The Inventor of Painting

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Translated by Kent Minturn and Eric Trudel

First published in vol. IV of Albertiana (2001), pp. 165–187, the journal of the Société Internationale Leon Battista Alberti, Hubert Damisch’s ‘L’Inventeur de la Peinture’ reconsiders two descriptions of the mythic origins of the art of painting found in Alberti’s On Painting (the ‘vernacular’ Italian version) and Pliny’s Natural History. Although Alberti’s text is clearly indebted to his ancient predecessors, he folds in, for purely theoretical reasons, the figure of Narcissus as the inventor of painting. This addition expands the traditional idea of painting as originating from an attempt to outline a cast shadow, or as an attempt to imitate nature, and allows for a more thorough analysis of the role that desire and ‘specular duplication’ plays in the paradoxical essence of painting, an art which simultaneously seeks to ‘embrace’ and ‘nullify’ its planar surface. (Kent Minturn)

Narcissus, or on Metamorphosis

Leon Battista Alberti’s writings offer explicit proof that he had read Pliny: Pliny’s Natural History is one of the declared sources of his De pictura. But Alberti’s borrowings from Pliny’s text are, ultimately, less important than the displacements and interpolations for which the Natural History provided the overall pretext and subject matter. Rather than making use of this ‘source’ like a mirror to reflect his own thought, Alberti knew how to put it to his own ends the better to indicate, by way of difference, the novelty of his work.

If there is one commonplace that Alberti refused, it is that of the decadence of painting. As ‘humanistic’ and erudite as he was, he was not a man to tolerate the topos of the death of art, and above all of painting. This topos had been current in Antiquity, as we see from Pliny, and became fashionable again in the seventeenth century.¹ Book II of De pictura opens with a eulogy to painting whose emphasis would be surprising were it not, in every respect, perfectly timed. As it has been pointed out more than once, all artists of the Quattrocento, and painters first and foremost, claimed for their practice the status of a ‘liberal’ art, and called themselves intellectuals, not craftsmen. So much so that the intention to which this dithyramb answers is readily apparent. But this celebrated passage did not relate only, or initially, to an exterior, social goal; that of publicity. It has a precise function within the inner economy of the treatise, which at least in its vernacular version does not have as its designated recipient a higher power that it would have to convince of the great destiny of painting. It is rather aimed at a new type of artist, who Alberti admits to have subjected to a difficult test throughout Book I of his small work²: this book — as one reads in the prologue which appears only in this particular version — which, ‘from roots within Nature


² On the painter preoccupied with ‘humanism’, or the ‘humanist’ preoccupied with painting, to which the De Pictura is addressed, see Michael Baxandall, Giottos and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition, 1350–1450 (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1971). This interpretation needs to be inflected when reference is made not to the Latin text of De pictura, but to the version in ‘vulgar’ language, dedicated as it was to Brunelleschi, and destined for readers unable to read the language of the humanists. This is why, among other reasons, I decided to limit myself to the text of De Pictura.
herself (*dalle radici entro dalla natura* \(^3\)), brings forth this very noble and beautiful art. If, in both Alberti and Pliny, painting is indeed partly connected to nature, it is less because of its physical aspect, the materiality of its grounds and its pigments, than because of what is rational in it. Alberti immediately informs his reader of this: he will have to go through an entirely mathematical (*tutto matematico*) first book. The book, taking its cue from geometrical optics (the *perspectiva* called *naturalis*), exposes the presuppositions on which perspectival construction — along with the theoretical conditions of its implementation — is based. *Indarno si tira l’arco ove non hai da dirizzare la saetta:* ‘It is useless to draw a bow if you have nowhere to aim the arrow.’\(^4\) The construction which will later be called ‘legitimate’ seems, metaphorically speaking, to assign a goal, if not a ‘reason’, to painting, as a kind of point towards which the convergent lines in a painting move. But a painting cannot be reduced to a target (as has happened recently in America with Jasper Johns’ *Targets*, and earlier those of John D. Peto), nor can painting itself be reduced to its mathematical foundations: however well reasoned it must be in its means, art still aims at something other than ‘natural’ ends.

At the beginning of *Book II*, Alberti therefore endeavours to justify the strenuous activity that he has already imposed on the painter, his reader, and insists that his art is not unworthy of the work and the pain it requires; to say nothing of the difficulties to come: indeed, the demonstration is not finished, and he is not done with perspective. Alberti does not hesitate to claim that there is, at the heart of painting, a divine power (*tiene in sé la pittura forza divina* \(^5\)). In the first place, this art is capable of providing a semblance of presence to absent beings, just as friendship does; this idea brings us back to the portrait, which occupies a central position in books XXXIV and XXXV of Pliny’s *Natural History*. Painting can even turn absence into presence and endow the face of the dead with a prolonged life (*così certo il viso di chi già sia morto, per la pittura vive lunga vita* \(^6\)). In terms of the supernatural or ‘divine’ capacities given to art in its resolutely pagan and profane form, Alberti introduces the theme of resurrection, or at least survival, for which the portrait can be an instrument: painting is indeed a remarkable invention (*begnissimo invento*), and one capable of making the gods jealous, yet also one binding us inseparably to them — as Alberti emphasises, in the same terms as Pliny — by the support painting brings to religion, providing it with a visible image of divinity.

