The Image—the Distinct

The image is always sacred—if we insist on using this term, which gives rise to so much confusion (but which I will use initially, and provisionally, as a regulative term in order to set into motion the thought I would like to develop here). Indeed, the meaning of the "sacred" never ceases to be confused with that of the "religious." But religion is the observance of a rite that forms and maintains a bond (with others or with oneself, with nature or with a supernature). Religion in itself is not ordered by the sacred. (Nor is it ordered by faith, which is yet another category.)

The sacred, for its part, signifies the separate, what is set aside, removed, cut off. In one sense, then, religion and the sacred are opposed, as the bond is opposed to the cut. In another sense, religion can no doubt be represented as securing a bond with the separated sacred. But in yet another sense, the sacred is what it is only through its separation, and there is no bond with it. There is then, strictly speaking, no religion of the sacred. The sacred is what, of itself, remains set apart, at a distance, and with which one forms no bond (or only a very paradoxical one). It is what one cannot touch (or only by a touch without contact). To avoid this confusion, I will call it the distinct.

One attempt to form a bond with the sacred occurs in sacrifice, which as a matter of fact does belong to religion, in one form or another. Where sacrifice ceases, so does religion. And that is the point
where, on the contrary, distinction and the preservation of a distance and a “sacred” distinction begin. It is there, perhaps, that art has always begun, not in religion (whether it was associated with it or not), but set apart.

The distinct, according to its etymology, is what is separated by marks (the word refers back to stigma, a branding mark, a pinprick or puncture, an incision, a tattoo): what is withdrawn and set apart by a line or trait, by being marked also as withdrawn [retrait]. One cannot touch it: not because one does not have the right to do so, nor because one lacks the means, but rather because the distinctive line or trait separates something that is no longer of the order of touch; not exactly an untouchable, then, but rather an impalpable. But this impalpable is given in the trait and in the line that separates it, it is given by this distraction that removes it. (Consequently, my first and last question will be: is such a distinctive trait not always a matter of art?)

The distinct is at a distance, it is the opposite of what is near. What is not near can be set apart in two ways: separated from contact or from identity. The distinct is distinct according to these two modes: it does not touch, and it is dissimilar. Such is the image: it must be detached, placed outside and before one’s eyes (it is therefore inseparable from a hidden surface, from which it cannot, as it were, be peeled away: the dark side of the picture, its underside or backside, or even its weave or its subjectile), and it must be different from the thing. The image is a thing that is not the thing: it distinguishes itself from it, essentially.

But what distinguishes itself essentially from the thing is also the force—the energy, pressure, or intensity. The “sacred” was always a force, not to say a violence. What remains to be grasped is how the force and the image belong to one another in the same distinction. How the image gives itself through a distinctive trait (every image declares itself or indicates itself as an “image” in some way), and how what it thus gives is first a force, an intensity, the very force of its distinction.

The distinct stands apart from the world of things considered as a world of availability. In this world, all things are available for use, according to their manifestation. What is withdrawn from this world has no use, or has a completely different use, and is not presented in a manifestation (a force is precisely not a form: here it is also a ques-
tion of grasping how the image is not a form and is not formal. It is what does not show itself but rather gathers itself into itself, the taut force on this side of forms or beyond them, but not as another obscure form: rather as the other of forms. It is the intimate and its passion, distinct from all representation. It is a matter, then, of grasping the passion of the image, the power of its stigma or of its distraction (hence, no doubt, all the ambiguity and ambivalence that we attach to images, which throughout our culture, and not only in its religions, are said to be both frivolous and holy).

The distinction of the distinct is therefore its separation: its tension is that of a setting apart and keeping separate which at the same time is a crossing of this separation. In the religious vocabulary of the sacred, this crossing is what constituted sacrifice or transgression: as I have already said, sacrifice is legitimated transgression. It consists in making sacred (consecrating), that is, in doing what in principle cannot be done (which can only come from elsewhere, from the depth of withdrawal).

