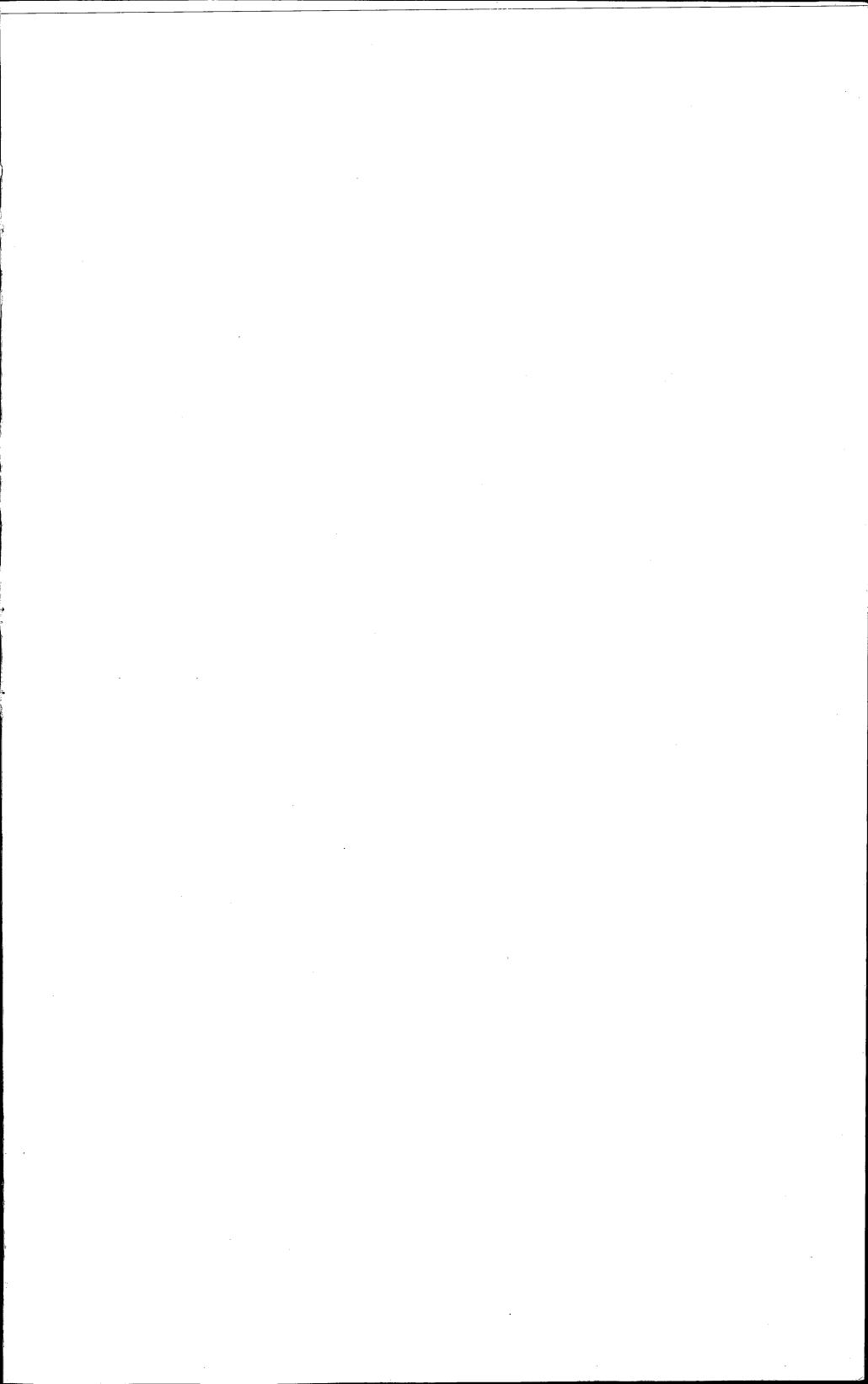


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ART CRITICISM



Art Criticism

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Breaking the Picture Plane: Reflections on Painting

John Hultberg

INTRODUCTION: THOUGH I SPEAK AND HAVE NOT CLARITY

I have written this rather ornate apologia without knowing who my audience is and therefore am uncertain of my tone of voice. It was obviously motivated by a certain bitterness for the neglect from art critics that has come my way recently in my painting career. In the isolated moments when the self-search I had undertaken (to find out how much of the blame was mine) was not interrupted by addictively refreshing jeremiads against established critics, dealers, collectors, etc., I came to the conclusion that my work had been weakened by useless detail. This had come into being when I was no longer sure of my once ingenuous impetuosity. I doubt, therefore I embellish; I doubt, therefore I explain.

Being isolated from the avant garde climate by my fall from mild success led me into an insight about the rest of the culture. Folk art, usually considered simple in mind and heart, is in reality too rich in timorous complexities to be communicated effectively. Widely used slang fads are usually disfigured by arcane affectations some lost purpose of secrecy. This seems to be a symptom of a loss of self-respect and of ambivalence toward moral values no longer operative in practical zones.

I wondered if I could redeem in myself my unquestioning love of the paint magic by seeking carefully in my depths the sources of the rapturous abandon I admired most in the kind of painting I felt would overwhelm the majority of people who were free of prejudices. This made me want to revitalize a shabby myth of thoughtless nineteenth century romanticism, its politically radical generosity and bravery; and to wonder whether, if illustrated, it would produce a hypnotic surrealism without malice.

If there is little documentation here, that is because I have been unable to find any, and least of all in my own work. I thought this folk-ferment would be polarized out of the inchoate glossalalia of abstract expressionism's atomizations, but that will not happen as long as we are distracted from the central yearning by irrelevant data, expected by historians to change hearts that must be moved first by religion. Perhaps my way is futile, but in my desperation I must have faith that a ritual of words will make my brush less dry. I want art to be more than an ambivalent euphoria, piercing accidentally the

depressions of our entropy. I want it to change the cosmos that spawns such despair. This is the theme that is expanded and modified in the following passacaglia variations.

1. PAINTINGS THAT "SPEAK IN TONGUES"—ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM'S GLOSSALALIA

When the people of the town of Frederickton, New Brunswick were allowed into the New Beaverbrook Museum, prior to the festivities for a 1963 exhibition of international modern art (a solemn affair) they were soon convulsed with laughter, which offended the zealots who had arranged the show. But isn't this exactly the reaction of gaiety that most of the artists represented would have expected? Klee and Miro would have, I am sure, since theirs was a safety-valve art reflecting and mocking the insanity of the world since World War I.

Though laughter may also have greeted the products of the represented abstract expressionists, this reaction was not the intention of these artists. Theirs was a vision beyond tragedy or farce, relating to the dispassionate elan vital of nature, not human grotesquerie, ignoring the Zeitgeist. So stunned by the human condition were they that they had no strength to relieve it, wishing only to attempt a portrayal of the undecipherable energy behind all of life. Pain was subdued with paint.

It was not usually a violent outpouring. When Sam Francis returned from Paris to New York in 1954 he said that what surprised him about the work of Jackson Pollock was its softness and delicacy. My first confrontation with his painting in 1950 had made me think of thoroughly bombed railroad tracks, but I felt no violence in the remains.

At this time Francis told me he wanted his own pictures to be so boring that people would turn away from them and, finding the world even more boring, would return to the painting. Though some of us indulged in sullenness or outrage, I would venture that the dominant mood of this unusually informal school was lyrical, almost tender, a celebration of the seething forces behind manifest nature. Loud colors or bounding forms more often suggest exuberance than anger, an attempt to make the unnatural natural, inevitable, self-evident.

"Self-evident" is not a term usually applied to painting, yet how few pictures are able to speak for themselves. In the past, the fables of religion or myth had to be known for complete understanding; now it pays to be a member of a religious cult, usually Eastern. Or, to "read" the work, you must know that the painter is trying to outdistance another artist in daring, complexity or "minimalism." Another block is when the painter is illustrating some family myth or in-joke, or re-confusing lines from Dylan Thomas or Melville's white

whale saga (more recently Hesse or Tolkien). Now if these new artists expected our weary eyes to follow the coastlines of their continents of paint with no aid from references to familiar objects, we must regard them as very serious moralists, not out to merely delight us with felicitous discoveries, but to instruct us by metaphoric contours in a geography only a trusted faith tells us really exists.

No wonder so many art patrons fell back into Matisse's welcoming armchair. (Perhaps the sparks emitted from the new painting had led them to fear they were being ushered to an electric chair.) Since paint can never equal the splendor of a sunset, does it follow that the painting must represent only itself? Without content it tends to become decoration. Those who say it must first be a decoration before it tells its story are the opposite of these artists who have no wish to sugarcoat any "literary" pill, who want the forms to be the whole story.

The positive spirit in modern art, as opposed to the spirit of our times that seems unhealthy to us, is an open laying down of one's candid vitality, unfettered by sickness' emotion. As in Scriabin's "Poem of Ecstasy" or "The Rites of Spring", this mindlessness overwhelms us with a force of sexuality that breaks all rules. Picasso's shock and delight are not poetic in the sense that surrealism is. We may feel ashamed of these excesses later, but while in their grip they were everything to us. Wasn't abstract expressionism a return to this intoxication after an era of furtive escape from superego influence?

Although the artists who surfaced after World War II in New York have been called alcoholically subjective, autistically solipsistic and even "marsupial troglodytes" (J. Varda), their work, as compared with the morbidly subjective Surrealism of Europe, seems simple-hearted, exuberant. Nor did they intend to abstract from Nature, deforming objects as did Picasso. They preferred to be called "non-objective", allying themselves with the Mondrianesque American pioneers of the Thirties. M. Rothko, in a lecture in San Francisco in 1948, said he would rather paint eyes on a rock than abstract from the human body.

If they were seduced by the felicities of observed nature it was not evidenced directly in the painting. Instead of duplicating objects of contemplation, they wanted the canvas itself to be the object of contemplation. Moreover, the canvases were the record of a sort of dance the painter had executed with his loose paint, using when possible large free arm movements instead of hand finger dexterity necessary for verisimilitude. This led to such things as the "one-shot painting" in which chance was at a premium, the canvas either a success or wiped out—the act of wiping out creating some happy accidents for a new try. For this courage, I've heard these painters commend such artists as Velasquez, Magnasco, Bonington, Sorolla, Turner, Monet; painters whose paint brio produced shattered forms more important than the subject matter.

But the paint-slingers of today, because of the Zeitgeist of upset, would not risk the scorn of their fellows by defecting to naturalism.

From this inevitably too companionable matrix, many artists soon broke away to make styles of their own, which displeased founding pioneers like Ad Reinhardt, who in one of his cartoons has an over-happy artist pointing to a picture and saying "That's me! That's my style!" (W.S. Hayter, in his class at San Francisco, told us we should submerge our individualities in a common expression as had been done in Byzantine and Gothic art, but I believe the style he suggested was his own.)

It seemed that the only style around that could absorb individuals, united only by the faith of abstraction, was the international constructivist hard edge of reason—it peacefully contained architects and designers didn't it? But it seemed that some of these rebels preferred soft edges with hard centers. The worst solecism one could commit in those years was to look for recognizable elements in the non-objective flux. Leonardo's advice to search for recognizable things in wall stains was taken to imply only organic non-objectivity. One artist said he found inspiration in the foam on the side of his beer glass. He was exasperated when a collector triumphantly saw "three little pickaninnies upside down" in one of his paintings. But the vigilance necessary to make sure these forms did not creep in could make the work less than spontaneous. We must realize that surrealism was a dirty word in America at that time, being equated with the European *Gotterdammerung*. Yet, to me at least, the most effective of these new American works were those that hinted at some totemistic figuration. Because the Jungian depths here were scary, we can understand why so many of the painters later accommodated themselves to the sunny *dolce far niente* of Matisse and Bonnard.

For some reason I wish to associate this intuitional chance-taking with the feminine element in our psyches. Yet just as important was the masculine sense of *thereness* of the canvases; the huge, wetly flung impasto slabs had almost magical presences, like totemic tikis. From their beseeching atavistic incoherencies was to be forged an entirely unique language, which had a chance to be applicable to all the species of painting that up to now it had ignored, forbidden genres of the past, whose challenges almost none were to accept.

World War II had caused a change of heart to occur in the younger painters of America who were striving for recognition in 1950.¹ A movement that wanted to dispose of the European accumulation of artistic dogmas of modern art probably was to be expected after the upheaval. But that there should be so much resentment against dadaism and surrealism is surprising, given the political bitterness of the average GI artist and the growing acceptance of these iconoclasm. True, J. Miro, a surrealist, had been an influence on some of the older artists (few of whom, incidentally, had served in the war

and many of whom were born in Europe) but this was a surrealism that did not use unsettling perspective and provided a shock more genial than cauterizing.

A resolutely non-human, disdainful high comedy of inexorable Turneresque nature was slated to replace the world-weary, all too human nihilism of the art-mockers. These "mad-vets" were not craftsmen in clean denims, for they wanted to get away from the image of the artist as a person who takes infinite pains. Their one important pain was a sense of having to make up for lost time and they trained themselves fast, teaching each other more than they learned from their unbaptized instructors on the GI Bill. Proudly tattered beer drinkers with half-revealed war sagas, few became total alcoholics or were incurably sexually lonely. Few were known to record in writing their barroom ideas and were politely silent if one among them embarrassed the others by publishing words. Their ambitious preoccupation was too subtle, too big for descriptions. Here was painting (often boring or chaotic) which came from the noble Whitmanesque largesse that fed the young writers like J. Kerouac, flawed with a windy, rough-hewn American gaucherie, but being often above vengeance and subtle deceptions. This time of postwar grace, of loafing and inviting one's soul, was inchoate in the sense of rising out of, not sinking into chaos. As it defined and preened itself it lost members who never had thought of it as a real school, but even to them it remained a moral presence.

Politically, most of this group was Leftist, but friends from the Right were agreed with in their denunciations of decadence, cleverness, facility. Perhaps there was a bit of stoic masochism in their vow to complete a painting in one standing (hard to prove and not a new idea since it goes back to Whistler and the Impressionists). In their lunging paint slings, would they have admitted that dance was necessary to their complete involvement in this almost exorcizing ritual of physicality? Not to the extent that some Europeans would later film themselves in the act of painting. And the sloppiness and dripping or impastoing to a new depth I'm sure was seen as an unselfconsciously rapt byproduct of excitement, like the "dirty" instrumental timbre of the cherished old jazz music, liquor-fueled, that had not yet been ousted by the new coolness of marijuana's progressive jazz and "pop" art.

There was little self parody. One artist, after squeezing out a tube of paint onto a painting, left the empty tube embedded in the paint; but, like the tube caps that appear in Pollock's work, this could be smiled at as the result of carelessness or preoccupation. When the canvas was sclerotic they might have rationalized "Sacre du Printemps." Could one make a comparison between these random dislocations and shatterings and "speaking in tongues", the religious glossalalia that, since before St. Paul's time, has been useful in freeing a worshipping mind for prayer? On this non-objective level, to introduce recognizable sounds (as in "Finnegan's Wake") would be as dissonant as bringing recognizable forms into these paintings. For the kind of rich, sub-

conscious poetry below or above gibberish, one would have to utilize (in painting) a new type of surrealism that could illustrate dreams as well as adapt to deep space the unconscious vocabulary without the commonly-shared classical referents that the non-objectivists demanded.

Paintings like these are not problems to be solved, but rather answers without questions. If questions arose, it must mean that the painting did not seem natural to us, was over-embellished because of indecision. The strengths in the best work recalled the flung spume of W. Homer, the gilt-edged clouds of Ryder, the Turner sunsets never beheld on land or sea. What was sought was always the quality of inevitability that finds correspondence in the unconscious laws of vision of everyone who saw the painting. Not just the record of a frenzied dance, but an object of contemplation one can return to without tiring; a thing for museums, as Cezanne had wished for his work.

Rothko's exultation that painters were at last able to stretch their arms and breathe again and C. Still's admonition to keep one's work in the closet and show it only to initiates lest they be defiled by impure eyes—these statements show an intention not to be classed with any decadent group of popular proselytizing surrealists, as well as an unworldliness that supports H. Crehan's calling Still a Manichaeist. If one believes that the devil completely rules the world and that escape to paradise comes only with death, one cannot be called an existentialist, vowing to stoically improve things on Earth. Believing in essentiality, a transcendently perfect existence elsewhere, the engages find glimpses of this perfection in mathematics, scientific laws. But in this new work there were no perfect circles or straight lines, only the tattered fragments from a heavenly battlefield. Bertrand Russell's positivistic finitude, his belief that all things in the universe could be numbered and that the list had an end, could never apply to these jagged-edged forms of multiplicity's nightmare.

Also here was a hint of unused demonic privilege. C. Greenberg claimed that not superego but only fear of punishment kept J. Dubuffet from murder. Now we see intellectuals debasing this revered heresy in their dandyish sanctification of the criminal (apropos Sade and J. Genet) which is a misunderstanding of the Manichaeistic privilege, in Sartre and N. Mailer notably. These canvases were placards saying "Repent, the world is at an end!" One cannot be slightly apocalyptic, choosing from the damned everyman some to be excepted from punishment. Instead of feeding on the supposed European traditions of vengeance, these men and women in deciding to be fearless in paint were on the gauche Whitman trail to being both loving and loved in their generous ignoring of particular grievances, since only what is feared is hated.

2. SURREALISM: THE RICH PERSON'S FOLK MAGIC?

It was a surrealist, Dali, not an angry abstract expressionist, who

printed a bullet track fired into a lithographic stone. This Duchamp-like prank is no doubt considered an example of the humor that relieves the modern artist of self-important tensions, but this kind of insane clarity betrays a sickness the Americans rarely exhibited. The adolescent gruesomeness that is so typical of surrealist painting is the darker side of the poetry that was a desperate device to contain the European pre-war senselessness, make the unbearable somehow life size. It is a regimen of insights easily parodied and debased, as we see in many younger poets. But it is a tribute to the American painters' simple-heartedness and sense of isolation from jaded ambivalence that their reaction to Duchamp was probably "Why not yawn?"

There needed to be a sublimation of surrealism's lubricities into a more wholesome folk magic that expressed the instability of elements revealed in new tools like microphotography, a dread wonder and faith masking doubt in the future of space technology. But the photographs were better than the spooky black paintings that seemed to thrive in Europe but that, like words which there have a sympathetic connotation, such as "pathetique, pauvre, miserable," over here take on negative shadings. And the habit of taking things out of context in order to see unfamiliar qualities in them is closer to the literary sleuth of worldly insights than it is to the disjointed derelict from unity, aching for order through healing non-humanistic Nature.

It had become evident that this most painterly of schools in the U.S.A. had not really caught on with writers, as had surrealism in Europe, where the cross-pollination was stifling. Here any interest by writers was due to the artists being exotically unliterary, a little barbaric but amusing, and not challenging the writers' graphic territory. The intention at first was not to overpopularize it but to keep this pure product from being raided by the voracious lower class taste. Perhaps painting and sculpture always have been this kind of catalyst to the literary leaders, part of an enchanting game for those who were able to abstract with facility witty opinions that dumbfounded inarticulate, but needy, artists. But they should have realized that "literary" has another less derogatory meaning, a possible painterly unfolding of a saga with an entirely different kind of cast than the all-too-human puppets who, in the Victorian era, made traditional illustration ridiculous. This application of a myth saga could be a fulfillment of its promise when it was ready to emerge, free of sponsors, with the kind of exact intuitions that only total revulsion against the obscenity of war nourishes.