Painting conceived as a remedy for absence, the latter either as separation, death, or as a distance between men and the gods: in all cases *mimesis* is at work. *Mimesthai,* ‘to imitate’, in the absence of the being or the thing, means to mimic its presence faithfully. But if he takes up the reciprocal implication, between the art of painting and that of the portrait, a link noted by Pliny under the title of *imagines*, Alberti still does not see any contradiction in adding to painting, in his eulogy, functions more properly decorative, but no less mimetic, although there can be nothing graphic about them. The same argument which led Pliny to deprecate the painting of his time and to proclaim the death of art, overshadowed as it was, according to him, by false luxuries and by decoration, becomes a positive one in *De pictura*. Painting adds to the pleasures of the soul as it adds to the beauty of things: fashioning them as it does, it can make ivory, gems, or gold itself even more precious; and even lead, the vilest of metals, becomes more precious than silver in the hands of Phidias or Praxitiles (the reference to sculpture, limited here to its surface, returns us to painting). And yet this art, if it can function as a *supplement*, does not simply add value to actual

8. Alberti, Della Pittura, p. 46, the example is taken from Pliny, Natural History, XXXV, 62, but it concerns [the example] Zeuxis rather than Phidias.

9. Alberti, Della Pittura, p. 46, ‘E chi dubita qui apreso la pittura essere maestra, o certo non piccolo ornamento a tutte le cose’

10. Alberti, Della Pittura, p. 46.


13. Alberti, De re aedificatoria, t.II. p. 448. ‘Ornamentum autem affecti et compacti naturam sapere magis quam innati’, ‘the ornament is presented in the form of an additional attribute, supplementary, rather than natural’.


15. Vitruvius, De architectura, Book VII, chap. V, pp. 1–2. As is indicated above, I borrow the word ‘bigarrure’ [multicolorings] from the translation of Perrault. ‘Ex eo antiquis [...] imitatis sunt primum crustarum marmorum varietates et conlocaciones [...] Potae ingressus sunt, ut etiam aedificorum figuras, columnarum et fastigiorum eminentes protectus imitarentur...’.

16. Alberti, De pictura, p. 94.

17. Cf. Henri Matisse, ‘Notes on The Dance for Merion’, in Dominique Fourcade (ed.) Écrits et propos sur l’art (Hermann: Paris, 1972), p. 138: ‘As I walked around, incapable of deciding from which end to begin, standing in front of the seventy-two squared meters of white canvas that were to become Doctor Barnes’ decoration, I saw by chance a cord going from a window somewhere in my large studio, detach and project itself on my large canvas, creating a certain curve. Écrits et propos sur l’art I had in front of me the relation between this curve and the large rectangle on the sides of my decoration. It created the initial relationship with the surface to decorate, a surface composed of three parts, and it was this sudden relationship that enabled me to start to take possession of this large surface...’.

wealth, whose metals are at once its source and gold standard, nor can it be reduced to a simple exterior sign of opulence. Paintings can reach incredible prices.\(^7\) But painting, ultimately, does not have a price, as is exemplified by the story of Zeuxis, who, in the end, gave away all his works since no wages satisfied him.\(^8\) The painter who knows how to give the appearance of life to the beings he represents, even those who are imaginary, or have long since disappeared, the painter who has the power of metamorphosis and even of the transmutation of metals, this man has the right to be considered a God. But his task does not stop here, nor do his powers.

Painting is the master and ornament of all things.\(^9\) The master, since blacksmiths and sculptors, goldsmiths and ceramists, and all the arts, model themselves on that of the painter; but ornament, as well, if it is true that there is not an architect, ‘if I am not mistaken’ (si io non erro: this is Alberti speaking), who does not borrow his architraves, his bases, capitals, columns, frontispieces, and other similar things from painters.\(^10\) One can readily agree with Alberti when, in the De re aedificatoria, he presents the column as the principal ornament of architecture,\(^11\) but it is less easy to understand in what way this example illustrates the claim that architecture is indebted to painting; not surprisingly, commentators have consistently preferred to ignore it and thus avoid having to re-consider the whole question of decoration as it is formulated in the writings of Alberti – not only decoration, but painting too, since this art operates in the two dimensions of the planar surface.

I have suggested elsewhere that the privilege Alberti accords to painting over the other arts in the ornamental hierarchy is connected to something which is for him, above all, the constitutive operation of this art, the fundamental constraint to which it is yoked, and its permanent source: a projection on a planar surface\(^12\) – something that Pliny, for his part, summarised perfectly when he found the supposed origin of the art of painting in the tracings of a shadow cast on a wall. Proof of this is to be found in a passage of De re aedificatoria, where Alberti intends to show that the ornaments used by architecture – which provide it with a kind of additional beauty, or supplement\(^13\) – can be broken down into a certain number of parts each of which presents, when projected on a planar surface, a characteristic profile: thus that of a flat line, which reveals the appearances of the letter L, and the groove [lit. ‘throat’] or the quarteron which is placed under it like an S or a C.\(^14\) If the work of the architect is linked, at this point, to that of the painter (according to Vitruvius, painting, after having first imitated the veins, the ‘multicolorings’ [bigarrures] of the marble, soon moved on to a superior register, counterfeiting, through a projection on the wall, the silhouettes of edifices or colonnades\(^15\)), it is because they both obey the same paradigm according to which the field of the visible must be taken for an equivalent – in Alberti’s terms – to what can be found projected on the planar surface, under a kind of combination of surfaces (or profiles), articulated one to the other in the manner that letters are assembled on a page to form words and sentences.\(^16\) Even when an ornament gives the illusion of relief, or depth, it acquires a properly decorative value only through a kind of transformation, or metamorphosis, in relation to the plane on which it is registered, and through an operation characterised by Matisse as a ‘taking possession of the surface’; such an operation itself being born, in the example given by the painter, in the form of a cast shadow.\(^17\)