But the distinction of the image—while it greatly resembles sacrifice—is not properly sacrificial. It does not legitimize and it does not transgress: it crosses the distance of the withdrawal even while maintaining it through its mark as an image. Or rather: through the mark that it is, it establishes simultaneously a withdrawal and a passage that, however, does not pass. The essence of such a crossing lies in its not establishing a continuity: it does not suppress the distinction. It maintains it while also making contact: shock, confrontation, tête-à-tête, or embrace. It is less a transport than a rapport, or relation. The distinct bounds toward the indistinct and leaps into it, but it is not interlinked with it. The image offers itself to me, but it offers itself as an image (once again there is ambivalence: only an image / a true image . . .). An intimacy is thus exposed to me: exposed, but for what it is, with its force that is dense and tight, not relaxed, reserved, not readily given. Sacrifice effects an assumption, a lifting and a sublation of the profane into the sacred: the image, on the contrary, is given in an opening that indissociably forms its presence and its separation.

Continuity takes place only within the indistinct, homogeneous space of things and of the operations that bind them together. The distinct, on the contrary, is always the heterogeneous, that is, the unbound—the unbindable. What it transports to us, then, is its very unbinding, which no proximity can pacify and which thus remains at a distance:
just at the distance of the touch, that is, barely touching the skin, à fleur de peau.\textsuperscript{6} It approaches across a distance, but what it brings into such close proximity is distance. (The fleur is the finest, most subtle part, the very surface, which remains before one and which one merely brushes against [effleure]; every image is à fleur, or is a flower.)

This is what all portraits do, in an exemplary manner. Portraits are the image of the image in general. A portrait touches, or else it is only an identification photo, a descriptive record, not an image. What touches is something that is borne to the surface from out of an intimacy. But here the portrait is only an example. Every image is in some way a “portrait,” not in that it would reproduce the traits of a person, but in that it pulls and draws (this is the semantic and etymological sense of the word), in that it extracts something, an intimacy, a force.\textsuperscript{7} And, to extract it, it subtracts or removes it from homogeneity, it distracts it from it, distinguishes it, detaches it and casts it forth. It throws it in front of us, and this throwing [jet], this projection, makes its mark, its very trait and its stigma: its tracing, its line, its style, its incision, its scar, its signature, all of this at once.

The image throws in my face an intimacy that reaches me in the midst of intimacy—through sight, through hearing, or through the very meaning of words. Indeed, the image is not only visual: it is also musical, poetic, even tactile, olfactory or gustatory, kinesthetic, and so on. This differential vocabulary is insufficient (though I cannot take the time to analyze it here). The visual image certainly plays the role of a model, and for precise reasons, which will, no doubt, emerge later. For the moment, I will give only one example of a literary image, whose visual resources are evident, but which remains no less a matter of writing:

A girl came out of lawyer Royall’s house, at the end of the one street of North Dormer, and stood on the doorstep.

The springlike transparent sky shed a rain of silver sunshine on the roofs of the village, and on the pastures and larchwoods surrounding it. A little wind moved among the round white clouds on the shoulders of the hills, driving their shadows across the fields.\textsuperscript{8}

Framed by a door opening onto the intimacy of a dwelling, a young girl, whose youth is all we see of her, already exposes the imminence of a story and an unnamed encounter, an unknown shock, happy or painful: she exposes this in the light from the sky, and this

\section*{The Ground of the Image}
sky provides the wide, "transparent," and unlimited frame in which the successive frames of a street, a house, and a doorway are embedded. It is less a matter here of the image, which we do not fail to imagine (the one that each reader forms or forges in his or her way and according to his or her models): it is a matter of an image function, of light and the proper relation of shadow, of framing and detachment, the emergence and the touch of an intensity.

What happens is this: with the "girl" (whose name is an intensity unto itself) an entire world "comes out" and appears, a world that also "stands on the doorstep," so to speak—on the threshold of the novel, in its initial traits and in the "opening lines" of its writing—or that places us on its threshold, on the very line that divides the outside and the inside, light and shadow, life and art, whose division [partage]⁹ is at that moment traced by something that makes us cross it without eliminating it (the distinction): a world that we enter while remaining before it, and that thus offers itself fully for what it is, a world, which is to say: an indefinite totality of meaning (and not merely an environment).

