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FRAGMENTATION AND AMBIVALENCE : ART AND SIGNS OF PRECARIOUSNESS

Karel Boullart

If God does not exist, Dostoyevsky said, everything is permissible. If God didn't exist, anticipated Voltaire, one ought to invent Him. And indeed, one can add, if everything is permissible, nothing is possible any more. But, following Nietzsche, God is dead, and it isn't easy, one might say, to invent God. Theology aside however, let's substitute "God" for the more mundane notion of "culture", and it seems these lapidary utterances catch the spirit of the times. Thus, limiting ourselves further to the production of art, one can, again and again, as was done recently at a congress in Vienna, ask the question : "Ist die Moderne erschöpft ?" (1).

We're not going to answer this question, because death and resurrection are the things art and culture are made of. We'll simply try to outline a frame of reference that might in some way clarify the problem of "modernism", its fragmentation and ambiguity, in short, its trials and errors.

Man is a cultural animal. This means, individually and collectively, he has to shape his finiteness on the basis of a — self-made — quasi-axiomatics of value in all its forms. In other words, his culture is the outline wherewith he has to build the house he feels at home in and secure, because he believes he can thereby realise the values, which make him feel that it is worthwhile being human and that life is worth living. In this sense all culture is construction of total significance. It is evident such significance must be construed on pain of selfdestruction or universal selfdeceit. It can be shown as well that such a construction — precisely because of its quasi-axiomatic character — necessarily falls apart in three large

domains : an ethical order (law and morals), a theoretical order (science and technology) and an aesthetical order (art and cognate activities and objects). Moreover the general frame, the quasi-axiomatics, is of a metaphysical and religious nature, in this sense that a "cultural framework" is based upon and justified by its "cosmic embeddedness" : given the world as it is (in this culture), given man in this world (in this culture), this "culture" is precisely the one that makes men human. From this point of view, art can be defined — very generally - as an objectified metaphorisation of a culture and its values : it is the only possibility man disposes of to present his "cultural being" in a concrete, perceptible form, and such an activity is necessary because of the inherent instability of human culture as such. The ethical order - underdetermined as it is — is a very unsatisfactory "codex" indeed, because it is of necessity pseudo-discursive; the theoretical order is discursive all right, but notoriously abstract and therefore, as far as concrete life is concerned, irrelevant to a high degree. Only the aesthetical order is at the same time vitally concrete as real life is, and nevertheless universally available as a mathematical formula is. And art indeed is the simulation of such an - impossible - synthesis : therefore its nature is metaphorical. For the same reason it is the least incomplete objectified form of cultural conscience and therefore it has — at least in principle — a maximally deepening and heightening effect. In this sense it is understandable art is a barometer indicating man's humanity and values, his truths and his lies and generally the problem of being a human, i.e. a "cultural" animal.

From a nihilistic point of view, any cultural option is — even and especially one is at home in — an idle illusion. But viewed from the standpoint of the "culture" itself, this "home" is substantial or at least an inevitable attainment. Culture is illusory because it cannot be justified adequately : all culture is questionable and this is so, because it is impossible to order the totality of world and man in a systematically efficient way : every culture has its limits, and consequently, its unsolvable conflicts, in fact, its tragedies. On the other hand culture is substantial because in principle man has no alternative but such as entail final inadequacy and in the long run unsatisfying partiality. Thus not only human life, individually and collectively, but also human culture is finite : it is born, it reaches a sense of security and at last it discovers — though never completely — its limits and consequently its "tragedies". And in such circumstances man becomes conscious of the inevitable uneasiness that is

the mark of all cultural options. The "divine right of kings" that characterises cultures at their heyday, needs must make place for an "interregnum", a search for a new "kingdom of man". The deeper such a crisis, the longer such an "interregnum" may last, and the more desperate the search, the more absolute the "eureka's" and consequently the more cruel the battle of opinions. In this Gordian knot it is hard to make out what is illusory or what is substantial : this is only — if at all — possible from a distance, and such distance generally isn't the privilege of contemporaries. Our time, our culture, is such an interregnum, perhaps the most important, the most exceptional one, but also the most dangerous that ever was. Maybe it is even the final one. One may fairly presume that the "God" of Greek and Christian culture became moribund in the Renaissance, that the autonomisation of man, his reason and his experience has been completed with the Enlightenment and its proclamation of majority, and that somewhere in the beginning of our century, this "new" man — finally humanised — began his agony of death in the midst of war, misery and humiliation. This doesn't mean, as some might say, one cannot talk as well of a great liberation being under way. But let's be cautious and beware of the great slavery that might be the consequence of such a — putative — all-round emancipation.