The victims of uncontrollable and perverse imaginations, neurasthenics like Poe, who ignore the folk sources for the sake of their own horrifying compulsions, achieve a popularity in a mass audience they usually loathe; the need that they satisfy being of only that side of human nature that is lustful, greedy, all-too-human, whereas Blake, Beethoven, Tolstoi give us a beatitude of an almost childlike nature, simplicities unfashionable in our ago-

nized age. How close, yet how seemingly far, are these yea-sayers with their "work ethic" involving strife and vindication from the serene hypnotic drifters like Debussy and Whistler to whom serendipities seemed to descend effortlessly? In the magical childhood of the synthesis from nightmare and reverie that may finally bless the venerable eccentric who has earned a difficult mysticism we may, as in the "grace" of Beethoven's last quartets, feel that something is being perfected that will be useful for us in the future if we wish ardently enough to become universal artists, to touch all with a distillation of the love we feel inarticulately and which is the hope and faith in the Creator's mercy that we on Earth produce as naturally as a bee produces honey.

Modern art criticism often resembles psychoanalysis in that the ability to learn and apply an intricate ritual is more important than any originality of insight the transmitter of the faith may have. Nostalgia for the Weltschmerz or pathetic fallacies of outmoded art will distract and incapacitate those dedicated to the stringent stoicism of modern art's dry-eyed purgational method. The small, manageable list of artists who are the building blocks of most critical articles makes one think that the authors have a dread of a multiplicity that might shatter their faith in the myth. It was a struggle for them in the first place to get these outrageous devices accepted by a small public, but once initiated to novelties, that public seems to want stronger stuff, and the critics are loath to look too far afield, cherishing as they do their stable tamed to become household words. It is this ability to move about in a real world, comparing, rejecting, combining, that the powerless artist envies in the critic. In his lonely studio, not too aware of what others are doing, he is curious about the mobility of that critic, a mobility which the artist, a little too close to the battlefield for comfort, often relinquished in favor of the kind of solipsism shown by couch-bound psychoanalysts.

The jaded esthetes, in their petulant ennui, have stumbled onto Nineteenth Century literary painting, but it soon will be returned to the dusty attic. Maybe such fickleness is healthy, leavening our monolithic involvement with the new—but why this re-rewarding of kitsch by a posterity that (until lately) was embarked on giving belated justice only to the neglected of that age? We have our own sentimentalities as sickening as the Victorians'—tropisms up to now settled solely on certain destructive artifacts that were intended only to be weapons against "literary" complacencies, and which display no intrinsic love or even warmth.

As Christ the eschatologist might have been impatient with his activities as psychologist and healer, so the victim of today's world-angst man degrades St. Paul's *caritas* in favor of faith or hope. Love, the vital center of our art up to now, is hard to find among our new icons meant only to exorcise fear; they cannot bear the weight of our agony. The esthete has little compassion for those love-hungry masses who want to hear over and over the time-tested

music that (like the Mona Lisa) has lost any thrust and heat it once had. But the dedicated artist who wants to be like the universally respected spiritual helper of yesteryear must leap over the avant garde esthete's snobbish antithesis of abstraction to the Hegelian synthesis of strong emotion, using folk elements as compost for communication.

One could compare the international style in architecture and in constructivist painting to the musical kit that was sent out from Germany to colonize America in the Eighteenth Century, a Haydnesque basic language that could be easily adapted to the wilderness. Hasn't Abstract Expressionism become even more of such a lingua franca, more flexible and personality-sustaining than Mondrian's and Corbusier's dogma? American music languished in the Nineteenth Century because of the replacement of the amateur chamber music by professional romanticism that had to be led by the kind of personality that our country did not encourage. So in plastic art after the Second World War, when the more flamboyant surrealists left our fostering shores for Europe, a vacuum was created for which the country had not spawned replacements. Who would now shock and delight us after the drying up of social realist provincial reservoirs? Wasn't this sense of incipient entertainment why the new school of organic painters was built up by the popular media (Time's "Jack the Dripper") as well as by the crumbling edge of the bickering avant garde? But the notion that it would self-destruct in favor of its alter ego "pop" art was perhaps the result of its too stringent demands. What should have replaced it was a kind of folk grassroots simplicity, harking back to the social realism of the Thirties, non-commercial.

3. UNANIMITY: THE MANDATE OF THE INARTICULATE

Landes Lewitan's statement that New York artists were suffering from bottle fatigue does not imply that they led lives of noisy desperation in bars and their "club" (hardly a retreat with arm chairs and fireplace). Though few were willing to resign themselves to the pre-middleage fact that the only happiness is in the paint, compared with the more leisured gentlemen and ladies of the brush of yesteryear, they were fanatically immersed in paint and unselfconsciously counter-culture—I can't imagine them attending Broadway musicals or even cultivating to excess the joyous journalistic bringers of bad news.

But, seated too close to the brass section, they didn't always hear the rustling strings. "Real savvy guys" in big city infighting some of the New York group were loudly aware of who their exact enemies were and their narrow-mindedness about those they felt did not belong may have shocked more herbivorous visiting provincials who didn't always share their keen joys of the bloody defense of territory. Like children who, at a certain age, form clubs

whose main purpose seems to be to exclude their unpopular schoolmates, they were hard on the arriviste, enthusiastic curiosity here outweighed by length of tenure. Since there were no longer any august judges to appeal to, the commune gave all a courage that led paradoxically to timid conservatism.

This is the tough-mindedness that P. Pavia spoke for when he said in "It Is" that it was inexcusable for anyone in New York at that time not to know what was going on, revealing the exasperation of the seasoned intellectual pessimist at the wide-eyed parvenu. But there were imaginaries as well as real turds in this new garden, and avoiding them led to a cautious mumbling, noncommittal stance instead of the initial intention of stretching arms and taking new deep breaths. Here were second-wave pilgrims to whom the new faith did not come so easily, who had to earn back a lost ingenuousness painfully, working gingerly and without much panache with the muddy colors from the slough of despond, not having earned the bright colors of the founding fathers' emblems of vindication.

The day will come, believed Duchamp, when we will no longer say "*bete comme un peintre*." But aside from the birdlike gaiety of the neo-dadaists, aren't painters usually a stolid, inarticulate lot? Many have the squat short endomorphic muscularity of Picasso, his phlegmatic peasant wit. And, in their awkward muteness, they usually can say "my kingdom is not of this world." Yet H. Hoffman did not have to tell us (as he did) that our creativity made us as important as anyone else; we had the war's overturning of defunct materialist values as a weapon for our new enfranchisement as official dreamers.

One shouldn't look for the correct time in a clock store. We see experts scrutinizing with microscopes paintings it took the artist ten minutes to finish with a wall brush. Or they puzzle over the suicides of certain Slavic painters which probably occurred impulsively (providing philosophical ramifications that will, no doubt encourage their devotees). They are pondering a movement that was only vital before it had any large influence. Vlaminck and Derain painted better as Fauves than as independents, and for the Abstract Expressionists this kind of symbiosis was also nourishing, the group acting as superego against excesses that might cause it to lose own respect. But unsettling insights caused some to drift away, many to oblivion in provincial art worlds where "one man alone just ain't no Goddamn, good." As a person attempting to live alone in the woods will write accounts of his escape from corruption to fortify himself, members of this group would join hands with each other by means of magazines, exhibits, distanced not only by heart-breaking U.S.A. miles but by an urgent wish to go against the grain of the "groups'" growing threat to the fulfillment of their own insistent personae.

Contrary to legend, in only a few cases do the prices of dead artists' work rise. It no longer pays for an artist to die. The public that neglects its great artists, trusting that posterity will vindicate them, is guilty in its materialism of

causing by neglect a bitterness among artists that results in an inferior product. Our art world is a miserable, truncated thing, functioning only for an oligarchy that cannot imagine what a rich and complex pantheon of honored artists would do for the country. Assuming that there will be a posterity (and just to keep sane we must have faith in this) it must have a richer choice of what to select from than it has now.

In the time of the post-impressionists, as now, the critics asked for, instead of that poetry, pyrotechnical acrobatics without content. Things have not changed much. Before he demolishes an artist's reputations the writer of unintended self-revelations (only distantly inspired by the art he observes) should try to find out what the artist's intention was. He who expects a bowl of ice cream will not like it if he is handed soup.

As a battle makes ordinary land sacred, an ordeal on the part of an "action painter" will sanctify (for properly briefed intellectuals) some rather undistinguished scrawls. It is these unexamined classics that encumber the paths of artists uninitiated in swiftly-changing, painterly rituals

The army of mediocrities who keep up unquestioningly with the latest art styles² are just as superficial and opportunistic as were their Nineteenth Century ancestors, cerebral desiccation having replaced the trivial technicalities of academic sentiment. An interviewer for Harpers was shocked when Winslow Homer declared he "wouldn't cross the street to see a Bougureau."

Perhaps the hard-to-understand artists on the crumbling edge of the avant garde are only trying to produce something that will be too difficult for the middle class to "raid". We liked certain songs until we learned what the words meant. Modern art beguiles the weary businessman in his *Weltschmerz* until he is told to take it seriously for scientific advancement by zealous critics. To make heartbreak bearable and to condone violence vicariously are conflicting and mind-boggling duties for the simple-hearted artist. Art is more than the moral substitute for crime; neither is it the receptacle for pain-healing that religion now fails to supply. For the art zealot it is more kin to science, the experiments of each new school going deeper into the unknown. To the bourgeois collector this may be a more plausible reason for its existence than any solace it once dispensed.

Why does a certain critic use up so much space demolishing those artists he feels are on the wrong path and so rarely give examples of what he wants to see more of? Cannot he somehow fit *our* neglected work into his scheme? Can it be he has no scheme or is merely afraid to offend his favorites if he becomes too catholic? It seems natural for a critic to have his favorite artists among his close friends, yet loyalty as a warm human quality must (by rights) fade before enthusiasm if something new comes along that is better. Cool objectivity toward a painting created in a passionate intensity which has succeeded in moving many people can be explained only as a wish not to

offend someone. When critics disagree, does the artist die?

For me the message of abstract expressionism was: give up technological complexities and amenities for that half-forgotten paradise of your collective unconscious, that smelly, ragged farm where the man of nature, surrounded by wives, children livestock, sinks back into the untended vegetation and oblivion without regret. (I think of H. Hoffman, D. Smith, F. Farr as such tellurians.) Now, fed up with the sterile paintings that reacted against the sloppy largesse of this beatitude, we are able to understand that that paint was a reaffirmation of what good painters always have wanted paintings to do—make concrete the transitory fulminations of nature.

4. MACHINES AND “MACHINES”

In 1951 I was puzzled by some large canvases stained with simple stripes that F. Lobdell, back from a year in Paris, unfurled. “They’re flags,” he stated. There is a big difference between going to a painting for solace and insight and using it as a symbol for loyalty. In the liberating “push-pull” sideways tension of H. Hofmann’s paintings, there was an effort to create a non-illusionistic space by avoiding the habit of perspective’s depth. This seems like the stop and return action of a reciprocating engine as opposed to the smooth revolution of a turbine. And as machines have been known to shake apart because of vibrating harmonics at critical speeds that must be avoided, perhaps the somewhat incestuous harmonies of this group, echoing the jittery tensions of paintings searching for a messages caused it to self-destruct around 1960s at which time the “pop” artists and their aides stepped onto the stage with “machines” in the French sense of large shockers. And from this time on the dealers and museum directors became more influential than the critics.

When one is blessed with an unsolicited spell of feeling good just being alive seems enough to ask but later in depression we cannot imagine that we could ever have had that joy. So these bucolic nature distillations, simple and haphazardly correct, did not wish to risk thought’s complications, but were glad to be humble talismans of possible universal well-being. Later, chastened with the chill premonition of a coming swift, tragic cauterization, we would see the paintings as untenable simplifications—with their spendthrift colors and atomized undirected forms that must be abandoned now for work that would show our saddened maturity and would not seem to erase themselves as these lucky, fragile gratuities had. Saying that we should trust only our intuitions implies that all have equal talent buried beneath their inhibitions and that unearthing this is our only duty. But as the manic phase is eclipsed and the necessary, inevitable “penseroso” emerges with its almost welcome grimness, have we saved any of the hope from our childlike moments that will help forge our tragic, subjective mood into something durable, that will have

preserved some of the exuberance that made us runners toward paradise?

Those who would float in this natural stream, nourished by the uninvestigated mysteries around them are not to be confused with the petulant seekers after specific miracles who are always changing their styles of painting in this fruitless quest; their aim to shock and delight only a small circle which, in turn, presents it as fashion to the great art audience. "Can you top this?" is what they ask and, as in the laboratories of innovational science, each new "breakthrough" makes all else obsolete. But the Nature-dedicated painters *never* have solved any of science's problems and only want to go deeper into the poetry of what they must do. As in the work of J.S. Bach and Mozart, they want to find new and more profound melodies (which exist intact like the forms Michelangelo claimed to release in his marble) not to launch new and superficially exciting styles, leading to "progress".

Tolstoi's clean old peasant arbiter does not seem so simple-minded when we behold the latest sick jokes and trashy toys of the spoiled brat art collectors. Rewards for *frissons* stultify with discouragement the dedicated painter who does not wish to diminish any output, least of all his own. Earth should teem with life; those planners of others' lives who so quickly move to stop overpopulation should try instead to irrigate the deserts and share the food and land now hoarded by the rich. This is the spirit of the painting that celebrates the deep sources of nourishment in the loved Earth, whether the painters are aware of it or not. We see in hard-edged minimalistic abstractions evidence of the misery and fear that surface when the flow of these green juices is thwarted.

The art that supplanted that of expressionism was the coolness of marijuana, all things equally hilarious, as opposed to the heat of alcohol with its built-in punishment and creativity to placate guilt. Sticky with sweat, American whisky, blood and a few tears, these extrusions of ambivalence were, as H. Rosenberg suggests, records of unleashed energies rather than objects of contemplation. But the method should be broadened now and deepened to vitalize paintings with larger vistas, populated with the symbolic (if not literal) images of natural life, dragged in perhaps in the form of cloud phantoms and proportioned by statues with the stance of human dignity. Deformations and psychotic obsessions would be embedded as compost in a panorama of forgiveness, not blown up as ephemeral pranks.

Instead of finding out what painting can do that it never has done before we should ask what painting does that no other art can do. Why should it—in its self-deluded evolutionary "progress"—turn into sculpture or theatre? The painting hangs still on the wall. We visit it as we do a church for our spiritual refreshments and it does not change. The pilgrimage is not like that which one takes into Nature's realm, where all is enervating cycle and repetition; neither is it like that grim glimpse we get in mathematics and some sci-

ences of the divinity of straight-edged order, inviolate. Straight lines are what nature does with too much difficulty and man with too much ease. These inaccurate ejaculations are gambled on reproductions of the electricity behind Nature's observed turbulence or serenity, given only enough order to communicate within the limits of paint. Three-dimensionality is not an enemy to it, though it, too, must obey the canvas's laws in order to be an object of beauty.

As opera gives even its villains lyrical soliloquies, a painting can give an ugly landscape a timbre and glamour beyond most devout photographs. And as a picture of an accident or sexual act can sometimes shock us more than the real event, the painter composting horror into an absorbent panorama thrills us more than raw life can.

Alban Berg was able to forge his unmelodic and harsh music into a vehicle for the transformation of squalor and misery in an almost ennobling pessimism. In this endeavor recognizable melody might be a liability—any hint of well-being had to be hard-earned under these new spartan rules—all of the complacencies of the past were to be demolished as Marx and Freud had done. Ironic insights of the lonely anti-heroes, however, do not give us much satisfactions except that of utter honesty. Can we compare atonality to the atomization of forms in cubist painting? What would remain after recognizable clues had been excised would be something like a ghost of a familiar gesture that would reassure us in this no-mans-land of total reconstruction, If we could conceive of these operas being applied to folk music and legend, under a new banner as in Brecht and Weill communisms the public might be educated to like the bitter medicine. Likewise, the acerbic and desiccated regime of cubism, instead of being replaced by the tyrannic antidote of hedonistic license, as in Matisse and Bonnard (leading to an excess of silly Epicureanism) could become a "way" of painting so eclectic as to be more than novelty, an ascetic religious satisfaction.

Saper Vedere: to know how to see—was Leonardo's definition of the use of painting. To know not only how to look at other paintings but at the whole world (in Aix we see with Cezanne's eye, in Arles with Van Gogh's; on the Thames, Whistler's). More, it teaches us to be patient so that we learn by contemplation to sense in these details the presence of the Creators whom we must assume possesses the kind of love and serenity we feel when in Art's quiet intoxication.

Expandable brevity in a painting's compacted forms differs from K. Burke's synecdoche (taking the part for the whole), which is the weakness of most abstraction. In distillations to high intensities all of the properties of the large entity contemplated are preserved as a sun's are in a dwarf star or the genetic code in a cell nucleus. We get an inkling of this imperceptible metamorphosis in that instant when the painting we've struggled with seems to finish itself, automatic and inevitable, without error, a sublimated fury, the fuel by

which inspiration was stabilized.

5. MORES OF THE LOCAL EXPRESSIONISTS

Lighthearted enjoyment of their sudden fame's absurdity, a semi-bohemian group bravado based on alcohol rather than imagist drugs, doing things like old-fashioned dancing and softball with elegant style, Hemingwayward, rarely risking pratfalls in the big business environment in which they moved, these were some of the traits of the most prominent abstract expressionists of the early nineteen-fifties. No one could complain of their frightening eccentricities, yet they have become well-known as much through their behavior as through their works, thanks to brilliant publicity, mostly word-of-mouth. The surface tension of their paintings had weakened to such an extent that by the end of the decade they had lost most of their followers, but their code of manners was still in effect as a defense against lionization.

Their physicality and anti-literary bias found an unlikely symbiosis with intellectuals who had been fighting sentimentalities with abstruse word puzzles that held no interest for the artist. To head off a public that might show too much interest in the seductions of surrealism, they pushed non-objectivity in paint as the banner of the thinker. "What's good in the new art?" was answered with "This is what we like." Eager to improve themselves, collectors collaborated in aborting insights and fantasies typical of a European surrealism too effeminate and decadent for the U.S.A.

Silenced up to now by my realization that attempting to fill in some of the blanks of that period would be called envy, I write down these sclerotic gripes now in the hope that others in my position will agree with me, since they know that because of our double allegiance to the art organization and our superegos our ambivalences are tearing us apart to a degree that threatens our careers. Excavations in paint that were intended to be later worked out in completed form were truncated and exhibited in the craze for the unfinished that dominated those years. (How many times have I been told to stop before I wrecked the picture and later heard the same people remark that I had trouble finishing my work!) Ever aware, however unconsciously, of decorative requirements, we overestimated the importance of composition in our paintings, well-rehearsed for their places on distant walls of collectors and dealers who suddenly knew only too well what they wanted. Instead of abstracting from real-life objects, we were abstracting from the non-objective non-forms that were our basic vocabulary against the crimes of abstraction (well-known to turn good-hearted neighbors against each other) and to lead to a closed circuit in art. Paintings were leaping from their walls a little too melodramatically; we

were letting a lot of subtle insights slip by because of group pressure.

As a creative minority, we usually save our most deadly weapons of anger to use against ourselves, but are capable (if driven too far) of swiveling them against those who accuse us of narcissistic masochism. The self-immolation that characterized the paintings of the abstract expressionists (physically they beat themselves up) was inevitably replaced by the cool, calculating hatred of "pop" artists who had been waiting for their moment. Rather than being a return to the universal language of recognizable forms, their objectivity was the wounding reverse of the coin of masochist inwardness carried too far.

Half-in-anger is no good at all for the artist's wish to publicize injustices and half-in-love is the source of sentimentality. The diplomatic deceptions of ambivalence, love-hate made palatable, are still poisoning our paintings. Assuming that a worn-out social system and not our unalterable "human condition" is to blame for our discontent may not be the correct diagnosis, but it will serve to polarize the ambiguities of an art that then can move toward complexity in a more self-aware fashion. In painting there is no substitute for the content-laden masterpiece that speaks to all who see it.

Critics like H. Rosenberg seem above the sordid painterly questions that absorb all of the artists except those enraptured by the politics of gallery and museum. Like the rank and file of science, business and government, they describe the world only in the jargon of their trade, unintelligible to outsiders, their bohemianism closer to the sanctioned letting-go of the work ethic than to the distress of an anguished idler like E.A. Poe. Sensitive to defections from their fragile cohesion as abstract artists, their attitude is like that of Alcoholics Anonymous toward the member who lets them down by falling, making it easier for them to lose faith. This is how artists survive in a country where any individuality is a liability for all.