If it is possible for the same line, the same distinction, to separate and to communicate or connect (communicating also separation itself . . .), that is because the traits and lines of the image (its outline, its form) are themselves (something from) its intimate force: for this intimate force is not "represented" by the image, but the image is it, the image activates it, draws it and withdraws it, extracts it by withholding it, and it is with this force that the image touches us.¹⁰

The image always comes from the sky—not from the heavens, which are religious, but from the skies, a term proper to painting: not heaven in its religious sense, but sky¹¹ as the Latin firmamentum, the firm vault from which the stars are hung, dispensing their brightness. (Behind the vault are the gods of Epicurus—to mention him again—indifferent and insensitive even to themselves, therefore without images, and deprived of sense.)

The painted sky contains within itself what is sacred in the sky insofar as it is the distinct and the separated par excellence: the sky is the separated. It is first of all something that, in the ancient cosmogonies, a god or a force more remote than the gods separates from the earth:

When the Sky was separated from the Earth
—Firmly held together up to then—
And when the goddess mothers appeared.¹²
Before the sky and the earth, when everything is held together, there is nothing distinct. The sky is what in essence distinguishes itself, and it is in essence distinguished from the earth that it covers with light. It is also itself distinction and distance: extended clarity, at once distant and near, the source of a light that nothing illuminates in turn (lux) but by which everything is illuminated and brought into distinction, which is in turn the distinction of shadow and light (lumen), by which a thing can shine and take on its brilliance (splendor), that is, its truth. The distinct distinguishes itself: it sets itself apart and at a distance, it therefore marks this separation and thus causes it to be remarked—it becomes remarkable, noticeable and marked as such. It also, therefore, attracts attention: in its withdrawal and from out of this withdrawal, it is an attraction and a drawing toward itself. The image is desirable or it is not an image (but rather a chromo, an ornament, a vision or representation—although differentiating between the attraction of desire and the solicitation of the spectacle is not as easy as some would like to think...).

The image comes from the sky: it does not descend from it, it proceeds from it, it is of a celestial essence, and it contains the sky within itself. Every image has its sky, even if it is represented as outside the image or is not represented at all: the sky gives the image its light, but the light of an image comes from the image itself. The image is thus its own sky, or the sky detached for itself, coming with all its force to fill the horizon but also to take it away, to lift it up or to pierce it, to raise it to an infinite power. The image that contains the horizon also overflows it and spreads itself out in it, like the resonances of a harmony, like the halo of a painting. This does not require any sacred place or activity, nor any magical aura conferred on the image. (We could also say: the image that is its own sky is the sky on earth and as earth, or the opening of the sky in the earth—that is, again, a world—and that is why the image is necessarily not religious, for it does not bind the earth to the sky but rather draws the latter from the former. This is true of every image, including religious images, unless the religiosity of the subject degrades or crushes the image, as happens in the pious bric-a-brac produced by every religion.)

The celestial force, a force that the sky is—a force that distinguishes, that renders distinct—is the force of the passion that the image immediately transports. The intimate is expressed in it: but this expression must be understood in the most literal sense. It is not the translation of a state of the soul: it is the soul itself that presses...
and pushes on the image; or rather the image is this pressure, this animation and emotion. It does not give the signification of this pressure: in that sense, the image has no object (or “subject,” as one speaks of the subject of a painting), and thus it is devoid of intention. It is therefore not a representation: it is an imprint of the intimacy of its passion (of its motion, its agitation, its tension, its passivity). It is not an imprint in the sense of a type or a schema that would be set down and fixed. It is rather the movement of the imprint, the stroke that marks the surface, the hollowing out and pressing up of this surface, of its substance (canvas, paper, copper, paste, clay, pigment, film, skin), its impregnation or infusion, the embedding or the discharge effected in it by the pressure applied to it. The imprint is at once the receptivity of an unformed support and the activity of a form: its force is the mixing and resistance of the two.

The image touches me, and, thus touched and drawn by it and into it, I get involved, not to say mixed up in it. There is no image without my too being in its image, but also without passing into it, as long as I look at it, that is, as long as I show it consideration, maintain my regard for it.

The image is separated in two ways simultaneously. It is detached from a ground [fond] and it is cut out within a ground. It is pulled away and clipped or cut out. The pulling away raises it and brings it forward: makes it a “fore,” a separate frontal surface, whereas the ground itself had no face or surface. The cutout or clipping creates edges in which the image is framed: it is the templum marked out in the sky by the Roman augurs. It is the space of the sacred or, rather, the sacred as a spacing that distinguishes.

