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► **To cite this version:**

Marta Segarra. A Reflexive Gaze on Art History: 'Pregnances'. *Word and Text, A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics*, 2024, 14, pp.138-147. hal-04813651

HAL Id: hal-04813651

<https://hal.science/hal-04813651v1>

Submitted on 2 Dec 2024

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A Reflexive Gaze on Art History: ‘Pregnances’¹

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Abstract

This paper examines one of Jacques Derrida’s essays concerning aesthetics, ‘Pregnances’ (first published in 1993), which comments on the work of a woman artist, Colette Deblé, in relation to the question of the ‘feminine’ and to a feminist gaze in art history. Derrida argues that Deblé avoids oppositional or ‘reactive’ logic regarding Western pictorial tradition in favour of a what can be called a reflexive gaze of this undoubtedly phallogocentric tradition. Deblé’s work also represents a reassessment of the traditional opposition between (masculine) activity and (feminine) passivity, as well as male/masculine penetration and female/feminine impregnation, but also of chronological temporality, hierarchy between the original and the copy, and precedence of the original over the quotation.

Keywords: *Colette Deblé, feminine aesthetic, feminist art history, feminist gaze, penetration, pregnancy, birth*

In *Spurs*, Jacques Derrida evokes Nietzsche’s statement that the ‘old aesthetic’ (equivalent to ‘an aesthetic of passive, receptive consumers’) should be ‘replaced by [a new] one of producers’.² Following the logic of the opposition between passivity and activity as defining gendered positions, the old aesthetic is assimilated to a ‘feminine’ aesthetic, while the new one would be a ‘masculine’ one. However, readers of *Spurs* are well aware that Derrida complicates the apparently clearly phallogocentric nature of Nietzsche’s assertions about women and femininity, showing that one can find in Nietzsche’s thinking on this subject at least ‘three types of such a statement’, which is to say three different and even contradictory ‘positions’.³ The first condemns ‘the woman’, ‘[i]n the name of truth, as a ‘figure or potentate of falsehood’; the second also censures woman, but this time because she ‘identifies with truth’ or because she ‘play[s] with it [...] to her own advantage’, without believing in it. The third, finally, reveals woman ‘as an affirmative power, a dissimulatress, an artist, a dionysiac’.⁴

In another text, when asked about ‘woman’s place’ by Christie V. MacDonald,⁵ Derrida answers that perhaps ‘woman’s place’ is where there is no place for fixed and defined positions. He proposes to ‘challenge a certain idea of the *locus* [*lieu*] and the place [*place*]’ that he identifies as ‘the entire history of the West and of its metaphysics’, an idea that he believes is also shared by ‘feminism’.⁶ It would therefore appear to be contradictory – and above all against Derrida’s deconstructive thinking – to argue for the existence of a ‘feminine aesthetic’, while inverting, for example, the values and affects that Nietzsche associated – apparently, and in the case cited by Derrida – with the feminine and the masculine. Nevertheless, *Spurs* does not

¹ A French version of this text was published as ‘De l’esthétique “féminine” au regard de travers’, in *Derrida et la question de l’art. Déconstructions de l’esthétique*, ed. Adnen Jdey (Nantes: Cécile Defaut, 2011), 383-96.

² Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles / Éperons. Les Styles de Nietzsche*, intr. and preface by Stefano Agosti, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 75.

³ Derrida, *Spurs*, 95.

⁴ Derrida, *Spurs*, 97.

⁵ *Spurs* is quoted in Christie V. MacDonald’s interview with Derrida, which includes the following specific question: ‘how would you describe “woman’s place”?’ Jacques Derrida and Christie V. MacDonald, ‘Choreographies’, *Diacritics* 12.2 (Summer 1982): 66.

