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# WHAT IS ART?

and Two Other Essays

Paul Rhoads

"What Is Art?" was written for Lucien Oulahbib in december 2009, and was to have been published in the fall of 2010, in French translation, in "Neo-Modernité, mode d'emploi: sexualité, art, science, politique, religion".

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The cover includes a detail from a portrait of Galatée Bonnet, and this books is set in fonts, both by Paul Rhoads.

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# WHAT IS ART?

## LANGUAGE AND POLITICS

*"Literature is the enemy of painting." Renoir*

It would be easy to mock "contemporary art". But mockery, most powerful of all rhetorical weapons, is universally lethal, and "contemporary art" has reached a state, and is on a path, which blunts need and desire to mock. Furthermore its eventual death would not mean a rebirth of Art. "Contemporary art" does not kill Art; it is rouge on the corpse, an appearance of vitality. Because we no longer know what the vitality of Art is we no longer know what Art is.

*Literature*, said Renoir, *is the enemy of painting*. To understand Renoir we must tear away the masks which obscure him, and the first is the story, or origin myth, of artistic Modernism. This myth is universally known: Impressionism cast off the academy; then came the various 'isms' in a grand march to abstraction and on to "contemporary art". Like all good lies it has elements of truth. There were indeed certain influential painters who had fallen into a certain fault — about which the myth misleads us. In reaction the Early Modernists

elaborated an analysis not with a view to a new Art but to renewing Art. Certain academics — Bouguereau, chief of the academy, is a convenient example, but there were others: Alma Tedema, Gérôme, Sheffer . . . — had fallen into what the Early Modernists called “illustration”. Half a century later this analysis became impossible to understand because the meanings of the terms in which it is expressed were changed. These terms are: “illustration” (or, more narrowly, “representation”), “decoration” and “abstraction”.

The return which the Early Modernists hoped to provoke cannot be characterized as reactionary. Other painters of the same period were reactionaries. The Pre-Raphaelites may be qualified as reactionary because they aimed at reviving a specific historical style, that of Perugino and Botticelli. The Pre-Raphaelites were concerned with style—in this case a specific kind of elegance. But style is about the look of painting, an aesthetic attitude. The Early Modernists were concerned not with style but with painting itself, with what underlies all styles and attitudes, with how painting works not how it looks. The Early Modernist return was not to some point in the history of painting but to the heart of painting.

### *Disegno and Colore, Illustration and Decoration*

The Early Modernist analysis is unprecedented in painting discourse. Prior to recent times painting is notable for a paucity of theoretical discourse. The most famous is the 16<sup>TH</sup> century dispute between *disegno* and *colore*. These terms have also become

distorted and incomprehensible. This dispute is not about drawing versus color; initially the question was Michaelangelo versus Titian. The idea was not that Michaelangelo was a supreme draftsman and Titian a supreme colorist, but a question of emphasis which had less to do with drawing and color than the goal of Art. Titian, as people could see perfectly well, is as competent a draftsman as Michaelangelo, and Michaelangelo's color is as marvelous as anyone could want. But the way these crucial artists draw and color differs. Michaelangelo is never very concerned with such things as textures, transparencies, half-shadow and reflected light, while Titian, though many of his figures are as monumental and volumetric as anything in Michaelangelo (think of the Christ of his Entombments), is not as necessarily or consistently preoccupied with the latter. Titian's art, in contrast to Michaelangelo's, is characterized both by direct observation and a certain freedom from observation. To express this another way: the human form as an ideal is central for Michaelangelo while for Titian the center is the human figure in the context of the world. *Disegno* is not 'drawing' but preoccupation with, or emphasis on, not form as such but ideal or idealized form; and *colore* is not color but everything that "colors" or enrobes the human form and how we perceive it — in different lights, partially, textured, in movement, and so on — to which "inaccurate" drawing (certain kinds of deliberate distortions or freedoms) can contribute. This is certainly related to Michaelangelo's having been both sculptor and fresco painter, while Titian practiced that supremely sensitive medium: oil painting. But this is not the core of the matter, which is the more fundamental question of

what Art is about. At that time Art was understood to be about Man, a created being, made in the image of God, creator of the world. From this perspective either *designo* or *colore* could variously, and even in contradiction, be claimed as more ideal, more realistic, more effective, more noble, and etc..

The Early Modernist distinction "illustration/decoration", by contrast, is an attempt to define the nature of painting from a practical point of view. Though the terms illustration and decoration were initially technical and neutral,\* by the 1960s both had become terms of opprobrium. This may have been inevitable. The Early Modernists critique of painters like Bouguereau was that they were too illustrative. Illustration, however, was not therefore a fault. The Early Modernists saw it not merely as essential but even inevitable. But for them, in the absence of decoration painting is not "art". Painting is characterized by a dynamic between illustration and decoration.

The Early Modernist analysis can be recovered by a study of painting in the light of those parts of Early Modernist studio practice which survived into the 1970s. There are also documents, such as Arthur Wesley Dow's 1899 book: *Composition: Exercises in Art Structure*. Dow was a American artist and influential Modernist who had studied in France. On page 49 of the 7<sup>TH</sup> edition we find the basic Early Modernist critique:

\* These terms predate Modernism. The Early Modernists took them over from the academic vocabulary and refined them. (See the quotation from Dow, next page.) They gave the word "representation" a larger and more profound meaning, better captured in the term "illustration".

*I use the word "academic" to define all teaching founded upon representation. . . In academic art teaching representation\* is the starting-point. . . drawing with such an end in view is not strictly art-work.*

As for the cause of this development, Dow points out that: *soon after the time of Leonardo da Vinci art education was classified into Representative (imitative), and Decorative, but that later on: the true relation between design [i.e. structure or composition] and representation was lost.* (page 4)

That a painting is both a picture of something and an ensemble of shapes and colors made of paint on a surface is not an insight original to Modernism. Two centuries previously, probably replying in exasperation to the pious question of an Art pilgrim to his Roman studio, Poussin defined Art as: *pictures of anything under the sun, made with colors and lines on a flat surface, the goal of which is delectation.* The Early Modernist analysis is an elaboration of this statement to which they were compelled by the denaturing extreme into which painting had fallen. The problem was not that painters like Bouguereau put too much emphasis on *picture*, or even illusion effects, but that they neglected *color and line* as such — i.e. composition

\* Dow uses "illustration" to mean a picture, usually printed, used as an example or to accompany a story. He uses "illustrate" for "demonstrate", or to emphasize the narrative as opposed to the decorative aspect. In this essay I emphasize the term "illustration" over "representation"; the latter means presenting something again ("re-presenting") while the former means simply "showing" (casting light upon). Something shown might be something invented which, strictly speaking, something "re-presented" is not (at least it is not represented by the painter as painter). The term "illustration" is therefore larger, and more adequately expresses the fundamental meaning of the Early Modern analysis.

or the decorative aspect. That the problem was not illusion versus composition is proven by how the Early Modernists considered painters like Valasques, Rembrandt, Rubens and Van Dyke to be masters of composition even though they are notable illusionists.

Illusion, in the sense of *trompe l'œil*, is only one aspect of illustration. More fundamental is the sheer sensation of volume, or space itself. There is also a third aspect of illustration, namely meaning, or what today we call "image" or "message". This is what Renoir meant by "literature". Dow puts it this way: . . . *so much modern painting* [i.e. 19<sup>TH</sup> century academic painting] *is but picture-writing; only story-telling, not art.* (page 4)

Of course any picture, no matter how abstract, has some sort of meaning, otherwise how could it be said that the non-objective paintings of Mark Rothko are "spiritual", or that Jackson Pollacks are "dynamic"? But meaning, however inevitable, interesting or important, is structurally incidental to painting. Even the paintings of Renoir, that enemy of meaning, have meaning. Renoir's meanings, however, are as limited and appropriate to painting as possible: everything most delectable to look at. But it is not necessary to take Poussin's dictum this literally; Poussin's own paintings are full of "unpleasant" political and psychological subjects. Still, the aspect of meaning which is closest to painting as painting is the delectable quality of whatever the subject happens to be, however "unpleasant", because the only reaction we can have, strictly speaking, to painting as structure is enjoyment or appreciation (the French term *jouissance* is more adequate) of that structure. Painting,

through illustration, can overlap, say, political discourse, but it can hardly replace — i.e. is not equivalent to — political discourse, any more than political discourse could replace painting. Painting has its specificity even if this does not contain all that painting is or can be. Illustration always has a story-telling or meaning aspect but, in the context of painting, “illustration” is above all, or fundamentally, “space”.

### Abstraction and Pure Painting

For the Early Modernists the word “abstraction” did not mean non-representational; rather it pointed to the relationship between “illustration” and “decoration”. The Early Modernists would not have called non-objective painting “abstract” painting, they would have called it “decorative painting” and, theoretically at least, they would have regarded it as erroneous and extreme as they regarded Bouguereau. This is admittedly a one-sided presentation. It reflects the attitudes of Modernists like Renoir, Degas and Bonnard, for whom “painting” was never non-objective. But the Modernists included men like Dow who gave the decorative aspect a status they denied to the illustrative aspect. *Perspective and anatomy*, Dow wrote, *are only helps to art, not substitutes for it*. The student must begin with *composition, that is, with a study of art itself*. (page 45) Though Dow, and others who shared this attitude, never practiced non-objective painting, this attitude contributed to Modernism eventually generating the opposite of what it originally combated. Such Modernists not only reject the

goal of Art as understood in the debate between *disegno* and *colore*, but tended to reject any sort of goal; thus the rise of “pure painting”. This was initially expressed in emphasis on “beauty” understood decoratively, which would seem to mean something “agreeable to look at”—though what constitutes or legitimates such “agreeableness” was never properly considered. In a characteristic statement Dow writes:

*The modern\* arbitrary division of Painting into Representative and Decorative has put composition into the background and brought forward nature-imitation as a substitute. The picture-painter is led to think of likeness to nature as to [sic] the most desirable quality for his work. . . judging their art by a standard of Realism rather than of Beauty. In the world's art epochs there was no such division. Every work of space-art was regarded as primarily an arrangement, with Beauty as its raison d'etre. (page 44)*

This “Beauty” is discussed by the Early Modernists without reference to the goals implicit in *disegno* and *colore* but exclusively in abstract terms like “harmony”, “balance”, “proportion”, “opposition”, “subordination”, “repetition”, “symmetry” and so on. This only displaces the problem because, at bottom, these are just various kinds of regularity. If beauty is the goal, and regularity is the essence of beauty, then uniformity is the

\* By “modern” Dow means the academics. This passage addresses the extremist tendency in 19<sup>TH</sup> century painting which Dow traces to the theoretical division representation/decoration. In this pre-Modern form it is notably crude and certainly a function of the theoretical and reductionist passions which led to the French Revolution. In terms of painting it is Neo Classicism which begins the trend which culminates in Bouguereau.



ideal. Exactly this reductionist conclusion was quickly drawn; in 1918 Malavich painted his famous *White on White*.\*

In the second half of the 19<sup>TH</sup> century, however, and aside from Gustave Moreau's watercolor experiments, the phenomenon of "abstract painting", i.e. the blatant elevation of purely decorative Art to the moral status of "painting", was not envisioned. "Abstraction", therefore, was not opposed to representation; it was an understanding of representation in terms of decoration; i.e. color and line which represents or illustrates is also color and line simply — as implied by Poussin.

## Progressivism

The Early Modernists were not Progressives. But in the same period Progressivism, and the effort to politicize all aspects of life, was gaining strength.† Artistic Modernism and Progressivism converge in the 1930s.

\* The same thing occurred in music: elimination first of melody, then rhythm, then harmony, so that ever since the 1960s many composers claim that music is fundamentally about sound or noise. John Cage's *4'33"* (1952), is the musical equivalent of *White on White*.

† This development is profoundly linked to modern philosophy in general, and Positivism in particular. The rise of science and technology—or the inflation of human power—with anti-clericalism and scientism—created a climate in which the debate between *designio* and *colore* is so irrelevant it becomes incomprehensible. Early Modernist thinking therefore tends to understand painting in technical terms only. "Contemporary art", with its emphasis on meaning, is therefore, in a certain manner, a restoration of the pre-Modernist attitude, namely the centrality of meaning. The gulf separating traditional painting and "contemporary art", however, should not obscure how the eventual replacement of the latter by Classical Realism, rather than a step back towards the former will be another step in the same direction.

Political Progressivism, in the 1930s, was essentially Marxism: history evolves in logical stages towards an ideal culmination (dictatorship of the proletariat, radical equality and so on). This theory is now discredited, so that it's irrelevance to painting, which ought to have been clear from the beginning, ought now be clear to everyone. But a century ago vast and valiant efforts were made to integrate Art into the Marxist vision and thus to prefigure its culmination, or the artistic equivalent of Communism. This gave rise to Social Realism, a major stylistic event in the history of Modernism which today is covered in an ashamed silence. Social Realism is propaganda — illustrations of the laborious proletariat, capitalist bosses and so on — and though non-propagandistic paintings are also made in this style (which persist in Asia), because it is specifically adapted to ease of mastery, reproduction, and monumental and temporary modes, it is structurally the tool of political messianism. In accordance with Modernist ideas it is somewhat abstract; it does not abandon volume but forms are simplified and color areas are flattened. Modernism was denounced as decadent by the political forces of Socialism and, for this and other reasons too famous to mention, Social Realism collapsed in the West.

But the Progressive ideal is larger than Communism, so this break did not affect the underlying alliance of Modernism and Progressivism, which had the effect of transforming the shift from illustration (Social Realism) toward decoration ("abstraction"), which the Early Modernists understood as a limited correction to an extremist error into the historical evolutionary movement of painting, and pushed to the extreme. By the 1950s "abstract" became equivalent to "non-objective",

and it actually became a political, artistic and moral sin to engage in representation.

To put this another way, where "decoration" had originally been seen as an aspect of painting, it was now seen as its essence: the historical goal. For this reason the word "decoration", for a time, was the most prestigious word in the artistic vocabulary. But when the historical process was competed, in the triumph of "decoration", (i.e. when "abstraction" became equivalent to "non-objective"), the word "decoration" joined "representation" as a term of opprobrium. Rather than remaining associated with arrangement of shape and color it became politicized, or associated with reactionary or bourgeois taste.

The term "decoration" was no Early Modernist coinage. "Decorative Art" had meant works like Jean Goujean's *Fountain des Innocents* or the murals of Puvis de Chavannes, which were regarded as masterpieces of the first order. They were "decorative" because associated with architecture, and thus other purely non-illustrative elements like scrolls, moldings and pilasters. In English, with its comparatively poorer artistic traditions, the word may have lacked the connotative richness of the French, so that the shift of the artistic center from Paris to New York may have precipitated the change. In any case it occurred; what had previously been a term of the first dignity and importance became an insult.

With representational painting condemned as politically reactionary, a generation of painters was pushed aside. These artists of the 1940s and 50s were nothing like Bouguereau. They were all Modernists, often Expressionists, influenced by Cezzan, Cubism or the Nabis. Tossed into the by then well

stocked trash can of history — pell-mell on top of monarchy, religion and capitalism — their elimination was a western artistic equivalent of a soviet purge. In the 1960s and 70s those extremely rare art students seriously interested in drawing or representation were bullied and called fascist.\*

This was incoherent. The Socialist powers had rejected “abstract” art. They condemned it because it did not serve the revolution: it was elitist, capitalistic and decadent. Though the source is questionable the charges are hard to answer. Abstract painting, despite decades of effort to “democratize” “contemporary art”, remains the domain of a sophisticated and fashionable but very small group, and given the money involved can hardly deny being “capitalist”. As for decadent; on the basis of the Early Modernist analysis non-objective painting is as decadent (not morally but structurally) as Bouguereau and Cabanel. Furthermore, since the historical process allegedly pushing painting into non-objectivity never existed — as several decades of Post-Modernism prove — the purge of representational painting can only be understood in two possible ways: a hypocritical partisan strategy, or ideological intolerance.

All this is a 20<sup>TH</sup> century version of the *Guerre des Bouffons*, which was an attack on the music of Rameau by political theorists like Rousseau, as too aristocratic. Rameau’s operas were about gods and heroes, not ordinary folks like Pergolesi’s *La Serva Padrona*. It was not popular (democratic) enough, and therefore not progressive. This complaint had nothing to do with music; it was the first

\* I speak from personal experience.

ideological (political) attack on Art by Modern philosophy. It was the beginning of the danger of "literature" to Art; a problem inherent to philosophical modernism.