If everything is permissible, which possibilities are offered to art ? If the metaphysical and religious frame that was art's home has lost its credibility, what direction can it take ? How evaluate its frenetic endeavours to demolition and reconstruction, to annihilation and re-creation ? What are the characteristics of this "experimentation", if "certainty" is no longer possible ?

Let's start our analysis with "classical" art, i.e. art in periods wherein collective "metaphysical models" are thought valid and let's see in which way the desintegration of such models affects art : than, perhaps, we could discover that many motives of form and content in "modern" art can be linked with such a tendency to desintegration, re-creation and re-organisation. It must be stressed however that theory is easy and art is difficult : the indications we'll find will be rather abstract — as is the fate of all theory — and consequently they will be markedly underdetermined. Nevertheless, it may be hoped that such an orientation, such a frame of reference may have a certain power of demarcation that invides further analysis. Art wouldn't be a "tremendum et fascinans", if it were possible to "explain" it definitely, adequately and completely. And precisely in art this unexplained "rest" is always the most important

thing and the most fascinating aspect of a work of art as well.

The world can be described as a series of events, states of affairs and objects, embedded in a finite, linear and irreversible sequence, defined by finite initial conditions and finite ultimate restrictions, which — on the anthropological level — can be thought of as "unsolvable conflicts". The "metaphysical" model man develops individually and collectively in order to shape his "life", can be described as a quasi-axiomatic set of ethical, epistemical and aesthetic values and norms. Given the irreversibility, linearity and finiteness of these sequences, the meta-function of the aesthetic and art in culture can be analysed as an endeavour to preserve — for all times — the "panta rei" of "lived concreteness" and thus to make experience indefinitely available for all. As repetitivity can only be found in objects — these being in essence and up to a certain point repetitive, i.e. cyclical series of events — the repetitivity of the concrete and the irreversible can only be achieved by way of symbolisation as an analogue of reality, as an "instauratio" of an alternative "world" or cosmos that sheds light upon and as it were "cristallizes" the "panta rei" of lived concreteness. Whatever the function of art in particular metaphysical models, i.e. whatever the "aesthetic" models which are valid within particular cultures, everywhere and always the meta-function of art implies that a work of art necessarily appears at the same time as an "object" and as a "symbol" of events, states of affairs and objects, and as an embedded cultural order of these on the basis of a given set of values and norms. As art is fixation of the irreversible and the concrete in effigy, the artwork is always and everywhere an object (cf. the repetitivity of the medium of art) and at the same time a "subject" (by means of the presentation in a medium of the irreversible and the concrete), and consequently a pseudo-object and a pseudo-subject. The work of art therefore has, up to a certain point, the characteristics of a "person", because a person in his or her uniqueness can be defined by the particularity of his linear, irreversible sequence, which is the consequence of his or her cultural and individual choices. It must be said therefore that art — in this classical sense — is a synthesis in effigy of subject and object. This means, first, that art is a synthesis of event and thing, because it presents us with the only universally available "canonical" form of experience in its concreteness. Secondly, it is a form which is at the same time content and vice versa, because it presents a semantics which has been transformed in syntaxis in a quasi-axiomatic way (with the

consequence that both cannot be separated as is paradigmatically the case in science), and thirdly, it is a reality which is at the same time a symbol, because art presents an analogue of concrete experience which sheds light upon the "real world" and the culture it "expresses". Moreover, art is the optimal means to enlarge human experience, to intensify and deepen it and to reveal the essentials of cultural options. In short, art is the most efficient means to objectify cultural conscience. These characteristics further imply that a work of art can only be apprehended by contemplation. "Aesthetic distance" is the consequence thereof : on the one hand emphatic identification and on the other unmoved, serene distancing, in fact, as Schiller said, violent mouvement and complete rest at the same time. These characteristics are paradigmatically and compellingly present in artworks which exemplify the "tragic", especially in "classical" tragedies. Indeed, in tragic works of art, the "aesthetic" character of the work is necessarily most prominent and in this sense the "tragic" can be viewed as the core of art and aesthetic experience itself.

