of this too unitary, too one-way-functioning *trans-*: trans-mutation, trans-fer, trans-figuration . . .).

This shows my misgivings as to the first word that will shape "what happens" and be used to identify that from here onward, for it has to preserve the gap that gave rise to these extremes (the famous desire-Idea dualism) and that *imparts tension* to the experience while at the same time saying how far the nude—and perhaps the nude

alone—succeeds in *dissolving* their opposition. The erogenous zone is recognizably present, but reworked to the point of abstraction: or else it portrays a world on its own, into which desire can become absorbed. It can even be said that Gibson's art lies in taking the erogenous to the edge of de-identification, so precisely is it determined: it is then peremptorily apportioned between light and shade, where enlargement, or the blurred image, derealize it at will. The interplay of volume, mass, curve, and texture creates a lunar atmosphere in which the pulsing flesh seems colder than marble.

This is what makes photographic work so interesting in comparison with the older techniques of painting and sculpture: its technical capacity for realistic reproduction enables photography to go the furthest in the direction of pleasure (and to become exclusively erotic—pornographic), and so incurs the greatest risk of coming close to "flesh," as we might say (figuratively speaking; Courbet used photographs when he was painting *The Creation of the World*). For there is indeed a strange juxtaposition of nakedness, the flesh, and the nude—the nakedness of shame and the flesh of pleasure—and since photography can make the broadest sweep from one to the other, between Eve and Venus, it highlights all the more strongly the requirement specific to the nude ("the beautiful").

So it is a continual source of amazement to see the strange thing that happens to desire—strange, and regarding which the notion of a disinterestedness proper to art, though not entirely mistaken, is overinclusive—when faced not with flesh but with the nude (and at exhibitions of photographs of the nude, this disturbance of their desire is what I would be curious to observe in the gaze of the spectators). For the nude does not adorn itself with significations to compensate for its derealization of desire; it does not make an emblem of the body and it avoids entering the forest of symbols. Nor does it try to effect a conversion of "flesh" into "spirit." Not at all: the purpose of being unburdened and refined is to remain nude, and it allows nothing to be superimposed on it—not even "meaning." This is how it remains the in-itself, the essence; it is also why desire, when faced with the nude, becomes pensive or, as I suggested earlier, evasive.



VII

That the nude signifies essence can be seen from one of the best-known writings of Descartes. The scene is etched in the mind of every would-be philosopher: a block of wax stands on a table, yellow, fragrant, resistant to the touch. But when held close to the fire it suddenly melts and spreads until it has become no more than liquefied matter, revealing itself for what it is, retaining nothing other than its essential quality as an extended body, *res extensa*. By passing from one state to another, says Descartes, this body becomes what it is *in itself*, disencumbered of the elusive secondary qualities of its "external forms" (smell, color, and so on) and finally lies bare. "But when I distinguish the wax from its outward forms—take the clothes off, as it were, and consider it naked—then although my judgment may still contain errors, at least my perception now requires a human mind" (*Tanquam vestibus detractis nudam considero . . .*). "Naked" refers here to that which is stripped of the last adornment or encumbrance, is no longer covered by or combined with anything else, that thereby achieves its ultimate reality and can undergo no further change: that which attains the fixity of its essence and therefore has ontological value. Because once it is reduced to its naked state, the physical loses its phenomenal inconsistency and assumes a metaphysical status (which is the purpose of the episode in Descartes' *Meditations*). In other words, the being can only be attained if it is naked; by being laid bare it is not diminished but raised to a higher level.

But it would seem that the artist is able to perform the same operation as that carried out by the metaphysician's mind of Descartes, for let there be no mistake about it, that the nude is sculpted, painted, or photographed with such passionate and incessant assiduity does not mean that artists find the human body more "beautiful" than any other body, or even than any other reality. Primarily, it is rather that the human body is the only body that can possibly be nude: it is the only one that can procure the experience in which by cutting away the inessential until there is nothing left to subtract, nothing more to remove—in the same way that the melted wax is stripped of its "external forms" and appears before the mind as nothing more

than "extended matter"—the unsurpassable (the essence) is finally attained. This is what laying bare the nude consists of.

The metaphysical experience of the nude—for all true nudes are metaphysical—is that this body offers a possible access to the intimacy of Being. Here the body's own *intimacy* suddenly becomes objective: that, as we have seen, is the achievement of the nude. This most secret aspect, through which Being appears in cameo, is definitively discovered and revealed. As an *in-itself.* With nothing left to cover or conceal it, nothing to create illusion—no possibility of evasion or holding back. Let there be no mistake: the clothes have been removed from this body in just the same way that the "external forms" were lost by the heated wax. My reference to Descartes is intended to underline the distinction between the experience in question and another with which it could easily be confused. The experience of the nude is not an unveiling (the act of undressing that provokes desire) in which the source of pleasure lies in witnessing the final revelation of what was most deeply hidden (*quae plus latent plus placent*—the logic of striptease). It has to do with a rigorous operation of *reduction* (ontological, eidetic: Descartes-Husserl). As regards the body of wax, it could only have been a matter of comparison—*tanquam*—and the experience remained purely theoretical. In the case of the human body, however, it is literal, for it becomes *sensible*: since none but the human body can be stripped bare, it is the only "locus" of Being where Being can be experienced in its nakedness; thereby promoted in its being, it is thus made fully manifest.

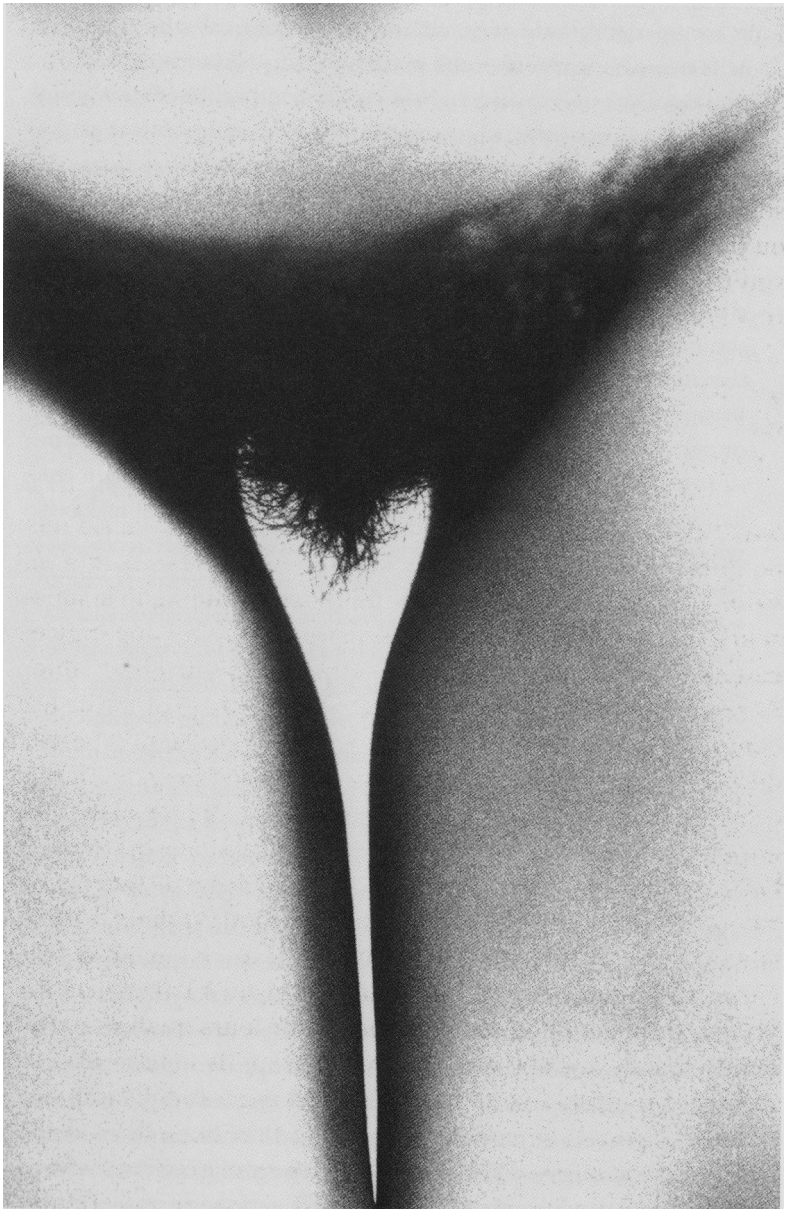
VIII

The experience in question is therefore not that of an unveiling (procuring pleasure) but that of a more-manifest (producing beauty). Plato should be read closely here: not only does he state that among "all the things that the soul values," only the beautiful (unlike justice or self-control) is manifest and is therefore the sovereign means of ascending from the sensible to the Idea—this is what is most commonly remembered in Platonism. He also goes on to say that the beautiful is "that which is the most manifest" in the realm of the sensible, or, even more exactly, it is what surges most powerfully into

manifestation (*ekphanestaton; Phaedrus* 250d). For just as important as its superlative state of manifestation (relative—absolute: "very" or "the most" manifest) is the soaring or surging out indicated by the prefix *ek*—as it appears in ec-stasy or e-vidence. In other words, beauty is what *stands out* most among the visible: its power is to cause being to appear and bring it most clearly to our sight.

I think that this best defines the vocation of the nude (and I imagine that Plato's concept of beauty would not have been unaffected by the statuary of his time; see Plotinus's reference in the opening to chapter 8 of *Enneads*, 5). The beauty of the nude does not really lie in the harmony of its forms or the correct proportions of the parts (as in the later Stoic definition of the beautiful by that which is *aptum*), even though these are the qualities most often observed and commented on when comparing and analyzing different nudes. These remain surface qualities, or rather, mere auxiliaries to the nude, and do not express what it is. What confers its status on the nude and makes it what it is, is the fact that preceding all the various and particular features that can be observed, it possesses the more essential—or more accurately, the radical and thereby relatively unexplorable—quality of being able to cause part of the visible to *surge out*. Out of the visible, as a fragment of the visible, and detached from the visible, at one and the same time. And all of the nude's various qualities have to contribute to this, in such a way that within the visible or the manifest, it brings out something more visible and more manifest than they. In short, the beauty of the nude derives from its power of e-vidence. For although beauty has the capacity for revelation attributed to it by Plato (revelation in the strongest, that is, ontological sense: the revelation of essence), it is the nude that, by being stripped bare, takes this capacity to its highest degree and fulfills it. It is the power of that which is absolutely manifest, absolutely exposed—the *epopteia*.

It could be said that the nude *exposes* Being more completely, and that this is where its "beauty" lies. Think of the few great nudes in the history of art, such as those of Botticelli. In his *Birth of Venus*, the "birth" in question is not the anecdotic birth of being born: it expresses, precisely, how the appearing surges out, the e-vidence of the nude body standing out within the visible. The body of the Venus



may be somewhat ill-proportioned, the face rather small, the shoulders sloping and unstructured, and the whole body unstable-looking, so that the ensemble has a shifting quality about it, but this only serves to increase the amazing impact of this nude's presence—*amazement* in the emphatic sense of the word, *thambos*, the Plotinian sense of awe in the presence of beauty. Or the fearful rapture felt by Plato's lovers on suddenly discovering within the sensible world an echo of the Idea being contemplated. For the elegant elongation of the Venus, the fluidity and rhythm of the body, and even the pensive expression of the face, which are so often the focus of attention, are in fact less important for their individual qualities or the grace and movement they impart to give the figure its extraordinary, delicately "feminine" charm, than they are for the eruptive quality they contribute to making the nude surge out to the fore. In this nude, borne on its mother-of-pearl shell, Botticelli has painted the most accurate depiction of a *more-visible* soaring into view: the instant when the appearing arises at the furthest distance from appearances and the sinuously drawn lines of this body create a cleft within the sensible. But this does not open onto a "transcendent" beyond, as would be expected from a religious or spiritual revelation: here it is the visible itself which, in this nude, becomes simultaneously the locus and the object of the revelation.

IX

In this sense it could be said that photography fulfills the vocation for the nude more completely than its predecessors, so I find it very strange that in his two volumes on the nude, which are generally considered the best works in this field, Kenneth Clark nowhere mentions the photographic nude. It seems to me, on the contrary, that its specific techniques cause photography to emphasize to the utmost the nude's ability to shine out within the sensible world, since its art does not derive from devices of imitation and re-creation but is based essentially on its ability to create an event (or an advent: the advent of the nude as the apparition of Being). While painting and sculpture involve a drawn-out process, the instantaneity of photography means that every click of the shutter brings the nude into being. That is the effect sought after, at least.

This capacity is indeed specific to the *instant*. Ever since Aristotle, the problem of the "instant," as "present instant" (*to nun*), has been a constant in philosophy (in relation to Being, precisely): the future and the past "are" not, for the one "is" not yet and the other "is" no longer, and therefore only the present instant *is*; but this present instant exists only as a mere point of passage from future to past, "through which" the future "slips away" into the past (Saint Augustine). As such, therefore, it is nothing but an atom of time, indivisible, with no extension whatsoever, and which consequently can have no possible consistency (as *in*-stant): it is not a part of time and its present is no more than a "limit." Unless, as Saint Augustine inevitably concludes, through our conversion this instant can rejoin God's eternal present, the true *ubi*.

This leads to the observation which, though elementary, we nevertheless have to return to in order to measure its impact with regard to the nude: that photography's capacity for instantaneity gives it the vocation of realizing this pure limit of the present instant; the camera shot is this "point" of time—devoid of extension, but *through which* alone being "is." Which, applied to the nude, specifies the possible effect: making the nude surge out in the instant—by *immobilizing* this instant, the photograph fixes it in its eternity of essence.

Both nakedness and the "flesh" are *experienced* in bodily movement, whereas the nude is *discovered* in fixed immobility (the pose)—which is necessary for displaying the Form as well as for capturing its identity on the flat surface. Photography repeatedly produces this fixity of essence (one only has to compare here a roll of photographic nudes and film footage of naked bodies). Because of the time-freeze that produced it, the nude is cut off from the body as such and from the life that animates it, and this is what enables it to allow for an ecstasy of the visible. Planes and oppositions intersect yet again, and in the irruption by which the nude produces an aperture within the sensible world, the Being that is reached—but what could be more impermanent, more "time-bound" than this skin texture or the plenitude of the curve of the hip or the breast?—is suddenly lifted "outside time." And, since the instant captured in the photographic nude mirrors this ephemerality most closely, the impression it creates of

suspending mortality is thereby made all the more intense—perhaps even tragic.

From a methodical rather than an existential standpoint, this would also lead me to the conclusion that to reach Being, the photographic nude operates in a way exactly opposite to that of the concept. The concept gains access to the being or the in-itself by proceeding concomitantly from the particular to the general, from the visible to the intelligible, from the *orata* to the *noeta* or, as it has constantly been said since *Phaedrus*, from a "plurality of sensations" toward a "unity assembled by thought." The concept abstracts being on an atemporal mode: that of "Being," and no longer that of "becoming." The photographic nude, on the contrary, captures the in-itself in the instant and therefore in a way that is the most immediate and the most (or the infinitely) concrete—in direct touch with the sensible, with the body, with the skin, with the nude. This curve, this texture, this downy skin, that blemish, and this dark shadow—here and now, the most local and the most fleeting—are seized in the flash of an instant but fixed forever, making the particular not only unsurpassable but suddenly immutable and thereby absolute. Henceforth they are no longer part of the becoming of things, for they have seceded from it; trapped by the camera, Being has suddenly let itself be condensed, absorbed, and, as it were, isolated in their intimacy.

Since we are bound by the conventions of language, bringing into play our familiar dichotomies, such as that between the instant and the atemporal, is at least a convenient way of putting things. What else can we do, as soon as we start thinking, but put back into operation the dichotomies thought implies? Now the impact of the photographic nude as an *experience* lies precisely in its ability to open a breach through which a possibility can be glimpsed of passing beyond these scissions. This is the propensity of its power of effraction, which was mentioned earlier: effraction within the sensible, through its capacity for irruption—what we referred to as the surging out of the nude—and also within the theoretical, as the nude undermines its categories and disturbs the classifications it operates. It could even be considered first of all an effraction with regard to that primary, generative opposition: the "sensible" and the "theoretical." With tongue

in cheek (I say this with a wink at Gibson), I might call this the *zen* or *haikai* side of nude photography.

X

In order to break free of these dichotomies that we find ourselves enmeshed in from the moment we begin to think (although it is rank but naive arrogance to say "I think," when it was these scissions that started the thinking for us), we have to step back from our thought, or at least from our mental habits, and perceive it from outside itself. Similarly, investigating the possibility of the nude—in other words, looking at all the prior cultural and theoretical conceptions that gave rise to the nude and ensured its extraordinary longevity from the Greeks to the present day—also requires distancing ourselves from it and putting it back into perspective by separating it from what it has been so neatly molded into by tradition: it has to be seen afresh as something strange and unknown.

Now, everything shows the nude to be a phenomenon that is "bonded" so thoroughly with Western culture that the West never moved away from it—the Church managed to get sexual attributes covered up, but it kept the nude. The nude is something commonplace: it crosses and links the West from one side to the other, and is present in all regions and every epoch. It spread along with the renewals of Western civilization—from Greece toward Rome and Pergamum, the Renaissance, Classicism, and so on—and has constantly served as the basis for training in the fine arts. But however commonplace, it is nonetheless also the most crucial phenomenon in that it brings into play the extreme expression of choices that informed and fecundated Western thought. "Choices"—could this mean that the nude itself involves a choice? Here we would normally acknowledge only "aesthetic" choices concerning the best proportions, the ideal curve, or the most appropriate pose; at best there has been some hesitation, from a more ideological standpoint, regarding the legitimacy of the nude, when its boundaries with flesh and nakedness were no longer sufficiently clear. As if the choice ended there . . . What buries the choice of the nude so well, and makes it theoretically innocent is that—beware!—it presents itself in the guise of the natural, so that

the "cultural" aspect is most easily concealed within it and forgotten about: for this is a nude, merely a naked body. It is simply a matter of the human body, which is always the same thing—that to which nothing is added, which has cast off, along with its garments, the last signs of civilization and therefore also the characteristics that distinguish one culture from another, or in short, that which is naked. Therefore, it would be easy to imagine that the nude is self-evident and not founded on or justified by prior biases. So how could we possibly be surprised by it? Yet this would be necessary for any thinking on the nude. But no one thinks about thinking on the nude. If truth be told, the question has hardly ever been put at all: what is a nude?

In order to address the question, some travel would be required. The nude is also to be found in India, though to a far lesser extent than in the West, and usually in the context of erotic art—but here it is, rather, a matter of "the flesh" than of the nude. History also shows that Greek art was known in India; there is indeed a common "Indo-European" category, and it certainly extends beyond linguistics. Similarly, pursuing the Far East route, some traces of the nude can be found as far away as Japan (the influence of the Shinto heritage—relation to water?), although in this instance it must be more a case of nudity than of the nude. But there is one vast cultural space that has never been penetrated by the nude, and where it has remained in total neglect: China. Yet painting and sculpture of the human figure are widespread in the Chinese artistic tradition, whose antiquity and importance are universally recognized.

Now I finally have to admit that so far, I have been speaking as a sinologist. I have been considering the obverse of the nude, from the reverse viewpoint of China: while I was speaking of the European tradition of the nude, it was its absence in China that intrigued me.

None of the obvious arguments that might spring to mind to explain this gap stand up to analysis. The idea of indecency (Chinese moralism), in particular, fails as an argument because nakedness was also disapproved of in Europe, and furthermore, the naked and the nude are not the same thing. Therefore, such a radical absence, which admits no exceptions—a rare occurrence in cultures as vast as

this—demands closer examination. The case is not anecdotic, but one that has exploratory value. For the absence of the nude involves an impossibility, and following this thread will take us into the heart of what structured both European and Chinese thought. Reversing the construction of the parallel, it could be said that the existence of the nude reveals and condenses the choices of European culture to the same extent as its absence in China reveals specific characteristics of Chinese culture and thought. The latter sheds light on the former, for each reveals the other. In fact, it was this absence of the nude in China that led me to an interest in its development in Europe. Since I could no longer take the nude in art for granted, I was led to inquire into its possibility (in the Kantian sense of the term: what made its existence *possible*?). Here, then, is the justification for this framework: the impossibility of the existence of the nude in China will permit an assessment of the conditions that made it possible in Europe.

XI

It is indeed rather strange to deal with something not in but *through* its absence. Not that it is felt as something missing—that would be an exaggeration—but simply because it is not there, and such an absence disturbs our force of habit. Also because it illuminates through contrast, creating contrast and thereby setting thought back in motion. An absence of nudes . . . none will be found over there any longer, not in the squares or the temples, nor in books or museums.

It is stranger still, and fascinating as well, to infer from this absence the impossibility it manifests. The deeper we delve into the reasons for this absence of the nude in China, the more we find theoretical bifurcations springing out. An alternative arises, precisely where up till then everything seemed perfectly obvious. The deeper the nude is uprooted from its intellectual ground, the more planes emerge to show the coherences underlying it: disconnected from these, the nude, which was concealed under the guise of the natural, suddenly stands out as an incongruity.

It is a strange thing to see the fold of our cultural habits spread out and the place occupied by the nude closed in.

XII

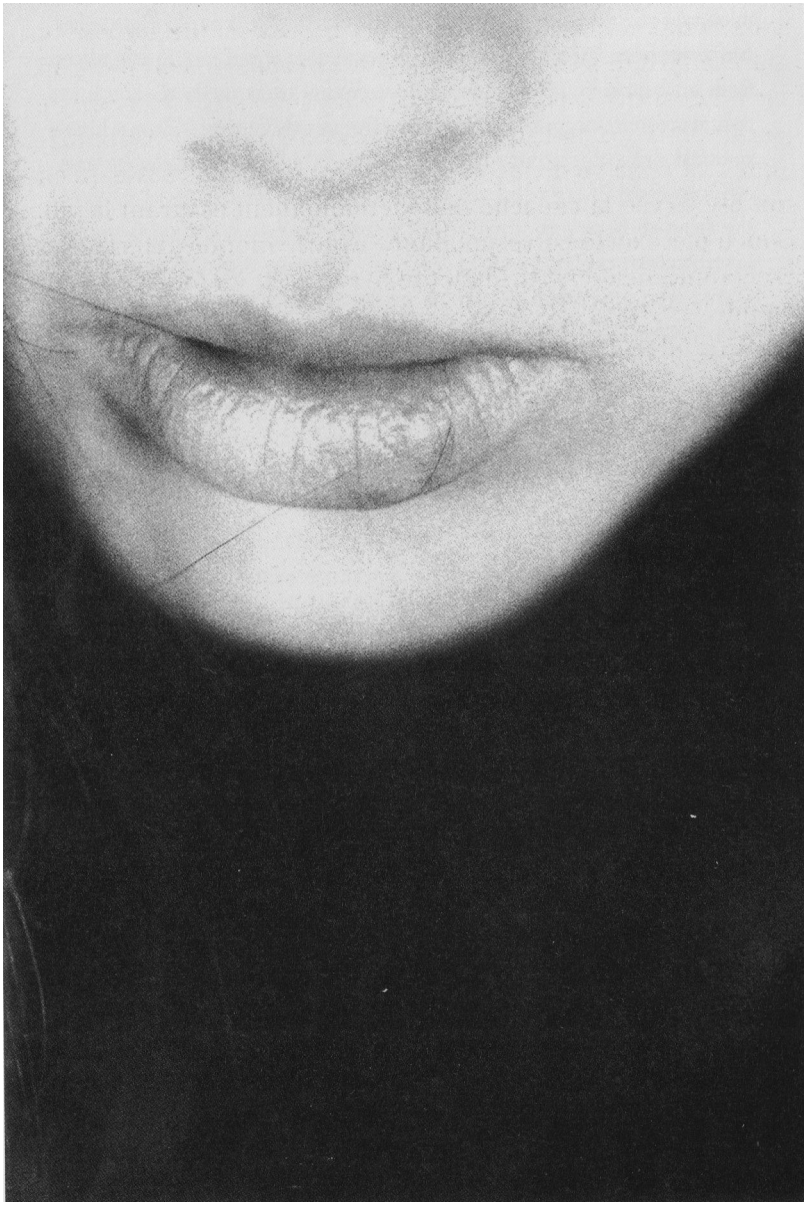
Which means that I should rewrite in relief what I have so far discussed in intaglio, and go patiently through all the arguments again—with "China" demonstrating them *a contrario*. I shall confine myself to a few points.

