

Poetry, Portrait, Poetrait

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this essay is to show how a writing of visible traits has been an ideal shared by writers of (and commentators on) French poetry for at least the last two hundred years. I use the term *trait* in its various meanings, both as personal attribute and as written or, especially, painted trace: according to the etymology of por-tray, the trait "drawn forth" in a painting or what I call a "poetrait," preserves some vital element of the object or person portrayed. In order to define this writing of traits, I begin by examining some early texts of the 18th and 16th centuries that propose such a writing. After contrasting the trait with the concept of an arbitrary linguistic sign, I go on to show how the trait depends for its existence on the displacement of meaning inherent in figurative language, and especially in poetry. An analysis of poems by Eluard and Saint-John Perse forms the basis for my argument that a poetic writing of traits, inviting the reader to seek meaning in a poem's visual form, rests on a myth of the portrait whereby the marks of a written language are drawn directly from nature.

The eighteenth-century notion of a pictographic script that preceded and gave birth to the earliest written alphabet still exerts a hold on the popular imagination of today, despite attacks against the philosophical and linguistic premisses of such a view that have been made over the last twenty years.¹ The fact that this notion has not undergone radical reform over the last two hundred years can be seen from the two juxtaposed commentaries on the origin of writing that follow — the first from de Brosses's two-volume *Treatise on the Mechanical Formation of Languages* that was published in Paris in 1765,² and the second, the entry for "cuneiform," from *The New Harper's Bible Dictionary* whose eighth edition appeared in New York (Harper and Row) in 1973:

When the natural figures [i.e. pictograms] were viewed for the first time as symbols of other objects, there were so many things that they could be used to say that it became necessary to simplify, alter and corrupt nature and reduce the figures to simpler traits which made them unrecognizable.

Cuneiform [writing] was the successor of the impractical pictographic, which had devised thousands of symbols made to resemble the house, man, or animal, etc., indicated. In the transition from pictographs to phonetics, the number of symbols was








gradually reduced, for the sake of speed, from several thousands to about 150 arbitrary groups of lines; which were still further reduced, after contact with the old Hebrew alphabet, to about 39.

A second notion that is equally long-lasting although, perhaps, less well known is the view that poetry gives us a privileged insight into the workings of these early forms of writing, and especially of hieroglyphic writing (a more developed form than the pictogram proper since the hieroglyph incorporates elements of syntax in addition to the pictorial form of its characters³). This is the view expressed, for instance, in the eighteenth century by Diderot when he wrote that poetry is “no longer just a chain of living terms that expose [their writer’s] thought with force and nobility, but that it is still a tissue of hieroglyphs piled up one on the other that paints this thought.”⁴ It is also a view that has been given theoretical respectability recently in France by Julia Kristeva and we see it surfacing in her claim that “phrasographical writing [i.e. hieroglyphic writing with a rudimentary syntax, as in Chinese ideograms] prefigures the type of linguistic mechanism whereby the message is removed from the individual words themselves and is instead transmitted in a trans-verbal articulation that dreams or modern poetry or the hieroglyph of every aesthetic system commemorate.”⁵

In the pages that follow I shall examine this notion of poetry’s link to a pictographic origin of writing and try to unearth some of the reasons for the hold that it has exerted over critics and poets for the last two hundred years. Rather than look for such reasons in the work of poets who have overtly espoused a pictographic aesthetic — Ezra Pound, for instance, whose 1934 book *ABC of Reading* advocates the invention of poetic ideograms modelled on Chinese characters⁶ — I shall concentrate instead on poems and essays that exploit a key term in the quotation from de Brosses that I gave at the outset: the “trait.” For it is in the trait, a special written trace that is something more than just an inscribed sign, that I believe hieroglyphic readings of poetry find their authority.

