

OLIVIER RICHON  
TO COPY (1)

2013

*L'objet d'art est par définition un crocodile empaillé*

—Alfred Jarry

Following an old tradition, books from the collection Critique of the Editions de Minuit repeat their cover page for the title page inside the book. Not exactly though, as the blue logo of Critique, made of a capital C intertwined with another but inverted C, is absent from the title page. In Vincent Descombes's *Le Même et l'Autre* (the Same and the Other), the title page is repeated twice, with the addition of a caution addressed to the reader:

'This page reproduces the previous one. Other it is the same. But in order for the reader not to dismiss this second title page, attributing it, for instance, to a binding mistake, I had to write this warning which is not present on the first page. In order to be the same, it had to be other.'

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Yet perhaps it became too other, as a few signs are absent on that second page and were present on the first. Absent is the logo of Minuit, a star with one of its points touching the beginning of the letter m, and eclipsed is the inscription LES EDITIONS DE MINUIT at the bottom of the page. The concept of repetition introduces the book to the reader, but the practice of repetition does not quite follow. It is as if the pure repetition of the title page was not acceptable or judged unnecessary. Here conceptual repetition did not translate into a literal visual repetition. If literal repetition did not quite happen, what remains

nevertheless is the procedure of staging an argument about repetition, sameness and otherness.

The stage belongs to the theatre. In French, *répétition* also means rehearsal. It is the work that takes place to prepare the first theatrical representation, the first night of the play. Staging also belongs to photography: from the often dubious practice of staging an event to that of staging things and people, as in the still life or the tableau vivant. Staging requires rehearsing positions and poses. Although belonging to bourgeois family entertainment, the tableau vivant, Roland Barthes once remarked, is also a Sadean device: the characters appear to be framed, lit and immobile. Their stillness turn them into fetish objects, their immobility fragments and freezes the narration. In the Sadean text, the tableau vivant requires an organization of roles and poses. Order is the prerequisite of the disorder of what will follow. Bodies are choreographed, rehearsal is needed. The scene needs to be constructed as an image before becoming the stage for an event. The sexual activity that follows is the repetition as action of the tableau vivant. Here repetition requires detachment. Action is carried out, as Madame de Clairwill puts it, '*avec phlegme, avec cette apathie qui permet aux passions de se voiler*': a phlegmatic and apathetic repetition. A machine.

Stillness, one of the conditions of most photographs, involves a type of rehearsal. The still life is a careful staging of objects on display. The picture is taken as much as it is made; it occurs when the rehearsal of the position of objects in relation to one another is complete, when the objects have been moved left and right, so that they appear optically at ease. Repetition as rehearsal. It is this condition that enables the picture to be made, a picture as still or perhaps as stiff as an embalmed body, like that of Alfred Jarry's stuffed crocodile.

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A shift takes place between things, people and the rehearsal of their poses; mediation occurs in the act of constructing and recording a photograph. This mediation, or transformation, can remain unnoticed and invisible. Does it mean that the subject of the photograph is not necessarily primary, that it does not come first, even if it appears to? That nothing comes first just by itself is the subject of Neanderthal Man, from Italo Calvino's *Impossible Interviews*:

*Neander:* That's what you say. Were you there? Me yes, I was there. You no'

(...)

*Interviewer:* That's a useful point, I think. Mr Neander's great merit isn't so much the simple fact of being there, but of having already been there, having been there then before so many others. Precedence is a quality no one would wish to deny Mr Neander. However much, ... even before that, as further research has demonstrated – and as you yourself can confirm, isn't that right Mr Neander? – we find traces, many traces, and on a number of continents, of human beings, yes already human humans...

*Neander:* My dad...

*Interviewer:* Right back as far as a million years before...

*Neander:* My gran...

*Interviewer:* Hence your precedence, Mr Neander, no one can deny you, though it would seem a relative precedence: let's say you are the first...

*Neander:* Before you anyway...

*Interviewer:* Agreed but that's not the point. What I mean is that you were the first to be believed to be the first by those who came after.

The first needs the arrival of those who come after to be first, and cannot be first just by itself. Its firstness is delayed until it meets those who come after.

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In the late 18th century, Thomas Wedgwood and the chemist Humphrey Davy attempted to fix shadows of profiles on surfaces like paper and white leather, surfaces coated with light sensitive silver nitrate. Some historians place them amongst the first inventors of the process of photography. The experiment recalls a founding myth of Western painting: to copy or to preserve a profile by tracing the outline of its shadow.