The existence of the nude is made possible primarily by what, with the Greeks, we came to understand by "form": a form that functions as a model, whose background is often mathematized and geometrized, and takes on the value of an ideal as it fixes an identity of essence (the *eidos*)—this is what was consecrated by the nude. Plotinus recognizes that "there is in nature a rational principle (*logos*) which is the model of beauty in the body" (*Enneads*, 5.8.3), although he goes on to express a preference for the rational principle in the soul. In other words, there is an "archetype" of bodily beauty that is its true form, and which artists strive to achieve. But now try to conceive of a "form" that would be seen only—as is the case in China—as the temporary actualization of the ongoing evolution proper to all living things. Think, therefore, of a body that is only the concretion (by individuation, and hence fleetingly perceptible) of the invisible underlying mass of energy in ceaseless deployment—actualization and resorption—as it forms the universe: the consistency on which the nude hinged disappears immediately, leaving no essence to be immobilized. My body comes into the world, grows, ages, and decays. It is constant prey to the transformation that brought it into existence, even though the process is so seamless that it is imperceptible to the eye. The body presents no durable (and much less any definitive) state that might characterize it—the state immobilized by the nude—and I am aware only of different phases. When the real in its entirety is seen as an evolving continuum and that therefore "form"—or at least, what we translate as such in Chinese (the notion of *xing*)—is conceived as something not stable but transitory, one understands the Chinese lack of interest in the eminently stable form that underpins Greek thought and science, and to which the nude gives permanence. There are no more archetypes or eternal forms, no more models or upper world of essences; and it is no longer possible to say like Saint Augustine under the influence of Plotinus: "Then I shall

stand immovable and fixed in Thee, in my form and in Thy truth." *In forma mea—veritate tua*: the keywords "form" and "truth" are coupled together—our great pairing from antiquity—and the nude operates at their point of fusion.

For the notion of Being and the question of the in-itself are inescapably to be found in the background of the nude: the nude is the unsurpassable "as such"—the *res ipsa*—of a reality reduced to its identity. The nude answers the question of the *ti esti*, the "what is it?" But we know that classical Chinese has no verb "to be" but uses only "there is" together with the copula, and that it considers the real not from the viewpoint of being but from that of processes (*dao*). It follows that the impossibility of the nude in China is primarily attributable to its lack of ontological status there: what remains, therefore, is either the flesh (Chinese eroticism) or indecent nakedness. The bedrock of Being that the nude has been founded on since the times of the Greeks is "missing."

The notion of the human body is also in question, and here the gap is no less marked. In the West, the notion that prevailed is that of an anatomical body consisting of a flesh-covered skeleton whose every muscle, tendon, ligament, and so forth is susceptible to analysis, deconstruction, and dissection (as evidenced by art school teaching on the nude, or painters' preparatory drawings). However, for a very long time the internal function of circulation and exchange remained a matter of secondary importance—if it was perceived at all. But it was this anatomical analysis that enabled the meticulous imitation from which the nude derives, to the point where in Europe, even in the representation of clothed figures, these were first drawn as nudes. In China, on the other hand, the body is viewed from the standpoint of "energy," not anatomy: it is perceived in a global, organic way that preserves its life-ensuring functional capacity. The body is conceived of in exact correspondence to the external world, with which it is in permanent communication. It is itself a universe that is both closed and open, permeated by breaths flowing through a system of channels or "meridians" which run through the body and circulate vitality. The body is comparable to a large bag (usually represented by an oval) inside which, as in the rest of the world, ceaseless transmutations take



place. None of this constant internal renewal is manifest externally except at the orifices, with each corresponding to a particular organ. No revelations are to be expected from the outer conformation of flesh and muscle, of what broadly remains little more than a torso containing the organs (the limbs are frequently omitted altogether in medical drawings). Since the Chinese see the body as the mere concretion of the energy that animates it, it is not surprising to find that the relation between "form" and "matter" (*eidos-ulē*), ideal form and inert matter, which brought forth the nude in Europe, is absent in China—to go back to Plotinus, in the wake of Aristotle: art is the transference of form into matter.

The reason why anatomy—which is the basis for the nude—remained so unelaborated in China, despite its extremely refined figurative art, is that there the human body did not acquire the status of an object, as is called for by the nude. The experience of the body was above all that of one's *own* body as sensed internally. It is the experience of the life-giving fluxes and exchanges that we regulate internally by our breathing and the practice of flowing sequences of movements (as in *tai ji quan*, which is quite unlike our gymnastics with its muscle-building exercise of the "naked body"). Consequently, far from any kind of representation of the nude figure, which they would consider corpselike (a reminder of the cadavers once used as models in art schools), the Chinese found it convenient to use the movement of drapery—the folds and gathers of the clothes, the sinuous windings of the belt, or the sweep of a sleeve—to express these precious vital rhythms.

The disjunction that gave rise to the nude could be studied endlessly, for it inevitably brings up a great many other planes, particularly that of aesthetics (if this division into planes still makes any sense: as we have seen, the nude is a crossroads). I mentioned earlier the commotion provoked by the nude's surging out and its stunning effect. Now this *event*, offered like a miracle for contemplation, would stand in opposition to the endless *unfolding* of delectation favored by the Chinese (again, the logic of processes). Unlike the *epopteia* of the nude, where the revelation suddenly comes into view as something unsurpassable (the "everything is here" of the nude),

the Chinese preferred the experience of a blandness whose capacity to unfurl is inexhaustible. This is the blandness of discretion. A nude, on the other hand, is never discreet—on the contrary, it bursts onto the scene by effraction. It is invariably and ineluctably spectacular, while the Chinese formula would recommend quite the contrary: "in the beginning one barely notices it; but there gradually emanates from it a savor whose intensity unfolds unendingly." The critic Guo Ruoxu recounts that Yan Liben went to Jingzhou to see a painting by Zhang Sengyou, one of the earliest great figure painters. At first sight he was not impressed by it, but on a second viewing he appreciated it more. Going back to it yet again, he admired it greatly, and finally stayed there for more than ten days before being able to tear himself away from it . . . Chinese aesthetics demand that there should always be a "beyond": a "beyond" to words, to shape, to the taste of things. "Landscape beyond the landscape," figurative representation is successful to the degree that the observer can wander within it endlessly and at will. The nude, on the contrary, abruptly severs all possibility of a "beyond": it immobilizes the gaze, captures desire, focuses the attention. Its form is final: the nude *freezes* (the pose), at a stroke and for eternity.

The nude emerges out of a great challenging confrontation with Being, which we seize forcibly so as to obtain its surrender and rob it of its enigma: standing before his model, the artist is Oedipus looking straight at the Sphinx. I feel that, on the other hand, the fact that Chinese tradition ignores the possibility of the nude can be attributed to an aversion to this *overdirectness*. If there is any ideological reticence, it is less on strictly moral grounds (with regard to nudity) than of a ritual nature. For rather than this clear-cut way of grasping things, which is considered somewhat brusque, and the value attributed to immediacy that it implies, Chinese culture has a preference for an oblique, indirect approach that preserves the autonomy of things and the possibility of their evolution. Similarly, Chinese rhetoric recommends not "hemming in" an issue too tightly but leaving a certain degree of "breathing space" around it: writing "*beside*" the point allows for a process of closing in on the subject that enables us to discover its full dimension gradually, and thus provides *access* to it.

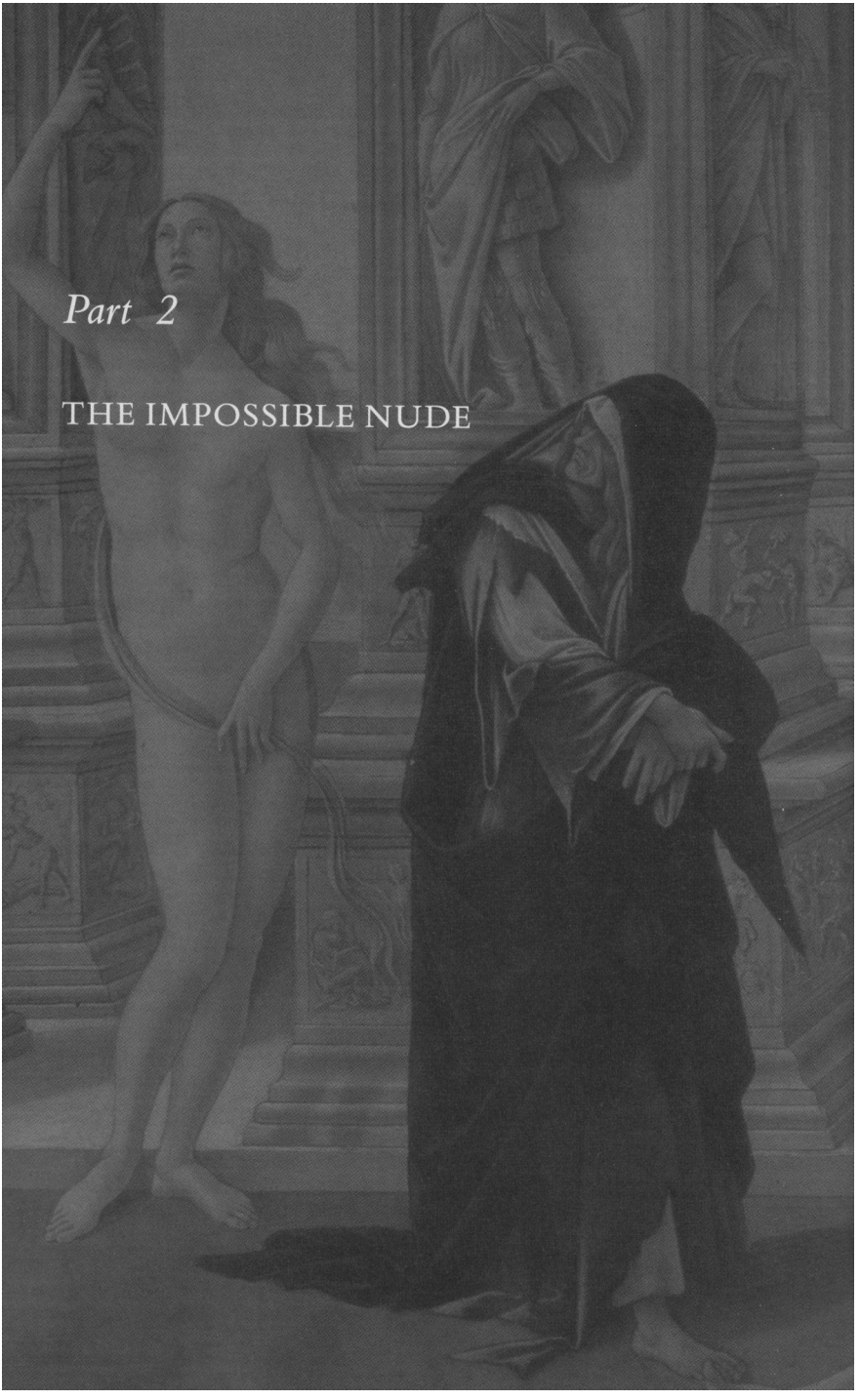
The general recommendation, in literati art at least, is for a loosely woven approach, leaving room for movement. Such an approach respects the floating nature of things and their capacity for "life," and by evoking them from a distance, more vaguely—on the register of absence—renders them pervasive rather than present. Now there is nothing more aggressive than the nude, even if it can only be glimpsed obliquely and is intended to be allusive; nothing is more blatantly present either, despite the photographer's scope for manipulating its intensity. Furthermore, in painting as much as poetry (both arise from the same principle), Chinese aesthetics constantly urges that the experience not be allowed to split between the poles of "without" and "within," "emotion" and "landscape" (*qing* and *jing*), visual experience and inner experience, for all true figurative representation is born of the meeting and interaction of the two. The experience could therefore not be further away from the objectivation of the most intimate, which the nude arises from and whose power it carries to the highest degree.

In short, the question can no longer be avoided as to whether artists and aesthetes in China ever sought the Beautiful. The issue is inescapable if it is true that, until modern times at least, in Western culture the notion of the Beautiful remained linked to ideal Form and that this is what the nude aims to *embody*. However, on reading Chinese treatises on aesthetics it becomes clear that priority is given to the resonances of the figuration (*qiyun*), the radiance that emanates from it (*shencai*), and the atmosphere it diffuses (*fengshen*). Chinese artists have no more concern for making the more visible surge out of the visible than they have for bringing the ideal down into it. On the other hand, they do aspire to capturing the invisible *through* the visible, to tapping into the dimension of the invisible efficiency or spirit (*shen*) (and, as such, infinite) that unceasingly pervades and animates the visible. What they seek to grasp in the figure being represented is the living character that alone manages to "give sense" to the figuration (*yisi*). But "life" cannot be achieved by formal resemblance—the formal resemblance (*xingsi*) to which the nude is historically attached. Yet two brushstrokes indicating the eyes would suffice to evoke this "life" . . . Gu Kaizhi, the first great Chinese painter known to us,

would sometimes wait for several years before putting in the pupils of the eyes in a portrait he had made. When asked why, he replied that "the elegance or ugliness of the four limbs" in fact bore no relationship to this tenuous point where "the spirit is transmitted."

The nude calls for contemplation of the ideal, and does not transmit this dimension of invisible efficiency, or "spirit."

The split has only just opened up. But from this outside a start can already be made on encompassing the nude; coming into view is a new object, all the more fascinating to consider because it is to be identified through its absence: the impossible Nude.



Part 2

THE IMPOSSIBLE NUDE

I

So there is nothing self-evident about the *nude*. Nakedness, like the sense of shame, is common, but the nude is a matter of choice—the same choice that underpins philosophy: for the nude is the "thing itself"—it is the in-itself, it is the essence. Which immediately begs the question: in what way does the nude represent a certain bias, prior to philosophy, in the way thought grasps the real and relates to it?

One might have thought that art and the nude are merged. For the nude is as old as art: can it not be traced back to the anthropomorphic figurines and cave drawings of the Stone Age? A Cycladic idol from almost five thousand years ago is already amazing in the concern its geometrical treatment of the nude shows for integrating elegantly stylized parts of the body into an overall architecture. Or again, the *Female Musicians* fresco in the Tomb of Nakht at Luxor depicts a group of three girls following one another, with the middle figure turning her head to look behind in such a way as to create a kind of transition. Two of the girls are dressed in white tunics, but the lute player in the center is naked, highlighting a carnal presence within the group whose charm is accentuated by the fluidity of the contours. A rigorous modelization of the nude is already shown in the Cycladic idols, and the early Egyptian fresco depicts the elegance of a graceful body: was there no need, then, to wait for the Greeks in order to see the emergence of the nude?

Now, face to face with the nude, China does more than just show an exception: not merely because such an exception would be

monumental, but especially because in the development of Chinese aesthetics we can see what *resisted* the nude to the point of ruling out the possibility of its existence. China simply *missed* it. This brings up the questions, what prevented the development of the nude in China, and what other possibility prevailed to the point of shrouding the nude and blocking it off entirely? Or more radically: what, in cultural terms, is a possibility that fails to develop, and how should it be understood? To me there is nothing anecdotic about this question, which cannot even be classified within the vast but nowadays so clearly mapped out field of anthropological research. The substance of the question is philosophical, and this substance is what I want to bring to light and examine from the starting point of China and the nude. For the nude does not only reveal what might constitute the aesthetic originality of the Chinese tradition as opposed to our own (precisely because it allows them to be set face to face), but also, in more general terms, it should enable our investigation to reach into the articulation between art and thought. Or more exactly, to trace the articulation between "art" and what is *implicit* in our modes of thought, for the nude discloses choices of the mind that have been buried or forgotten. Although the nude seemed so conventional as to be termed "academic," its absence and related impossibility now suddenly call into question what we have commonly understood as "representation"—so commonly, in fact, that the word has become meaningless to us. However, what the nude brings into focus (and is unveiled indirectly in China) restores the significance of the term; by doing so, the nude persistently questions our thinking about "form," "ideal," or "beauty," but does so in an implicit way and with no possibility of discussion.

II

Formulated like that, in notional terms and on a comparatist basis, this would appear to be a valid inquiry, although I have to admit that I feel uneasy about venturing into it.

To an even greater extent than with my other queries about Chinese civilization (its indirect mode of discourse, strategic manipulation, and so on), this is a subject that I find extremely difficult to

broach with my Chinese interlocutors. When I have taken the plunge, it has very quickly become apparent that even once past the initial uneasiness (which is linked to the frequent confusion between the nude and the reverse aspect of nakedness from which it proceeds), the matter is going to be of no interest to them. But then on my part I find I cannot be satisfied with the reasons first advanced—shame (or, to put it in a more negative way, the moralism of Chinese tradition), the status of women in China, and so on—in which my inquiries become mired.

It truly is a strange situation, and one that leads me back, on this point at least, from the dreamed-of philosophical dialogue to the soliloquy of the anthropologist in foreign territory. At the same time, we cannot fail to observe that because of the self-commenting and very literary nature of its culture, China has been little given to anthropology, which is normally focused on its distant borders or its minorities such as the Hakkas or the Miaos. Here, then, is the first difficulty encountered in my work, and in this instance it is even exacerbated: from within Chinese civilization—as also from within our own—there is no such issue (although Chinese thought, like ours, did submit itself to scrutiny both explicitly and in general terms). The only reason that such a question *can* be raised is that my own experience as both sinologist and philosopher enables me to cross the two perspectives, to reflect one body of thought onto the other and question each from the standpoint of the other. This is why I feel that I am the only one who brings it up. Both sinologist and philosopher? But philosophers have their constitutive issues and live amongst their references, while sinologists have their constituted elements as they were handed down from China. In France, abroad . . . I am indeed intellectually alone.

This reminds me of how I came to look at the question of the nude. It was in the early 1980s and China, after Deng Xiaoping's return to power, was beginning to "open up," as they say. China was opening up to foreigners (or to their capital) and to a market economy, and in order to make a success of it the country had to offer sufficiently solid and readily visible guarantees of a new willingness for exchanges with the West.

Among other things, this meant extending and modernizing Beijing's airport—even though it was already the only international airport in China—and nudes were painted on one of the walls of its restaurant. Were they really nudes? I do at least recall half-clad female figures painted in the style of Gauguin. These were, of course, women from the southern Xishuangbanna "minorities," so that the nude remained something exotic; furthermore, in this Chinese showcase it would be seen almost exclusively by foreign passersby, which intensified its marginality.

Nevertheless, this painting very quickly became a pretext for conflict at the highest levels of government, between the followers of Deng Xiaoping and the conservative line of Mao's "heir apparent." The latter, critical of the regime's new policies, saw this work as a sign of the "polluting" influence of the West, while Deng Xiaoping went to see the painting and is said to have told the journalists that "it would do." I saw it once myself, but the next time I was there it was covered by a large curtain. After that I never saw the wall again at all. Why were they so uncomfortable about it? I wondered if this might warrant further investigation.

One thing was certain, at least: this touched a strangely sensitive nerve. Another thing seemed likely: the conflict between, on the one hand, this sign (of ingratiation) conceived for the benefit of foreigners—and no accidental choice, either: a nude—and, on the other, the reaction it immediately provoked, was in fact an indication of underlying cultural and ideological issues that were very different from those announced by the leaders and in the media, described as "opening up" versus orthodoxy. Both sides clung to the pretext, with no wish to go into the archaeology of the debate. Yet behind the officially exploited symbol of the struggle between two lines of thought, one could detect a symptom whose analysis was being carefully avoided: this nude—or seminude, rather—was an implant, and one that could not be absorbed.

Chinese "tradition" will, of course, rightly be invoked here. But wait: have nudes ever actually been painted or sculpted in China? In the first place, who has been described as being naked? There is a proverbial story in which the great Yu ventured unclothed into "the

land of naked people," but this was given solely as an instance of his exemplary ability to adapt to whatever circumstances he encountered. Here as elsewhere, nakedness provokes opprobrium, even if one feels secure against it. Mencius attributes the following words to Hui of Liuxia, an ancient sage whom he often taxed with excessive laxity: "Although you stand by my side with shoulders bare, or even with your whole body naked, how can you defile me?" (Hui of Liuxia, 2.A.9) . . . Or again, on the converse register of Daoism, nakedness can be considered the extreme sign of a slovenliness associated with creative freedom and genius (the good painter of the *Zhuangzi* strips off and makes himself comfortable, naked to the waist, before getting down to work). The third-century Liu Ling, one of the seven characters of the famous Bamboo Grove, was even notorious for having taken what was generally seen as an odious form of eccentricity to what was no doubt a greater extreme than anyone else. Indeed, individualism was rarely asserted so forcefully in China as it was during this post-Han century, with the collapse of the empire and the ensuing disintegration of official ideology; the revival of Daoist studies emerged from these ruins, offering the fulfillment of aspirations other than service to the State. They were used to justify the sages' exemption from social constraints. From then on, wisdom would dictate living according to one's own inclinations; it was the only path left. In this vein, it is said of Liu Ling that he published only one poem in his lifetime. This was "In Praise of Wine," where, in contrast with codified values and in total contempt of both ritual prescriptions and philosophical discussions, which bristle with conflicts, he celebrates the perfect lightheartedness that can only be attained by escaping beyond the overconstricted limits of our world: "Heaven and Earth are but a morning / The myriad ages no more than a single instant." According to the description we have of the poet, he traveled in a cart drawn by a stag, with a pitcher of wine in his hand and followed by a man with a spade, ready to bury him on the spot as soon as he died. "He treated his body as though it were earth or wood and followed his own whims throughout his life." The chronicle goes on to note that when he was drinking, he would take off his clothes and remain naked in

his room. To critical visitors he would unabashedly reply, "I hold Heaven and Earth to be my home and this room my trousers. And what business, gentlemen, do you have in my trousers?"

Now even this curious character, despite his fame for having taken his penchant for emancipation to such lengths as to enjoy flaunting his nakedness, has never been depicted in the nude. On the bas-relief tiles from the Xishanqiao tomb in Nanjing, like his fellow Sages of the Bamboo Grove he is portrayed wearing an immense robe whose ample folds billow down to the ground (see illustration above). However, like the other sages he is barefoot, which is an evident sign of a nonchalant attitude toward worldly convention. In truth, these portraits are all equivalent, and it is even impossible to distinguish between the famously handsome looks of Xi Kang and the ugliness attributed to Liu Ling. The figure's meditative air, together with the

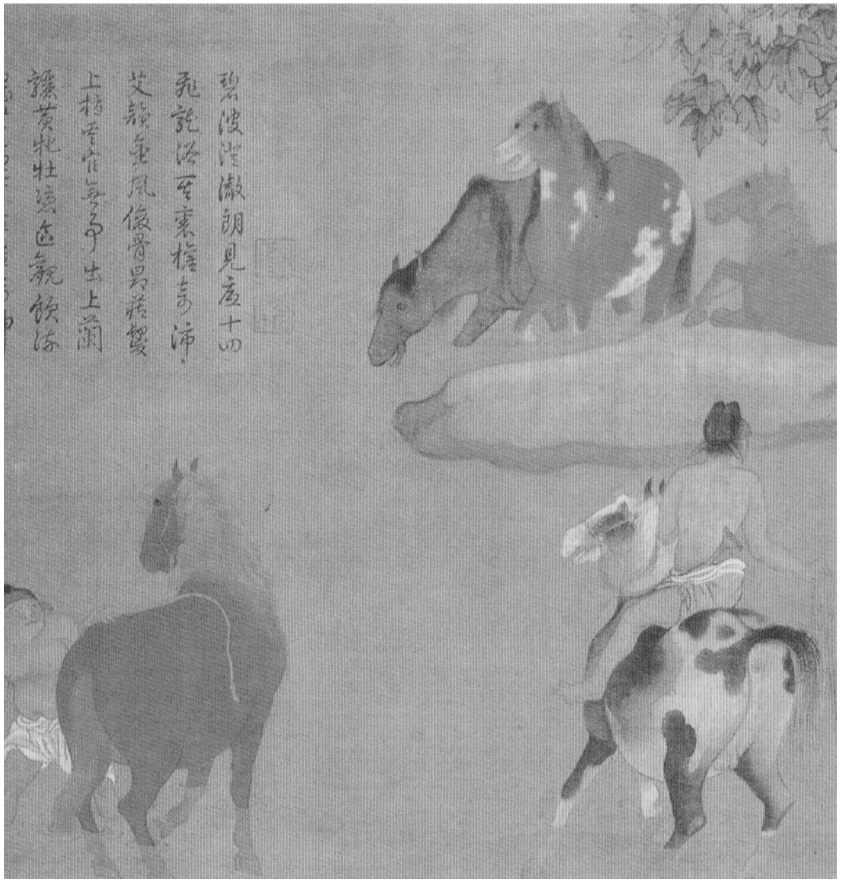
casual fall of the drapery into loose, generous folds—even the slenderness of the tree trunks around him and the delicate tracery of the branches above his head—here suffice to express the essentials. Or rather, they let through—hint at—a "meaning" which in this case is a state of mind: a sense that this character has shed the weight of things and knows how to become totally detached from the world. "Pure," "calm," "serene," withdrawn into himself, he listens only to his inner spontaneity and gives free rein to the "natural" in him; he transcends the world but is transparent to himself, as he is to the few people who understand him. His subtlety arises from his capacity to remain "natural," and therefore his own world—which is the real world—is as light as air, freed from physical or moral gravity. Indeed, there is no room for stiffness here: the folds of drapery, his gestures, the foliage, are all sinuous, yielding curves; nothing is jarring, nothing is crowded, dense, or heavy—everything is freely spaced; all things vary and echo each other harmoniously. The complex texture and compactness of things have been cast aside, and movement is all that is left. Life is at last set loose: instead of being presented as an example of moral virtue, as would have been the case in the preceding era, this portrait "transmits" an inner freedom from care and gives access to detachment.