According to the hypothetical birth of alphabetized characters that Antoine Court de Gébelin postulated in his book *The Origin of Language and of Writing*, published in Paris in 1775, ten years after de Brosses’s treatise, Roman characters still contain the essential traits of the pictograms from which they were derived. With “each letter being the painting in the object” for Court de Gébelin,⁷ and each phoneme being a painting of an medium of sound (appreciated by the ear and not the eye), “the resemblance between two portraits,” as Gérard Genette has written, “results only from their equal faithfulness to their common model,”⁸ namely the object “painted” by both the sound and the letter. I believe that Genette’s use of

the term “portrait” in this remark does not come about by accident. For the hypotheses advanced by such eighteenth-century researchers as de Brosses and Court de Gébeline rest on the supposition that the simplified characters of the modern alphabet still contain “traits” of their natural pictographic predecessors. More specific than a “truth of painting” as Genette has called it (p. 108), this supposition is in fact a “truth of the portrait” or rather, as I hope to show, a *myth* of the portrait whereby the trait that is “drawn forth” in a painting (according to the etymology of por-tray) is believed to be a mark *contained in the original object itself*.

We can see this myth at work if we contrast Court de Gébeline’s derivation of the upper-case Roman letter A with the more recent derivation of that character given in the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (1979 Edition). In the latter volume the modern letter is shown to preserve the ancient Greek upturned V form with its stems joined by an almost horizontal bar: . This Greek character was formed by turning around through 90 degrees the older Greek  character which in turn was an inversion of the earlier Phoenician symbol “aleph” , meaning, we are told, “ox.” In other words, there is a visible continuity of *traces* between the three lines in the Phoenician  to the three lines of the Roman A. In Court de Gébeline’s derivation, however, this continuity of traces is replaced by a continuity of *traits*: the Greek character , with the help of its “corresponding” Chinese character , points backwards to an original pictogram of a match stick man with his arms held by his sides while his legs are spread apart, , which obviously represents a person, or more precisely for Court de Gébeline, “*le maître*,” the “master,” a meaning whose ideological import is reinforced by the definition of master as “He who has” which contains in its French form the very letter that this speculative etymological journey was meant to explain: “Celui qui A.”⁹ Reading this etymological derivation in the direction that Court de Gébeline intended (rather than in the reverse direction that our early etymologist followed: from the modern A back to a fictitious origin) we see how the “legs” of our letter A still carry the traits of their original pictogram depicting man himself, the first master of writing and perhaps (although Court de Gébeline does not make this connection explicit) even the very first master (and namer) of all — A-dam. In other words, our modern alphabet is not made up merely of traces or arbitrary lines but of lines drawn by nature herself, or “natural figures” as De Brosses termed them, and then “drawn forth” from nature by the world’s first por-traitists, the inventors of pictograms.

To better understand what is involved in this notion of natural traits and also its relevance to theories of poetry, let’s pursue a bit further the contrast between trait and arbitrary trace. We can recast this contrast in Saussurean terms by saying that, unlike a sign, that has an arbitrary link between its

signifier (or trace) and its signified (or conceptual meaning), the trait has a motivated link between the two.¹⁰ Court de Gébélín makes essentially the same point when he argues that “what is painted [namely, the original pictogram] could not be arbitrary, since it is always determined by the nature of the object to be painted.”¹¹ In other words, the trait reflects the original scene that it depicts in the same way that we think a picture reflects its original — in a “natural” (non-arbitrary) way. (Incidentally, Saussure himself would appear to be sympathetic with this view since he too used a *picture* of a tree as a symbol for the signified that corresponds to the Latin signifier “*arbor*,” in his famous illustration of the signifier-signified relation.¹²) Why do pictures and traits appear to have a motivated link to their originals? And why do such writers as Court de Gébélín, Diderot (for whom poetry “is a tissue of hieroglyphs [...] that paint thought”¹³), Condillac¹⁴ and Saussure consider *thought* to be reflected in pictures?