The use of leather as a surface brings to mind the use of parchment, this thin animal skin used for writing that was superseded by paper from the middle ages onwards. The image on parchment that Wedgwood and Davy achieved produced an inversion of tones and values. What surrounds the profile gets darker, and the profile appears as a white shadow. The paper was placed in a glass case normally used for a stuffed bird. This ingenious apparatus connects in thought portraiture with taxidermy as an origin for photography. The Parchment is turned into a photosensitive skin. Light is a new type of ink. These pre-photographic experiments address in some way the question of Mimesis. They announce an expansion of the notion of mimesis, prompted by the invention and dissemination of photography as a practice of reproduction and representation. Wedgwood was influenced by ideas from Erasmus Darwin concerning copying as a technology. Darwin was

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working on what he called a bigrapher, an instrument that he perfected in 1778. The apparatus consisted of two quills fastened together. As the hand wrote a word with one quill, the other quill mechanically reproduced that word on another sheet of paper. This enabled duplicates of writing to be made at the same time as the original was being produced. A great idea and instrument, which paradoxically would also faithfully reproduce errors: slips of the pens and of the tongue as well as crossed out words. A letter and its perfect duplicate are now in the British Library. The letter describes the act of writing and of duplicating itself, proposing a *mise en abîme* of its own activity.

Wedgwood and Davey used a glass box for the display of birds for their experiments. What sort of bird was this box made for, and could it be a parrot, known for copying human speech, just as Darwin's bigrapher copied words mechanically, one quill parroting the other? The parrot can be an allegory or rather a caricature of Mimesis. This bird features prominently in Gustave Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple*. It is the pet of the servant *Félicité*. Following the death of her bird, she has it stuffed. A religious woman, she can see a resemblance between her stuffed parrot and the Holy Ghost. *Félicité* develops the habit of telling her prayers on her knees in front of the stuffed bird. She is in ecstasy when the sun strikes the glass eye of the animal, producing a suggestive luminous ray. Whether dead or alive, *Félicité's* parrot mimics. It is language and image. As a speaking bird it used to offer an image of language. As a stuffed bird it offers an image of life and becomes a religious prop, a frozen image, a tableau mort-vivant.

In Raymond Roussel's *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*, meaning seems to arise from the chance encounter between rhyming words. The text is accompanied by elegant and elliptical illustrations; the images do not really illustrate the text, as the text does not follow a series of events. One of the illustrations shows a well dressed man on the street, looking at a parrot on its perch behind a window so it seems. Both look at each other, the parrot's head being at right angle from the man's head. In the text, the parrot is present in one sentence: *pour que le perroquet distinctemnt radote* (so that the parrot drivels distinctly). Roussel gave instructions to the illustrator, H-A Zo: a parrot on its perch appearing to talk to a passer by. But talking is not what a picture is meant to do.

*Félicité's* parrot, Darwin's mechanical quill, Wedgwood and Davy's chemical profiles in a bird's box have a certain kinship with aspects of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, Flaubert's unfinished masterpiece. *Bouvard et*

*Pécuchet* are two clerks whose job is to copy letters. They never cease to be astonished by sameness. Their friendship is sealed instantly when they discover they both have an identical idea, like writing their names inside their hats. They both attempt to digest an encyclopedic knowledge, they put theory into practice, and when it fails they go to another theory and so on. Wedgwood and Davy's photographic experiments are known for their failure. This is how they are remembered. The light sensitive paper or parchment would get darker and darker under daylight. They failed to stop the action of light on silver nitrate, thus causing the image to darken into oblivion. It demonstrated that, contrary to common opinion, it is from light that comes darkness.

The experiment offers a poetics of failure, and failure is linked to a gradual erasure of the image. It is a blackness producing apparatus. It is a visual equivalent to a page saturated with ink, as the one we encounter in Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. Sterne's notorious black page would be the consequence of writing too much, repeatedly, covering the page until it gets filled with ink. Blackness would be an excess of writing, just as a black photographic print is the outcome of an excess of light. Is photography then just literature; is writing with ink just like writing with light?

#### Notes

Vincent Descombes *Le Même et l'Autre*. Minuit 1979. Translated as *Modern French Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press 1980

Italo Calvino *Numbers in the Dark*. Vintage 1996

Alan Barnes *Negative and Positive Images. Erasmus Darwin, Tom Wedgwood and the Origins of Photography; in The Genius of Erasmus Darwin*. Aldershot 2005

Roland Barthes *Sade Fourier Loyola*. John Hopkins University Press. 1997

Raymond Roussel *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique*. Léo Scheer 2004