⁶ Derrida and MacDonald, ‘Choreographies’, 69.

refrain from evoking the ‘feminine’ (‘which should not be hastily mistaken for a woman’s femininity, for women’s sexuality, or for any other of those essentializing fetishes’, warns Derrida) as ‘[t]hat which will not be pinned down by truth’.⁷

Thus, I will read one of Jacques Derrida’s essays concerning aesthetics, and, more precisely, a text devoted to *hearing* – insofar as the term ‘aesthetic’ is related to *aiein*: both ‘to hear’ and ‘to see’ – the work of a woman artist, Colette Deblé, in relation to the question of the feminine, which never ceases to haunt the philosopher’s texts. ‘Pregnances’⁸ explores different meanings of this term in French (*prégnance*), referring to the phenomenological sense (the capacity of forms to impose themselves on perception) as well as to pregnancy (a meaning that has been lost in contemporary French). A third sense of *prégnant* (which imposes itself forcefully) seems to be missing, but perhaps it is underlying. Here, I am going to accompany this brief text by Jacques Derrida – 17 pages in the 2004 French edition, a volume composed mainly of reproductions of Colette Deblé’s work – since, as Stefano Agosti says in his preface to *Spurs*: ‘If one is going to speak of Derrida’s “text” one can, finally, but re-state it, only prolong it’.⁹ My own text, then, is intended as an echo of Derrida’s – which is not a mere formula, but, on the contrary, perhaps too ambitious a goal, given the role of the nymph Echo in ‘Pregnances’, insightfully analysed by Anne-Emmanuelle Berger.¹⁰

‘Pregnances’ opens with a short paragraph including images that will be woven through the text: “Between two waters – she sees better, you see, than we can glimpse. Or if you prefer: *through these* waters she glimpses better. She knows how to cross over.”¹¹ In Derrida’s reading of Colette Deblé’s wash drawings, water – or rather, in the plural, waters – and terms related to sight and to crossing over (*entrevoir* for ‘glimpse’, in the French original) are poetically linked. The semantic field of water is dominant, stemming first and foremost from the technique specific to these drawings – *lavis* in French, which is a synonym of ‘aquatint’, a signifier openly related to ‘water’. However, *lavis* is also linked to water, since it comes from *laver* (to wash), and Derrida invokes this verb in both its reflexive and transitive forms. With the reflexive *se laver*, he refers to the bathing scenes that are frequent in Deblé’s drawings, but also, once again, to the wash technique, recalling that in English, *lavis* is said ‘wash’ or ‘wash drawing’.

The evocation of these bathing scenes, typical of the voyeuristic or scopophilic gaze of Western pictorial tradition towards the naked female body, but also of domestic scenes of washing and cleaning, equally deemed ‘feminine’, introduces the frequent metaphorical meaning of ‘cleaning’, that of erasing a stain, moral or symbolic. For Colette Deblé, says Derrida, it is not a matter of ‘cleaning up the history of women (sluicing it thoroughly, of course) in order to reappropriate, to lay bare (finally) woman’s true, clean body, her own’ (‘P’, 120). Many female artists, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, tried to reappropriate (‘finally’) women’s bodies and women’s history, which had been withheld from women themselves, not only in painting – hence the need to make them *propre*, which means ‘clean’ in French, but also ‘proper’, in the sense of a reappropriation –, for their bodies had been charged with meanings and affects (fear, hatred, or even idealization) often harmful to women themselves. Hence, the desire to make these bodies ‘clean’ by washing them of this semantic burden.

⁷ Derrida, *Spurs*, 55.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, ‘Pregnances’, trans. Andrew Rothwell, in *Thinking Out of Sight. Writings on the Arts of the Visible*, ed. Ginette Michaud, Joana Masó and Javier Bassas, trans. Laurent Milesi (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 118-28.

⁹ In Derrida, *Spurs*, 25.

¹⁰ Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, ‘The Latest Word of Echo’, trans. Rachel Gabara, *New Literary History* 27:4 (Autumn 1996): 621-40.

¹¹ Derrida, ‘Pregnances’, 120; hereafter ‘P’ with page references in the text.