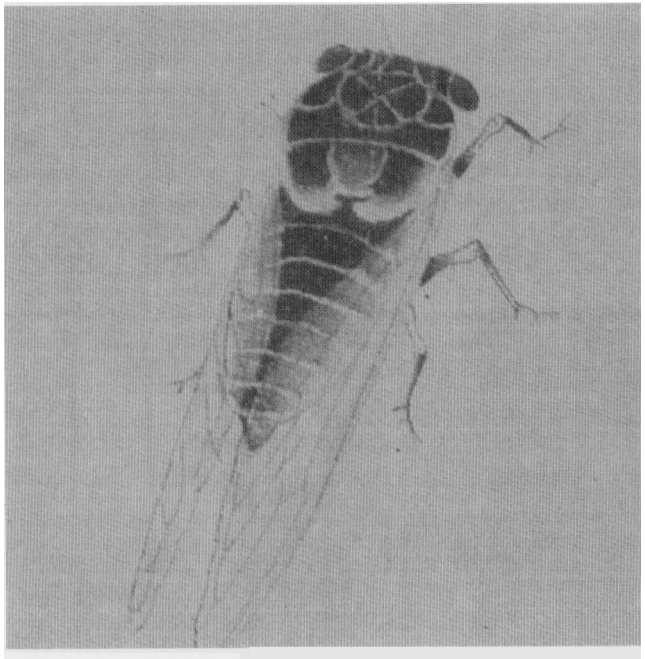
In answer to this absence of figurative representation of the nude in China, one might point to its erotic nudes, and it is true that manuals of erotic art included images very early on. A painter such as Zhou Fang (circa 800), reputed for his paintings of court beauties, was also famous for his depictions of bedroom scenes, as was Zhao Mengfu. But the nudes painted by Qiu Ying in the sixteenth century, which are the earliest surviving representations, come as quite a surprise. So long as the figures are clothed, they are graceful and delicately drawn: as the young woman rolls the awning above her she shows a glimpse of the curve of her arm; her lover, behind her, seizes the opportunity to clasp her around the waist. The flowing lines of the two tunics, whose colors melt into each other and whose folds almost intertwine, express the complicity of their affects (see illustration p. 48, top). But now consider one of the following scenes on the same scroll: the two naked bodies on the chair look like a heap of sacks (see illustration

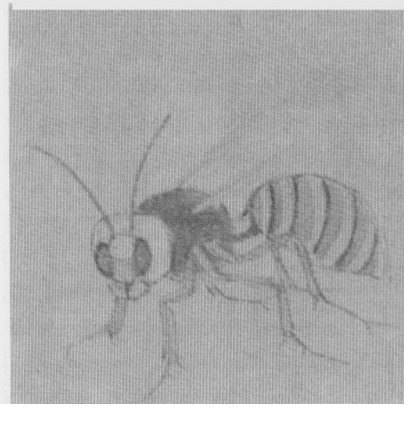
p. 48, bottom). Not only have the figures lost all consistency but the bodies are formless, neither clearly stylized nor anatomically accurate: there is no modeling and the flesh is colorless. The specifically sexual is generally crudely shown. A more leisurely look at these images shows that all the art is applied to the surrounding decor: the bodies are flat and coarsely rendered, while the erotic element emanates from the atmosphere of luxury, calm, and sensual pleasure created by the precious objects on the table, the plants, the folds of the cast-aside robes, and the contrasting colors. The eroticism is subtle, suggested by the details and hinted at obliquely. In another image, an outdoor scene, it seems to permeate the cavernous hollows of the rock and the variations in the foliage, or even the arabesques of a carpet. Once again, the nude—notwithstanding the delicacy of the drawing—holds no interest.

Some early indications can be drawn from this, starting with the fact that in China the nude never became detached from flesh or nakedness as a distinct possibility and effect in art. In modern Chinese, "pornographic" is still simply translated as "(of) naked body" (*luoti*); the semantic distinction is not fully made. Furthermore, given that in Chinese eroticism the body can be depicted naked without this making it a nude, it can be deduced that there has to be *form* (testifying to a *self-consistency*—but what is the principle of it?) for there to be a nude. In other words, human bodies can be almost completely stripped, as in Zhao Mengfu's painting *Horses in the River*, without their having the *presence* of a nude (see illustration p. 50). Reciprocally, it is also true that a nude can be a nude even if the body is not entirely unclothed (in particular, covering the genitalia makes no difference at all).

Were further proof required, this painting of horses also demonstrates that even if the Chinese painter paid little attention to the nude, he was nonetheless an admirable draftsman. He is capable of minute observation: these horses are drawn to perfection and their proportions respected with accuracy. Chinese painters enjoyed painting horses, and Chinese critics often devoted a section of their treatises to them. Consider also these insects (see illustrations p. 51). This helps to narrow down our inquiry: why was the human body *in itself*







of less interest? To be sure, neither horses nor insects are nude; what is at issue here is indeed that *as such*: the nude.

III

Can one speak of Chinese "tradition" in such global terms, though? And is it not shaped by its history, like any other? In other words, what do we see if we extract China from the framework of its misperceived "immobility" and take a closer look?

The direction of its evolution does in fact confirm our contention that with the revival of Chinese art, especially painting, representation of the human figure gradually lost importance. Yet it was initially considered the most difficult artistic exercise, for which the early masters such as Gu Kaizhi gained their repute—although they valued human figuration as a means for moral admonition rather than for its aesthetic qualities. Later on, however, the human figure was eclipsed by landscapes, with the definitive turning point situated between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries under the Song dynasty (see the role played by Su Dongpo). Why this loss of interest? It was, of course, due to the fact that landscape painting was better adapted to what the "literati" painters hoped to achieve in their art: what they painted on the narrow surface of paper or silk (wall painting was increasingly left to craftsmen) was not a (defined) subject, but the world itself, each time. They reproduced the great workings of the "empty" and the "full," the compenetration of the visible and the invisible: their aim was not to "represent" nature by imitating it or even by selecting parts of it (the "beauty of nature"), but to *reproduce* its ceaseless process. Down to the most insignificant bamboo shoot or slight iridescence of water, these artists depicted the continual advent of forms emerging out of their original undifferentiated phase—they painted the "cosmic." Their merit, we are told, was to carry us into the "transformation" of things (*hua*) and to accompany their actualization with their brushstrokes (see Shitao's treatise). This was achieved by exploiting the alternate successions—of convex and concave, vertical and leaning, pale and dark, dense and sparse . . .—whose rhythmic patterns pace the movements of the brush just as they modulate the course of the world. The *whole* of a

landscape, its heights and depths, "mountains and water," whether captured in its essential complementarity or even simply in the indeterminate shape of a rock, lends itself to this purpose better—because in a more available manner—than does a human body, which is determined by the proportions of the limbs and whose prescribed form has to be respected. The demarcation is underlined by a classic judgment: "With regard to Buddhist and Daoist figures, to men and women and to oxen and horses, recent times are inferior to the past; but as for landscapes, trees and rocks, flowers and bamboos, birds and fish, the past is inferior to the present" (Guo Ruoxu, *LB*, p. 61).[1]

Something else to be observed in this nomenclature classifying pictorial subjects is that nowhere does "man" appear as a separate category. Religious figures, calling for veneration, are set apart in advance and placed at the head of the list, followed by "men and women" as a collective term, who precede oxen and horses. The human figure is not singled out as distinct: painting of the human subject is dispersed under various different headings, with no generic status of its own. This is confirmed by another treatise on painting, which classifies the successive genres of "Daoists and Buddhists," "historical characters," and "barbarians" (*Xuanhe huapu*, *LB*, p. 466). Yet another treatise (Mi Fu) enumerates, in order: Buddhist subjects and narrative paintings, landscapes, bamboos, trees, water and rocks; in last place come female figures, along with the statement that "their representation might be entertaining for the *gentry*, but cannot be included among the pure pleasures." As groups, "men" and "women" are set at a distance from each other, or at least they are distributed according to axiological criteria instead of being merged into a common entity (this still lingers in the classical expression *shi-nü-hua*, designating the painting of human figures).

Chinese treatises on painting even insist on the care with which social classes and historical eras must be distinguished in the treatment of human figures; clothing contributed to this, and was even itself an ostensible sign of status and epoch, particularly in China (and

1. For practical purposes, Chinese references are based on the Zhongguo hualun leibian (abbreviated as *LB*), ed. Yu Jianhua (Hong Kong: Zhonghua shuju, 1973).

especially in the past). However, it can be seen that the nude brings about exactly the opposite effect: it *abstracts* "Man" by detaching him from any specific time or social condition. The nude is unitarian-egalitarian; it is atemporal (Adam), and even freezes man in time (see the plenitude of the youthful forms that are the preferred subject matter of the nude). On one hand, in China there are beings, human *and* the others (*ren-wu*), which are encompassed in the same global notion; on the other stands the nude, alone and apart. This nude is something unique. For thousands of years the Nude has been confronting the Sphinx in relentlessly obstinate pursuit of the answer to the same, unvarying question: what is man *in his generality*? A question that has never been asked in those terms in China (which is why China developed a wisdom but not a philosophy). This is another way of saying that the nude serves as a concept of man, whom it identifies in his essence, *reducing* him to a single organic composition and *subsuming* him under a single community of flesh and form. The Nude sets man apart from the world and isolates him at the same time that it outlines his common features—its effect is generic.

One might easily have thought the contrary: that by stripping man of the artificiality of clothing, the nude merges him with nature—gives him back to it, in a way. But this would be to ignore the implicit dialectics leading up to the Nude: clothing—or, rather, the moment of clothing—is what definitively separates man from the animal kingdom, but by its return to the natural state, the moment of the nude further accentuates this divergence and pushes it to the fore. It calls for the emergence of two overlapping planes and makes that of a *pure* representation surge out: man alone is—can be—nude, and his own essence appears the more clearly for it, as does his formidable solitude within Creation. Because of the effect of consciousness that it implies (its effect of *for-oneself*), it is indeed the Nude, rather than the clothing, that embodies the break between Chinese and Western civilization. Even when faced with the temptation of naturalism—or indeed, when using this as a disguise—the nude is unable to conceal the powerful process of abstraction and separation that it has undergone since its very origins.

The Nude takes man out of nature and encloses him in the solitude of his conscious mind, as is clearly shown in Western classical landscape painting, where the nude is never fully integrated into the scenery. The landscape is merely a decorative backdrop against which the nude stands out—as in Poussin, for example. Conversely, Chinese treatises on painting emphasize how the (clothed) human figure should "respond" to the landscape and be in complicity with it, the scenery responding in turn. Figure and scenery should "turn toward each other": "It is as though the man were looking at the mountain and the mountain also leaning to look at him." Or again: "A man playing the lute should seem to be listening to the moon, while the moon, in all its serenity, should also seem to be listening to the lute" (*The Mustard Seed Garden, Renwu* section). In other words, the human figure should be painted in harmony with the world, immersed and integrated into it. *The Mustard Seed Garden*, which is a technical treatise, uses this pattern to teach the depiction of the human figure "in the autumn, in the mountains, walking with hands clasped behind his back" (as indicated by the caption seen on the right; see inset). This indicates that the natural context—the setting and the season—which is defined beforehand, *but not actually depicted*, is considered inseparable from the representation of the figure itself. Otherwise, the critic goes on to say, "the mountain is merely a mountain and the man merely a man." And if the mountain is nothing but a mountain and the man nothing but a man, then the intimacy of their relationship falls apart and the co-originarity that the painter was trying to trace—which, indeed, was the purpose of the work—is lost.

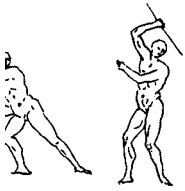
The Nude, however, brings to the fore this "merely a man"; isolating man from any context, it depicts the plenitude of this *nothing but*—in other words, his essence.

IV

What this idea of the essence of man bears upon, and what the nude derives its self-consistency from, is morphology, which *specifies*. Anatomical science is known to have undergone a remarkable development in Greece (Galen), where anatomy was well suited to the Greeks' penchant for analysis. Now in the European tradition, it is claimed that this knowledge is at the basis of the painter's art. In his *Treatise on Painting*, Leonardo da Vinci insists that a painter's knowledge in this area could never be too detailed: "In showing the movement of a limb, the painter who is familiar with the nature of the nerves, muscles, and tendons will know exactly how many tendons, and which ones, produce this movement. He will know which muscle thickens to cause the tendon to contract, and which ligaments become the thin cartilage that surrounds and supports that muscle." Leonardo adds: "In this way he will be able to represent the muscles in ways both diverse and universal." The twofold requirement of simultaneous diversity and universality is indeed at issue here, for the unity of a law shows through beneath the variety of its phenomenal manifestations. The method is a scientific one. To Leonardo, as throughout the whole of classical painting in Europe, the human body is a physical body subject to rigorous principles of muscular tension, balance, and counterpoise. It is both governed internally by the causality of forces and perceived externally according to the laws of optics. It follows that in order to depict this body, which he always initially considers as naked, the painter must first draw its blueprint, and using it as a case study he must dissect the composition of forces, analyze movements in terms of thrust and traction, evaluate the points of exertion, and determine the bearing points. At once geometrician and physicist, he builds axes, deduces centers of gravity and support, makes his calculations in terms of angles, determines proportions, and draws up equations.

344. *The arms can be crossed in front up to the point where the elbows reach the center of the chest.*

The elbows then form an equilateral triangle with the arms and shoulders.

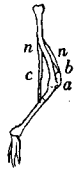


345. *How a man prepares to strike a heavy blow with all his strength.*

When a man prepares to deal a heavy blow, he bends and contorts his body as far as he can with a movement opposite to his intended blow. He thus gathers as much force as possible and hurls it at the object, which he strikes with a decomposite movement.

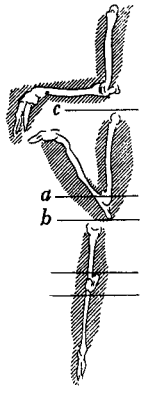
346. *The composite strength of man, beginning with the arms.*

The muscles that move the longest bone of the arm so as to extend or flex it originate one behind the other near the center of what is known as the auxiliary bone. The muscle at the back causes the arm to extend, while the one in front flexes it.



That a man has greater strength when pulling than when pushing is demonstrated by the "*de ponderibus*" principle, according to which: Among weights of similar force, that which will develop the greatest power is the one placed furthest from the axis of their point of leverage. It therefore follows that, muscles *nb* and *nc* being of equal force, the muscle in front, *nc*, has greater strength than the muscle *nb* that lies behind it, since *nc* is attached to the arm at point *c*, which is further from the axis of the elbow *a* than *b*, *b* being situated next to this axis. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*

However, this is a matter of *simple* force, not the composite force we propose to examine and which should be emphasized. Composite force will be such that when an action like pulling or pushing, for example, is executed with the arms, the power of the arms is increased by the weight of the person and the weight of his legs, as well as by the force exerted by the torso and the legs, whose efforts are deployed in extension. It can be compared to two men straining against a column, one pushing it and the other pulling.



267. *Measurements of the human body and the flexion of limbs.*

The painter must of necessity be familiar with the supporting bones and the layer of flesh that sheathes them, as well as the joints that thicken or diminish with their flexions and extensions, causing the measurements of the arm to be different according to whether it is straight or bent, as at *c*. Between its maximum extension and maximum flexion, the arm increases and diminishes by one-eighth of its length. The lengthening or shortening of the arm is due to the bone that juts out from the elbow joint, which, as can be seen in figure *ab*, lengthens the distance from shoulder to elbow when the angle of the latter is less than a right angle, increasing as this angle narrows and decreasing as it widens. The distance between shoulder and elbow increases as the elbow angle becomes less than a right angle and diminishes as it becomes greater than a right angle.

268. *The proportions of the limbs.*

Every part of the figure of any given animal must be in proportion to the whole. This means that a man who is short and stout will have limbs that are all correspondingly short and stout; should he be tall and thin, his limbs will be long and slender, while one who is of medium proportions will also have limbs of medium size.

The same applies to plants that have not been damaged by man or the wind; when this happens, their youthful growth is renewed on old stems and their natural proportions are destroyed.

269. *The articulation between the hand and the arm.*

The joint between the hand and the arm decreases in size when the hand is closed and enlarges again when it is opened. Between the elbow and the hand, the arm does the opposite, because as the hand opens, the muscles relax and make the forearm thinner, and when the hand closes, the muscles and ligaments retract and thicken as those not caused to stretch by the flexion of the hand move away from the bone.

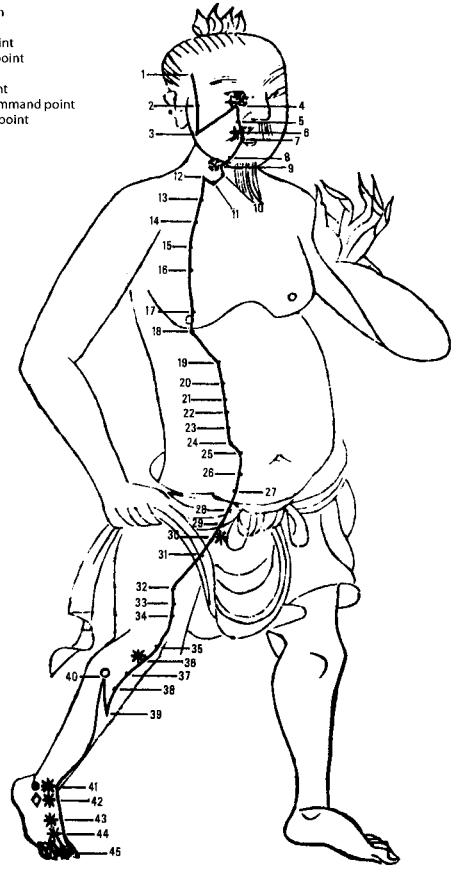
In China, the human body is perceived in quite a different way. This is undoubtedly one of the most radical points of divergence between Chinese thought and our own (and this difference does indeed make it appear as "our own"). Anatomy has been of very little interest to the Chinese, who hardly explored the field. They pay less attention to the identity and specificity of morphological components (organs, muscles, tendons, ligaments, and so on) than to the quality of the exchanges between "outside" and "inside," which ensure the vitality of the body as a whole. This explains why they see no problem in the unclothed body being summarily represented like a sack: it is a receptacle pierced with orifices. As such, however, it is the container for infinitely subtle energies, whose diffusion it is important to keep track of.

Understanding this will require a change in our habitual modes of thought with regard to physics—even before we start thinking about the implications in medicine. Instead of considering the human body from the standpoint of its organic structure, and then thinking of it in motion according to a complex interplay of calculable forces, the Chinese perceive it as being pervaded by a network of pathways for the circulation of physiological energy, which is manifested through the various pulses. The body is not governed by causal relations (whose effects are measured in the same spot at different times) but, as Western sinologists put it so as to encapsulate the difference more clearly, by an "inductive" relationship (Porkert), by "correlativity" and resonance (Needham), simultaneously linking different but corresponding points. Very early on, the Chinese had knowledge of points on the surface of the body through which certain symptoms could be detected and the course of illnesses influenced. By connecting these sensitive points, which are palpable concavities on the body surface that function as openings for the flow of energy (*xue*: point of tonification, of dispersion, source point, meeting point, and so on), it was possible to identify these energy channels (or "meridians": *jingmo*), which, like lines of force in a magnetic field, act as vectors to convey energy throughout the body along defined pathways (Porkert compares this to the way a subterranean stream is revealed by springs

足陽明胃經之圖

凡四十五穴
左右共九十穴

- ● tonification
- ■ dispersion
- ◇ "source" point
- ✝ "meeting" point
- ○ "Lo" point
- △ assent point
- ✱ ancient command point
- ✱ forbidden point



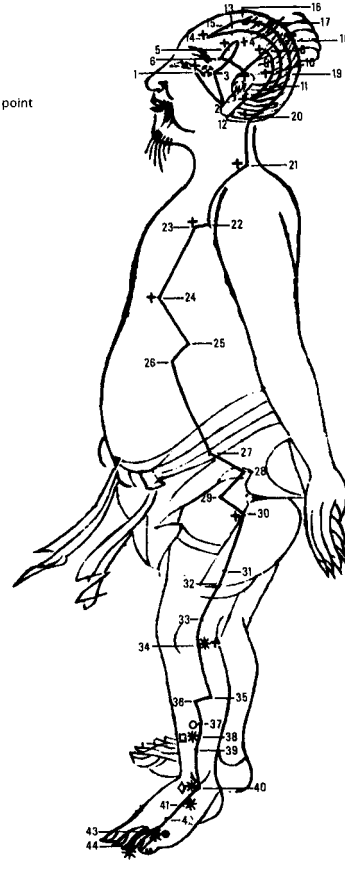
bubbling up through holes in the ground). Physiological disorders propagate along these sinarteries between the interior and the surface of the body, and are traced along the same circuits by diagnosis and therapy (see acupuncture diagrams, pp. 60 and 62).

This circulation is entirely internal, and none of it is apparent in the nude—neither in its shape or volume, nor in the smoothness of the skin. But what a Chinese artist tends to render in painting a figure is precisely these flows of invisible breaths connecting it with the outer world and animating it from the inside, because this is what sustains life. The *undulation* of the clothing—of the sweeps and folds, of the sleeves and of the gatherings at the waist—is used to convey this, for the array of curves created by the garments is the only perceptible external sign of the inner network of the cardinal channels; as the flow of energy sweeps through them their vibration can transmit these rhythmic pulsations (see illustration p. 69).

This explains the particular appreciation accorded in China to a figure painter's ability to render with a single, supple, "cursive" (*xing bi*) stroke the continuity of the breath that pervades and animates the subject's body (see the traditional praise of Wu Daozi, the great painter of the Tang dynasty). It is also why, while the nude isolates the body within its form and volume, when Chinese painting depicts figures, it focuses on presenting them as intimately bound up with the world around them: for, like the human body, the entire landscape vibrates with flowing breaths that pervade it. The explanation of the man and the mountain facing each other in a reciprocal "gaze," as described earlier, and the painter's aim of reaching their co-originarity is that, like the man, the mountain is also threaded with energy pathways (similar to veins, *jingmo*: the same word is applied to the mountain as to the human body), along which the cosmic breath travels (see illustration p. 63). This is not merely the banal "personification" of nature commonly used as a rhetorical device: both man and mountain are concretions of energy, and the geomancer also locates the sensitive "points" along these energy channels on the body of the mountain in the same way that the acupuncturist locates them on the surface of the human body.