Deposed royalty is still deferred to, if only inadvertently. The subjective expressionists, who H. Rosenberg now figures were closer to surrealism than he or they thought at that time were a superannuation, the last stirrings of the vast European "post-romantic" excitement of which the cubist method was only a belated facet, and which had started before the century's turn in, the liberation from Victorian paternalism into a sort of female-erotic earth-mother fermentation as found in Rodin, Klimt, Mahler, Rilke, Sibelius, Strauss, T. Mann, Scriabin, Debussy, d'Annunzio, D.H. Lawrence, Knut Hamsun, Isadora Duncan, Yeats, Munch, etc. But our cafard now had to be depicted more naturalistically, all warts. The lovely shimmering of all those Edwardian subjectivities, a heroic lullaby that no longer lulled, had to be torn down, replaced; not restored.

Those who tend to fall down, who succumb to psychosomatic sickness, who blame themselves for necessary vulnerabilities, gaze too steadfastly at the painted surface for it to release its magic. Turning away from their guilt allows a healing to begin, when they realize that they are the chosen meek. The

pain in the eyes of the cripple gives humility to the arrogant striders, and it is only some flawed beauty in the painting that will allow us to open its thorny hide as it hangs half-heeded on the wall, divested of any theatricality it may once have had for the overeager parvenus at the *vernissage* of historicity.

Willow buds, fuses that set off Spring's slow explosion, nourish annual daydreams. We happy few who know that beauty is its own reward are quickly put out into our desired pastures by our pragmatic cognoscenti.

Artists whose love for another person is unrequited are perhaps luckier in their fruitful frustration than the lovee, who, has only the sterile satisfaction of satiated vanity.

In the sweetness of the years before our revolution, hamadryads (who in the words of Dawn Powell "appealed to men of all sexes") attended possessively the abstract expressionist revelers who, if they insulted their companions while drunk were sure to apologize later if the perpetual party seemed endangered by bad feelings. Bare life was rarely to be faced, too many commitments were made, everything fell due at once. Why urinate in the gas tank except from despair at some unnamable injustice to which the artists gave silent assent? Since their demise the more pragmatic jokers of our art world, like the President's men caught breaking and entering, don't have much "style."

To a pragmatist, a coward is someone with too much imagination. Desensitized, the former have shut down most of their valves and windows and barge ahead grimly, knowing intuitively that Earth was created for them, mute guzzlers of Nature's stew, more meat than vegetables.

By absorbing so sedulously the biographies of our culture heroes, we extend our own years not only with vicarious identifications but by snarling in an unproductive way our life lines into detours of meaningless intrigue, from which we emerge with the kind of depression we get after watching too much television. But how else is one inspired to continue in the heartbreaking career of artist? No wonder we want to inhabit that over-rewarded and under-populated pantheon. Yet the only artist worth remembering is the one who doesn't give a damn about this arbitrary elite. Great artists' lives were not held together only by their art.

Does painting take a perverted pleasure in its adjutant role, second fiddle to the more public arts? Are poets vindicated by our common breakdown in which their oppressors are brought low? Could either take command of the machinery of a society where anyone who "behaves nice" is taken for a crook and boors are called "diamonds in the rough"? Or pass tests where the correct answers are the quickly changing cliches of current fashion? I want to believe that some people will always be around who do not admire the public men who traffic in human weakness, and whose only success will be to influence toward decency by their unworldly dedication those who advise legislators and judges.

6. KEEPING ONE'S DISTANCE FROM PAINTING'S UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

When a painter, trained in copying reproduces directly from the natural observed world in front of him something that looks completely non-objective, without a hint of any familiar object—an arbitrary design in a snowbank, a cliff, a cloud, he is paying a tributes not always consciously, to those who got this effect by pure invention. Both were so busy throwing out the furniture of the past that they had no energy to invent new forms of any memorability or to adapt from those forms mourning in art's junkyard. What is so disturbing or hard to understand in the decorative flux they achieved? Only in that painting that hybridizes the natural with the mind's phantoms is there danger and adventure. (Dali speaks of the abstract ennui.) What I have tried to do was the opposite of this non-objective purification, fleshing out amorphous half-forms in a landscape or room perspective, trying to give these shy wraiths a local habitation and a name.

If abstract expressionism is looked at with scientific eyes it might seem a natural panicking reaction to recent disturbing discoveries: the uncertainty principle in physics, fusion instability, anti-matter, immunization of disease microbes, the kind of form breakup that would logically occur in an atomized society. But from a religious viewpoint it seems too earthbound, too easy a reaction to the physical superficiality of these threats, not concrete and tangible enough in its solipsistic symbolism to be of comfort to one in spiritual distress who doesn't want to be merely delighted or distracted. The very verticality and hush of a museum wall exaggerates the monumentality and sacredness of a picture we would find merely curious in a book. Veneration of graffiti hallows frail insights with an esthetic uncertainty principle.

One of his discarded paintings can help to finish another for the painter hesitant to bring anything to completion for fear he may go too far and jeopardize any shaky identity the picture may have. With no familiar landmarks to help, some artists get to love the battle too much to be able to clarify the painting beneath the pocked, scarred ground. This sacrifice of meaning on the part of abstract expressionist pioneers inspired their followers more than did their more legible key works that the public remembers. In the hard-to-capture, penultimate state of these rudderless records of self-search, there might be found a fresh gesture set down and, in exhaustion, left alone. This is the opposite of the easy grace of unembattled one-shot serendipity.

To pacify outrageous fortune with a sanctioned serenity (as Anton

Bruckner did in his music) was not the aim of these painters only recently given the freedom to expose and make concrete their tics and compulsions in public places. Anything that seemed to resemble the furtive symbolism of yesteryear was wiped out in favor of honest emptiness. Yet now these once harsh vocabularies seem to stand for a benign nature, symbols again as friendly and toothless as Bruckner's elephantine verities.

We dug too deeply and too soon and now hasten to refill those pits which are no longer discoverers' excavations but only holes full of stagnant mud, something to stumble into. Today few are dedicated enough to that search to return to the ground where the shards are monotonously those stamped with the personalities of artists we dare not imitate now. Is it here that in the future the great city of Telluria will be unearthed and all the warring sects of modern art and literature reunited?

Music, which employs a difficult mathematics in its working out to communicability, permits a person with no mathematical or intellectual gifts to invent some of its most unforgettable melodies. The fortuitous inventions of the thrown brush likewise imply, at least to the layman, a more complete follow-up, a controlled working out. If the finished work is difficult to understand, the artist has ignored the message of the initial intuition, the craftsman's sedulousness has triumphed over the poet's serendipity.

Abstraction in the sense of mathematical analogs is not the essentializing of irregularities of Nature that characterizes the sort of alchemy that in painting searches for the encoded universality that each cell of an organism might contain. A simplistic reduction, as in much straight-edged constructivism, gives the pleasure one gets from mathematical solutions, not the "informal" intuition we receive in "expressive" music, poetry, painting, sculptures dance.

K. Burke's polemic against the use of synecdoche amounts to saying that one doesn't call the woman he loves a genital (except perhaps when alone with her). But like the laughter evoked by someone calling out the number of a limited series of jokes shared by marooned men, the response of a conditioned public to half-worked-out canvases leads to instant recognition of a certain artist's work, even his intention that he hasn't bothered to declare. We indulge fearfully and by rote our new facility to make symbols out of almost nothing in our religious demand for omens, portents. We end up making love to naked canvases, blanks of Pointlessness.

How skillfully we learn, as we age, how to expand or shrink our allotted time, after youth's wasteful pillage! But the work of very few mature artists finds much welcome in a society obsessed with childish forgetfulness; witness the frequent superannuation today in this country by aging artists of their serviceable but immature styles. Defining a wished-for spiritual serenity with metaphors of sensual pleasure may be one way to achieve sublimation,

but the only metamorphosis that will transcend the humiliating ephemera around us will be as inexplicable by that evanescence as a larva's conception of its winged future.

There are the juicy parts of a painting and there are the bony and gristled parts, without which the former would not exist. The intelligentsia, in its stoic masochism, aims to be above the lure of delectation that the public rifles and then discards. Commendable, but sometimes the crowd excels the critic in intuition, as when the latter at long last jettisons certain sacred monstrosities (L. Eilshemius, Archipenko) that the public never accepted in the first place. Extrapolating on the basis of carrying to extremes an effective style, like the anguish of early Webern and Schoenberg strung out in desiccation of our present serial academy, this self-laceration is becoming ludicrous, untenable. (E.g., the journalistic surrealism of the New York Times' current sick and ugly political cartoons, a belated homage to insights in pioneer surrealists, must seem embarrassingly inappropriate to readers of more as well as those of less sophistication, who might have savored this kind of shock treatment at an earlier time but now want something more mature, even more esthetic.) But the vanguard is listened to as never before, out of a fear of solecisms by the new rich—as powerful as the priesthood that ignored Van Gogh and Gauguin.

7. THE HALLOWED SHOOTING GALLERY

Our recently established freedom to do anything we want in art only frightens some artists who crave restraints from above because of timidities more spiritual than marketplace. Looking back, those now forbidden kingdoms of ordered paint that required such difficult academic visas may soon seem desirable to us from our prison of anarchy where authorities warn us to be new, different. Yet a whiff of modern art's destructive, impious euphoria makes one quickly an addict to its rather insensitive "sense of rumor." One soon forgets the more solemn introspective uses of art. Now the newly-enfranchised vanguard takes up eccentricities that are increasingly bizarre and destructive, are initially flattered, then disgusted when the status quo public they intended to mock begins to ape them without style. Vowing, like Cezanne, that pragmatists will never get their hooks in them, they retreat into pride, untempered by real adversity. A little too sybaritic about country pleasures, these languid landscapists dare not excavate the blood-soaked earth beneath their summer greens.

Nowadays we are so busy helping the critics on our side dispose of the junk that has accumulated on the surfaces of the paintings in our institutions that we don't have time or energy to replace them with our own more refined rubbish. The fallow surfaces of hardly blemished canvases surround us, blind men staring at each others waiting for fertilities.

How can they deny their starved furies, these geometricians who

mortify into hard edges and mushy centers forms overburnished and many times removed from the insights of Earth's profligacy, soft-edged with gemmed cores?

Paul Klee made the terrifying journey into another person's consciousness a hilarious, though jittery adventure, a "panicky sweet morning". He left doors open for us to follow, but few are risking the shoals glimpsed there, flowering orchards of bloody foam.

When M. Duchamp launched Urinalism the shameful psychotic devices of thousands of outsiders, furtive plastiquers, suddenly were sanctioned as museum-worthy. The pornography that does the most damage is that which is redeemed by its artistic value. The warmth of the intimate voices of shared insight doesn't linger around such sterilities, in spite of their undeniable usefulness in blowing up herbivores. One of the "pop" artists explained that celebrating the crass and banal in commerce was the only way they could shock their jaded clientele. Why should the carefully tended fabric of the accretions of our culture be torn apart every time some experimenter wants to delight his friends by playing pranks on bewildered people he feels contempt for?

Someone who genuinely enjoys astringent atonality or a wounding Piccassoid edge must have a rather Spartan, if not puritanical tolerance of discomfort, satisfaction of iconoclasm here being stronger than *calme, luxe et volupté*. This is a perversion comparable to J. Calvin's remonstrance that since God had created flowers we didn't need painting, Modern art has perfected superior mortifications for those whose self-flagellating frenzy is stronger than any love. What began as refreshing bitter uprooting of complacencies now shrivels for lack of warmth, since hatred does not temper art as they had expected. This vicarious murder was part of an impatience with abstract blandness, with the colored blanks we were allowed to fill in with an intolerable permissiveness.

Like cautious novelists who create colorless characters in their Romans a clef by combining the attributes of too many friends, the bulk of the abstract expressionists did not wish to make their forms too recognizable or intrusive, lest they break the code of the picture plane and alloverness set up by valued estheticians. And if one became a little too popular with the middle class he was sent to a Siberia of journalistic neglect.

What amazed us most when we first saw the abstract expressionists' originals was, I believe, their tentativeness writ large, tender hesitations blown up to overwhelming proportions, giving us the feeling of some tremulous evanescent religious miracle about to occur, genuine because of the humility of emendation, the brush still searching and, because of the all-important hugeness of the sparsely inhabited (except perhaps by angels) acreage, almost ecclesiastical. Like listening to atonal music or gulping down incomprehen-

sible poetry, being in the presence of these canvases gave us a kind of grace or blessing of being more intelligent than we really were, the burden of deciphering being taken from us and assumed by suicidal martyrs. It was as though the down-draughts of dismay of Schoenberg or Bartok were replaced by Webern's Zen tinkling, a new, less hardbitten approach to the Mystery, since sturm and drang had failed to crack it.

J. Cage's famous four-minute silence was a concerto for coughing audience and distant automobile horns, R. Rauschenberg's six white blanks a surface for angry fingerprints; these closed an era of anti-public dada jokes, a necessary reenactment of modern art mythology, after which we could begin to paint and write again, our canvases truly bare for the moral of modern art's lesson.

"You talked me into it!" the half-convinced art collector exclaims when the critics and dealers have worn him down with their hard sell. The suddenly famous artist soon has all of his work accepted without question, but when he reaches a certain saturation point of overpopularity he is likely to be "revisted" by house-cleaning esthetes, at which time he is shelved by some mysterious osmotic legerdemain. Like the high class parvenu his name is linked with, who ambivalently wants to be accepted as honest and at the same time flaunt his immunity from the law, this artist is a casualty of our system's inevitable moral schizophrenia. Naïf idealism, not ambitious conniving, helped him to produce his eclipse.

Are all of these newcomers serving the spirit of art with their pathetic acrobatics, like the juggler of Notre Dame, even though it is a matter only of exposing themselves or lettering a subway? But the spirit of art, dragged into this fool's game, is not mocked; nothing these clowns do can help us with our problems. Why then are we sometimes amused by these self-deceptions? Or dignify them with our notice just because they have occurred?

Like the conversation of their fellow New Yorkers who exchange throughout the week facts they've read in the Sunday Times, the intellectual fodder of our artists is as predictable as it is limited. Their aim seems to be a kind of low-grade theatre, like the circuses of their childhood. Magnified to dignity and portentousness by being stuck on a public wall, their works inspire reactions far from the poetic insights released by the iconography of a humanism once treasured. Sentimentalizing violence, their overkill methods make sterile the grassy realm at their feet that they no longer scrutinize, no longer sprouting.

Does our new painting and sculpture electrify practical people into leading richer lives as the inspirational arm of a widely creative culture, or is it the last twitch of a moribund society? What artist is not vulnerable to perversions unless he feels some responsibility to a group? But loyalty to a cell of assassins can be self-defeating. Each little irrational art movement is rounded

with the sleep of reason.

In the American art world all argument is *ad hominem*. Without the biography, the personality, there is no easy access to the work of art—on which the signature must be visible to avoid embarrassment.

Learning in 1965 that Stravinski's favorite composer was now Guillaume de Machaud instead of Gesualdo, I found this reinforced by the enthusiasms of the New York cognoscenti, self-appointed but condoned elite whose standards we must agree with in cases of extreme tastelessness or art launched in bad faith to hoax us. The vanguard backs up the non-objective blob, that stared at long enough becomes a recognizable something relating to the world of modern art if not the observed, tangible world; they encourage the artists who have no faith in Shakespeare's love at first sight.

To order the esoteric, to cleanse it of freakishness is what our experimental art was born to do. Those who can no longer distinguish the refreshingly eccentric from the peculiar, the necessarily cathartic from the sick obsession, are not those we can trust to tell us what art will live. Unless we absorb an entirely different kind of knowledge from that which has helped us up to now we will not survive the events of our future. Is our difficult new painting and sculpture a precursor of this para-knowledge? Perhaps today's artist's seeming lack of love is due to his preoccupation with this new tongue.

Our need for parable now rivals that of the ancient world hinted at in the New Testament, their disgust with rationality. It seems natural now that we celebrate culture heroes aside from their products. Picasso vindicates those well-endowed malcontents who do not react to lyrical beauty in art, are sexually stimulated by dark humor, angry boulderments, absurd theatre, hieratic totems of dangerous cults. Because he was a collector himself he is a hero to the middle class art collector; he made his life and working leisure into the kind of game they enjoy in their vacations from buying and selling. Most artists, attempting to disencumber themselves, merely admired his style of living and loving.

The painter dedicated heart and soul to the modern spirit of change did not need to flavor his non-objective product with pearly-loitering images to get the attention of the critic or collector; one merely had to wait patiently until they turned to new novelties in their ennui, and it did not take long. But the elite possessors gave power to their artists only on the condition that, like political figures, they take care of their mutual best interests, one of which was increasing values, though here the critics were more vital than the artists, since anything is collectible, speculatable. With critics like this, who needed dealers—or in some cases, vice-versa? The age of the universal artist who spoke to different levels of intelligence is past; now the painter quickly briefs his priests who transmit his narrow, difficult specialty to the laity. The church-like museum or gallery was as important as the painting, with art criticism as back-

ground music this thorough-bass of caption, catalog and walky-talky makes us aware of a symbiosis without which some of these fugitive art objects would vanish. There seemed to be some doubt by the painters that the forms would stick.

The echolalia repetitions of almost identical forms in the same canvas by L. Rivers, J. Johns, R. Rauschenberg, A. Warhol are either a glorification of the hesitant corrections of late expressionism, a perverse kind of humility or else an exorcism of ghosts in a state of perpetual shock. Palimpsests on crumbling manuscripts replace the holy scrutiny of essential objects fixed in an unstable reality, routinely reiterated for our increasing serenity. To these speeding victims of relativity's parallax acts are more valuable than thoughts, thus the nervous emendations laid bare. These cool over-rehearsals little resembled the correct guesses of intuition's heat that had initiated the movement. In their rapt, sense-numbing jazz music and zombie dancing, I sensed in these young artists of the late Fifties a group self-forgetfulness bordering on oblivion, reflected in their cool close-to-home-base paintings and sculptures, centripetal, not expanding.

There are skeptical as well as pious fools, who blindly resist all pervasive Zeitgeists on some perverse principle of dispassion, spurning follies that would make them wise. The steamroller of modern art was that kind of world-faith and only an artist who has experienced it and exhausted it can be the one who will reassemble the scattered parts of this great destructive machine into a new, compassionate, universal synthesis. As for the academic mercenaries who didn't have insight or courage to take up these difficult experiments when they were timely, their haste to do so now when all is permissive and saleable only clutters further the field where the hoped-for deed will occur.

What is the unearthly template in the extruder of a sea shell that orders the chitin to have the scalloped waves that another does not have, how is the rhythm of their intervals decided upon? Like the variety of wildflowers that aim by their diversity and spreading out in time to capture the attention of insects by advertising allurements like our own human sales techniques, this subject of meditation is only made fruitful to us by very delicate, exact, poetic insights close to, but beyond the facts of scientific observation. To find this magical realm between abstraction and reality we allow the poetic vocabulary its own head, its own peculiar metaphors. "It takes the weight of the whole world to make a feather fall", a scientific statement by W. Sullivan, has this magic as does the paradox by D.H. Lawrence: "The growing crops make the sun shine." It is as though scientific fact were trying to prove true these outrageous fantasies, in order to be more well-balanced. But like Nature, poetry has to sow many seeds, most of which are unprofitable and impractical. Paint, given its own impetus, should go straight to the essence of a form that is observed or conceived of, universalizing it beyond its local idiosyncratic ac-

cent. Its fluidity of happy accident flows away from the hard, dry channels of adamant abstraction that aims for such pragmatic conveniences as decoration and therapy.