Thus, through a process repeated innumerable times in painting, an image is detached from itself while also reframing itself as an image—as in this painting by Hans von Aachen, in which the painting is doubled in a mirror that is held out, as though to us, while at the same time, within the image, it is held out to the woman it reflects.

In this double operation, the ground disappears. It disappears in its essence as ground, which consists in its not appearing. One can thus say that it appears as what it is by disappearing. Disappearing as ground, it passes entirely into the image. But it does not appear for all that, and the image is not its manifestation, nor its phenomenon. It is the force of the image, its sky and its shadow. This force exerts its pressure “in the ground” of the image, or, rather, it is the pressure...
1. Hans von Aachen, *Joking Couple* (in fact, the painter and his wife; ca. 1596), Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

that the ground exerts on the surface—that is, under this force, in this impalpable non-place that is not merely the “support” but the back or the underside of the image. The latter is not an “other side of the coin” (another surface, and a disappointing one), but the insensible (intelligible) sense that is sensed as such, selfsame with the image.

The image gathers force and sky together with the thing itself. It is the intimate unity of this assemblage. It is neither the thing nor the imitation of the thing (all the less so in that, as was already said, it is not necessarily plastic or visual). It is the resemblance of the thing, which is different. In its resemblance, the thing is detached from itself. It is not the “thing itself” (or the thing “in itself”), but the “sameness” of the present thing as such.

With his famous phrase “This is not a pipe,” Magritte merely enunciates—at least at first sight or at first reading—a banal paradox of representation as imitation. But the truth of the image is the inverse of this. This truth is, rather, something like the image of the pipe accompanied by “This is a pipe,” not in order to replay the same paradox in reverse, but, on the contrary, to affirm that a thing pres-
ents itself only inasmuch as it resembles itself and says (mutely) of itself: I am this thing. The image is the nonlinguistic saying or the showing of the thing in its sameness: but this sameness is not only not said, or “said” otherwise, it is an other sameness than that of language and the concept, a sameness that does not belong to identification or signification (that of “a pipe,” for example), but that is supported only by itself in the image and as an image.

The thing as image is thus distinct from its being-there in the sense of the Vorhanden, its simple presence in the homogeneity of the world and in the linking together of natural or technological operations. Its distinction is the dissimilarity that inhabits resemblance, that agitates it and troubles it with a pressure of spacing and of passion. What is distinct in being-there is being-image: it is not here but over there, in the distance, in a distance that is called “absence” (by which one often wants to characterize the image) only in a very hasty manner. The absence of the imaged subject is nothing other than an intense presence, receding into itself, gathering itself together in its intensity. Resemblance gathers together in force and gathers itself as a force of the same—the same differing in itself from itself: hence the enjoyment [jouissance] we take in it. We touch on the same and on this power that affirms this: I am indeed what I am, and I am this well beyond or well on this side of what I am for you, for your aims and your manipulations. We touch on the intensity of this withdrawal or this excess. Thus mimesis encompasses methexis, a participation or a contagion through which the image seizes us.

What touches us is this self-coincidence or self-fittingness [convenance à soi] borne by resemblance: it resembles itself and thus it gathers itself together. It is a totality that fits and coincides with itself [se convient]. In coming to the fore, it goes within. But its “within” is not anything other than its “fore”: its ontological content is sur-face, exposition, expression. The surface, here, is not relative to a spectator facing it: it is the site of a concentration in co-incidence. That is why it has no model. Its model is in it; it is its “idea” or its energy. It is an idea that is an energy, a pressure, a traction and an attraction of sameness. Not an “idea” (idea or eidolon), which is an intelligible form, but a force that forces form to touch itself. If the spectator remains across from it, facing it, he sees only a disjunction between resemblance and dissimilarity. If he enters into this self-coincidence, then he enters into the image, he no longer looks at it—though he does
not cease to be in front of it. He penetrates it, is penetrated by it: by it, its distance and its distinction, at the same time.