足少陽膽經之圖 左右各四十三穴

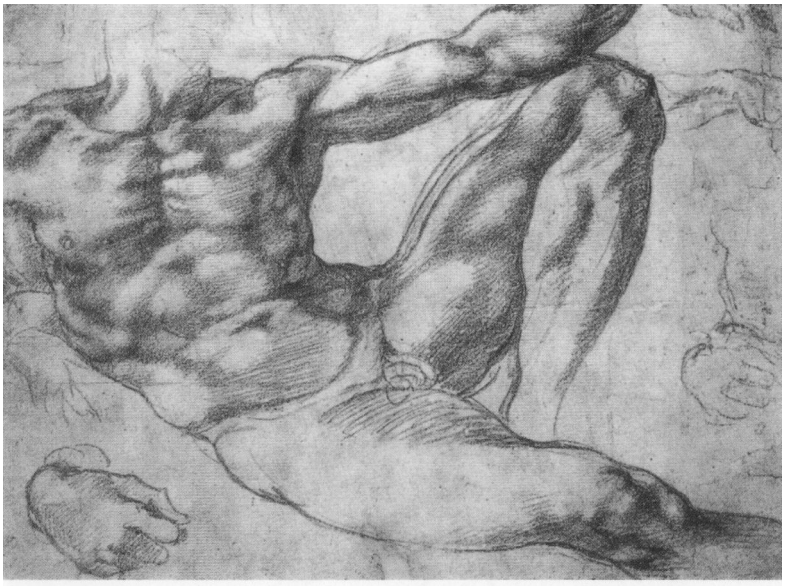
- ● tonification
- ■ dispersion
- ◇ "source" point
- ✝ "meeting" point
- ○ "Lo" point
- ▲ assent point
- ✱ ancient command point
- ✠ forbidden point



V

So the possibility of the nude is indeed founded on morphology; and morphology simply betokens "form" (*morphē*). Could it be, then, that the Chinese and the Greeks apprehended it in different ways, and the unity we attribute to the notion may in fact conceal the possibility of a hidden dilemma? To find the answer, we need to carry our investigation upstream, into the philosophical background.

We are only too well aware that "form" (*eidos*) ruled Greek thought. It was even the starting point—to which we always return—of the history of philosophy. "Form," as an archetype, founded and structured the Platonic world of Ideas, any form within the sensible realm being merely an image of the real-intelligible form (on the sensible plane, the *eidos* is an *eidolon*). Aristotle also held that it was "form," henceforth associated with matter, that constituted reality. Consider

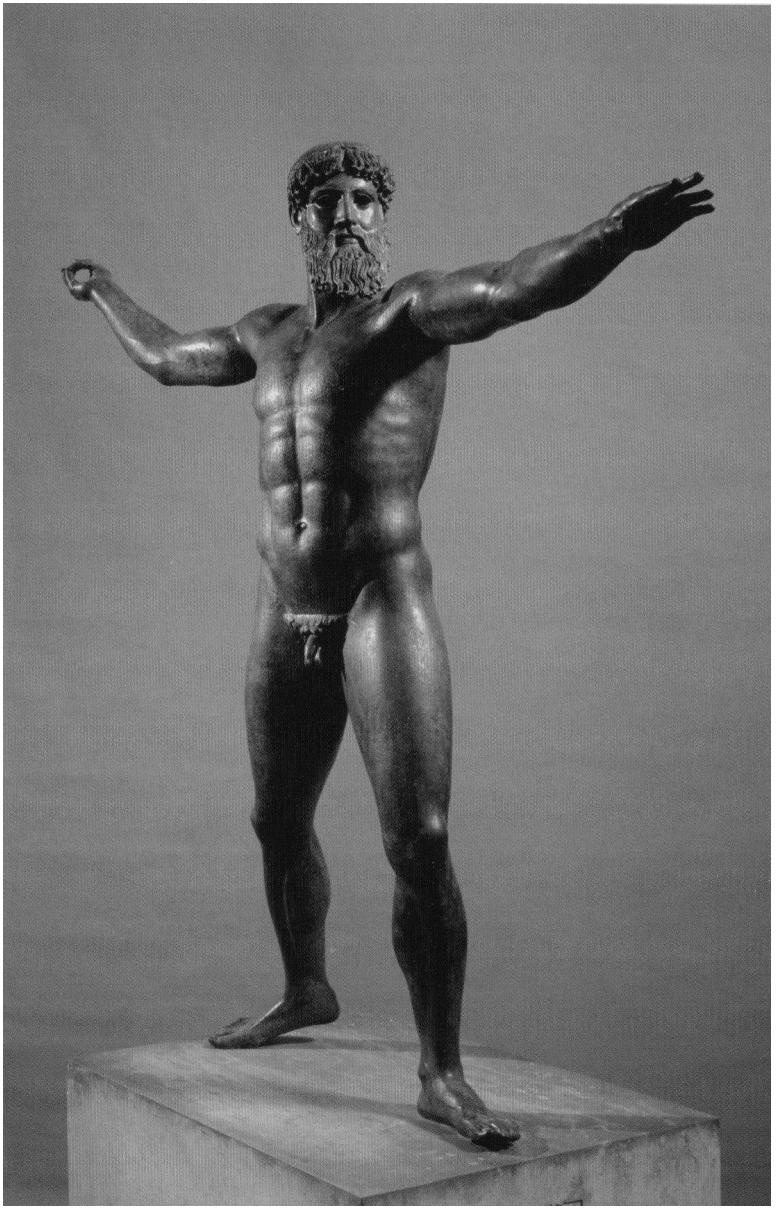


the bronze circle (*Met.Z*): its matter is bronze, its form is the circle. Both matter and form are ungenerated, but it is from the form "desired" by matter that every thing receives its determinacy, or that which makes it what it is (its "quiddity," as the Scholastics put it): form is what gives every thing its essence.

Or again: "For every thing, form is the cause of its being" (Plotinus); "Every existent is a being with form" (Porphyry). *Esse cum forma*, the Latin authors would also say . . . It has to be admitted that we are so accustomed to these formulae that we no longer notice them—we have grown insensitive to their strangeness. Yet they are the basis of the surprising success of ontology. Being "and" form: being *is* form. We owe to Plotinus, and his integration of Aristotle and Plato, the conception of the real as hierarchically ordered by this relation between form and matter—where Form takes precedence over matter. Form is active, luminous, eternal: it is the norm and the good; matter is passive, recalcitrant, and dark, and it is so well concealed beneath reality's layered strata of forms that it "becomes difficult to discover."

For in every stratum of the real, form is both informed by the unity from which it proceeds, and, as the rational principle (*logos*), it informs the matter that is subjected to it. The triumph of Form, furthermore, was not confined to Greece. Saint Augustine took this general ontology and used it as a grounding for his theology: sensible form is inferior to intelligible form, and the latter, which is mutable within the human mind, necessarily depends on an immutable Form that is the *Forma dei*, or the "form" of God. Hence, Moses longed to see the form of God, the primary Form, which is none other than the Word, the divine Intelligence in which the forms of all creatures are contained: in other words, Ideas.

For *form*, Plotinus uses two words in conjunction with each other, and often even goes so far as to suggest that they can be synonymous: *eidos*, which is the idea-form—intelligible form, with ontological status, and *morphē*, which designates the contour that circumscribes matter (the outline that describes an individual form or completes a colored surface, and so on. See *Enneads*, 1.6, where *morphē, eidos*, and *logos* are all equivalent). A similar ambiguity is to be found in the language of Saint Augustine: *forma* is used to mean (1) the model form (Intelligence, the Divine Word), (2) the external form that is the contour, and also (3) form perceived as the source of beauty. This should also be read the opposite way around: beneath the "plastic," visible form, we keep sensing the informing, ontological, model form. Now it is out of this very ambivalence that the possibility of the nude is conceived: the Nude is the embodiment of our quest for the model, archetypal, "primary form" to be reached through the sensible form. For the nude is not just one form among others: it is *the* form par excellence (the Nude). It is the essential form that appears within the sensible, just as, in reverse, it is the sensible form rejoining the idea-form. In fact, through the Nude we have tried unceasingly to find a hypostasis of Form. The Zeus (Poseidon) at the Artemision (see illustration p. 66) is a case in point. And it is even the Nude which, because it is the most sensible—immediate to the senses, uncovered: laid bare—brings the two poles of plastic form (modeled relief and contour) and idea-form most directly into communication, within itself. The plastic form uncovers the idea-form, and the last veil finally



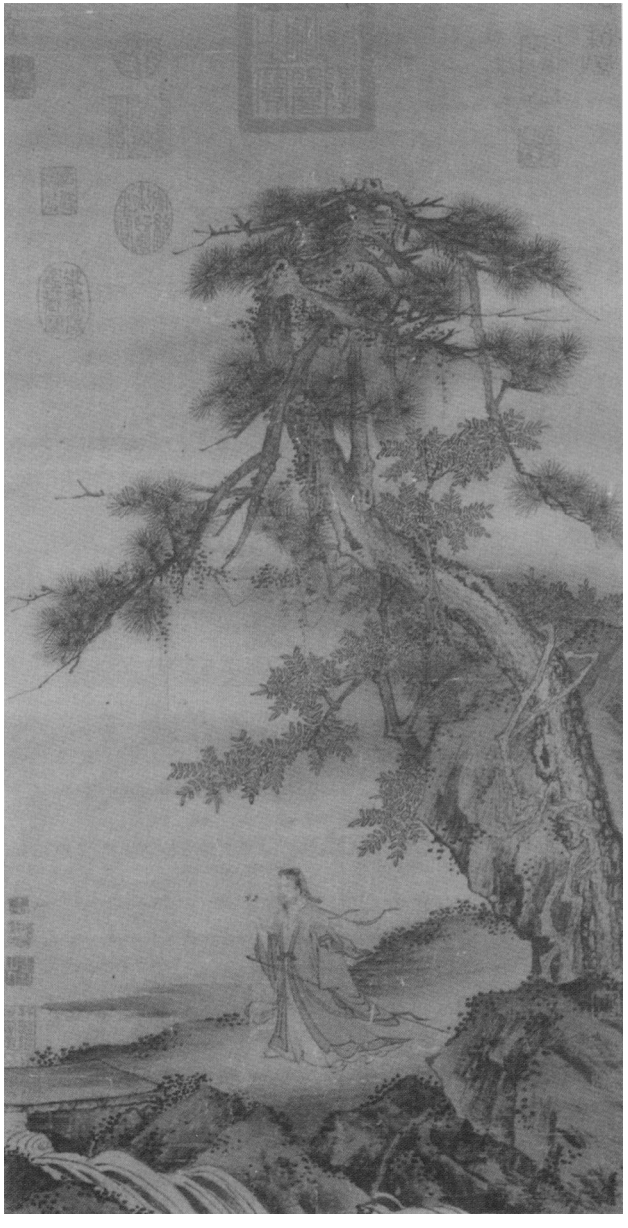
falls away; the idea-form ennobles the plastic form: we are in the very presence of the Idea, of the model and archetype. Hence the elevating tension of the nude: the tension is imparted by our metaphysical dualism. It gives rise to the transcendence summoned up by the nude—the vertigo of the extreme to which it leads: our awed amazement (*thambos*) at the nude (the ecstasy). At the same time, it melts (dissolves/resolves) this dualism into the sole unmediated possibility of perception—that which is *laid bare*: this explains the characteristic sense of satisfaction, concurrent and soothing, that we experience when we look at the nude.

It seems to me that Heidegger states the real question in this respect in one of the rare margin notes to his *Sein und Zeit*. The Greeks, he says, turned away from the pragmatic nature of the *pragmata*, the ordinary objects of our concern, those we actually deal with, by qualifying them from the outset as "pure and simple things," on a theoretical level; that is the turning-point at which Greece, and philosophy with it, shifted into metaphysics. On one hand, there is *eidos* and *morphē* with no distinction between them and, on the other, matter (*ulē*). "And what if" (but what if), Heidegger asks, *morphē*, the contour-form, is not *eidos*, not the idea-form at all? This raises another possibility for thought, and a different trail emerges—which China will open up for us by approaching the phenomenon of "form" from a completely different perspective that turns our backs to the nude.

Indeed, China did not conceive of any intelligible form beyond the realm of the sensible, nor any immutable form that is an essence. In short, there is no such thing as metaphysics in ancient (pre-Buddhist) China. But what does this mean in *positive* terms? We shall have to create a deep upheaval in our *habitus* in order to think this through. In China, the real is not conceived in terms of being, but as processes (whose constancy lies in their regulated character, and which, taken globally, constitute the course of Heaven, or the *dao*—the "way"), so that the Chinese term which we translate as "form" (the notion of *xing*) designates an ongoing actualization of cosmic energy-breath (the notion of "matter" is not found in China, any more than is the notion of archetypal "form"). What is individuated "takes

form" by emerging from the undifferentiated phase of the formless (the *wu* stage), and is destined to return to it. Form is a *formation*: the term can also take on a verbal function (see Wang Bi's commentary on the *Laozi*, §1). Birth is the transition from "non-form" to "form" and death, from "form" to "non-form" (see *Zhuangzi*, chap. 22). "Change," the *Zhuangzi* also says (chap. 18), "brings about energy-breath; as this changes, it brings about [that which has] form; and as this changes yet again it brings about life"; consequently, since everything is subject to *trans-formation*, wise is he who "does not take his stand on that which has form" (chap. 17). While the Greek form is by principle impervious to change, the equivalent Chinese notion is never more than a phase—coherent as such (China is not haunted by mobilism)—in the great process of things (even in medicine, the human body was conceived in terms of phases similar to those occurring in nature). Another essential difference to which we shall also keep referring—it is not difficult to conceive, but it is hard to integrate—is related to the fact that Chinese thought, unlike Greek, makes no sharp division between the visible and the invisible (*alias* the sensible and the intelligible, the latter being the "principle" and "cause" of the former, *archē, aitia*). In China, attention is focused entirely on the transitional stage between the one and the other: either the "tenuous" (*jing*) or "subtle" (*wei*) stage in which concretion is barely emerging and becoming actualized, or else, on the contrary, the stage where it has become so refined that it reaches into the spiritual (the notion of *jing-shen*). Here again, the *transition* is the predominant issue: contrary to the Greek world of separate, fixed, and clear-cut form—the world of hegemonic Form—China's attention bears upon the discreet and the continuous.

These undefined areas of *transition* are also given their full value in the Chinese arts. Instead of perceiving invisible, otherworldly harmonies in the sounds produced (see Plotinus: "Musical harmonies imperceptible to the senses create the sensible harmonies"), Chinese music is attentive to the harmonic capacity of a pared-down sound (the more the sound is pared down, the greater this capacity is). As the *Laozi* says (§41), there is "great sonority (in) little sound": a few notes played on the lute are enough for us to hear the silence they will



fall back into. It also becomes clear why, rather than representing the human body—which, like the nude, stands out immobile and needs floating garments around it in order to impart movement (see illustration p. 69)—Chinese painting prefers to depict mountain peaks glimpsed among the clouds or a bamboo stalk that apportions the compenetration of the empty and the full. In China, what is painted is not fixed form, but the world in the process of acquiring form or resorbing into its undifferentiated mass. Chinese painting takes us to the root of the visible in order to find the invisible, instead of conceiving the invisible as being on a different plane and of a different nature. It is this emergence (immergence) *between* the stages of having and not having form that is depicted: close by, the evanescent forms of rocks—in the distance, the riverbank fades away into a vague horizon . . .

VI

I fear I may have been a little hasty in bringing China and Greece into such a head-on confrontation: I might have let the need to construct the comparison draw me into generalities on both sides (which are always valid to some extent, but are perhaps too soon taken for granted or their meaning is outworn). What I really expected from addressing the question of the nude (of the conditions for its possibility) was that—the issue having become unavoidable—we would be forced away from the codified formulations that no longer serve thought. I expected that its incongruity would provoke a disturbance; so let us not abandon it too quickly to an established discourse. We would be well advised to take our time and let the question keep its strangeness by going further back and looking at it from this angle, for example: why did literati painting in China finally prefer to depict a bamboo stalk, or a rock, rather than the human figure?

A man—a rock: a strange contraposition . . . For is there any way to compare them? The Chinese critic appears to think so, since he starts from the principle that painting a rock is just as demanding as painting a human body. Not because he considers the human body immobile, but because he considers the rock alive. The *Mustard Seed*

Garden begins with this: "When considering a human body, attention should be given to the energy-breath (*qi*) as well as to the ossature. Now, rocks are the ossature of Heaven and Earth, which are likewise permeated by energy-breath. This is why rocks are called 'Cloud-roots.' Rocks devoid of energy-breath are dead rocks (petrified) in exactly the same way that the ossature of a human body without the energy-breath is dead (sclerosed)."

This means that it is no more possible to paint rocks that are not endowed with breath than it is in the case of the human body. But what exactly does painting rocks *endowed with breath* imply? The treatise answers that it means seeking the energy-breath "within that which cannot be apprehended." The expression designates what is too tenuous, too subtle, to be perceptible ("apprehensible"), and indicates that the painter's task is to open up the rock to its inner, invisible dimension so that within the stone the physical and the material can decant and expand until they let through the flow of cosmic energy that causes it to exist. "Cloud-roots," the rocks are called: the expression is not used merely as a nicety of style and should not be taken as a "poetic" embellishment. It states the truth: rocks are not of a different nature from clouds; their concretion is merely denser and more solid, so that anyone who wants to depict them must above all preserve the animate, "living" character that makes them, like all the rest of nature, part of the real as an ongoing process. We have already seen how this is achieved: all that needs to be done is to reveal in the mass of the rock or the mountain the lines of force (notion of *shi*) that run through its configuration and channel the flow of cosmic energy, just as the energetic pathways in the human body do.

But this is still only the start of the question. We were talking about preference: why depict a rock *rather than* a human body? A great scholar of the Song dynasty (Su Dongpo) sheds light on this with the following comparison: "Men, animals, palaces and even tools all have a constant form; on the other hand, mountains, rocks, bamboos, trees, waves or mist have no constant form but nonetheless possess an internal coherence that is constant" (*LB*, p. 47). In the two sets of pictorial subjects, "man" comes under the same heading as defined

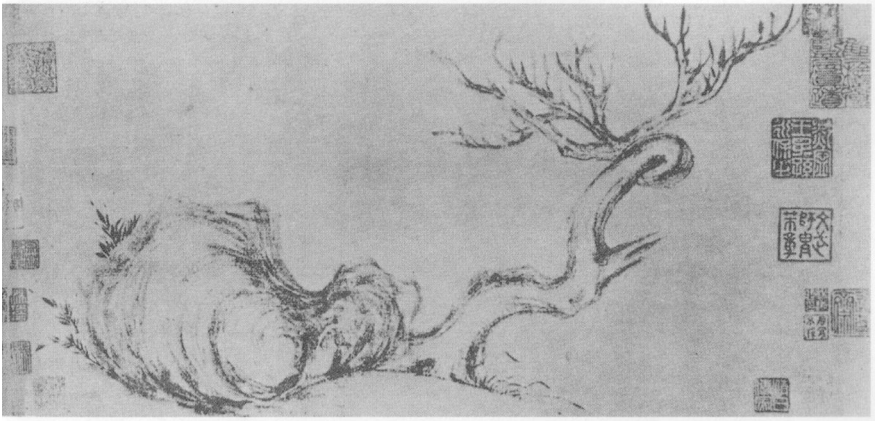
objects (house, crockery, and so on), whereas rocks belong to the other category along with mist or waves. Now these two categories are not of equal value: "If a constant form is not perfectly rendered, it is obvious to everyone; but if the constant coherence is deficient, it may even escape the notice of shrewd observers." Hence, "Those who seek to deceive and to steal undeserved renown invariably choose [as their subject] those things that do not have constant form." Since, in itself, a rock does not impose any determined form, it might be thought that any form could serve to express the inner organizing principle common to all rocks. The difficulty appears to be less great, given that "while in depicting the human figure, the slightest error is apparent to all"—since everyone knows the prescribed form of the human body, on the contrary, "inadequacies in the depiction of the internal coherence" are far more difficult to detect. The cost of this, however, is in inverse proportion: an error with regard to a constant form, such as that of man, is confined to that form and does not adversely affect the work as a whole, whereas a fault concerning the internal coherence of a rock, or waves, entails complete failure. From this it is easy to deduce where the scholar's preference would lie: constant form can be successfully achieved by mere craftsmen, but as far as the constancy of internal coherence is concerned, even the greatest talents are susceptible to error.

As far as the human body is concerned, the scholar tells us, all the artist has to do is to reproduce the same, prescribed form: the elements that compose the face, the torso, the limbs, and so forth. But for a rock or clouds, all forms are possible, so long as an internal coherence imparted to this rock or to that cloud makes this cloud or that rock effectively possible. Because it does not vary, this internal coherence is what makes a rock a rock, or rather—not to slip back into the vocabulary of essence—it is what makes a rock "serve" as a rock, "count" as a rock: produces (pictorially) the effect of a rock. What is translated here as "internal coherence" is the cardinal notion in classical Chinese thought (the notion of *li*) and goes hand in hand with the notion of energy-breath (*qi*) in the same way that we know the Greek idea-Form goes hand in hand with matter (*eidos/*

畫石起手當分三面法觀人者必曰氣骨。石乃天地之骨。而氣亦寓焉。故謂之曰雲根。無氣之石則爲頑石。猶無氣之骨則爲朽骨。豈有朽骨而可施於騷人韻士筆下乎。是畫無氣之石固不可。而畫有氣之石即見氣於無可捉摹之中。尤難乎其難。非胸中煉有媧皇指上立有顯未未可從事。而我今以爲無難也。蓋石有三面。三面者即石之凹深凸凌。參合陰陽。步伍高下。錙量厚薄。以及碧頭菱面。負土胎衆。此雖石之勢也。熟此而氣亦隨勢以生矣。秘法無多。請以一字金針相告。曰活。

ulē). Where, then, does the difference lie? Both illuminate by their intelligibility, but one from the standpoint of being (essence), and the other from that of processes. The Greeks' idea-Form belongs to quite a different order of reality from matter and, serving as a model for it, informs matter from this Outside that transcends it, whereas the Chinese principle of internal coherence is inseparable from the energy it organizes. The energy's constancy hinges on this regulating capacity, which enables it to become actualized by "taking shape" in a viable manner (see the Chinese thematism of the "way"). Consequently, to the Chinese painter, depicting a rock is a matter not of representing it by imitating its form, but of seeking out the energetic ("vital") principle that causes a rock to deploy into a rock. What the painter reproduces is the logic inherent in this process (the "that by which it is such" is the classic Chinese expression): making it take shape—though "making" is overly imperative, and it would be more accurate to say "allowing" it to take shape—in accordance with the principle of coherence, which will ensure that whatever form the representation eventually takes, it will *effectively* be that of a rock.

The nude is not merely uni-form—a globally identical and therefore fixed form, allowing no real leeway for improvisation. It is also a form that is *circumscribed* and hence distinct, perceived in a clear-cut way—even when it has the iridescent quality imparted by the sensuality of the flesh, as in a Renoir painting. By being enveloped within its form, the nude stands out. In this it satisfied perfectly the Greeks' liking for boundaries, which give Form its informing power (see the correlation between *horos* and *eidos* in Greek): form is the "enveloping boundary," and beauty is a demarcation (determination) by form. *Forma* designates at once the beauty of a thing and the limit that differentiates it from any other by the contour that circumscribes its matter. *Formata et distincta*, says Saint Augustine of beauty: beauty appears when the flowing in-finitude of matter is immobilized by its form, which unifies it and thereby withdraws it *definitively* from confusion. Consequently, even if it were no longer inhabited by its informing virtue of essence and of archetype (the virtue attached by ontology to the *eidos*), from a purely aesthetic standpoint form would still prevail, because of its power to delimit and distinguish (see the



thought of *schema* form as external form, in the rival tradition of the Stoics). The nude is precisely this form par excellence whose contour detaches it from the world and resettles it in itself: even when the nude is lost among the shadows of mythological scenes, it is still the most achieved and distinct form. *Formata et distincta* can truly be said of the beauty that is proper above all else to the nude.

Now, what does Chinese theory have to say about painting? "It is easy to paint the mountain in the rain or the mountain under clear skies. But when fine weather is turning to rain, or when the sun begins to shine again through the rain; to take shelter one evening surrounded by mist and fog . . ., when all the landscape is lost in confusion, emerging—immerging between what there is and what there is not: that is what is difficult to paint" (Qian Wenshi, *LB*, p. 84). Not a definite, clear-cut state of things, but the moment of change from one state to another, *between* the opposite actualizing and undifferentiated stages: Chinese painting shows the *trans*-formation from one to the other, captures the effect of vague haziness—the undecidedness (*huang hu*, as it is said in the *Laozi*, §14)—that goes hand in hand with change. But everything is always in the process of change. Whereas Greek thought attributes greater value to the formed and the distinct, which gave rise to the cult of definitive Form exemplified by the

Nude, China thinks—and paints—the transitional and the indicial (in the modes of the "subtle," the "tenuous," the "indistinct"). It is in this that Chinese thought is invaluable, for Greek thought, based on the principle of contradiction and in which clarity is all-important (Descartes again: clear and distinct ideas . . .), has left us strangely unequipped to think (depict) the *indistinctness* of transition.