## "CONTEMPORARY ART"

*Abraham Lincoln: "If you call a tail a leg, how many legs does a dog have?"*

*Reply: "Five."*

*Abraham Lincoln: "Wrong: four, because calling a tail a leg doesn't make it one."*

"Contemporary art" begins in the 1960s. Its initial form is Pop. The term "contemporary art" is sometimes used as if it begins with Cubism or even before. This is in accordance with how the ultimate, and indeed obligatory, critical term has become "modern". Rembrandt, Raphael, Giotto, Cimabue, Praxitelies, Egyptian murals, cave painting: all are extolled as "modern" or, better, "astonishingly modern". Thinking is so polluted by Progressivism that admiration is due only to what is, or once was, *on the cutting edge of societal development*.<sup>\*</sup> This in spite of Post-Modernism (i.e. the evaporation of artistic Progressivism), and even though Classical Realism, that ghostly

<sup>\*</sup> To borrow an nice irony from Rush Limbaugh.

revival of the spirit of Bouguereau, will shortly be a serious commercial and ideological challenge to "contemporary art".

Abstract Expressionism, which arose in the 1950s, is the last gasp of Early Modernism. "Contemporary art" prolongs Modernism exclusively on the basis of its non-artistic affluents like Progressivism. Pop lacks all the elements with which the Early Modernists were concerned. There was no outcry at Pop's use of imagery because it was not a return to representation; presenting a Brillo box is critique, literature, perhaps even poetry, but there is no question of space. Op (i.e. "Optical") was about technology and thus also a form of critique.

Abstract Expressionism, Pop and Op had a certain vitality. Painting, though always somewhat *recherché*, has historically penetrated society. The average Parisian of the day may not have known the names Lebrun, Watteau or David but he was familiar with the related styles which surrounded him in many forms. Art Deco, in this way, is related to Social Realism. Abstract Expressionism, Pop and Op were likewise sources for fashion, advertising, industrial design and Psychedelic Art. They penetrated society. This, however, was the last time we saw any relationship between the high and low, the sophisticated and the popular. Minimalism is an intellectualized attempt to keep the historical ball rolling, and go Abstract Expressionism one better. It ought to be called Abstract Expressionlessness. It never poked its head from the ivory tower of social irrelevance into which painting thus retreated in the 1970s, and from which it is yet to emerge.

Most of the isms which arose in the 70s and 80s come

under the general heading of Neo Dada. Like Pop and Op this work is about ideas, ironic and elaborate jokes, political and social commentary and reference. Like Warhol's Brillo box, Jasper Johns' American flag is a symbol, a visual pamphlet, a taunt — as you prefer. Likewise Rauchenberg's referential confections, Yves Kline's *bleu*, Buren's stripes; all is sign and story. Strategists like Jeff Koons are as isolated as they are successful — thanks to a very small number of super-rich parvenus, journalists and culture ministry bureaucrats eager to keep in step with a cultural elite which secretly holds them in contempt.\* Such operators may be publicized in splashy doses but it is only rare members of that already restricted segment of the public which recognizes their names which can also recognize their productions. Hopping from notion to notion, such work is of a nature to which "stylistic cohesion" is not a relevant category. A trip to Bilbao is a pilgrimage sacred to democratized "culture". Its hadjis recount their experience like a ritual prayer. It is theater, a promenade round a kabaa-like ivory tower (i.e. a mystery within an abstraction), a story about ourselves.

Painting has always had meaning. But it also always had space and pattern. Neo Dada is all imagery, pure literature; Photo Realism and so on are equally unconcerned with space and pattern, equally subordinate to literature. Painting in the spirit of photography, or copied photographs, may result in intriguing objects of a certain sort, but it is an act of painting in only the most superficial sense. Normal painting concerns

\* *The Cradle Will Rock*, Marc Blitzstien's Communist opera of 1937 has a wonderful scene where abjectly sycophantic and mercenary artists condescendingly discuss their rich patrons, particularly the good dinners they provide.

are eliminated. Any painting, no matter how unconsciously or incorrectly conceived, will have space and pattern. But this is equally true of natural or accidental discoloration on a wall. The space in question will tend to be as incoherent as the space in non-objective painting on the one hand or Bouguereau on the other. To call such imagery "painting" is a radical departure from Early Modernism, and to call it Art is a radical departure from Poussin and Renoir.

### The Freudian Element

The intriguing imagery of Surrealism, whose period of vitality was prior to the 1940s, had a good deal of popularity but no practical influence on painting because the Surrealist idea does not address painting itself. But it had a gigantic influence on Modernism. Just as Social Realism is a form of artistic Marxism, so Surrealism is a form of artistic Freudianism. The Freudian idea is that we are motivated from the unconscious; and the essential artistic problem is not disturbing the unthinking flow of creativity. Any teenager can explain how learning to draw, or learning anything at all, is destructive because it interferes with or blocks the vital creative source. This is the Surrealist idea.

The transfusion of Marxism and Freudianism into Modernism seems to support the theory of an unfolding historical process of cultural evolution, which condemns lingering in old modes (like representation) as irrelevant or even reactionary. But the concepts in question are not unknown



to the past. To say nothing of the Greek Muses, Plato's *Ion*, or the dythrambic poets collecting lyric preludes among the clouds in Aristophanes, Blake's advocacy of visionary inspiration versus rules and training is basically the Surrealist idea. Even Sir Joshua Reynolds, for whose principles Blake had such contempt, was not unaware of the importance of fantasy and inspiration. In the 14<sup>TH</sup> discourse he writes:

*When we draw our examples from remote and revered antiquity . . . we subject ourselves to some inconveniences. We may suffer ourselves to be too much led away by great names, and to be too much subdued by overbearing authority. Our learning, in that case, is not so much an exercise of our judgement, as a proof of our docility . . .*

Blake and the Surrealists wanted no *exercise of judgement* at all, but it is noteworthy that even the augustly academic Reynolds warns against *authority, docility* and, further on in the same passage: *the tameness of the follower*. In the 12<sup>TH</sup> discourse Reynolds not only recommends taking hints from the accidents of brush work but suggests provoking them — just as Leonardo, another crucial source of the academic tradition, suggests exploiting random forms such as cracks in walls. Surrealism merely radicalizes such ideas, claiming that Art is exclusively, not partially, mysterious or irrational.

The intrusion of politics into Art prior to Marxism is strikingly illustrated by Neo-Classicism which, after the revolution of 1789, became the propaganda arm of French imperialism, and foreshadows Progressivism in its moralizing attitude, its condemnation of the previous style (rococo) on

moral and political grounds, as lacking republican *gravitas* and favoring aristocracy, its vision of a benighted past and advocacy of a shining future as embodied in artistic styles. It should go without saying that support or condemnation of imperialism, seriousness or frivolity are not, strictly speaking, artistic matters. Such linkages may be inescapable but however much politics and painting are sometimes mixed does not mean they are the same thing or that a given mixture is more than circumstantial.

Conceptualism is the ultimate, or disappearing point of artistic Progressivism. Abstraction had done away with representation in order to give full play to the essence: pure form and color. Conceptualism is the discovery of an even more profound essence: banishing form and color, conception is given free play. This frantic hunt for essence is a grotesque caricature of Platonism. At the end there is nothing left, which brings us to 1990 — a date now two decades in the past. The triumph of literature over painting is the death of Art.

## Post-Modernism

As the term suggests, Post-Modernism does not prolong Modernism. All that was left to prolong in 1990 was what Modernism had become: Progressivism. But where Progressivism abolished representation, Post-Modernism restores it. Post-Modernism prolongs “contemporary art” but only reflexively. It is a rudderless hulk blown on the winds of relativism — which our proverbial teenager can explain

with aplomb: each artist his own rule, each art work its own cosmos of meaning.

Art used to be understood as a sort of language; the dispute between *disegno* and *colore* was about how that language should be used to discourse on man and the cosmos. Discourse, or shared meanings are absent by definition in the context of radical relativism because even disagreement depends on shared meaning because it is predicated on a shared understanding of the object of disagreement. The very effort to explain or even define radical relativism—let alone to defend it—is auto-annihilating because it is discourse which as such implies a transcendental arena of shared meaning and real interaction, which radical relativism specifically denies. When each individual exists in the private bubble-cosmos of his own meaning and value, anything is “valid” because there is no basis on which to invalidate or criticize, or even to comment. Though it almost always is, no work of art can be intelligently praised in the relativist dispensation because it cannot even be understood, and therefore it is not really “seen”. Each artist generates a new and unique art, of which the artist himself—were this matter thought through—would be understood to be the ideal and indeed exclusive audience.

In the group criticisms which still take place in art schools—they have to do something—it is usually suggested that the person presenting his work explain his goals or values so the work can “be criticized on its own terms”. This is supposed to satisfy radical relativism but it is a farce because unless the goals which allegedly define the art can be understood in common they remain opaque, but if they can

be understood in common a transcendental arena exists, which evaporates the pretence of hermetically personal values. All this is thoughtless and silly and need not detain us further.

In practice Post-Modernism is a slow process of dissolution. Its actors are leaching out into a creeping array of more and more natural approaches. Painters do not tend to be particularly theoretical and the unusual abundance of 20<sup>TH</sup> century painting theory, as already indicated, usually fails to address painting itself. This turns out to be a handicap in the Post-Modernist situation because there is nothing to pit against the confusing persistence of Progressivism, the Surrealist idea or the strangle-hold of relativism, dead ends which tend to confine practice along tepid, awkward and impoverished lines.

Post-Modernisms understands itself as the production of images, objects or events the inner structure of which is a web of reference. The goal of this referential nexus is to impress the observer in a certain way. If accomplished this is qualified by any of the popular synonyms for mental derangement, which are to Post-Modernism what "modern" has become to art history: the ultimate compliment. In fact these terms have the same meaning, for we may charitably understand the Post-Modernist terms to mean "strikingly original". There is also a Post-Modernist discourse about space, though it is extremely vague. The goal is likewise is to provoke a sensation of surprise or newness. The content or nature of this new thing is irrelevant; it is the surprise quality which counts. Intellectually Progressivism persists because originality remains the ideal. The resultant work, however, is hard to characterize even with the term literature, because meaning

itself no longer counts. Meaning can be irrationally exciting — irrational excitement being the essence of fashion — but, even in Pop, that the meaning was exciting (if it was) was secondary to the meaning itself. In Post Modernism meaning (if any) only counts in so far as it generates excitement. The result is gestures such as replacement of paint with excreta, dead animals in glass vats, empty rooms and so on.

What of such Post-Modernists as Francis Bacon or Lucian Freud who are said (thanks to the restoration of representation, or the senility of Progressivism) to revive traditional painting? Instead of flattering bourgeois taste these men flatter the currently fashionable taste for sodomy and the sordid — which, it should be emphasized, are as much a matter of fashion as Victorian strictures. Lucien Freud is an even more illustrative painter than Bouguereau (a contention this essay will equip its readers to verify). Bacon's work, in an extremely limited, not to say infantile, sense has more decorative interest than Freud's. But if a Bacon is compared, for example, to a poster by Lautrec, the extent of Bacon's real concern with design becomes clear. Tracing out a few rectangles in crude perspective or, by contrast, elegant scribbles, are neither "structure" nor concern with design, because such things do not function in any painting-way. The reputations of these men are based on their remarkable talent for the grotesque, their ability to shock, i.e. mastery of a certain kind of illustration. Typical of Post-Modernism, they owe nothing to Early Modernism; though they stand at an opposite moral poll from Bouguereau and Cabanel their approach to painting is fundamentally the same.

## THE EARLY MODERNIST ANALYSIS

*"I am a waiter." Marcel Duchamp*

Early Modernist theory effected a rebirth or return which Renoir and Degas demonstrate recognizably. Monet, the Cubists, the Fauves and the Nabis, by contrast, are associated with innovations alien to the Western painting tradition, such as optics, photography or Japanese\* and African art. These may have played a minor or superficial roll, but Cubism owes far more to the western painting tradition than to African art, and Impressionism far more to Corot than to optics.

Early Modernist theory is like a rock buried in the soil of

\* Dow, like many Early Modernists, is extremely preoccupied with Japanese art because of its flatness and preoccupation with design. The flatness, however, is due to the primitive quality of Japanese perspective, not to emphasis on design. In his own work, which uses as much emphasis on design as Japanese Art, Dow never abandons sophisticated perspective. This—concern with design without abandoning sophisticated perspective—only results in typically Western painting. Also under Japanese influence Gauguin, unlike Dow, seems to have tried to abandon perspective, but his work really has more in common with Puvis than the Japanese. Japanese Art had a real influence on decorative Art in the West for several decades, but in painting its impact was mostly limited to how it provided a striking counter example to "illustrative art".

the western tradition. It is also, naturally, largely a visual matter, and to the extent it can be verbalized it must be in the special jargon of painting. We must therefore begin with a glossary. No dictionary can help us. There are only studio traditions and the sparse technical writings which have occurred over the centuries. The terms presented below are a reconstruction of Early Modernists discourse which is mostly based on older language. The historicity of individual terms, however, is less important than the concepts expressed, and we must get at these by studying and refreshing our own language. The concepts may seem banal, but each has profound implications and the terms will be used extensively in what follows.

Color is, or was, understood in painting to have four aspects. Value (or tone) is lightness and darkness. Temperature is coldness (blue and gray) and warmth (yellow, red, orange) (green and purple are more or less warm or cold depending on the proportion of blue, and any color, including red and blue, can be relatively warm or cold). Intensity or purity is the relative pureness of color, or dullness or grayness. Hue is the specific "color" ("red", "yellow", "blue", "brown", "black", "white", "pink", etc.).

As important as these four aspects is their hierarchy. The most important is value. Photography can help us understand this because almost any picture can be made black and white and remain almost completely legible. This is not because photography has made us used to black and white; it is equally true of dim light in which we continue to correctly interpret our surroundings but where hue is lost. Hue, which one might think is the most important aspect of color, is therefore the

least. Thus whether a color is, say, colder and duller or warmer and more intense, is also more important than the specific hue. Important to what? The question should be kept in mind.

The word "form" changes in context. In general a form is a shape. When discussing composition form means the overall or general idea or plan. In drawing form means volume, but volume equally means direction. In drawing a form must be more than simply volumetric but needs a direction in space. This is about how a form is legibly related to other forms, by taking a specific place in the depth carved out by the drawing. Another word for this is articulation.

Space means the illusion of depth.

Since illustration and decoration must work together, the represented thing, the subject, should be abstracted. Consider Bouguereau. Superficially, or to the untrained eye, his paintings seem like any other such paintings. But take *The Concert Champetre*. In this painting each shape, whether part of a figure or the landscape, is like a puzzle piece which fits together with others to create the form. A Bouguereau figure, by contrast, is an appliqué and the landscape a backdrop: the figure could be shifted without affecting the form. The landscape and figure may be lovely in themselves, but there is no decorative integration. The parts of a Bouguereau may be appealing but in *The Concert Champetre* the form itself is at the heart of the appeal; any shifting would destroy the form. Note the head of the central figure: it forms a dark shape against a passage of lighter ground, while the body is a lighter or more intense shape against darker ground. In this manner all the colors and shapes engage each other to generate the form.



This form remains operative even if the painting is turned upside down, or when we abstract from the subject. When a Bouguereau is turned upside down it becomes incoherent because there is no form in the proper sense.

Abstracting a subject means treating it, or understanding it, in terms of color and line, or decoratively. The elements of the form (i.e. the shapes on the surface) are the decorative aspect. But there is also the illustrative aspect, which opens up another dimension: depth. From a certain point of view composition can be said to a decorative matter; this, in part, is what the Early Modernist meant by opposing illustration to decoration.

## Space

There is an aspect of Early Modernist theory known largely though a studio tradition. Hans Hoffman, a student of Matisse, was the teacher of many Americans, including most of the Abstract Expressionists, at his school in New York.\* Among Hoffman students were teachers still active in the 1970s.† Figure drawing was the central feature of Hoffman's pedagogy. In this he agreed with the western tradition. Hoffman emphasized depth to the almost total exclusion of

\* Hoffman, like most artists of his time, was very political. He once gave a series of paying lectures on Art to raise money for the Spanish Civil War. I would be amazed if he were not among those Modernists convinced that pure abstraction was an historical necessity. His primary concern, however, both in his teaching and own work, which was non-objective, was space.

† I attended this school in 1974, as a student of Hoffman students. I also studied with other Hoffman students elsewhere.

other aspects of drawing, such as proportion and articulation. This emphasis, whatever else may be said about it, is also and nonetheless in essential agreement with the tradition. In the 17<sup>TH</sup> century, for example, a rough ink sketch by Rembrandt would have been prized above one of Bouguereau's essentially flat arabesques, because in Rembrandt the power is always less about the brusque handling (as impressive as that always is) than the spatial articulation. According to the Early Modernist analysis—which in this regard is simply a statement of the core technical idea of the whole painting tradition from Duccio to Delacroix—the essence of decoration is value (or pattern, i.e. *color and line* on the surface), and the essence of illustration is space or depth. Pattern is the flat; space breaks into the flat.

Depth in painting is symbolic, a meaning engendered in the mind. No matter how haphazardly or accidentally colors are distributed—or to the contrary how smooth, dull and confined to regular areas, and even if the painter's intention is to avoid it—space is generated by marks on the flat. When space is not deliberate it is confused and feeble but it is still unavoidable.