To begin with the first question, it is clear that a painting faithfully depicts its object only for a viewer familiar with the specific code of depiction employed in the painting — whether this code be the convention of match stick representations of people (as in Court de Gébélín’s alphabet), the convention of a fixed single focus for perspective first established in Italian Renaissance paintings, the convention of movable and multiple foci for perspective (as in Cubist paintings), or any other system of conventionalized rules for representation. We must learn these (arbitrary) codes when, as children, we learn to see a painting as a painting (and not as just another object within our field of vision), but once they are learned such codes become part and parcel of the cultural world in which we live — a world that appears by *necessity* to be the way it is. Just as we tend to feel, in our monolingual moments, that a spade must indeed be called a spade, so our imaginary pictures of spades (like Saussure’s tree picture) seem to denote the meaning of the term with even more necessity — merely because the codes of visual depiction are learned earlier than the codes of verbal designation (a fact about the acquisition of *cultural conventions* that is often distorted into a “fact” of nature expressed in such truisms as “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.”¹⁵). In short, the appearance of a necessary or motivated link between a picture and what it represents can exist only *within* an arbitrary or coded system of meaning, and yet this is not to say that there is no motivation between a painting and its object. Motivation inevitably comes into play (as in the case of calling a spade a spade) because cultural life, as Ludwig Wittgenstein points out, is the ground for all necessity — so much so that even a style of painting within a certain culture at a given time cannot be seen as interchangeable with another style.¹⁶ What this all points to is that the “natural” motivation between a pictogram and the scene it

depicts, a motivation posited as the hypothetical inauguration of both writing and painting by thinkers from Warburton and Condillac onwards,¹⁷ is not natural at all but rather a fictional *ideal*.¹⁸ Moreover, it is precisely the ideality inherent in this notion of motivation that is expressed in the logic of the trait, according to which a trait is not just any old line inscribed arbitrarily by a human hand on a surface but is rather a trace drawn forth from nature itself (and hence motivated to an *ideal* degree), carrying in its very inscription a guarantee of its own truthfulness.

Such a writing of traits (that guarantee their veracity, unlike everyday writing composed of signs) is what Montaigne wanted to approximate in his *Essays*: “Or les traits de ma peinture ne fourvoyent point, quoy qu’ils se changent et diversifient” (“Now the traits in my painting are never at fault although they change and vary”), he writes in his essay “On Repentance.”¹⁹ The painting he refers to here is his written self-portrait that is the *Essays* in their totality.²⁰ In his preface to the reader he gives one reason for composing such a portrait: “I have intended it solely for the pleasure of my relatives and friends,” he writes, “so that, when they have lost me — which they soon must — they may recover some features of my character and disposition [aucuns traits de mes conditions et humeurs], and thus keep the memory they have of me more completely and vividly alive.”²¹ The written traits, then, will ideally embody that other, natural, writing of traits whose characteristics (like an early version of DNA) make up the person Michel de Montaigne. These natural traits are inscribed in him in an ever more profound way than his own name that smacks of the cultural arbitrariness that I discussed earlier: “I have no name that is truly mine: of the two that I have, one is common to all my blood relatives, and even to others [. . .]. As for my other name, it is there for anyone who will want to take it for himself.”²² What is particularly interesting is Montaigne’s notion of how his literary language of traits will capture the inscribed traits of nature. For although the comparison between writing and painting is ever present in the *Essays*, it is really a comparison between painting and a specific type of writing — figurative writing, whose model is poetry. While writing about “poetic flashes that enrapture their author and transport him outside himself,” Montaigne adds that “It is the same thing in painting when certain marks escape sometimes from the hand of the painter [qu’il échappe parfois des traits de la main du peintre] surpassing his creativity and knowledge and provoking in him both admiration and astonishment.”²³ The painted trait and poetic trait point to a common source.