Painting is not only used as a model for the other arts: it guides them, it carries them to their completion; it is – as Alberti says – the flower of the arts [note: in French ‘elle en est la fleur’ means the best, the finest of them
all]. So much so that the author of De pictura does not hesitate, at this point, to address his reader directly: ‘You will not find any art, unless it is an extremely vile one, that does not consider painting in such a way that, whatever beauty you see in things, you can be sure it was born from painting’. But it is not enough for Alberti to take note of the power of transformation, even of sublimation — in a word: of metamorphosis — which is the essence of this art. Here he finds the pretext to a fable unprecedented in the artistic literature and which takes on, in De pictura, the value of an origin myth: ‘Consequently I had the habit of telling my friends that the inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus, who was transformed into a flower; for, as painting is the flower of all arts, so the tale of Narcissus fits our purpose perfectly. What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the source?18

Narcissus converted into a flower: quel Narcisso or — as one reads in the Latin text — Narcissus ilium, this Narcissus—here (could there be another one, even several?). At first glance, it is this floral metamorphosis — or, to take the text literally, this conversion — which authorises the confluence of Ovid’s fable and the operation that is painting, fiore d’ogni arte. But Alberti at once rectifies the statement: it is not only the final metamorphosis (the conversion) of Narcissus (that of the poets) which appears relevant here (viene a proposito, lat.: ad rem ipsa), but also the whole fable (omnis fabula), the whole story of Narcissus (tutta la storia di Narciso.). On this point, as on many others, the Italian version of De pictura is all the more contrasted if one compares it with the Latin text that the author calls on, once again, by a rhetorical turn recurrent throughout the whole treatise, as a text in the position not only of a recipient, but also of an interlocutor. The whole story of Narcissus proves to be in fact pertinent, and most especially the episode of the spring [‘source’] in which the hero of the fable discovers, without initially identifying it, the object of his desire, seeing there for a long time only fire [NOTE: in French n’y voir que du feu — means to be blind to something, to fail to notice something, or to be fooled by it], the same one that burns him; until the moment when, having finally recognised the image for what it is, his own, far from freeing himself from its influence, he sets his desire free and awaits the final metamorphosis. Can the person to whom Alberti addresses himself and whose approval he seeks, i.e. the painter (unless it is, as suggested by the dedication of the vernacular version, Brunelleschi himself, who Alberti hopes to assist and defend against the biting attacks of his detractors), doubt that painting is anything else, in principle, than an artful embrace of the surface, a surface that constitutes the first and inalienable given of painting, its irreducible precondition, and — so to speak — its ‘source’? To embrace, to take possession of it (according to the words of Matisse), or even to measure it with two arms; the braccia being a Florentine measurement which corresponded to the length of the arm lifted in front of the body, which is to say a little more than fifty centimeters: the first demonstrations of perspective to which Brunelleschi’s name is linked utilised a small painted panel, itself the dimension of half a braccia, which the spectator, or — as Poussin said — the ‘one who looked’, was to hold in hand and view in a mirror, and on which was painted or, as the biographer says, ‘portraitured’ (ritrato) the baptistery of San Giovanni, the projected image offering an exact replica of its model.19

It is not necessary, of course, to look too hard at Alberti’s text to find in it surprisingly ‘modern’ resonances of such a definition of painting. For it really is a matter of definition here, and one which is concerned primarily with a new reality, that of a painting. In regards to mural painting, things could be different,
at least at first. Those who have had the privilege of climbing onto the scaffolding reaching up to the Sistine chapel ceiling during the recent restoration campaigns were able to share the same experience: even if he was working lying on his back, as Vasari suggests, Michelangelo was unable ‘to embrace’ the surface given to him, unable even to measure it, unless in an abstract manner, by thought or by imagination, with the help of the preparatory chalk line traces (this is perhaps what Alberti meant to suggest, also, by con arte?). Whence the irrepressible and properly phantasmagorical desire, a desire itself entirely of the surface, or on the surface, which these giant figures of incredible beauty would awaken in the spectator allowed to consider them closely, as if pushed against them, taken in their grasp; these figures which, even as they look back at us, from a rediscovered distance, remain permanently enclosed, absorbed in themselves, prisoners of the dream which brings them to life, and through which they come to the surface and appear. That same dream which pushes the figure of the Creator to measure with his arms extended the limits of the panel in which he is inscribed.

The Painter and his Model

Poetarum sententia/secondo la sentenza de’ poeti: between the original text of De pictura and its translation into ‘vulgar’ language the clause inserted within another clause has been moved. In the Latin text, it relates to the poetic invention from which the myth of Narcissus originates. There is nothing like this in the Italian version, which holds that Alberti, while discussing with his friends, had the habit of saying – ‘according to the poet’s saying’ – that the inventor of painting was Narcissus converted into a flower. As if, through this displacement, the author had intended to stress the action of ‘saying’ as much as the work of the metaphor (according to Quintilian the metaphor implies a manner of transfer, or of translation, in the etymological sense of the word). Although Alberti, throughout the first book of De pictura which is – as we have said – ‘entirely mathematical’, does not cease to insist on the fact that, while using all the concepts, definitions and modes of reasoning employed by geometers, he does not speak any less the language of a painter (parlo come pittore) – enough to give his discourse a strong metaphoric aspect, all the more so since he claimed for it a demonstrative rigour – the addition of ‘according to the poets’ suddenly marks the transition, at least provisionally, to another type or modality of discourse: Alberti expresses himself here not as a painter, but rather as a poet. This does not imply – as Michael Baxandall has very well demonstrated – that the thrust of the metaphor is without critical and theoretical impact.