However, Derrida speaks of this operation in a negative mode: ‘No, following the firm contours of the line, a drawing colored with a wash sees itself discreetly tinted, *impregnated* rather than drowned, filtered but also preserved, the body of its lines intact, still shimmering in the liquid element.’ (‘P’, 120) Colette Deblé’s work, then, is not tantamount to appropriation or re-appropriation, not because of a lack of courage or strength – the firmness of the line’s contours suggests the contrary – but because, like Derrida himself, she avoids oppositional or ‘reactive’ logic, which results in keeping the same old arrangements, even if they are apparently reversed. Therefore, the point is not to reverse the values of tradition, whether artistic or philosophical, but to put tradition askew, obliquely looking at it or *glimpsing* through it. This stance implies, certainly not a refusal of action, but a renunciation of control, of the author’s authority: ‘there is so little of the signing artist about her, the sort who makes authoritarian claims about copyright, paternaternity, legitimate title to representations’ (‘P’, 123).

Deblé’s work also represents a reassessment of the traditional opposition between (masculine) activity and (feminine) passivity. Activity and passivity are combined in the work of both the painter and the writer of ‘Pregnances’, as shows the reflexive use of the verb ‘to see’ in the paragraph quoted above: ‘a drawing colored with a wash sees itself discreetly tinted’.¹² Moreover, the frequent use of the French expression ‘*voyez-vous*’ in this text suggests, beyond its idiomatic meaning (translated as ‘you see’), the possibility of a reflection of the gaze, or of a reflexive gaze that includes subject and object – just as *regard* (gaze) can mean the action of directing the eyes towards something or someone, a gesture that involves activity and exteriority, protrusion or even penetration, as well as the expression of the eyes of the beholder, reflecting a judgement, an emotion or a state of mind of this subject, thus related to interiority. Derrida goes on to describe ‘an art that seems to combine the active and passive senses of two verbs [...]: *imprinting* [empreindre] and *impregnating* [imprégner]. [...] Invading and leaving one’s mark, but by penetrating, like the flow expelled from a lifted sluice-gate, *flooding*, making a womb big, *impressing* oneself in the fluid flow itself’ (‘P’, 121).

Here Derrida explicitly mentions penetration – the quintessential image of male/masculine activity – but penetration is fluidized, generalized, and therefore deconstructed as a concrete, localized form of violence. Penetration is thus *demasculinized* by its association with the effects of water, an element traditionally assimilated to the feminine, and above all with its insidious and diffuse ways.

The drawing ‘shimmer[s] in the liquid element’, overflowing, swollen waters: ‘Swollen by the confluence of so many possible contexts, the word “wash” overflows its banks.’ (‘P’, 120) Derrida appears to be fascinated by the multiple possibilities the word *lavis* offers for reverie: it resonates with vision (*la vision*), in the feminine (*je la vis*, I saw her), with life (*la vie*), and, of course, with washing – in plenty of water – which, as said before, is the French word’s origin, concluding: ‘[...] heavy like a pregnant woman or a departing ship laden with cargo. A wash always moistens.’ (‘P’, 120) The parallelism between the ‘pregnant woman’ and the ‘departing ship laden with cargo’ heightens the relevance of the liquid element and underlines the spatial and temporal progression inherent in the process of pregnancy as much as in the sea journey – incidentally, the word *partance* (‘departing’), with the suffix *-ance* so dear to Derrida, stresses the duration of the process, rather than its finality. The last sentence (‘A wash always moistens’), which resembles an aphorism, once again brings together passivity and activity in this use of a verb that is both transitive and intransitive, in English as in French (*mouiller*). As well as referring to sexual arousal, both of male and female, *mouiller* refers to softness (*mou*, *molle*), which is also at the origin of the Latin word *mulier* (woman). In the transitive sense, ‘moisten’ implies a contact, a touch that ‘leav[es] one’s mark’. (‘P’, 121) These women’s bodies painted by Deblé, Derrida adds a little further, are ‘untouchable’, maybe even

¹² See also Joana Masó, Gabriela García Hubard, Javier Bassas Vila and Santiago Borja, ““Ecographic Images”: Writing or Piercing the Visible”, *Mosaic* 40.2 (June 2007): 217-30.