This is because of how we see. We have binocular vision. Our minds, cross-referencing images from two eyes and triangulating, give us visceral information about distance. This is the most important way we sense space but we read the spatial environment other ways also, building up a lifetime of familiarity with how the world appears. Near things, for example, overlap far things. When we cannot rely on binocular vision (which happens often) we are not lost spatially

because other visual clues are usually available. Because our interpretation of such clues is intimately associated with our binocular experience such non-binocular clues still tend to provoke a visceral sense of depth. When we see overlapping on a surface it is a familiar symbol which we read as space. It is illusion, only symbolic, but it functions. Thus even Abstract Expressionism is full of space. Pollacks or Mattas are like peering into a tangle of wire or sticks. The most austere Mondrians imply objects at different distances. Illusion of depth, or space, is the fundamental aspect of illustration. In the 1970s, when Abstract Expressionism was still the *nec plus ultra* of serious painting, the term "ambiguous space" was used a great deal, because, despite banishment of representation and the consequent doctrine of flatness, space persisted. The effort to eliminate space — to eradicate the deepest aspect of representation and thus to satisfy history by "affirming the surface" — paradoxically has the same result as illustrative painting. Illustrative painting provides certain symbols which help reconstitute space in ways non-objective paintings does not, but the more viscerally satisfying experience of space which occurs in real painting is similarly absent.

It is not neglect of the decorative aspect as such which is the problem. Dow deplores the loss of the *true relation* between *representation* and *design*. This is the crucial point. Illustration and decoration are unavoidable; painting resides not in its unavoidable aspects but in their true relation. There are really three kinds of painting: illustrative painting, true painting, and decorative painting. But only the central one has what might be called "painting space".

## Abstract Imagery

Non-representational painting does not escape the illustrative aspect.

Abstraction in the original sense is not equal, but is importantly related, to simplification and its corollaries; when abstraction is pushed to a certain point, therefore, representation becomes comic or grotesque. The grotesque is an important feature of Romanesque and renaissance art, and I mean the word in that sense; distorted and fantastical. And by comic or cartoonish I partly mean simplified and partly something which is funny or silly by its nature. Distortion can be deliberate but abstraction pushed very far imposes distortions which are not deliberate as such; the choice of radical abstraction is deliberate but the consequence of cartoonish or grotesque imagery is then inevitable. When abstraction is radicalized almost to the limit the grotesque shades into the crude and silly; when non-objectivity is reached there is something inevitably playful, at best, about the forms.

Matisse and Frans Marc use simplified forms but usually do not go so far as the grotesque. They never abandon crucial aspects of representation and representation-related grace. We might even say that their work has distant but audible echoes of the noble style. Most German Expressionism was often deliberately grotesque and thus cartoonish in a certain manner. Paul Klee or Miro might not have Matisse's

degree of interest in grace but their abstracted forms are self-consciously playful. They work with the grotesque in the best sense, deliberately giving their forms an amusing or delectable quality. Arp's "kidnoids" are pleasant, or amusing like Dali's melted clocks. It is thanks to Rothko's colors that his paintings are reputed spiritual; his shapes are as child-like as Arp's — though it pleases certain people to see in this crude simplicity something grand. But Rothko's shapes only contribute to "spirituality" though scale, because big things are impressive. If the same forms were small the effect would be more cerebral; like Joseph Albers, an intellectual game. Pollack's drips are associated with childish exuberance, not to say tantrums. Franz Klein's slashing and hacking are ultimately closer in affect to the Alice in Wonderland world of Surrealist imagery than, say, the dire, violent or nightmarish atmospheres of Salvador Rosa, Henry Fuseli or Allesandro Magniasco. Silly, cartoonish\* bizarre, brutish or cloddish imagery is the inevitable concomitant of a radical descent into non-objectivity, as is clear with Picasso. Examples in "contemporary art" include Basquiat, Keith Haring, Karl Appel, Fernando Chia. The quality of this imagery is not about inability to draw, as Picasso demonstrates. If these men cannot draw they could have learned; surely they do what they want to do! But at this degree of abstraction it is not possible to do much else. Basquiat's and Appel's brutishness, and Haring's tidy cartooning, are the extremes of the range of image types open

\* I mean no denigration of cartoon imagery. Herriman, Windsor MaKay or Jack Kirby are wonderful artists. I am simply indicating the effect of abstraction, understood as non-objectivity, on the illustrational aspect of painting.

to radical abstraction, i.e. to an anti-representational attitude.

Among the American Abstract Expressionists only Phillip Guston made a notable effort to work with space. His evolution towards cartoon imagery is therefore not such a great step as it might seem. Abstract Expressionism, which in Guston's case was perhaps politically unavoidable, forced him to deal with pattern, but apparently this was not where his heart lay. Even his non-objective paintings, compared to the other Abstract Expressionists, have a narrative quality: his forms tell a spatial story. His rectangals and other patches live a certain drama; they agglomerate and float in a vast light-filled space. These simple forms are related to his cartoon figures, as Pollack's chaotic abstract imagery is related to the crude nudes he originally painted, and which remained the subject of the "abstract" paintings — at least in his mind.

When Guston abandoned abstraction for unabashed comic narration he also abandoned concern with space. Contemplating Guston's work we can begin to glimpse Dow's *true relation* between the illustrative and the decorative. Imagery as such, whether the "classical" figures of Bouguereau\* or the cartoon figures of Guston, does not generate visceral painting space. Guston's "abstract" paintings are more spatial than either. This quality makes them a remarkable prolongation of the influence of Mattise into the second half of the 20<sup>TH</sup> century.

\* Bouguereau's figures are *not* classical. They owe more to an optical approach, and probably even to photography, than to Michaelangelo, Raphael, Poussin, David or even Ingres. Not that there is nothing ideal about them, but that ideal is a fashion ideal rather than a truly artistic one. Photography is certainly more important to some of the late 19<sup>TH</sup> century "academic painters" than to any of the Modernists.

There are painters of this type today, like Pierre Soulage. In such painting there are forms but no drawing (i.e. no volume or direction). The neo-abstraction practiced by some Post-Modernists, which tends toward a compromise between Abstract Expression and Minimalism — or, to give it a dignity it does not deserve, between Mondrian and Kandinsky — is mired in this same problem. The invented forms, whether geometrical, blobish or scattershot, are meant to suggest space but lack volume and direction. There is space but it is “ambiguous space”.

Now why, after all, cannot this sort of spatial abstraction be thought of as painting as the Early Modernist defined it? The latter certainly had nothing against decoration. Matisse sometimes emphasizes decoration or pattern to an extreme degree. In none of this work, however, even in the cut-outs — or on the other hand some of Degas’ notably illustrative paintings which seem to be based on photographs — is the interaction, the *true relation*, of the decorative and the illustrative ignored. The great fuss about “flatness” or “integrity of the surface” in the 50s though the 70s was symptomatic of a deliberate campaign to eliminate space. The work of Guston or Soulage is only less extreme: painting space is partly there, partly eliminated. It is vague and confused. It is an effort to have the cake and eat it too. The motivation which drives painters to this is fundamentally ideological.

That space occurs inevitably does not oblige the painter to take it into account. That all painting is constituted of pattern does not oblige the painter to take that into account either. Bouguereau aped the illusionism of painters like Valasques

or Ingres\* without coming to grips with the whole problem of painting.

## Cubism

By contrast to the unintentional, confused or “ambiguous” space of Abstract Expressionism, the early Cubism of Picasso and Braque has painting space in all its sculpted splendor. Cubism certainly cannot be accused of ignoring pattern, and it certainly exemplifies the Early Modernist idea of the *true relation*. In a way it is a high point of Modernism, and can therefore seem a high point of painting itself. But Cubism should be contrasted with Cezzan. African art is an influence on aspects of Picasso’s Cubist imagery but Cubism obviously comes out of Cezzan. The most obvious difference between Cubism and Cezzan is that Cezzan is more nuanced and suave. But if Cezzan is compared to most painting one is forced to say that it is Cezzan, for all his grandeur and invention, who lacks nuance and suavity. Compare him to Corot or Delacroix: one cannot say the latter are less spatially powerful, less dramatically convincing compositionally. Of course if you compare Cezzan to a Baron Gros or a Cabanel, their relative suavity seems feeble, saccharine, even pathetic.

\* That Ingres deliberately distorts his figures is fully in the spirit of Michaelangelo and Titian. But that he used such a finished style including remarkable effects of texture and light, is a somewhat extreme type of *colore*. The later academic painters were interested in the effects, not the classicizing distortions. They preferred an overwhelmingly optical approach, and abandoned the constructive principles still present with Ingres.



Cubism is exemplary of Early Modernism but it is also a culmination of another kind. The reaction against Bouguereau and company was not exclusively theoretical. A painter of the first rank like Renoir was above the sort of juvenile revolt represented by Cubist iconography. There is nothing theoretically necessary, nothing demanded by painting itself, in this attitude. It partakes of the snide and nihilistic tendencies born of the exigencies and frustrations inherent in the hope to transform man and society, and which, in addition to high spirits, underlay Dada and earlier cynical tricksters like the Hydrophobes, Fumists or Hirsutes. The African influence in Cubism is like Josephine Baker's banana skirt. This sort of thing will go on but it has nothing to do with painting.

But Cubist imagery cannot be reduced to this. I have the impression Braque was less moved by such sentiments than the charm of Picasso's inventiveness. The relative crudity of Cezzan is a completely different matter.\* Cezzan wanted to draw like Ingres but this turned out to be impossible for him. So he invented a system of basic forms (spheres, cubes and cones) to which he reduced everything. This system may have limits but it gets to the heart of the matter: form. Better to draw like Cezzan, crudely but to the point, than to carefully trace arabesques without spatial tension like Bouguereau. This was understood by Matisse who never allowed his remarkable gift for the graceful to interfere with the problem of depth, and it was understood by the Cubists.

\* The difference between Cezzan and Picasso is that the former was a slave to Art while for the latter Art was a slave.

## THE ROOTS OF MODERNISM

*"History is bunk." Henry Ford*

How are space and pattern made to function together so that Dow's *true relation*, or "art" is achieved? To address this we must make a foray into history. Matisse's teacher, Gustave Moreau, was the student of Ingres; Ingres was the student of David, and David was the student of a giant in his own time, a painter who looms unseen over Modernism: François Boucher.

In his 12<sup>TH</sup> discourse the great English painter, and head of the English academy, Joshua Reynolds, discusses "nature":

*. . . the French are much in this practice of extempore invention . . . The late director of their Academy, Boucher, was eminent in this way. When I visited him some years since in France, I found him at work on a very large picture, without drawings or models of any kind. On my remarking this particular circumstance, he said, when he was young, studying his art, he found it necessary to use models; but he had left them off for many years.*

For Reynolds painting was based on principles, but also on "nature" (i.e. working from models), and he was highly

preoccupied with the noble and exalted — our neglect of which has affected our understanding of Art. Any style, Reynolds teaches, comes out of social attitudes and is expressed in a language. As he put it in the 14<sup>TH</sup> discourse: . . . *the language of art, the art of imitation, must be learned*. . . It was for this reason that trips to Italy were important: to learn the language of what Reynolds called the “historical style”, which he thought was the highest type of painting and which nothing in England could teach. Reynolds points out that Gainsborough did not make this trip but confined himself to portraiture and English landscape, wisely making no attempt to practice the historical, or noble style (of which Michaelangelo is the premier representative). Reynolds recognized Boucher for a very able painter but saw his work as radically flawed for two reasons: it is lacking in “nature”, and it used the subject matter of the historical style (gods and heroes) but failed (as Gainsborough would have failed) to be truly noble or heroic.

The 20<sup>TH</sup> century, so contemptuous of Reynolds’ preoccupations, agreed with him about Boucher, and while there is much heavy-handed seriousness in Modernism, there are also artists like Le douanier Rousseau, Duchamp, Dali, Miro and Magritte. Is the condemnation of such powerfully constructive painters as Boucher and Fragonard for “frivolity”, which cost them two centuries of neglect, fundamentally about the contrast between their sentimental, elegant and good humored attitudes towards their subjects, and the severe and tonic personages of Raphael or Poussin? What an irony if the 20th century agrees with Reynolds on this moralizing point!

Attitudes toward Boucher have evolved in the last quarter

century but he is still far from being correctly appreciated. The prejudice against him was never as strongly aimed at Tiepolo, though that artist can also discount nobility, but Tiepolo's compositional power was never totally unrecognized. Caneletto, also ironically, is admired for his imagery, for having so convincingly represented his subject, rather than for the remarkable compositional force which would have been the logical focus of modern appreciation. All this is notable in a time overwhelmingly concerned with pure painting, for the summit of pure painting is Boucher. This is what Reynolds means by his *eminence*; Boucher not only ignored nature, he did not use *drawings of any kind*, i.e. his power of conception and construction was unparalleled. Boucher is more cubist than Cubism itself. When it comes to conception, composition, space and invention, Cubism is to Boucher as a dog cart is to a Fararri. With Boucher there is not just a crude, (though very satisfying) relief, but a totally organized and highly complex tesseract of spatial dynamics, the ultimate integration of space and pattern, the *true relation* in the absolute. Boucher is so important because no painter, before or since, mastered this central business to a higher degree or demonstrates it with greater clarity. Furthermore, given the developing situation created by modern philosophy,\* Boucher had a unique influence on subsequent painting leading up to artistic Modernism. That this influence went totally unacknowledged takes nothing away from its reality, and makes the whole affair only that much more remarkable.

\* Namely the new emphasis on technology and thus theory; or the growing scientific and human-centered basis of society, pushing aside religion, and with it the older artistic goals. Painting was coming to be about painting.

## The Baroque Style

Boucher, of course, did not come from nowhere.

In the 17<sup>TH</sup> century *disegno* and *colore*, tending to become radicalized, give rise to two approaches to painting which have been named: Mannerism and Caravagism. There is a third approach which seems traceable to Dominichino. It was called, or came out of, the so-called Roman School. There was a famous opposition between Carravagio and Dominichino.\* The latter is practically forgotten today but it is he, particularly as an influence on Poussin, who had the greater impact on the painting tradition. Carravagio emphasized the optical or illusionistic. This is a radicalization of *colore* which, apart from some famous and important exceptions, failed to dominate western painting. Dominichino seems to have codified the stylized landscape as theater of biblical or classical drama. Poussin worked this genre with tremendous success, and Claude Loraine made it his own. It became the standard exercise of French academic education even into the 20<sup>TH</sup> century. It was of particular importance to Early Modernism, thanks to Puvis de Chavanne — a painters whose crucial roll in Modernism has been forgotten for forty years. More than any other painter in this well mined vein — which runs up to Cezzan's bathers — Puvis makes clear its emphasis on pattern by his use of delineated and flattened areas of color. The importance of the word "decorative" in the Early Modernist vocabulary is certainly related to the influence of Puvis.

\* Which had a personal aspect because the brutal Carravagio bullied the mild Dominichino.

In addition to his way of painting, or his way of exploiting or renewing a venerable tradition, Puvis also evokes the old nobility, but he does this in a typically French way, as the music of Debussy or the writing of Anatole France evoke ancient Greece; gracefully, poetically, without the severe and fantastical grandeur of Michaelangelo but not without a magical charm and a certain suave dignity. This typically French attitude is traceable back through Watteau (a fundamental influence on Boucher) to Charles La Fosse and the school of Fontainebleau, this latter being a branch of Mannerism.

Now this is an exaggeration: there is obviously an important element of *colore* in La Fosse, and Watteau can hardly be called a Mannerist! Radicalizing *disegno* means emphasizing idealized form. Pushed to an extreme it means the triumph of what might be called arabesque. Arabesque in this sense, however, is by no means the same as “design” or the decorative aspect. It is a stylized attitude towards illustration—in contrast to the optical or realistic attitude of Caravaggio. In this light it is fair to say that Watteau’s gracile figures and trees have more in common with Rosso, Primaticcio and Cellini (the artists who brought Mannerism to France via Fontainebleau), than to either Caravaggio or Poussin.

Now the tradition from Poussin (which begins in the Roman School, with the Carracci and Dominichino, and which was essential for Reynolds) in contrast to Caravagism and Mannerism, is an effort to prolong the balanced practice of the 16<sup>TH</sup> century. It avoids radicalized *colore* and *disegno*. To put it another way, this approach is less about the look of painting—which, from the modern perspective, is what

*colore* and *disegno* are about — than about the essence, as later understood by the Early Modernists, namely composition. Emphasis on composition, however, has its own logic, which led it towards what became known as the baroque. This is because of its concentration on the inner workings of painting. I suspect that the essence of the baroque style was first reached by Luca Giordano, another largely forgotten painter greatly important in his time.