But, like "God", "tragedy" is dead also. In modern art this classical form of art desintegrated or rather it exploded, because the metaphysical and consequently the aesthetic models on which it is based, lost their credibility. And these models were destroyed by the worldwide landslide caused by the Industrial Revolution. The scientific and technological developments which made possible this revolution destroyed the metaphysical premises of our culture, and for the moment it is not clear in which direction a new and less inadequate world-view must be looked for. The consequence is that aesthetic models which could be implemented to the end of the 19th century lost their representativity and paradigmaticity. Man lost his certainty and uneasiness and fear took its place : he is confronted with a no man's land, an emptiness which needs must be delimited, peopled and ordered. It is not possible any more for an artist to present "cultural being" paradigmatically : first of all he must delineate his media anew, and culturally he must look profetically into the future. He is obliged not only to test out new media, but he must create the content of his work as well : he must create the culturally ordered world which presumably is worthwhile and is or seems valuable enough to be the stuff of artistic presentation. Therefore, paradigmaticity and adequacy can hardly be achieved to-day : art is obliged to become "experimental", technically, semantically and syntactically. Because the medium of art is the

conditio sine qua non of the unity of form and content, the artist is confronted with the problem of his means of expression, and therefore the old classical "arts" of the 18th century are as inadequate as the classical features of the work of art. New techniques and new media must be "thought" out, and new combinations must be tried out. Technical and medium-like "novelty" and "originality" of form and content are and must therefore be brought to the foreground, even if they are as such in fact merely pre-aesthetic : the new and the original are therefore — and not exclusively in art — in themselves recommendable. But manifestly it is dangerous to suppose new techniques and idiosyncrasy of form and content constitute as such — as elements of renewal — paradigmatic aesthetic value. They are not sufficient : they simply are the necessary condition of cultural creative processes which clear the way for — indeed — new and original paradigmatic works of art, which again have or may have "classical" characteristics.

At first, the desintegration of traditional metaphysical frames of reference implies the desintegration of aesthetic models because these have lost their credibility, but this does not, as a consequence, necessarily imply the desintegration of the meta-cultural characteristics of the work of art as a synthesis of subject and object. Private and group-mythologies, i.e. hermetic art can take the place of old, well-known but no longer acceptable evidences, but they may well leave traditional art forms unchallenged and unchanged. Programmatic, idiosyncratic and mystical elements are consequently woof and weft of many mouvements of modern art. We can cite, for instance, futurism, Malevitch' suprematism, surrealism, Mondriaan and "De Stijl". It is evident these "mouvements" are very diverse and their motivations are remarkably divergent and it is clear artistic objectification may take very different technical, formal and semantic features. Malevitch' mystical marxist mythology of a non-objective world leads to a quasi-mathematical system of signs and a particular symbolism of color, but the object itself remains quite a traditional work of art : it is indeed a mediative icon. On the basis of Freudian psychoanalysis surrealism invented a new iconography with fully traditional means. The same is true of the communist mythology of the worker as it is found in the work of Fernand Léger. The artwork remains a symbolic universe shedding light on and cristallising concrete experience, whether in the abstract or in the figurative vein. And this traditional way of conveying experience is preserved because one has the impression — rightly or wrongly —

that one disposes of an "authentic" world-view and a cultural alternative, whatever may be its peculiarities and in fact its glaring contradictions. Less naive and more exacting minds may be convinced it is impossible to realise collective cultural integrity in our times, and their protest against loss of identity and meaning may take the form of an all-round negativism.Dada-nihilism is a possibility also, and Tristan Tsara is probably the most typical example of such a destructive attitude. But this nihilism, which in fact tries to escape from the dilemma of culture as such, cannot any longer accept the art-object in the classical sense : this anti-cultural attitude cannot but lead to the radical rejection of the meta-cultural model of the art work, and the art-object as an indefinitely available culturally relevant entity ought to be rejected as frustrating and mystifying. Dada in its purest manifestations precisely is such a dislocation without conclusion and without alternative. Dancing above the abyss it manifests an exuberant hilarity fed by the panic of nothingness : Dadaists are the clowns of culture. This nihilism has its sour truth. But this truth is all too naked, or rather it exposes man all too much to the indifference of the world at large : the inevitability of cultural choices demands imperatively man must be clothed in order to survive. And as the artwork in its integrity — and illusion — has been destroyed, man of necessity will have to defend himself against the nothingness of his destiny with the fragments which are left of art in its classical form. In this perspective two tendencies are quite markedly present : the idea of the "own", the intimate, the evenemential and the "I", and the idea of the "other", the external, the world and its things as such — both seized in their — supposed — immediacy. And this can be manifested on two planes : in the artwork itself, which in a certain sense leads to a belated recuperation of some aspects of tradition, or in the concrete experience of the "I" itself, which volatilizes the art-object to an event and consequently to subjective action. The traditional work therefore, thing and event, is reduced either to an event as such, as for instance in "happenings", or to the event of creation itself objectified, as in 'action-painting". On the other hand the artwork can be reduced either to the thingness of things and then, for instance, ready-mades are brought to the museum, or the object is left where it is, and artistic i.e. cultural feelings are more or less absorbed in the "enjoyment" of nature. Between both extremes the whole gamut of indication, documentation and manipulation can be found, which guaranty a minimum of subjective creativity and

