



---

Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness

Author(s): Jonathan Bordo

Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Winter, 2000), pp. 224-247

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344122>

Accessed: 14/10/2008 10:51

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Critical Inquiry*.

# Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness

Jonathan Bordo

We will not attempt to decide the question whether the races, which we at present term savage, are all in a condition of original wildness, or whether, as the structure of their languages often allows of our conjecturing, many among them may not be tribes that have degenerated into a wild state, remaining as the scattered fragments saved from the wreck of a civilization that was early lost. A more intimate acquaintance with these so-called children of nature reveals no traces of that superiority of knowledge regarding terrestrial forces which a love of the marvellous has led men to ascribe to these nations. A vague and terror-stricken feeling of the unity of natural forces is no doubt awakened in the breast of the savage, but such a feeling has nothing in common with the attempt to prove, by the power of thought, the connection that exists among all phenomena.

—ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT, *Cosmos*

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* [*eine Art Sehen unsrerseits*]; it is our *acting* [*unser Handeln*], which lies at the bottom of the language-game.

—LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*

I wish to thank Tom Mitchell, Jesper Svenbro, Paul Duro, Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Toby Foshay, and Yves Thomas. Over the period of my research leave in 1998–99, versions of this paper were read to the department of Art History at Ohio State University, the graduate program in the History and Theory of Architecture at McGill University, the departments of English at the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria (Canada), and the Fourth International Word and Image conference at Claremont College. I am also grateful to the editorial board of *Critical Inquiry* for engaging my core claim about modern painting.

*Critical Inquiry* 26 (Winter 2000)

© 2000 by The University of Chicago. 0093-1896/00/2602-0001\$02.00. All rights reserved.

## 1

Wilderness is a hallowed ground; it is at the origin speech, as in the phrase “the voice in the wilderness.” It is the void and a voiding (*tohu-bohu*); clearing, the clearing; a wasteland, a nest of wild beasts, the raging sea, the Teutonic night, the forest; “quelques arpents de neige vers le Canada”;<sup>1</sup> *terre des sauvages* (from the seventeenth century), *Terre sauvage* (a painting by twentieth-century Canadian painter A. Y. Jackson); bereft of culture, the savage; the sacred precinct of summer camp. What condition is being addressed through the figural inscription of the subject in Wilderness? This is not only a question of the word *wilderness* behaving like a name tag attached to some one or group or tribe’s intimate and parochial relationship to the real, to real estate. When it comes to wilderness, European tribal nations have come to be rather possessive of wilderness as its symbolics, a paradigmatic site for the symbolic staging of Benedict Anderson’s imagined community of the nation-state: wilderness as the *utopos* of territory, the Republic in the Wilderness, the Great Trek into the Wilderness. Modern European linguistic dispensations of the word emphasize the root (Indo-Germanic *wilde*), but what about the suffix, the *-ness* that qualifies the wild, so to speak?

To add a *-ness* to an adjective or past participle, such as *empty*, *sad*, *dark*, or *wild*, transforms qualities and properties into states or conditions: emptiness, darkness, sadness, wilderness, through which transformation *wild-* becomes almost magically a substantive and a subject—and darkness fell over the land, the trackless wilderness. The dictionary also notes one exceptional usage, having bearing on this inquiry, namely, *witness* betokening a condition of knowing, when nominalized betokens the agent of the condition of bearing witness.<sup>2</sup> *Ness* transforms the wild from errant, arid, avoid, to transgressive, exultant, a condition of pure presence or absence. Wilderness as a linguistic locator manifests or instantiates the condition of wilderness. *Ness* comes to hold the wild as in a nest or niche, as if the wild were contained or the core of something. At its core is the wild, the formless: *where the wild things are*. Is this the distinction that deep ecology seeks to draw between *wilderness* and *wildness* when it summons Thoreau’s epigram that “in Wildness is the preservation of the

1. *Le Petit Robert*, s.v. “arpent.”

2. *New Oxford Shorter Dictionary*, s.v. “-ness.”

---

**Jonathan Bordo** is associate professor of cultural studies at Trent University, where he teaches aesthetic and cultural theory. His current project is a monograph entitled *The Landscape without a Witness: An Essay in Modern Painting*.

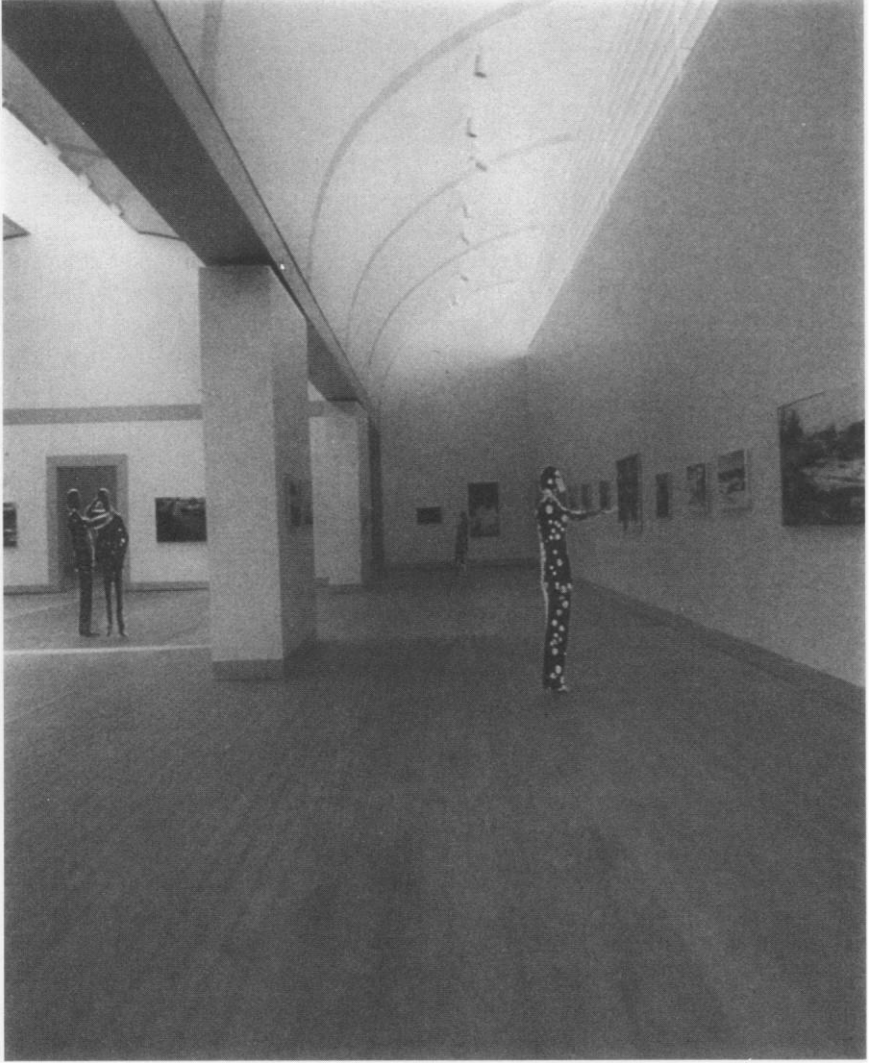


FIG. 1.—Maquette of gallery viewer, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

World?"<sup>3</sup> Is it a transport from the ineffable envelope to its ineffable content? Thus we are right to insist on distinguishing between wilderness, a wilderness, and *the* wilderness.