This explains why the representation of bamboos, rocks, waves, and mists has taken precedence in China, and not the depiction of the nude. Consider these three illustrations of rocks. The *Mustard Seed* technical treatise (1) gives a schoolbook lesson on how rocks can take myriad forms while retaining in each instance the consistency of rocks (see illustration p. 73). As for Su Dongpo's painting of a "strange rock" (2), it gives a glimpse of the "internal coherence" that imparts a dynamic quality to the mass of the rock by rolling it in upon itself, in the opposite direction from the movement of the tree trunk beside it, making it share in the life of things (see illustration p. 75). Finally, Ni Zan's "elegant rock" (3), set against a background of bamboos and sterculias, remains blurred, vaguely defined, indistinct. The mass of concentrated energy is not circumscribed within the form of the rock (the blurred inkwork contributes to this impression), and its "form," which without being completely individuated is not inconsistent either, contains all forms—or rather, it excludes none (see illustration p. 76). All of this calls back to mind the *Laozi* (§41): "The great square has no corners," "The great image has no form." This rock is at once virtual and real, and its reality excludes no other possibilities: it is caught in suspense between the "there is" and the "there is not," forming/de-forming—"alive"—but not formed.

VII

To probe more deeply into what ties the nude to a fixed form and makes it a definitive form, let us go back to what is at the start of the nude: what makes a nude is the *pose*. Pose or counterpose: we know that with regard to the standing nude, a whole art developed around the difference between the supporting leg and the resting leg, which creates a disequilibrium whose subtle compensation gives the figure

its momentum. However, action and movement themselves were traditionally rendered by a succession of poses, each of which had to be maintained in strict immobility. The method is indeed ponderous, and so were the paraphernalia: we are even told that in the academies of the Classical age, wooden staffs were used for support, and ropes and straps were hung from the ceiling to help the model to hold the pose. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that these exhausting sessions began to be replaced by poses that were changed at intervals, and Rodin is supposed to have been the first to allow his models to choose their own positions.

Photography shows this even more clearly: for there to be a nude, there has to be immobilization. Cinema proves that so long as a body is in motion, it is impossible for it to be *constituted* into a Nude: whether shameful or provocative, it remains simply a naked body.

A new aspect of the contraposition is revealed here. In fact, in this respect the opposition between the two traditions is so marked that once it is discovered, it is difficult to see what could possibly be built upon it. For Chinese literati (Su Dongpo, *LB*, p. 454; Wang Yi, *LB*, p. 485; Jiang Li, *LB*, p. 499) incessantly repeat that when trying to depict a human figure, creating a pose is to be avoided at all costs. If the subject is made to sit up straight, in ceremonial attire, staring impassively at some object, the "natural" is lost. It is like playing a guitar or a lute "with the pegs glued down": what is fixed lets nothing pass through it. Once the capacity for variation is lost, what is left is not a living character but a statue of wood or clay; the modeling of form is all that remains.

This is corroborated by Ricci, who reports that when the Chinese discovered European painting (Sullivan has established that this was of the Virgin and Child variety), they were astounded to see that it was more what in their eyes pertained to sculpture rather than to painting. There is a head-on clash on this point. A Chinese critic (Chen Zao, *LB*, p. 471) remarks that in order to avoid making the figure look like a statue, one has to be careful not to paint it "like a mirrored reflection." From our standpoint, on the other hand, we know that the mirror was held to be the "painter's master"—Leonardo da

Vinci even made its use a rule of art: "When you want to see if your picture corresponds completely to what you have copied from nature, take a mirror and observe the reflected image of the real object."

According to the Chinese, in order to render a character well, his image must be captured at moments of spontaneous, unstudied reaction: when he suddenly changes position, starts moving forward or backward, or begins to gesticulate; when he is shouting, singing, recovering his breath, smiling, starting to reply, frowning, yawning, hurrying. In short, a lively rendering requires grasping the fleeting moment of real life: not contemplating the subject face to face, but observing him obliquely so as to capture what his features cannot help letting through, unbeknownst to him. Having taken all the time necessary to absorb his expression, "I close my eyes and I seem to see him before me"; and "when I suddenly give my brush free rein, it is as if he were there beneath it" (Wang Yi, *LB*, p. 485); and then, as though in the throes of inspiration, one encapsulates the critical feature. A number of anecdotes tell us that rather than looking directly at the model, the artist would prefer to reproduce the shadow cast upon the wall, whose outline, unburdened by matter, has greater powers of suggestion. This is a far cry from the *modeling* of the nude.

I have already pointed out that, seen from this angle, the inversion between these two traditions is perhaps too explicit to need more detailed examination. In the pose, the painter attempts to capture within the modeling the integrality of form itself, as it is embodied in the nude, whereas by means of the anti-pose Chinese painters try to capture the single characteristic or indicial trait that reveals the personality of the individual subject, in much the same way as we would do in making a sketch. However, this has to be taken further, for the pose reveals what we conceived as being central to representation: the relation between subject and object. Standing in front of the model, the artist confronts a reality that is completely external to him, and this external character of the "thing" is, just as solidly established, by and for the artist's mind, as is this mind's very power. *Res extensa/res cogitans*: setting a pose means conferring on the poser the unadulterated status of object, by cutting off the model from the

subjectivity that apprehends it, and considering it solely in the light of the laws of perception, whose validity is established a priori. Hence the perceptive modeling essential to the nude; the nude is the objectified body par excellence. The forceful return of the nude during the Renaissance and throughout the Classical era (when the pose became "academic") is attributable to its having been contemporary with the constitution of an objective natural science based on the necessity and universality of its laws (physics, optics, and so on). To quote Leonardo again: "Study science first, then the practice that arises from it"; this revival goes hand in hand with the upsurge of theories of perspective to construct the object of perception and give the modeling its relief. In the first "Academy," founded in Florence on the initiative of Vasari, anatomy and perspective were taught in conjunction with the nude: there is an *episteme* of the nude.

Panofsky had no difficulty in observing that medieval thinking, on the contrary, "fundamentally denied the subject and the object," which would explain why the nude showed the greatest decline ever in Western civilization during this period. It could also be said that China shows a similar disregard for the subject-object relationship, or rather, that Chinese art as a whole considers it sterile and aims to surpass it. "Landscape" is not divorced from "emotion," but one resides within the other, the one reveals the other. As many Chinese thinkers have said (Wang Fuzhi makes it the core of his poetics), the division between the domain of the "eye" and that of the "mind" is purely nominal. An image (poetic, pictorial) is inexhaustibly both; and here again, this "indistinctness" is not a lack (lack of clarity, of rationality?), but both an asset and an effect. Chinese estheticians keep repeating that art arises at the point of meeting and fusion between interiority and the world, and the process—here again, the notion is inescapable—of art is born of a continuous interaction between the two. Turning back to Ni Zan, his "elegant rock" is not placed like an (external) thing set before the perceiving mind; suspended between the "there is" and the "there is not" of transformation and therefore free of all modeling that would reify it, the vagueness of the rock's configuration invalidates any idea of objectivity.

Not by contradicting it, but ignoring it, excluding it as a possibility: this rock is not "represented."

For the time being, we will confine our attention to the first point of contrast, briefly considered earlier. Revealed in the pose and captured in the contours of its form, the nude calls for objective perception—or at least, perception that tacitly implies objectivity—even if it fights against it. The nude commands attention by its *presence*. And even this presence is an effraction: the nude storms in, folding space around itself, saturating it and creating a surrounding vacuum; all other "things"—chair, sheet, rug—are reduced to mere accessories or a setting for the enhancement of the nude; they capitulate and withdraw. This can be seen even in hazy compositions like Bonnard's. What is depicted in Chinese art, on the other hand, is stamped by its quality of *pregnance*. While it is in the stage of pregnance, nothing is final and the real is imbued with a "possible" from which nothing has been excluded thus far. Instead of imposing anything (on perception), the vagueness that inhabits the configuration allows things to pass discreetly through. This lack of definition is a resource, and through the brushstrokes the dimension of absence that pervades the configuration leads to its capacity for immanence.

VIII

Unlike science or philosophy, the characteristic of art is that, in theory, it is nonexclusive. Every manifestation of art seems to present another possible variation; there is toleration between them if not an echo, and all can be displayed together in the same museum. Despite the heavy twentieth-century battering of the notion of objectivity, and however fragmented the modeling of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* is, this work can still take its place alongside others from a distant past. Something—some obstinate residue—remains of the objectivity that has been torn to shreds with such loud delectation, and of Duchamp's systematically broken-up modeling. The intense pursuit of their destruction has failed to eradicate their stamp—and maybe with even less success as the intensity grew. On the other hand, I wonder if there is not some radical incompatibility between

Ni Zan's painting and all these nudes, both painted and possible: does Ni Zan's delicate scroll perhaps disclose a completely different way of conceiving and relating to the "real"? "Tenuous" and "delicate" are convenient words to use in discussing Chinese art (Mallarmé: "Imitate the Chinese, of limpid subtle heart / whose purest ecstasy is to paint the end"). But what is it that these words cover which we perceive as attenuated—the least disturbing—because we are incapable of grasping it *in its fullness*? What if it were here that everything pivoted, unannounced beneath this discreetness?

For it goes without saying that this is not merely a difference in the choice of pictorial subject matter—nude or rock: as we turn from one to the other, what is questioned subterraneously is the "object" itself. After looking at the problem from every angle, it now has to be tackled head on: in what way has the nude, more than any other "thing," embodied our idea of *representation*? And how *could* Chinese literati painting move so far away from it? In a word (although that word is itself suspect): "what" do the Chinese paint?

Behind this query lies the further question, which is one of the most difficult for a sinologist to handle, of how to explicate something he clearly perceives in every field and in every respect, but which never rises above the surface and as such is never amenable to analysis: the elementary (thence the difficulty) fact that China never conceived of *mimesis*. With regard to *mimesis* in the strict sense of the word, as imitation-representation, the Chinese conceived of neither the gesture of disjunction from the "world" that mimesis implies nor the doubling of the world that it calls upon to cover over this rupture as though it were an everlasting breach with nature, and whose "metaphorical" operation, as Ricoeur showed, acts as a transfer and highlights the object. For mimesis is what makes the object. To the Chinese, who followed a different thread, the justification for the existence of art is not rooted in the natural human delight in "imitation" evoked by Aristotle at the beginning of his *Poetics*, which lies at the origin of painting but is equally valid for dramatic poetry. It should be borne in mind that the Chinese even had no knowledge of the theatre (their opera is recent), nor, consequently, of the stage upon which all eyes are focused and where the action is displayed,

together with the characters involved in it. *Ad ostentationem scænae*—this exposure also puts the object in the forefront. Now more than any other, the nude is the *exposed* object.

I just made overly brief mention of the "transfer" operated by art. How do the Greeks see this? Given that, since Aristotle, all things have been considered to consist of their substantial base (their "matter"—the *hupokeimenon*) and their particular form (*morphē*), art is logically conceived as the introduction of a form into a matter. An individual man, according to Aristotle, is "this form realized in such-and-such a way in this mixture of flesh and bone"; sculpting or painting it will therefore consist of transposing the form, such as it is constituted within "this mixture of flesh and bone," into that other matter-base of stone or paper. This matter resists through its inertia, Plotinus says, and the form must prevail over it, for art resides in form alone: "Imagine two blocks of stone, one untouched, the other turned into a statue of a man that art has created by combining every beauty to be found: it is clear that the stone which art has imbued with the beauty of a form becomes beautiful itself, not because it is a stone, but because of the form given to it by art" (*Enneads*, 5.8). Plotinus reiterates this in even more general terms (this is a crucial reference, because with his combination of the Aristotelian notion of matter and the Platonic transcendence of Form, that of the form-idea, Plotinus became the first true art theoretician in the Western world). He says that "all the imitative arts, such as painting and sculpture, are products of this world, because they use a model that is perceptible to the senses and which they imitate by transposing (*metatitheisai*) the forms, movements and symmetries that they see" (*Enneads*, 5.9). This notion of a *transfer* of forms, from the model to its copy, predominated throughout the Classical age, and is essentially what is applied by the nude. The only question arising after that, as summarized by Panofsky, was whether this form appeared as such in nature and was subsequently transported, through imitation, into the work of art (this idea was taken up again during a good part of the Renaissance), or whether it was an image abiding within the mind of the artist, who transferred it directly to matter with no further mediation (the conception prevalent in the Middle Ages).

Now as I was asking for earlier, let us go on to a different "physics" (even before we get to "aesthetics" this time),[2] and stop considering form as a determination that, in its very principle, is independent of the matter it envelops, whether already present as such in nature or appearing to the mind: the very form that the nude represents by imitating it. Instead, let us see it as an actualization of the energy-breath (*qi*) that emerges from the undifferentiated mass by becoming individuated (concretized) under the effect of the invisible efficiency which, as a more "subtle," refined, "spiritual" (*shen*) energy, puts emphasis on the process of things by trans-forming them. Although such a reality *takes form* within the sensible, by becoming more or less opaque, *through* this form it nonetheless carries the dimension of the invisible, or of "spirit," from which it proceeds by immanence. In this case, reproducing the form will mean using it to capture this fundamentally imperceptible dimension of efficiency—the more subtle it is, the more efficient—that causes it to exist. What is therefore incumbent upon the artist is not to succeed in overcoming matter's resistance and transferring the form into it but, to take the most commonly used Chinese expression, to be capable of "proceeding from the form" in order to "transmit the spirit" (*chuan shen*) that inhabits it and allow this "spirit" to pass through. By painting the rock's undecided mass permeated by emptiness, Ni Zan "transmits," or *lets through*, this "spiritual" dimension that makes it become a rock. For

2. This is a question of method: how could the difference be described here other than by first taking it all at once in its entirety, so as to give at least the idea of it—and therefore doing so in a notional language that may level it down, but manages to cover both terms of the opposition and make their confrontation possible? To some extent, this language is arbitrary (clumsy because of its approximations, rough in its accommodations), it is true, but what can I do about it? It is a delicate operation: constructing the possibility of a comparison and even making room for the overall shift that lies cloaked under such discretion involves transforming—sometimes forcing—into a Western language things that the Chinese language itself, with its own semantic content and linguistic effects, has never expressed in such terms. Otherwise, there would be a risk of our inquiry being mired in pure heterotopy (that of Chinese "sensitivity"?) or of our being cornered into the sole argument of "delicacy." In that case, we would have no theoretical framework for the difference—though the present framework is not final and will always have to be reworked—and we would also run the risk of being unable to make a place for the gap and to integrate it. I shall come back later to Chinese intuition in a more anecdotic mode, to try and stay closer to—more at a level with—its own words on the matter. More attentive to the way it breaks through.

as Song thinkers often stated with regard to painting, spirit is not exclusive to man (see Deng Chun, *LB*, p. 75), and the other realities of the world also possess this spiritual dimension (Note: I give the translation of "dimension of spirit" here to avoid the dualistic scission the term "spirit" immediately evokes for us).

The fourth-century artist Gu Kaizhi, known principally for his figure painting, is the earliest of China's painters whose name survives today. He is the first to be credited with this art of "transmitting the spirit," and a number of anecdotes associated with his name help us to understand the effect that was sought and the meaning of his art (recounted in chapter 21 of the *Shishuo xinyu*).The most general of these anecdotes relates that when Gu Kaizhi painted a figure, years could go by before he put in the single dot required for the pupils of the eyes. When asked for the reason, he replied, "What is most subtle does not reside in the elegance or ugliness of the four limbs, which are fundamentally unrelated to it: in a portrait, this is what the transmission of the spirit hinges on"—"this" referring to the pupils of the eyes. The pupils are that subtle, indicial point through which the spirit of an individual, whether real or in representation, is primarily conveyed. Bodily form in itself and physical beauty are of little importance, whereas the artistic skill with which these pupils are barely indicated, suggested—or "pointed at"—determines the vivacity of the overall portrait, and therefore how "alive" and truthful it is.

The pupils are not the only indicial trait that transmits the spirit of an individual: one day, while painting a great man of the past, the same painter added three hairs to his subject's cheek. When asked why he did this, he replied, "He was a distinguished, brilliant man who had a gift for detecting abilities. It is precisely his flair for doing so [that is shown by these traits]." Those who looked at the painting inquired about it and realized that with the addition of these three hairs, it was indeed "as though his spirit shone through" and that "it was incomparably better than before they had been put there."

These anecdotes, as was popular at the time, are recounted with a view to arousing breathless admiration at such great skill, which can only be appreciated "between like minds." They do, however, also give food for thought. The anecdotes themselves are indicial, leading

us with no more than a subtle touch to imagine something entirely different from the notion of the art of representation to which we have become so attached. Not form, in its capacity for determination (to be "imitated"), but an infinitesimal point—between the "there is" and the "there is not"—where everything happens. Not the body's assertive matter and contours, but one of its components that is so subtle—barely perceptible—that it makes the transition between the visible (the physical, the patent) and the spirit borne within the visible, which becomes apparent in its entirety through this single trait. When Gu Kaizhi wanted to paint the portrait of a court dignitary, the official replied, "My features are repulsively ugly, it's not worth your trouble." It appears that this man did in fact have a defect that made his eyes extremely hard to see. "But it's precisely because of your eyes," the painter replied, "I shall merely indicate the pupil by a pale-colored dot; then go over it lightly with 'flying white' brushwork, and it will look like thin clouds veiling the sun." This "flying white" refers to the calligraphic technique whereby a swirling movement of the brush leaves part of the line unpainted: the white space opened up within the form is an aperture through which the physical is emptied out, becoming refined and evasive, and thus allusive to the impalpable, inexhaustible dimension of spirit that pervades it and causes it to vibrate.

It has been said of this artist that his painting was like a spring silkworm spinning its filament, so delicately did his line emerge and capture in its continuity the unbroken flow of the moving lines of a robe, the uninterrupted dynamism of life. "At first sight," this painting seems "flat and facile" and the formal resemblance is sometimes even faulty; but "on closer inspection, its art is complete and it contains something that cannot be described in words" (*LB*, p. 476). Generally speaking, "formal resemblance" (*xingsi*) is not the predominant concern in Chinese art. In Xie He's "Six Principles of Painting," which became basic dogma in art, the first of the principles, set apart from all the others, is the resonance that arises from the energy-breath and gives life and movement to the figuration. What is referred to here is "resonance" as opposed to "sound": the word designates the impalpable, ineffable ("spiritual") quality in a

physical or acoustic phenomenon, but filtered out of the materiality that contains it. This enables it to range freely beyond that matter, allowing cosmic vibration to flow and expand through the intimacy of its phenomenal actualization. After this principle comes the technique whereby the composition is given structure, together with the appropriate brushwork. This is followed, in third place only, by formal figuration. And even then we are not told that it should imitate the object: what is recommended here is not the transfer of form (this notion being included under the final principle, which concerns transmission of the model of the great masters by copying them), but ensuring that the figuration corresponds—"responds"—to the actual reality that calls it up: like all realities, which provoke and respond to each other analogically (the notion of *gan-ying*), to advance the continuous process of the world.

It will be pointed out that this disdain for formal resemblance in China is the result of a slow evolution (particularly marked from the beginning of the Song dynasty, at the turn of the last millennium. See Su Dongpo: formal resemblance is mere "childishness"): which means that the increasing departure from resemblance paralleled the aforementioned diminished enthusiasm for figure painting (and greater interest in landscapes). "Form" and "resonance" became two opposing criteria in figuration (see *LB*, p. 466), and while "painting the form is easy," "painting the spirit is hard." Gu Kaizhi, quoting from the poetry of Xi Kang, already commented that "the hand that strokes the five strings is easy [to paint] / The eye following the wild geese home is difficult," for the gaze lifted toward the sky must express the nostalgia and longing for infinity that is held within it. The movement of the hand has a form, a gaze has none; the hand is the tangible, the eye is the spirit. It was later said that there are those who, when painting flowers, "describe the form," and those who "transmit the spirit"—which is "all the more applicable in the case of the human figure" (*LB*, p. 70). That even became a cliché. However, even the earliest texts on pictorial aesthetics dealing with resemblance indicate a relationship between the dimension of the spirit and the formal configuration (*shen* and *xing*) that orients the painter's figurative work in ways very different from those that our cultural

fold of representation imposed on us (here I differ from Susan Bush in her book *The Chinese Literati on Painting*). The formula is concise but crucial (Zong Bing, *LB*, p. 583): "The dimension of the spirit is fundamentally without beginning or end; it lodges within the forms and sets in motion that which resembles them."

The word "lodges" is important here: it indicates that the spirit resides temporarily within the actualizing form, and instigates correspondences through it. The form is only the vector for the spirit, which expands beyond it, and resemblance is itself impregnated with the e-motion—putting into motion—engendered by the spirit. Now through the figuration of forms, painting, the text concludes, "releases" the spirit (*chang shen*), which "goes beyond" the form. The process of painting therefore echoes the process of the universe; and, as developed in later aesthetics, it is by "departing from the form" that "resemblance is achieved"—the only true resemblance, which is that of the inner resonance.

Literati painting increasingly identified with this act of *going beyond*, and it was therefore impossible for it to be comfortable with a Form that was definitive and perfect—self-sufficient and satisfied with its own harmony—such as that which, for us, is celebrated by the Nude.

IX

However, matters cannot be left to rest there, for it is obvious that in the Nude as well, form oversteps its own boundaries: it reaches outside itself, toward the ideal form. To go back to Plotinus, as we saw earlier, "all the imitative arts," such as painting and sculpture, are "products of this world" because they use a "sensible model," which they imitate by "transposing the forms, movements and symmetries that they see." But something of these arts also belongs to a "there"—the There of the "intelligible" and of Ideas: "for everything that is form in the sensible world comes from there" (*Enneads*, 5.9). Hence, the symmetry of the delineations can be traced back to the perfect symmetry that is contemplated only in the world of the mind; and the sensible form is itself no more than an "image," a "shadow," or a "trace" of this ideal form that has "escaped" from its own world to

penetrate matter and arrange it in a way that inspires us with awed amazement. To look at it the other way around (from the standpoint of experience), this awed amazement stems from a sense of vertigo at the surge of the Infinite, precisely within what at the same time appears to be the most rigorously circumscribed and finite, while its own form—that of the nude body—is in no way blurred. What provokes our "awed amazement" is the sudden irruption of this Elsewhere within the immediacy of the sensible, and even of that which is the most sensible, in the contour and the flesh of this naked form. The experience is metaphysical. Painting or sculpting a nude means carrying out this *anabasis*, or "elevation": seeking out, through the given form (which is inevitably more or less anecdotic), a superior—ideal—form that is the form of the absolute and the archetype.

"It remains, therefore, that the totality of all beings exists first of all elsewhere": in the "there" that is "outside of the world" (*ektos kosmou*), and of which this world is a copy; this "there" of the eternal, wherein everything "is of far greater beauty" because all things are "unadulterated"; this "there" where all is heaven, "where the earth is heaven, as is the sea, and also the animals, plants and mankind"—"all is heavenly in the skies of that other world there." Plotinus establishes the notion of the *ideal* on the basis of a twofold proposition: (1) the ideal comes from a "there" that is outside this world, from which it acquires its absolute perfection; (2) what is ideal is Form overcoming matter and in-forming it (the soul itself is to Intelligence as matter is to Form). Now, this is where the gap with China is the most striking. If we were to trace the geology of this gap back to some initial cleavage, I think the following might be a reasonable proposition: this notion of the ideal—and consequently also that of ideal form—never developed in China, because the Chinese never conceived of an Exterior to the world of processes. Or if they did, it was only in a marginal way, with poets such as Li Bo or Li He, whose imagination was so powerful that it overstepped the framework of Chinese ideology and nurtured dreams of another world. Normally, the only world known in Chinese thought was that of the course, or the "way" (*dao*)—in other words, the world of *viability*. To the Chinese, "Heaven" is nothing other than the totality of the processes that

emanate from the undifferentiated Mass and whose ceaseless renewal is ensured by their own capacity. Heaven, never deviating from its course, embodies Regulation, which is why it ultimately corresponds to what we understand by nature. I offer as proof of this the fact that when their language had to be opened up to Western notions, the Chinese could only translate "ideal" as "thought of the *li*" (*li-xiang*). *Li* is the "internal coherence" inseparable from the energy-breath it organizes, which causes a bamboo to grow into a bamboo or a rock to become a rock, and by virtue of which this rock, whatever form it may have, does indeed present the consistency and configuration characteristic of a rock. Expressed in this way, the notion becomes that of an inner principle which is both dynamic and structuring and from which the process of things derives. It no longer contains anything of the intelligible or the divine Outside that parallels our own world, of the essence and the archetype which the Ideal suggests to us and toward which the mind strives.