We might say that, compared to Poussin, Carravagio is realistic but less formal, not to say formless; the compositions of this great artist are by no means unsatisfying but their structures are more due to the logic, or fallout, of observation than the sort of construction which is the hallmark of Poussin. On the other hand, compared to Carravagio certain Giordanos are like geometrical figures or decorative patterns.

Again, this is exaggeration, but these simplifications have some use. The constructions of the baroque and the arabesques of radicalized *disegno*, though related by their artificiality, have a fundamental difference. The latter is part of the illustrative aspect because it is about how things look, while the former is part of the decorative aspect, or construction. Radicalized *colore* (Caravagism) faded quickly but radicalized *disegno* (Mannerism) survived in a certain way in France into the 18<sup>TH</sup> century. Boucher represents the ultimate convergence of this radical *disegno* and the baroque: he is the ultimate in illustration as artificial arabesque (gracile figures, invented rather than painted from models) and the decorative aspect as construction. That his illustrative side is deliberately abstracted (i.e. without nature, or invented) and that his construction is

self-conscious in every aspect, make his painting — to speak anachronistically — “Modernist”. Boucher does what Cubism does but at a higher level.

The noble style is ultimately about illustration; about how things look, the story they tell. Boucher never bothered about nobility, and only barely about story. He took his iconography from Watteau, and blithely abandoned almost all but the look of it. He counseled the young Fragonard not to take the 16<sup>TH</sup> and 17<sup>TH</sup> century painters too seriously, to ignore their grand nobility. Perhaps thanks to this Fragonard had only a short period of discouragement and depression in Rome.

When it comes to representation, Renoir is like Boucher: exclusively interested in that delectation proper to painting itself. Boucher is to the noble style what Wodehouse is to the ordinary novel: there is a story but its *raison d'être* is structure. Boucher's profound illustrative interest was the arabesque of volume and direction, which he used within pattern. He was a fully “abstract” painter in the exact sense of the word.

In a triumphal spasm of the *Guerre des Bouffons* Boucher and Fragonard, like the representational painters in 1960, were purged. Various influences, with no essential relation to painting — which I have, and will mention — provoked a slow renewal of radicalized *colore* which can be traced from David, through Ingres (with his effects) to Bouguereau (with his optical emphasis). The latter, given the *true relation*, and compared to Caravaggio (who discounts but does not abandon the decorative aspect) can hardly be called a painter. To the essence of this we now turn.



## PAINTING

*"Painting is pictures of anything under the sun made with lines and colors, and its purpose is delectation." Poussin*

Words are vain in this exercise if the reader will not make direct reference to actual painting and reconstructs the analysis visually for himself.

We have seen that pattern implies space—i.e. that form, or space, is generated by even the most random patches of color. And that even the most extreme illusion, and thus depth or space, is generated by patches of paint. Painting therefore consists of two inevitably interacting systems: a system of pattern and a system of space, or what happens on the surface and what happens in depth. This is theoretical because the systems cannot be separated in practice.

The space system might be called the drawing. The pattern-system consists of areas of color which, first of all, are areas of a given value. They are also areas of temperature, intensity and hue; a given value area may therefore consist of two parts, one warmer, one colder. Such an area may be contiguous with other areas which are, say, lighter but also warmer and

colder. The warm or cold colors form their own areas, which overlap value areas, and so on. In a similar way volumes are represented in a given perspective which generate specific forms on the flat — or such forms might overlap to define new areas which have nothing to do with representation as such. So drawing defines volumes which, despite direction or spatialness, are inevitably expressed as areas on the surface, i.e. in terms of pattern.

Imagine a simple form: a garden wall with a sky behind, in which is a cloud. If the point of view is square-on, the wall will be some sort of rectangle (if not, a rhombus). The wall must be some color, and this might be different from the colors of the surrounding forms.\* There is great leeway here because such a color difference, to be sufficient as a difference, need only concern one of the four aspects of color. Now imagine a shadow falling on the wall, forming a darker shape. This does not disturb the volume of the wall because the drawing gives it "direction"; it is intentional and spatially stable. We now have four areas of color which might be contiguous on the surface but in space are certainly not. The cloud and wall-shadow might share the same value: in this way a new area or unity is created. We now have the following situation: a flat surface on which is represented depth — the distance between wall and sky — superimposed upon which is a flat value area illustratively common to wall shadow and cloud. This value area does not represent anything. It is not a volume. It is pure pattern, and as such it contradicts the space. Or we might say

\* A color difference is not strictly speaking necessary because a line is sufficient to differentiate forms.

that it is in maximum tension with the space because, as pattern, it lies flat on the surface, but as cloud it is far and as wall it is near. In fact this heightens our awareness of the picture space. It is the essence of Hoffman's "push and pull".\*

In the same manner forms may be aligned along straight lines or curves, which express themselves on the surface while linking forms in disparate spatial positions.

This explanation is simplified but fundamental. Such dynamic contradictions between surface and depth, *which cannot occur outside the context of representation*, is the profound charm of painting. It is the reason the Early Modernists condemned "illustrative painting". Again; this matter can only be suggested in words. It must be experienced visually to be understood.

### Some Examples

Titian's *Pope Paul III and his Grandsons* (Naples) is a very clear example of drawing and color interacting in this manner, but almost any great painting provides clear examples.

The ideal way to see the difference between illustrative painting and true painting is to compare Canaletto's views of *SS. Giovanni e Paulo and the Scuola di S. Marco* (both displayed in the Metropolitan Museum show of 1989, see back cover). The earlier Dresden painting (particularly the left side), compared

\* It is my understanding, both from what I have heard and from looking at his work, that in his own work Hoffman concentrated on color itself as activator of space. This would have been an error, in that it would have given a secondary factor primary importance. In this he would have missed the *true relation*, and betrayed the tradition.

to the later view (from a private collection) is more illustrative because it ignores the problem of pattern, and thus it is flatter.\* The later is grandly dominated by triangular areas which careen across the surface and into the space. Several early Canaletto's have the weakness of the Dresden painting.

Any Boucher is an excellent example. The *Venus and Vulcan* composition (which exists as a large painting in the Louvre) is a particular favorite of mine. The shapes are multifarious, twisting and often diaphanous, but the form is geometrically organized. The space is complex and active and the painting has both breadth and focus.

Boucher should be compared to Cubism, as well as Bouguereau (or equivalent) and non-objective painting.

## The Spirit of Boucher

Painting is more than a formal exercise—though you would not know it to have listened, as I did, to the exclusively formalist discourses of the 1970s. Boucher's exuberant iconography in particular has no necessary connection to the formal aspect of his work, but all painting is necessarily harnessed by iconography of some sort. It is mysteriously ironic that the Modernist passion for essences and purity was blinded to the greatest example of pure painting because it could not see beyond the very thing it pretended most to

\* This seems paradoxical but is instantly understood when seen. It is the essence of what I am trying to demonstrate.

despise (representation), and that the iconography in question happened to embody everything it abhorred politically. Already in the early 19<sup>TH</sup> century Boucher was held in low esteem (many of his paintings were deliberately destroyed during the French revolution) but this did not impede the tradition of practice upon which he put an unprecedented stamp. The character of Cubist imagery, which dispenses with models to reconstruct reality in a stylized language, is equivalent to the approach about which Reynolds complains. These are the reasons I claim that Boucher was the fundamental influence on Cubism. The influence is profound and essential.

The Early Modernist analysis is a lucid but incomplete statement about aspects of Boucher's practice, which was the fundamental strata of French 19<sup>TH</sup> century painting. It was this which the Early Modernists sought to revive, against the illustrative extremism of the official guardians of the flame. These did not include Puvis, or other painters in the academy important to Modernism, which is why the problem was never the academy or academicism as such.\* The anti-authoritarianism of certain Modernists is simply another non-painting issue. The rolls of Manet and Whisler should also be revisited.\*

\* The problem was caused by an ever greater emphasis on representation, which affected painting in general but not the greatest painters, namely Corot and Delacroix. Ingres' emphasis on effects of light and texture is a typical symptom. This tendency has two causes: the influence of 18th painting theory and discourse, which thoughtlessly emphasize representation, and ideological factors foreign to painting stemming from the French revolution, i.e. subordination of Art to politics, which is to say, the instrumentalization of painting for propaganda—which also happened to Modernism in the 1930s—and which thrusts painting towards illustration.

What of 16<sup>TH</sup> century painting? Because it does not proceed in the baroque manner is it therefore lacking? The great masters of every period were alive to the fundamentals of painting. Boucher's treatment of these fundamentals is as sophisticated, systematic and powerful as possible. *The Concert Champetre* may lack the same degree of system, but it is perfectly effective. Painting works a certain way, so it whispers to painters how to paint. System is subordinate to visual awareness. Michaelangelo's compositional method is more basic but no less satisfying. He fills a space with a figure or figures whose parts, thanks to his spatial invention and color handling, create a fascinating form. His *Last Judgement* is a patchwork of marvelous compositions, elements of which are the most profound influence on the baroque approach. The Venetian painters had a natural or even naive approach; their compositional modes are to the baroque what Monteverdi is to Mozart. 16<sup>TH</sup> century compositions (those of the great masters) are more varied than Boucher because they depend less on system, but their integration of space and pattern is often satisfying at the highest level.

The same cannot be said of Abstract Expressionism, while Minimalism and Neo-Dada can hardly be spoken of in formal terms.

To accept at their self-evaluation the disparate phenomena accumulated under the aegis of "contemporary art" means

\* One of Manet's main contributions to modernism was his attitude, which I believe contributed to the ideological collapse of the 1930s, while Whistlers' originality was really a new sort of *colore*, i.e. it often pointed away from the basic modernist direction and was in fundamental harmony with so called "academic" painting.

prior acceptance of the contention that the nature of Art has evolved. But does the very term Post-Modernism not underscore the senility of this theory? And is such evolution necessary to understanding the phenomena in question when Renoir's term is so adequate? The evolutionary vocabulary may be wind but it succeeded in blowing the mantel of artistic prestige off the shoulders of the last men unquestionably worthy to bear it. The burden of proof is now on the puffers to show that pattern, including natural or accidental stains on walls, no longer implies space, that drawing no longer implies pattern, and that these natural phenomena, which make painting what it always had been hitherto, were, by some miracle, rescinded in 1960.

Modernism, for a time and incompletely, revived the spirit of Boucher. This went awry. The cadaver only remains among us, imposing by its sheer mass and inertia. It will be washed away on the resurgent tide of radicalized *colore*, in a form even more extreme than Bouguereau — of whom, despite all the forgoing, it should in justice be said that he was not exactly a slouch.







A Letter to A Herzen Reading Mother  
From Her Dostoyevsky Reading Son



## A Letter to A Herzen Reading Mother From Her Dostoyevsky Reading Son

I've just reread the first chapter of "The Possessed", and there is indeed no question but that Dostoyevsky links Herzen with Stepan Trofimovitch. Dostoyevsky's narrator (who is by no means equivalent to Dostoyevsky himself) calls Stepan Trofimovitch an 'old style liberal' who espoused 'the higher liberalism'. He is linked explicitly with Herzen (chapter 1 section 1), and Herzen is mentioned throughout the book. That Stepan Trofimovitch's nobility, unlike Herzen's, is pretty shallow, that unlike Herzen he is neither courageous nor hardworking but clownish, self-preoccupied and lazy, does not do away the point: the attitude, ideas and activity of Herzen, or men like him, are responsible for the worst human catastrophes. Dostoyevsky expresses this in various ways. It is first made explicit in chapter 1 section 6 where Stepan Trofimovitch, after his disastrous trip to St. Petersburg with Vavara Petrovna, reports to his provincial circle (of which the narrator is a member):

*. . . "you cannot imagine what wrath and sadness overcome your whole soul when a great idea, which you have long cherished as holy, is caught up by the ignorant and dragged fourth before fools like themselves into the street, and you suddenly meet it in the market unrecognizable, in the mud, absurdly set up, without proportion, without harmony, the plaything of foolish louts! No! In our day it was not so,*

*and it was not this for which we strove. No, no, not this at all. I don't recognize it. . . Our day will come again and will turn all the tottering fabric of today into a true path. If not, what will happen? . . . "*

In other words the 'idea' held sacred by the relatively noble-minded Stepan Trofimovitch, is the same 'idea' which is "dragged in the mud", i.e. what Herzen finds so beautiful can very easily become ugly — or that the 'idea' cannot, of itself, given the various nature of humanity, maintain its own beauty. This is underlined in the story by how the idealistic sentiments cherished by Vavara Petrovna and Stepan Trofimovitch reappear as the actions of their children: machination, scandal, crime, murder, suicide; all for the 'cause', and all of which, in the end, and beyond the horror, turns out to be pointlessly malicious and absurd.

It is easy to say that Dostoevsky is a prophet. What, indeed, could be more inspiring of horror than what happened in Russia less than half a century later, and how, in hindsight, can all the misery wrought in the name of the 'great cause' be characterized other than malicious and absurd? Does not the horror contradict and condemn the 'idea'? Is not the 'cause' (i.e. the dedication of the perpetrators) condemned by their malice? Given that today so many still defend the 'great idea' and espouse the 'cause', apparently the horror neither contradicts it nor does the malice condemn it. On French radio I have listened — in amazed fascination — to countless hours of apologetics of Marxism and Communism since 1990, and this has only intensified in the last 2 years. This does not mean Dostoevsky was wrong, it only means that Stepan Trofimovitch

is alive and well. I say Dostoevsky was not 'wrong'; I do not say he was not a false prophet, because I don't think he was a prophet; he was simply intelligent and great of heart. To understand the roll of the Vavara Petrovnas and the Stepan Trofimovitches in such matters is only a matter of basic human understanding — and only for those who care to look at such things and think about them.

Dostoyevsky's attitude, though rare, is not unique. In the 1935 introduction to our Modern Library edition, Avraham Yarmolinsky calls Dostoevsky a "reactionary", and says the book is "begotten of fear and wrath", that it is an "exaggerated, distorted, anachronistic picture of gullible fools and fiends with a mania for destruction". He qualifies this damnation to a slight extent but obviously Yarmolinsky was not seeing, in 1935, what lots of other people were also not seeing. Some, of course, were not being shown — and were only too happy to continue to believe — but many who should have seen and known were busy refusing to see and know because they were eager not to see or know anything damning their 'great idea', their precious 'cause'.

The argument now takes a sudden and predictable shift. Granting all this, it will be demanded, what does Dostoevsky propose: a Tsar and serfdom? If that were indeed the alternative then any descent person should, indeed, prefer a Tsar and serfdom, however darkly painted, to the unprecedented horror of the USSR with its unrelenting conquest, sabotage, torture and mass murder. The prisons of Tzarist Russia were notoriously luxury hotels compared to the Gulag — like the pre-Revolutionary Bastille (one only has

to read Madame de Staal de Launay, who, when she was locked up was not Madam de anything but merely a lackey) compared to the prisons of modern France. So, given the worst that the Tsars and serfdom could produce; yes, these are preferable to the practical consequences of the 'great idea'. But this is by no means the alternative, and by no means what Dostoevsky had in mind! So: what did he have in mind?

The question cannot be opened without first treating certain things which tend to be smothered under our short-sighted contemporary assumptions. Consideration of these neglected things will eventually lead us to aspects of Christian theology but the path is not direct. Dostoevsky, like Solzhenitzyn, is a 'reactionary' because his analysis of the human situation comes from a place ruled out by the leading spirits, including, in particular, the 'higher liberals'. To get to the point where Dostoevsky's attitude becomes comprehensible we must travel a certain distance in the history of philosophy, but first I will underline another point in "The Possessed", one which Yarmolinsky unjustly characterizes when he mentions a letter Dostoevsky sent to the future Alexander III with the gift of the book, in which Dostoevsky, according to Yarmolinsky, "*sought to show how the revolutionary movement was brought about by the divorce of the educated classes from the masses*". I have not seen the letter but this cannot have been what Dostoevsky meant. The cause of revolutionary movements is explained by Dostoevsky as the 'idea' or the 'cause'. The nature of the 'idea' or 'cause' will not be clear until we discuss Modern Philosophy, but this "divorce of the educated classes from the masses" (which I don't think Dostoevsky would have characterized in such

terms) is something he is explicit about, as in this speech by Stepan Trofimovitch (chapter 1, section 9):

*"Like hasty people we have been in too great a hurry with our peasants . . . We have made them the fashion, and a whole section of writers have for several years treated them as though they were newly discovered curiosities. We have put laurel wreathes on lousy heads. The Russian village has given us only 'Kamarinsky' in a thousand years. A remarkable Russian poet who was also something of a wit, seeing the great Rachel on the stage for the first time cried in ecstasy; 'I wouldn't exchange Rachel for a peasant!'. I am prepared to go further. I would give all the peasants in Russia for one Rachel. . ."*

The passage continues to show how Stepan Trofimovitch became extremely alarmed for his own safety when there were any rumors of peasant uprisings, however dubious.