K. Stockhausen's electronic music is disturbing to me in its unintoxicating boundlessness—a pathetic “content” almost overhumanistic is bent to an anti-poetry unenthusiastically, as though not wanting to offend the suave *Zeitgeist*. Such giving and taking back in painting would amount to erasure (almost achieved in some expressionistic abstractions). Oversweet bucolic greens humiliated by such shock dissonances might be returned from sentimentality to the harsh red excitement of Nature's bloody matrix. We welcome these brutalities in this time of total reconstruction when it seems natural for us to be revolted by our bodies and their once sacred autonomies now inadequate appetites for our desired, but unacknowledged mutation to pure mind. This insistence on complete honesty, resulting in the disassembling of all our motivations is the most beautiful trait in our present anguish. Perhaps the time has not yet arrived for artists to try to put it all back together

The world is full of first-rate artists barking up the wrong tree. And in the U.S.A. our true folk treasure has yet to be dug up. We who haven't the patience or skill to copy nature exactly have built up an academy in which that skill becomes a liability—the rationale is that we must draw inspiration only from ourselves, or bend Nature to our own peculiarities. Is this just a reaction to the Nineteenth Century positivistic dogma or will it lead us positively into a more convincing way of objectifying ineffable phantoms? Negatively, I hate to make small line drawings even as “cartoons” for larger works but delight in using the brush to draw lines in a sanctioned ritual of large painting where the arm has been allowed to come into play for the first time since Rubens.

I attempted and failed, in 1952, to walk around Manhattan by staying as close to the rivers as possible, but I didn't have the inspiration to call it an art project. When K. Koch predicted in a poem in *Art News* at about that time that artists would make large scale Earth monuments, none of us thought it would come to pass. Those who have created this kind of theatre are more interested in confounding fellow artists—than in getting large groups of believers behind them, which is all to the good. Imagine what would happen to the land if we all got into this anti-ecological act! Beneath all the fund-raising and press releases there is some kind of large masochism that must disturb anyone who doesn't wish to adopt his enemy's tactics in institutionalizing irrelevant, uglifying narcissisms. For good reasons they are ashamed of being artists, move up to a more intellectual showmanship. Is this what their mentor M. Duchamp meant when he said: “No longer will we say ‘stupid as a painter’”? A clearing in the wood, Nature's own earthworks, is what is wanted now in art's jejune anarchism.

There is something immature about the passivity of the art-lover who

expects the artist not only to fill his void but to be flattered by his attentions. Associating painting, music, dance with physical love, we are not trained to put them to more philosophic use as we age beyond sex's tyranny. If Schoenberg's "Transfigured Night" had been written by an old man instead of a man in his twenties we would have to admit that we were faced with a force resembling erotic anguish, yet wider, a rejuvenating headlong harnessing of the *elan vital*, a new kind of joy not easily tarnished. We don't expect this kind of youthful onslaught from maturity, as in Zen Buddhism's exciting serenity. If we did we would have more satisfying paintings, not the degrading nerve-end novelties we associate with thoughtlessness' and physical delight's gratification. Sublimation is talked about but rarely investigated or practiced. Transparency is the reward.

The rarified and meager atmospheres that so many artists inhabit lately and attempt with such far-fetched arcane symbols to communicate are, in reality, easily attained but with difficulty survived in. Those landscapes of palpable forms that we luxuriate in without effort came about with great effort on the pioneer artist's part. We inheritors pay the price of frustrating obscurity for their irresponsible adventure, self-gratifying, that is dogma today, driving us apart in the name of experiment that belongs in science, not art.

These rather unsanitary haut-reliefs the latest experimenters hope to pass off as paintings are really sculptures, Paintings have mutated in this monumental direction away from poetic illustration because we want to rival the mysterious inchoate machinery around us. (This kind of mechanized trivia, deadly to me, nourishes others but that doesn't keep me from warning those who have my allergy.)

When the scientific painters say they love the act of painting it's not a sloppy wet embrace but a strenuous leaping into a puzzle, with a kind of dry satisfaction that a romantic never can share. Let us keep these two worlds apart for the sake of the intensity of each; only by avoiding scientific adulteration will the painter rival the miracles of the laboratory. If the intuitive are to be allowed to enhance the quality of rationalism for our survival, they should go further into their foolish insight's logic before being commandeered.

The artist who has learned to make do with despair isn't a favorite of those in the grip of busy euphoria. We need such opposites now, with a minimum of congress between them. Poets shun all who recommend a united front in esthetics, ignore the subtle tempting melodies of technological ephemera only experts can remember!

Just because we were surrounded in childhood with nauseating popular songs, commercial art, soap operas, grade "C" movies, loud cars, patriotic parades, dance marathons, institutionalized wet dreams, bubble gum, singing commercials, auto accidents, etc., doesn't mean we will salivate with nostalgia when they are exhumed and exhibited in the makeshift theatre of "pop" art.

And yet I can imagine these atrocities being given a poetic *raison d'être* in a panoramic painting with a tragic intention. Perhaps this is what these well-rewarded artists want to do and are failing to do; but except for the Pompeian life-casts of G. Segal none seem serious enough to have been moved by that view of life. And the critics and collectors (by using these works for conversational self-gratification), museum-goers (by their reality-testing compulsions via verisimilitude) and art crooks (by their speculative greed), these careless eyes have helped to return the artist to his old role as clown entertainer, pyrotechnical moron, closing the exits from bondage that were opened momentarily with the appearance of the liberating abstract expressionist mystique after World War II.

The oversensitive confront this septic sludge in the landscape at their own risk and the overinsensitive are themselves finally driven mad by a universal warning of apocalypse no one can ignore. Trained to be perceptive, the painter has had to close too many valves to have enough fuel to transform this wreckage into art. J. Johns' off-register duplications relate to a rhyming compulsion or echolalia out of shock, banal vacuities raised to the level of hypnotic symbolic vessels representing nothing to us anguished idlers, hollow dummies of Baudelaire's flaneur.

Having a shrewd idea of what constitutes beauty in painting will help an artist even if he does not want to paint pictures that beguile one. Amalgamating uglinesses from his observed world, he employs them as fertilizer. Lesser eyes are carried away by this ephemeral garbage, which only seems to be cauterizing anti-poetry as long as one keeps one's nose to the catalog. (Why is it that it is usually those painters who have most painstakingly built up their skills who go out of their way to offend us?)

Perhaps painting and sculpture should be no more than constant thanksgivings for the gift of sight and a discovery of new delights in our landscape. (If I pay my debt to humanism in this picture may I, as a reward, paint a pure landscape next?) But we want it to be a key to help us into a new state of mind, like the pleas of weaponless animals who are continually praying for a mutation, protective coloring, a longer claw. Perhaps if there were only one idea of order instead of these sects that erase each other an indifferent God would dispense something more exciting than serenity.

Neither the id's scrawl nor the superego's geometry is of any use to our art-starved millions.

The stern, prickly morals of a Durer, a painter who appeals less to artists than to writers and political leaders, arms them for life's battles, helps them to strike accurately at their exact enemies. Can we expect to see our sick esthetic someday embedded in a larger message or are those times forever past? Now we are nerved by the most inexplicable talismans, blown-up fragments of some forgotten saga, their painterly magic unalloyed by stodgy mo-

rality.

Is the central unseen event of such importance that we artists are satisfied with exhibiting these tiny shards that we have picked up far from the explosion? But a tangible relic of the true cross beats any abstract faith.

The immaculate museum walls are temporarily threatened by the crude yokelisms of commercial naif artifacts dragged out of context to exhilarate the jaded. Seeing them *in situ* we remark that they are our true "pop" art, that it is only by having been put in a plush setting that they have been given any validity beyond a banal, pragmatic existence. Yet folk melodies sanitized for concert halls bore us until we hear them sung by an amateur. Commercial art cannot survive the metamorphosis in and out of fine art any more than a cheap commercial non-folk song can. We have yet to invent a sturdy, everyday American folk art that will flourish on both levels. The naif art that thrills us in museums has already led a life more exciting than Art; the tiki once smeared with menstrual blood and kept at a safe distance from a native village has only been put out to pasture when it decorates an off-white Park Avenue wall.

Modern art's unanchored symbols are the fetishistic shoe without the foot. The explanatory catalog, the code-book, is as important as the painting it decodes. An eloquent set of insights has been made literary in a new sense. The pretentious lore of pseudo-science may make these ambiguous subjectivities objective to the pragmatistic businessman collector, but are a block to the neurotic for whom art is a first aid kit, who want purity without moralistic message.

Our minds are tissues of "screen memories", false memories that hide events too shameful to remember; these must be unearthed by painful psychoanalysis where direct search is of no avail. So painting that hits the nail on the head does not tell the true story, whereas the glancing blows of fantasy intrigue and hold us; in this irrational fable we remember what ailed us.

8. *SIC TRANSIT FUROR SCRIBENDI*

Death by neologism and the self-destructing slang of the underworld are visited upon our language by intellectuals who, by taking up this fashion, are being counter-snobbistic toward purists. The do-it-yourself kits that debased the idealism of postwar American art were patronized and encouraged by critics who may have expected a popular front for non-representational painting. Eventually such horrors were hybridized that a predictable revulsion occurred against all sentimental pieties except the drastic purity now judged sterile enough to resist the epidemic. But the piety that causes the disease, pride of possession, has not been questioned. Only when this obsolete religiosity is purged will painting and sculpture rank with the more portable arts.

The critics of Art News were always dignifying by references to lit-

erature the not very evocative works of painters who had never read much of anything. As in Henry James or Proust, looking at pictures and sculptures is merely an excuse for a strolling author's companionable witticisms and exquisite insights, the art objects cringing in embarrassment at these clevernesses rolling over them. Perhaps in the irascible surfaces of these silent dreamers we can sense a regret of having handed over all explanations to the word men.

Beneath the hectic and yet austere vocabularies of painters like W. deKooning do we detect a stifled yearning for the lush realism of the surrealists (the wipe-out angry smear of a head turning too fast for us to see echoed in F. Bacon), along with a fear that these temptations might take root? The "club" siphoned off a lot of literary insights that might have enriched New York expressionism but which were not being worn in those dogmatic years.

The worst melancholy comes from clearly seeing one's own and others' mistakes and not being able to correct them. At least we may list them in writing, we who have rarely bounded with words our amorphous urges, publish or literally perish from our dammed-up gripes. But we blow our steam unnoticed in the flood of other non-writers similarly relieving themselves of iniquities' intolerable tensions.

American painters are only allowed by the wordsmiths to talk folksy, like J. Marin. M. McCarthy said that she only wanted to hear painters talk about their craft, their tools, not philosophize, and Mallarme told Degas sonnets were written with words, not ideas. By sharpening their images on and off the canvas, painters might achieve at least the stringency of a Whitman, or failing that, lead prolix writers back to mute, pregnant forms worth at least a dozen words, away from the hypnotic marketplace. Buying art they don't really like is the tribute the latecomers to the art "game" pay to the intellectuals, their expert advisers who the speculators fear might have an answer to their discontents almost as difficult as psychoanalysis. Why should our love of art, one of our few sources of redemption from self-doubt, be made self-conscious by these very pragmatic experts whose own esthetic revolution has not been completely bloodless?

Doctors too close to the disease, these critics have only a few favored patients, most of whom have only got collectors' greed.

Painters who are very conscious of the eyes of the painters of the past are constantly on stage in a way that seems affected to those whose work is not intended to be judged in this way. This veneer of sophistication delights their bookish apologists who are not too conversant with the painter's view of his tradition. We get muddled esthetic language from both ends. Both want a synthesis that will put all in order, but neither takes the other's realm seriously enough. What could be more literary than titling a non-objective potpourri after Dylan Thomas? Or more sentimental than discovering a noble savage in a tongue-tied paintslinger?

"Let us sing a new song" was the cry of American art in 1946. Then the erotic encyclopedists, slumming in art's undiscovered shantytown, overloaded a simple-hearted yea-saying with subtleties worthy of the early Church. In the spirit of group iconoclasm we tolerated the most uncommunicable eccentricities of our fellow fighters. But a euphoria that is not selective debases all it touches, and a psychotic concocting of ever more intense poisons is worse than a waste of time. Therefore, sooner or later many were excommunicated from this jolly permissive monastery. Cynical old-timers chided over-idealistic neophytes, structured the emotionality of millionaires bitten by the art bug, with the new rules of the game. The habit of looking nervously at Europe was broken and a lot of things were rendered unto Caesar. Since abstract expressionists were always violating the vows of non-objectivity, new bulls were published to cover these lapses. Admitting pre-"pop" artists like Rauschenberg and Johns with "their species of terror that activates the mystic, explorers, revolutionaries, scientists" (Rosenberg) brought in a divisive anti-art, useful in humiliating all too masochistic and cooperative collectors, but as dangerous to build with as blocks of dynamite. How could a painting regimen that releases the vitriolic juices of self-debasement and shuns common referents ever be used to consecrate the compassion hidden in our shared despair?

H. Rosenberg finds the same grim battle in Giacometti that he found in A. Gorki and W. deKooning. Instead of seeking insights that are inevitable, straight from heaven and set down without equivocation, he treasures these artists' mistakes in cramped palimpsests as a scholar would those of ancient manuscripts. Unrolling these brittle scrolls for us is a literary enthusiasm that isn't shared by most artists, who want the natural to appear whole, or if there is a struggle, would like to see the carnage removed from the battlefield. Apparent to the critical, the reality beneath the skin of the work of art is not accessible to most of us who want to see more communicable forms. Why should the paintings always remain unfinished? "Liberating himself from the habits of the eye...the artist attains an automatism that is the opposite of letting go."³ The promise of liberation of fleshed out excitements is what sparked abstract expressionism, not sequestering furtiveness. Ineptitude is not the tool with which unconscious insights are garnered.

The salient quality of abstract expressionism was the laying of one's cards on the table. Once the recalcitrant forms are released from the preconscious mind (or wherever they hide) they are well-defined actors in a drama that is anything but melodramatic, yet perceptible enough not to need literary exegesis. The New York critics of the Partisan Review school, understandably sickened by the mickeymouse euphoria around them, insisted on searching for the tragic thread beneath—this was commendable. But to enlist a way of painting that was a promise of a new autonomy and beatitude, untouched by the grim cynicism of organizers for a united front, was to make painting a "hand-

maiden" of Marxism (unless things get worse they won't revolt). Thought here is that gray matter that is the enemy of good painting.

Are we in this country still expected to share, at this late date, the iconoclastic fury of European artists and writers of the last generation? The complacencies they fought have changed so completely that we have begun to get a little curious about them: were they so smothering as to merit the overkill of futurism and other sects? This good fight is the essence of the *raison d'être* of our liberated art schools (whose students, I have noticed, usually seem miserable, quarrelsome, haggard). A sentimentality has grown up about this continuing universal revolution, never resting long enough to build up scar tissue. In this tradition, debates at the New York artists' club in the Fifties were usually refreshingly *ad hominem*, like husbands and wives who, out of fear of each other, fight only in the presence of others.

"Fishing in murky waters", as Freud was accused of doing, has now become standard in all the arts, not for reasons of increasing self-knowledge but because even the poor simple-hearted painters in their bucolic cesspool feel shame if their inspirations spring too ingenuously from a simple joyous source. Folly to agitate these depths out of fashionable concern; they who buy art are so busy dying they don't get messages any more from the realms of innocence.

Untouchables don't necessarily dislike being touched; the wages of onanistic loneliness are solipsism and in art these grotesquely distorted alienations rarely speak to each other.

Seduced into a sentimentality before his aseptic intellect could take command, the kitsch-sleuth curses himself, looking furtively about him for observers of his gaffe. He doesn't believe this devil that obsesses him should be given "equal time".

Ferret out your daily kitsch from the garbage of middlebrow, busy little vanguardist! The poison you brew is too toxic to be effective, since it destroys you as well. Better to woo with works of art that draw in the enemy to a warm fire and meal where he can be sweetly cajoled out of his sentimentality (part of the coin of hate) with a love ubiquitous as found objects of a culture discarding its soul with its wastes.

Formalizing and specializing the nonsense syllables that primitive man enjoyed may lead to practical languages but it doesn't nourish the music and poetry that caused that initial glossalalia to communicate with the spirits of earth and the gods. In painting, our bottling of the sacred waters of an inchoate universality surpassing idiosyncrasies results in a limited vocabulary of forms useful only for decorating walls. Abstracting for purposes of wider communication, we've lost the subjective phosphorescence of a uniqueness we all had in common; minute, subtle variations from mind to mind affording true "style".

Why should I be at the mercy of some self-loathing screenwriter's hangover? Is film as masscult immune to folk remedies? Deep down we know that psychopaths are not as sick as us neurotics; we have the sub-art of our society to prove it. This accounts for the pallid ambivalences of our high art, the bloodless realm of the neurotic liberal who can't afford mentally the pure raw madness of the masses (though he pays them tribute by using their slang). The future art that will heal this gap will be at once less topical and ephemeral in subject as well as go profoundly to the depths of a so far uninvestigated folk mass unconscious,

To preach that hope is an instrument of the devil, a treacherous signal leading us to further despair, is an unforgivable cynicism alien to the spirit of art that diminishes our small fund of courage in a cold universe. Since art is the very embodiment of hope for all who take the pains to absorb it, the seeming pessimism of the dedicated artist exists only to frighten people into improving their society and is not an end in itself. One of the privileges of someone like F. Goya is to hold the mirror of earthly folly to his already entertained and captured audience. Perhaps our current schlock or funk art is a brief searing blast of moral outrage intended to shame us into sterner delights than sloth. Our innocuous art muckrakers don't get the point of this art, being so inept in vituperation that they unconsciously solicit plugola from those they make notorious.

The painter or sculptor doesn't mind playing second fiddle to writers, critics, priests, etc. if he is secure in a common shared faith. But when the writers begin to over-celebrate his product as something with magic powers above other metiers, when he knows that it is only a small but necessary part of the total culture, he realizes that the basic fabric of that culture has been torn, and that soon any charlatan's-claims of godliness will be taken seriously.

A large percentage of any American abstract expressionist painting was pure air (but cleansing) from the sea, aiming to rinse out the old, and this made their creators think they could use the help of the articulate wordsmiths. A movement that wanted to give up all literary metaphor in favor of an unexplainable "thereness" thereby allied itself with a literature of pure paint only superficially non-literary. Allusions crept in—the East Hampton landscape, non-objective portraiture where many other readings were possible, enriching with a freshly-minted myth a threadbare, but precious austerity in 'which a seasoned lover of painting, being candid, found only' one meaning: a simplification of the ferment of nature. To find a serviceable *raison d'être* in the words of these 'newly-inaugurated art apologists was like going to the Romantic English poets for a logically reasoned credo of' political activism.'

Artists called in to give their benediction to the taste of people of "action" can't be blamed for publishing (in revenge) hubristic manifestos, as Still and Rothko did. These had some good effect, at least made the nouveau

riche realize that artists suddenly full of ideas should be watched carefully (in both senses). Wanting the badges of culture, the collectors are also a little ashamed of things of the spirit, especially when they can't understand them. But seeing such high price tags on these paintings, they were reassured of their own religiously materialistic kinship to these rare birds. (We outsiders who have not won their respect exhibit a self-deceiving naivete towards the exploiters amounting to criminal negligence.)

We sophisticates are no longer so amused by the yokels of the "sticks" since we have been impressed and alarmed by their speed in picking up something like "pop" art, which was not originally meant for the hope-bleary eyes of the demonstrative enthusiasts who tend to applaud between the movements of symphonies at concerts. (Was "optical" art invented by sadists to wound these eyes?) We are forced to realize now we're all in this together, all homesick for an austere decency that will arm us for our dismaying adventure in this age.

Everything today is tragic, but some things played sweetly out of tune are more tragic than others. That will cost you a little more.