Would it be too bold to suggest that European culture is still haunted by this Elsewhere (of another world) and is indelibly stamped by the aspiration toward it? I can think of nothing worse than cultural generalizations, and yet once this thread is drawn, it seems worth holding on to. Along with it there unwinds a genealogy of the spirit: the aspiration toward the ideal has fertilized the fantasies of what I dare to call "Western" culture and has been one of its motivating forces. There are still echoes of Plotinus in Baudelaire: "I am beautiful, oh mortals, as a dream of stone." And there is still no end to the secularization of "God" under cover of the ideal (as expressed in statues glorifying the ideals of Beauty, Liberty, and so on).

This Ideal is the Form that the Nude reaches out for; it even falls to the nude alone to *embody* this straining toward the Ideal—because it does so in the literal before the figurative sense. If beauty lies in the body just as form lies within matter, Plotinus goes on to say, it follows that beauty of bodily form has its source in a different plane ("world") from that of the bodies themselves. In other words, what makes a body beautiful is that in it we perceive a form-idea (*eidos*) that binds and dominates "nature that is form-less and resistant to the idea." Hence, bodily beauty "stems from its participation in a rational

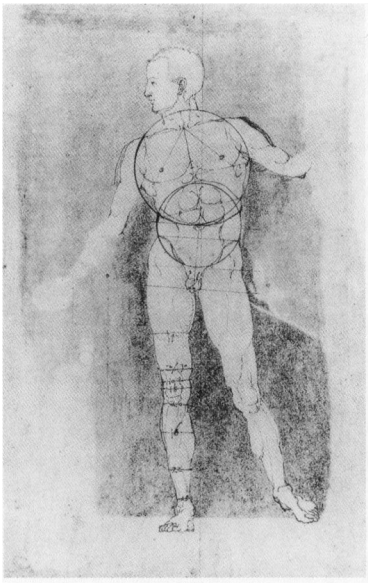
principle that comes from the gods" (*Enneads*, 1.6) or, conversely, "there is in nature a rational principle (*logos*)" that is the (intelligible) "model of bodily beauty" (*Enneads*, 5.8). This rational principle of the ideal form is what constitutes the aesthetic "canon": the soul judges that a body is beautiful "because [the soul] adjusts to the idea it bears within itself, and uses this to form a judgment in the same way that one uses a rule (*kanôn*) to judge if a thing is straight." This ideal character of form, to which art aspires and that the nude embodies, redeems art from the discredit cast upon it by Plato. As I have already said, this is what makes Plotinus truly the initiator of art theory in the West; for if all this is so, art is not merely an imitation of natural things, but "runs back to the principles that are the wellspring of the natural object," thereby "adding" to nature and going beyond the sensible form. This is exemplified by the Zeus of Artemision. "Pheidias made his *Zeus*," Plotinus concludes, "without reference to any model perceived by the senses, but taking Zeus as he would be if he were to consent to become visible to us" (*Enneads*, 5.8). This is the source of its essence: a Nude is not empirical.

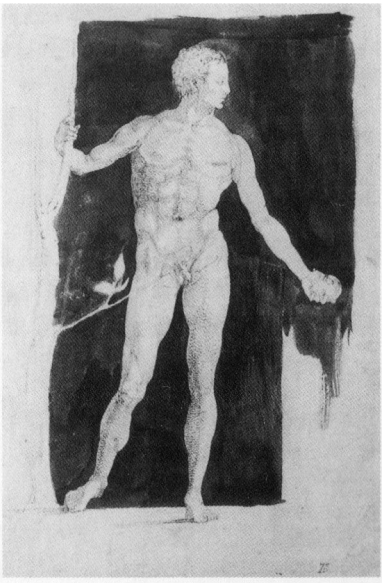
Bréhier's translation gives this as "Il l'imagina tel qu'il serait"—"He imagined him as he would be." But the word "imagined" already goes too far: "taking him" ("*labôn*") is the far more direct expression used in the Greek. Here Plotinus does not use exactly the same language that Philostratus the Athenian attributes to Apollonius of Tyana in speaking to his Egyptian interlocutor: "It is imagination," says Apollonius, not imitation, "that created the gods." The nuance is important: for even if it does convey the idea of a product of the mind that does not depend on an imitation of the sensible, under the guise of the psychological Bréhier's "imagined" nonetheless covers up and begins to integrate the abruptness, or even the incommensurability, with which the two planes meet and which make the surging of the Nude into an event. The word "imagined" reduces the extreme tension by which the Nude is constituted and made sublime. What Plotinus says exactly is that Pheidias actually found—"took"—the form (he made the statue), *but* only "such as it would be if"—unreal?—Zeus consented to appear "through our eyes": the surging out of the Nude, as a form springing from another world, must retain

its power of effraction and ecstasy within the sensible. It must retain the miraculous impact that every great nude produces *every time*. This Nude is the Revelation of the ideal through form; it is the epiphany of the Logos. And all Greek art remained suspended upon its Form. Even Plato, who is usually considered an enemy of art, wrote a remarkable passage (*Republic*, 472d), aptly quoted by Panofsky, in which he compares the model of the perfect city, whose exact counterpart is never to be found in reality, with the work of a painter who, having depicted the most beautiful "model" of the canonically beautiful man, would then be unable to prove that such a man "can" exist.

X

This canon of the nude is first and foremost that established by the number manifested in its proportions. The tradition goes back beyond Plato himself to Pythagoreanism, which holds that the beauty of the nude lies in a numerically defined body structure, inspired by musical harmony. At least, that is the tradition invoked. The measurements by which all parts of the body are linked and coadapted to each other are based on numbers, and since there is an equivalence between the form and the number, the number has the same vocation for transcendence as the form. It carries us from the sensible numbers that can be perceived in space and time to the intelligible numbers found within reason itself, then from those internal numbers to the superior numbers—"numbers that transcend even our minds," says Saint Augustine, "and remain immutable in truth." Hence it is the Number of numbers that is embodied by the Nude, which emerges from that multiplicity to signify its own unity. Polycletus, to whom the famous canon is ascribed, says the same thing with regard to the work of the artist: "Beauty emerges gradually, through a great many numbers." We know that Renaissance art theoreticians took this requirement to such lengths because it revealed for them a metaphysical truth (see Ficino): the Vitruvian figure inscribes man within both a circle and a square to become the symbol of the mathematical correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm. This is why both Leonardo and Alberti approached the nude with the use of protractors and compasses, and when Dürer pursued the proportioned





mathematization of the human body down to the "particle" (*Trümlein*) of less than a millimeter,—this became an end in itself (see illustrations above).

When the body is clothed, there can be no geometrization, because geometrization is based on anatomy and is therefore applied directly to the contours of muscle and flesh that constitute the nude. From everything that has been said above concerning the Chinese view of the body, whose envelope is of interest mainly for its permeability to inflows from the outside that irrigate the inner body through its energy channels, it is readily conceivable that the Chinese body was never amenable to any such geometrization of its surface or volume: the idea was never even imaginable. Similarly, Chinese thought (with the exception of the late Mohists) gave little attention to the relationship between the *whole* and the *part*, which, in the Stoic tradition antagonistic to Plotinian thought on the *eidos*, based the beauty of the nude on the proportioned relation between its various parts and on their "symmetry." In Chinese painting, it is rather the alternation and

interaction of the "empty" and the "full" that are seen as being constitutive and are reproduced—as the compenetration of the visible and the invisible, of the "there is" and the "there is not"—through the configuration of a bamboo stem or the mass of a rock.

But with regard to the nude, the Greeks gave passionate thought to the question of what constitutes a "part" (*meros*)—for it has to be said that in the nude, "being" is grasped in a paradoxical way. A part is a single part because, like the whole body, it has an outline of its own (see the beginning of Galen's treatise *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*). But at the same time, it is connected on one or several sides to other neighboring parts: otherwise, it would not be a "part of" something else. However, it is not joined to them on every side: otherwise it would no longer be "one" single part. It is this ambiguity in the modality of being that is ceaselessly vouched for in the representation of the nude: the part is simultaneously one in itself and a component of a whole, both self-contained and dependent. There might even be nothing more instructive than the nude in this respect, for however beautiful the limbs may be individually, these *membra singula* lose their beauty if they are separated from the body as a whole. As Saint Augustine says, "A comely hand that even when contemplated alone is admired upon the body, loses all its grace if it becomes separated from it . . . just as, without the hand, the other parts are also ugly." On one hand, the nude embodies the multiple unity that constitutes beauty: the one is several, it is diverse, and its beauty is that of the *concordia partium*. On the other hand, it shows the integrity of the form to advantage: this "one" must be "all." As Plotinus writes (*Enneads*, 6.7), "Why the eyes? So that 'all' should be complete. And why the eyebrows? So that 'all' should be complete." Or again, Saint Augustine, in *The City of God* (11.22): "If one eyebrow is shaved off, almost nothing is taken from the body, but how much is taken from its beauty; for beauty is found not in the mass of the body, but in the symmetry and proportion of its members." The characteristic of the nude—and this is where its formative quality lies—is that it shows the submission of the aptness of the parts to that of the whole; in other words, how the anatomical must lead to the organic. As indicated by the canon

associated with the name of Polycletus, "Chrysippus considers that beauty lies not in the harmonious proportions of the individual elements, but in those that govern their assembly, such as a finger's proportion to another finger, and that of all the fingers to the carpus and the metacarpus." And between these and the forearm, the forearm to the whole arm, and so on.

Closer scrutiny shows that the relationship is reciprocal, and this is where the difficulty of executing the nude lies: while the various elements must be in harmony with each other and at the same time contribute to the unity of the whole, they also have to contribute to the unity of the whole in order to be in harmony with each other. There is no before and after here: the condition is also the consequence—*archē* is also *telos*, and from the beginning to the end of its contour, the form of the nude hangs on this reversibility and is nurtured by it. In the crucible of the nude, the two modes of beauty distinguished in Classical tradition are thus inextricably combined: the aptness of the whole (*pulchrum*), which is an object's conformity to what it should be (*eidos*), and the aptness of the part (*aptum*), which is the aptness of one object in relation to another with which it is connected. The first is the aptness of a form in relation to its norm; the second, the aptness of a form in relation to what it is to become a part of; together, they elevate the body into a symbol of "harmony." Saint Augustine defined the beauty of the human body as "a harmony of its parts, together with a certain softness of the flesh." Alberti, referring to the Nude as the representative of beauty, answers that "Beauty consists of a harmony and concordance of the parts with the whole, as determined by number, proportionality and order demanded by harmony: in other words, the absolute and sovereign law of nature."

"Harmony" as a law of nature? But the Chinese thought likewise, and even set harmony up as a supreme value (*tai he*), just as the "natural" became the linchpin of its reflection. This is enough for a distinction to be made between these two types of harmony—and the gap widens further. On one hand, there is harmony seen from the viewpoint of the being of Form (*eidos*), which is both constitutive and distinct, and founded on the relationship between the part and the

whole—the form that is exemplified, and even revealed, by the nude. On the other hand, harmony is viewed from the standpoint of the course, or the way (*dao*); it is the harmony of a process of alternate variations, the harmony celebrated in thought that is centered on regulation. According to the Chinese, each brushstroke on the painter's scroll "closes" at the same time as it "opens"—as opposed to its "being" an integrated element. Each stroke is in a process of transition, held taut by a polar relationship of opposition and complementarity, whose compensating action is the vector of the constancy (that of the "internal coherence") that perseveres throughout the transformation of its form. This is the harmony we see deployed by the undecided form of the rock through the variations of the "empty" and the "full" that it shows.

One is a *synthetic* harmony that fulfills analytical requirements and proceeds by integration (the nude), and the other a *regulating* harmony from which the possibility of continuous transition derives—the same harmony deployed, for example, in *tai ji quan*, considered "Chinese gymnastics" (though that "considered" underlines the gap . . .). With regard to the approach taken, what the nude thus symbolizes by contrast could be pursued even further. For there is something that puts the nude at the core not only of Europe's plastic art, but also of its thought and, notwithstanding the fact that the nude's history can be traced further back (to Egypt, and even as far as the Cycladic idols), makes it truly a product of the Greek mind. This characteristic is that the particular way in which the nude links the part to the whole reproduces the exact workings of Hellenistic thought: it simultaneously "discerns" (*discernere*), as Latin again puts it, what seems to be one and yet is not, or else is less so than it appears to be, and "connects" (*conectere*), by establishing relations and achieving the fullest integration possible. The nude is the ideal perceptive object for this dual operation, whose complementarity—distinguishing and composing—it shows in the most exemplary manner. Both by rising up from sensible multiplicity to the unity of Form and by descending from the unity of Form to the various forms this embraces, all the way down to "indivisible form," the nude sets in motion the same dialectic (Platonic) pendulum that gave rise to philosophy in Greece.

XI

The contrast that causes the sudden upsurge of the nude, which has become symbolic of both the biases and the workings of Greek thought, is so powerful that it jolts even those categories which have hitherto seemed the least suspect—those that are the most neutral because they are purely factual, denoting nothing but activity. There is such a thing as Chinese "painting" just as there is European "painting": we say this simply as a matter of observation. A "painter" "paints"—the evidence is not merely tautological, for it presents this activity as generic; yet is "painting" as univocal as all that? Could it not be that beneath this proclaimed identity, "painting" undergoes such an internal dissociation that the notion becomes too closely related to others and can no longer be so clearly apprehended? Not that it implodes, which could be the direction of contemporary painting, but more simply because among Chinese literati, painting might be part of a much broader range of inquiry and attitudes, of which this would be only one variation, and no longer so specific. The Chinese have often spoken of the literati painter, while he is painting, as being engaged in "writing"; and this writing might be opposed to the meticulous work carried out with the brush (see the opposition *xie yi/gong bi*). Let us ask ourselves if the abandonment of the function of representation does not mean that "painting" no longer maintains its appropriateness. Could its retreat from "brushwork," the transgression of its own frontiers, and its change of genre have led it to a point of alienation? Earlier, I feared that asking "what" the Chinese painter paints might be too objectifying, but now I see that this suspicion backlashes onto the verb itself and undermines it.

Let's give this doubt due space. When painting a nude, a painter *poses* it as an object. This is even what I find most amazing in the operation of the nude (whose strangeness should be probed beneath the "academic" usage). I see the being of the model in front of me, whom I have every reason to perceive as being as much of a subject as I am—with a life, feelings, hopes, sufferings, and so forth—and all I retain is the immobilized form; suddenly, through artistic convention, I turn the model into a *pure object*. That is why I am no more tempted by desire for the flesh than I am moved by compassion for its shaming.

Such is the insulating (insolent) power of the aesthetic function glorified by the nude, which it immediately excludes from all ordinary dealings. That a nude poses—as soon as there is a pose—means that a sacrifice is made to Art, and Art is "Art": self-reflective, dedicated to itself, self-justified. On the dais, or even posed on a sheet, this nude is emptied of its interiority and set apart from the outset; and this *from the outset* is decisive. The nude is apart in the same way that an actor entering the stage is, cut off from his inner life so as to become the character he has to play: the model lends his/her forms to plastic expression, just as an actor lends his/her voice, breath, gestures to the expression of sentiments or ideas—a nude is of the same essence as the theatre. Under my attentive gaze, and because he/she is exposed, the model cannot interest me as a person, and his/her present feelings or thoughts have no more to do with me than his/her past does. With the pose, all intersubjectivity is suspended (even if its rights are reasserted behind the scenes: Picasso adopted a humorous attitude toward the ambiguity of the relation between painter and model).

Has the strangeness of the relationship been sufficiently investigated? This nude is well and truly present, physically present, but there is no longer any communication with it. Even if it looks, it is with an absent gaze: from the outset the nude is forbidden to look; it is present—passively—only to be looked at. To reverse the preceding concessive clause into a causal relation, we should even say that because the nude is superlatively and physically present, and the space surrounding it is saturated by this presence, thereby monopolizing all attention, there is no longer any room for dialogue to take place. This prevents all possibility of exchange with the nude, and what is displayed in front of us therefore implies something inaccessible. The model is there only as a guide toward Form and as a perceptual support in the quest for measure and proportion, providing a site for the unmediated encounter between the concrete and the abstract, each of which is taken to its extreme. On one hand there is the concrete presence, the unconcealed physical body displayed right in front of us, the "here and now" of these sensible—completely visible—contours and their flesh. On the other, its counterpart, the abstract situation: I

no longer take account of the personal life of this "other," or of what the individual is experiencing or thinking, but strip away any affects and propensities the model might have. These are always more or less anecdotal, as the model is there only for the harmonic possibilities I deduce from it, then detach and transpose onto stone or paper. In short, the power of the nude lies in the paradox that although so close to us, this body with its warm flesh, vibrant with life—the same life that wells up in ourselves—is nevertheless apprehended at a distance, cut off from us, cast into the rank of an object, and exists only as a means by which we may reach out toward an ideality.

Now set against the preceding remarks, if we press this incongruity of the nude into a dialogue, what does it mean, as was commonly said in Chinese, that what the literati painter does is "write"? Painting—writing: rather than being two clearly distinct terms, each one seeps into and finds its own truth in the other. While "painting" (*hua*) actually signifies "drawing outlines," the etymology of the Chinese character's graph for it denotes a narrow raised path that runs around a field and defines its limits—"writing" modifies this perspective. Of course, there are tangible reasons that can be brought up to explain this shift. In China, writing and painting make use of the same instrument: a brush (both also use ink); unlike the letters of our alphabets, Chinese ideograms are also in a way pictorial markings, whose form is determined but not fixed (the art of writing lies in breathing life back into them). While these reasons are convincing, because they concern the materiality of things—they are tangible—this does not mean that they are sufficient to exhaust the common ground shared by these notions of painting and writing, which makes their substitution possible. Saying that the literati painter "writes" indicates that what he depicts—whether bamboos, rocks, or human figures—is never divorced from some intended meaning, and that even when the form he paints is taken from the outside world, it is still invested with his subjectivity. The treatises insist on this point, and sometimes even make it their first precept: whatever his subject matter, be it a bamboo or a rock, the Chinese painter begins by "communing in spirit" with it (notion of *shen-hui*), and the artist discloses his subjectivity through

it. "Receiving" the form—"pouring out" his feelings into it: the reciprocal opening up and interaction between these two poles is what gives rise to the process of painting and poetry alike, and the painter's "writing"—expressive writing—is as far as it could be from the objectifying (isolating) bias embodied by the nude.

There is a term in Chinese which clearly indicates that what the painter or the poet depicts remains inhabited by his intentionality; the term also gives to understand that "what" he paints—"writes"—is never completely objectifiable. *Yi*: idea—vitality-intention-meaning-feeling-pertinent vision . . . When he paints, the literati painter is "writing *yi*" (*xie yi*); and the Chinese refer to the "*yi* of the brush" (*bi yi*), and also to an "ancient *yi*" (*gu yi*) or a "living *yi*" (*sheng yi*). Taken in its broadest sense, the notion designates "what the inner heart strives toward," and the absence of any term in our own languages that translates this accurately is due less to the wide scope of its semantic spectrum than to the fact that it articulates planes that we ourselves have disjoined, such as those of meaning and vital energy or of desire and idea. (I render this—cautiously—as "intentionality." Without adhering strictly to the phenomenological sense, I do retain its idea of an aim and of a tension of consciousness toward that which it signifies.)

In depicting a human figure, the Chinese painter's aim is not to represent its bodily form, but to express the subject's most characteristic intentionality. According to one of the great Song literati (Su Dongpo, to whom we owe the marked preference for the term *yi*; *LB*, p. 454), "in every man" there is a particular point "where this intentionality is to be found." It might be in the eyes, the eyebrows, perhaps in the cheeks, or "between the beard and the cheekbones" . . . like the three hairs that the painter Gu Kaizhi added to his portrait, with the result that it was then "as though his spirit shone through" his subject and the latter's great ability to detect talent was expressed in those three hairs. In figure painting, the method is to look "in the darkness," among the "multitude" of personal traits, for the one feature that will best reveal the character. The art of portraiture, it is said, belongs to the same *dao* as physiognomy, so that a good painter can

bring a figure to life merely by finding that point where the subject's intentionality is manifested, with no concern for the body as a whole. Another anecdote on the same page tells of a painter who found that his portrait of a court dignitary was not sufficiently like his sitter; but one day, as he was returning from the palace, he gleefully shouted, "I've got it!" He added three wrinkles to the outer edge of the eyes, so discreetly that they were almost imperceptible: making the sitter lower his head and look upward, with eyebrows raised and a frown between the ridges of the brow . . . With this, the critic tells us, he had captured "the great resemblance": that which "transmits the spirit."

It could be objected that the importance given here to the expression of intentionality and inner disposition mainly concerns the art of portraiture, but to the Chinese theoreticians the opposition was all-embracing: "whether in the art of writing or that of painting," one should "apprehend things by becoming one with their spirit," whereas it is difficult to "seek it out" "from the starting-point of tangible forms" (Shen Gua, *LB*, p. 43). The formula is accepted wisdom: whatever the subject of the painting, "once the intentionality appears, it is complete," the painting is perfect, the artist has "reached the internal coherence" and "penetrated the dimension of spirit." Consequently, "a natural mode of intentionality is attained from afar." The word "natural" is apposite, because this intentionality emanates spontaneously without having been controlled, constructed, or objectified. But why *from afar*? Like the poet, the painter refuses to grasp the figuration "tightly": far from indicating indifference on the part of the artist, this distance preserves the field of expansion necessary for its expression, which would be hampered in an enclosed face-to-face situation that would make an object of it. And just as he allows room for the figuration's pregnance to flower as it emanates and decants, the artist also gives himself some distance to cover, so as to discover his figuration as he clears a path to it. This "from afar" permits both poles to engage in a process through which they can aspire to a "meeting," instead of facing each other in a locked stance. An example might be seen in ancient painting, which "depicted the intentionality" and the state of mind, not "the form." The one is even the condition of

the other: it is by "forgetting the form," which is tangible, present, and objectified, that one "reaches the intentionality" and the state of mind. These can only be captured "beyond the ink and brush," just as the richness of meaning can only be grasped "beyond the words."

Once again, the *Mustard Seed Garden* gives us a description of the technicalities. It first establishes that the fact that painting aims to "write" the intentionality relates it to the art of cursive script in calligraphy, whose speed of execution—although rapidity is, of course, not sufficient in itself—makes it far more difficult than that of regular script, where each stroke is made separately. This is why it is said with regard to painting that "writing must be linked to intentionality," so that "if no intentionality is being expressed," "the brush cannot be put to paper." If intentionality is conveyed, on the other hand, it necessarily follows that, as in the illustration below, the subjects painted "seem to be looking at each other, even if they have no eyes" and "seem to be listening to each other, even though they

山澗清且淺遶以濯我足

寂坐正吟詩

坐閒桑落酒來把菊花枝

have no ears." Being a technical treatise, this manual puts forward a number of schematic examples: in one, the figures are drinking beneath mulberry trees—it is the chrysanthemum-picking season; in another, one is sitting alone, reciting a poem (see illustration p. 103) ... Both the specific situation and the intentionality that pervades it are expressed simultaneously and in elliptical fashion: "this is manifested in an indirect way and emerges obliquely" in one or two strokes of the brush. Or "between one or two strokes of the brush," as the Chinese says more precisely, so as to allow room for the stroke's expansiveness. Technically speaking, this means recommending an economy of means taken to the point of scarcity. "It sometimes happens that what a great many brushstrokes fail to capture can suddenly be expressed in one or two": emanating unceasingly, the "subtle" can then be "attained" and the painting or the poem is rich in *allusiveness*.