What this means is not that Dostoevsky had some sort of "blood and earth" attitude whereby social chaos is generated when society loses coherence because the elites lose touch with the masses, but that, to the contrary, it is the 'idea' (an elite matter) which generates a social divide. The divide may have a negative action but it is the revolutionary movement, already underway, which causes it. To be explicit: Dostoyevsky's view, from everything I can see, is not that revolution is caused by elites losing touch with the masses.

Old style aristocrats and peasants in 'traditional society' not only live and work side by side in familiarity and in the same mental and physical world, but even share the same pleasures and pains. This is still going on in France — though of course

on a very small and socially not very significant scale. The remnant of both aristocracy and peasantry share a passion for the land, for owning it and for hunting in particular, which they do together. "Michto" the mason who built my studio, a magnificent and now rare example of the French peasant type, a man who lives from hand to mouth and close to the land, is also the president of the hunting club of his village, and because he has the best dog pack in the whole region for certain types of hunting he spends lots of time at castles, hunting at fancy outings with barons and counts. A few years ago yet another political party was started in France, called "Hunting, Fishing and Tradition". It made a splash in a few elections, and its adherents are mainly aristocrats and peasants, once again together.

The revolutionary idea creates a divide in society because it rejects 'tradition'; the divide, however, is not between those who reject tradition and those who cleave to it. As Dostoevsky makes clear is not a matter of mutual misunderstanding; it is a matter of mockery, contempt and disdain coming from above towards those below. We see this now in America. There is a terrible tendency for what might be called 'the educated elites' to look at 'middle Americans' — those who watch NASCAR, drink beer by the keg, live in tract houses, fart, spit, curse, hunt, fish, drive 4x4s, eat at Macdonald's, work in factories, own guns and go to church — with something close to horror. They do not recognize themselves in these knuckle-dragging neolithics. They are disgusted and repulsed by them. They see them as hopelessly retrograde obstacles to the 'idea' and the 'cause' (in its current forms of course). These lower orders



must be stifled and controlled. They are an alien body, not part of a common social fabric. The traditional aristocrat may look down on the peasant in a certain manner, but they are not alien. They form his army, grow his food, are his hunting companions and share his celebrations. He may or may not love them, he may see them as *unter-menchen*, but he does not regard them as actually sub-human. He may be the natural God-ordained leader, but by the same token they are his responsibility, or he is allied with them, in a pre-existing order of things. There is something above both aristocrat and peasant which brings and holds them together under a common dispensation, a fundamental commonality deeper than countervailing distances and prejudices.

Traditional society may have classes and fixed modes, and social mobility may be difficult, but the divorce evoked by Yarmolinsky is not one which breaks traditional preordained distances between individuals of different classes. It is a symptom of 'revolutionary movement', a movement which, normally, should have the opposite effect and abolish class differences. But, according to Dostoevsky, revolutionary movement creates social division of unprecedented width, rents in the social fabric which are uncrossable gulfs. The view of 'traditional society' as having certain characteristics (like classes and lack of social mobility) is over-simplified however. There are all sorts of 'traditional' societies, by which I mean societies not menaced by revolutionary movement. In traditional American society social mobility has always been very great. But social mobility of various sorts characterize many other societies. European societies, even in the middle

ages, were rarely as rigid as Asiatic societies, and though few societies — perhaps none — have ever been as internally mobile as American society there are many examples to point to. In 15<sup>TH</sup> century Italy a mere peasant boy, Titiano Vicelli, thanks to artistic talent, become associated with all the kings and emperors of his day, and fabulously wealthy. This was the case with many artists. Several painters, not content with mere riches, bargained their way into the nobility. Or Joan of Arc; an uneducated peasant girl at the head of the royal army. This was no crazy whim of some addled king; before Charles VII gave Joan this unprecedented command she was sent to Poitiers where she was run through an inquisition by the most educated and highest ranking authorities and counselors of the day (the record of this event has been lost but the record of her trial gives a good sense of how things must have gone). So here was a society where authority and intelligence was by no means hobbled by social prejudice and habit (assuming these existed), even in this extreme case. ("The Princess Cassimassima" contains a similar idea, more hinted at then developed. What seems to impress James, in the words of Stepan Trofimovitch, is how the lower orders become *newly discovered curiosities*, or how the elites crown *lousy heads* with *laurel wreathes*. But James does not go much farther than that. He is interested in class relations within society more than society itself.)

So, if the social divide, per Yarmolinsky, does not cause the revolution, what does? Where do the revolutionary ideas come from? What is the origin of the 'idea' or the 'cause'? It comes from Modern Philosophy, and in a certain respect is even identical with Modern Philosophy. I will only mention that the

major point of departure is Machiavelli and Spinoza — though it is by no means as if the special ideas developed by modern thinkers were unknown to antiquity. In antiquity these ideas were known and rejected. Leo Strauss examines this point, which should by no means be understood as a condemnation of Modern Philosophy by Strauss, who categorizes himself as a modern intellectual. The condemnation, which is seen from the 'modern' perspective as 'reactionary', comes from men like Dostoevsky and Solzhenitzyn.

The term "reactionary" is part of the vocabulary of the Modern perspective; the relation of "reactionary" to "modern" should be understood.

The rise of Modern Philosophy precedes, accompanies and is then overshadowed by the rise of science and technology. The rise of science is, at first, identical with the rise of Modern Philosophy. Modern philosophy is predicated upon atheism but Modern science is not equivalent to atheism. Modern science is like philosophy; both are a quest, unguided or unhampered by revelation or theology, for knowledge of the cosmos. Both are a direct approach to knowledge. Philosophy is distinguished from religion not in being opposed to God but in being apart from Him. Science, in its initial forms, like post-Socratic classical philosophy, was not opposed to God. It proceeded outside religious tutelage but not in opposition to it. Science is not opposed to God but neither is it, as such, beholden to God. By "as such" I mean that its practitioners may have felt, or feel, beholden to God personally, or think their researches and findings benefit from divine aid. But the process of science itself — systematic observation, logic, mathematics and

so on—was not religious as, say, alchemy which sought to tap into a divine process, or to manipulate concepts of matter which, in a certain sense, have more in common with theology than physics.

Modern science became so important not because of itself, not i.e. because of theoretical knowledge, but because this theoretical knowledge gave rise to technology. The meaning of technology, for humanity, is power. Power is very important for humans, and technology is power. The most obvious example is military power: the power to destroy through control of violent explosions. One of the pillars of the colonial age is the power the West gained through technology. The opening of commerce with Japan by American gun boats is a nice example. Military power, of course, is not the only sort of power technology brings. Agricultural and medical technology give power to live longer, healthier lives, and so on and so on.

The progress of science and technology from the 15<sup>TH</sup> through the 17<sup>TH</sup> century was so spectacular, and garnered so much power, that it started to have a tremendous effect on humanity's outlook. In a certain important way this effect culminates in the 19<sup>TH</sup> century with Positivism. Positivism is a form of Modern Philosophy explicitly based on certain assumptions related to science—though more fundamentally it is based on enthusiasm about power. The assumptions in question are dubious. Many of them are no better than “unsubstantiated dogma”. But it is easier to see this today than it was in the 19<sup>TH</sup> century when the progress of science and technology seemed to be boundless and unqualifiedly good. Today we have become suspicious of technology. It is

sufficient to mention cloning, atom bombs or pesticide. Rightly or wrongly we are no longer as enthusiastic about technology as we used to be, and many people have even turned against it.

Positivism, unlike the more circumspect Modern philosophy proper, explicitly rejects religion — i.e. it is anti-clerical — and embraces scientific progress leading to greater and greater human power. This progress, or enthusiasm about it, is the origin of Progressivism. In the old philosophical view life was radically uncertain. The wheel of fortune turned. Life was understood to be precarious. There might be progress, but then there was also regression. Progress was neither inevitable nor infinite; it depended in some measure on chance, and in any case was finite. Today we are still deeply affected by attitudes stemming from Positivism. There are people who believe that, given medical progress, it should soon be possible to achieve actual physical immortality. In the 1950's Jack Vance wrote a book about this ("Clarges" a classic view of the human and social problems which technological immortality would involve), and he is not the only one. There are people who actually get themselves frozen in order to benefit from technology of the future. Such people may be crack-pots but there are plenty of them. The pervasive 'youth culture' is a milder form of the same thing. Aging and physical decline is no longer seen as an unfortunate development softened by inevitability. Of course, in some ways, at least in the West, it really is not as inevitable as it once was, but my point is that people go beyond simply benefiting from new possibilities, they have also changed their attitude, so that, for example, those who fail to remain youthful in spite of age can be seen

as irresponsible and somehow at fault. Aging has a tendency to become a sort of sin, something shameful for which a person is responsible rather than a pitiable condition beyond our control. I insist on this point only as a clear contemporary sample of how technological progress can affect attitudes. In the 19<sup>TH</sup> century the effect was strong, and progress through science and technology not only affected philosophy, giving rise to Positivism, but became a sort of religion—not an actual religion, but a basically religious attitude—known as Scientism. Scientism is faith or hope in science, for what it will bring mankind, a new kind of man-made salvation: prosperity, cures, powerful gadgets and ultimately, through these things, happiness.

The essential idea of Positivism, that through scientific progress man can make the world and himself into whatever he wants, points to something beyond science. It is a vision of existence where no god sets rules or limits, where human progress is open-ended and depends only on human will. God certainly has nothing to do with it, and even 'fate' (unexpected events or results) plays no essential roll. Positivism is the transfer of an enthusiastic and hopeful attitude infecting science to the human realm. Thus the most characteristic aspect of Positivism does not concern science at all but is the idea that man determines the moral order. It is man, not God, who says what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, what is ugly and beautiful. This is because the cosmos is just a mechanism; there is no morality or values inherent in things. Values and morals are just stuff people make up. People are the

only possible source of concepts; a mechanism generates no concepts.

As anyone can see we are still, in many ways, living in the age of Positivism, and in consequence we enjoy an evolving or 'progressive' morality, and relativistic notions about such things as Art and beauty. The examples are familiar. Homosexuality used to be a perversion, now it is a life-style choice. Abortion used to be murder, now it is the right of a woman to control her body. Crime used to be a consequence of depravity, now it is a consequence of privation. This last point is crucial. The ever expanding roll of government and entitlement programs — a world-wide process which began in the 19<sup>TH</sup> century — is predicated on a positivistic attitude: if only everyone had what they needed there would be no evil, for the problem of evil is simple: it has nothing to do with outdated notions of virtue and vice, sin and guilt. People are depraved only when they are deprived. When the mechanism functions smoothly — when the proud and greedy are not allowed to deprive the deprived of the good things the proud and greedy monopolize — all is well. It is not just political, of course; technology can contribute by making social conflict obsolete by generalizing wealth and power.

This sort of thing is what Dostoevsky called the 'idea'. The 'cause' is to remake the world according to these alleged insights and powers, escaping the pathological ruts of the past when the world was dominated by unscientific and false notions. Marxism is the most elaborate and famous version of the 'idea' and the 'cause'. Positivism shows the way to Marxism because, since man is the master of his own destiny, he can

model the world, and himself, as he sees fit. The mechanical details can be worked out, but the crucial starting point is the postulate that there is no previously given 'human nature' to foul up this wonderful process, no fateful force, no natural or divine order to stand in the way of determined men working together to remake the world on a plan which will realize the hopes of all by assuring universal happiness, and thus bring the process of history to a close. Marx worked out the details of this program but added a twist: God didn't control things, but man didn't either. It turned out that History controlled things. Luckily, however, Marx's historical process turned out to be going exactly where the most enlightened minds wanted it to go; what luck! So the revolutionaries could either sit around and wait, or push along the historical process.

This is why Stepan Trofimovitch—which is to say men like Herzen—are held by Dostoevsky to be responsible for revolutionary horrors.

Communism, for a long time, was supposed to have brought history to a close—or to be in the process of doing it. After 1998 it was then supposed that, after all, the liberal democratic order had brought us, or was bringing us, to the end of history since it was demonstrably providing more and more good things for more and more people. America and Western Europe offered unprecedented levels of affluence to unprecedented numbers of people. The post 1998 millennial enthusiasm, however, faded quickly. For one thing Western prosperity, great (in fact totally unprecedented) as it was, had nonetheless not done away with all inequality, unfairness and privation; in particular it had not reduced the amount of



evil. In some ways it even seemed to increase it. Today, only two decades later, Liberal Democracy — despite globalization which became possible only after 1998, and which spread even more affluence (through doses of Liberal Democracy) to new millions of people in Asia — is under strain. If it collapses in favor of 'world governance' there will once again be joyful announcements that the 'idea' has been realized, that the 'cause' has been served.

In parallel to the emergence of Positivism — and with its tremendous on-going influence even today despite our partial disenchantment with technology — there have been countervailing influences. Men like Dostoevsky and Solzhenitzyn have taken 'reactionary' positions, and now religion has experienced a certain revival — witness the new prestige of the papacy, the new importance of, and respect given to Islam, or the increasing controversy about Jews. When I was a child the pope was hardly mentioned, and Islam — of which I was only barely aware — was a quaint and romantic folkloric element of certain far, exotic and primitive regions. As for Judaism, if anyone had put it to me when I was ten years old, I would have agreed that it was at the point of extinction.

I will discuss the 'reactionary' factors later. The countervailing force to Positivism which needs to be understood first is another branch of Modern Philosophy, a force which is not 'reactionary' because it also partakes of 'progress'. A sketch of the genealogy of this branch is more than can be attempted in this letter; suffice it to say that, in the end, Positivism — in its present form, which, as far as I can tell, does not even recognize itself as a form

of Positivism (let's call it "neo-Positivism") — is confronted with Heidegger. Heidegger is the perfected form of this countervailing force. This is what makes that Times article which asks whether Heidegger's having been a Nazi should disqualify him from philosophy is so abysmally stupid. It does not matter if Heidegger was a Nazi. It does not matter if he killed his grandmother with an ax. It does not matter if he played "Yankee Doodle" backwards on the slide-whistle while standing on his head. You just can't get away from the fact that Heidegger's thought (which owes a great debt to previous thinkers like Nietzsche) is a looming force hanging over the world and over each soul in the world. They — whoever 'they' are — can 'disqualify' him all the like. They might as well disqualify the clouds for blocking the sun.

Heidegger, and in particular the problem he addresses, has to be understood. Understanding the position taken by Heidegger is complicated, but the problem he addresses is essentially simple. That Positivism fails to address this problem — despite the tremendous success of positivistic thinking — is such a flaw that it is impossible, on a theoretical level, to take Positivism seriously, and this is certainly the reason it has long ceased to be respectable — by which I mean that hardly anyone calls himself a Positivist.

Here is the problem. If man dominates and determines everything, including morality, if man, in other words, has the powers which used to be ascribed to Nature (by philosophy) or to God (by religion), the question — the basic metaphysical problem — becomes: on what basis does man choose one goal over another? Or, to put it in a more pointed manner: on what

basis does man define good and evil?

Though this problem is grotesquely obvious and absurdly transparent, there are two ways it becomes hard to see.

The first, the one which allowed Positivism to arise in the first place, is the irritable, impatient and above all thoughtless protest that good and evil are perfectly evident qualities, to understand which we need neither God nor any hemming and hawing about humans choosing their own goals. Evil is hurting people, being unfair, and so on; goodness is benevolence and such; period.

Some of these people are thoughtful enough to insist that, while good and evil, defined this way, are admittedly congruent with "Christian morality", they are in fact the pre-existent ground of Christianity (and all other religions) and therefore Christianity is a pointless superstructure built upon this more basic foundation, and by no means a crutch borrowed by Positivism!

There are many problems with this. One is that it silently identifies a new ground—those fixed and obvious qualities of 'good' and 'evil' allegedly prior to religion—but in doing this Positivism is destroyed, because an essential aspect of Positivism is groundlessness. To put this another way: Christian values are so ingrained that, in the West, people tend to think of them as an absolute.

A word about the term 'ground'. Ground is like nature or like law. Human laws might be identical to natural or divine laws but they also might not be. Human laws can take any form. Natural laws and divine laws have the form they have. They are given. They are a starting point, a source, a ground.

In Positivism there are no natural or divine laws. The ground is human will. But will is a movement of the soul, not a ground. It is like desire. First comes the ground of desire, then there can be desire. For example sexual desire or desire for food: the ground of these desires is the body. There can be a body without sexual or food desire, but there cannot be sexual and food desire without a body.

There is a confusion of language here. The divine order is said to be a function of the divine will, i.e. things are the way they are, the ground is what it is, because God wills it. But human will is not like divine will. When God wills something it therefore comes into existence—according to the theologians—but humans have no will in this sense. Human will is only hopes, wishes and plans and determination to try to realize them. Humans might realize their plans, but that depends on work and luck. God does not work, and he cannot be frustrated by bad luck. Also God can will anything into existence, while human realizations are limited to what it is possible for humans to realize. Humans cannot create suns, or space, or matter. At best they can feebly manipulate trivial bits of that matter which is to be found on or very near the surface of one or two tiny planets.

