

**Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), x+99 pages.**

This most recent translation of a work by Jean-Luc Marion provides English-speaking readers with a lesser-known text. Originally published in French in 1996 as *La Croisée du visible*, this work, which focuses on aesthetics, falls through the cracks, so to speak. This is so because it is not easily locatable within the usual pattern of Marion's writing, which has taken the shape of trilogies or, to use his own expression, triptychs. This falls outside his three texts on Descartes, outside his explicitly theological works, and even outside his most recent phenomenological investigations. I mention this at the outset because these triptychs are not arbitrary: each one marks a certain progression through a distinct project. The matter becomes even more complex when one realizes that Marion wrote *La Croisée du visible* as he was in the midst of his phenomenological work: the first of that triptych, *Réduction et donation* (*Reduction and Givenness*, 1998), originally appeared in 1989 and the second, *Étant donné* (*Being Given*, 2002), was published in 1997. One might say, then, that this text on aesthetics appears alongside the other, "important," texts and that, while it is thematically linked to them, it has nothing significant to offer other than some comments on art. On the other hand, one might also say that the appearance of this text calls into question any attempt to schematize Marion's thinking by compartmentalizing his work into separate periods or exclusive projects. Perhaps the text itself will help us decide.

The first sentences of Marion's own preface make clear that this is not merely a book on aesthetics: "The question of painting does not pertain first or only to painters, much less only to aestheticians. It concerns visibility itself, and thus

pertains to everything—to sensation in general. . . . The exceptional visibility of the painting has thus become a privileged case of the phenomenon, and therefore one possible route to a consideration of phenomenality in general” (ix). With this claim we are alerted to Marion’s own understanding of the centrality of this book: written in the midst of his work on phenomenology, this study of painting deepens and concretizes the aesthetic paradigm that will so profoundly influence his constructive phenomenological project. The appearance of this work in English, therefore, comes at a very opportune time, given that Marion’s second and third phenomenological works have also recently appeared in English. Alongside the recently published translations of both *Being Given* and *In Excess* (2002; *De surcroît*, 2001), it becomes possible for English readers to fill out their understanding of Marion’s phenomenological work by reading the important analyses provided in *The Crossing of the Visible*.

For those who know Marion’s work through his earlier, theological texts, the analyses in this book will come as a welcome elaboration of some central yet complex ideas. For example, from the early pages of Marion’s *L’Idole et la distance* (1977; *The Idol and Distance*, 2001), one discovers the centrality of the categories of the “visible” and the “invisible” only to wonder about them and seek further clarity. Likewise, in *Dieu sans l’être* (1982; *God Without Being*, 1991), the best known of Marion’s works in North America, one is immediately introduced to a complex discussion of the “idol” and the “icon.” All of these “aesthetic” categories receive significant elaboration in *The Crossing of the Visible*.

Besides making these thematic connections, which one would expect even from a peripheral text, this book makes a more challenging claim: if, when confronted with painting, we find ourselves asking after the very nature of phenomenality, we will only ask well insofar as we recognize that “theology

becomes, in this situation, an indisputable authority [*instance*] concerning any theory of painting. Having sometimes denied this, other times simply forgotten it, aesthetic thought finds itself entangled in long aporias” (ix). What is suggested in his recent phenomenological work—that the religious phenomenon might disclose something about the nature of phenomenality itself—Marion here puts into practice. As a result, the arguments presented here draw Marion’s phenomenological investigations into a web of relations with his explicitly theological work. Far from standing alongside the other “important” projects, this small text seeks to live within both the phenomenological and the theological domains and therefore provides an example of the richness of Marion’s work when considered as a whole.

At the center of this book is “the gaze.” Throughout its four studies, Marion moves from an analysis of the “object” constituted by the gaze of perspective, through an analysis of the “idol” that constitutes its own appearing and thus dazzles the gaze, to the “icon” upon which the counter-gaze of the prototype crosses with the gaze of the viewer, and which thus constitutes the reciprocal ground of love. The painting appears within each of these modes and thus provides us with a vehicle for venturing along this path of phenomenality. In what follows, I will connect Marion’s discussion of the object, the idol and the icon with his claim that painting serves as a paradigm of phenomenal manifestation. This will allow me to introduce his fundamental concepts while reaffirming the centrality of this book and its analyses.