The body's convulsions, from sneeze to orgasm; let us expel unwanted matter—this is what abstract expressionism's shudder and dance of revulsion was aiming to do until we drifting searchers, suddenly enchanted by the loveliness that was its by-product, began to exalt as almost sacred objects that which had up to that time been considered as effects subservient to a larger vision. Like the centripetal brittle fragmentations of Anton Webern's musical notes, what had once escaped our attention or annoyed us became a refreshment and then an addiction. Soon it was one of the laws of the art world—(how quickly we make them!)—that all that didn't conform to this atomization was suspect. As the constellation of Castro and Pollock ascended, we even convinced ourselves that it had politically leftist credentials in its freedom from connotation's despotism. But in its increasing purity there was a liberating regime as static as reaction's. Bureaucratic machine's servants can't afford to even feel self-contempt, let alone show it.

9. TRYING TO AWAKEN FROM ART HISTORY'S NIGHTMARE

The thought of Spengler and Toynbee doomsdays has helped many fact-bewildered historians through sleepless nights. Like drowners, our artists seem to be recapitulating the history of our culture in a flash, but not ingenuously. Not since Lyly's "Euphues" have we seen so many conceits in our writing. Over-consciousness in areas that don't matter makes us numb in soul, where awareness is everything. But the tragedy is that the apex from which we are supposed to be declining has yet to occur. Like faith-healers, we prefer to order intolerable multiplicities or swallow the grim medicine, of nature we suspect is only a placebo. Perhaps the apocalyptic cloud's spectra of off-whites

are the only colors we can afford now.

Our right hands are often happily surprised by what our left hands have done. Only after a painting has been finished can its intention be described by the artist—if what he had planned had come to pass there would have been a painting not worth describing. As long as the puzzled layman can ask “is he out to shock, out to comfort us or out of his mind?” there is still hope for the painting or sculpture, and it’s almost certain that it took its own direction apart from the artist’s intention or mood. He tells himself: I would like to combine the humanism of Rembrandt with the absurd wit of Klee, as Hugo Wolf stands between Wagner and Satie, but ends up painting another portrait of those three flighty Spring sisters, April, May and June.

“You tried too hard.” What a strange thing to say to a painter who, if he had tried just a little harder could have released the full flow of his unmined genius, inhibited by fashionable esthetics. So would we all amaze ourselves if we were to will ourselves to capture the beaten-down talent that is in each of us equally as our share of the “Godhead”, the universal energy,

If a painter sees more than surfaces perhaps he is not being true to the fructifying limits of his vocation. Wisdom in art lies in not being wise; this is how we were cured of psychosomatic disorders, by looking away from the wound. But how often the artist is prey to the very sicknesses he has healed in others with his work. An art strong enough to also cure its practitioners has not yet evolved and will not evolve if we keep speeding up the highway to Apocalypsia.

Perhaps a fertile period in art can afford to be retroactive, to rewrite history, as well as being alert for expected mutations that will shape its future the way it wants to. I can imagine something like Chopin’s Nocturne, Op. 27, No. 2 galvanizing an intelligentsia in the 1840s toward a new tenderness once called flacidity by a harsher age that could not afford industrialism’s luxuries of compassion. In our time art’s pieties are toward a cauterization beyond a love betrayed and sentimentalized by the mass id.

Bela Bartok’s continued fidelity to dissonance and shock as he grew older like Adrian Leverkühn’s in T. Mann’s “Dr. Faustus” endeared him to the younger iconoclasts. Today he might have second thoughts, confronted with his disciples’ nihilisms lacking his spirituality that allowed him to roam carelessly into realms of incongruity all too congruous now. “Manic” excitement must give way to recuperative depression as the hangover warns the euphoric drinker into temperance. If an artist turns up who uses his gifts best in an anachronistic framework, why should he be responsible to those who only know the intoxication of nowness? They have not seized their day correctly and won’t let him be heard. They who don’t have tricky intelligences must muddle through with inept love, hoping for mercy from those who re-write history.

The little nonsense that wise men relish is usually so stereotyped and self-conscious that it disgusts zealous youth. We try to keep ourselves young by returning to childhood, feeding children impractical fantasies, knowing that too soon they will don the crimes of our adulthood; sensitive children know that they are not being groomed for the idealistic responsibility they want and that we tell these lies in order that we may return to innocence in our nostalgia. The artist in our society must feel this way, eager for a strong role in a shared idealism, but forced to be decorator or comedian. But so chaotic is the "real" world becoming that he is beginning to seem as valid a guide as anyone else, a one-eyed king in Armageddon.

Like making a gesture or using a phrase that, unknown to them, is taboo in the country they are visiting, many otherwise *au-courant* people offend plastic artists by not using correctly jargon of modern art, a touchiness often found in recently liberated minorities. But the literary curiosity in us may feel rebuffed by artists sending each other secret signals. We feel that they, like advertising agencies lately, are trying to impress each other more than the target public. So are we all Balkanized today, the painters in their phobia of the literary element in art torturing their surfaces with indecipherable significances that manage to look handsome at a distances and serviceable as chic wall hangings. So what has been risked? Painting and sculpture are still where they always were, in the salon as conversation pieces.

If one is unfortunate enough to be cursed with a gift of lyrical melodic inventiveness in an era that only accepts dissonant fragmentation, one must realize that those who have become used to serial music find consonant harmonies just as repellent as we once found theirs. They can no longer afford the luxury of tears and probably regret it in their unrelieved dry rage. But if from this arises the austere grandeur of a "Mathis der Maier" we are inspired to continue farther on this rocky path toward an unfathomable objectivity beyond self-indulgence. The dislocations of cubism and constructivism are in painting the puritanical regimen that encourage candor, the honesty that is the one thing we can be proud of in our era. These harshnesses comfort us and help us survive the horrors we uncover in our relentless exhumations. In the moratorium on harmonic illusions these pioneers get nourishment only from each other. But as the self-flagellation becomes an epidemic the melodist sings more and more only to himself, a child of another age of romantic self-deception, harmless but out of key.

The art of abstraction has something furtive and unlawful about it as in a symbol of a suppressed political movement or pornography's pathetic shorthand. Conditioned by a fragment of what we cannot know in its wholeness, our reaction to these signals is unhealthy and stunted. A photo of an auto accident or sexual act is sometimes more shocking than the actual event in situ. Picasso's distortions stir us more than *trompe l'oeil* or the non-objective.

Did we think that by turning living objects into machinelike simplifications we were getting at their essences? We didn't. Yet we had to do it to learn a deeper lesson.

The art layman is perhaps as impressed by the art lover's ability to decipher modern painting and sculpture as he is by a musician's transformation of notes into sound. This is a befuddlement the dedicated artist never considers, so inured is he to this undemocratic rigmarole. As long as the eyes of the novice are riveted to the strange, intricate drama before him he can remain convinced, but if his attention strays for a moment to the larger world he is struck by the unnaturalness of the artifice. Absorbed in the game, we declare that they who dislike modern art probably hate the good art of the old masters as well, that the essence of the message of modernity is so explosive and volatile that it can be communicated only obliquely, by symbols learned with difficulty. Here we are far from the crimes of passion that make the world twirl, yet more neophytes are daily converted to significant form's religion than R. Fry had ever expected. But there are some who must rely on intuitive revelation, must have the full documented experience that alone can warn them of uglinesses prettily camouflaged that a faulty theory might allow. Perhaps compassion will turn out to be the ultimate frisson of the jaded as the legends and superstitions of modern art's fashionable celebrations trickle down to the lumpen proletariat. The strong lonely weirdoes of art who are their own counsel have always found new mythologies without meaning to. G. Santayana remarked on the warm friendliness of the first evening star as compared with the lonely, incomprehensible awe we experience when the sky is full. One new work of art could inspire a contemplative solitude rivaling quickly cooling fireworks that only dismay with multiplicity.

10. WHY SHOULD PAINTING KNOW ITS PLACE IN THE SCHEME OF CULTURE?

Our present elite avant garde does not easily forgive its artists for painting well and soon learns to spot the work of a slick artist feigning fashionable unpainterly crudeness. It is hard on painting that does not know its place, that wants to move into the moral sphere of literature, "pop" art being an inept, tentative foray they did not expect to be so popular, allowing it in when they saw it had no teeth. Optical art was a sort of masochistic chastisement, a self-imposed meager diet for sensuous excesses that seemed about to run wild, not very effective toward a new sick brutality launched by exquisite playboys to poison the art crooks. As always in American art surrealism stands behind the scenery, over-rehearsed but never invited onstage.

There is perhaps no defense against organized dedicated villainy, but deceit and diabolical cleverness has its charms for our liberal crusaders, soon

desensitized by the imitated means of the enemy that their vague goal justifies. (When they urge death for bigots the show is over as far as the republic is concerned.) And painting and sculpture that aids the political radical becomes strained and peculiar, displaying affectations of panic that will never convert the target public. We artists must always expect to lose out in the political and business world; we who have to patiently explain to the pragmatists what altruism is cannot expect gentle treatment. Falsely accused of opportunism by the opportunists, we can only prove our innocence by our unworldliness and shame them with our vulnerability, like early Christian martyrs, preferring this to self-lacerations that weaken us. Self-crucifixion requires a little help from others.

Considering the multiplicity of culture centers in our country, doesn't it surprise you that the *dramatis personae* of modern art should be so limited? There are many provincial *Davidsbunds* at war with the philistine and dying of neglect, so bemused are we with the moribund international scene. Are they willing to trade their birthright of independent fame (unachievable in a total socialization of all our assets above the profit motive) for the kind of guild pride that nourished the cathedrals and music of the middle ages? I can conceive of new cathedrals warmed by purposely anonymous paintings and sculpture donated by artists who no longer wonder: what is there left for art to do? Through a return to charity, a reuniting of our lonely split *personae* in a society where fame is not bargained off for wealth.

"Get the corrupt priests out of modern art and let the layman judge for himself!" Ah, but it's not that simple. Would you fire the Congress and legislate by referenda? I don't think you would take that chance. These empty minds are too vulnerable to destructive pranks, are already reaching for their anti-Kulchur revolvers, and the other day I heard an archbishop whistling a singing commercial! Maybe something as seemingly unimportant as an error in taste has caused the country to take the wrong moral direction. No, we who have this vocation for making artistic taste a moral imperative as a compensation for our having been denied the ecstasy of total creativity as in the pasts miserable in our exacting inquisitions, do this selecting and nullifying only for your own good. "As things start slipping into anarchy you'll thank us." So speaks the artist engagé.

As a holding company invents phantom small concerns for monopoly purposes, so were all the confusing art movements only facets of a massive dissatisfaction for whom any unity was too reminiscent of the monolithic status quo they were fighting'. Nothing new in experimentation has occurred in painting and sculpture since 1915. Our new crazes are the result of a youthful generation reviving history for stability. Ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny, an individual's painting or sculpting career may duplicate the history of art, until he ends up with today's pseudo-primitivism (which S. Dali says is the

worst disease of modern art). Yet these seemingly wayward sects fortify the monopoly.

That first fine careless rapture that abstract expressionists could call up at will (until its academy, pressured by new sects, made tighter rules against spontaneity) can be resurrected at any time by young painters ingenuous and self-directed enough to weather group intimidation. How quickly we accept an arcane inarticulate explanation over one that is succinct and blessed with common sense!

Not breaking the picture plane has become as much of a tyranny as perspective once was. The fact that the non-objective painters are constantly searching in the old masters' work for correspondences to their flat space shows a lack of confidence in a dogmatic rule that often reduces the impact and dramatic dialog of their paintings. And when famous old paintings are cannibalized for purposes of homage it is usually only for an excuse to hand on the forbidden receding planes the fulminating veneers that have trouble inventing their scaffolding.

Like dessert after protein, or buying a necktie after being suited, painting is what we turn to last, after our literary, musical or public sculpture needs are taken care of. Yet each of our rooms have four walls which are not often left bare, even if cheap reproductions of paintings are bought at the ten-cent store. But the timbre of an impastoed original oil is such a tactile conditioning that many of us will use any tasteless hand-painted pompier, scorning the masterpiece whose replica in print is often superior to the blackened over-burnished original. We have not evolved to a stage where the memory of the artifact will suffice, as it might in novels or music; but stronger than our need to be physically and constantly reminded of colors and forms is our greedy collector's instinct, which vitiates any esthetic urges we may be left with after our other demands are satisfied. This appetite, along with gambling speculation, is what makes it seem that painting today is blessed financially above the other arts (which doesn't commend painting since anything physical can be collected and used in speculation). No wonder painters, in their mute boorishness, often regard themselves as second-class citizens, on whose impoverished walls are hung photos of admired masterworks only.

The universal artists cannibalize all important art of the past and present without being too consciously familiar with it, hoping critics will translate any obscurities for the layman; they don't expect to be illustrators of the critics' theories. These spokesmen did not want abstract expressionism to speak too loudly except in safely incoherent pseudo-scientific jargon that had little to do with human joy or anguish, like a religious ban of human image to keep the non-literary element in step with the (cocktail) party line. Intellectual puzzling-out is alien to painting's traditional aboveboard largess. Why in this era of moral permissiveness must it concern itself with a cryptography of

symbolism? If the arts only exist to formalize and make articulate our anarchic Dionysian frenzy in order to purify rationality and help keep the culture on a level keel, why do critics keep telling artists: "Now don't worry your pretty little heads about these terrible things," handing them tricky games with which to amuse themselves? How long before they are allowed to take up grown-ups' weapons?

Does the eclectic feel that he can jump from one compatibility to another with complete mobility or nobility like a low-brow checker crowned king by his public? Some artists' work borrows from so many sources we crown him original because it's too much trouble to figure out the influences.

The advantage of having a strong personal style in painting is largely negative in that it allows one to be heard above the roar of mediocrities and imitators. These egocentric peculiarities distort the messages from the realm of the ideal. But the lucky parasites who have found their sturdy, banal oak tree only want to survive the storm, don't expect others to attach themselves to their own thin identities. The great unifying manner that will put us all above such survival tactics has yet to arrive. Wagner, Debussy, Schoenberg had influence that seemed almost universal during their reigns, but each has been superceded. Yet each seemed exactly right for its epoch. To posterity an eclectic style may seem the most original since it survives to tell its tale and then bows out. Only when we have set our society in order will the artists feel secure to relinquish their own personalities to the overwhelming chorus of earth-praise.

How can any artist continue to exist creatively unless he believes his work is first rate? To keep going, we mediocrities must convince ourselves that we are being discriminated against, that however neglected we now are "our time will come" or that our contribution to the great machine, though miniscule, is vital. Though some of us feel that in a reversal in revolution we would be on top, most of us benefit from Capitalism's corrupt largess and chaos.

Fed up with all of the systems we once called faiths, we save in our Hellenistic torpor the tesserae from the never-to-be-repeated murals of unity; they give us only scattered insights, at least portable in our journey toward a new wonder.

When one's sins of omission are seen by others as crimes of commission one had better examine one's habits. The coward cast as alcoholic exaggerated to impress his needed bullies what could be more generous or life-enhancing than a little hyperbole? Paying for these lies, what virtuosos we became in the subtleties of our poison, what energies we wasted mollifying hangovers, forgiving ourselves for unreconstructed blackouts. When one is in the world of strife one is not in the world of art and the anti-arts we once practiced there have only weakened our real vocations. Of what comfort is chaotic art in a chaotic time?

I can imagine a future art of painting of such grandeur that we will almost wish for a great tragic event to occur so that the art would celebrate it. Now painting has become the genre one turns to last, for relaxation after the more practical arts have been attended to.

- 1 A "mad-vet" joke of 1946 has the demobilized soldier of World War II answering his parents' plea "Son, what's the matter with you? Why don't you speak to us just once?" with "I'm afraid I'll fuck up." This could explain the hermetic muteness of the painting of that period, inscrutable cover-ups of unmentionable experiences and the permissive critics' "Leave him alone. Don't you see he doesn't want to talk about it?" Thus encouraged, the ritualization of circumlocution in a painting which few would confuse with futurismo's paean to technological vitality began to take over the American art world.
- 2 "For purposes of clarification, this ('Smith paints New York style') will be referred to as a "Manner'...the look in a picture that is distinctly the artist's own...this meaning will be referred to as 'Style.'" T. Hess, *Art News*, April, 1957. "By style I mean the formal mode of expression—realism, super-realism, abstraction. By manner I mean the individual handwriting, the workmanship of the individual artist." H. Read "The Philosophy of Modern Art" 1955 p. 92.
- 3 Harold Rosenberg, *New Yorker* magazine, July 1974.

The Femme Fatale as seen in the work of J.K. Huysmans, Felicien Rops and Aubrey Beardsley

Sarah Bielski

Decadence is, as its root word implies, a time-based notion. Its dialectic is fulfilled only through a cycle of decline and regeneration. As a means of expressing their interest in decline, decadent artists needed a fixed symbol to represent the cycle, and upon which to pivot their ideas mid-stream. This symbol was a hugely eroticized woman. She was seen most frequently as the femme fatale found in the work of J.K. Huysmans, Felicien Rops and Aubrey Beardsley, among others. As a way of examining the varied and complex ways these artists used the symbol of woman, it is essential to see her in the larger context of the decadent movement. The obvious and pervasive sexism in these works cannot be ignored from a contemporary post-Feminist standpoint. While this sexism deserves mention, it is a separate examination and will be touched on here only to compare the degree to which it exists in each artist.

All three artists employ the archetype of the *femme fatale*, most frequently seen in decadent works as a sexual or spiritual killer. If she is the latter, as seen in Huysmans and Beardsley, she uses her sexuality as a means of spiritual temptation. She is inextricably linked with sex and can be seen, by virtue of Freudian psychology, to represent male fear of a sexual or spiritual castration and the subsequent loss of potency and power. This could mean a syphilitic death from a prostitute or the loss of one's soul to the Devil. Dr. Donald Kuspit noted that woman is such a complicated decadent symbol because she is both mother and lover. She gives life and therefore is resented for the inevitable decay of that life. Further, sexual satisfaction with that who brought life fueled the moral dilemma of sex with one's mother. She is resented for this situation and considered sexually threatening as she has the power, by her very nature, to make man feel an incestual moral torque. Bodily desire for 'woman' amidst fear of disease was of almost obsessive interest to Rops, while Huysmans and Beardsley focused on spiritual death through sexual temptation. In both cases, the operative emotion is fear. Obsessed with their physical decline and the larger moral decline of a *'fin de siecle'* culture, the decadents held woman responsible for their ennui and dissatisfaction. The result is appropriately decadent: these artists rarify woman until she becomes an essentialized symbolic sounding board for their fear and resentment of her sexuality.

Whether denigrated or relatively empowered by these artists, woman

was further exoticized by her placement in a Satanic context. Huysmans' novel, *Las Bas*, found woman as an agent of the Devil, sent to spiritually and sexually seduce the protagonist, while the etchings of Rops saw her as His supplicant whore. In shackling her to evil, it was easier to morally judge her. Beardsley's illustrations of Oscar Wilde's play, *Salome*, however, posited her in a complex role: a stylized symbol of evil. For Beardsley, she operated as a safe exposé of evil, rather than an embodiment. Beardsley also provided a slightly more empowered woman, coldly aware and in control of her sexuality. While in the case of Rops and Huysmans, woman was a veritable scourge: sexually loose and never satisfied. In addition, Huysmans morally judged her for a sexual anticlimax while the aim of Rops' pornography was purely climactic. In contrast, Beardsley stopped the viewer at the sublime moment preceding climax. Through the spheres of evil, morality and sexual climax, the *femme fatale* in the work of Huysmans, Rops and Beardsley can be examined.