cultural reference : from the "objet-trouvé" in the living-room to "land-art" in the desert. These centrifugal tendencies are sometimes manifest in form and content as well, and can be connected with the concretisation of new and pseudo-universal contents or restrict themselves to the exploration of particular aspects. Art then becomes, for instance, the symbolic flag-wagging of a "de propaganda fide" as is the case in Stalin's and Zdanov's realism, or it explores and elaborates technical aspects as in "op-art". In these cases personal mythologies have disappeared and technicalities of form and content become predominant. In this way, however, content may be shrivelled up to the explicitly didactical and the pseudo-definite and form may lose its substance and degenerate in mechanical play for the sake of visual intrigue. In such cases, cultural substance has been lost to be replaced by illusory emotionalism and the mere perceptually pleasant. Finally the synthesis of symbol and reality can become inexpressible : the reality, the materiality of the artwork is but self-referential and symbolic values lose their embodiment. The classical "hand-writing" of the artist reduces to materiality as such, speaking its "own" language, and content is sought in experimental play and display of materials : matter as such is taken to be creative and responsive on its own, as if out of raw nature cultural forms, values and norms could arise as it were by spontaneous generation. One has in mind the work of Jean Dubuffet, it we attend to the not quite unimportant fact that lyrical improvisation here has taken the place of a supposed natural emergence of meaning. On the other hand the symbolic nature of art itself, its specifically meta-cultural aspects, convergently with the desintegration of the classical artwork, can be examined and in such a case art becomes its own, more or less academic subject of research. As matter becomes mere matter and symbols are left to their own devices, art loses its possibilities to refer and abandons its possibility to shed light on reality. And thus art has nothing left but itself : content reduces to the almost discursive question of art's own rôle in reality and culture, art becomes a propositional calculus about art itself, or more generally, a way of computational instruction about the so-called creative process. The volatilisation of symbolic values to the inducement or the indication of visual processes or thoughts reduces the work of art to the problem of its own concept as creation or residue of creative activity : "minimal" art and "concept" art may serve as examples.

These fragmentary and explosive endeavours to exercise or

implement our interregnum — the artwork as thing òr event, form òr content, matter òr idea — naturally do not only desintegrate the "givenness" of the art-object but the contemplative attitude as well. They result in a symbiosis of contemplation and creation or action, in a more or less daily and complementary self-realisation of artist and art-lover alike, a symbiosis exemplified up to a point by "body-art" and "happenings", and their — not in the least unexpected — therapeutic message. And thus, activity as such, individually and collectively, is in danger of being proclamed artistic. And indeed, if the artwork has no longer an identity isolating it from an act of life, if its symbolic character is given up, and if dadaistic negativism is transformed in the ineluctable immeadiacy of "acting" and "living", life is art and art is life, and man has reached his putative ultimate goal : he is an artist and his life is his work, as it is or seems to be — commercially at least — for Gilbert & George. The old romantic irony of the brothers Schlegel and the idea of art for art's sake, have been exchanged for the aesthetisation of man, individually and collectively : the emptiness of the interregnum has been infused with megalomaniac ideas of "I" and with history as spectacular play. After the liquidation of the aesthetic model and its essentials, the myth of metaphysical embeddedness has been exchanged for the mythology of the individual and collective "I" : the artist has become a stuntman and politics, the surface tension of communal life, has degenerated into show-business.

But isn't all this quite true ? Isn't it true we are living in a second-hand world, in a society of our own fabrication, throwing away the very substance of its existence, a world of pre-fabricated ideas, feelings and behaviour, programmed, mechanical and automatic, as if it were a sofisticated toy ? And is all protest against this play of gadgets not past hope, past care ? And isn't it the task of art — with the means and in the media such a manufacturing plant provides — to present this world, whether we identify, critically demystify or merely register ? This mere registration of fact with the help of mechanical and thus neutral means, leaves the aesthetic object as it is, and moreover, bypasses the problem of any metaphysical model whatever. This regained "figuration" — this residue of "vox populi" — is but an object within the empty objectivity of our times, it produces works which are bereft of all interiority and are but the figuration of dummies. But what about it, if our so-called real "cultural" world is made of the same stuff ? The presentation of lies with such neutral means is precisely our