In the pre-Modern view human goals, as well as good and evil, are grounded either in nature or divine law; humans can choose virtue, vice or self destruction because these are possibilities inherent in the ground, inherent in the situation into which humans are thrust. But what we are really talking about is not material, it is spiritual or moral. Man might be able to manipulate the moral sphere in a way the physical sphere

escapes him. If there is no ground, there is no good and evil; we are, in the famous phrase: "beyond good and evil". This means, for Nietzsche, that man—in fact only very special men—are creators of new moral orders, or "cultures". Like a god they will the new moral order into being; they do this simply by conceiving it. Because they are god-like Nietzsche calls them 'super-men', or 'over-men'. The most powerful argument for this sort of thing is Art. Artists, great, original and seminal artists at least, seem to create "new worlds". Great thinkers seem to create new moral orders. Heidegger, however—and quite rightly so—is not so sanguine about this alleged god-like quality of any humans. The great artists have feet of clay. Beethoven was impossible. Van Gogh was nuts. These are not aristocratic super-men, they are just folk who also happen to be amazing artists. The same thing is true in less fashionable areas; someone can be an impeccable cab driver and a pest in the home. Perhaps great artists are unconscious conduits of something; but in this case it is not human will, but something coming through human will, which generates new moral worlds. Be this as it may, this is why "culture" is now so important; it is the domain where man seems god-like.

Another problem with man defining good and evil for himself is an observable fact; namely that the moral authorities of the positivistic dispensation are constantly trying, and often succeed, to change the content of morality, or to redefine good and evil. This brings us right back to the question of the ground of human goals; on what basis do these moral authorities propose changes to morality? What guides their choices? What informs their militantism? What is the

basis, the goal, the ground of their action?

In the framework of Positivism, however, there can be no ground; there is only human will, utterly free and untrammelled. But humans, despite what Rousseau taught — and the Positivists unconsciously (and self-contradictorily) depend on an rousseauist attitude — are not necessarily benevolent. However let's just say that humans are basically benevolent . . . but this would mean that there *is* a ground, a pre-existing human nature (benevolence in this case) which, if the perversities of society could only be shifted aside (this is Rousseau's idea) would express itself properly. Rousseau contradicts Positivism because he counts upon a fixed, given human nature (this unchosen, pre-existing benevolence) which is more fundamental than any human goal; it is the ground of all human goals. And this ground, if only it were untrammelled by society (if only men were not depraved by being deprived) would express itself — i.e. things would be good. But the above is a logical mess because Positivism does not take the problem of ground seriously.

The second way the problem of Positivism becomes hard to understand leads us to Heidegger. Positivists, if you could corner them, would admit that the ultimate ground is human will. But Positivists, and neo-Positivists in particular, see this as unproblematic because they sloppily say to themselves that humans will choose sensible and nice things which are in their self-interest, or that "nice" and "self-interest" are congruent, or that self-interest is an evident and unproblematic quality. But this just snaps us back to the problem of ground, because on what basis do we know a thing is nice or in our self-interest? The fact

we have chosen it? And if we choose the opposite tomorrow?

Nitzsche saw this problem clearly; he spoke of “the will to power”. It is in this sense that Stalin was a perfect student of Machiavelli. Machiavelli, the initiator of Modern Philosophy, excludes morality — thus reducing religion and theology from an interface with reality to, at best, a mode of social control. Machiavelli, in a proto-positivistic way, knows what men need: peace and prosperity. For Machiavelli this is simply given. That is his ground but he does not say how or why or where this ground comes from. It is just there, obvious in itself, the way ‘survival’ is the unexamined and obvious ground for the Darwinians — but why survive? And if creatures are ‘programmed’ to survive, how did this purpose to survive arise? Out of what does a goal arise? It is not enough — as these people think — to repeat that “things are just that way” because why shouldn’t they be another way? Somehow a particular order of things exists. It may be sheer mechanical chance, but how can we know that? How can it be demonstrated? Mockery of theology is not a demonstration. Contempt, no matter how sincere, for the idea that our self-awareness, like our bodies, must somehow be a quality inherent in the cosmos, is not a demonstration. What does self-awareness mean in the context of mindless mechanical chance?

Machiavelli’s peace and prosperity, at least, are not newfangled goals arising out of some alleged process of progress. They have a certain comfortable evidence. They are easy to agree about. So, leaving aside their metaphysically problematic quality, the way to secure them is power, control, manipulation, force; anything goes, so long as they are

achieved, for why should anything stand in the way of peace and prosperity? This is Stalin. To make the omelet (to realize the 'idea', to serve the 'cause') eggs must be broken.

But, here again, we must insist on confronting the basic problem; what is this machiavellian ground? What makes peace and prosperity the human goal? Who says so? If it is so natural, if it is so obvious that peace and prosperity are the goal of humanity, why are they so difficult to come by? Why are they opposed at every turn? What is the meaning of this difficulty and this opposition? Rousseau's answer, that society is perverse, just leads back to similar questions: what is the meaning of this alleged perversity? Where does it come from? Why, for example, is perversity not the fundamental reality, since there is so much of it around? And assuming the perversity could be cleared away, what is this thing which is simply there? What is this human 'goodness' the existence of which Rousseau so blandly assumes. Where does it come from?

The reply to such queries is well known: primitive man was terrified by thunder; his imagination ran away from him and he invented religion, and women got oppressed. Then science came along, thunder was explained, women were liberated, and everything will really be just fine if we could only root out the last stupid and stubborn remnants of this original mistake born of ignorance and lack of scientific explanations. But this is again the voice of impatience and irritability. People are unwilling to look long and coldly at the basic theoretical problems. They ignore the fundamental importance of the questions. In particular they fail to see how corrosive certain



theoretical problems are to the various positions of Modern Philosophy which subtend their attitudes. The importance of Heidegger is that he has powerfully addressed these problems. Heidegger is the key to the further success of the whole enterprise of Modern Philosophy, which is to say; of the future of the 'idea', the 'cause'. We are living a contradictory soup of what I call "vulgar Heideggerianism", Neo-Positivism (and 'reactionary' forces). What the Neo-Positivists refuse to see is that only Heidegger holds back the swelling forces of reaction from overwhelming the tottering structures of Modern Philosophy.

Heidegger's ideas (and those ideas upon which his ideas are built), at least in their vulgar forms, are familiar to everyone. To begin with there is relativism; i.e. beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Then there is historicism; the idea, for example, that Art is a product of its age, its culture and its geographical area, that there is no "going back" to older forms, and so on. This is obviously related to progressive thought, and thus with the Hegelian-Marxist idea that history unfolds with mechanical inevitability. Then there is Multi-Culturalism, according to which each culture is a unique and incommensurable universe, a sort of law unto itself, a "horizon of meaning" as Heidegger says, such that it is impossible, not to say irresponsible or even reprehensible, to postulate a hierarchy of cultures (or values) which could only be the imposition of the prejudices of one culture on the others. The high-school students will explain this — in snobbish tones of indignation. Multi-Culturalism is a form of relativism, a relativism not of customs only but of good and evil; each culture has its own incommensurable standards.

These ideas are not Heidegger's ideas, but they are close to his ideas. They are their vulgar or popular form. Behind them looms undiluted Heidegger, lending power to these disjointed and sloppy notions. It is important to have a feeling for the disjointed and sloppy character of our thinking because the contradictions are illuminating.

For example, most Westerners would agree that it may be acceptable, or understandable, in the context of, say, Islamic culture to lapidate women taken in adultery or homosexuals. They would tend, however, not to agree that such a thing was 'good in the absolute'. But anyone who dared to claim it was 'bad in the absolute' would open themselves to the charges of intolerance, racism and 'reactionary' thinking which would be sure to follow. But the word 'absolute' is sloppily equated with 'universal'. It is the universality which Multi-Culturalism challenges, not the absoluteness because, if one looks at the thing closely, though Multi-Culturalism denies a universal and unique absolute, by the same token it proclaims that each culture is an absolute unto itself. The 'absolute' has retreated from universality but is at home in each culture. Here we move closer to true heideggerianism, and at each step it gets tougher. Multi-cultural Westerners, were they to be consistent, should be willing to agree that any value of a given culture is 'good in the absolute' or 'simply good'. If one qualifies this by saying that such and such is only good 'in the context' of a given culture, or that such and such values are 'relative' (to a given a culture) it is by no means the same thing! Such qualifications stealthily imply a higher standard, a universal and absolute perch from which the different cultures can be looked down

upon and seen to be 'relative'. But this is the antithesis of fully heideggerian Multi-Culturalism! It may be objected that calling such values 'relative' is based on a simple observation that the values in question are, in fact, in conflict. But what allows us to perceive this alleged conflict? To do so we must have a higher perspective, a universal view from which we can evaluate the cultures! Where does that leave Multi-Culturalism? It makes it a higher culture, the culture that understands the other cultures; it makes it a universal absolute! From this perch we see and understand the workings of Tolerance and Intolerance, we survey the deeper ground of culture itself, a sort of ocean of profoundly fundamental concepts on which sail the various ships of culture, each with its particular cargo of values.

True heideggerianism, by contrast, is almost inconceivably radical. Heidegger's idea is not that the values of different cultures contradict each other and that tolerance will bring salvation—that's for snotty high-school kids and *Times* editorialists. Heidegger's idea is not simply that culture is a "horizon of meaning". For Heidegger culture is far more than a source of mere "meaning"; it is the source of *being* itself. To this we must return.

Multi-Culturalism is an unfocused, tempting but ultimately spurious and self-contradictory universalism. It can be seen as merely an attitude of indulgent tolerance for unfamiliar attitudes, or as a sort of hedonistic celebration of variety for its own sake (folklore, national cuisine and costumes). But it is also an ideological bludgeon. Anyone who dares claim there is any problem, for example, with 'Islamic culture' is branded 'islamophobe'. The justification for such accusations rarely

turns out to be that female mutilation, forced marriage and so on, are “ok in the context of Islamic culture”, but the hasty, specious and diversionary pretence that Islamic culture is in fact ‘good’, even ‘better’ than Christian culture in particular, because it is more tolerant and more dedicated to peace. Now any serious person who knows any history knows this is foolishness, but when I say this I am by no means claiming that Islamic culture is ‘bad’, or ‘worse’ than Christian culture! That sort of thing—though essentially easy to settle because it is a matter of unproblematic historical fact—is simply besides the point. The point is that the true basis for accusations of islamophobia, or denunciations of ‘intolerance’ and ‘absolutism’, cannot be that such attitudes contradict the facts (i.e. that Islam is in fact devoted to peace, etc.), because the accusers will also claim that cultures are radically relative, and if that is so, why, and on what basis, make any comparison? (I mean; why do they ever compare Christian culture unfavorably with Islamic culture?) Furthermore, if someone accuses a culture of being ‘bad’, it must, presumably, reflect their cultural prejudices, and how can cultural prejudices be condemned by Multi-Culturalists since cherishing cultural prejudices must be the meaning of Multi-Culturalism? . . . unless it is only about appreciating exotic cuisine and folk songs? To say nothing of the fact that the whole implication of Identity Politics—the political expression of Multi-Culturalism—is that people are unable to escape their cultural prejudices, and obviously it is unfair to berate someone for something they cannot help.

The serious implication of all this is that each value of a culture, however grotesque it appears from outside, is good;

it is even a sort of absolute. Absolute, if you must, “within the horizon of the culture”, but there is no other horizon, no higher perspective! These limited absolutes are nonetheless absolute because they totally fill the whole perceivable horizon, i.e. the entire cosmos — from a given perspective.

Multi-Culturalism is vulgar because it is self-contradictory. It sloppily satisfies two irreconcilable attitudes: on the one hand it proclaims that cultures are radically relative, that each is a law unto itself, a ‘horizon of meaning’ which cannot be judged from an outside perspective, and at the same time it is a form of higher knowledge, a perch down from which the cultures can be scanned and seen to be relative. The whole cluster of multi-culturalist attitudes is a self-contradictory mess.

There are endless examples of this. Few Westerners fail to agree that, say, the “Mona Lisa” is a very beautiful and interesting painting but most would also insist that this is only their personal opinion, that, for other people, it might, with equal right, be repulsive and uninteresting. Now what can this possibly mean, unless it means that they live in a radically private world so that the “meaning” they “perceive” is for themselves alone. In this case why do they even bother expressing an opinion about anything to anyone? Or take Western condemnation of, again, lapidation of adulterers or banana thieves, or whatever. This is at least partly based on Western moral progress, because a high degree of condemnation of adultery and theft used to prevail in the West — even if it didn’t always lead to stoning. So, based on a morality which is obviously ‘evolving’, which is the result

of an alleged 'progress' but which is grounded on nothing and thus susceptible to change in any direction at any moment, a given attitude is condemned in the absolute by minds which refuse to acknowledge that anything can exist in the absolute! This sort of utterly hopeless self-contradiction is extremely common. It may be understandable; we can easily say, "well, obviously it is pointless and harmful to take extreme measures against things like adultery, and if our morality progresses further it certainly won't contradict this, but refine and enlarge it." But this won't do, because these same people, as explained above, are incapable of defining the ground of this progressive morality and thus where it might go. In any case it is impossible to define this groundless ground because it is an absurd concept. They must either avoid attempting an explanation or change their ideas.

The fact is that the ground of the new morality, as Nietzsche explained — well after the advent of Positivism — is the famous "will to power". It is pretty easy to see that "the will to power" might lead anywhere, and that has to be faced. It is not necessarily as ominous as it sounds, but it might be very ominous indeed. In any case, the tension inherent in the vulgar heideggerian attitudes sketched above, the contradictions which traverse them in all directions, have an enervating effect. This is the source of such phenomena as Post-Modernism and "Western self-loathing".

There is always something given, and humans must simply cope with that. We are just not like God. There may not be any God — though ultimately this is not only unprovable but even hard to sustain (for anyone who knows how to think logically

and hard)—but pretending there is no given, no 'Nature', is silly and immature. Also silly is pretending that the given is obvious and clear, something everyone can clearly see and understand.

We must now look more closely at this problem of ground, but first I want to characterize the most prevalent attitudes currently encountered.

### *Neo-Positivism*

This ignores relativity and the more hopeless contradictions of multi-Culturalism. Good and evil is obvious and unproblematic, needs no defense and requires no investigation. This is an attitude common among those who see no problem with imposing a world government to "save the planet", no matter how draconian and pervasive such rule may turn out to be. They are utopians, full of allegedly good intentions and theoretical benevolence, and they regard themselves as the elite of humanity.

### *Multi-Culturalism*

Cultural relativism, 'tolerance', and condemnation of any hierarchy and thus authority, dominate this attitude which contradicts itself by being the very thing it condemns: a higher perspective and authority which understands the cultures better than they understand themselves. The problem of tolerance for intolerance is never considered. People with this attitude are a newer type of Neo-Positivist and represent a new and particularly soggy form of anti-Westernism. They include, however, what might be called the battalions of heideggerianism.

### *Neo-Conservatism*

Neo-conservatism is also a form of Neo-Positivism. The Neo-conservatives are ex-Marxist utopians who have exchanged the old radical progressive utopianism for a more limited and practical but still essentially utopian attitude in favor of Liberal Democracy. Noting how the latter, though not perfect, nonetheless has offered more good things to more people than any other form of human organization, they have thrown in their lot not only with consumerist globalization but also the destruction of illiberal regimens and the imposition of Liberal Democracy. The difference between McArthur in Japan or the Marshal Plan in Germany, and Neo-Conservatism is that American policy in the 1940s, despite the slogan of making 'the world safe for Democracy', was not fundamentally dedicated to the spread of Liberal Democracy. First it was about simple survival (being under direct military attack by the Japanese and German national armies) and then, after it destroyed the aggressor regimes, had to come up with some sort of solution for these countries. In Japan, for example, the institution of the Emperor was not abolished. The solutions were based, certainly, on what Americans were familiar with, what they believed worked best, but the basic motivation was the need to solve a pressing practical problem, not an ideological program. It can be argued that both the Afghan and Iraq wars are similar in character, that the Taliban and Saddam were threats to America, and now, having destroyed them, we are faced with a similar practical problem. The wars in Bosnia and Kosovo cannot be seen in this light. It was never argued that Mislovic was a threat to anyone outside his region,



and I do not think Clinton engaged America in Serbia out of any Neo-Conservative sentiment. But I think those wars were supported by Neo-Conservatives for utopian reasons. As for Afghanistan and Iraq, it is of course also argued that these regimes were never threats, and it cannot be claimed that they were the same kind of threat as Japan and Germany. Al Caida is an ultra-national phenomenon, a decentralized pan-national, moral crusade. Its association with particular countries is contingent, the way the association of Communism and particular countries was essentially contingent (as Nazi and Japanese militarism were not). In any case Neo-Conservatives, as Neo-Conservatives, support the Afgan and Iraq wars not because of the threat (real or imagined) but because destroying such regimes will favor Liberal Democracy, and thus promote their preferred utopia. Of course people who are Neo-Conservatives may also believe there was a threat, but that is not a neo-conservative position as such. The point is that Neo-Conservatism is a combination of Positivist progressive utopianism (Dostoyevsky's 'idea' or 'cause') and a more practical approach. It is a less radical utopianism. There are many types of diluted utopianism.