‘According to the poets’: the metaphor of Narcissus as the inventor of painting, this invention (because it is one, in turn, in the rhetorical sense) is, as I said, without precedent. Since it does not appear as something borrowed, it takes on the value of a foundational source where painting is called on to reflect itself in what would constitute its essence, despite the fact that it is nothing but appearance. But if this figure perfectly matches Alberti’s point, it is all the more remarkable that it was never taken up again and that it never led to any further consideration in the art historical literature, except in an indirect manner. As for the origin myth, it is rather Pliny’s version of the origin of the disegno which was to go down in history, and was to be explicitly taken up, from the early sixteenth century and onwards, as one can see, for instance, in writings by Leonardo da Vinci.
Vasari, and even Félibien. If this invention had no legacy in art historical literature — this is not exactly the case in iconography, as indeed we know, it remains in iconography\textsuperscript{21} — it is undoubtedly because the figure of Narcissus, and Alberti’s commentary on him, leads directly to more, when considering what constitutes the true operation of painting, than the banal, purely rhetorical interpretation does, according to which art does nothing but present a mirror of Nature, in which it can reflect itself, as Narcissus does in the mirror of the source.\textsuperscript{22} To say nothing of the importance the fable gives to the instinctual component of this operation, whose outflow can be measured against that of the abbracciare solely on the scopic drive. As history has shown — at least, I repeat, in regards to theory, before painting itself took over in this respect, as we will see a little later — the very excess of the figure, as much as that of the commentary which it calls forth, could only lead to the repression of both.

The figure of Narcissus as the inventor of painting does not break with tradition so much as it interrupts it. But this interruption goes along with an additional displacement, which is no less significant. Indeed, Alberti has no sooner introduced this figure (and the definition of painting which corresponds to it), than he evokes the traditional origin myth, quoting Quintilian, who is said to have claimed that ‘the earliest painters used to circumscribe the shadows made by the sun, and the art eventually developed by a process of additions to this’.\textsuperscript{23} This sentence and the one which precedes it in the announcement of the two competing origin myths start with the same verb, although conjugated in different persons and tenses (Che dirai tu essere dipignere ... Diceva Quintiliano ...\textsuperscript{24}): as if Alberti had intended in this way to underscore the link of succession and yet of opposition between the two moments of the development of what is ‘said’ of painting. But the occurrence of the name of Quintilian is here all the more surprising as the formula is directly borrowed from the \textit{Natural History}, as the text later makes clear; in fact, it is a literal copy of Pliny: ‘Some say that a certain Egyptian by the name of Philocles, and a certain Cleanthes were among the first inventors (tra i primi inventori) of this art. The Egyptians affirm that painting was practised by them six thousand years before it was introduced in Greece’\textsuperscript{25}.

The reason why Alberti has substituted the name of Quintilian for Pliny here and has chosen to attribute to the former an idea that was clearly borrowed from the latter, although in different terms, is not immediately apparent. In order to grasp this reason, it is necessary to go back to the sequence of events in the discourse. Whereas the \textit{Natural History} deplores the decadence of painting (if not its ruin), Book II of \textit{De pictura} opens, as we have said before, with a eulogy to this art which is based on two arguments that are themselves borrowed from Pliny, but which Pliny considered antinomical: on the one hand, the essential connection between painting and the art of the portrait; on the other hand, the capacity of metamorphosis attributed to painting, ‘the flower of all arts’. Following this, Alberti introduces the image of Narcissus converted into a flower, and the definition of painting which is connected to him, and immediately returns to the traditional origin myth as Pliny defined it, but substitutes, in doing so, the name of the author of the \textit{Natural History} with that of the author of the \textit{Institutio Oratoria} (Quintilian). And all this while claiming to be opposed to Pliny’s manner of presenting things: ‘But it is of little importance to us to know who were the first painters or the inventors of this art, since we are not writing a history of painting [Lit: we do not tell stories about painting] like Pliny, but are
manufacturing anew (di nuovo) an art of painting (un’arte di pittura) which as far as I can see no one has written before’.26 This holds true even if, as Alberti also observes, some writers of Antiquity perhaps treated proportions or colours, or tried, as Xenocrates did, to describe a painting or another by means of language (literally: to put it in writing – misono in lettere non so che pitture27), which corresponds to the birth of a kind of literature that would see great success, ekphrasis.

Alberti is not interested in the historical origins of painting. But neither did Pliny himself care about them: if he mentioned them, in a very hypothetical manner, it was within the parameters and the terms of a natural history, and to bring to the fore the logic, itself ‘natural’, guiding the development of this art. ‘We do not tell stories (non recitiamo storie): the plural is necessary here (even though the Latin text speaks of a history of painting in the singular, historiam picturae), insofar as it refers to classical anecdotes on art and artists of which the Natural History offers a very extensive repertoire. And yet, has not Alberti just told such a ‘story’ – ‘recited’, ‘repeated’, or at least evoked it? But this story, the fable of Narcissus – contrary to the anecdotes borrowed from the ancient writers, starting with Pliny – is only invoked in De pictura for theoretical reasons, and not for narrative or for picturesque purposes. Alberti had little concern to know when and where painting appeared for the first time, and did not much care to have empirical evidence of its beginnings or to learn of its first concrete developments. What mattered to him was to expose what this art consisted of and to offer a working definition of it to painters. As Panofsky well understood, the great accomplishment of the Quattrocento was to give birth to a theory for art, whereas sixteenth-century writers would soon return to writing on art, when they did not content themselves with telling ‘stories’ about it.28 Alberti does not write on painting: he endeavours to produce an ‘art’ or, as Panofsky accurately translated it, a ‘theory’, which would be useful for painters who were his audience.