*The* wilderness as the substance of that condition holds within itself the wild. It is not to chide Wittgenstein to say that grammar, not philosophy, has gone metaphysical on us when it comes to the ordinary word *wilderness* and its dispositions of use. *The* wilderness marks its (auto)promotion as a linguistic sign, a sign for dislocation and gaps, as a claim to an exception to culture within culture, pure willfulness (from Germanic *wil*), beyond the law. It offers signification by emptying and dissolving significance. It halos a very human enunciation by declaring human erasure. The wilderness posits itself as a sign to threaten the extinction of the very human sign. *The* wilderness is the name that I will retain from ordinary language for the linguistic sign, site and object, of my theorizing. Consider *the* wilderness as a proper name.

Despite the extraordinary, almost ubiquitous range of the word *wilderness*, four prognostically reoccurring clusterings of signification feed this problematization: (1) The wilderness as a tropic or symbolic orientation, tending northerly and westerly wherever it lands geographically; (2) the wilderness as a proper name used instead of inherited place names in colonial situations to justify the violent capture and dispossession of territory; (3) the wilderness as a transgressive way of acting that fabulates the "savage" way of life; (4) the wilderness as a temporality and an alleged past coincident with the emergence of the modern European idea of antiquity. These four clusterings taken together reveal the symbolics of the wilderness as a highly productive site for the very invention of modernity itself. This essay is concerned with the second theme, in conjunction with the necessary positing of a specular witness, constitutive of a kind of modern picturing. The specular witness performs a rather special and dual role. It exalts a picture that testifies to an unpicturable condition—the wilderness sublime—while simultaneously legitimating, as a landscape picture, terrain violently seized, dispossessed of its indigenous inhabitants, and reconstituted as territory.

Paintings, not written texts or physical expanses, have been my reflective starting point, paintings alleged to be of *the* wilderness with wilderness as their alleged referent. Why alleged? Because few of these pictures ever name themselves *the* wilderness, but all of them are considered to be about *the* wilderness. These pictures might be taken as a paradigmatic ekphrastic assemblage at least in W. J. T. Mitchell's image-text analysis, with one qualification.<sup>4</sup> Because the word *wilderness* and its cog-

3. Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *Essays: English and American*, ed. Charles W. Eliot, 50 vols. (New York, 1910), 28:421.

4. See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, 1994), esp. pp. 3–8; for the image-text relationship, see also pp. 411–18.

nates are remotely, not contiguously, determinant, these pictures visualize a textual condition from Scripture when Scripture is seldom cited. The verbal referent is seldom empirically accessed when most ekphrastic analysis posits an assemblage, on, beside, or just below the inscriptional surface. Words and images might visibly cohabit a prolonged surface or be in a palimpsestic relation of alternation. In all these cases the composite object is empirically available. Classical landscape, for example, names its topos—Arcadia, the desert, and so on. However, the verbal referent of the paintings that I will shortly introduce appears remote and inaccessible. The landscape art that gave rise to this reflection on picturing has a place within the European tradition of northern symbolic art, closer in its nationalist yearning to the localist imprint of Worpsswede than to the universalist aspirations of American landscape art of the nineteenth century, directed as it was to justifying its project against a European standard.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed it was in the study of somewhat austere and even parochial early twentieth-century Canadian landscape paintings that I first came to be troubled by their curious and oblique specularity, arising from the very idea of wilderness as positing and effacing a witness to an unwitnessable condition. Addressing this specularity in turn led to a more wide-ranging reflection on the apparatus of modern picturing and the subject that seems necessarily posited in the role of specular witness. This concern is an entrance for problematizing the relation between theory and picturing. Pictures Theorize and Theory Pictures is a slogan for saying that reflexivity is not the exclusive monopoly of language but spreads into pictures.<sup>6</sup> To the question, What are the pictures that comprise the core of my examples doing? the response is, they are witnessing, and the witness function underwrites their meaning. I am concerned with witnessing as a general and determinant *doing* of modern pictures, how it works and the cultural implications of pictures to perform such a role. What I have called the witness function is a strategic site for revealing this reflexivity. The picture's putative role to do this, to witness, is indicated, if not established, in part by the very apparatus of picturing itself—framing in an extended sense.<sup>7</sup> Thus this essay seeks to return a more general account

5. See especially Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko* (New York, 1975); Roald Nasgaard, *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America, 1890–1940* (Toronto, 1984); Charles C. Hill, *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* (Toronto, 1995); Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture* (New York, 1980); and Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993).

6. See Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, esp. chap. 3.

7. See Paul Duro's introduction to *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, ed. Duro (Cambridge, 1996) where he effectively diagnoses the uncontrollable slippages between the meaning of the wide and the narrow and the material and the conceptual senses of *frame*.

of the witnessing operation of the picture to the problematics of wilderness.<sup>8</sup> *The wilderness* is a particularly fruitful site to reveal the tangle of modern picturing and the specular witness.

## 2

The reader might recall a short story by the Canadian author Margaret Atwood called "Death by Landscape," at the outset of which the narrator tells us about some early to mid-twentieth-century Canadian landscape paintings by the Group of Seven, which hang on the wall of her protagonist's apartment in Toronto looking out on Lake Ontario.<sup>9</sup>

The pictures are signs of the wilderness; they represent solitary foregrounded trees and variously arranged northern landscapes, whose icon I have elaborated elsewhere as the figure of a solitary northern tree.<sup>10</sup> Pictures are the access and visual signs for the condition of the wilderness. As signs they evidence or testify to the condition of *the wilderness*, an ineffable condition (fig. 2).

*The wilderness* as enunciated from Tom Thomson's *The Jack Pine* is a condition that in principle denies access to the presence of a Subject. It both denies the speculation and invites testimony to this situation or condition. The paradox of this situation describes the shifting of the burden of picturing as a consequence away from the transitive of the picture as proximal rendering over onto the intransitive of the picture as visual sign; and yet the linguistic aspect of the visual sign, or the linguistic sign preceding it, has to be called, as it were, from out of the wilderness of the picture. Being in principle unrepresentable, the wilderness leaves a picture as a testamental deposit for that which the picture was unable to picture. These pictures of landscapes deny human presence by depicting landscapes without figural witnesses. The very inscription of the subject as figural witness is an obstacle to the fulfilling of an apocalyptic intention, the utter dissolution of human presence, which the witnessing itself arrests by its being visually posited. The witness is a temporary stopping point in the sign's apocalyptic journey to dissolution, a journey that will

8. For a more general account, see Jonathan Bordo, "The Witness in the Errings of Contemporary Art," in *The Rhetoric of the Frame*, pp. 178–202. On the wilderness as the painting site whence the witness figure arose, see Bordo, "The *Terra Nullius* of Wilderness—Colonialist Landscape Art (Canada and Australia) and the So-called Claim to American Exception," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 15 (Spring 1997): 13–36 and "Jack Pine—Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence from the Landscape," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27 (Winter 1992–93): 98–128.

9. See Margaret Atwood, "Death by Landscape," *Wilderness Tips* (New York, 1991), pp. 97–118. For a more detailed elaboration of this narrative, see Bordo, "The *Terra Nullius* of Wilderness," p. 14.