The self-coincidence of the image in itself excludes its conformity to a perceived object or to a coded sentiment or well-defined function. On the contrary, the image never stops tightening and condensing into itself. That is why it is immobile, calm and flat in its presence, the coming-together and co-inciding of an event and an eternity. The musical, choreographic, cinematographic, or kinetic image in general is no less immobile in this sense: it is the distension of a present of intensity, in which succession is also a simultaneity. With regard to the image, the exemplarity of the visual domain lies in its first being the domain of immobility as such; the exemplarity of the audible domain, by contrast, is that of distension as such. At one extreme, immobility—immutability and impassability—at the other, distension and the passionate movement of separation: the two extremes of sameness.

There is an expression in French: sage comme une image, literally, “wise as an image.” But the wisdom of the image, if it is indeed a kind of restraint, is also the tension of an impetus or impulse. It is first offered and given to be taken. The seduction of images, their eroticism, is nothing other than their availability for being taken, touched by the eyes, the hands, the belly, or by reason, and penetrated. If flesh has played an exemplary role in painting, that is because, far beyond the figuration of nudity, flesh is the spirit of painting. But penetrating the image, just as with amorous flesh, means being penetrated by it. The gaze is impregnated with color, the ear with sonority. There is nothing in the spirit that is not in the senses: nothing in the idea that is not in the image. I become the ground and depth of the painter’s eye that looks at me, as well as the reflection in the mirror (in Aachen’s painting). I become the dissonance of a harmony, the leap of a dance step. “I”: but it is no longer a question of “I.” Cogito becomes imago.

But at the same time each thing, in the distance in which its self-coincidence is separated in order to coincide with itself, leaves behind its status as a thing and becomes an intimacy. It is no longer manipulable. It is neither body, nor tool, nor god. It is outside the world, since in itself it is the intensity of a concentration of world. It is also outside language, since in itself it is the assembling of a sense without signification. The image suspends the course of the world...
and of meaning—of meaning as a course or current of sense (meaning in discourse, meaning that is current and valid): but it affirms all the more a sense (therefore an “insensible”) that is selfsame with what it gives to be sensed (that is, itself). In the image, which, however, is without an “inside,” there is a sense that is nonsignifying but not insignificant, a sense that is as certain as its force (its form).

One could say that the image—neither world nor language—is a “real presence,” if we recall the Christian\(^\text{17}\) use of this expression: the “real presence” is precisely not the ordinary presence of the real referred to here: it is not the god present in the world as finding himself there. This presence is a sacred intimacy that a fragment of matter gives to be taken in and absorbed. It is a real presence because it is a contagious presence, participating and participated, communicating and communicated in the distinction of its intimacy.

That is in fact why the Christian God, and particularly the Catholic God, will have been the god of the death of God, the god who withdraws from all religion (from every bond with a divine presence) and who departs into his own absence, since he is no longer anything but the passion of the intimate and the intimacy of suffering [\(du \ pâtir\)] or of feeling and sensation: what every thing gives to be sensed insofar as it is what it is, the thing itself distinguished in its sameness.\(^\text{18}\)

So it is as well, according to another exemplarity, with what is called the “poetic image.” This is not a decoration provided by a play of analogy, comparison, allegory, metaphor, or symbol. Or else, in each of these possibilities, it is something other than the pleasant game of an encoded displacement.

When Rilke writes (in French):

\[
\text{Au fond de tout mon cœur phanérogame} \\
\text{At the bottom of my phanerogamus heart}\]

The simultaneously sexual and botanical metaphor of an open heart exposing itself creates a certain collision of meaning and sound, and a slightly humorous effect, somewhere between the noun and the adjective: this collision communicates the density of the word \textit{phanérogame}, its foreign substance, both in relation to the French language and to the language of sentiments, in a double withdrawal that at the same time lays the heart open as a plant or a flower, a botanical plate. But in this way it also communicates its visibility, which gives both the sense and the sound of the word, as well as the contours of a sort of indecency in poetic form. It does this even as it discreetly carries away the “coeur phanérogame” in the decasyllabic rhythm of which...
it forms one hemistich, in a discreet but distinct reference (all the more distinct for being discreet, not crushed by a noisy rhythm) to the French prosody that the German poet is playing with here. The image is all of this—or it is this, at least, in the cutout of the verse and in the pulling apart of the language, in the suspense of rhythm and attention, and in this *fond* whose *f* is repeated in the *phb*, a muted consonance. This is an echo of another verse (also a decasyllable) in a variant from the same poem:

les mots massifs, les mots profonds en or
the massive words, the deep golden words

Here it is poetry itself that becomes the matter of the image.