‘intangible [...] And yet: beyond actual contact, but open to that *absolute tactful touch*,¹³ caresses that touch without really touching’ (‘P’, 126). These bodies are ‘untouchable’ because neither the artist’s nor the spectator’s gaze, under the influence of what Derrida calls ‘a law of tact’,¹⁴ can do violence to them. They are thus ‘beyond actual contact’. They preserve their wholeness and uniqueness, without this conveying the sense of belonging, the body being the ‘most personal property’ of women as the feminist claim of “‘my body belongs to me,” like “my desire””, suggests.¹⁵ However, the word ‘untouchable’ may also have a pejorative meaning – as in the case of Dalits in India, the people whose *impure* and degrading contact is to be avoided – which relates to the contempt, fear or hatred traditionally elicited by the female body.

The bodies in Deblé’s washes perform and are subjected to ‘caresses that touch without really touching’, a type of caress that takes us back to the realm of desire and love, and even ‘real love’ according to Hélène Cixous, which is ‘a don’t-touch, yet still an almost-touching’.¹⁶ This magic of touching-not-touching may only be achieved through language – Echo’s desire, according to Derrida, is ‘to caress him [Narcissus] with words’¹⁷ – through ‘words that touch, that put bodies, not egos, into relation’, as Anne-Emmanuelle Berger develops.¹⁸ But if voice can touch without touching, gaze also possesses this miraculous capacity (‘eyes are miraculous hands’, states Cixous in a passage quoted by Derrida¹⁹). Voice, touch and gaze are brought into close association by Deblé’s washes.

In its intransitive use, the verb *mouiller*, in ‘A wash always moistens’, refers also to desire and even sexuality. Vaginal fluid is melted with amniotic fluid when the bag of waters breaks during the birth process, but also with rain (‘rain-dropped painting’), ‘tears’ and ‘sperm’, ‘whale-sperm perhaps or sperm-whale sperm’ (‘P’, 125). Sperm is associated with male penetration and fertilization (like rain, if we think of Danae, one of the mythological figures drawn by Colette Deblé), but it is a ‘feminine’ sperm because it is whale sperm, and this animal is chosen by the artist for her ‘parody of a Chinese self-portrait’, says Derrida, quoting Deblé: ‘If I were an element I’d be a liquid; if I were an animal, I’d be a whale.’ (‘P’, 121) This sperm whale recalls the feminization, or rather demasculinization, of penetration that Derrida alludes to when referring to Genet,²⁰ for instance, but also to himself, through the ‘*miracle of a feminine ejaculation, which would catch the light and which I drank in with my eyes*’,²¹ referring to the metamorphosis of silkworms that he contemplated in wonder as a child, and which constituted a kind of sexual education, although an unorthodox one. The whale, from the Book of Jonah to Agnès Varda,²² fascinates our imagination as a maximization of the mother’s womb and

¹³ See also the work of Fabrice Bourlez on tact and touch, for instance: ‘Tacts de la déconstruction’, in *Qui a peur de la déconstruction?*, ed. Isabelle Alfandary, Anne Emmanuelle Berger and Jacob Rogocinski (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2023), 223-42.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 67. It would be necessary to refer to this major essay by Derrida to develop the whole question of touch, but this is beyond the scope of the present contribution.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‘Voice II’, trans. Verena Andermatt Conley, in *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf & others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), 163.

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous, ‘Love of the Wolf’, trans. Keith Cohen, in *Stigmata. Escaping Texts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 78.

¹⁷ From a Derrida’s unpublished seminar quoted by Berger in ‘The Latest Word from Echo’, 635.