10. See Bordo, "Jack Pine," esp. pp. 112–15.

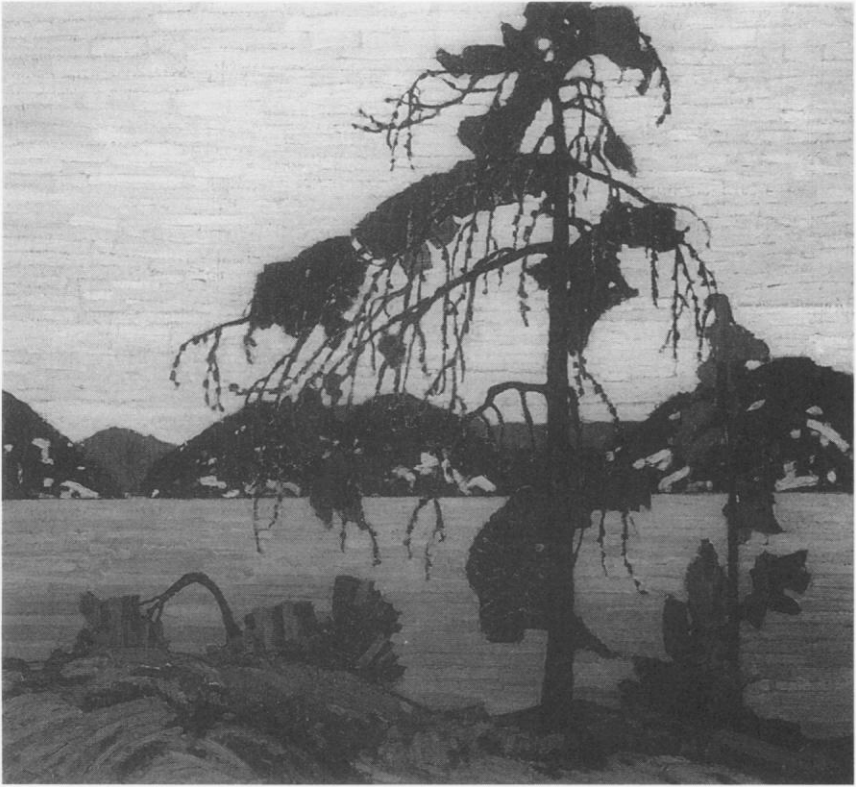


FIG. 2.—Tom Thomson, *The Jack Pine*, 1916–17. Acc. #1519. By permission of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

later find itself interrupted by the intrusion of nonfigural visual inscriptions themselves, marks or signs testifying to that condition. So at least for Thomson and the Group of Seven, *the wilderness as picturing* seems marked by a sustained effort to fulfill pictorially a metaphysical intention to deny systematically human presence, the pictorial analogue to the fifth day of creation.

The paradox of the landscape without a figural witness comes to assume a particular visual significance when one recalls that the Western European landscape, at least as early as the fifteenth century is enunciated as a witnessed landscape, a landscape marked by deliberate signs of human presence: if not human beings figuratively present, then evidences of living human presence (shelters, dwellings, paths, roads, signs marking enclosures such as walls and fences, smoke rising from a fire), if not material evidences of living human presence, then traces on the land of former human occupancies (cairns, tumuli, ruins, graves, architecture).



Indeed the witness figure as it appears in nineteenth-century Australian, American, and British North American landscape art in the "new world" transported these symbolic apparatuses of landscape along with other symbolic devices of capturing and laying claim (fig. 3). Such figures perform the role of witnesses, and I will refer to them as witness figures. Like the figure of the apostle, pointing to Christ on the Cross, there is an apostolic aspect to this testifying, but in this case the figure testifies to the condition of *the* wilderness, itself already prepared by Scripture.<sup>11</sup> The figure is a witness in the wilderness to the condition of *the* wilderness. The testimony is the rupturing event, inaugurating human presence itself. It is the moment when the clock started ticking: from this moment, history. While landscape is the stage for European memory, the wilderness is that state or condition that obliterates history by initiating history from that very moment enshrined as visual testament. *Before* is the posit before memory as it points backward as memory. Thus *before* the European (human) advent is marked by the very present of sight, of testimony as that sighting, contaminated by that seeing. Because the wilderness alleges the zero degree of history, the indigens who are imputed to dwell in the wilderness are considered to be in a wild or savage state, even deemed to be fauna and flora, and/or deemed thus to be not there at all.

Even when American transcendentalist discourse raised ontological questions concerning human presence itself, the thought of no human place is seldom fulfilled by a visual step to void completely the figural inscription of the subject from the visual surface. Rather the ontological question of human presence itself becomes the assertion that it is *the* wilderness as a kind of human occupancy that marks America's cultural superiority over Europe.<sup>12</sup> But this assertion of human presence anticipates a threshold still to be crossed from wilderness as witnessed to wilderness as unwitnessed landscape art.<sup>13</sup> The crossing of the threshold from witnessed to unwitnessed is marked by the erasure of the figural traces of human presence from the contents of the representation and the substitu-

11. See Bordo, "The Witness in the Errands of Contemporary Art," for a sketch of its diexis and its relation to eucharistic representation.

12. See Bordo, "The *Terra Nullius* of Wilderness," esp. 22–30; see also Bordo, "Cultural Symbolology," review of *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America*, by Sacvan Bercovitch, *Semiotic Review of Books* 5 (Mar. 1994): 4–8.

13. See Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956); Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, Conn., 1967); and Max Oelschläger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, Conn., 1991). I particularly recommend Miller, *The Empire of the Eye*, esp. chap. 3, and a companion volume *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, ed. David C. Miller (New Haven, Conn., 1993). See most recently Mitchell, *The Last Dinosaur Book: The Life and Times of a Cultural Icon* (Chicago, 1998), esp. chaps. 16–19, which drops the American wilderness sublime from just before the landing at Plymouth, Massachusetts, into the Jurassic.



FIG. 3.—Thomas Cole, *The Falls of Kaaterskill*, 1826.

tion of that witness figure, for example, by the nonhuman figure of a solitary tree. The solitary tree is a stand-in for the specular witness.

### 3

I have designated these subjects, usually although not always human figures, as witnesses, assigning to them the role of signifying tokens in a

chain of visual proofs or testimonies to a condition that is almost always unnamed and in principle unpicturable. I want to problematize the discourse of the subject more generally in terms of what I call the witness function and the way that the *dédoublement* of classical representation has the witness function as its necessary appurtenance.<sup>14</sup>

A picture is an ordered sedimentation of witnessings—of the *ergon*, in the *ergon*, around the *ergon*. In this regard the pictures of the wilderness are a region where testamentality takes on a special character. What, however, does it mean to witness? What is witnessed? The grammar of witnessing, as I have suggested, is scriptural and, most relevantly, with respect to visual art is part of the Gutenberg episode, “the era of the Book” in Jacques Derrida’s encapsulation of early modernity.<sup>15</sup>

With modernity, the witness function becomes inseparable from the reflexivities of the subject, and the subject as witness comes to organize the space, frame, and contents of visual art in the very way that the word came to organize sight. The very well travelled example of Jan van Eyck’s commemorative portrait of the Arnolfini bridal pair of 1434 is illustrative of this pictural testamentality with its saturation of authorizing inscriptions. The picture posits two specular witnesses, reflected in the mirror, as bearing witness to the marriage, making the picture an agent in the event of the marriage. Panofsky says of the picture that it is “both a double portrait and a marriage certificate.”<sup>16</sup> A double portrait, it portrays two figures in the mirror, one alleged to be the artist van Eyck himself; it is alleged to be van Eyck because of the authority of the signature and date above the mirror, which declares “Johannes de Eyck fuit hic,” with the not particularly exact date 1434. Thus the picture is both a portrait and a self portrait. The painting, for Panofsky, doubles as “a marriage certificate” because the two figures in the mirror are the witnesses to the marriage; the picture, thus, is a proof of the marriage. In this role, the signature is the authorization of the witnessing, represented in the picture by the witness figures in the mirror. Panofsky emphasizes the juridico-legal status of the signature with these words: “the artist has set down his signature—lettered in the flourished script normally used

14. On the *dédoublement* of classical representation, see especially Louis Marin, *La Critique du discours: Sur la “Logique de Port-Royal” et les “Pensées” de Pascal* (Paris, 1975), esp. pp. 58–67. I have argued elsewhere that what is called the gaze as secured to an opticality is itself an appurtenance of the witness function and not the other way around. See Bordo, “The Witness in the Errings of Contemporary Art,” p. 197.