For the image is always material: it is the matter of the distinct, its mass and its density, its weight, its edges and its brilliance, its timbre and its specter, its pace and step, its gold.

But *matter* is first *mother* (*materies* comes from *mater*, which is the heart of the tree, the hardwood), and the mother is that from which, and in which, there is distinction: in her intimacy another intimacy is separated and another force is formed, another same is detached from the same in order to be itself. (The father, on the contrary, is a reference point and marker of identification: figure, not image, he has nothing to do with being-a-self, but with being-such-and-such in the homogeneous current of identities.)

The image, clear and distinct, is something obvious and evident. It is the obviousness of the distinct, its very distinction. There is an *image* only when there is this obviousness: otherwise, there is decoration or illustration, that is, the support of a signification. The image must touch on the invisible presence of the distinct, on the distinction of its presence.

The distinct is visible (the sacred always was) because it does not belong to the domain of objects, their perception and their use, but to that of forces, their affections and transmissions. The image is the obviousness of the invisible. It does not render it visible as an object: it accedes to a knowledge of it. Knowledge of the obvious is not a science, it is the knowledge of a whole as a whole. In a single stroke, which is what makes it striking, the image delivers a totality of sense or a truth (however one wishes to say it). Each image is a singular variation on the totality of distinct sense—of the sense that does not link together the order of significations. This sense is infinite, and each variation is itself singularly infinite. Each image is a finite cut-
ting out, by the mark of distinction. The superabundance of images in the multiplicity and in the history of the arts corresponds to this inexhaustible distinction. But each time, and at the same time, it is the *jouissance* of meaning, the jolt and the taste of its tension: a little sense in a pure state, infinitely opened or infinitely lost (however one wishes to say it).

Nietzsche said that "we have *art* in order *not to be sunk to the depths* by truth." But we must add that this does not happen unless art touches on truth. The image does not stand before the ground like a net or a screen. We do not sink; rather, the ground rises to us in the image. The double separation of the image, its pulling away and its cutting out, form both a protection against the ground and an opening onto it. In reality, the ground is not distinct as ground except in the image: without the image, there would only be indistinct adherence. More precisely: in the image, the ground is distinguished by being doubled. It is at once the profound depth of a possible shipwreck and the surface of the luminous sky. The image floats, in sum, at the whim of the swells, mirroring the sun, poised over the abyss, soaked by the sea, but also shimmering with the very thing that threatens it and bears it up at the same time. Such is intimacy, simultaneously threatening and captivating from out of the distance into which it withdraws.

The image touches on this ambivalence by which meaning (or truth) is distinguished without end from the bound network of significations, which at the same time it never ceases to touch: every phrase that is formed, every gesture made, every act of looking, every thought puts into play an absolute meaning (or truth itself), which does not cease both to separate itself and to absent itself from all signification. More than that: each signification that is constituted (for example, this proposition, and this entire discourse) also forms by itself the distinctive mark of a threshold beyond which meaning (truth) goes absent. It goes absent not in an elsewhere, in fact, but right here.

It is in this sense that art is necessary, and is not a diversion or entertainment. Art marks the distinctive traits of the absenting of truth, by which it is the truth absolutely. But this is also the sense in which it is itself disquieting, and can be threatening: because it conceals its very being from signification or from definition, but also because it can threaten itself and destroy in itself the images of itself that have been deposited in a signifying code and in an assured beauty. That is why there is a history of art, and so many jolts and...
upheavals in this history: because art cannot be a religious observance (not of itself or anything else), and because it is always taken back up into the distinction of what remains separate and irreconcilable, in the tireless exposure of an always unbound intimacy. Its un-binding [déliaison], its endless flourish [délié], 21 are what the precision of the image weaves together and disentangles in each case.

Let us remain with a final image, which speaks of an image’s gift of love and death: 22 “The Image of My Past Days,” which Violetta holds out, and sings, is an image of youth and of lost loves, but it is their truth at once eternal and now absent, inalterable in its distinction. But again, and finally, this image is none other than the opera itself which is now reaching its end, the music that has just been love and tearing apart, and which expires by showing them, infinitely distinct in their distance.