¹⁸ Berger, ‘The Latest Word from Echo’, 636.

¹⁹ Hélène Cixous, ‘Savoir’, in Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, *Veils*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 9. Quoted by Derrida in his text included in the same volume, ‘A Silkworm of One’s Own’, 35.

²⁰ See Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavy and Richard Rand (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986). Cixous comments on this ‘demasculinization’ in ‘La fleur est partie’, in *Lettres de fuite. Séminaire 2001-2004*, ed. Marta Segarra (Paris: Gallimard, 2020), 1135-82.

²¹ Derrida, ‘A Silkworm of One’s Own’, 89.

²² See Varda’s autobiographical film *Les plages d’Agnès*, dir. Agnès Varda (Paris: Les Films du Losange, 2008).

pregnancy – *prégnance* –, but who first swallows a living being, only to spit it out, albeit transformed. Derrida turns it into a ‘story’, almost a fable: the whale-artist,

a certain whale swallowed up the whole of Western painting [...], all those women gulped down one by one, swimming around and growing in its stomach – and now suddenly (suddenly but after the appropriate amount of time, as if to mimic a gestation period, the push to labour) here they all are, returned to their true form, still damp, their own spitting (spat-out) image. Delivered, re-engendered; engendered anew, for the first time. (‘P’, 121; translation slightly modified)

This ‘story’ evokes the freedom Colette Deblé takes with her ‘models’, these women’s bodies seized from the history of painting: she removes them out of the frame, *swallows* them, gives them back their freedom of movement, so that they can move and *swim* in these waters that are at once sea, tears and amniotic liquid, which is also seminal fluid – thus *defeminizing* the liquid element that is supposed to be *proper* to femininity – to bring them out again, true to themselves. One could think that Deblé is making ‘spitting’ images of the models in the original masterpieces, but her work problematizes the notions of model and original, as Derrida points out. Deblé’s women are the same old figures, and yet they have changed, since they have been ‘re-engendered’. Like newborn babies, they find themselves ‘still damp’ because they have just been delivered, but are at the same time women who have just given birth, as the double meaning (passive and active) of the French word ‘*accouchées*’ indicates. These women impregnate and at the same time are impregnated, give birth and are given birth, deconstructing activity and passivity, as with penetration, but also chronological temporality, the hierarchy between the original and the copy, and the precedence of the original over the quotation. The paradoxical phrase ‘engendered anew, for the first time’ captures this deconstruction of temporality: how can something happen ‘anew, for the first time’, and how can an event – engendering – that is by definition a onetime occurrence happen ‘anew’? These women are ‘pregnant with the future and the memories that they bear’ (‘P’, 121), adds Derrida, who thus argues that there is no opposition between the memory of the past and the promise of the future.

The temporality of giving birth is also undermined by the image of these ‘damp’ women, gorged with the ‘the amniotic fluid running down a new-born’s body as they stubbornly, blindly, gropingly hunt between the woman’s legs for the milky way’ (‘P’, 125; translation slightly modified). Like Goya’s painting in which we don’t know whether the dog is sinking or rising,²³ are these creatures emerging from their mother’s womb, or are they sinking into it, in the universal – and therefore rather masculine – dream of returning to the womb? Again, it is a question of touch (‘groping’), and of a ‘blind’ gaze that conflates the inside/outside opposition, since the newborn looks for ‘the milky way’ between their mother’s legs – except that, of course, they are also looking for their mother’s breast or womb (the French ‘*sein maternel*’ means both) from which the milk – yet another liquid element – will gush forth.