The French surrealist Paul Eluard thought he had rediscovered this source when writing his book of poems and essays *Donner à voir*. “Quel est le trait qui dit je t’aime sans qu’on puisse en douter?” (“What is the trait that says I love you so that it cannot be doubted?”) Eluard asks rhetorical-

ly.²⁴ Like Montaigne before him, Eluard is dreaming here of a writing of traits that would guarantee truthfulness and he believes he has found it in the figurative nature of poetic language. For in the next sentence he writes: “Words win. One can see what one wants to see only with closed eyes, everything is expressible in a loud voice.” (p. 71) Poems allow us to see things other than with our eyes since the language of poetry, *via* its use of metaphor and comparison, recreates the traits of the particular object or person that is the text’s subject and yet is, by necessity, absent from the text’s verbal medium: by comparing person A to objects *c*, *e* and *f* we arrive at a unique description of A which may, depending on our talent with comparisons, just capture A perfectly. The true portrait, then, is not a literal copying of a subject but rather its transcription *via* the rhetorical displacements of literary language, and the true trait will be a *figure* of its original mark, “drawing out” this original mark by comparing it to another, or by highlighting it through exaggeration (just as skillful cartoons — a form of drawing praised by Baudelaire for its supreme artistry²⁵ — capture their subject by displacing it).²⁶

One of the clearest illustrations of Eluard’s 1939 theory of the poetic trait is Saint-John Perse’s 1962 poem *Oiseaux* (*Birds*) which offers its reader a model of how to read poetic traits, or what I shall henceforth call “poetraits.” This model is *Oiseaux*’s own reading of the twelve highly stylized etchings of birds by Georges Braque that accompanied the first edition of the poem — a reading summed up in the following lines from section III of *Oiseaux*:

All things [i.e. facts about the birds’ anatomy and aerodynamics] known to the painter at the moment of his rapture, but which he must leave out of consideration in order to yield in a stroke [pour rapporter d’un trait] on the flat tint of his painting, the true sum of a thin spot of colour.

A spot struck, as if by a seal, that is neither a cipher nor a seal, being neither a sign nor a symbol, but the thing itself in its fated actuality — living thing, in any case, and taken live from its native tissue [...]

From the tragic shores of reality up to this place of peace and unity [...] the bird follows [the painter] towards a new world without breaking any of the ties with its original milieu [...] A single poetic space goes on to ensure this continuity.²⁷

It is the curious configuration of “poetic space,” then, that allows traits to pass, as if by magic, from nature to art, and allows the “bird, outside its migratory flight and thrown down on the painter’s etching plate, [to] beg

[in] to live the cycle of his mutations [i.e. in Braque's series of etchings]." (p. 413) Just as Braque's brush-strokes are said to bring forth traits from the living birds themselves, so Perse's portraits present themselves as the very invocation of these same originals.

Formerly [birds] took part in the poetic adventure, along with the augury and the haruspex. And here they are [i.e. in Perse's poem], words subjected to the same sequencing, for the distant exercise of a new divination . . . At the twilight of ancient civilizations it was a wooden bird, its arms crossed over and gripped by the officiating priest, who had the role of the scribe in mediumistic writing [...] (p. 417)

Birds they are of a true fauna. Their truth is the unknown element of every created being. [...] They are not drawn from any literature [...] But from reality they come, not from the fable of any story, they fill the poetic space of man, carried in a true trait [portés d'un trait réel] up to the fringes of the surreal. (pp. 424-5)²⁸

Like the mediumistic writing referred to in the first of these passages, a writing of portraits rescues beings from the dead. For the birds drawn forth by Perse's poem are not the inert birds of past literature but, we are told, the living birds of the real world. Similarly, the written traits of Montaigne's essay served as a way for the author's family to bring back to life their dead relative (see discussion of Montaigne above), and the original pictographic traits in Court de Gébelin's etymological alphabet were the key to rescuing the original "living" meaning that is almost lost in the "dead letters" of the modern writing system.²⁹