15. See Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1976), esp. chap. 1. See also Hans Blumenberg, *Die Lesebarkeit der Welt* (Frankfurt am Main, 1975), and Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450–1800*, trans. David Gerard (London, 1976).

16. Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting: Its Origins and Character*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 203.

for legal documents—as a witness rather than as a painter.”<sup>17</sup> For Panofsky, there is a picture *and* a witness in a somewhat loose conjunctive relationship. The picture is the record itself of the witnessing to the marriage by the witness Jan van Eyck who commemorates his witnessing with a double portrait of the bridal pair, Giovanni (?) Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami (?).

More precisely, I want to say that the picture, not van Eyck the artist, is the witness. Even if such picturing could successfully authorize the facticity of the event, this would neither make the portrait a marriage certificate, as Panofsky claims, nor would it establish van Eyck to be a witness at the event of the marriage. However, the grammar of the picturing apparatus claims that it, the portrait, not van Eyck, the artist *or* the man, is the visual witness to the event. It, the portrait, is the putative visual witness, certifying the painting to be the visual witness by “notarizing” the painted mirror with the signature and the date.<sup>18</sup> The picture casts a double illusion that van Eyck is the witness for the event and that the picture is its certificate. These are significant pictorial allegations.<sup>19</sup> Panofsky is surely right to characterize the picture as casting a sacramental-legal aura, which his somewhat overelaborate iconographic analysis makes evident. But to cast that aura confers neither sacramentality nor

17. *Ibid.* Damisch gives the following gloss:

Like the painter of the *Arnolfini Wedding*, an image of which, returned by the mirror situated in the very spot on the picture plane toward which the orthogonals converge, bears the famous inscription *Johannes van Eyck fuit hic* and the date 1434. . . . *Hic* means *here*, in the spot from which I see it, as reflected, and not *there*, where I see it to be by means of the mirror, in the position of the witness facing this man and woman whose portrait was executed by van Eyck, if we are to accept Panofsky’s classic reading, as a kind of marriage certificate.

Here Damisch rides on Panofsky’s coattail, accepting his marriage certificate allegation and using it to link the technical device of perspective to an imaginary as providing a specular topic (Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective*, trans. John Goodman [Cambridge, Mass., 1995], pp. 130–31).

18. Compare Linda Seidel’s tendency to invest in the expertise of van Eyck’s notary practice when she writes, “Jan asserts, through the use of notarial ‘style,’ that he has set down what we see on the panel without actually claiming that he saw it happen. He both stakes out a claim for his authority *and* pretends to no greater truth than that which this genre of scribal practice allows” (Linda Seidel, *Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Portrait* [Cambridge, 1993], pp. 138–39) to Edwin Hall’s reducing of that notarial practice to a rhetoric tout court: “moreover there is no indication of a notary officiating at the ceremony to verify the couple’s consent. Van Eyck himself could not have fulfilled this role: his florid signature alone would not have made up for his lack of credentials as a trained and publicly authorized legal professional, nor could it have constituted the painting itself a legal document, since the date under the signature gives only the year of the ceremony” (Edwin Hall, *The Arnolfini Betrothal* [Berkeley, 1994], p. 60). See more generally Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1994), esp. chap. 19.

19. Hall, *The Arnolfini Betrothal* shows them to be just that—allegations, unsupported by the historical facts.

legality on the painting. It does show the picture's self-ascribed assignation as performing (rhetorically speaking) a witnessing role to an event and thereby contributing to the marriage event's legitimation. The figures in the mirror testify, not to the event, but to the picture as a visual witness, just as the absent specular subject who is outside the picture, the alleged van Eyck, is a witness, not to the marriage but to the picture. Van Eyck is the first witness to his picture, inaugurating an iterative chain of witnessings from the event of the picture onward.<sup>20</sup> What seems to look out so transparently, looks at. A representation collapses into a sign.

The picture assumes its testamental force partially because it visually reproduces the iconography (however inexactly, casually, and profanely!) of the Book, most significantly the witness figures themselves testifying to the sacredness of the event. The testamental scenography invites the viewer to the party as vicarious specular witnesses. The picture assigns to itself the role of authorizing the event precisely by penetrating the event in order to give itself this role. Thus the figures in the mirror are to be taken as witness figures in view of the (extra)legal and commemorative role that the picture has assigned to itself. The autodeictic operations of witnessing around the internal mirror, the internal frame, flag the role that the picture assigns for itself as legitimating an event. The picture is an avowal—declaring that something took place to which it was the witness. For all these claims to authorizing an event by visually capturing the real, are we any closer either to the empirical reality of the event or to its sacramental-legal status than before the picture's intervention?

Émile Benveniste presents two different words to distinguish the testimony of a witness (*testis*) from the testimony of the arbiter (*arbiter*), the magistrate, the notary. His work confirms that the picture is invested to perform these two rather different and indeed binary witnessings. A witness (*testis*) has to be present to bear witness while an arbiter (*arbiter*) does not have to be present. The painting posits both present and absent witnesses, both *testis* and *arbiter*. On the one hand the picture carries a delegate or proxy witness to the event (the witness figure in the mirror). On the other hand the picture as witness substitutes itself for the witness. It is the picture that notarizes the event, is its arbiter, so to speak. It "arbitrates" because it sees without having to be present. The picture, performing both tasks, falls in between. It makes a claim to be both an absent and a present witness. Thus the van Eyck painting is a double witness-

20. This is what I understand Seidel to mean when she writes, "Thus, it is not the painter who bears witness to the marriage. . . . His role is finished as he tells us in his inscribed text. Instead, it is the painting, like the ones made for Joos Vijd and Chancellor Rolin but further abetted here by magical authenticating glass, that fulfills that role on into the future. We and our successors are constituted as witnesses to the event we see; to each successive generation, Jan's painting provides first hand testimony" (Seidel, *Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait*, p. 162).

ing.<sup>21</sup> We can invest in both witness functions but not simultaneously. What appears to be simple, straightforward, and unambiguous has become ambivalent and multistable. It is akin to Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit figure in the *Philosophical Investigations* because the picture casts both witness functions alternately but not simultaneously.

Leaving to one side the philosophical question as to what it means to impute to pictures the agency of witnessing, the Arnolfini double portrait as a model of modern picturing bathes its mimetic practice in an instrumental aura. Look at all the socially useful work it is performing—witnessing, notarizing, recording, officiating—the painter as magistrate, notary, and priest all in one (a package deal)! This instrumental framing, gives to this picturing its legal and epistemological faces. The notary's practice of signature, date, and seal and the visual demonstration of verisimilitude in the mirror are two related instrumental postures. In this regard the notarization by signature and date around the mirror authorizes the verisimilitude of the picture as a "mirror to nature," recalling Richard Rorty.<sup>22</sup> The legal and epistemological charades leave the aesthetic as a remainder once they are cancelled. What we call the aesthetic is thus an excess that resides in and is concealed by the instrumental burden that the picture assigns to itself. The officially commissioned portrait that claims to sanction a marriage simultaneously casts an illusion that undermines that very instrumental framing. The aesthetic, so called, thus exceeds the frame that the picture has constituted instrumentally for itself.<sup>23</sup> That the painting has come, if not to justify itself, then at least to demonstrate its capacities, whether societally qualified or not to perform such tasks, suggests just how pervasive the language game of testimony is and just how much the specular witness is a dominant complication, and not an iconographic contingency, at the core of modern picturing.