From all that has been said, one might think, in a classic feminist interpretation, that Colette Deblé’s operation consists in reappropriating, in the name of women, the body that has been stolen from them, in re-presenting this body by washing off the load with which it has been burdened by ‘all those masters who have *staged* and *represented* [it]’, says Derrida, enumerating all sorts of treatments that this body has undergone: ‘hidden, sublimated, elevated, violated, veiled, dressed up, undressed, revealed, unveiled, reveiled, mythified, mystified, denied, prized or misprized, in a word *verified*, for it all comes back to the same thing, to the verity of [...] women’s bodies.’ (‘P’, 121-122) Woman’s subject, or woman as subject, is here diverted from its usual meaning in feminist discourse. Derrida refers to ‘woman as subject, woman [who] has always been *their* subject’ (that of the painters’ ‘patrons’ and of these

²³ This painting from Goya appears on several occasions in Hélène Cixous’s work – for instance, in *Manhattan: Letters from Prehistory*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007) – as an image of the non-opposition between life and death, among others.

‘masters’ themselves) (‘P’, 121-2; translation slightly modified), whereas one might expect to read ‘woman as object’, the target of many feminist accusations and demands, especially in the field of the representation of women’s bodies in art or in advertising. The ambiguity of the term ‘subject’ also plays with the conflation of passivity and activity: from the Latin *subjectus* meaning ‘subjected to, inferior’, ‘subject’ has come to mean a living being who has agency. Derrida makes use of this ambiguity here – and in other texts, such as in the beginning of *Spurs*: ‘it is woman who will be my subject.’²⁴ He also plays with the term *affranchir*, which means ‘to free’, ‘to deflower’ and ‘to initiate’, but which in the semantic field of the postal service – of such relevance to Derrida – has evolved from ‘to render (a shipment) tax-free’ to ‘to pay a tax (for a shipment)’: ‘hers are liberated women, women set free of their models, emancipated from their capiternal masterpieces now kept at arm’s length, and yet faithful women too, laughing daughters and sisters, mistresses and bearers of memory’ (‘P’, 122). These women, ‘liberated’ from the paternal model, remain ‘daughters’ and ‘sisters’; they are therefore at the same time ‘faithful’ to this model, making no attempt to oppose it. Colette Deblé’s is ‘une vision sans exemple’:²⁵ an ‘unrivaled’ (‘P’, 122) vision as well as, literally, a vision without example – the artist does not claim to be exemplary. Her women do not intend to replace a ‘verity’ or a truth that is considered outdated for a new (counter)truth; they free themselves from the lines that are supposed to ‘circumscribe’ them, as Derrida writes concerning Nietzsche: ‘Because a “woman” takes so little interest in truth [...] the truth, as regards her, does not concern her in the least. It rather is the “man” who has decided to believe that his discourse on woman or truth might possibly be of any *concern* to her. [...] Circumscribes her.’²⁶

Like the German philosopher, but in a much more measured and nuanced way, Jacques Derrida is wary of the ‘theatre’ of ‘progress’ endorsed by classical feminist discourse; if feminists entrusted ‘everything’ to this ‘representation of progress’, ‘everything would collapse, flow, founder in this same homogenized, sterilized river of the history of mankind [man’s kind in the locution *l’histoire des hommes*].’²⁷ This history carries along with it the age-old dream of reappropriation, “liberation”, autonomy, mastery’.²⁸ Derrida is therefore appreciative that Colette Deblé achieves to ‘avoid any temptation of sentimentously writing a feminist history of women’, an undertaking that would be ‘worthy’ and ‘necessary enough’ but ‘a little dogmatic’, and that, in its place, we can hear,

above the murmur of her drawings, a gentle and disarmed critique of the sententious authorities who preside over the great specialist histories of women or even of the representation of women, the grand and confident narratives about the way things are, and the history of representation, and men and women [...]. (‘P’, 123)²⁹

Derrida also notes that, although Deblé’s drawings seek to ‘quarrel’³⁰ with the history of painting, they do not shout out their disagreement: their voice, insinuating itself like water, whispers ‘a gentle and disarmed critique’. These adjectives would make any feminist cringe, since they evoke attributes traditionally associated with the feminine; all the more so if we equate ‘disarmed’ with ‘without truth’, as the philosopher does in ‘A Silkworm of One’s Own’, where he compares *wahrlos* and *wehrlos*, referring to Freud.³¹ This ‘without truth’ would run

²⁴ Derrida, ‘Spurs’, 37.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, ‘Prégnances. Sur quatre lavis de Colette Deblé’, *Littérature* 142 (June 2006): 8.