Marion begins his analysis of the painting—the aesthetic object—with an account of “perspective.” Proceeding in this way allows him to draw important connections between the constitution of the aesthetic object and objects in general. Drawing on the resources of Husserlian phenomenology, Marion suggests that, like the world of sense-

data in general, a painting becomes “real” insofar as it ceases to be an amalgam of colored pigments on a flat surface and is instead given form and depth within the experiences of consciousness. It is perspective, the organizing power of the gaze, that gives the painting its reality, just as it is intentional consciousness that organizes the world of our experience. In both cases the invisible (i.e., the gaze = that which, in seeing, we do not see) organizes the visible to such an extent that Marion points to a “paradox of perspective”: “The visible increases in direct proportion to the invisible” (5).

This is all very well and good, Marion claims, until it is the case that paintings stop actually playing themselves out according to the game of objectivity. If, as he shows, the painting-as-object is constituted by appearing within the relation between the aim of the gaze and the visible, then it is entirely likely that paintings that do not appear as such will not appear “according to perspective” and will, instead, exemplify a different mode of phenomenal manifestation. In examining the works of Monet and Pollock, as well as Hantai and Malevich, Marion discovers paintings that do not represent according to perspective. In their works “the visible is liberated from vision at the moment when it seizes its own invisibility. The invisible, from that point on, plays no longer *between* the aim of the gaze and the visible but rather, contrary to the gazing aim, *in* the visible itself” (19). No longer an aesthetic “object,” the painting now achieves its own proper status as either “idol” or, as we will see, “icon.”

As the painting emerges into visibility according to the conditions of its own reality, it is no longer constituted within the play of the real and unreal that characterized the object—aesthetic or otherwise. The painting-as-spectacle appears according to the “liberty of appearance” (30) and thereby testifies to its “unforeseen nature” (28). Whereas, in the case of objects, the gaze constituted the visible, in the

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case of the idol the visible calls forth the gaze because it presents itself—independently—to the gaze in order to be seen. However, despite all discontinuity between the painting-as-object and the painting-as-spectacle, one thread of continuity remains: desire. In the case of the object, the perceptual gaze put the invisible into play in order to shape the visible. It thus opened a world according to the mundane desires of intentionality. In the case of the idol, however, the “meager desires” of intentionality are annulled and a new desire is provoked: the desire to see and, in seeing, to be enraptured. It is important to note, therefore, that while the object and the idol remain categorically distinguished, they remain tied to the subjectivity of desire that is their condition of possibility. For this reason, the object and the idol are paradigms of a phenomenality that appears according to the horizon of the ego, whether it is the mundane and, indeed, necessary horizon of the objective world or the ravishing, dangerous, and even totalitarian world of the idol (see chapter 3).

It is for this reason that the icon is the only true manifestation of phenomenality that is free of the fetters of subjectivity. Though displaced by the power of the idol, the gaze of the viewer maintains a position of centrality: the “viewer” remains a “subject” because it remains the only actor, that is, the only one desiring. With the icon, however, things are different. Rather than one subjective gaze that determines the scope of the visible, the icon manifests another gaze: as one looks upon the icon, one is seen. As one looks into the two black pupils of the painted eyes, one sees the invisible. But this invisible is neither “a single new visible [i.e., an object], nor a counter-visible [i.e., an idol], but rather the invisible origin of the gaze of the other upon me” (56). Thus, Marion claims, the icon “definitively exceeds the scope of expectation” (33) by inverting the order of aims and, therefore, of desire. Because

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it serves as the place where two gazes cross, the icon, as paradigmatic of phenomenality, opens up the possibility for communion and even, Marion suggests, for love (86–87).

*The Crossing of the Visible* is a creative and provocative account of phenomenality with profound ethical and political implications. As Marion makes clear, each mode of phenomenality is constitutive of a world of meaning and, therefore, calls for certain intersubjective parallels. For this reason, the book points back to some of his earlier works on intersubjectivity—see *Prolegomena to Charity*—and to his most current work on love.

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