The trait's capacity to bring the dead back to life highlights, among other things, an apparent contrast between photographs and painted portraits. For however life-like a photo of someone may appear, it carries within it what Susan Sontag has called an "inventory of mortality"³⁰ in its fixed, frozen image of the human body that is "taken" (away) from a person's life. Photographs, then, turn living beings into shadows of their own mortality, which is probably one reason why some people prefer painted or sculpted portraits of their lost companions — portraits that remind their owners of the *life* they are missing rather than of the *absence* of this life. How do painted portraits and written portraits achieve this effect of infusing life into representation? First of all, the painted trait and written trait are both figurative displacements of their subject, not literal copies, like a photographic negative, that are "taken" mechanically from the subject. Both the accomplished painting and effective literary portrait capture

their subject by translating its features metaphorically — the painting exaggerating certain features and effacing others, the text inserting the features into various codes of meaning. In this way the portrait conveys the apparent uniqueness of its subject while a literal photographic copying of the subject reduces the subject to the rank of one person among the millions of others already framed in snapshots — all of them looking the same.³¹ More importantly, however, the painted portrait contains in its very brush strokes a sign of life: the life of the hand that painted them and, by extension, of the painter's mind that, we suppose, directs the hand. Functioning as a metonymy for the very moment of inscription the painted trait points us to the living presence on which the act of inscribing would appear to depend — the presence of thought, that is, of thinking ideally close to itself and animating the inscribed mark.

In his recent book *Miroirs d'encre* Michel Beaujour has argued that the literary genre of the self-portrait is generated from a writer's desire to express "What I am now, while I'm writing this book"³² and we can see that this moment of writing is for the literary self-portraitist what the moment of inscription is for the spectator of a painted portrait: namely, the ideal moment of the trait's inscription (it is not by accident that Beaujour calls the works he analyzes "self-portraits"). For in this moment outside time (when thought and the tracing hand are in perfect union, with no time-lag from one to the other³³), Court de Gébelin's etymological dream and the Diderot-Kristeva ideal of a poetic hieroglyph appear to come true. The figurative inscription of the trait accomplishes "the dream of artistic creation"³⁴ which is "nature at last recaptured by thought"³⁵, or the inert body of someone in a painting brought back from the dead and made present, the words of the literary self-portraitist infused with life, or the letters of our alphabet animated with their original thoughts.

As I have tried to show, this dream of the trait is made possible only through poetry — that is, through a type of writing that parades its figurative nature. More precisely, it is made possible by poetry that refers to the act of inscribing traits (as in the extracts from Eluard and Perse that I quoted) and thus appears to catch the hand bending back on itself and writing about what propels it — the thought of the artist.³⁶ Poetraits appear to capture the thought expressed in each of their words but they do so only by silencing these words, or purveyors of arbitrary meaning, and by focusing our attention instead on their visible tracings. While these tracings are, in themselves, *meaningless*, the very fact that they attract the reader's gaze bestows on them the potentiality for meaningfulness. Such a silencing of language while simultaneously making it visible is the narrator's expressed aim in this final quotation from Eluard:

Eye of a Deaf Person

Do my portrait.
It will alter itself to fill up all the gaps
Do my portrait without any noise, only silence
So long as — if it — except — provided that —
I don't hear you.

It all concerns, it no longer concerns.
I would like to resemble —
Annoying coincidence, among other important matters.
With no tiredness, heads tied
To the hands of my activity.³⁷

Confronted by these disjointed sentence-fragments (that help produce the illusion of thought-flashes transmitted instantaneously through the tracings of the poem), it is precisely *our* heads (or our imagination as readers) that are “tied to the [...] activity” of the poet inscribing meaning. The *readers'* heads and not the poet's are what produce Eluard's (and, indeed, every) literary portrait.³⁸

1. The most far-reaching critique of the notion of an original language of pictograms is in Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), translated into English as *Of Grammatology* by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976). Part 2, chapter 4. Another more recent