²⁶ Derrida, ‘Spurs’, 63; translation slightly modified.

²⁷ This explanatory insert appears in the original English version of the interview.

²⁸ Derrida and MacDonald, ‘Choreographies’, 67.

²⁹ However, Derrida says of this type of feminist reactive discourse: ‘Certainly, it is not timely politically, nor in any case is it possible, to neglect or renounce such a view of “liberation”.’ In Derrida and MacDonald, ‘Choreographies’, 67.

³⁰ ‘Forget the (a)quarrel(le) that she, and all the other women, is picking’ (‘P’, 121).

³¹ Derrida, ‘A Silkworm of One’s Own’, 60.

counter not only to the consideration of ‘Woman as the major allegory of truth in Western discourse’, but also to ‘Femininity (the essence or truth of Woman)’,³² two correlative discourses that feminism has fought against, albeit often with old weapons. Colette Deblé’s washes are not *certain* of what they offer to the viewer’s gaze, they are not underpinned by any preconceived truth or ready-made concept, they do not teach lessons, and they *command silence*, says Derrida (‘P’, 126). This quality would also be at odds with the feminist aim of giving women back the voice that had been denied them, liberating them from the ‘silence’ to which tradition had condemned them. However, the silence to which ‘Pregnances’ refers has a special ‘quality’: it consists above all in ‘not to name’, in not postulating the truth of the woman and the truth of the ‘specific/clean body of woman’ (‘P’, 126; translation slightly modified) [‘le corps propre de la femme’³³]. It is therefore a silence pregnant with words, in the same way that Echo’s silence – reduced to making the words she hears resonate – is in reality a speech full of meaning and effect, according to certain versions of the myth, including Derrida’s.³⁴

Colette Deblé *strips away* any ‘theory of women’ (‘P’, 123; translation modified) (*on* women as much as *by* women themselves), laying bare ‘singular’ bodies that are nonetheless subjected to ‘insistent repetition’ (‘P’, 126). These bodies belong to a *series* (from the Latin verb *serere*: to weave, a traditionally feminine activity) and constitute *citations*. Derrida thus coins the word ‘*sericitation*’ (‘P’, 126), which refers to series, but also to silk and, more specifically, to the ‘silkworm’ – incidentally, serigraphy, a technique close to washing, also comes from ‘silk’ and not from ‘series’ as is often thought. This deconstruction of the opposition between singularity and plurality is reminiscent of the author’s – as well as of the subject’s – renunciation of mastery and authority. Henri Michaux states in his afterword to *Plume*, an anguished homage to the subject’s lightness (close to the *weightlessness* of Deblé’s women): ‘In the name of many I sign this book.’³⁵ In a similar way, Derrida says of Colette Deblé: ‘she mingles with the crowd’ (‘P’, 123). The infinite multiplication of bodies warns against any temptation to seek out the singular truth of *the* woman, ‘a truth in itself of [...] woman in itself’, in Nietzsche’s words.³⁶ The German philosopher would also have deconstructed this singular truth by referring to women as ‘my truths’, in the plural, and Derrida concludes: ‘The very fact that “meine Wahrheiten” is so underlined, that they are multiple, variegated, contradictory even, can only imply that these are not *truths*. Indeed, there is no such thing as a truth in itself. [...] truth is plural.’³⁷ One could argue that Derrida’s approach to Nietzsche in *Spurs* corresponds to the same manner he appreciates in Deblé: ‘tampering with the original’, her washes ‘bring[...] out the truth-effect of the old body’ (‘P’, 126) – and we could extend this image to deconstruction as a way of looking at texts that gives birth to unforeseen possibilities.