## 4

Analogous to the way that the Book prepares the Arnolfini portrait to arrogate to itself the testament to a marriage, the Book also prepares *the wilderness* for its being rendered as visual art. The very distinction between witnessing as absent and present, between presence and absence

21. See Émile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1969), 2:110–22. "Ces passages indiquent clairement la différence entre *arbiter* et *testis*: le *testis* est là au vu et au su des parties; l'*arbiter* voit et entend sans être vu. . . . On n'invoque jamais en justice le témoignage d'un *arbiter* pour remplir une fonction testimoniale; car c'est toujours l'idée de voir sans être vu que ce terme implique" (2:120).

22. See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J., 1979).

23. Damisch's technician approach to locating the autonomy of painting is belied by this account. Perspective is part of the illusion apparatus of witnessing.

as marking and speculating, turns out to be decisive because there is a precariousness to the participation of witness figures pictorially, which the logic of wilderness, especially in “new world” spaces of colonization, accentuates to the point of aporia and paradox. Indeed the distinction completely reverses the relation between the aesthetic and the instrumental of the early modern picture because the aesthetic, not the instrumental, turns out to be the “public face” of the picturing practice. The modern discourse of the wilderness is compelled to display an unwitnessable condition. I will suggest that there is a change in the witness function of the picture when wilderness travels from Europe to the “new world” by discussing a few European topoi of wilderness: (1) Arcadia; (2) the “new world” itself; and (3) solitude.

### *Arcadia*

The difference in the testamental orientation of the discourse of the wilderness between early modern European and nineteenth-century American and British colonial begins to be apparent when one recalls for example Poussin’s *Et in Arcadia Ego*. The shepherds of Arcadia, ignorant of human ways, come upon a grave mound and puzzle about it. Human death, memory, and suffering are just below the surface of the idyll. Even a thought experiment cannot keep them out. The tomb’s surface allows for graphic inscription. The shepherds are faced by indiscernible glyphs. They interrupt Arcadia. Writing penetrates the precinct of Arcadia, bringing history or, as was said about primitives without history, prehistory to Arcadia. The *seme* of the tomb blocks a regress to the other wild condition of Arcadia that the pastoral posits in Panofsky’s reading of it.<sup>24</sup> Before Arcadia there was writing—the dark age of Arcadia. The “before” of the tomb *seme* makes history spatial. “Et in Arcadia” does not threaten the extinction of the subject. It foretells the death of the eternal present of a culture of speech. Neither Arcadia nor the prior condition, which the inscription on the tomb declares, is wilderness. The European utopics of landscape never seek to surrender the inescapable, unerasable traces of human continuance. Landscape stages history. This is as true for Arcadia as it is for the desert of Poussin’s *Gathering of the Manna*. The tomb *seme* of *Et in Arcadia Ego* is an outcropping of antiquity in the tropological space European modernity has opened for antiquity in depicting classical fables. The newly opened site for antiquity is situated just below the symbolic outcropping of Arcadia. By making time spatial, European landscape begins to posit antiquity as a deep history of itself, visually positing two layers.<sup>25</sup>

24. See Panofsky, “*Et in Arcadia Ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition,” *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago, 1955), pp. 295–320.

25. For the ancient Greek practice of reading tomb monuments that are enunciated in the first-person singular, see Jesper Svenbro’s remarkable *Phrasikleia: An Anthology of Read-*

*The Fable of the New World*

There are more than a few officially commissioned portraits of René Descartes, the most famous being the one by Frans Hals. There is a portrait of Descartes by Weenix, dating to the epoch of the 1630s and belonging to Descartes's thwarted ambition to publish his complete scientific works in the repressive wake of the second trial of Galileo in June 1632 (fig. 4).<sup>26</sup> The trial prompted Descartes to withdraw its publication and disavow its contents. That this portrait belongs to that epoch is revealed by its very contents. The picture, purportedly of Descartes, is of a figure, holding up a book and pointing to the following sentence: "Mundus est fabula." This phrase is surely not the title of the open book that the figure is holding, but perhaps the phrase points to the title. Or is the book intended to be a trope for the world, as in these phrases, rather popular at that time, "the book of the world" and "the book of nature is written in mathematics"? What fable is this? Why is the world a fable? What world is a fable?

Indeed "the book of the world" comes up in the first *Discourse on Method*, coupled with the assertion that at least one of the worlds, frequented by Descartes is a fable; it appears in the initial chapters of Descartes's treatise on physics entitled *Le Monde*. "Mundus est fabula" is thoroughly discussed in at least two places. In a key text from the sixth chapter of *Le Monde*, Descartes writes that in order to spare the reader an account of the difference between the objects and processes of his physics and the commonsense view of the order of things, he will have recourse "to the invention of a fable" as a way of exposing his physics without giving offence. To understand his physics, Descartes requires the reader to shift conceptually "from this world in order to arrive at a completely new one fashioned in the imaginary spaces."<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere Descartes uses the word *feindre*—feigning, faking, pretending—for this abstraction: "feigning this new world." If the "new world of physics" is to

---

*ing in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992), esp. chaps. 1–2. Svenbro demonstrates that in a significant class of stelai or gravestones dating between the seventh and the fifth century B.C. the epigraphy inscribed in the first-person singular calls on the passerby to read out loud the inscription as an act of commemoration. In studying the epigraphies of daughters, whose role is to proclaim the fame of their fathers, Svenbro shows decisively (and against a whole tradition of interpretation) that and why the epigraphies are written in the first-person singular. The first person refers, rather than to its cogito, to the *Hierheit* of the tombstone, which will be there when the writer and the previous readers are gone.

26. For an interpretation of the trial of Galileo and its impact on Descartes, see my "The Appeal to Reason: The Legitimation of Science and Cartesian Genealogy of Knowledge" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1980), esp. pt. 2, sect. 2.

27. "De ce Monde pour en venir voir un autre tout nouveau que je ferai naître en sa présence dans les espaces imaginaires" (René Descartes, *Le Monde, ou traité de la lumière*, in *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, ed. Ferdinand Alquié, 3 vols. [Paris, 1963–73], 1:343).