authenticity, or isn't it ? Spuriousness is authenticity ! Thus, the nihilism of Dada has become neutral and indifferent in the world of "pop-art". Authentic feeling, its exploration and refinement — a dangerous anomaly in this world of mechanical and brutal automatism — has been sterilised. This interregnum consumes and recuperates — on the basis of its technological powers — its own critique, and is but recognizable as false from the outside. And so even these modern means are neutralised in their critical aspects and therefore no longer pertinent. On the other hand, this new "realism" can nevertheless retain its effect of estrangement and indifference by objectifying the mechanical and the inhuman in "classical" works by critically X-raying as it were the callousness of the given and as such can acquire an hallucinative power, more or less adequate to the "fake" of modern existence. Hyperrealism perhaps can be interpreted in this way. And finally one can try, like Bacon and Balthus, to visualise directly and explicitly the solitude and the terror, the reprehensible and the contemptible and the humiliation of man with fully and exclusively classical means. But the exceptional character of such — traditional - artistic endeavours and their stylistic isolation seems to prove such a recuperation of European classical art is a very precarious undertaking : few have the capacity to stare the "modern" Medusa right in the face without petrifying. And as cultural balance has been lost, it is in all probability but the understatement and its cognates which can avoid excess and therefore banality.

We have tried, though very generally, to show how traditional art has fallen apart under the pressure of modern emptiness and desorientation in a series of motives and endeavours which can be combined in very different ways and lead to very variable results, even to a "modern" and therefore extremely anxious "classicism". At the same time we hope to have made plausible the contention that we "Moderns" move on the edge of an abyss which has been opened up by the loss of substance of traditional metaphysical and consequently aesthetic models. There are, however, as it seems, two ways in which modern man can fall headlong in the precipice. Panic indeed must be exorcised. But maybe it happens that man doesn't have at his disposal the necessary mental force or that humiliation and misery have bereft him of the means to safeguard even a precarious authenticity. The pressure of hostile reality, which threatens and manipulates him can be so strong, that man appears as a hunted and trampled down animal : and thus he'll find

his paradigm in Büchner's "Woyzeck", who undoubtedly can yell out, but cannot act any more. And for the artist one can think of the history of Schönberg's "Moses und Aron", the tragedy of the ineffable : "O Wort, du Wort, das mir fehlt" (2). The greatest despair is indeed exemplified by immovability and silence, by death which has infested life even before it has had occasion to die. But panic can be exorcised by fraud as well, by thinking away its pains, as we fantastic beings might do, by playing "as if's". Thus we can enjoy ourselves, as long as can be, in the self-made fictions we have erected to secure ourselves, and which we call, by the art of lying, the "world". So 'kitsch' is the danger at large for modernity, a danger permanently acute and everywhere to be found. Such enjoyment is selfdelusion, worked up into deep emotion : everything is affectation and pretence, for in this fake world only fake emotions and fake objects can be sold profitably. This illusory world and life can be sanctified only by fake religion and its pretended soundness permits such a man of illusions to exalt mere pretence, to pretend that "classical" art is the only valid one (the aesthetic reactionary way), to pretend "modern" art is the soul-saving revolution of art and life (the aesthetic progresive way), and even to pretend that "modernity", whatever it presents, is humanity simply, truly and definitely. In such a way, indifference, insensitivity and egotism are screwed up to avid consumption of "culture". In fact, it is a dinner for necrophores that have abdicated long ago. Indeed, it isn't easy to invent God without being a charlatan !

Can it be the possibilities of modern art are exhausted ? As long as man exists, cultural history cannot be blocked and, this history necessarily being history of art as well, art cannot disappear — as recently retro-mouvements illustrate — and its development cannot be halted. But evidently — as has happened before — art can metamorphose and it is plausible for most artforms this metamorphosis will be very substantial, as substantial as the Industrial Revolution has been for mankind at large. The human species can be superseded only in science-fiction, and even if this were to happen, we cannot entertain the idea that such an evolution would be of interest for man. Moreover, it is quite an illusion to suppose that human beings would be able to direct biological evolution in a sensible way : even the most intelligent computer cannot but solve well-defined problems. And man and his culture, his ethics, his art and even his science are no well-defined problems in the mathematical sense of the word : they are riddles. And

answers to riddles are notoriously dangerous and risky : Oedipus could solve riddles and nobody knew less than he. The problem of man — of culture and art — is really a parable and only in very special and exceptional cases, a mathematical equation.

University of Ghent

NOTES

[1]Frankfurter Allgemeine, 12 February 1980, Nr. 36, p. 23.

[2]Moses und Aron, Act II, 4.Scene, closing sentence.