Now, the idea or the project of writing an ‘art’ of painting was a direct revival of Quintilian’s project in his Institutio oratoria. Whereas Pliny aimed, essentially, to furnish his readers with a maximum amount of information relating to the use of materials and the techniques to give these materials ‘artistic’ form, Alberti, like Quintilian before him, intended his work to be prescriptive: according to Quintilian, any art can be taught and transmitted, provided that one returns to its principles or, as Alberti will say, to the ‘roots’ it has within nature. In the same way that, in architecture, the invisible foundations support the visible parts of the work (ut operum fastigia spectantur, latent fundamenta, Institutio Oratoria, I, Preface), it is in fact impossible to reach mastery, in any domain, without having been first through all the stages of the art. We can understand why henceforward the author of De pictura chose to interpolate the two names: that of the author of a natural history of arts that we will call the material arts and that of the author of a treatise on the human art par excellence and the principles and rules it obeys (de ratione dicendi, ibid.), whose sole realm – seemingly immaterial – is that of language, the art of eloquence (ars orandi). All the while ‘reciting’ and ‘repeating’ Pliny, but without naming him, or only so as to insist on what is different in his work. The reason for this interpolation is clear: the rigged game of the citation functions as an invitation for the reader to refer back to Quintilian’s text – despite the fact that the citation is borrowed from Pliny – while disavowing the general intention that

26. Alberti, Della Pittura, p. 46, ‘Ma qui non molto si richiede sapere quali prima fussero inventori dell’arte o pittori, poi che non come Plinio recitiamo storie, ma di nuovo fabrichiamo un’arte di pittura, della quale in questa età, quale io vegga, nulla si trova scritto...’.
27. Alberti, Della Pittura, p. 46.
underpins the *Natural History*, a text which nonetheless remains Alberti’s main source.

In fact, it is hard to imagine how the author of the *De pictura* could ‘recite’ or ‘repeat’ Quintilian; here again, we are dealing with a very subtle intertextual operation, one that cannot be entirely explained by going back to the rhetorical model inherited, precisely, from Quintilian. For the assertion that Alberti attributes to Quintilian (but which Pliny phrases much more resolutely) is presented in the *Institutio oratoria* under a form and in a context that are quite dissimilar. Indeed, one comes across it in Chapter 2 of Book X, a book devoted entirely to imitation, and in which Quintilian insists on the necessity, in every respect, of imitating the models inherited from the past, yet also underscores the fact that although art consists, to a great extent, in imitation, it is first and foremost a matter of invention. It is necessary, at first, to conform to a received model in all disciplines (*omnis denique disciplinae initia ad propositum sibi praescriptum formari videmus, Or. Inst., X.ii.2.*): just as children practice ‘going over’ (*secuntur*) letters, so do musicians imitate the voice, and painters copy the works of their precursors. In all things, it is wise to be modelled on what has been successfully invented before (*sic ea quae bene inventa sunt utile sequi*), and to aspire to resemble those who have succeeded. But invention, in fact and in law, still comes first (*ut invenire primum fuit estque praecipuum*).

Alberti could go as far as accepting that art consists in large part, as Quintilian claims, in imitation (*artis pars magna continetur imitatione, ibid., ii.1.*), although the myth of Narcissus relies less on *mimesis* than on specular duplication. Quintilian, it is true, considered that resemblance is seldom produced by nature, and more often by imitation (*similem raro natura praestat, frequentem imitatio, ibid., ii.3.*). But imitation has its limits, and can even become harmful if one does not use it with caution and discrimination (*caute et cum iudicio*). In any case, one should not, at the risk of demeaning oneself, be content merely to attain the effect one is imitating (*turpe etiam illud est, contentum esse id consequi quod imiteris, ibid., ii.7.*), like these painters who try to copy paintings (literally: to follow them, to go over them again, as children draw over letters), to *describe* them, in the geometrical sense of the word, with the help of measurements and lines (*ut describere tabulas mensuris ac lineis sciant, ibid. ii.6.*): how could the ‘primitives’ (*rudes*) have progressed, under these conditions, when they did not have any masters or models? Alberti will remember the formula, in the Prologue of *De pictura*, as a way of glorifying his contemporaries, who, equally devoid of predecessors and examples, discovered arts and sciences which were literally ‘unheard of’.29

What would have happened, asks Quintilian, if no model had been outdone (*si nemo plus effecisset*)? We would still navigate the sea on rafts, and painting – and here, and only here, without any further developments, we get the only occurrence of this topos in Quintilian’s text – would still consist in tracing the outline of shadows cast by bodies in the sun (*non esset pictura, nisi quae lineas modo extremas umbrae, quam corpora in sole fecissent circumscriberet, ibid., ii.7.*).

Thus it is true that Quintilian referred to a liminal stage in which the operation of painting was reduced to the outline of a cast shadow, in agreement with all those who saw no other origin of painting to this, and as his contemporary Pliny claimed. But the *Institutio oratoria* does not say anything more on this subject, Quintilian merely affirming, more than once, that a look back at history is enough to demonstrate that no art ever remained in its primitive state (*nulla mansit ars qualis inventa est, ibid, ii.8.*).
The assertion according to which no artistic practice can be perfected by imitation alone (nihil autem crescit sola imitatione) is in complete accordance with Pliny’s thesis: if painting, at its beginning, was about doing little more than fixing the ‘similitude’ of a model found in nature, the second stage saw the invention of a more elaborate method when colours were applied. Now, this again happened naturally, as Quintilian himself admits: for it is generally easier to improve on something than to (re)produce an identical copy (facilius est plus facere quam idem, ibid., ii.10.) of it. Nature herself could not make two things that are absolutely similar, nor ensure that a copy be equal to its model, as in the case of a shadow compared to the body casting it, a portrait compared with the original face, or the performance of actors compared with real emotions (ut umbra corpore et immago facie et actus histrionum veris adfectibus, ibid., ii.11.).