Now a word about 'Reactionaries'. Believing that, say, Al Caida is a threat which requires a military response is 'reactionary' because it falls back on primitive calculations which fail to take into account the multi-cultural perspective. The Multi-Culturalists understand that if Muslims are unhappy, and thus aggressive, it can only be because their culture gets no respect, because the West has insulted and humiliated it though

colonization and so on. Muslims are deprived because they are deprived. This is the dregs of multi-culturalist vulgarity. Despite its apologetic facade Multi-Culturalism arrogantly believes it understands, and can thus control, the cultures through apology, humility, multilateralism, etc.. I have heard this position laid out countless times. It is the dominant position of the Western elites. Anyone who disagrees, who dares claim that, say, Islam is by nature aggressive or that Chinese culture is tyrannical and slavish, is branded a 'reactionary'. This is essentially the attitude of Yarmolinsky towards Dostoevsky in 1935, though the vocabulary is now different. As for the 'Reactionaries' themselves: 'Reactionaries' are those who have not accepted Modern Philosophy. This is too crude a statement, but to give it the qualification it deserves, to try to explain the ways Modern ideas also affect so-called 'reactionary' positions of different sorts, is too cumbersome a matter for this letter. I must, however, allude to an ineluctably related matter and get it out of the way.

Nazism is constantly called 'reactionary'. This is not only a serious impediment to political stability, it is an historical and linguistic foul-up, the result of the military alliance between Stalin and the West, the defeat of Hitler and the tactics of Communist aggression. In fact, as everybody knows, there is a relation between the ideas of Nitzstche and Hitler, and Heidegger comes out of Nitzstche, and Heidegger was a Nazi. Everybody should also know that Nitzstche's thought is more radical than Positivism or 'les Lumieres' which generated Marxism. This is because Nitzstche advances Modern Philosophy by coming to grips with the problem Modern

Philosophy always neglected, the problem of ground. (And Heidegger gave Nietzsche's solution a more solid form.)

Fascism, it should be said, is not equivalent to the thought of either Nietzsche or Heidegger, but it is a vulgar form of this thought. It can, with this proviso, thus be said to be related to the thought of Heidegger — just as Multi-Culturalism is a vulgar form of Heidegger's thought. Of course this means that Multi-Culturalism is related to Fascism, and that is indeed a scandalous fact, but it need not detain us. Now if this Nietzsche-Heidegger solution to the problem of ground in Modern Philosophy had been arrived at by going back to classical philosophy then it might justly be called 'conservative', or 'reactionary', but it was not arrived at this way. The specificity of the Nietzsche-Heidegger solution is not that it goes back to something in the past but that it comes to grips with a problem specific to Modern philosophy, and provides a solution, and thus advances the whole Modern project. Now the solution in question might, I suppose, though not coming from there, have turned out nonetheless to resemble something in classical philosophy or Christianity, or some other pre-Modern attitude, and in that case it also might justly be called 'conservative' or 'reactionary'. But, far from resembling anything from the past, it makes Modern Philosophy even more alien to pre-Modern attitudes and thought than Positivism. For this reason Fascism, rather than 'reactionary', is even more radical, and thus even more 'modern', than Progressivism and Communism.

The term 'reactionary' designates opposition to Progress, to the forward movement of the Modern project, and thus of Modernity itself. But such opposition is only 'conservative' or

'reactionary' from the Modern or progressive perspective! Pre-Modern thought is aware of, but rejects, what came to be known as Progress, or the project of Modern Philosophy (the establishment by man of peace, prosperity, justice and happiness). This is the meaning of Plato's "Republic" — even though it has usually been interpreted as promoting utopian radicalism. Be this as it may, the example of Plato demonstrates beyond any question that classical philosophy was not unaware of the 'idea' or the 'cause'. ("The Republic" paints a word picture of exactly what Marx hopes to establish: a radically just society, including such staples of Progressivism as feminine equality and elimination of the family.) So the things designated by 'conservative' and 'reactionary' look very different when seen by a mind free enough to stand outside the Modernist attitudes upon which these terms are predicated. If Plato is right, and utopian progress is a hopeless boondoggle, then the attitude of classical philosophy, which sees the world as fateful, with alternate periods of progress and regression, is not 'reactionary' it is just sensible, or even profound. If the 'idea', the 'cause', rather than carrying everyone into a human paradise, generates unprecedented misery, suffering and grief, then Christianity is not 'reactionary' it is, or it might be, a truer salvation, or perhaps a zone of comfort in a harsh world and a hard life, or at least a more or less harmless form of charlatanism, or, at worst, an obscurantist and murderous influence nonetheless dramatically less harmful than what Progressivism has inflicted on the world. The point, however, is not to excuse an evil Christianity by comparison with something even worse, but to show that designating it as

'reactionary' is only meaningful from the Progressive or Modern perspective. It might be bad, or even deeply evil — to be rejected utterly — without being 'reactionary'.

A comparative evaluation of, say, Christianity with Communism would turn out to be whatever it is. One would be worse or better than the other on this or that ground (X number of murders over all, X murders per year, X prosperity promoted/hampered, X hope generated, etc.). The result, in other words, would not be that one is 'reactionary' and the other 'progressive', unless the a priori of the comparison is Progressivism. But the a priori always is Progressivism!

This brings us to Leo Strauss. The thrust of Strauss' work cannot be said to be simply a critique of Modern Philosophy, or a rehabilitation of Classical Philosophy (including medieval Islamic and Jewish thought). It is, rather, a critique of an unprecedented and radical nature which has permanently called into question the basis of Modern Philosophy. This catastrophe, however, does not undo, nor does it even try to undo, many aspects or many results of Modern Philosophy. Strauss is not "in disagreement" with Modern Philosophy. He does not "combat" Modern Philosophy. He has simply indicated extremely serious deficiencies which have long gone unnoticed because of the prejudice fostered by Modern Philosophy against Classical Philosophy. The people who have noted these problems over the centuries (though only Strauss has provided the definitive analysis) are the 'Reactionaries' — Swift, Dostoevsky, certain theologians and so on. But Leo Strauss is neither a Catholic nor a devout Jew. Neither is he a partisan of Classical Philosophy. The point which is

important here, and this brings us back to “The Possessed”, is that, right from the beginning, Modern Philosophy is a progressive political and social project. The fundamental difference between Classical and Modern philosophy is that, where the former is strictly theoretical, a wonderful realm of thought, of use mainly in a private and moral way, the latter, from the get-go, is an attempt to change the world. This is the meaning of the early link between Modern Philosophy and science, or the deep harmony between Modern Philosophy and technology (or human power).

Here we see Dostoyevsky’s point: the Modern project itself, the idea which becomes a cause, is the problem. And those who spread this virus, the Stepan Trofimovitches, the Herzens, bare responsibility for the infection. This is Dostoyevsky. That said, it must instantly be pointed out that Modern Philosophy is not only responsible for Communism and Fascism, it is also responsible for Liberal Democracy!—and this is a reason (though hardly the most important one) that Leo Strauss is no enemy of Modern Philosophy. But the ‘Reactionaries’, notably Solzhenitzyn, do not accept Liberal Democracy! Liberal Democracy may be far more benevolent than Communism. It may have all the virtues ascribed to it by its supporters (peace loving, benevolent, prosperous, generous, tolerant) but for Solzhenitzyn—and, I assume, also for Dostoevsky—in the crucial respect it is just as bad as Communism, because both are soulless.

Just as Fascism is a more modern than Communism, so Communism is more modern than Liberal Democracy, which comes out of 17<sup>TH</sup> and 18<sup>TH</sup> century thinking (Montesque in

particular). This thinking is as atheistic (by which, again, I do not mean anti-God but apart from God) as the rest of Modern Philosophy. But this earlier Modern thought was not anti-clerical (as opposed to just privately atheist), the way the later thought virulently became. For this reason Liberal Democracy is characterized by tolerance, meaning tolerance for religion and religious diversity. It is for this reason that America, the foremost example of Liberal Democracy, has a good deal of religiosity. But that is not the same thing as 'soul', as the 'Reactionaries' use the word.

'Soul' is a profound communion of all aspects of life. A society which has soul is not a theocracy but a society where religion (Christianity in particular) penetrates everything, so that all the people are in communion with each other, the land and the past; a society where Art speaks to everyone, where all share in a common life but where each individual remains precious. The latter would be an effect of Christianity because God is a savior who knows each person's heart. Christendom, or the middle ages (even up through the 18<sup>th</sup> century in many ways) is the model of this sort of society.

There is some resemblance between Heidegger's idea and the ideal society of the 'Reactionaries' — the Russian reactionary idea in particular is largely alien to classical thought, and thus "modern" in certain respects—but the resemblance is not profound. For Heidegger culture is the ground not of meaning but of being itself. What this means is simple: without ground there is nothing. A groundless person might be alive but they would hardly know they are alive. They would not be very conscious. They would not, for example, have any

notion of good and evil. They would not, in particular, have any consciousness of the real existence of other people, who would only have the status of animated objects. There are such people today, and there are more and more of them. With the collapse of culture we are seeing more and more people formed on this model. People are more and more zombie-like. They live in a private universe which becomes a conceptual prison. Those famous but very rare cases of children raised by animals demonstrate the point even more. But if one carries the idea to the extreme — in thought — it is clear that a person totally without “culture” (or values and education), a person without any notion of good and evil, cannot see good and evil, and is therefore unaware of them and, to that extent, he himself does not exist, or is not alive to what is essential in life. A person without culture descends into non-existence, or into non-human existence.

Nitzsche taught that value was generated or invented by great creative spirits. Heidegger rejects this. For Heidegger man cannot replace God. But for Heidegger God is “the God who comes”, i.e. the ground, the ever new and renewed grounds which arise through the process of ‘culture’. This process, this arising, is fundamentally mysterious, which means we cannot choose or mold it. It comes from a place which remains beyond our ken. Multi-Culturalism is foolish and pretentious next to this holistic vision. We are, in the nature of things, formed by our culture, we are creatures of it. It is not simply our ideas and attitudes, but our existence itself, our full realization as human persons which depend on ‘culture’. Art, therefore, is



the deepest and most important human activity, not because it generates 'culture' but because it reveals and realizes our 'culture' more deeply. The artist, like the moralist, does not create out of nothing. There is ground; the ground is 'culture', and 'culture' (Art) becomes the ground. Heidegger became a Nazi because this was the God that was coming. And given the dynamism of Identity Politics and Multi-Culturalism it is difficult to claim he was wrong. The only credible opposition to Heidegger is the 'Reactionaries', spiritual giants like Dostoevsky. So a final word about this.

The basis of Dostoevsky and Solzhenitzyn's attack on Modernity, and the reason there is all that talk in Russian literature about the Russian Soul saving the world, has to do fundamentally with Christianity and Christendom, and not simply nostalgia but actual remnants of medieval society which have persisted in forsaken places like Russia. The icons are the most obvious example, but a great deal would have to be said about such things to get anywhere. One must, more importantly, have some idea of Christian theology to see what the 'Reactionaries' are getting at. Here it must be pointed out that Christianity, or the various churches, though they contain 'reactionary' elements, are themselves suffused with Modernity. Protestantism in particular, with its homosexual bishops and female priests, is as progressive as possible (but these aspect are by no means the essence of the problem of the Modernist infection of Protestantism, only its more scandalous and silly consequence). Phases of the Catholic and Orthodox churches are also sclerotic with progressive ideals. So, again, it is not Christianity in some vague sense, but Christianity

understood in a particular way—the way it was generally understood in the middle ages, and by certain theologians and currents ever since—to which the ‘Reactionaries’ refer. This is a great problem because the middle ages predate the rise of Modern Science, and the ‘Reactionaries’ are thus suspected of being obscurantist fanatics, willfully blind not only to progress but to Science itself. But this is mockery and prejudice, and it cannot be gone into here.

The superficial similarity of the Heideggerian idea and the ‘Reactionary’ vision, at least as it is vulgarly understood, is that both are holistic societies based on mystery. The profound difference is that where the heideggerian culture is sunk irredeemably in itself, Christendom is a universal view of the cosmos. This, I mean, is how these perspectives understand themselves. Where heideggerian culture forms men ineluctably into a given type of being, about which they can have no perspective (Heidegger himself was apparently unable to have a critical distance from his Nazi engagement), which they must simply accept, in the Christian society God is the guarantor of human freedom. St. Paul wrote: “everything is permitted even though everything is not good”. This is the Christian understanding of human freedom. It is freedom to do wrong, freedom for stupidity and nastiness, which ultimately means turning away from God, or pride.

In Christendom there is both ground and freedom. In Heidegger there is only ground. What is missing is a discussion of Christian theology, but this letter is already too long.





## Remarks on Heidegger



## REMARKS ON HEIDEGGER

### Science

The meaning of Heidegger's philosophy is that Being equals culture, an idea which has become so powerful that—in vulgar, dilute and grotesque forms—it has come to dominate our world.

The most striking aspect of contemporary culture is the predominance of science. For Heidegger modern science is religion. People believe in science. They have faith in science. Science is all powerful and is ushering in a new age. But scientific domination of culture has an unprecedented consequence. A religion of science is not unprecedented in all respects, because its essential quality—a materialist metaphysic—is as old as the history of thought. Epicureanism is based on a materialist metaphysic; a theory that only material exists. The old materialist doctrines, however, remained theoretical. Before modern science the materialist doctrine was no more intrinsically plausible or implausible than any other theoretical propositions—for example reincarnation, or the divine right of kings. Modern science, by contrast, performs miracles. It demonstrates transcendental power on a daily basis. It has made everyone into a veritable necromancer. We travel in horseless carriages. We fly to the moon. We communicate over vast distance with a small apparatus. We have efficacious potions against disease. We listen to voices from the past, and

peer at animated pictures of far events. We destroy cities with a single infernal engine. And we are as habituated to this state of affairs as we might imagine the immortal angels are habituated to living among the clouds and playing harps.

The relation of Heidegger's thought to the religion of modern science is his idea of Being. Materialism is also a theory of Being. It understands the nature of what is. It says: *what is, is matter*. The reason for this, from Heidegger's point of view, is not that modern science excludes "spirit",\* but that the triumph of this religion has a particular quality: it transforms every single human, including a south-east Asian savage with a plastic bottle, a transistor radio and an aspirin tablet, into a Being as mysteriously powerful and astonishing as Moses or Jesus. We command powers as essentially incomprehensible to ourselves as turning staffs into serpents or separating the sea was to Moses — with the possible exception of theoretical scientists of the highest rank — but we are different from Moses in that we have no insight into our relation to such powers. The vulgar explanation of the telephone — that our voice is carried by a flow of electrons in a wire, or microwaves from a satellite — is fundamentally no better, as a statement of what is called "fact", than, say, the statement that God gives the strength to resist sin. What is a an electron? What is flow?

\* This characteristic exclusion, of course, gives materialistic theory a certain color—a sophomoric quality one could say, for the materialist metaphysic has theoretical problems of a rather grave and obvious nature. Now explanations of such things offered by non-materialistic theories may be equally problematic—though it must be conceded that at least they adress the questions. This, however, is irrelevant because the alleged weakness of other metaphysical theories, or "religions", do not nullify the weaknesse of materialism.



The greatest living physicists doubtlessly have a much better understanding of such things than the rest of us, but, as much as they may know about how electrons appear, what they do, or what place they seem to have in the economy of matter as thus far explicated by scientific theory, such knowledge is necessarily founded in awareness of their ignorance regarding the ultimate parts or motions of electrons. True scientists must be as ultimately mystified by the objects of their contemplation as Moses was by the powers lent him by God. They may trust or hope that the mysteries they contemplate will yield to the scientific method. But the scientific method cannot be brought to bare unless phenomena are understood as problem to be solved, as codes to be broken, as mysteries to be elucidated. The pioneering scientists are like prophets. Their experiments are like prayers. They stand on the frontier of human experience peering into mystery; they penetrate mystery and return with knowledge. Prophets of non-materialist religions who foray beyond the edges of normal human experience and awareness, do not bring back knowledge. They bring back wisdom.

Wisdom, unlike knowledge, is simultaneously mysterious and limpid. "Love your enemy" is nothing like an alleged statement of fact about electrons. I say alleged, because the vast majority of living humans are incapable of verifying, or even really understanding, any statement about electrons in a truly meaningful way. By contrast, the wisdom in the instruction "Love your enemy" is something even foolish or uneducated people can a) legitimately argue to be foolish or clever, b) regard as revelation, c) take as a subject of infinite contemplation, d) adopt as a program of action. But knowledge

also, in a way, is wisdom and folly, a subject of contemplation and a programs of action; take atomic power. The difference between the command to love your enemy, and atomic power, is nonetheless fundamental. In everyday human terms the unity of matter and energy, or the relation of the speed of light to time and gravity, is a button on the desk in the Oval office. To put this another way: the ultimate meaning of modern science is power.