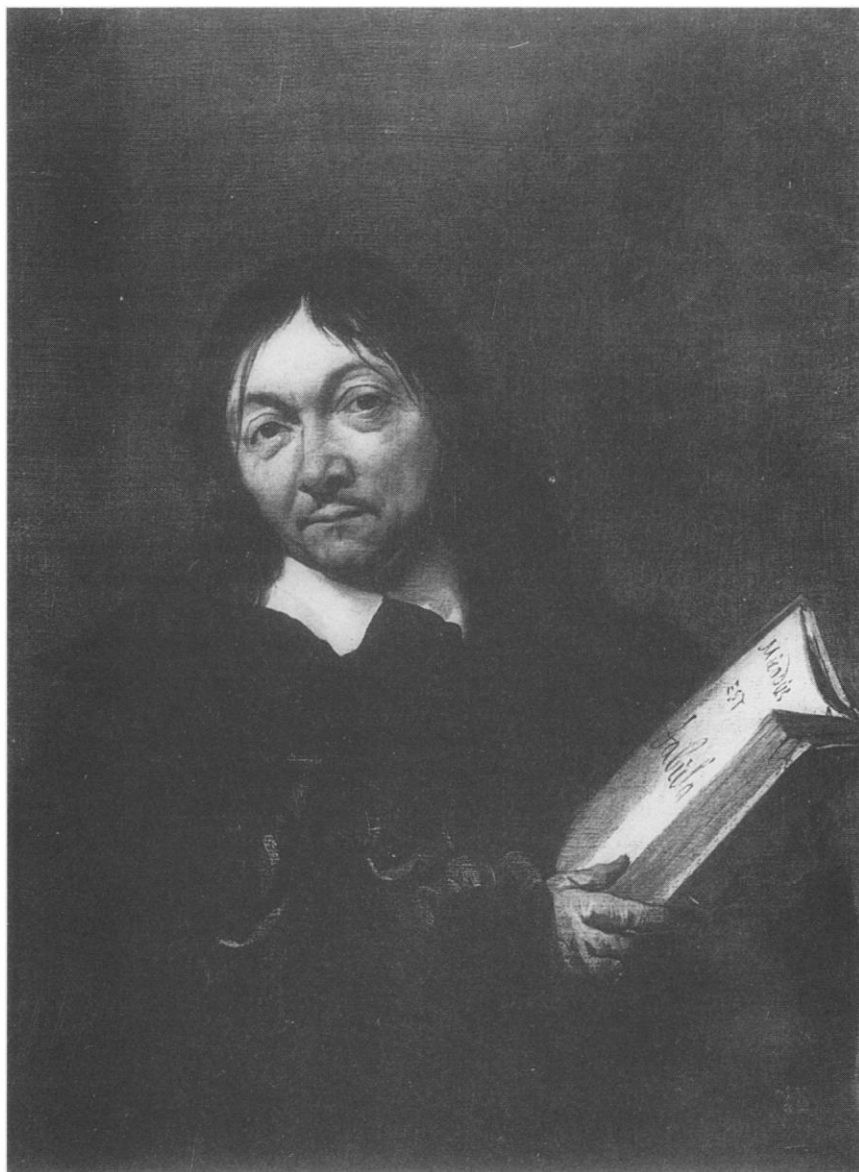


FIG. 4.—Weenix, *René Descartes*, 1630s?. Central Museum, Utrecht. Collection Violet.

be feigned, then, of course, it is a fiction, a fable—feign, faint, *virtus* not *actus*. Positing, supposing, hypothesizing, and conducting a thought experiment might all be taken as feigning. Indeed the term for all these negational conceptual operations is *theorizing*. That is why I didn't refer to Descartes's physics as physical theory; the space for modern theory was

in the process of being enunciated before it came to have the name theory, *avant la lettre*, so to speak. The feigning arrives at the destination of an imaginary topos, the *nouvel monde* of science, not, Descartes tells us, to be confused with the true world, *le vrai monde*, created by God according to Scripture 6,000 years ago. This *nouvel monde* is a fiction, devoid of reality. Suffice it to say that this “new world” is rather empty—consisting of rather simple atomlike entities called corpuscles, the results of their causal interactions, and the voids in between—compared to the true world, which is dense, teeming with life. This declaration of theory’s alternate reality has important precedents, going back to Copernicus and Osiander’s preface to *De revolutionibus*, where the word *hypothesis* is exactly analogous to Descartes’s “fabula”; both characterize the nature of this new theory.<sup>28</sup> It arises in the space between existing cultural norms and an emerging epistemological practice. This kind of speculating marks its own activity as fiction generating. The declaring of the fiction of theory indicates a strategic site where an emerging science seeks to accommodate itself within the existing cultural formation, to effect what Fernand Hallyn has called a “cultural insertion.”<sup>29</sup>

What does it mean to affirm something by disavowing its purchase on reality? *Le Monde* is not the only place in this compendium of writing where Descartes declares his thought to be a fable or a picture. It occurs significantly in the very preface to *The Discourse on Method*. The very first discourse contains a fictionalizing disavowal that is directed, not at the object of his speculation, but at the very narrative he is conducting, which is the story of his journey into science. He calls that account “a picture” (“d’y représenter ma vie comme en un tableau”). His physics is a fiction, and so is the account of its intellectual genesis. “Histoire,” “tableau,” and “fable” come to be used interchangeably: “But I offer this writing as a history, or if you prefer, a fable, in which a few exemplars might be found to be imitated, among many others that one wouldn’t find reason to follow.”<sup>30</sup>

Indeed we can say that the *discourse* is the word-concept Descartes deploys as the title of the preface to his compendium of science because it sets the stage for the report on his scientific results. One of the very first speech conditions for talking about science is that it be talked about as a negation. Thus Weenix’s portrait of Descartes, a portrait that is literally a tableau or a picture, confirms in its literal pictureness the negation that Descartes enunciates in his discourse. The portrait is the discourse

28. See Blumenberg, *The Genesis of the Copernican World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), esp. pt. 3., chaps. 1–2.

29. Fernand Hallyn, *The Poetic Structure of the World: Copernicus and Kepler* (New York, 1993), p. 24.

30. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, ed. Étienne Gilson (Paris, 1964), p. 48. “Mais, en proposant cet écrit que comme une histoire, ou, si vous l’aimiez mieux, que comme une fable, en laquelle, parmi quelques exemples qu’on peut imiter, on en trouvera peut-être aussi plusieurs autres qu’on aura raison de ne pas suivre” (ibid.).

of the *Discourse on Method in figuris*. It says what it shows and shows what it says. It announces, "I, René Descartes, declare my physics a fable." The portrait is a visual speech act. While the van Eyck Arnolfini is a visual avowal to the reality of a marriage, the Weenix portrait of Descartes is a visual disavowal of the reality of physics.

The portrait of Descartes reveals a reiterative pattern of denial. Disavowal is an explicit and radical form of denial that seems here to have a legal cast to it: Descartes taking an oath. Disavowing (*verleugnen*) his physics by declaring it to be a picture, Descartes declares his whole scientific project to be a fiction. His disavowal is not a repudiation or a recantation. Through this denial, Descartes legitimates the speculative enterprise of theory.

This denial reiterates itself in the very vehicle(s) that Descartes deploys for framing his disavowal whether as narrative or as figuration, whether in words or in images—fables and pictures. The very vehicle for framing his project of science as discourse is itself a denial. The picture itself, the (alleged) portrait of Descartes, is a denial. The vehicle for discourse marks itself as a picture.

A picture, unlike a photograph at least in Barthes's indispensable account, marks itself out as a sign, not to be confused for what it signifies.<sup>31</sup> It halos itself as standing in a particular relation, outside, above, and ontologically less than the stuff of the world. To picture is also a denial. To represent is thus a significant kind of negation. For something to stand for something else, the something else has to be put to one side, collected, dressed down, negated so that something can stand (in) for it, without being confused with it. The term *denegation* covers the broad range of these *nots*, a term that came into being as one of many efforts to translate the variety of meanings that Freud gave to the notion of negation and denial.<sup>32</sup> It moves from the *simpliste* of grammatical negation, to putting to one side, to cancelling, to an explicit disavowal.<sup>33</sup>

The Descartes portrait by Weenix is thus a picture in a picture, a disavowal in a denial—both *verleugnen* and *verneinen*. Descartes is testifying in a picture to a fable. The testimony, a disavowal, is a denegation of a negation whereas the van Eyck portrait, also a denegation is a testimony avowing to

31. See Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris, 1980), p. 18: "Mais pour qu'il y ait signe, il faut qu'il y ait marque; privées d'un principe de marquage, les photos sont des signes qui ne prennent pas bien, qui *tourment*, comme du lait."

32. See Sigmund Freud, "Negation," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–74), 19:235–39. See also, most recently, André Green, *Le Travail du négatif* (Paris, 1993).