We know from experience that actors on a stage often have the tendency to act more than they need to, in a word to ‘overact.’ The art of the portrait itself tends easily towards this, towards the caricature. But the shadow cast on a wall? Is the fact that its outline exactly repeats that of the object enough to justify, if not a parallel with the portrait, at least the connection established, here again, with the workings of mimesis? As for the image in the mirror, and although Quintilian does not mention it, the story of Narcissus and the figure that leads us to recognise in him the inventor of painting require that we take it into account. The mirror does not ‘imitate’ reality, it repeats it without adding anything to it, it reproduces it without transformation (so much so that René Thom speaks of a transformation ‘zero’). Except that it does give it a frame: a mirror by definition is finite, strictly delimited; one can, at least in theory, move it, transport it — delimiting and embracing are gestures that have much in common — but also measure it, and even crop it, as one would a painting. As to imagining a mirror that would extend beyond all limits, and wonder what would or could be reflected in it, the question is, strictly speaking, a metaphysical one, although one already implicit in the medieval title of the speculum mundi, the mirror of the world (but of a world itself finite). In fact, the fifteenth century only had at its disposal mirrors of restricted dimensions, and everyone was easily convinced that there was no image in the mirror, as Leonardo would later claim, that was not entirely determined by the spectator gazing into it, regardless of the fact that he himself was reflected in it, or not. Things get particularly convoluted when one encounters a representation of Narcissus pitted against his own image in the mirror. But this only lends more weight to Lacan’s claim that a painting is a device by which a subject must find himself as a subject: to find himself as such, which is enough to suggest (and to make sure) that the place the subject occupies is not reduced to what treatises on perspective designate as the place of the eye, or of the ’subject’. So much so that one is tempted to see the Narcissus of the fable not as the inventor of painting in general, but rather as the inventor of easel painting. But is this not precisely what Alberti implicitly intended to suggest, in a surprisingly ‘modern’ manner: that painting cannot be conceived independently of — or outside of — the canvas (as in fact it was already the case in the Quattrocento)?

The cast shadow and the specular reflection share the same evanescence, at the same time that they necessarily refer — unlike the portrait — to a reality or to an object given in praesentia, and which is intensified, so to speak, by the effect of projection or reflection (with the slight difference that a shadow is always cast by an opaque body intercepting the light, whereas light can be reflected in a mirror). What Narcissus sees, that which he outlines, to take Ovid literally, is nothing but the shadow of an image (quam cernis, imaginis
umbra est, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III, v. 434). The shadow does not replicate the body; it must, however, ‘resemble’ it, as Chamisso’s hero learns at his expense; indeed, Peter Schlemihl is a man who, having sold his shadow to the devil (as others would sell their soul), found himself in a predicament and decided to borrow another person’s shadow when he had to go into society. The outrage of his hosts was such that he was quickly driven away because of the incongruity of his action. Is this a reason to claim that the shadow *imitates* the body, or – to put the question differently – that the gesture which consists, in order to fix it, of outlining it, or, in Alberti’s words, of circumscribing it, belongs somehow to a form of *mimesis*?

The reference to what in photography is known as ‘outlining’ [‘détourage’] announces that one deals, in this case, with a message without a code, as Roland Barthes said of the photographic image itself: there is a reduction from the object to its (photographic) image, as there is from the body to its cast shadow, but no transformation. Similar to the example of ‘contour effect’ that Man Ray produced when he introduced the ‘solarisation’ process into the field of photography, the line which ‘goes over’ the contour of the shadow cannot be divided into significant units: it is a perfect, literal analogon, which prevents this (strictly mechanical) mode of reproduction from being endowed, beyond the message it denotes, with a certain ‘style’ to which a given culture can assign a meaning – or a second value – of connotation. As Robert Rosenblum has shown, the idea that painting was invented by outlining the cast shadow of a body exposed to the sun or to the light of a candle, a motif or ‘subject’ often mentioned in texts, is very seldom represented in the arts before the last third of the eighteenth century, when it enjoyed a sudden vogue and then, after 1820, it disappears again. This ephemeral success can be explained by the fact that the motif corresponded in every way to the taste of the time for a mode of representation that was essentially linear, to forms projected onto a plane that were clearly defined with continuous contours, and yet that it also conferred, by analogy, an unexpected dignity to the art of the ‘silhouette’, then very popular, but essentially mechanical.

To speak about a ‘message without code’ implies that the outline of the cast shadow of a body constitutes a kind of index or of indice, in the sense intended by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. But it is a secondary index, the index or the sign – so to speak – of an index, one which no more ‘imitates’ the shadow than the shadow ‘imitates’ the body to which it is connected by an indissoluble connection of physical causality. For the shadow itself is not so much an icon of the body (to borrow once again the terms introduced by Peirce’s taxonomy) as it is its index, which can function as such only under specific conditions: for instance, when the shadow, thanks to a framing trick, is seen apart from the body, whose unexpected arrival feels imminent, as one sees in horror movies; or when the body appears, as in Chamisso’s novella, without a shadow that is revealed, *in absentia*, as its inalienable attribute (this is true of the body of the living, and things are different for those who have died; in Dante’s poem, the souls confined to Purgatory are surprised, on the contrary, by the poet’s shadow: the ‘shadows’ of the afterlife do not have a shadow). Such an index is ever-changing, as it is determined by the relative positions of the source of light and of the body. But it is also a fugacious index, one without substance or a reality of its own, directly connected to the body or the object it denotes, just like an image in the mirror. Peter Schlemihl could explain as much as he wanted that he had lost his shadow during a very difficult winter, when it got stuck, imprisoned.
in the frozen ground: the ‘outlining’ nonetheless remains secondary to the projection of the shadow, which amounts to a quasi-trace at best, and which leaves nothing behind. To fix it, as police officers do with fingerprints, one has no choice than ‘to describe’ or ‘to go over’ the contour, to (re)produce it.