5. Julia Kristeva, *Le Langage, cet inconnu*, p. 323. In his article "Readable/Writable/Visible" published in *Visible Language* XII 3 (1978), pp. 231-244, Leon Roudiez has applied Kristeva's theory of "trans-verbal articulation" to an analysis of some works by, among others, Maruice Roche and Michel Butor, and has argued that Kristeva's theory helps us explain the "visibility" or "fullness" of these works. In the present essay I attempt to get behind Kristeva's theory, so to speak, in order to examine some of the assumptions on which it rests.
6. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; rpt. New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 21-24. Raymond Queneau is another poet intrigued with ideograms. For instance, in the section called "Pictogrammes" in his *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), pp. 208-217, he offers some examples of pictographic poems that he composed using some elementary American Indian hieroglyphs.
7. Court de Gébelin, *l'Origine du langage et de l'écriture* (Paris: 1775), p. 402, quoted by Genette, p. 143.
8. Genette, p. 143.
9. Court de Gébelin's "Hieroglyphic and Primitive Alphabet of 16 Letters" (beginning with the letter A) is reproduced in Genette, pp. 144-145.
10. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (1959; rpt. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1974), p. 67 for the distinction between signified and signifier.
11. Court de Gébelin, p. 275, quoted by Genette, p. 120.
12. Saussure, p. 67.
13. Diderot, "Lettre sur les sourds et les muets," p. 374. See above for the complete quotation.
14. "the first attempt at writing was a simple form of painting. It is probably to the necessity for tracing our thoughts in this way that painting owes its origin." Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746; rpt. Paris: Galilée, 1973), p. 252. As the editor of this recent edition of Condillac's work, Charles Porset, points out in a note on p. 252, Condillac's theory of the origin of writing (as well as those proposed by De Brosse and Court de Gébelin) was directly influenced by Bishop William Warburton's *Essay on Egyptian Hieroglyphics* . . . that appeared in England in 1737 and was translated into French in 1744.
15. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC/Penguin, 1972), p. 7.
16. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953; rpt. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), p. 230, where Wittgenstein writes: "Compare a concept with a style of painting. For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure? (The Egyptian, for instance.) Is it merely a question of pleasing and ugly?" I develop the argument that cultural forms of life are the ground for the related terms arbitrary/motivated in my article "Wittgenstein's Semiotic Investigations," *American Journal of Semiotics*, III 2 (1984), pp. 33-57.

17. See the quotation from Condillac, pp. 252-3, that I gave earlier and that identifies the first form of writing with the first form of painting: "the first attempt at writing was only a simple painting [and it is to this attempt] that painting owes its origin."
18. In *De la grammatologie*, p. 412, Jacques Derrida gives another crucial argument against the possibility of an original pictogram that would supposedly have transcribed a unique scene: the transcription of this scene necessarily implies its duplication or repetition, which in turn entails both an element of translatability or metaphoricity as well as the impossibility of the original pictogram being "uniquely" tied to its original depicted scene and hence of its being a unique, one-off pictogram. I shall pick up the question of a metaphorical element in depictions *via* traits later in this essay.
19. Montaigne, *Oeuvres complètes* ed. by A. Thibaudet and M. Rat (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1962), p. 782.
20. From the statement in his opening paragraph that "it is myself that I am painting" (Montaigne, p. 9), onwards right through the *Essays*, there are many uses of the words "painting" and "portrait" and other related terms. See, for example, pp. 126, 147, 1082.
21. *Essays*, translated by J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958), p. 23.
22. *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 610.
23. *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 126. The French critic Du Bos gives prominence to Montaigne's paragraph in his *Critical Reflections on Poetry and Painting*, trans. by Thomas Nugent (London: John Nourse, 1748), vol. II, p. 13.
24. *Donner à voir* (1939 rpt. Paris: Gallimard "Poésie," 1978), p. 71.
25. See Sima Godfrey's discussion of Baudelaire's interest in cartoons and drawings by Daumier in her article "Baudelaire's Windows," *L'Esprit Créateur*, XXII, no. 4, pp. 83-100.
26. See *Donner à voir*, pp. 69 and following, where Eluard writes of how painters since Picasso have understood "the absolute poverty of literal illustrations" (p. 71) and that a true vision of a scene springs primarily from the painter's imagination. The painter, he concludes, should be "in front of a poem just as the poet is in front of a painting." (p. 72)
27. Saint-John Perse, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1972), p. 411.
28. My argument in this paragraph extends in the direction of a theory of the trait material that I used in my article "Saint-John Perse's *Oiseaux*: the Poem, the Painting and Beyond," *L'Esprit Créateur*, XXII no. 4 (1982), pp. 47-55. There I focus on the specific relationship between the twelve Braque illustrations and the overall meaning of Perse's poem.
29. One of the most sustained reflections on the apparently "dead" letters (*lettres mortes*) of language is given by the poet Yves Bonnefoy in a 1958 essay where he writes, "but 'all that' [i.e. a living world of presence] can suddenly just as well evaporate and signify a *dead letter* once an attachment has been broken" — "Les Mots et la parole dans la *Chanson de Roland*," *Le Nuage rouge* (Paris:

Mercure de France, 1977), p. 175. Bonnefoy is much more pessimistic than Eluard about poetry's ability to constitute portraits, as can be seen in the following comment: "Now it's night: if by these words I think I am expressing my sensorial experience, they become suddenly no more than a frame from which presence evaporates. The portraits that we believed to be the most life-like show themselves to be merely stereotypes." *L'Improbable* (1959; rpt. Paris: Mercure de France, 1980), p. 114.

30. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1973), p. 70. For similar comments on photography's "killing" its subjects, see Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) and especially his comments on pp. 9 and following about "that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead." (p. 9)
31. For an eloquent description of this "sameness" of snapshots, see Kierkegaard's rather prophetic comment made in 1854: "With the daguerrotype everyone will be able to have their portrait taken — formerly it was only the prominent; and at the same time everything is being done to make us all look exactly the same — so that we shall only need one portrait." (quoted in Sontag, p. 207).
32. Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), p. 13.
33. It is this ideal a-temporality of the trait that Barthes admires in Japanese interior design when he comments that "everything here is *trait*, as if the entire room were written in one single stroke of the paint brush." *L'Empire des signes* (1970; rpt. Paris: Flammarion, 1980), p. 58.
34. Saint-John Perse, p. 427.
35. Saint-John Perse, p. 414.
36. These arguments on the importance of the inscribing hand for the myth of a writing of traits are inspired (as is the entire essay) by Jacques Derrida's comments on painterly traits in his *La Vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978) — especially by his comments on the direction of the hand, or *ductus*, on pp. 220-222, and other comments on pp. 15 and 181 concerning the purity of the painted trace. By focusing on poetry in this essay I am developing a remark made in passing by Derrida concerning the historical "subordination of all the arts [...] to poetry": for it is in a certain view of poetry's figurative nature that the myth of the painterly trait, as I hope to have shown, finds its strongest justification. In an earlier study of an entirely different nature Mario Praz comes round to a similar view of the domination that the act of inscription exerts over Western art: "we wonder," he writes, "whether the secret of the parallel between the arts might actually turn out to be only a secret of calligraphy," *Mnemosyne: The Parallel Between Literature and the Visual Arts* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, Bollingen Series, 1970), p. 25.
37. "Oeil de sourd," *Répétitions* (1922) in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Marcelle Dumas and Lucien Scheler (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1968), vol. I, p. 119. The symmetrical typography of this poem (arranged around an invisible vertical axis) heightens the reader's awareness of the poem as a visible trace, while its disrupted syntax almost "silences" the message carried by these words — that is, the everyday (arbitrary) meaning of the signs of the language in which the poem is written. For a more developed discussion of Eluard's use of typo-

graphy in other poems of the 1920s, see my essay "Reading a Poem's Typographical Form: the Case of Paul Eluard," *Teaching Language Through Literature*, XXIII no. 1 (1983), pp. 38-46.

38. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the annual Convention of the Northeast Modern Language Association in Philadelphia in March 1984.