33. Marin in his decisive study of French classical painting, transported the notions of denegation and negation from psychoanalysis into the study of early modern culture in a particularly appropriate and effective way by showing how denegation is essential to understanding the very apparatus of modern representation. See Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, trans. Mette Hjort (Chicago, 1995), pp. 45–64.

the reality of its referent authorized by the picture as real. Denegation is thus inseparable from the logic of picturing—whether in the way that Heidegger speaks in the broadest sense of a “world picture” or in the more nuanced cultural historicist articulations of contemporary theorists.

The strategies of denegation that I have considered indicate just how enmeshed theory and picturing are. The crux of the denegation of early modern theory constitutes a specular witness and a denial that its discourse is itself practice. The crux of the denegation is to deny that the speculation of physics is practice. Thus the picture posits a specular witness testifying to a content offered by the picture. The denegation of the picture opens up “free spaces” (“dans les espaces imaginaires”) for speculation itself. The speculation denies its speculation to be complicit with and enmeshed in the world. For theory to picture and pictures to theorize require discourse to deny its effectivity by denying that its speech, by an act of speech, is an act. In short the constituting move of modern theory as framing itself as a picture is to declare itself culturally exempt—*virtus* not *actus*.

Descartes’s philosophical demonstration of the modern cogito is itself inseparable from picturing as denegation. Descartes produced a philosophical proof of the modern cogito by a demonstration of the specular witness as necessarily outside the picture and yet codependent with it. The pictures are witnesses and the cogito is a specular witness. The self-reflexive performatives that we have encountered in pictures as specular witnesses come to be applied by Descartes to elicit the necessary accompaniment of a cogito outside the picture. The cogito proof works entirely in the language game of the denegation of picturing.

### “Paisible solitude”

Denegation saturates Descartes’s whole project. It positions the object in the fictive displacement of the “new world” to the wilderness of the incommunicado of writing that he calls “une paisible solitude”—the site for reducing to rubble shared culture.<sup>34</sup> “Une solitude paisible” is another seventeenth-century utopics, not the “new world” of geography or the “new world” of science but the site for the fable of monologue, a first-person writing that supplements itself as inward thought and professing—a public and a private witnessing. The writing itself is the testament. In the epoch of the Book, then, writing comes to posit about itself the picture—the cogito as a specular witness to its writing as a picture. The cogito is thus a philosophical demonstration of the already posited specular witness.

Solitude, the condition of secession of an inquiring subject is the typi-

34. Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques* (Paris, 1976), p. 6.

cal seventeenth-century word for wilderness, a wilderness of the *eremos*, the subject in its solitude, separated socially from others. It neither postulates nor anticipates a condition extinguishing itself. Even Descartes's *deus malignus* does not threaten the subject's extinguishment. The cogito is savage in the way that it claims to strip from itself common culture and constitute itself out of itself, as if it carried its ground for speculation within itself. It aspires to the savage state, as Merleau-Ponty later came to recognize.<sup>35</sup> The move from one to zero is certainly as radical a move as the move from many to one. It is the completion of that which the first step inaugurates. Wilderness travelling from Europe to America attempts the passage from one to zero both in its relation to others and in its account of nature.

## 5

The modern cogito posits a specular witness facing the picture. The denegation that is the picture-sign, carrying its panoply of authorizing reflexivities, posits the subject as a specular witness looking at a picture as the privileged and indirect access to the real. The cogito of the new world wilderness is that very specular subject, a witness figure testifying to the condition of wilderness by marking itself as being there at the site of the wilderness. But the difference is that the very act of being seen and the *factum* of the picture insult the condition to which the picture is the testimony. Whereas all the European topoi of the wilderness, however "empty," are stagings for Poussin's *istoria*—for Descartes's free zone of scientific speculation—the European wilderness transported to the geographical "new world" of exploration and colonization inextricably complicates the specular witness.

Atwood in "Death by Landscape" describes why her protagonist Lois has these paintings on the wall of her apartment; it is not from taste or *gemütlichkeit* but because it reminds her of a wordless dis-ease, of a trauma that took place in her summer camp youth in the trackless wilderness. The incident in question was the disappearance of an American friend in the Canadian bush and its unsolved mystery. Landscape pictures posit the specular witness because of this now very private and repressed inci-

35. My thanks to Alberto Pérez-Gómez for recalling me to the savage cogito of Merleau-Ponty in *Le Visible et l'invisible* (Paris, 1964) and his distinction between Descartes's *cogito tacite* and his *cogito langagère*, to use Merleau-Ponty's own distinction. Each project for the radicalizing of the cogito in the pursuit of a common seam between nature and culture leads to disburdenment of the cultural posit that it seeks to ground. So a Deleuzian nomad never escapes its Cartesian inheritance, even despite its ventriloquism. The pursuit of a radical alterity results in the reinvestment of the same. The "nomad" and the "savage" are outcroppings of the European predator. They are its hunting masks.

dent (known to the narrator and not to the fictive subject). The pictures from the Group of Seven are proxies, stand-ins for this “unnameable” incident.

Wilderness for Atwood is the name for the site of the blow, and the pictures transfer, not the memory of the incident, but the blow that obliterates the event from memory; the vague memory of the blow substitutes for the memory of the event: trauma, in short. In this respect the two ends of the classical modern sublime, Burke and Kant, converge at the site of the wilderness. In Burkean terms, *the* wilderness is the name for the site of the incident, the blow that knocks out the witness as marking the difference between the picturesque (witnessed) and the sublime as unwitnessed. However, the wilderness is that very condition or state in terms of the very idea of wilderness that denies its being humanly witnessable. In this respect, it is curious, although not surprising, that Kant never problematized the wilderness as a sublime idea—the sublime of the solipsism of the subject itself. Trauma links the existentiality of Burkean threats to the conceptuality of the Kantian sublime. The event of the blow inevitably shifts to the effect of the blow that the subject is incapable of registering. Trauma colloquially understood as “an event without a witness” finds in *the* wilderness a symbolic scaffolding, which actualizes landscape as a *mise-en-scène* for obliteration and the memoryless in contrast with classical representation where landscape is the *mise-en-scène* for history and historical narratives.<sup>36</sup> Trauma makes the sublime forensic and historical. It introduces into the aesthetic the requirement of an incident as organizing visual meaning. An incident in the wilderness, projected onto these pictures, makes the pictures carriers of failing meaning. In Atwood’s narrative, an incident that took place in the bush comes to be the traumatic punctum carried by these paintings.

Since the incident in the Atwood story has been repressed, it renders the picture an incident without a witness. This points to the special place landscape paintings have as the generic carriers of the incident. For the Group of Seven the figure of the solitary tree marks the site as it were of an incident, an X. The absence is the incident that is signed by the figure of the solitary tree. Atwood fills that X with a narrative. The figure of the solitary tree, a stand-in, is a phantom.<sup>37</sup>

36. In the genealogy of the “preclinical” notions of trauma, antecedents from the classical sublime will appear later in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. For an earlier effort to formulate the linkage between trauma and the sublime, see Bordo, “Ecological Peril, Modern Technology, and the Postmodern Sublime,” in *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, ed. Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick (New York, 1992), pp. 165–81.

37. Stimulated by the recent reading of an essay by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok entitled “Notes on the Phantom”: “In no way can the subject relate to the phantom as his or her own repressed experience, not even as an experience by incorporation. The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other” (Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. Nicholas T. Rand, 2 vols. [Chicago, 1994], 1:175).