The shadow is similar to the body, trait pour trait, as the traces of its outline are to the shadow. Yet, neither one nor the other can be assimilated to an icon, in Peirce’s sense of the word. As in photography, the shadow is, in certain regards, like the object it denotes. But this similarity, as Peirce notes precisely when discussing photography, obeys a physical necessity: the photographic process requires a set of conditions such that the image corresponds point by point to its object. The same is true of the shadow’s outlining, which implies, to function as an index, the same connection, point by point, trait pour trait, between the contour of the object and that of its cast shadow, at the same time that it imposes strict conditions for it to take place: the object must interpose itself between the source of light and the screen, while the shadow of the profile (one recognises here the principle of the ‘silhouette’, but also that of the first portraits in ‘medallion profile’) will make for a better index, will be more easily identified, and more immediately recognisable than the outline of a character presented in a frontal manner. Except that no one could see his shadow – nor could one under any circumstances paint one’s own portrait, in profile unless one was using an additional mirror, or had asked a third party to trace the outline of it.

The index refers to its object not so much by similarity or by analogy, but by the physical or even dynamic connection that binds it to the object in space, and in the memory of whomever it functions for as a sign. This definition, however, brings us back to Pliny, towards the end of Book XXXV of his Natural History, where the origin myth reappears as a ‘story’ in the proper sense of the term: that of the potter of Sicyon’s daughter, a story much commented upon ever since, with the slight difference that, if this is an origin myth, it relates less to painting than to disegno. Indeed, Pliny introduces this ‘story’ after informing his reader that he believes he has said enough about painting, and that it is time to move on to something else and to talk, still under the rubric of soils, about sculpture (De pictura satis superque; contexuisse his et contextvvm spectiem comprehensendam abolvendamque deesse videeret). So by correcting and refining the lines and surfaces as the particular object required they grew increasingly successful, and experienced pleasure in doing so (non id quidem sine voluptate), until they arrived, logically, at the stage where they were able to obtain the resemblance which they desired without the help of these half-formed images found in the materials at hand (nulla inchoatarum [... adruma] (L.-B. Alberti, De Sculptura, Cf. Alberti, On Painting and on Sculpture, ed. and trans. by Cecil Grayson (London, 1972), p. 121, and the recent edition and translation in Italian De statua, Maros Collareta (Sillabe: Livorno, 1998), p. 5. As is often the case, certain philologists who rely on chronology think they have found a solution to the problem raised by the conflicting hypothesis presented in the De statua and the corresponding passages of De pictura. According to them, Alberti had finished his small treatise on sculpture before returning to Florence, in 1444, one year before he wrote the Latin version of his treatise on painting. Or, conversely, that he wrote it ten years later, after his trip to Rome. As if the gap of a few years was enough to overcome the difficulty and invalidate the comparison between the two texts. As if Alberti had changed his mind in the interval. In fact, as Cecil Grayson has shown, the origin myth presented in De statua appertains only to sculpture, which indeed proceeds by adding or subtracting matter, in opposition to painting, which plays essentially with contrasts of colours (quod colorum oppositionibus uterum). What matters, in each case, is the fact that although art
historical, and even anecdotal argument, which had been that of his predecessors, and his own, which is presented as a theory. Alberti was in agreement with Quintilian: the delineation of a shadow is not enough to define painting; but neither is the application of one or more colours within an outlined surface. At a time when painting was asked to obey the paradigm of perspective, the delimitation of the painting took on the value of a prerequisite. And how in fact did Alberti proceed to paint, to speak as he does in the last pages of Book I of De pictura? He would first draw, on the surface he intended to paint, a rectangle of appropriate dimension, which he compared with a window through which he could gaze at the subject of his painting. He would then choose a unit of measure which, in relation to the measure of man, gave him the scale of his painting but also the basic unit of the perspective system. The abbracciare [embracing] of the surface of the painting, or – as Matisse would later say – its taking possession of, was thus a necessary condition to establish the site of representation, which is what the construction of perspective comes down to. The drawing of figures came only after. Except if the painter did without the aforementioned construction and instead used, as De pictura teaches, a transparent veil divided into squares that Alberti, still speaking ‘between friends’, had the habit of naming intersegazione. This veil was to be placed between the eye and the object one intended to paint, so that one could then transfer, point by point, trait pour trait, the contours of the object on a surface similarly squared.

The presentation of the ‘veil’ process in Book II of De pictura — under the title, Circonscrizione (On the delineation of contour) — immediately follows the aforementioned eulogy to painting. The reference to the story (tutta la storia) of Narcissus also puts forth a definition of this art, and reminds the reader, a posteriori, of the traditional origin myth of painting. If the veil process and the outlining of a cast shadow are not without connection, the former, which consists in transferring on a planar surface the contour of an object considered through a transparent grid, is different inasmuch as it is not purely mechanical but rather calls for imitation: the painter is not only recording or fixing the contour, he must reproduce it. But this reproduction, in turn, is nothing but a substitute for construction which takes on the value of a demonstration: if Alberti decided to name the veil a painter could interpose between himself and his model an intersegazione, it was because this veil merged, theoretically speaking, with the intersecting plane of the visual pyramid with which the painting was to correspond. By laying the stress, with the story of Narcissus, on the surface that the painter needed to take possession of, Alberti thus did not intend to deny disegno the privilege it held in Western tradition, at least not its logical, or even ‘natural’, priority. And how could he, since there exists no other means to define a surface – and first and foremost that of a painting – than to delimit and outline it: a process not to be confused, as happens too often, with that of framing, the latter being related to the use of a mirror, or of an optical or photographic device? It is the contour, as Alberti again observes, which gives its name to any surface (adunque l’orlo e dorso danno suoi nomi alle superficie). And although painting is more than mere delineation, it would still be impossible to praise the composition or the distribution of light and shadows in a painting if this delineation is inaccurate. Inversely, an accurate ‘circumscription’, the well-traced contour of a good drawing, can be savoured on its own.