Huysmans' 1891 novel *La Bas* or 'Down There' concerns an attempted spiritual castration amidst a prurient interest in Satanism. The protagonist, Durtal, is a writer currently working on the biography of Gilles de Rais. De Rais was a rich baron who assisted Charles VII through loans and the purchasing of soldiers during the revolution. He was entrusted with the care of Joan of Arc until her death, after which he disappeared to the countryside and indulged his interest in the occult. In his troubled quest for an alchemical solution to making gold, he sold his soul to the Devil. This launched De Rais into a murderous and wildly sadistic lifestyle as his extreme taste followed him to the mass killing and torture of children as part of his Satanic worship. *La Bas* posits, through Durtal, that De Rais was seduced into the supernatural as he witnessed the visions of Joan of Arc. Here, Huysmans makes a clear statement about the receptiveness of woman to the occult as well as her ability to lure men to it. Durtal's friend, Des Hermies inquires, "Do you think the Maid of Orleans was really responsible for his career of evil?" Durtal replies:

To a certain point. Consider. She roused an impetuous soul, ready for anything, as well as for orgies of saintliness as for ecstasies of crime. There was no transition between the two phases of his being. The moment Jeanne was dead, he fell into the hands of sorcerers who were the most learned of scoundrels and the most unscrupulous of scholars.¹

Huysmans suggests that even as a saint, woman can be responsible for the moral decline of man. Further, if the most moral and sexually pure woman is a *femme fatale* of sorts, all women can be upheld to that archetype. Through Huysmans' negative portrayal of Joan of Arc, it is clear that he sees woman as inherently evil.

Huysmans parallels the life of De Rais with the personal temptations of Durtal. He chronicles Durtal's desire to escape ennui through extraordinary sexual and spiritual experience. As Durtal is writing, he begins to receive anonymous letters from a woman. She flagrantly praises his work and describes her ambivalence in meeting him. Huysmans details this ambivalence in Durtal as well. The characters both know that meeting would destroy the exoticized fantasy, the "chimera" which Durtal has envisioned between her letters. Huysmans chose this word for its dual meaning as an unrealistic fantasy and as a fire-breathing she-monster. In this way, his protagonist can imagine extraordinary scenarios with an unknown woman and later resent her for setting fire to his fantasy as he meets her in the flesh. He believes of his chimera, "that with a woman as passionate as this one seemed to be, he would experience superhuman sensations and novel abandon."² By way of Durtal's chimera, Huysmans relates woman to what can be seen as a sexual anti-climax. The idea that the rarefied, essentialized and artificial is cleaner and more satisfying than reality is a decadent hallmark and, unfortunately for woman, a way in which man can hold her responsible for the dissatisfaction inherent in his unrealistic fantasy.

Feverishly distracted, Durtal becomes unable to work and consents to a meeting. When the woman turns out to be Mme. Chantelouve, the wife of a well known Parisian whose salons Durtal has attended, he is not displeased with her looks, though his chimera is extinguished. In between her visits, however, he becomes re-infatuated with her reality. His desire builds up again and they eventually consummate the relationship. As Gilles de Rais replaced one unsatisfying sadistic act for one more rarefied, Durtal finds it is not enough to carry on a mere flirtation; he must sexually possess Mme. Chantelouve. In accordance with the decadent theory set forth, the reality of sex is an enormous let down. Sex of the caliber in Durtal's mind can never exist. Therefore, he ends the affair, lamenting the next morning: "The flesh decisively does not intend that one shall get along without it and indulge in out-of-the-world pleasures which it can partake only on condition that it keep quiet. For the first time, reviewing these turpitudes, he really understood the meaning of that now obsolete word *chastity*, and he savoured it in all its pristine freshness. Just as the man who has drunk too deeply the night before thinks, the morning after, of drinking nothing but mineral water in future, so he dreamed, today, of pure affection far from a bed."³ Mme. Chantelouve does not bring a literal sexual death to Durtal so much as she brings death to his richer-than-life fantasy. In his ensuing ennui, Durtal looks for an extraordinary experience in his work. Suddenly, it is no longer enough to do research from afar. He now feels that he cannot continue without first hand knowledge of the Black Mass.

Durtal discovers that Mme. Chantelouve is a friend of Canon Docre,

one of the few known practitioners of the Black Mass in Paris. Following his curiosity further, under the auspice that it will inform his work, Durtal asks Mme. Chantelouve to arrange with the Canon for an attendance at the mass. In this way, she enters the novel as a spiritual *femme fatale*, able to facilitate his introduction to a subversive religion: acting as De Rais's Joan of Arc. Again, Huysmans ties woman to evil but now adds a sexual component, which will allow him to levy greater moral judgment against her. He heightens the mystery and terror surrounding this event in a way similar to his extra-sensual portrayal of Durtal's pre-coital desires. Predictably, Durtal finds the Mass horrific in its actuality and he flees with Mme. Chantelouve to the street, whence she entices him into a bar. She takes a private room and pleads with him for sex: "'I want you,' she said, and she took him treacherously and obliged him to desire her. She disrobed, threw her skirts on the floor, opened wide the abominable couch. A look of swooning ecstasy was in her eyes and a smile of joy on her lips. Suddenly, when he was able to escape, he shuddered, for he perceived that the bed was strewn with fragments of hosts. 'Oh, you fill me with horror! Dress and let's get out of here.' The fetidness of the room nauseated him. Then too, he was not absolutely convinced of Transubstantiation, he did not believe very firmly that the savior resided in that soiled bread, but in spite of himself, the sacrilege he had involuntarily participated in saddened him." Huysmans judges her moral character by way of her arousal at the Mass and through Durtal's sadness in being "involuntarily" involved. This only serves to reinforce her moral turpitude. He, in effect, lets Durtal off the hook, while convincing the reader of his disgust in her sexual and religious perversion. Despite his inclinations toward the rarefied, Durtal is strong enough to resist both spiritual death and (although he succumbs after the Mass to her sexual perversion) sexual death as he then cuts all ties to Mme. Chantelouve. Her positioning as an agent of the Devil makes her a spiritual killer by way of sexual seduction. It would not suffice to place her as a purely spiritual seducer, for the *femme fatale* is inextricably wound up in sex, as again, she is mother and lover. A similar theme is addressed in Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. He imbues his *femme fatale* with considerably more power than Huysmans. Beardsley's Salome occupies not only a different place of power, but functions in a different relation to evil and to climax while escaping moral judgment as well.

Salome, like Mme. Chantelouve, uses sex to spiritually seduce. However, she has a great deal more power. Salome never has to actually give herself sexually to her stepfather Herod. Instead, she uses her sexuality as a bargaining tool for the head of John the Baptist who was spiritually strong enough to withstand her advances. In response to Herod's insistence that she dance for him in return for anything in the kingdom, Salome requests John's head. Acutely aware of herself and the extent to which Herod desires her body, Salome can

ask for the unreasonable and receive it. Wilde has therefore given her an incredible amount of power, which Beardsley successfully translates. In her essay, "Felicien Rops and Aubrey Beardsley: The Naked and the Nude,"⁴ Linda Zatlín argues that Beardsley's treatment of Salome suggests her incorporation of male power:

They (Beardsley's women) can attempt to cloak themselves in man's power, to bargain by his rules, and to become equally hard, as does Salome. She becomes stony-eyed and calculating with the knowledge that Herod wants to sleep with her (The Stomach Dance). In this drawing, Herod's lust is emblemized by the drooling dwarf whose priapus is barely disguised as clothing decoration. Salome's evanescent success in reversing the rules of power, when she bargains with Herod for John the Baptist's head as if she were a man, leaves marks of hardness and cynicism on her face (The Dancer's Reward; The Climax). Beardsley does not define women in terms of sinner and saints. Instead, he projects the diverse choices available to them.⁵

Salome is aware and in control of her sexuality, shrewdly using it as leverage. Where the women of Rops and Huysmans are agents of the Devil, Beardsley's Salome is not. She does not need to foster an alliance with the Devil, as her sexuality is powerful enough to achieve her goal. Although not explicitly Satanic, it is implied that she is not in conjunction with dark forces. This does not mean neither her character nor these images are free from evil. On the contrary, Salome is the ultimate *femme fatale* as she is the representative of a calculating, chaste sexual and anti-hysterical evil.

As Zatlín suggests, Salome's sexuality is potent because she uses it to usurp male power. This may be the true face of evil for the decadent man. Huysmans and Rops so clearly fear woman and in their inability to face that fear, they pepper their work with images of woman as the Devil's plaything. If she achieves any sexual power, it is through a Satanic pact. They can then exert power in the sphere where they feel powerless. Their work becomes a sort of 'evil-lite' whereas Beardsley cuts straight to the sublime terror of Salome. Chris Snodgrass illuminates this idea in "Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque." "For Beardsley, Art's reassurance of order and control is precisely what permits a "safe" investigation of life's depraved and chaotic realities, the stylistic chastening of evil and depravity through artistic technique making it possible to avoid moral degradation without having to resort to the demeaning bromides of mindless probity."⁶ In other words, Beardsley does not have to resort to the sexual debasement of women to talk about evil. His Salome is evil, but again, she embodies a removed, sterile evil. Further, through this stylized evil, Beardsley reinforces notions of decadent artificiality and pre-climactic plea-

sure.

This is best seen in *The Climax*, where Salome has possession of the head of John the Baptist. The print illustrates the narrative climax of Wilde's play while visually orchestrating notions of pre-climactic sublimity. Snodgrass elucidates: "We can see how Beardsley exposes evil while simultaneously trying to seal it in a stylized elegance in *The Climax for Salome*... The counterbalancing curves of Salome's wild hair and the way the upward curve of the line dividing the black/white background is off set by the complementary line of Salome's back and the contrary swoop of her dangling robe, reinforce the fact as she is 'suspended forever agonizingly close to a fulfillment she can never know'" (Read, *Style* 165).⁷ This agony parallels Durtal's experience before he possesses Mme. Chantelouve. Huysmans, however, must take his reader over the top in order to foist blame on woman as a source of anti-climactic ennui. In his pornographic work, Rops rides the peak of the crest. In other words, his etchings sit on the fence and may be described as continually climaxing. This idea is facilitated by the sexual availability and subsequent moral judgement of his female subjects.

To examine the morality issued upon their women, it is essential to explore the moral stance of both Huysmans and Rops. Zatlin sums up their relationship: "Huysmans' tribute to Rops, that the artist paid homage to 'Woman essential, beyond all time and space, Woman, the nude and Beast of Poison, the Whore of Darkness, the absolute Handmaid of the Devil,' reveals Huysmans as a salient example of an enthusiastic adherent of the prevalent nineteenth-century concept of woman."⁸ She emphasizes woman as the utter sexualized embodiment of evil rather than its symbol. When Rops and Huysmans sexually align woman with the Devil, they are passing a moral judgement on her susceptibility to evil. She is loose, without strong morals, will power or the ability to think for herself. In the end, it is the male character in *Las Bas* who, after an attenuated seduction, resists temptation. Spiritual seduction as seen in Rops, however, is a full-on pornographic invitation. His "Temptation of St. Anthony" depicts the Devil ousting Christ in favor of a woman with a come hither gaze, surrounded on her cross by animal attendants. In their own ways, Huysmans and Rops debase woman in an occult context in a weak effort to conceal their fear of the powerful female sexuality represented by Salome.

Why is female sexuality so terrifying? Ideas of her nefarious intent aside, woman cannot mediate this problem; it is biological. She is man's biological opposite and, naturally, attractive to him. When looking at the larger fin de siecle cultural milieu, however, she becomes an emotional problem for the decadent artist. Rops and Huysmans accuse her of sexual temptation, holding her responsible for both the anti-climax and for her insatiable sexual proclivity that makes them feel powerless to satisfy her. After all, if the Devil still cannot satisfy her, how will mortal man? Believing woman is a causal agent in their

ennui or physical distress leads them to pass moral judgement. Zatlin comments:

The only picture in Rops's *oeuvre* in which a man overtly expresses his rage at woman is *Cavalry*. Here, a crucified man with an erect phallus, whose rage has distorted his features, uses his prehensile toes to bind the hair of the naked woman in front of him tightly around her neck. As she strangles and dies in recompense for arousing his lust, her arms jut out in mimicry of his crucifixion. The religious references, the title and the cross, brand the woman as the Antichrist, the cause of man's misery. But the illusions are blasphemous, for we see not only the cause but the symptoms of man's plight: his contempt and self-disgust.⁹

Looking at the over-the-top nature of Rops, it is clear how his deliveries are not commensurate with the decadent idea of the anti-climax. In fact, he has been considered one of the least decadent of his peers. He is interested in sex divested of mystery and foreplay. The Ropsian woman is, as Zatlin alluded to in the title of her essay, "naked" rather than "nude." That is to say, Rops strips his women. Further, his contempt for them is obvious in his choice of titles such as *Human Detritus*, *Heart in Hand*, and *Deplorable Attitude*. *Heart in Hand* portrays a woman reclining with her skirts pulled up and her legs spread, inviting the male viewer. She appears to be swooning with pleasure, while in her left hand, she is holding a heart with a stylized vagina in the center. In the exposure of two available vaginas, Rops declares the wanton nature of woman, so lusty she needs two sex organs through which to receive the pleasure she needs. Further, in looking at the symbol of the heart, a connection can be made as to what is supposedly closest to a woman's heart: sex. Unlike the successful sexual anti-climax in *Las Bas*, Rops's is an immediate simulated climax without the essential decadent ingredient of heightened lust. The viewer does not benefit from Durtal's slow assent to a passionate frenzy for his mysterious admirer or from the frozen sublimity of Beardsley's Salome.

Similar judgment is passed on Mme. Chantelouve. She is one-dimensional; only out for sexual pleasure. Her arousal at the Black Mass can be taken further and seen as phallic worship. This idea manifests itself, more literally, in Rops. Again, Zatlin: "In Temptation, naked satyrs lie on the grass. Drooping birds (spent phalluses) rest on branches below her, while she reaches for a bird perched on the satyr's finger. Behind them, a cupid rushes toward her carrying a cage, imprisoning yet another 'fresh' bird. At the center bottom of this print is a stylized vagina, which summarized Rops's point: woman craves so much sex that she is tempted by anything in the approximately correct shape."¹⁰ Both of these examples are ripe with judgment. Whether she is woman an insatiable whore or woman as the Devil's whore, she is sacrificing herself

sexually to man and beast. In *Illustration for ADM*, Rops depicts a naked young woman with her seat pressed against a monkey's cage. With a smile on her face, she is passively allowing the animal to penetrate her from behind. For Rops, her position is key in establishing woman as a member of the lower order of beings. Not only does she consort with animals, she engages in the primitive, instinctual sex of the animal kingdom. This allows Rops to judge her as base, immoral and insatiable. He goes even further in suggesting, through the smile on her face, that perhaps the ape is not her last resort but a perverse choice. Bram Dijkstra explains further in "Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin De Siecle Culture":

In any event, it is clear that by 1900 writers and painters, scientists and critics, the learned and modish alike, had been indoctrinated to regard all women who no longer conformed to the image of the household nun as vicious, bestial creatures, representative of a pre-evolutionary, instinctual past, who preferred the company of animals over that of the civilized male, creatures who were, in fact, the personification of witchery and evil, who attended sabbaths and dangerous rituals astride goats.¹¹

Salome, in contrast, remains virginal and so escapes similar judgment. This is not to say that the sexually 'experienced woman' is cause for Beardsley's moral judgment. For instance, Beardsley's *The Toilet of Lampito* finds her turned away from the viewer, engaged in personal activities which may be read as masturbation. Says Zatlin of a similar print: "If she is nude, she averts her eyes from the viewer, and her gesture is allusive rather than unmistakable. These women are involved with themselves, but they do not open their vaginas for male inspection. Their state of undress or nudity does not obscenely accentuate their breasts, and they do not actively invite the viewer to become aroused. They do offer the spectator the opportunity to envision woman as full human beings, capable at the very least of sexual parity."¹² This parity includes self-pleasure. The Beardsleyan woman does not depend on man for pleasure, nor is her personal pleasure available to him visually.

In what should not be construed as a defense of Rops and Huysmans, it is important to mention that they did not exist in the same political climate as Beardsley. During his lifetime, the role of women in society changed drastically. Securing the right to a better education, women carved places for themselves in the workplaces that were previously reserved for men. For the first time, a woman was able to be seen alone, outside the home, and not be mistaken for a prostitute. Beardsley was witness to countless changes such as these. Even so, his illustrations for *Salome* reinforce the notion that woman is evil, regardless of the chastity or wantonness of that evil. Despite the differ-

ences cited herein, the femme fatale figures strongly in the work of the three artists considered here. She is a loaded archetype that itself deserves scrutiny through a feminist lens. It could be argued that Beardsley does woman a disservice by robbing her of part of her humanity: the joy of sex. Surely as a response to a changing society, however, he grants her a basic human right not given to her by his peers: political empowerment, albeit by way of her sexuality. Still, in the works of these decadents, woman is never both politically and sexually empowered.

Notes

1 J.K. Huysmans, *Las Bas* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1924).

3 *Ibid*, p. 197.

4 Linda Zatlín, *Felicien Rops and Aubrey Beardsley: The Naked and the Nude*, (Ann Arbor/London: UMI Research Press., 1989).

5 *Ibid*, p. 192.

6 Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

7 *Ibid*, p. 1165 from J. Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), p. 145.

8 Zatlín, p. 183.

9 *Ibid*, p. 197.

10 *Ibid*, p. 169.

11 Dijkstra, Bram, *Idols of Perversity* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 325.

12 *Ibid*, p. 194.

Guilt By Association: Gustave Moreau, The Unwilling Decadent

Mary Cullinane

Do not fear to rely on the masters: you will never get lost.

Gustave Moreau

The only possible error in art is imitation; it infringes the law of time, which is the Law.

Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger,
Cubism

Gustave Moreau is generally accepted as an established Academy painter, yet he became the darling of the decadent literary movement in *fin-de-siècle* France. He achieved his first major popular acclaim following the publication of J.K. Huysmans' *Against the Grain*, the manifesto of decadence, in 1874. The decadent writers of the *fin-de-siècle* had a highly developed aesthetic sense and often assumed the role of the dandy. This paper examines the character of the dandy and his contemporary background. The treatises of decadence as expounded in *Against the Grain* will be elaborated in order to establish the basic tenets of decadence. The art of Gustave Moreau will be evaluated according to them. The hindsight of a century has proved invaluable in this judgment process, due to the extended and repetitious nature of the evolutionary cycle of art.

I. THE NATURE OF THE DECADENT AESTHETE

Who were these decadent aesthetes common to literary circles of the *fin-de-siècle*? They derived from the mid-nineteenth century French Dandy, who in turn was a descendant of the English original, Beau Brummell. Dandyism in *fin-de-siècle* France developed into an aesthetic and philosophical movement. Baudelaire, the icon of mid-nineteenth century dandyism, espouses the virtues of dandyism in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863). He wrote that the Dandy belonged to "a new kind of aristocracy."¹ He had nostalgia for a lost era and longed for the simple, clear-cut class divisions of earlier times. While "Dandyism may reinvigorate or even improve upon a waning aristocracy," he regarded Dandyism as "the last burst of heroism in the decadent

period."² He traced the tradition back to antiquity when he described Dandyism as a "very ancient" institution, "since Caesar, Catiline and Alcibiades provide the most dazzling prototypes."³ The historical or legendary character of dandies was a constant topic throughout the nineteenth century.⁴ This association not only instills the idea of a noble lineage, but also assigns the dandy an elevated cultural standing.

The increasing urbanization and industrialization of the late nineteenth century played an important role in fashioning the character of the dandy. The rampant *fin-de-siècle* pessimism caused many to derive a corollary between the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war and the decline of the Roman Empire. In turn, the aristocracy became increasingly unpopular and the ever-growing middle class made them feel particularly vulnerable. The desire arose to distance oneself from the common horde, hence the association of the Dandy with the aristocracy, and the origination of the term 'snob.' The decadents cultivated a consciousness of their own, often resulting in a self-inflicted alienation. They regarded modern scientific advances with pessimism and despised the newly emerging vulgar democracy, epitomized by the bourgeoisie. The superior nature of decadent aestheticism forbade professional activity. Thus the decadent aesthete's life was characterized by irresponsibility and inactivity. Coupled with the desire for individualism, the Dandy's former preoccupation with elegance of bearing led to a sculpting of the self. In order to retain his sense of individuality the dandy retreated from society and its crowds and from all things commonplace. Commonplace often even extended to gender. The sexes become blurred, and in his quest for the ultimate artificial aesthetic, the dandy readily explored his female side, the woman in himself. For the decadent aesthete, "instinctual reactions, passions and enthusiasms are animal, and thus abominable."⁵

Among the decadent literary circles of the late 19th century, healthy relationships with women were an exception, and in fact misogyny was the rule. The major figures vacillated between impotence and perversion, and marriages when they occurred, were often supplemented by affairs. Baudelaire wrote: "Woman is the opposite of the dandy. Therefore she must inspire horror... Woman is natural, that is to say abominable."⁶ The paradox is of course that the dressed- and made-up woman exudes artificiality. The aesthete who revered artificiality was forbidden this avenue of personal expression by societal mores. The resentment of women common among the decadent literati was perhaps a logical consequence of this inequality.