This gaze is not equivalent to the piercing look that goes from a subject to an object in a unidirectional way, but a reflexive gaze, neither voyeuristic nor narcissistic: each of these women ‘sees herself drawn or painted’ at the same time as ‘she sees herself looking out, looking at others, through the window that a mirror remains’ (‘P’, 123). Women can thus be both looked at and actively looking at others. This has not been emphasised in feminist discourse, which has insisted above all on the reappropriation of the gaze by women-objects of the male gaze, against male *scopic exclusivity* throughout history, and not exclusively in the arts. Yet to refer to feminism or feminist discourse in the singular would perhaps amount to falling into the trap of a unique truth. Many women, from Virginia Woolf to Hélène Cixous, engaged in

³² Derrida and MacDonald, ‘Choreographies’, 69.

³³ Derrida, ‘Prégnances’, 7.

³⁴ See again Berger, ‘The Latest Word from Echo’.

³⁵ Henri Michaux, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Raymond Bellour with Ysé Tran, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard-NRF, 1998), 663.

³⁶ Derrida, ‘Spurs’, 103.

³⁷ Derrida, ‘Spurs’, 103.

deconstructing the traditional gaze for purposes that can be deemed feminist, without settling for a simple inversion of values or of the place where power is exercised. Colette Deblé's gaze, according to Derrida, is in truth a 'revelation [that] trembles with verity, trembles in the whole of its body and offers us the hazy, still unstable image, floating like a dream-association, a reflection of what is soon to be fixed on film' ('P', 125). The term '*révélation*' belongs, in French, to the semantic field of photography (meaning 'to develop' film), but also of religion, as a communication of divine truth. The most telling point here is the uncompleted nature of this revelation, 'still unstable', trembling, in motion, combining presence and absence like rhythm. This allusion to rhythm brings us back to the 'choreographies' that bring into play 'the multiplicity of sexually marked voices' in each individual's body, ruining the binarity of sexual difference and multiplying in 'indeterminable number' sex and sexuality.³⁸

These multiple marks *cross through* the body, says Derrida.³⁹ And it is on this crossing that he concludes 'Pregnances'. In a haunting *sericitation* of the terms 'to see', 'cross' and especially 'through' (*travers*), as well as their derivatives, Derrida depicts how Colette Deblé 'mak[es] others see what she sees through her eyes, through the pane of her window or the eye-piece of her telescope. For she is a visionary of bodies, a little mad, hallucinating a little' ('P', 127). The doubling of the gaze ('making others see what she sees') mirrors the artist's 'operation', which is certainly distracting – one of the meanings of *transvertere*, from which *travers* is derived, is 'to distract', in the sense of diverting. We are led astray, like the painter, but also like Nietzsche, who 'did not see his way too clearly there. Not could he, in the instantaneous blink of an eye', 'a little lost' in his text, where 'a regular, rhythmic blindness takes place'.⁴⁰ Colette Deblé's '*travail through*' ('à travers'), 'her powerful foible [*travers*] as an artist who paints and draws' ('P', 127), make us see this 'crossing' (*travers*) as well as all the worms (*vers*) in this can: silkworm (*ver à soie*), green (*vert*), glass (*verre*) – of the window and the mirror –, penis (*verge*), verdict, verity, virtue (*vertu*) and, of course, 'verse' as a unit of rhythmic order.⁴¹ Jacques Derrida's text performs, as an interpreter would perform a piece of music, Colette Deblé's washes, which in turn look through – and look askance at – the history of painting, by rebirthing it to our eyes.

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³⁸ Derrida and MacDonald, 'Choreographies', 76.

³⁹ Derrida and MacDonald, 'Choreographies', 76; translation modified.

⁴⁰ Derrida, 'Spurs', 101.

⁴¹ Derrida pursues this play of associations even further in 'A Silkworm of One's Own'.

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