XII

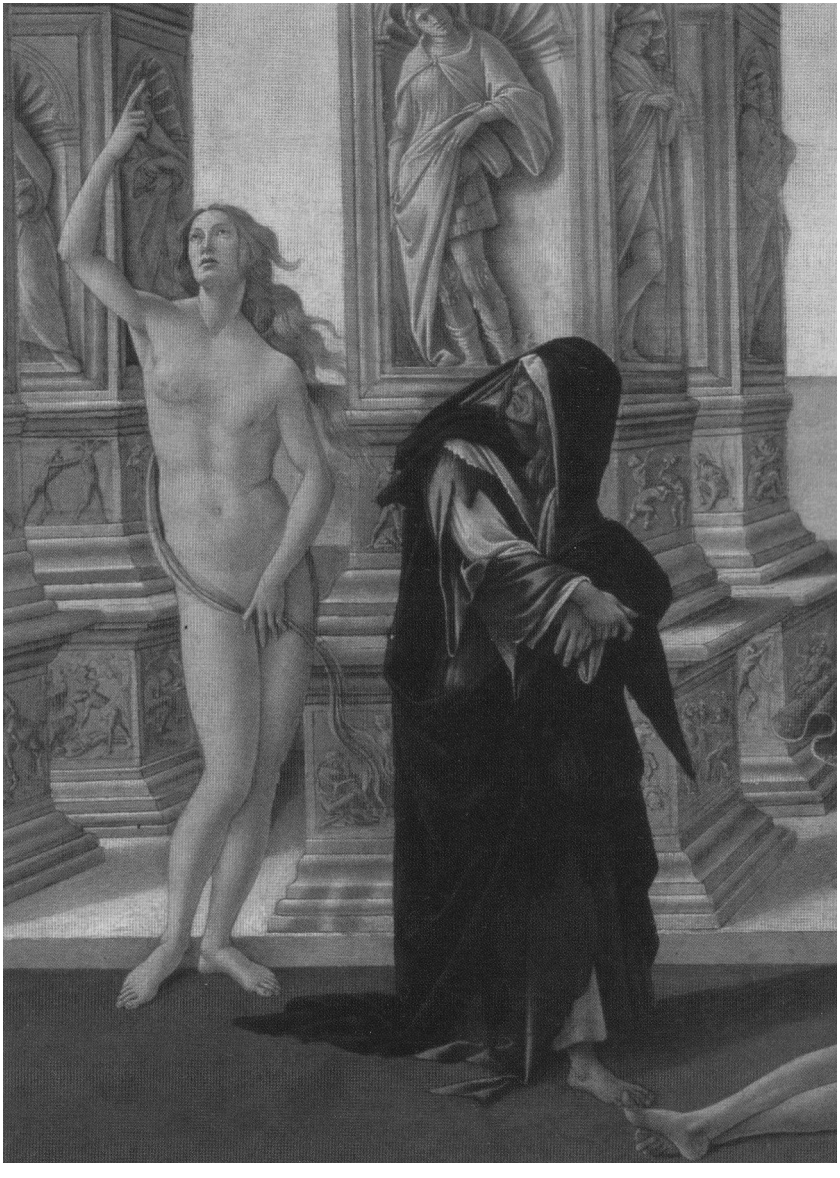
The Chinese painter works "obliquely," using only a few tenuous brushstrokes that are virtually imperceptible but sufficiently *pregnant* to express the subject's whole character. Three hairs on the cheek, a characteristic fold of the eyelids: in literati painting, the expression of intentionality operates through minute details, heedless of the overall form—it is indicial. This highlights the contrast that gives us the nude. For in Western art the representation of the human form expresses the inner feeling, or the ideas, in what is essentially a symbolic mode, involving the entire structured form. As repeated by Schelling, following the ideas of Winckelmann, Lessing, and Herder, the early proponents of aesthetics in Europe (*Philosophy of Art*, chapter 4, §123), what the artist brings to the fore through the nude is the "symbolic significance" of the human form. This should be understood as meaning not only the symbolism of the standing position, signifying the traditionally celebrated "uprooting from the earth"; but also, if the human form is resolved into component parts, the symbolism of the two particular "systems" (nutrition and reproduction on one hand and free movement on the other), together with their subordination to the "higher system of which the head is the center." This takes us back to the notion of a synthetic harmony, which is what supports

the symbolism: "These diverse systems carry a symbolic meaning in themselves, but they can only reach it completely through a subordination such as that imposed upon them by the human form," Schelling goes on. This human form is indeed the "archetype of animal forms," for whereas the other species "live only as part of the background of the atmosphere" (*auf dem Grund des Luftmeers*), man "stands out with the greatest freedom" at the same time that his form expresses the "link" between heaven and earth and the passage from one to the other. It is important to be clear about this "at the same time" on which the nude hangs: the fact that, through his form, man both *stands out* (against the background of the world) and combines within himself (the opposing factors at work in the universe) highlights the unique symbolic function that devolves upon the nude. In other words, the power of harmonic integration proper to man's form is all the more striking because on one hand, among all beings, he is the only one not fully integrated into the order of processes, and on the other, his form is strung between the conflicting forces that draw a cosmos out of chaos.

There would be nothing really new to be learned from following Schelling and the first German aestheticians in their inventory of the analogical significances associated with the various parts of the human body, for they are drawn from the old tables of the imagination. The body is shown as a landscape that reconstitutes the whole universe: the head "signifies (*bedeutet*) the heavens," and prominently the sun; the chest and the organs attached to it characterize the passage from the sky to the earth and "signify the atmosphere"; the cavity of the body signifies the heavenly vault arching over the earth, while the reproductive force at work within the earth is represented by the abdomen; and so on. Each individuated element suggests a specific vocation that is woven in with a web of associations, and this is why each of these elements is so important *precisely for its form*. At the same time, within the parts-to-whole relationship that is established in the human body, what is prevalent is the significance of the whole to which all of these elements contribute: even while it is in repose, the human form evokes "a self-contained and perfectly stable system of movements" whose overall equilibrium "proves to be an image

of the universe." The human body also reproduces the interrelation between the hidden and the manifest, the buried and the uncovered, inherent in the universe: indeed, in both the body and the universe, all that can be recognized from the outside is the perfect harmony, the balance of the figure, and the rhythm of the movements, while the "secret workings of life" remain concealed and the "preparatory stages and the production workshops" are interiorized. Whether in the human body, or the earth and the universe, life as the "product of inner workings" becomes concentrated on the surface, where it is diffused as "pure beauty." This is how, through the incessantly changing configurations created by the underlying tensions, the muscle contours on the surface of the human body come to be the living "symbol of the universal structure of the world" unremittingly pursued by both painters and sculptors. Already according to Winckelmann, muscular movement is comparable to a rising sea swell whose origin is as yet unknown: "As the sea begins to surge and its surface, calm until that moment, swells and boils into a mass of waves, one of which is submerged only to burst out under the curling overfalls of another, so does a muscle swell gently and, as though floating, move into another that draws it onward, while a third rises between the two and seems to accentuate the movement as it disappears between them, and to swallow our gaze."

Schelling concludes that the reason why the human form lacks "the strange clothing possessed by the animals" is so that *on the surface as well* it should be "no more than *an organ*" serving as a perfect instrument for conveying the manifestations of the soul and the inner life. Since, according to dualistic postulates, the vocation of art is to represent ideas that are "raised above matter," there is no object "more generally attuned to the plastic arts" than the human form, which is the "immediate expression of the soul and of reason." The same encomium was applied to Classical antiquity, whose archaeological remains were being dug up in the wake of its rediscovery during this period. When the German aestheticians celebrated the human form, what they had in mind were works such as the famous *Laocoön* or the *Torso of Hercules*, but the examples could equally well include Botticelli's *Calumny of Apelles*, which contrasts so forcefully



with his *Venus* (see illustration p. 107). In *Calumny*, the striking opposition of the heavily draped surrounding figures gives even greater emphasis to the power of detachment and symbolization of the nude, which in this instance, through the transitivity of the meaning that runs through it, becomes unambiguously allegorical. Truth alone stands proud and erect, divested of anything that covers and conceals, frontally exposed and absolutely nude: the "naked truth." This is not actually specified in the ancient text on Apelles on which the painting is based—and "shy and modest Truth" is all that Alberti's description mentions (*On Painting*, book 3). In Botticelli's painting, however, through the bodily dissymmetry arising from the classic shift of the hip—the figure is more curvilinear and still graceful on one side, more geometrically linear and elongated on the other—all the elements of the composition converge into a single, ostensibly symbolic gesture, pointing upward to an invisible Justice called to witness, and whose power—or so the inner conviction seems to be—will one day finally be triumphant.

We have, then, the *symbol* and the *indice*, set at a distance from each other so as to allow room for both the possibility and the impossibility of the nude. I have chosen to stand the two against each other in order to separate the respective aesthetic traditions of China and the West, precisely because, as they articulate the relationship between the visible and the invisible in different ways, the symbol and the indice also point to each other. Rather than bringing up the customary oppositions on which the conception of the symbol is usually grounded (symbol/metaphor, symbol/allegory, and so on), we should start with what is most familiar, even if later on we find that the semiotics thus set up have shifted out of kilter. The symbol rests on establishing two distinct planes, where the symbolizer (concrete) points to an invisible symbolized (ideaistic) that is an intelligible (for example: the bird, symbol of freedom). When it comes to the indice, however, the relationship is that between the detail and the whole; it is one minute point that reveals the entirety, its function being to provide the clue (a hair or a fingerprint is enough to expose the unknown author of the crime). The "fine," "tenuous," "subtle," almost invisible indication marks the transition between the manifest aspect

of the phenomenon and its unseen aspect, at which it hints. To be precise, as shown in the foregoing examples, the indice is the point where the visible and the invisible *compenetrate* each other instead of splitting up into overlapping planes. The synthetic harmony of the human body displayed before our eyes can be symbolic of a systematic—intelligible—structure of the universe (musical, mathematical . . .), or the muscular tension and elongation can be symbolic of the figure's aspiration to Truth. But if it is clearly perceived, the indicative detail of the three hairs drawn on the cheek, or a simple creasing of the features, is sufficient to give a glimpse of the subject's *complete* character and to show the full measure of his talent. The indice is of the order of the trace, not of the image; while the symbolic relates to a logic of representation (and requires interpretation in order to reconstruct its meaning on the ideaistic plane), the indicial relates to a logic of suggestion (allusion) that needs to be prolonged and unfolded in order to obtain its full effect.

In ancient China, words of wisdom are frequently expressed in an indicial mode, and this is what makes them so disappointing to anyone who has not learned to read them. They are devoid of both the allegorical and the notional. In his *Analects* (7.8), Confucius says: "I lift one corner and will go no further until my interlocutor has found the other three." Confucius *barely* makes an utterance; he avoids both lessons and parables—but invariably puts us on the track. Mencius does likewise: rather than moralizing and trying to convert by argumentation, which is always open to debate, he simply shows that the ordinary man's behavior already displays morality in the form of "shoots" that surface and hint at it (the *si duan*). One such indication is the feeling of "pity" we suddenly feel as we see a child about to fall into a well, and which is enough to reveal a basic humanity in us (to which the concerns of everyday life make us oblivious). This being so, attaining virtue will "only" be a matter of extending such reactions to the whole of our conduct, where usually they merely "break through" from time to time. Similarly, the aim of using the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing*) is to read in the figures of the hexagrams the indicial tendencies that disclose the evolution of coming events (notion of *ji*); more generally speaking, all of Chinese strategy lies in the art of detecting the

indices and making use of them.[3] In light of so many examples, the inquiry could justifiably be moved to a more general plane: might the indice be an operational mode, in terms of the "fine"—"tenuous"—"subtle" (although we have to go beyond an anecdotal interpretation of these words), favored by the Chinese "world" in the most varied domains? A mode such as this would indeed justify speaking of a "world." For although I am well aware of the reticence that will greet the risk of such a conceptualization, which seems to be dealing with totalized wholes, I, for one, cannot be satisfied with a naive image of the charmingly exotic Chinese "refinement." Nor can I renounce trying to establish the logic of the operations that everything shows to have been understood by the Chinese as being interwoven, and that the "literati," who were the emblematic figures of this culture, manipulated as such. As a final illustration I will take poetry. In China, with a few notable exceptions such as Li He and Li Shangyin, poetry makes limited use of symbols. These are codified ("white clouds," "pale moon" . . .) and serve as stereotyped images whose conventional impact has to be revived every time they are used. The feeling of "abandonment" evoked by the poem—a classic theme—is nonetheless suggested by discreet indices: a slackened belt (no strength to feed oneself . . .), the pathway is covered in newly grown grass (now trod by so few visitors . . .). Nowhere is sadness specifically mentioned, but everything alludes to it. It is a "state of mind" that no word can capture and that defies description, but which can be revealed by one slight detail; and as the emotion pierces through indirectly, this infinitesimal detail touches upon the infinite.

XIII

The sun dominates, the heavenly vault covers, and the ground below gives nourishment: it could be said that the entire system of the

3. Here I refer to earlier analyses in order to coordinate them. For indicial expression in the *Analects* of Confucius, see *Detour and Access*, chap. 9; the concept of the indices of moral conscience according to Mencius is discussed in *Fonder la morale*, chap. 4; with regard to the indicial tendencies detected through the hexagrams, see *Figures de l'Immanence*, chap. 8, par. 2; and for strategic discernment, see *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*, chap. 5, pars. 2 and 3.

universe is to be found within the form of a nude—it is form itself; here the universe breathes as it does in the recurrent movement of waves. But once it is stripped of the web of associations incessantly attached to it by the imaginary, and once we get past the symbolic scarp whose folds harbor these associations, the form of the nude is no longer self-evident. With its whole body stretched taut to cover the invisible, as though it alone, yet in its entirety, were the visible side of another world, the form of the nude signals other demarcations. Raised on a pedestal by an entire civilization, it shows a glimpse of other splits in its foundations. In particular, it points to the interest that first Greek and then European culture showed in modelization, whether this modelization proceeded from imitation or from idealization—the nude has continually oscillated between these two poles throughout its history—and whether it was based on anatomical analysis or mathematical calculations. Such is the power attributed to abstract form—abstract in both senses of the word: of being abstracted from the posing model, and of being abstract as an essence; the one supports the other, and the two are united in the archetype. As is confirmed in every respect, our "theory" has always *modelized*, and this is what science in the West owes its triumph to. Even political thought can be seen drawing up the plan of the ideal city in the same way that an artist would draw the canonical nude—as we saw earlier, Plato makes a comparison between the two. They share the common background of a possible mathematization of reality, which is to be seen in Cleisthenes' foundation of the Greek city on the basis of numerical distribution and the calculation of the proportions of the nude alike.

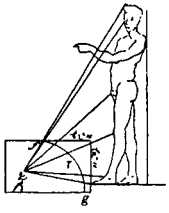
The nude stands at the crossroads of two requirements related to two complementary logics: it owes its rise to this combination of unveiling (the image is revelatory) and modelizing (with a view to achieving the ideal image). Now Chinese civilization is mistrustful of the revelatory power of the image, which it usually restricts to analogical similarities (*bi yu*), just as it remains untouched by religious Revelation; it prefers to scrutinize indices such as the cracks that appear on bones or tortoise shells subjected to flames, and whose patterns are used to detect future configurations. It seems to me that

Chinese "reason" is less modelizing than schematizing, given its attentiveness to the significant mark and its refusal to construct an abstract universe of Forms and essences. The diagrams of the *Book of Changes* (*Yi jing*) are the prototype of this schematization.[4] Beyond these hexagrammatic figures, from which it supposedly derives, Chinese writing, with its ideographic delineations, also pertains to the typical schematizations that became standardized as a result of decisions made by the scribes and through conventional usage. If the sun 日 can already be seen through the trees while the moon is still in the sky, this will indicate "daybreak" 朝 (ancient graph ); if the sun has risen above the horizon, or more precisely, above a lake (in which it is reflected) 旦 (ancient graph ), it will mean "morning"; and when the setting sun is still visible among the branches 莫 (ancient graph ), it will be "evening." In association with the moon, it means "bright," "to shine." 明 Or to give another example, when a tree 木 is repeated, it indicates a wood 林 or a forest 森; if preceded by the radical for *man* 人 (ancient graph )—a man leaning against a tree—it means "to rest" 休 (ancient graph ); or surmounted by a hand (taking the fruit 采; ancient graph ), it will mean "to pick"; and so forth.

What is actually so amazing about the Chinese language is not so much that it is ideographic—after all, a language can only be either

4. This schematization operates on the basis of two types of lines, continuous or broken (- and - -), standing for the opposite and complementary factors *yin* and *yang*. These lines are combined to produce a series of figures of either three or six lines, of which some form the general structure of the whole (hexagrams 1 and 2: Heaven - Earth ; 11 and 12: Rise - Fall, etc.), while others (9: the humble person's power to provide; 21: the corners of the mouth) are of a more anecdotic nature. This suffices for the schematization from the simplest to the most peculiar, and even including the enigma of the "concrete"—of the bipolar structure of the real as a process of continual interactions that suggest the future trend of a given situation through these randomly obtained lines.

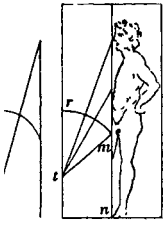
center of the wings; that is to say that, if the center of gravity is far from the midpoint of the wings, the bird's descent is very oblique, whereas if it is close to the center of the wings, this bird's descent is barely slanted.



431. *How can one show a figure that appears to be forty braccia high in a twenty-braccia space, while ensuring that its limbs are in proportion and that it stands upright?*

In this case, as always, the painter must not be troubled by the shape of the wall or partition upon which he paints, especially if this painting is to be seen from a window or other aperture. For the eye does not need to take account of the flatness or curve of the wall, but solely of what is to be represented beyond it, at different points in the landscape painted. It would nevertheless be preferable to draw the figure in the curve *rfg*, for this contains no angles.

432. *How can a figure be made to seem twenty-four braccia high, on a wall whose height is twelve braccia?*



If you wish to draw a figure or anything else that appears to be twenty-four braccia high, do it in the following manner.

First draw upon the wall *mn* one-half of the man you wish to represent. You will then do the other half on the arch *mr*. But before marking out the figure on the arch, draw somewhere else a reproduction of the wall and the arch on which you are to paint it. Behind the outline of this wall, you will then draw the figure in profile, whatever size you like, and link up all the lines of the figure to point *t*. You will reproduce the way these lines intersect *rn* to draw your figure on the wall, which is similar to the one on which you are to paint, and this will give you all your figure's heights and projections. As for the widths or thicknesses on the straight wall *mn*, you will give them their proper form for the figure diminishes of its own accord in the vanishing perspective of the wall.

With regard to the figure in the arch, it will have to be reduced as though it were upright, and you will have to make this reduction in

兩人對坐式

獨坐式

三人對坐式

兩人行立式

一人行立式

ideographic or phonetic—as the fact that it is the only one to have remained so, despite the demands of "modernization" and pressure from official power such as was seen in the Maoist period. Now, taking a last look at the *Mustard Seed Garden*'s technical illustrations teaching the depiction of the human figure, it is plain to see that they derive from the same principle. For they contain no calculations as to what form the body *should* take in response to the effort made by the various muscles and in accordance with the analysis of the forces at work; nor are there any measurements of the angles that will ensure the most accurate rendering of perspective. Such calculations were, of course, the basis of the modelization of the nude as taught by Leonardo in his *Treatise on Painting* (see illustration p. 113). The Chinese illustrations schematize both the "attitude" and the "intentionality" (*du* and *yi*) much as ideograms do, whether the figure is alone, inward-looking and meditative, or turned toward someone else, or is facing another figure but suddenly looking away (see illustration p. 114). Yet to express what the figure's gaze is drawn to and what attitude it conveys, there is never any need to represent the eyes themselves: the angle of the head and the movement of the sleeves suffice to suggest it all. Either the literati painter chooses to show the pupils of the eyes, through which everything is conveyed, as a discreet indication, or he refuses all detail and his depiction is broad and schematic. For what is rendered is not the cleverly analyzed movement of physical strength, but the movement of inner tension, captured in a "cursive" line that expresses what is happening within the figures or between them. Their intentionality is apprehended "from afar," preserving its ability for further development; these are silhouettes that communicate the intensity of life in its boundless diversity—they are not blueprints.

XIV

On reading the comments of Chinese critics who so assiduously repeated each other throughout the "tradition," and seeing how attuned their counsels on the art of figuration were to the theoretical biases of this culture, particularly as regards the indissociability of the regulating coherence and the energy that condenses to form the

concrete (*li* and *qi*), or—to view it from the opposite standpoint—the continual transition from the tangible to the sphere of the spirit, via the stage of the "tenuous"—"subtle"—delicate," one could almost be lulled into losing any sense of astonishment. Fortunately, the nude shakes us out of any such inclination to acquiescence and abruptly interrupts the process of assimilation ("sinicization") to which such a consensus was imperceptibly leading us: for in all these critical texts, including those dealing with the art of character figuration, there is almost never any mention of "beauty"—of that beauty whose ideal is embodied by the nude.

On this point the parallel is easy to establish, and the contrast is enlightening. Mediocre painters in the Chinese tradition were criticized for giving greater importance to formal resemblance than to conveying the "spirit," because the consistency of form serves only as a trace or an indication of the passage of the spirit. In Greece, Demetrius was criticized for giving greater importance to undiscriminating resemblance and fidelity to nature than to "beauty."

For how do the Chinese critics express their admiration of a landscape painting? "The peaks wreathed in clouds and the aspect of the rocks: the device is a natural one that bears no evidence (of the painter's skill); a thought borne by the brush deploys itself spontaneously in all directions: indeed, this participates in the continual creation-transformation" (Mi Fu, quoting Zhang Yanyuan; *LB*, p. 457). These critics point out the soaring quality that results from the freedom of execution and transcends the brushwork; they praise its ability to go hand in hand with the process of natural generation, but they never condense its value and allow it to be subsumed—reduced?—under the heading of beauty. This heading is, on principle, unique. Now, I should like to cast suspicion so far as to wonder if the "beautiful" might not cause us some loss. Let our imagination conceive of a deepening pleasure, untrammeled by any notional focus that would immobilize and construct it and also circumscribe it simply by unifying it and making it homogenous. A pleasure, in other words, that would retain the possibility of developing along with the critic's swerving beacons. More important still: here, critical scrutiny is brought to bear on the creative process through which the work comes into

being and develops, and is not restricted to the purely perceptive judgment of taste, on which aesthetics has been grounded. The term "aesthetics" had to be imported from the West in the late nineteenth century; in Chinese/Japanese it has been translated—and the choice points up the nature of the importation—as "study of the beautiful" (*meixue, bigaku*).

And what do the Chinese critics say with regard to figure painting? They praise the sensible "brilliance" and "radiance" that allow the dimension of the "spirit" to shine through the physical form (notion of *shen-cai*), for its expressiveness is what ensures the figure's "vitality" and creates the figuration's power to "move" (see Mi Fu, who gradually builds up one of the most complete conceptions of this: *LB*, p. 456*s*). The art of female figuration is subject to the same principle, as the critic Guo Ruoxu confirms (*LB*, p. 451): "When we consider how the renowned Masters of Antiquity depicted women, among the 'boys of gold and girls of jade' or the immortal divinities and the constellations, we see that despite their apparent rigid propriety the spirit conveyed is invariably pure-antique in character": "they have a naturally imposing and dignified air so that on seeing them people are filled with respect and a spirit of deference." It is symptomatic that English and French translators, such as A. Soper and Y. Escande, should have been led to translate this as "they are naturally of majestic and dignified beauty" (and Susan Bush before them: "inevitably have a spirit of antique beauty"). In doing so, they Westernize these expressions by replacing them with the word "beauty," for the Chinese text itself speaks only of "spirit" or sensible "aspect" (*se*, a term that covers a broad spectrum including color—complexion—air—charm—carnal desire—aspect, and so on). We replace these with "beauty," as though the notion of beauty were the ineluctable pivot or constant focal point—necessarily implied where not actually expressed—of any judgment bearing on art. However, the fact that "spirit" and not beauty is what matters here is borne out by the critical comment Guo Ruoxu then addresses to his contemporaries: "These prize only the charming-pretty aspect, so as to attract the attention of common folk, but they attain neither the principle nor the meaning of the painting."

This critical assessment could be seen as containing a moral judgment, and it is true that in China the art of figure painting retains its original didactic value. There are also instances, especially from the Ming onward (along, perhaps, with the development of the more popular genres of the novel and the opera?), of an interest being shown in the "beauty" (*mei*) of the women painted by the artist (see, for example, *LB*, p. 492). Already in the work of the Tang painter Zhou Fang, it was their "plumpness" that made women "beautiful," according to the criterion of the time (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, even in the paintings of such artists, it is clear that what was such a "wonderful achievement" about these works had nothing to do with the "cosmetics" or the "finery" (*LB*, p. 479). It was rather, as it was said of the paintings of Zhou Wenju, "the jade flute slipped into the belt, the eyes fixed on the fingernails in a concentrated intentional attitude expressive of anticipation: it is plain that they have something on their minds" . . .