As the absolute limit of itself, *the* wilderness posits no traces, which is tantamount to positing a visual alibi that nothing took place there at all. Catastrophic and murderous incidents that took place, once reframed in the wilderness, lose their context as having meaningfully occurred.<sup>38</sup> *The* wilderness is a denial of the meaning of the event and as a topos locates the occurrence as falling below the threshold of its registration as an incident. *The* wilderness also comes to be a frame and topos of the aesthetic of the sublime, a reflexive specular looking, constituted through a cultivated or practiced relation to pictures, visually testifying to an unpicturable condition. With modernity, there is no wilderness without a picture, and the paintings that I have been considering are simultaneously of *terra nullius* and testimonies in the domain of the aesthetic sublime. From projects of collective emptying through the wilderness as the theological and aesthetic exaltation of pristine emptiness, *the* wilderness prolongs the European imaginary into a “new world” displacement that severs the land from its occupants. *The* wilderness obliterates history while advancing the abyssal and immemorial as the trace of the sign. *The* wilderness might thus be construed as a monument without a witness, a trace that denies its discernability as a sign. The argument that landscape art is a scenographic staging of oblivion in colonial projects of the “new world” and *Lebensraum* has been presented elsewhere. I have sketched the way that pictures, in this case pictures that purport to be of the wilderness, do their work across two registers, giving denial a double sense. In one register, let me call it the politico-legal, the wilderness is part of a declaratory apparatus for the constituting of territory. The symbolics of the picture is a screen that offers a visual alibi, a kind of wedge or spacing between an inherited culture saturated with place names and new projects of territorialization that insert themselves by declaring that this land is thinly populated or not populated at all—a juridico-political degree zero.

The British conquered North America without juridical declarations of *terra nullius* to render inherited and dwelled-upon land “crown land,” but for Australia they did. The (Canadian) Royal Proclamation of 1763, which recognized the prior title over lands by indigenous people, was confirmed in the Quebec Act of 1774.<sup>39</sup> These legal recognitions of prior aboriginal title are often understood as the *causis belli* of the American Revolution. It might be said that the history of Canada has always been

38. Here I am referring to Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, “Blankness as a Signifier,” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Autumn 1997): 159–75. The wilderness as a semiotic operator blankets whatever it encounters with blankness.

39. Special thanks to the Commonwealth historians Bruce Hodgins, J. S. Milloy, and Henry Reynolds who have been the best tutors over the past ten years in conversation and in writing on the history of the constitutional pathways to the up-to-the-minute settlements of aboriginal land claims in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

a negotiation between the settler culture and its first inhabitants about title. Yet the dominant cultural project of Euro-North Americans came to articulate itself aesthetico-theologically in terms of the emptying of the wilderness initially by the Massachusetts Bay colonists, then by post-Constitution Americans, nineteenth-century transcendentalists, followed by Euro-Canadians during the first third of the twentieth century with Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven.<sup>40</sup> The emptying of deep ecology with the imaginary of the wilderness as its symbolic driver marks the close of the twentieth century. These North American and antipodean colonialist visions intimately configured the landscape imaginary by aestheticizing or “subliming” the *terra nullius*. The Australian imaginary came to articulate a hybrid space that contradicted the official operations of voiding. One might say the landscape imaginary overcame the declaration of *terra nullius* as preparation for the recent legal judgements on 3 June 1993 in the case of *Eddie Mabo v. Queensland*, 204 years after the declaration of 1788.

What is projective and instrumental about the wilderness picture in the register of *terra nullius* casts a retrospective and nostalgic aesthetic in the landscape art that forgets the trauma of history by depositing a picture as a monument. The sublime of the European wilderness thus sits on the register of *terra nullius*, which it retrospects. That it projects a totalization, as if it were completed, belies the fact of an ongoing resistance to that project. An indigenous absorption of this very picturing apparatus of specular testimony has been producing a countertestimony that displaces and rerecords incidences of European historical incursion in the indigenous picturing of landscape. The picture-as-witness, a mimesis, not a mimicry, comes to be the arbiter of a “double vision” in Homi Bhabha’s influential construal.<sup>41</sup> A picturing practice converts a way of seeing into an unsupported way of acting, to revisit the epigraph of this essay.

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;—but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as

40. See Bordo, “The *Terra Nullius* of Wilderness,” esp. 28–32 and “Cultural Symbolology.” See also Donald H. Akenson, *God’s Peoples: Covenant and Land in South Africa, Israel, and Ulster* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992).

41. See Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October*, no. 28 (Spring 1984): 125; rpt. in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York, 1994), p. 88. Mimesis, not mimicry, because the entering into a practice in this case of picturing, whatever the predisposition or agenda, requires the mastery of a technique, and in view of the availability of European painting practices, not closed by initiation, the ulterior motive for having the practice count as much as it counts to speak about the ulterior motives of play. Even if the Australian aboriginal initiation in European picturing practices is relatively recent, what is remarkable at least for this author is how fully and completely it has come to explicate and dispose for its political and cultural purposes of an “evangelical” version of the specular witness. The picture as counterwitness as constituting a site of mem-



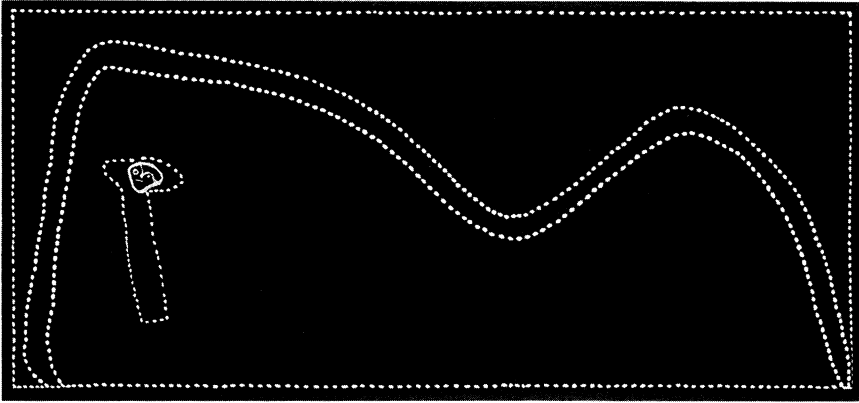


FIG. 5.—Rover Thomas, *Ruby Plains Killing I*, 1990. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* [*eine Art Sehen unsrerseits*]; it is our *acting* [*unser Handeln*], which lies at the bottom of the language-game.<sup>42</sup>

A series of recent paintings called *The Killing Times* by the late Australian aboriginal artist Rover Thomas are explicit pictures-as-witnesses. They record visually incidents of *terra nullius*, marked as stations on the public facade of the aboriginal dreaming. By marking them, not on a ritual track, but on the imitation of a ritual track put to historical purposes, these paintings are forensic diagrams, leading the viewer backward to the scene of a crime. One painting in this series is called *Ruby Plains Killing I*, which marks an X with a hollow log holding skulls (fig. 5); the hollow log itself recalls the hollow-log bone coffins of traditional Arnhem land burials as well as the Aboriginal Memorial.<sup>43</sup> The apparatus of picturing, not the land, carries the “two visions” that have been critically reversed and opened to further complications and recognitions. Thus picturing practices, emerging with modernity itself, come to assume a place as witnesses in an ongoing and contemporary cultural negotiation at an open, active, painful, and still unresolved site of memory.

---

ory occupies the latter part of the monograph I am presently completing entitled *The Landscape without a Witness: An Essay in Modern Painting*.

42. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York, 1969), §204.

43. See Rover Thomas, *Roads Cross: The Paintings of Rover Thomas* (exhibition catalog, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 18 Feb.–5 June 1994), pp. 40–45.