In J.K. Huysmans' *Against the Grain*, des Esseintes is the personification of the decadent dandy. It is commonly accepted that the character of des Esseintes is the embodiment of J.K. Huysmans' decadent traits. Huysmans was a civil servant by profession and had a relatively modest income. The character he creates in des Esseintes offers him an avenue, whereby he can

explore the bizarre and extravagant life he craves, but which is beyond his means. The character that des Esseintes has cultivated for himself is a decadent caricature evolved from his over-stimulated and over-refined aestheticism. The novel discusses almost exclusively the secluded environment he has created; indeed the persona of des Esseintes becomes almost indecipherable apart from this environment. He becomes his own creation; the Dandy has unwittingly become an artist.

Des Esseintes embodies the effete aestheticism of the Dandy described in the previous section. He abhors the lower classes, the bourgeoisie, and even his own aristocratic class, and endeavors to create his own private monastery far away from what he describes as "the incessant deluge of human folly."⁷ He deliberately subverts natural behavior by adopting a nocturnal schedule, living by night, while the rest of the world lies "inert, dumb and dead."⁸ He intends his new home to be an oasis in the desert of modern vulgarity, so he carefully crafts every single room to suit the requirements of a highly refined, intellectual and sophisticated soul, living in solitude. He deliberates at length on the colors with which he will decorate his study, and analyzes numerous shades and tones for their suitability under artificial light. The most important criterion of his task of interior decoration is to combine aesthetic perfection with uniqueness. In a continuation of the monastic theme he proceeds to model his bedroom on a monk's cell. Des Esseintes cannot be satisfied with the authentic humble materials of the cloister however, and uses extravagant and luxurious materials to create the impression of frugality. The plainness and melancholy of the final result of this artificial monk's cell is quite convincing – indeed, it is a work of art. His dining room, built as a room within another room, creates the perfect illusion of a ship's cabin. The space between both rooms is filled with tinted water and mechanical fish to convey the impression of aquatic marine life. His retreat from the outside world is so complete that even ocean cruises are feasible in his imaginary realm.

Des Esseintes further escapes reality by immersing himself in his art and literature collections. His choice of literature, ranging from that of the Latin Decadence to the Marquis de Sade, Edgar Allen Poe and Baudelaire, transports him to realms distant from the late 19th century city of Paris outside his doorstep. A triptych of Baudelaire's verse hanging in the study exemplifies des Esseintes' veneration of the writer. Baudelaire's prose has become his new religion and is appropriately honored, by using the traditional religious form of the triptych.

Des Esseintes is immensely proud of his art collection. But above all others, the paintings by Gustave Moreau, *Salome* and *The Apparition*, feed his vivid imagination with the stuff of fantasy, images of a forgotten glorious world where class hierarchies were still firmly in place. Des Esseintes is most fascinated by the image of Salome, which he found to be "so full of haunting

suggestion to the artist and the poet."⁹ Many artists had painted Salome, but only Moreau in his opinion, had succeeded in capturing the charms and allurements of this dancing figure. His reverence before the paintings of Salome bear witness to des Esseintes' thoroughly debased view of the female sex. In his eyes woman is the inevitable perpetrator of man's downfall – she can only play the role of the femme fatale. He cannot conceive of a stable and loving relationship between male and female and his own romantic encounters with the opposite sex are fraught with failure and impotence. He recalls his affair with a ventriloquist, when his fetishistic instincts propelled him to convince her to imitate the voices of - in a sense give life to - the chimera and the sphinx. In this example, his libidinal energy is directed towards unnatural objects of fantasy and illusion, rather than succumbing to the natural erotic charms of his lover.

Indeed, the debilitating effects of his sexual adventures coupled with his desire to escape from Paris led Des Esseintes to choose his new life of solitude. But this new life is steeped in decay and the imminence of death. His literary and artistic inclinations are inherently gloomy and share a predilection for sickness, decay, gross abnormality or death. The enjoyment of his paintings can only temporarily rescue him from the all-enveloping ennui so characteristic of the decadent's response to the ardors of existence. His health does not improve under these isolated circumstances, but deteriorates both mentally and physically. His choices and experiments are imbued with abnormality, weakness and failure. He strives to create art and improve on Nature by having a turtle's shell inlaid with jewels and by filling his home with artificially engineered exotic hothouse flowers. Both the turtle and the flowers die, and in an analogous manner his enjoyment of his beloved literature and art also expires. They induce a force of sensation and fantasy his weakened mind and body can no longer endure. Finally des Esseintes is forced by his doctor to abandon his life of solitude, and return to the city life of Paris - to a world where, to his mind, no single individual can match his refined aesthetic sensibility.

With the novel *Against the Grain*, Huysmans rebelled against naturalism, positivism and realism, and produced a novel, which is in effect an unintentional scathing satire of the times. Huysmans' fervent praise of Gustave Moreau's paintings did much to enhance Moreau's reputation in the Paris art world, but he was not alone in his unabashed admiration for this artist. Among other decadent literary figures equally enthused by the art of Gustave Moreau was Comte Robert Montesquiou, an aesthete, a dandy, a poet, and well-known society figure of fin-de-siècle Paris. He was a major inspiration for the character of des Esseintes, and also an ardent admirer of Moreau. Marcel Proust, another society snob, devoted several laudatory essays to the artist's work, and made frequent references to the same in his novel *Remembrance of Things Past*.¹⁰ The lesser known, but overtly decadent author Jean Lorrain, also found per-

fection in Moreau's work, as exemplified in the overt praise of the latter's painting in much of his prose: "He has smitten a whole generation of artists, yearning today for otherworldliness and mysticism."¹¹

Does the overwhelming appeal of Moreau's art among these decadent authors warrant the charge of decadence against his art? In the discussion of the lionization of Moreau's art by the decadent literary circle, I will consider a broad spectrum of Moreau's works, with the aim of establishing commonalities, and ultimately to determine if his œuvre can be described as entirely decadent. The charges of artificiality, deviation from the laws of nature, perverse or unnatural treatment of the women and the passions, and the rejection of modern life, will be made against Moreau's art. I will suggest that the charge of decadence in art can result in differing verdicts depending on the period when the charge is made. For this reason, and as in any fair trial, any exonerating circumstances will be taken into consideration in the final judgment.

II. THE CASE FOR THE DECADENCE OF GUSTAVE MOREAU'S ART

The artist Gustave Moreau (1826 – 1889) studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris and with the romantic artist Théodore Chasseriau. In keeping with tradition, he spent three years in Italy studying the works of the Renaissance masters. He achieved moderate success in his early Salon exhibitions, and his first noteworthy success in the Salon of 1864 with *Oedipus and the Sphinx*. Moreau dealt primarily with mythological themes in an overtly erudite and allegorical manner. His work is marked by a progression from relatively simple scenes to an ever-increasing preponderance of detail in his later paintings. Moreau reworked his canvases frequently and his unfinished works greatly outnumber the finished ones. He lived a life of near solitude and devoted his entire energies to his work. From 1891 until his death he was a professor in the École des Beaux-Arts, where Matisse and Rouault numbered among his students. Virtually all of Moreau's work is preserved. During his lifetime he had several large exhibition galleries built above his house, which he bequeathed to the state.

Moreau studied and assimilated art from ancient Rome through to the nineteenth century. Although in Moreau's mind, and in reality, his work was "reverently dependent on artistic tradition,"¹² he was "most affected by the paintings and sculpture of Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci."¹³ In his continuing endeavor to produce an imaginary world and evocative effect, he often combined many different influences, including "illuminated manuscripts and sets of Persian, Indian and Japanese prints."¹⁴ The landscapes of Leonardo are evident in the blurred, rocky chasms and gorges found in *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864). In fact, the background landscape in an overwhelming number

of Moreau's works is vague and mysterious. He was not concerned with a naturalistic depiction of the landscape, and the strange terrain often increases the mystery and the surreal nature of the image. Such barren, unrecognizable and often inhospitable environments heighten the impression of a world remote from the increasingly engineered landscapes of fin-de-siècle France. The accompanying dusky, reddening sky where the sun casts a dying light, and the autumnal or twilight charms so common in Moreau's work, are a perfect backdrop to the sense of a demise of an ancient order so poignantly felt by Moreau's most ardent admirers, the elegant upper-class of the Faubourg Saint-Germain.

We read in *Against The Grain* that Gustave Moreau's art ravished des Esseintes with "unceasing transports of pleasure."¹⁵ "Moreover, the artist seemed to have wished to mark his deliberate purpose to keep outside centuries of history; to give no definite indication of race or country or period."¹⁶ The counter-reality Moreau continuously painted correlated perfectly with the overriding desire of the late 19th century decadents to distance themselves from the common horde, from the influx of science and technology, and from their profiteers.

One of Moreau's guiding aesthetic principles was *la belle inertie* (beautiful inertia).¹⁷ This quality of calm enigma dominates Moreau's œuvre. It is especially apparent in *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864). The implicit violence and passion of the moment are transcended by the reserve and poise maintained by the painting's two main subjects. "The mysteriousness at the core of *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864) derives from a characteristic he derived from Michelangelo and employed for the first time in this work: the use of static figures whose staring expressions suggest they are lost in thought or dream."¹⁸ Moreau strove to avoid the direct portrayal of base passions. The characters in his paintings populate an imaginary frozen world, where even the most tragic or violent moment fails to break through the wall containing their emotions.

The eclectic mix of influences apparent in Moreau's work further contributes to the otherworldliness of his paintings. It is often impossible to pinpoint a time or place in history. There are many points of reference, but they do not combine to a conclusive whole. Often only the written narrative or the painting's title serves to clarify the image in the viewer's mind. Moreau accompanied many of his paintings with a commentary (written for his deaf mother), and these notes have proved invaluable. The painting *Salome Dancing Before Herod* (1876) is a major example of the accumulation of a number of eclectic sources. In preparing for this work, Moreau's already voracious imagination had been "stimulated by prints in the museum catalogues and archaeological publications which he looked through in the print room of the Louvre."¹⁹ Salome's bejeweled attire is "reminiscent of Indian deities."²⁰ The statues of ancient Gods, the black panther, Herod's jewel-encrusted throne, and the pal-

ace that recalls "a basilica of an architecture at once Saracenic and Byzantine," provide an eclectic mix of symbols and elements that transport the viewer to the furthest reaches of the imagination.²¹

The lapidary excess so overtly apparent in *Salome* bears witness to another of Moreau's guiding aesthetic principles, that of *la richesse necessaire* (necessary richness). This characteristic becomes increasingly dominant in later works such as *Bathsheba* (c.1886 and 1890) and reaches its zenith in *Jupiter and Semele* (1889-95). While Moreau chose a solitary existence in rejection of the materialism of his peers, his work could on some level be interpreted as homage to that materialism which he so deplored, given the attendant detail to sumptuous fabrics, lavish interiors and exquisite gems. This fascination with the manmade, the artificial and the luxurious found great appeal among the decadents, who so worshipped Moreau. Indeed Baudelaire, the arch hero of the decadents, is responsible for the famous phrase *Luxe, Calme et Volupté*, which could aptly summarize the most prevalent atmosphere of Moreau's work.

In *Orestes and the Erinyes* (1875) the eclectic mix of influences once more comes to the fore. "Moreau does not attempt an archaeological reconstruction of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, but designs it to be expressive of the emotional complexities of the narrative. The architecture is rich and complicated, incorporating Greco-Roman, Assyrian, Hindu, and Egyptian elements."²² Moreau does not however, mix and match artistic, mythological or exotic elements purely for luxuriant effect. According to Genevieve Lacambre, "He desired to create an art that rejected simple historical reconstruction in favor of a realm of evocation, imagination, and dreams."²³ Together with the principle of necessary richness, this aesthetic propagates an aura of mystery, and instills in Moreau's images a dreamlike quality. Some of the terms used to describe his paintings exhibited in the Salons of 1879 and 1880 were "dreams, hallucination, vision, bizarre, mysterious, strange."²⁴ This indicates, that while Moreau's subject matter was traditional, the public was presented with a treatment of such themes never previously witnessed.

The artificiality so venerated by the decadents, found an echo in the remote unrecognizable landscapes or the eclectically sumptuous interiors of Moreau's paintings. And the characters he painted in these settings were equally unnatural; the tall, slender and beautiful androgynous male, and the female poised as either the insidiously evil temptress or the paragon of cold aloofness, were all ideals, created in Moreau's fertile imagination. These personalities mirrored the decadent's hostility towards Nature. From a broader more contemporary stance, Darwin's theories, so prevalent in popular discussion of the latter half of the nineteenth century, implied that nature had the upper hand in deciding man's fate. Nature, in the eyes of decadents, was personified in the woman. The desire to usurp the dreaded female by portray-

ing her as the femme fatale, or substituting her for artifice, was the consequence. The theme of *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864) obviously springs from the literature of the period, as summarized by Edouard Schure: "Since time immemorial, Nature, seductive, inscrutable, is the queen of man. Nature, symbolized by the Sphinx, eventually is outwitted by man and plunges into the abyss. Thus, nature penetrated in the hierarchy of her forces is defeated by man who incorporates and surpasses her in thinking."²⁵ In this light, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* may be interpreted as the pictorial representation of the Dandy's decadent attempt to assert his superiority over the laws of nature. (Which, ironically, is what modern scientific materialism wants to do).

While they may exude sensuality and eroticism, Moreau's female figures are also cold and cruel and ultimately inaccessible – they are the forbidden (and ultimately undesirable) fruit. A virile artist responds to women in a directly sexual way, and the representation of individual women as untouchable goddesses is indicative of a somewhat warped female ideal. The figure of woman is utterly fascinating because of the paradox she embodies; she is at once symbolic not only of nature, but of its antithesis, artifice. Huysmans' narrative describes Salome thus:

...on the moist skin of her body glitter clustered diamonds; from bracelets, belts, rings, dart sparks of fire; over her robe of triumph, bestrewn with pearls, brodered work, each mesh of which is a precious stone, seems ablaze with coiling fiery serpents, crawling and creeping over the pink flesh like gleaming insects with dazzling wings of brilliant colors, scarlet with bands of yellow like the dawn, with patterned diapering like the blue of steel, with stripes of peacock green.²⁶

Salome dazzles, not because of her extraordinary bodily beauty, the body accorded to her by nature, but because of the lapidary wonders in which she is clad. Indeed one might posit that Moreau has not created a woman, but a work of art disguised as a woman and symbolizing all that spells the destruction of the male. Artificiality usurps Nature. In a similar synesthetic manner, des Esseintes became his own work of art, honed by his hyper-aestheticism and his disorientation between the real and the imaginary. The work of art is beyond death and common human frailty and defies Nature's transience.

The product of Moreau's warped female ideal, embodied in the figure of Salome, fascinated Des Esseintes, and he was spellbound by the "charms and active allurements of the dancer."²⁷ He regarded her as "weird and superhuman," simultaneously "the dancing harlot of all times," and the "thoughtful, solemn almost reverent" virgin dancing wantonly before Herod.²⁸ She fulfills his impossible ideal of virgin and whore. This unreal, cold, erotic sensuousness recurs throughout Moreau's work in *Samson and Delilah* (1881-82),

Messalina (1874), and *Jason* (1863-65) to name but a few examples. The dream of sexuality is delightful; its reality is immoral and disgusting.²⁹ Des Esseintes' enjoyment stems from the knowledge, that a realistic confrontation with such a female is impossible. Moreau has usurped Nature in creating the woman of des Esseintes' dreams. Des Esseintes can admire this fascinating creature from afar without fear of a debasement of his ideal. His passion need never fear consummation and its attendant cessation of sensation and experience. His is an introspective, decadent enjoyment, which can never be disappointed. This kind of impotent allurements characterizes the often yearning, dreamlike quality of Moreau's work.

As for Moreau's private life, he did not marry, and like many of his contemporaries he believed that "marriage stifles the artist." However, the female figure, which took such a background role in his private life, dominates Moreau's painting. She is never depicted in the warm, sensual, and accessible manner of Delacroix, but instead as cool, detached, and aloof. She is, with very few exceptions, the harbinger of death, despair, and downfall, in accordance with the Romantic tradition of the femme fatale. She is represented as Salome, Helen of Troy, Death, or the Sphinx. *La Belle Dame sans merci* was a prevalent figure in 19th century art and literature and was by no means a creation unique to Moreau. Fear of the degrading and sapping influences of sensuousness, of *volupté*, runs consistently through 19th century literature and philosophy from Baudelaire to Schopenhauer. We know that Moreau read Alfred de Vigny assiduously. De Vigny expressed very similar sentiments to Moreau in the poem *La Colere de Samson*:

An eternal struggle in all times, all places
takes place on earth in the presence of God
between the goodness of Man and the wiles of Woman
for woman is an impure being in body and soul.³⁰

The figure of Salome in *Salome Dancing before Herod* (1876) personifies the femme fatale. She is dressed in exquisite fabrics and her body is adorned with jewels. This Salome is not alive with the passion of revenge, as she glides on her toes, enveloped in her own private aura of mystery and enticement. She is the cold bewitcher, the temptress, and Herod is the unwilling victim. Huysmans interpreted Salome as "the incarnation of world-old Vice."³¹ He generalized her character to represent all of womankind when he described her as the "cause of all the sins and all the crimes."³²

More than any other painting, *The Chimeras (Satanic Decameron)* (1884) is the reification of Moreau's prejudice and that of his artistic colleagues of the period. This unfinished work is a mosaic of womanly vice. It is, in essence, a display of the cast of female characters from Moreau's entire oeuvre.

The subtitle *Satanic Decameron* evokes associations of evil, perdition, and damnation. This work is the artistic apotheosis of the attitude toward women prevalent among writers such as Baudelaire, Alfred de Vigny, Mallarme, Flaubert, and Huysmans, and of course among their avid progeny, the decadent aesthetes, personified in the character of des Esseintes. The following is an excerpt of Moreau's written accompaniment for *The Chimeras*:

This island of fantastic dreams encloses all forms of passion, fantasy and caprice in the woman, woman in her primary essence, the unconscious being fond of the unknown, the mysterious, in love with evil in the form of a perverse and diabolic seduction... These are the theories of damned queens who have just left the serpent; these are beings in which the soul is abolished, waiting at the side of the road for the lewd goat mounted by Luxury to adorn his passage: isolated beings... Women astride Chimeras, who carry them into space where they fall again, lost in horror and vertigo.³³

The male figure, on the other hand, receives a very different treatment in Moreau's hands. Beauty is perhaps his most distinctive quality. This is not the conventional handsome muscular beauty, the grace of perfection so praised by Giorgio Vasari, but a beauty more akin to that associated with the female. Moreau's males have long flowing locks and slender, often frail physiques. The skin is clean and unblemished and usually devoid of facial or bodily hair. Indeed, the gender ambiguity common in Moreau's work makes it often quite difficult to differentiate the male from the female characters, a most prominent example being *Jason* (1863-65). The androgynous nature of the male figure in this painting is prevalent throughout most of Moreau's work and is generally characterized by young adolescents with pouting lips and a classical Greek sensuality and smoothness of line. The choice of the adolescent as opposed to the mature figure serves to increase the ambiguous nature of the figures.