XV

A friend of mine, who is not a sinologist, told me of his disappointment on reading the hexagram closest to the notion of the beautiful (*Bi*, no. 22) in the *Book of Changes*, where the varying arrangement of the figures is supposed to contain all the threads of the development of things. For there is nothing to be learned from it with regard to the particular nature of beauty—and in any case, is it really "beauty" that the hexagram refers to? Rather, it is a power of figuration and adornment arrived at through intersecting lines (notion of *wen*) and not, strictly speaking, form (contrary to Wilhelm's translation, which, once again, is Westernized). And where does this capacity come from if not from the way one factor intersects another in order to create a balance: the *soft* (*yin*) on the second line "adorning" the *hard* (*yang*) at the base of the figure, then the *hard* (*yang*) on the sixth line "adorning" the *soft* (*yin*) that precedes it? This brings the conception of a *regulating harmony* back to the principle of figuration—whether of the configuration of heaven or that of civilization—whose viewpoint is still that of an unfolding process, and not rooted in a synthetic perception. The figure of the hexagram is in a process of becoming and is subject to

interaction, and it suggests no specifically "aesthetic," immobilizing plane—which would freeze form.

This is corroborated in the art of garden design. A garden in the French style is considered beautiful for the pictorial panorama offered to the viewer standing in front of it. A Chinese garden, on the other hand, cannot be labeled "beautiful" (unless, perhaps, as it is mentally recomposed after one has left), because there can be no synthetic perception of it: the garden is disclosed as one walks through it, following a path that takes us through an alternating variety of contrasting and complementary views. It does not create a vision but invites us to roam, refreshing and diverting the spirit (see the matrical expression in the *Analects*, *you yu yi*: "to roam among the arts").

For the aesthetic synthesis to function, it requires fixedness, for beauty can only be seen in immobility, when time is suspended and beauty can be set against the backdrop of eternity. "As a dream of stone . . ." said Baudelaire. Immobility of the thing being constituted as an object and immobility of the gaze absorbed in contemplation. One *stops* in front of beauty. This is what beauty owes its status of essence to, but it is also what creates its disparity with the evolutive conception held by the Chinese (of which an exemplary instance is the use of the unwinding scroll as opposed to the flat panel in painting). Despite his sensitivity to musical feeling as well as to poetry's power of incitement, Confucius never inquired into beauty. Nor would examination of the other great texts of Chinese thought[5] yield much enlightenment on the subject, for their silence in this regard relentlessly brings us back to the question we have already begun to reconnoiter—a question whose strangeness will ensure that its effects will not be readily exhausted: why did we feel the need to conceive an identity of the beautiful? And as a corollary: does the nude, which

5. In Mencius, either the "beautiful" (*mei*) is confined to nonjudgmental visual sensation, which is to the eye what savor is to the sense of taste (6.A.7), or else it is simply an intermediate stage between the "desirable" and "greatness" in the ascent to wisdom, in which case it indicates inner plenitude rather than its outward manifestation (7.B.25). Nor does Daoist thought, however much it is known to have fomented Chinese sensitivity to art, show much greater interest in the beautiful, which is always on the brink of the ornamental and therefore an obstruction to the simplicity and "unpolished" quality advocated by its [Daoist] wisdom.

has been more instrumental than anything else in exploring this identity, derive its legitimacy from it?

It could be argued that Greek thought subordinates the beautiful to the good, as Plotinus still did, and that the beautiful was not considered in isolation but as grounded in metaphysics and morals and dependent on them. However, it nonetheless remains that philosophy did carve out the notion of the beautiful and undertake to make it the object of a possible question—possible not because it could be answered, but precisely as a question: "what is the beautiful," "in-itself," in its essence (*auto to kalon*)? In the *Greater Hippias*, Plato writes: "He's not asking you what thing is beautiful, but what the beautiful is," that is to say, what it is that makes beautiful things beautiful, and that can therefore be abstracted from them. The answer is unimportant, although [in the *Greater Hippias*] the first response to the question is "what is beautiful is a beautiful virgin." "But you can also have a beautiful mare, a beautiful lyre or a beautiful cooking-pot. . . . But the most beautiful girl is ugly in comparison with a goddess." Even the absence of any answer is of little importance once we finally discover that the beautiful eludes definition; what matters is that the question should have been articulated, calling for the definition of a concept of the beautiful—or giving to understand, more simply, that one can thus speak of *the* beautiful. For the fact that it cannot be answered has not invalidated the question; on the contrary, it has sacralized it and confirmed it as an eternal query—this impossibility has installed the question as an enigma, setting the Beautiful up as an ideal and holding both art and thought equally in suspense. As heirs to the Greeks, we still have our "gaze fixed upon the beautiful," as Plotinus put it; and it is out of this still wide-open question that the Nude was born. We have never stopped clinging to the Nude and have always raised it on a pedestal because in and through it, with endless study of its variations and unremittingly delving into its possibilities, we have unceasingly sought the answer to that question, which has held us in thrall ever since it was posed. This *abstract* quest for Beauty has been concentrated—and concretized—in the nude.

For what was philosophy aiming at? In the words of Hippias, it sought to conceive a "beauty that can never be seen to be ugly in

any way by anyone in the world," that "is beautiful in the eyes of all and throughout all time." If the nude is better suited than anything to embody the essence of the beautiful, as every artist has always expected of it, it is because it alone lends itself to this operation of purification and absolutization that produces the canonical: there is no other canon than that of the nude. It is also because the pose necessary for the execution of the nude legitimizes in its principle the immobility that an analytico-synthetic perception of beauty demands, and even gives it exemplary status. Zeuxis is more than just the artist of whom it is said that he depicted grapes so realistically that the birds were deceived and came to peck at them on the painting. Another well-worn anecdote (particularly quoted since the Renaissance) is instructive in this regard, as the artistic procedure described parallels exactly the theoretical inquiry pursued in the Socratic dialogue. According to this tale, related by Pliny the Elder, when Zeuxis was to portray Helen, he had called on the five loveliest virgins in the town of Croton to pose nude, so as to pick out the most beautiful features of each one (an ugly neoclassical painting in the Louvre shows a girl in diaphanous drapery posing before the painter as he sketches, while the preceding model lowers her eyes in shame . . .). The fact that only the nude lent itself to this work of abstraction and modelization through selection made it the privileged domain of experiment for the *concept* of the beautiful; this is the reason for its elemental function in schools and academies of art.

XVI

Credit is due to Kant for having established, at the very core of his *Critique of Judgment*, that there is no *ideal of beauty* other than that of the human form. The starting point of his argument is a cleavage analogous to that used by the Chinese critic, setting what has an unchanging form against what does not. There is on one hand the free "vague beauty" such as that of a flower or the ornamental foliage of a frieze, for which there is no concept to determine what they should be. On the other, there is the beauty of a human being or a building, which implies a concept of finality that determines what they should be, or, in other words, what their perfection is (a beauty that is therefore not

"pure," but only "adherent"). From that basis, we shall proceed by a succession of exclusions. First, there can be no such thing as an ideal of a "vague" beauty, since the indeterminate idea of a *maximum*, which is formed by reason and enables the imagination to picture the ideal, has to be determined by the concept of an objective finality that intellectualizes the judgment of taste. It is impossible to imagine an ideal of a beautiful flower or tree, or even of a beautiful garden, for there is no concept to determine what their *finality* is supposed to be. What remains, therefore, is that there can only be an ideal of "adherent" beauty, conditioned by a concept that gives it a normative character. But in this second category, only "man" can have an ideal of beauty, because man alone "holds the finality of his existence within himself" and therefore he alone "can determine his finality by means of reason."

What is most instructive from that point onward is the way Kant describes the two modes of the Idea which constitute the ideal by combining their normativities, one pertaining to reason and the other to imagination. On one hand, the norm-idea (rather than normal idea: well translated [into French] by Alain Renaut) is the canonical standard which imagination forms dynamically through a rapid succession of superimposed images, as an archetype of the species concerned, which is never completely realized by a single individual. This norm-idea or standard image is not beauty, but the condition to which beauty must conform if its object is to be neither deficient nor excessive. On the other hand, the rational Idea determines the ends of humanity—reason is to be conceived as the faculty of teleology—and gives the representation its suprasensible dimension, which is that of ethics (reason being the faculty of reaching beyond the sensible). Through the conjunction of the norm-idea and the rational Idea and the coordination of the faculties involved, man is capable of expressing in his own form those Ideas which cannot be fully realized in practice, such as benevolence, purity, strength, peace of mind, and so on, and uniting the beautiful and the good.

The analyses briefly reviewed here are to be retained, even though they raise some doubt as to the nature of the form (*Gestalt*) designated as the only possible ideal of beauty. For as though the distinction were irrelevant, nowhere do I see it clarified (nor have I seen the query

raised by the commentators) whether the reference is to the human form considered a sensible whole with its flesh and contours, which is the case of the nude, or as it appears in portraiture, that is, a clothed body. Is it the Virgin and Child (embodying the ideal of purity, maternity, and so on) or the Zeus of Artemision? For who could argue convincingly that once the difference has been recognized, it would be of such secondary importance? Preoccupied as he was by the definition of the judgment of taste and the harmonious or conflictual relationship between the faculties, Kant felt no incentive to address the hypothesis of an autonomy of the nude or to recognize the power of effraction that thrusts it into view. Kant is wary of ontology; he anticipates with suspicion anything that might tear away the veneer and make the thing itself surge out by offering it to intuition. Otherwise, he would perhaps have been unable to abide so serenely by the distinction commonly made during those days of Enlightenment, on which he himself had written a short treatise in his youth and which is a central theme of his last *Critique*, where he uses it to discern the two species of a common genus: the distinction between the sublime and the beautiful. My hypothesis is that beneath its apparent conformism, the nude calls the separation of these two species into question; and that notwithstanding its status as a purely sensible object, it demands that we return to ontology.

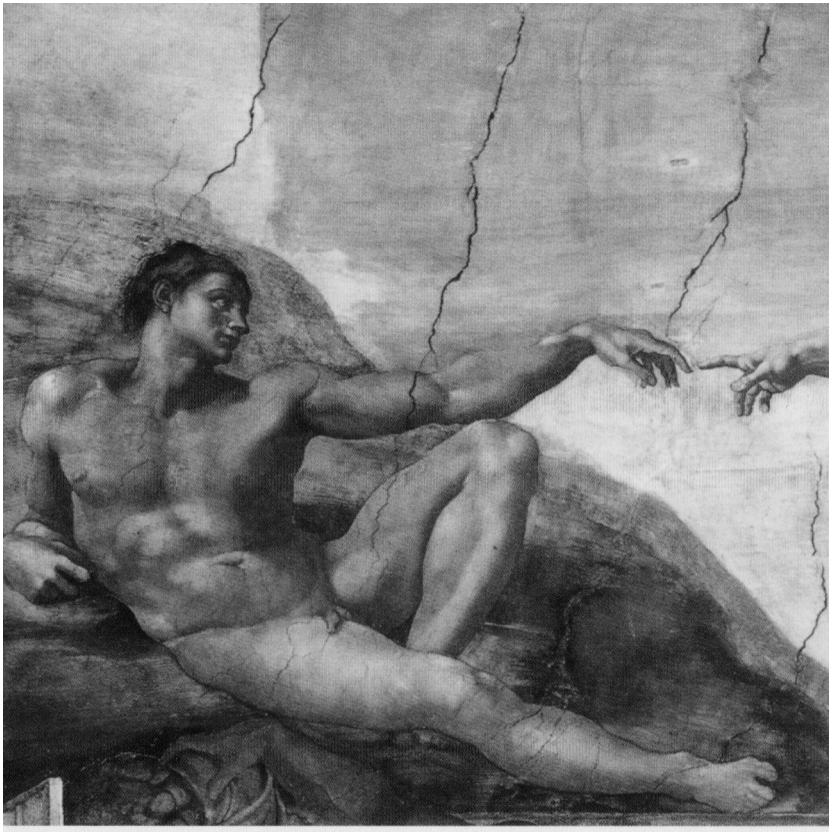
For whatever is done to efface its capacity to surge out, covering it under so much academism that it is virtually unnoticed or is seen as déjà vu, the nude peremptorily calls us back to the question of "being." The nude *reopens* the question point blank, stripping it of all the ponderous accumulations from philosophy's past, as though it had caught up with us in our—specifically modern?—flight from all radical experiences. All things considered, this is what I find really interesting about the nude; for, going back to Kant, I think that while the studio nude's persistent reproduction of the canonical churns out the "beautiful" in abundance, there are also Nudes that are "sublime." Not sublime as a superlative of the beautiful, or even as something that goes beyond the beautiful, but in the Kantian sense of making apparent something of a "completely different order" and being instrumental in its revelation.

Through the fact of the nude—I would use a more forceful expression: under the stunning effect of the nude (if it is a great Nude)—a distinction as thoroughly entrenched as this becomes uncertain as the predicates of the sublime suddenly become unmoored and drift over to the side of the nude. What is sublime, Kant tells us, is that which reveals an *absolute totality* that exceeds the capacity for understanding of our faculty of representation and even of our imagination. Now this absolute totality is exactly what, under the guise of the normative, the Nude does not simply offer—the word is too timid—but imposes, stuns us with, through what I referred to earlier as the "everything is here" of its presence. The Nude has the violence of the sublime, of a cataract or a raging ocean, and a violence that is all the more intense for being confined within the boundaries of this perfectly proportioned body . . . We see it happen every time, even despite the museumgoer's lassitude in front of this déjà-vu: by making the "everything is here" of its presence surge out, the nude causes our intuitive capacity to implode. Confronted by the startling outrush of a great Nude, the gaze is suddenly overwhelmed by the "everything" that abruptly opens up before it, and the eye, at a loss, no longer knows where to look. While it is delighted by the harmony of forms, the gaze is at the same time swallowed up in this "everything"; it is shaken in its perceptive power and loses command—it experiences something staggering. The nude inflicts similar violence on the space it was supposed to occupy and to which it should have been confined—it bursts out, incommensurable with anything else around it, and from the start anything sensible in its surroundings is recognized as being inadequate in the face of the revelation opened up by the nude.

"Ec-stasy" of the great Nude, and ecstasy of the viewer, that nothing can trivialize (nor can any mystique take it over). It continues to stand out against the background of interwoven forms and things, its power to amaze never diminished; and the gaze arrested by the Nude is overwhelmed by the totality that floods into it. That is the hallmark of a great Nude. When we wander through a museum or look through an art book and come across a great Nude, there occurs something rather like the sudden *vibration*, between flinching and

attraction, that Kant attributed to the sublime. For this sublime nude causes in whoever discovers it a feeling of surprise and even troubled anxiety that can never be completely absorbed by the pleasure its harmony produces. By abruptly unleashing the "everything is here" of its presence and allowing it to unfurl, the nude achieves something—right within the sensible, within the closest and the most sensible—that we suddenly no longer feel capable of reaching. Back to Plato's "fearful rapture" and the "awed amazement" evoked by Plotinus . . . Yet what the nude reveals to us is not our "suprasensible" nature, as Kant expected the sublime to do in order to reestablish the dualisms of metaphysics. On the contrary, it pulls us up short before what is almost completely disconcerting about being *totally* "that" (the completeness of forms) at the same time as it is *only* "that" (with no covering left: being naked). As the experience is one of radical discovery, some part of "being" suddenly leaves the shadowy depths where it is supposed to lie hidden and—emerging blatantly—shows itself in its entirety on the surface, at last coinciding with itself perfectly, in and through its form. *Esse cum forma*: this pure form becomes form itself. This is what suddenly makes the nude impossible for the gaze to approach: in front of a great Nude, the gaze is not amenable to being absorbed in its contemplation, but plunges into an abyss.

This shows just how impossible it is for Michelangelo's Adam to be reduced to the expression of a "moral idea" or the purity-innocence that preceded original sin, which is nonetheless so clearly expressed in the gaze he turns toward God with an outpouring of feeling. It also shows that, in him, the sublime is not confined to that minute space, of infinite dimension—the brilliant invention of this *Creation*—that both separates and unites the finger of God and the finger of Adam (see illustration p. 126). But in the very perfection of the canonical figuration, the canonical seems to be overshadowed and crushed by an overall scheme, through Adam's unfolding pose, which makes the nude surge out and throws its *e-vidence* into stark relief. From that point onward, the perfect beauty it displays fades completely into the background, just as the anecdotic quality of its forms and organs are consigned to oblivion, for they are shot through with the sudden feeling that in this body everything is there—totally there—and



that there is nothing further to be revealed, nothing missing nor even anything more to be imagined. Because not only in its flesh, but also in its movement and its gaze, this body is naked, limited to that particular form and offered in its entirety; by being only that, it is everything. In this Nude, the *only* is no longer restrictive, as it would be in the shame felt by Adam after his fall. It is quite the opposite: this *only* becomes all. The sublime Nude creates—invents and shouts out—and the source of its sublimeness lies in this adequation of the "only" and the "all."

XVII

In his comments on clothing in connection with sculpture, Hegel may have succeeded in discerning the opposition between form and spirit within the nude, and it could be that the two alternate routes I have been following so far, through Greece and through China, finally found a meeting ground in his work—is this perhaps where I should have begun? . . .

The philosophical synthesis proposed by Hegel would appear to integrate the two (*Aesthetics*, 3.2). "While it is true that as far as beauty is concerned, our preference should go to the nude," clothing, on the other hand, brings out the "spiritual aspect of form, in its truly living contours." Here at last we have them side by side, each under its own concept: the beautiful (the nude) and the spiritual (the clothed); the balance between them is even. It was a feeling for personal individuality and "love of beautiful and free forms" that led the Greeks to seek the one that is "most free and beautiful," through the organic forms of the human body. However, since "spiritual expression is concentrated in the face and in the overall attitude and movement," and also because the gestures of the arms and hands and the position of the legs, all of whose activity is directed outward, "are the most instrumental in exteriorizing spiritual expression," we need not lament the fact that "modern sculpture is so often obliged to clothe its figures." The nude permits variations of the form, but clothing produces a concentration of the spirit; by highlighting the gesture—face—gaze while veiling the animal element, it points to an inner life. There is therefore "no loss" incurred by observing the "moral proprieties" . . .

Hegel does stay in the Platonic vein: he follows in the footsteps of the *Hippias*, and never loses sight of the philosophical requirement of establishing a concept of the beautiful and building a possible aesthetic on its definition; but beyond aesthetics, his philosophy is at the same time wholly directed toward the final aim of realizing a world of the Spirit. This is why Hegel links the two and can draw a parallel between them. Yet is this parallel really valid? Can a *synoptic* vision effectively embrace them both on the same plane, as Hegel attempts to do? We should not be taken in by this balancing act that claims

the right to weigh the one against the other as though they were two opposing criteria. On reviewing these few pages of the *Aesthetics*, one has the feeling, rather, that Hegel continually swings from one perspective to the other in order to maintain *on either side* the coherence that properly belongs to each one—and never meets the other's. The result being that as he switches between the two he is led to repeat and correct himself. Hegel says that the Greeks represented the corporeal as a human attribute "imbued with spirituality"; however, he admits a little later, "even from the standpoint of beauty," the parts of the body other than the head and the limbs "have no important role in the expression of the spiritual under the aspect of a nude figure." As Hegel's thought is torn between these poles, he contradicts himself by first saying that clothing "brings out the spiritual in form," followed almost immediately by the statement that "in no way does it contribute to the expression of the spiritual" . . .

Hegel is so swayed toward one side or the other that instead of comparing them he merely swings between the two. He continually oscillates from one to the other because he never manages to raise the issue of their mutual exclusion; while he tries to compare them he is unable to make them fit into the same framework, precisely because he is—still—impeded by that force of disjunction. Kant could earlier be criticized for failing to distinguish between the clothed body and the nude within the human form, but here I can see that the heterogeneity of the two perspectives works against any comparison between them, for Hegel fails to *level out* the difference. This means we have to go back one last time to the question: between the clothed body and the nude, what is it that changes so surreptitiously, but so radically, under cover of a common human identity that it prevents their comparison—after all, isn't it always "man" that is represented? This failure raises yet again the query as to the source—and the nature—of the radical incompatibility of these perspectives, which leads judgment to swing to one side or the other, and which our detour through China has brought to light.

A depiction of a clothed man is an attempt to show that human being *as a person*, perceived in his individuality; but in representing a nude body, the aim is to capture an essence. Or rather, whether we

like it or not, it is the nude that *constitutes the essence*: the Essence of Beauty (Venus) or of Truth (as represented by Botticelli, Bernini, and so on), or even Virtue (by Correggio). There is no fixed procedure in this quest for essence, and its paths are always open to inventiveness: Donatello's *David* was a charming effigy of Eros for the Neo-Platonists around Cosimo the Elder in Caraggi, whereas Michelangelo represented David as a colossal nude in order to show him as made in the image of the Creator. It remains, however, that an ideality is conveyed by both the sensual body of the one and the powerful musculature of the other—the variation of form is an eidetic one; if the figure is a "nude," even a "young man" is subjected to this abstraction. The individual is eclipsed, for there is—can be—no such thing as a nude portrait. What the limits of the body, and even the intimacy of the carnal, give access to is a generality; or, to put it the other way around, the flesh of the nude *is an embodiment*. Here lies the source of its power of effraction: as soon as it comes into proximity with the sensible, it is borne away to a distance, onto an ideal scene. This is why the Nude is so often represented in a mythological setting, as in the Judgment of Paris, the Triumph of Galatea, Io, Atalanta and Hippomenes, Samson Victorious, and so on; or on the other register, Adam and Eve, Pietà, Last Judgment . . . In Canova's nude sculpture of Napoleon, the emperor is no longer involved as an individual: the absolutes of War and Heroism are represented in his form, and his sister, sculpted in the nude, appears as *Venus victrix*. Conversely, the fact that nudes were neither painted nor sculpted in China can ultimately be attributed to "theoretical" reasons: namely, that China never conceived, singled out, and put forward a cohesive plane of essences, and that the Chinese imagination therefore found no gratification in the *embodiments of essences* that the mythological figures represent to us. The Chinese language is capable of abstraction, but there is no subsequent personification; literati art conveys its meaning obliquely, but not through the use of allegory.

In treating the subject of literati art, I was led to use the concept of *pregnance*. By this I mean the capacity of an immanence—whether it resides in the undifferentiated mass of forms or of intentionality, for the two go together—to emanate. To "e-manate," as the language

indicates, is to arise out of its natural source. This *power of emanence* is oriented indefinitely toward a "beyond"; allowing it to keep its capacity for development, and to this end refraining from any pressure that might objectify it, the painter/poet writes this potential that "cannot be exhausted" (*wu qiong*). Being part of a process of continuous interaction, at the transition between the "there is" and the "there is not," it cannot properly be considered "aesthetic," since it is elaborated neither on a purely sensitive nor on the "Intelligible" plane.

Let us remember this when we get home from our journey, so as to restore the nude's strangeness. For it is still possible to travel further: the nude and the *antinude* cannot coexist in the same museum, in spite of all the bridges that the totalizing efforts of philosophy—even when it is Hegelian—ceaselessly try to create between the "beautiful" and the "spirit." The nude is not commonplace; in fact, what a very narrow interstice it has managed to nest in! There is on one side a reaction of shame that the nude can never quite silence, but whose negative effect is countered by the pose (whereupon it becomes a spiritual power of effraction). On the opposite side, there is the attraction of the flesh, whose appeal is never completely forgotten, but which the nude, in its quest for essence, forces us to transcend. Between the two, the Nude opens up a space where, through its power of formal objectification, Beauty is triumphant. The nude is suspended between desire and rejection; or rather, it suspends both of these and neutralizes their polarity, dismantles the complicities that would incline it to one side or the other, and stands out against the background of the world, *ex-posed* to the gaze—of the eye and of the mind. This is why, by surging out within the narrow aperture opened up by its unveiling, the nude imposes *presence*; it ascends from the sensitive to its intelligible form, deriving from it an effect of *e-vidence*. Here, man arrogates the power of appearing to himself in an isolating *as it is* of perception. The reservations that distort or overlay this perception are lifted, and he pauses in self-contemplation. Within the nude, man recognizes himself not as a particular existent caught up in the undefined fabric of the universe, but as being a part of "being": as being "man" and in his destiny as a being. A nude is this tour de force.

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