During the Enlightenment, when there was a renewed interest in the story of the potter of Sicyon’s daughter, Boullée claimed that painting was born from an
'effect of nature'. As such, this would have originated in a discovery, and the following step would have been, strictly speaking, that of invention. The distance explicitly marked by Pliny and by Quintilian between these two moments – that of discovery and that of invention – captured the attention of Alberti and his contemporaries. The same problem arose indeed for painters around the system of perspective, *perspectiva artificialis*, which it was thought could be the result of a discovery or the product of an invention: the dilemma was commensurate with the ties that art intended to establish with science, as its roots were supposed to be found within nature, and thus in geometry, or physics, and even chemistry. Such is the context in which to understand the metaphorical labour leading Alberti to see in the story of Narcissus (*tutta la storia*) the figurative translation of the abstract and, in fact, strictly conceptual definition he intended to give of painting (while deliberately playing on the notion of *metamorphosis*). This was not without theoretical implications: to designate the discovery of the outline of a cast shadow as the origin of painting amounts to underlining its link to reality, to insist at least on its indexical component, its function as index. Seeing Narcissus as the inventor of painting led, inversely, to stress the imaginary, or even phantasmagorical dimension of this art. Lacan argued that the imaginary register is characterised by the prevalence of the relation to the image of what is similar, as illustrated by the reference – itself theoretical – of the so-called mirror stage, thus suggesting that any behaviour, any imaginary relationship, is by definition doomed to be nothing but a delusion. Is the paradigm of Narcissus not suggesting something similar, by intimating that painting was founded, at the moment of its invention, on a specular duplication, and on a relation of homeomorphism between the real and its double, *mimesis* tending, as if it were its limits, to illusion, if not to *trompe-l’œil*?

Still Alberti was careful to explain that, unlike the Narcissus of the fable, the painter does not hope to grasp a reflection, but rather the reflecting surface itself. Does this amount to saying that such an object is any less a phantasm than the one identified by Narcissus as the object of his desire? It is one thing to want to grasp a mirror, even if such manifestation of desire would be better understood as fetishistic. But to desire water itself, the surface of the source? Whereas the traditional origin myth of painting is connected to the ground or a to a wall, by way of a shadow projected onto them, that is to say, once again, with *soil*, if not with stone, the solid element *par excellence* (soils and stones were the subject of Book XXXIV of Pliny’s *Natural History*), the story of Narcissus conjures up, on the contrary, a liquid element. Water, however, unless it is held within the limits of a container, is malleable, and will simply slip between the fingers of anyone who would like to hold on to it. At first glance, the task that Alberti assigns to the painter would thus be an impossible task, since the object that painting must seize, that it must appropriate, is defined, from the very start, as ever elusive, as if its enjoyment was in fact prohibited. That is, unless one wishes to entertain another phantasm, closely related to Peter Schlemihl’s, and which would solve all at once the problem of Narcissus and that of the painter, as in the utopia sketched by Fénelon in his treatise on the *Education of Girls* (which here comes in handy), a country which did not have any need for painters: ‘When one wanted to have the portrait of a friend, a beautiful landscape or a painting that represented some other object, one put some water in large silver or gold basins; then one placed this water opposite to the object that one wanted to paint. Soon freezing, water would become like the silvering of a mirror [glace de miroir], where the image of this object could not be
erased. One could carry it if one wanted to, and it was a painting as faithful as
the most beautiful mirrors’. 42

The definition of painting that Alberti puts forth with the story of Narcissus
can therefore be understood in two ways: either one sees in it the first sign of an
initial awareness of the necessarily phantasmagorical nature of painting, which,
when it comes to the objects of desire, cannot hope to present anything other
than inconsistent simulacra; or inversely one chooses to retain the insistence on
the thing ‘painting’ (ad rem ipsam) and the object constituted by ‘the painting’.
This calculated ambiguity echoes a contradiction implied by perspectival
construction such as Alberti describes it in Book I of his treatise: the process
of perspective is grounded, indeed, in a true paradox, which leads to
underscore the projected plane, to produce it as such and simultaneously –
to recall Sartre’s words, in The Imaginary – to ‘nullify’ [‘néantiser’] it as the
support of a construction whose sole meaning is to ‘pierce a hole’ in the
wall or – as the dubious metaphor of the ‘window’ would have it, and that
which goes hand in hand with it, the per-see (rere), the ‘seeing through’ 43 – to
go through it, which is to say, again, to deny it. Until the moment when, by
virtue of the power of metamorphosis which is that of painting, painting
reaches a new form of reality, one that is finally strictly pictorial.

42. Fénelon, De l’éducation des filles, cit. René
Démoris, ‘Original absent et création de valeur:
Du Bos et quelques autres’, Revue des sciences
humaines, vol. 40, no. 157, 1975, p. 67, and by
Daniel Arasse, ‘Les miroirs de la peinture’, in
L.Initiation, abréviation ou source de liberté? Rencontres
de l’Ecole du Louvre (Documentation française,

43. For an Albertian critique of the traditional
topos that equates the painting to a window, I
direct the reader to chapter 5 of my
Souvenir
d’enfance par Piero della Francesca
(Seuil: Paris,
Goodman as A Childhood Memory by Piero della
Francesca (Stanford University Press: Stanford,
2007), pp. 61–73.