Power, of course, is not just power to destroy. It is also the power to do things of which good children are taught to approve. That power has many forms, however, does not change what it ultimately is; i.e. no permutation can change power into wisdom. A man utterly helpless, about to be killed by his enemy, a man totally without power, may yet be wise and use what remains of his life to love that enemy. His murderer has power but he is insensate. That said, there is another relation between wisdom and power which should give the priests of modern science pause. The sort of power generated by their religion has its ultimate source in wisdom; the religion of science, though it regards itself as triumphantly independent, was spawned by that aspect of human activity which, according to Heidegger, it tends to reject or even render impossible, that foundation of wisdom which is contemplation.

Contemplation has a peculiar relation to scientific method. Contemplation might lead to a theory of, say, physics — in fact it is the only way any significant theory can be formed. But it might just as easily lead in some other direction. Contemplation, Heidegger explains, is a state of openness.

Openness to what? Heidegger replies in a characteristic

formula: contemplation is openness to Being. Being, we could say, is "what is". Now science begins with the premise that what is, is matter. Heidegger, however, excludes a-priory definition of "what is" prior to contemplation, for an obvious reason: contemplation cannot be a state of openness when it already knows its object. To put this another way, openness is not truly open if it is not unconditionally open. What does "open" mean, if *what is* is defined prior to our *being open to what is*, and thus to our experience of it?

Contemplation is waiting in a state of attention or expectancy. In such a state we are open to the unknown, and therefore the unknown can come to be known. Contemplation, whether religious, philosophical or aesthetic, is no longer part of our culture, Heidegger complains, because we are charmed and fascinated by our mastery of new powers, and occupied with our magical toys. For Heidegger this is an existential disaster. It cuts us off from what is. It distances us from Being.

However, even if one grants that our culture is not particularly contemplative (with the exception of the greatest scientists) one might doubt that this removes us from Being. What can being removed from Being mean? A man busy driving a car, talking into a cell phone, working at a computer screen and dancing to techno-music — however we may assess such a life — would seem to "exist" just as much as a praying monk, a meditating philosopher or a dreaming poet.

To understand Heidegger we must look at his biography. Heidegger is said by the highest philosophical authorities to

be the most important thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the most striking action taken by this man, who was a German in Germany in the 1930s, was joining the Nazi party. After the war he was scrutinized by French de-nazification officials and eventually punished by a period of five years during which he was forbidden to teach.

Heidegger was not obliged to take this step. Many of his eminent colleagues did not. It is interesting that the most celebrated intellectual followers of Heidegger, like Sartre, urged their disciples to specific political positions and actions, while Heidegger made no political suggestions. His whole teaching is notably theoretical, not to say obscure.\* He was notable for his poetic use of language. Sometimes his philosophy takes the form of dialogues or poems. To explain what happens in contemplation, the result of openness to “what is”, he speaks of the arrival of a “new god”. He did not mean that Jehovah would be replaced by another supreme being; his meaning is suggested in his definition of modern science

\*In this connection we may note two facts. 1) Sartre, notable for his engagement on the left, was one of the principal post-war promoters of Heidegger as a great thinker. 2) As a Communist in 1939 Sartre took Hitler’s side at the moment of the German attack on France—by way of obedience not to Heidegger but to Stalin, then in alliance with Hitler. Whatever other significance these facts, characteristic of many 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals, may have, I wish only to indicate how some of the most influential intellectuals of Heidegger’s time, particularly on the left, were almost constantly allied with him philosophically, and also, at times (like Sartre in 1939) politically. To state this another way: Communist demonization of the “bourgeois” and conservatives or non-leftists, as more or less Nazi, or the successful positioning of Hitler on the “right”, had little effect on Heidegger’s eminent philosophical position which, though politically embarrassing, was none-the-less ratified by the philosophical left. Thinkers on the “right” (Aron, Revel) paid virtually no attention to him. A characteristic heideggerian position, such as that “culture is Being” might be construed as a rather banal statement to the effect that it is important to read books, listen to music and look at paintings, but it is difficult to see how it can be interpreted as a call to political action of any color. In fact, that he joined the Nazi party was only superficially a political action; more profoundly it was a philosophical action—or an act of heideggerian-philosophy.

as a religion. Materialism, even if its essence is understood as refusal to go beyond matter, is a metaphysical (*beyond physical*) notion, or position. There are many "metaphysics", theories or positions which attempt to express or define reality. Each metaphysic (to the extent it is more than mere theorizing) is a living vision which defines a culture; thus it becomes "religion", as Heidegger uses the term. Such religions are, by definition, grounded in that openness, that contemplation of "what is" which experiences the new god. The new god is the crucial insight into Being, or that temporally and geographically local permutation of mysterious Being, for Being can only be perceived within the horizon of our contemplation.

## Humanity

Heidegger was not a moralist. He was not interested in such questions as the nature of good and evil, but in the apparently deeper question of the nature of existence itself — thus existentialism. His proclamation of the end of Christian mythology and culture is unrelated to the problem of the existence of God. Thunderous as it may seem, this proclamation was not a manifestation of some sort of anti-clericalism but merely a formulation of a background truth which, until then, had gone undiscovered.

Christianity has two parts: the underlying beliefs — mythology — and the resultant practices and modes of life — culture. Culture is based on mythology; mythology generates culture.

It is easy to see how God can be rejected in our scientific age. We think we know how the universe works, or at least what sort of things can and cannot occur. Doubting miracles, we are sure Christian mythology is false: the dead do not rise; children are not born without a human father; water cannot be walked upon, turned into wine or spurt from human veins; three loaves cannot be transformed into thousands of loaves, and folks do not float up into the sky. Christian myths, like Egyptian, Greek and Nordic myths, are false — except perhaps metaphorically, but that is just literature.

Each culture is unique because each mythology has distinctive aspects. Pagan culture is characterized by the tragic outlook: the gods are fickle, and when people die they go to the dreary realm of Pluto. Pagan mythology died and was replaced by Christian mythology. Christian culture is characterized by a hopeful outlook: even if life is unsure God is not fickle, so there is salvation and eternal joy after death. Both these mythologies, and their attendant cultures, are now dead or inoperative — objects of research and so on. But we do not therefore live in a situation beyond myth and thus beyond culture. According to Heidegger Man is Man because of culture.

We think of primitive cultures as characterized by taboo and ritual. Transgression of a taboo triggers social opprobrium, punishment, ritual cure and conventional reparation, all as convoluted and absurd as the taboos themselves. The more primitive the culture the more its members live in a world incomprehensible to nonmembers, a special labyrinth of laws and traditions. This type of culture is a filter which distorts

and baffles a view of reality. Westerners live, or think they live, unbaffled by such filters. For example, in primitive cultures sexual deviancy is often regarded with great severity but in the West we have transcended this. The ritual of coming-out has a heroic quality because it defies an irrational cultural taboo, and thus exerts a humanizing influence on society. We live in a post-cultural, or tabooless society.

Heidegger does not endorse this view. If old taboos are being phased out, new taboos are being created just as fast. In Christian culture there is a taboo against premarital sex. In our new culture there is a taboo against intolerance.

Towards premarital sex there seem to be three possible attitudes: *for*, *against* and *tolerance*. The latter seems to mean that, even if one is not *for*, one accepts that others might be, and lets them alone. This is based on the assumption that private actions have no effect on society, or that people exist in a state of radical separation. In the case of pre-marital sex, take the example of the mother of a 14 year old girl : how is she supposed to feel about her daughter's male friends being *for*? Once this problem is thought through it appears that there are only two positions: *for* or *against*. Tolerance is really a thoughtless or irresponsible type of *for*. Taboos or attitudes cannot be eliminated, they can only be shuffled around.

As already stated, for Heidegger culture is not based on taboos but mythology. Jesus dying on the cross for our sins (whether it is a true event or not) is a myth which generates cultural elements through the mechanism of people believing it is true. Such an element might, for example, be an ethic of forgiveness. But even if we believe this myth it would not be

the only influence on our behavior. Though we may know (in fact we would merely believe) that anger and vengeance are sinful, we still might feel angry or vengeful. Culture does not make us into automatons, its imperatives do not change our animal nature. But if the cultural injunction did not exist, how could we characterize what we were feeling, or know that choice existed in the matter? What counter force would throw our basic experience into a relief which could be grasped by our imagination? Heidegger said: *Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.* Without the word anger — and the attitudes and references which bring it alive — how do we even know we are angry? We might realize in a dim and vague way that we are experiencing something different from a simply torpid state, but such awareness is animal awareness. We would be incapable of anticipating our anger, reflecting upon it or, above all, regretting it.

Gerald Bruns, speaking of Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, explains that for Heidegger the function of:

*a work of art, its truth, is to open up a world, a human dwelling place. The work is no longer reducible to a product of subjective expression or the object of aesthetic contemplation. It is . . . an event that sets us free from what is merely timeless and fixed [mere objective reality]. It inserts us into history, situates us together in an ongoing world [it establishes] a world, but the work [of art] does not belong to the world it establishes, [it] belongs to the earth [the 'ground of our being'], which constitutes something like the absolute horizon of the world, the limit that determines the world's historically and*



*finitude. The [art] work opens a clearing in the density of the forest [of reality;] it lightens a place within the darkness. . .*

In other words, art generates (or elucidates) culture — a very *recherché* idea which has nonetheless passed into popular consciousness.

Nietzsche's superman, who is beyond good and evil, is, in traditional terms, a criminal. Today the criminal has become a hero because he embodies an important value of our new culture: self-actualization. Liberated from cultural taboos he is truly self-activated. This is probably the most striking example of how the old culture and the new culture differ; in the old culture criminals were objects of pity at best. Today they are objects of pity at worst, at best they are adulated. The criminal is a liberator because, by defying convention he destroys mythology. The other hero of the new culture, the artist, is like the first artist, Homer; he creates mythology. The total penetration of this idea into popular consciousness was driven home to me in 2004 when a seven year old boy, knowing I am a painter, rather than saying to me: *Tu fait de la peinture* (you paint), said: *Tu fait de la culture* (you make culture). This, of course, is a matter of vocabulary, but any French youth knows that "culture" means not only painting but what you eat for breakfast. He would also know that eating a different kind of breakfast is not "making culture" but that painting is.\*

But new mythologies cannot be established (perhaps they cannot even be created) before the old ones are destroyed:

\* Eating a different kind of breakfast would be "multi-culturalism".

transgression (destruction) is as important as art (creation). The essential modern hero, therefore, is the criminal-artist-prophet, whose mysterious and god-like will clears away the old, and ordains a new reality.

Heidegger was a philosopher — a lover of wisdom. I mean that he was not a cheerleader. The end of Christianity was not something he wished but something he observed. We vulgarly suppose ourselves to be free of myth, or that science has liberated us into the light of reality. Heidegger does not agree.

Culture is language. Languages are all the ways that meanings of all kinds are communicated. Science is above meaning. It understands itself to be in a one-to-one relationship with cosmic facts, the true truths. Science is a super-culture, a language which surpasses and encompasses all other languages. But it is not beyond language, because something beyond language could not be known. Science can only be the ultimate and universal culture if it is also the ultimate and universal language. Now even the scientists are obliged to admit — in fact this is precisely what they contend — that the cosmos, or ultimate reality, is the opposite of language: it is silence. The cosmos, as such, has no meaning; it is only a gigantic fact, or a gigantic infinity of facts. Our desires, emotions and attitudes — the language of our soul, the stuff and articulation of our self-consciousness — are something else: they are gifts. They are not a function of the silent cosmos, because meaning cannot be without language. They therefore come from somewhere else, a giver or, as

Heidegger put it: *the god who comes*. Without these gifts we reintegrate the cosmic silence and drift into non-being.

What of Heidegger himself; did his philosophical perspective snatch him out of dependence upon culture so that he enjoyed a pan-optic or cosmic view? No: his life was consistent with his doctrine; he joined the Nazi party in 1933 while it was still seeking power, and he did not leave it after it showed its face or after it rushed to its doom; i.e. he was neither opportunistic nor craven. Today many people think the Nazis were insane, but many elements of Nazi doctrine — racial superiority, eugenics, the admiration of force — were fashionable in the 1930s, and they are often fashionable today in other guises.\* And what if the Aryans, rather than losing the war, had managed to dominate the sub-races? How, in this case, could Nazi mythology be proved wrong when — as some so loudly today insist in our allegedly anti-Nazi democracies — majority will (or sheer power) is sacred? Be that as it may, the nature of Heidegger's beliefs certainly conditioned his reaction to Nazi vitality, to the god who came.

How many people besides Heidegger took such radical action? We think we agree with Heidegger. Christianity — in fact all religion — is dead, so we are relativists and multiculturalists. We insist that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and that there is no accounting for taste. We know that the

\* Another idea frequently encountered is that Hitler was mediocre. Such ideas do not face facts. Hitler was many things but basically he was an artist. In his youth he studied painting and wrote an opera. He took pictures of himself in oratorical positions to refine his technique. He spent endless hours with Albert Speer planning the theaters in which he played his starring roll. Unless Hitler's artistic side is taken seriously Nazism remains incomprehensible, for Hitler triumphed over the Germans through art.

silent cosmic void is the ultimate fact, from which no values can be drawn. This situation is somewhat odd, even uncomfortable. It is like a big drafty house; a bit spooky. But it can be fixed up — lace curtains, a refrigerator — one way and another life can be comfortably arranged. The cosmos may be silent but it leaves us alone; we may make of life what we will.

To a true Heideggerian this is beneath contempt. Culture is a music, a surge of living myth coursing through the fabric of our consciousness. It makes us what we are. The surge itself, quite apart from its content, is the stuff of existence. We do not generate this music and we cannot change it. It is not pretty sounds coming from a radio whose stations and volume we can select at whim. It is like blood flowing in our veins, the electrical charge activating our synapses. To stop this god-ordained surge is to drain our spiritual body of vitality, to nullify our humanity. There is only one exit from culture: collapse into a nonhuman state.

To wrench consciousness out of the charmed circle of culture is dehumanizing. This does not mean degradation, sinking to the level of crass barbarism; it is not metaphorical. Without culture — the music which gives substance to Being — Man shrivels into the state of unconscious worm, phantomatic zombie, a dumb beast in a manlike form, monstrous to the extent he is like Man but not Man.\* Mythology is ineluctable. Were it

\* Julian Young writes that Heidegger: . . . *thinks of every human being as born in to a very fundamental, 'transcendental' horizon of disclosure . . . the horizon of all one's horizons—[which] he calls 'world' . . . These historical worlds are defined and distinguished by different horizons of disclosure. They are embodied in what Heidegger calls 'language'. Hence his frequently repeated remark that 'language is the house of being' . . . world is the background' . . . understanding which determines for the members of an historical culture what, for them, fundamentally, there is.*

not for the myth-makers we would be vague outlines on the backdrop of the cosmic void, mute silhouettes without thought or feeling. Our lives would pass mindlessly, a semiconscious and lackadaisical pursuit of comfort. Like animals we would be born without hope, live without enthusiasm, die without regret. This is the key to the mystery of Heidegger's Nazism; fear of that nothingness which a true Man must fear; a heart that is cold and a brain that is still: living death.

Humanity's essential representative—the lawgiver, the myth maker, the criminal-artist-prophet—like Orpheus bringing life to the dead with love and song—driven by the deepest urge within the human race, the urge to become itself—colors the canvas of inhuman nothingness, works the cosmic silence into a semblance of the song of Orpheus. This is why art, for Modernity, is the ultimate human phenomenon. It generates the theater of life without which the drama of humanness fails to occur.

This insight deprived Heidegger of the capacity for revolt. With the Christian context gone, Nazi mythology generated the new reality. Culture is either alive in us, a music singing in our souls, or it is a vain wish, a dry unreality. To use the jargon in which such terrible thoughts can be cloaked: the problem of culture is existential. In the 1930s, with Christianity in decline, Nazi culture—a fume rising from a bubbling vat of Darwinism, Scientism and Nordic Nostalgia—seemed to Heidegger to be the music singing in the souls of the European peoples. It was new and vital music, croaking in the wreckage of the First World War, mingled with youthful lust and impatience. Was Heidegger wrong? The new mythology

was undeniably real in many hearts and minds, and the culture it spawned ran away with the world. Is any culture eternal? In the 1930s Nazi culture was the new mode, the way of the future, fashionable world-wide. For Heidegger, humanity — not people but what makes them more than animals — is the highest value; that without which nothing else matters. It was in defense of humanity that he embraced Nazism. Discounting Gaia, the goddess who is coming, this is an important hint about the currently fashionable metaphysical notions.