In his images of the male, Moreau often juxtaposes a beautiful face with a muscular heroic body, as in *Hercules and the Lernaean Hydra* (1869-76). Hercules is portrayed with long flowing hair, chiseled cheekbones, and a dainty nose, but his muscular anatomy is proof of his virility and of his ability to slay the many-headed hydra. The figure of Jupiter in *Jupiter and Semele* (1889-95) is God-like in stature and bearing, but there is a certain petulance in his stare and he is not without beauty and allure. He is the usual young male with dark flowing hair and large liquid oval eyes. According to myth, Semele persuaded Jupiter to reveal himself to her. Instantaneously with the first glimpse of his god-like figure, she is killed. Jupiter incubated their embryonic child Bacchus in his thigh until his birth. In the painting, Jupiter holds in his hand a lotus flower, a Hindu symbol of fertility. This may represent Moreau's interpretation of Jupiter as the incarnation of sexual duality, thus implying a profound blurring of sexual roles.

As if to emphasize their bodily beauty, the male figures are often

naked, or in the case of Jupiter, adorned with jewels. The nakedness is usually concealed with an elaborately decorated loincloth. This, whether intentionally or not, increases the suggestiveness. The emphasis on lapidary excess and on ornate detail is an aesthetic divestment of the organic, which results in a distraction from the traditional roles of gender. There has been some speculation as to Moreau's sexual inclinations, based on the themes portrayed in his work and on what little is known of his personal life. He lived with his mother until her death and they had an extremely close relationship. He had a long deep friendship with a Mme. Duruex, but there is no evidence of a romantic affair. He did however arrange that they be buried in twin graves. The issue of Moreau's sexuality is an unimportant one for this discussion, though many of the decadent literati of the time were openly homosexual or toyed with their own sexuality, Proust, Mallarme, Wilde and Montesquiou to name but a few. The male beauty so common in Moreau's work could only have heightened its attraction for them.

Frailty, and even illness, although usually feigned, was a fashionable trait among the decadent dandies. While Moreau's male figures do not appear ill, they are pale and lack stamina. They often appear weak and incapable of dealing with the ordeals that come their way. This weakness is characteristically portrayed in a languid but graceful manner, for example, the figure of *Orestes* in *Orestes and the Erinyes* (1875) swoons in an almost feminine-like faint. The male figures generally occupy biblical or mythical roles, or the figure of the artist or poet. Moreau commonly features the tragic male poet, thereby elevating the male to symbolize art. This characteristic of Moreau's work surely increased its attraction in literary circles of the day. The tragic poet, who withdraws from the world, parallels des Esseintes' rejection of all that is unpleasant, arduous and unsympathetic. This is a reiteration of the theme of the aristocrat as art, of making one's life a work of art, as elaborated in *Against the Grain*. The watercolor *Dead Poet Borne by a Centaur* (1890) depicts an ethereal, androgynous poet, being borne away from ardors of life by the centaur against the background of a setting sun. The inimitable *Orpheus* (1865) embodies once more the theme of martyrdom of the artist, sacrificed for his art.

In the novel *Against the Grain*, des Esseintes' ancestors are described as noble and brave; they were the antithesis of the materialistic bourgeoisie and decrepit aristocracy, which he strove to escape. His retreat to Fontenay is prompted by a turning inward, a rejection of all outside diversions and influences, other than those fashioned by his neurotic tastes. Gustave Moreau might not be categorized as neurotic, but his art is imbued with references to a more noble and innocent past. This persistent hearkening to past times reinforces the idea of the decline of mankind and of civilization, a theme also very dear to des Esseintes' heart. Modern heroes or landscapes found no echo in Moreau's art; his ideal champions were the dead or, more often, the

completely mythical. Coupled with a veneration of the past, is the elevation of the world of the imagination over real life, a turning inward to a realm of fantasy and refined sensation. Moreau's own life became increasingly solitary, as he grew older and more disenchanting with the increasing anomie of urban life. These aspects of Moreau's art mirror des Esseintes' denial of the modern world and his efforts to assert his own self, his uniqueness, in the ever-growing modern metropolis. Moreau was, Proust wrote, "one of those who have an inner soul into which they can sometimes penetrate. The rest of their life is a kind of exile, often voluntary, not sad, but tedious."³⁴

This escape to an inner realm is evident on a more subtle level in Moreau's work through the use of the arabesque, a form which fascinated Moreau. The arabesque as plastic equivalent to the soul in all its mystery was discussed by many artists and poets.³⁵ With its Greek and Oriental connotations it also embodied the "ideal and the universal" for Moreau.³⁶ Its labyrinth form suggests unreason and irregularity, and the proliferation of the arabesque form in much of Moreau's work implies the mysterious or the enigmatic. Moreau was drawn to mysticism, and wished to explore the arcane realms of thought and spirit, realms that were untouchable and divine.³⁷ The arabesque is associated with mystery, the world of the unconscious. Wonderful arabesques of line and color are evident in the unfinished *The Unicorns* (1887-88) or in *The Apparition* (1874-76). The arabesque in painting adds to the mystery. The clear lines of heroic Renaissance art are in sharp contrast to the mysteriousness deliberately fostered by Moreau. The swirling motion of the arabesque is perhaps most evident in some of Moreau's abstract sketches of pure color, which contain little or no figurative detail, but beautiful swathes of paint with the evocative power of the most compelling of the modern abstract expressionists. Moreau was extremely preoccupied with the mystery and idealism of Christianity. Like J. K. Huysmans, who finally converted to Catholicism following his dabbles in decadence and Satanism, Christianity appealed to many artists of the *fin-de-siècle*, who were disenchanting by the materialism of their peers.

III. THE COUNTER-ARGUMENT: DECADENCE AS NEITHER A BLACK NOR WHITE PROPOSITION

Viewed on a superficial level, the artificiality, gender confusion, the unnatural treatment of the female subject, and general rejection of reality would quickly condemn Moreau's art to the dungeons of decadence. If decadence in art is characterized by extreme maturity, a proliferation of detail, an extremely complicated style, a profusion of color and the tendency to translate the passions in a depraved or obsessive manner, then Moreau's art must be judged as high decadence. Along with the considerable popularity of his work among

the decadent literati, the evidence appears conclusive. However I would suggest that, unlike the cultivated decadence of many of these writers, the decadence of Moreau's art was an unconscious side effect of his effort to imbue his art with a generalized expression of "universal appeal." This was not decadence for the sake of decadence.

Moreau believed that he had a divine duty to illuminate through his art the souls and minds of his audience. His religious beliefs are evident in his following profession of faith: "Do you believe in God? I believe in him alone. I believe neither in what I touch nor what I see. I believe only in what I do not see and only in what I feel. My brain and reason seem to me ephemeral and of a doubtful reality; my inner feeling alone seems to me eternal and indubitably certain."³⁸ His painting mirrors this tendency, in its rejection of external reality and in its attempt to convey an atmosphere or idea, instead of exact historical narrative. Moreau rarely painted historical scenes, preferring the realm of myth or the imagination. One of his primary intentions was "to render visible, as it were, the inner flashes of insight, which one cannot connect with anything, which have something divine in their apparent meaninglessness and which, as conveyed by the wonderful effects of pure painting, open up really magical, I may say, even sublime horizons."³⁹ His dreamlike visions appealed tremendously to André Breton, who considered him a forerunner of the Surrealists. While Moreau's debt to past masters is evident in his work, this is not the result of a lack of personal painting direction, but out of reverence, as a means of invoking the timeless, the universal. And apart from such lofty motives, it was indeed quite common for artists at the time to emulate the art of the Renaissance, especially as this tradition was both taught and favored by the French Academy and the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Such imitation, far from being interpreted as a sign of decadence, was actively encouraged. In fact, innovation or stark individualism most often met with rejection; critics openly scoffed at the initial Impressionist exhibitions. As previously intoned however, Moreau only looked to those elements of High Renaissance art, that would further his artistic aims, and not for popular appeal. He eschewed traditional Romantic heroism and narrative in favor of a depiction of the mysterious and the private experience of the individual.⁴⁰

Moreau's mystical images were worlds away from the growing urbanization and industrial progress of the latter half of the 19th century. He explored the materialism and the increasing reliance upon and belief in the magical powers of science, which were becoming so commonplace. He felt that these new values threatened the very foundations of great art and abhorred the decay in standards of behavior and art he perceived in his surroundings: "but when proud materiality, when the low soul of the greedy and sensual wants to take precedence in this new civilization over the soul and thought, I feel only contempt and hatred in my heart."⁴¹ Kaplan writes that: "Because

Moreau was very much a man of his time he created pictures for the purpose of escaping from his society. He wanted to liberate his fellow man, to create spiritual dramas with personal and universal significance.⁴² While he may have intended his paintings as an avenue of escape, he may also have intended them to be a medium through which past traditions would survive. Moreau openly admitted his debt to past masters, and was convinced that only through the lessons of the past can we attain a viable future: "To be modern does not consist of searching for something outside of everything that has been done...It is on the contrary, a question of coordinating all that the preceding ages have brought us, to make visible how our century has accepted this heritage and how it makes use of it."⁴³ His retreat from reality was not self-indulgent, and he genuinely believed that he could apply the traditions of the past to enlighten the minds of others.

Moreau did not sway from his convictions, even if it led to negative criticism of his work, which often went against popular taste. He could not appreciate the Realists or the Impressionists. He regarded their subject matter as far too mundane and showing little or no trace of fantasy or the bizarre. Maybe the still and mysterious quality of Seurat should have had some appeal, paralleling as it did in some manner the *belle inertie* of which Moreau was so fond. But Moreau rejected even Seurat's approach, because for him, "the introduction into art of the scientific method could only lead to the death of the imagination."⁴⁴ He believed that, like the old masters, he would be appreciated in the future, and based on these convictions avoided following fashionable trends: "Indeed there is a past, a present, a future for an immortal and durable work...the false, the ephemeral is always what seems the most truly original to the eyes of imbeciles... the healthy, intelligible, noble and traditional works, even if perfectly original, will be judged... as aged and old-fashioned...there is only one method for the artist to get out of this situation. But the method is hard, it is to wait...sometimes not 10 not 20 not 30 but 50, 100 years until the deadly ridicule of special interest groups has died and passed away - then you will be the future."⁴⁵ More than 60 years after his death, Moreau's art was finally rediscovered and given its due appreciation.

How does one explain Moreau's abstract works, which he himself hid from his students? The swathes of vibrant color sometimes directly applied from the tube and lacking any figurative resemblance, were more unique and original than much of the avant-garde art of the *fin-de-siècle*. The *belle inertie* and *richesse necessaire* have vanished, and we are left with the canvases of pure color, proclaiming Moreau for what he is: a master colorist. The myriad details of *Salome* or *Jupiter and Semele* are replaced by floating arabesques and clouds reminiscent of the future work of another great mysticist, Kandinsky. There is much debate as to the true abstract nature of these works and the real explanation may never be known. Moreau, however, did have these paintings

mounted and framed, implying that they were not simply preparatory sketches but complete works within themselves. Moreau's innovation is also evident in his use of the medium of watercolor. Unlike most other nineteenth century painters, he painted watercolors for their own sake, not as preparatory sketches for oil paintings. He even exhibited *The Apparition*, a watercolor, in the Salon of 1876, and his only one-man exhibition was of watercolors.⁴⁶ It is true that Moreau cannot be credited with a great birth or even the blossoming of an art form. However, he was far from a pure imitator, and through his marvelous use of color and his vivid imagination, he gave his traditional borrowings an air of freshness and novelty, which make his paintings an absolute pleasure to behold.

A decadent art implies decay or death, the impending demise of a style. As if to hammer the last nail into the coffin, Moreau's paintings deal predominantly with themes directly connected with loss, decay, and death. Pierre Louis Mathieu labels Moreau "the last of the Romantic painters."⁴⁷ He does not categorize Moreau with the Symbolists, regarding him at most as a precursor to this movement. Rather than dreams (and that is the key word of the Symbolist aesthetic), it was on the imagination that Moreau relied, and imagination controlled by the thinking mind.⁴⁸ Although he may have been unique in pursuing his particular goals, "he is one of those painters who mark the end of an art form, in his case history painting, to which he gave a final luster at the very time when it was exhausting itself in barren repetition."⁴⁹ Baudelaire expressed similar sentiments, intoning that the Dandy's brand of elitism is a last gasp in a world where aristocracy is stumbling but democracy has not completely taken over.⁵⁰ Like a captain who does not abandon his ship, the decadents of the fin-de-siècle could not help but be drawn to the themes and images painted by that artist, who himself shunned modern existence. But Moreau's intentions were of themselves anathema to the elitism of the decadents, for Moreau desired to express his ideals in a universal language, which would be understood by all and throughout the ages. Through his painting he hoped to reach out to the masses, whereas the decadents intended their literature to appeal only to a select few. Indeed, J.K. Huysmans was somewhat dismayed by the general popularity of *Against the Grain*, a book which he had intended to find favor among only some very few close contemporaries. Far from wallowing in self-indulgent narcissism, Moreau endeavored, albeit in his personal solitary manner, to reach out through his painting to his fellow man. The decadents interpreted his art to suit their own refined tastes, for they were attracted by the rare, the exotic, and the bizarre. The great attraction of Moreau's work is however, that it is open to a multitude of differing interpretations. The Surrealist André Breton was fascinated by the allure of Moreau's women when he first visited the Moreau Museum as a sixteen-year old.⁵¹ This is a definite case of decadence in the eye of the beholder. Moreau's

themes and images are often decadent, but if decadence can be pure in the elevated sense, then this art is an example of sublime innocent decadence, far removed from the sickly perversions commonly associated with the decadent movement of the period.

"I am the bridge over which certain of you will pass" Moreau told Rouault, one of his most avid students.⁵² Matisse, another of his students, shared not only his master's astonishing aesthetic sense of color, but also his predilection for the use of the arabesque. The seed of the Fauvist's daring and vibrant use of color was planted in Moreau's classroom. The dream sequences of the Surrealists acknowledge their debt to Moreau's persistent delving into his subconscious imagination. The rich foundation of humus (and decadence) yielded a healthy fresh new fruit, leading to the ultimate conclusion that Gustave Moreau's art must be a major example of decadence in its most positive sense. This conclusion has only been reached with the benefit of hindsight. A similar treatment of the subject written at the beginning of the twentieth century would most likely also have yielded a guilty verdict. The mitigating circumstances reflected in Moreau's gift to posterity would, however, have been unknown. This gift incorporates not just his marvelous artistic oeuvre, but equally importantly, the incredibly innovative art it inspired. The absence of such mitigating circumstances would have warranted the charge of unredeemable decadence against an art which had worked itself into a dead-end.

The overt laudatory criticism of the decadent literati was elicited by the perception of the inherent decadence of Moreau's art. While the case for guilt by association is clear, neither Moreau nor this literary circle could envisage the grand developments in the history of art in the coming decades. Decadence is most commonly associated with death and decay, and in the case of the art of Gustave Moreau such associations most certainly exist. They are balanced if not surpassed in his art, by the regenerative, fertile aspects of decadence. Within death there is life, a life dependant not only upon the demise of an old art, but on the wealth of inheritance. The art of the Fauves and the Surrealists broke dramatically with the traditional concept of academic art and while little of this inheritance is immediately apparent, the debt to Moreau cannot be denied. Despite all attempts in his art to the contrary, the natural rules of organic life still prevail.

Notes

- 1 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (New York, 1965), p. 26; cited in Camille Pagalia, *Sexual Personae*, (London and New Haven, 1990), p. 428.
- 2 Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1961), p. 1179; cited in Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star* (Princeton, 1998), p. 29

- 3 Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 1177; cited in Garelick, *Rising Star*, p. 32
- 4 Garelick, *Rising Star*, p. 32
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.18
- 6 Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 1207; cited in Pagalia, *Sexual Personae*, p. 430
- 7 J.K. Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, (New York, 1969), p. 6
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 12
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 52
- 10 Pierre-Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau* (Boston, MA, 1976), p. 254.
- 11 Jean Lorrain, *Sensations et souvenirs* (Paris, 1895), pp. 258 ff; cited in Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau* p. 255
- 12 Genevieve Lacambre, *Gustave Moreau Between Epic and Dream* (Chicago, 1999), p. 5
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 5
- 14 Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau*, p. 14
- 15 Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, p. 50
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 53
- 17 Odilon Redon *Gustave Moreau Rudolph Bresdin*, (New York, 1962) , p. 118
- 18 Julius Kaplan, *Gustave Moreau* (Los Angeles and New York, 1974), p. 23
- 19 Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau*, p. 122
- 20 Kaplan, *Gustave Moreau*, p. 34
- 21 Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, p. 51
- 22 Lacambre, *Gustave Moreau Between Epic and Dream*, p. 255
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 18
- 24 Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau*, p. 143
- 25 Edouard Schure, *Precurseurs et Revoltes* (Paris, 1904); cited in *Odilon Redon Gustave Moreau Rudolph Bresdin* p. 115
- 26 Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, p. 51
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 52
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 51,53, 54
- 29 Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau*, p. 165
- 30 *Odilon Redon Gustave Moreau Rudolph Bresdin* , p. 114
- 31 Huysmans, *Against the Grain*, p. 53
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 54
- 33 *Gustave Moreau*, introduction by J. Cassou and J. Paladilhe, notes by R. von Holten, 1961, (Paris, 1961), p. 11; cited in *Odilon Redon Gustave Moreau Rudolph Bresdin*, p. 124
- 34 Marcel Proust *Contre Sainte-Beuve suivi de Nouveaux Melanges* (Gallimard, Paris, 1954); cited in *Odilon Redon Gustave Moreau Rudolph Bresdin*, p. 114
- 35 *Odilon Redon Gustave Moreau Rudolph Bresdin* p. 142
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 142
- 37 Julius Kaplan, *The Art of Gustave Moreau Theory Style and Content* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1982), p. 9
- 38 Gustave Moreau Archives, *Small Black Notebook* (Archives Musée Gustave Moreau), p. 20 cited in Pierre Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau*, p.173
- 39 Gustave Moreau, *Larger Black Notebook* (Archives Musée Gustave Moreau),

- p. 7-8; cited in Pierre Louis Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau* p. 182
- 40 Lacambre, *Gustave Moreau Between Epic and Dream*, p. 5
- 41 Gustave Moreau, *Notebook III*, (Archives Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris), p. 118; cited in Kaplan, *The Art of Gustave Moreau Theory Style and Content*, p. 6
- 42 Julius Kaplan, *Gustave Moreau* (Los Angeles, 1974), p. 42
- 43 Pierre Cadars, *Les Débuts de Gustave Moreau 1848-1864* (Toulouse, 1965), p. 71; cited in Kaplan, *The Art of Gustave Moreau Theory Style and Content*, p. 11
- 44 Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau*, p. 185
- 45 Moreau, *Notebook III*, p.120-24; cited in Kaplan, *The Art of Gustave Moreau Theory Style and Content*, p. 11
- 46 Pierre-Louis Matthieu, *Gustave Moreau The Watercolors* (New York, 1985), p. 7
- 47 Mathieu, *Gustave Moreau* p. 256
- 48 Ibid., p. 258
- 49 Ibid., p. 260
- 50 Garelick, *Rising Star* p. 29
- 51 Matthieu, *Gustave Moreau The Watercolors*, p. 90
- 52 *Odilon Redon Gustave Moreau Rudolph Bresdin*, p. 144

Degeneration in World War II Germany

Kempton Mooney

The week of July 18th, 1937 saw the opening of two major exhibits in Munich Germany. The first was the opening of The Great German Art Exhibition, the inaugural exhibition of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst. The second exhibition was *Entartete "Kunst,"* The Degenerate Art Exhibition. The two contrasting exhibitions, which faced each other on either sides of a public park, were a lesson for the German public. The first exhibition showed what art was acceptable, and in its presentation of idyllic nudes and victorious heroes it was also meant to show the public what it should strive to be. Across the park, the Degenerate Art exhibition was meant to show what was unacceptable. The works were laid out in such a way as to provoke their audience to hate what it saw. By giving Germany something to love and something to hate, the exhibitions were to unify the German people. They exemplify Adolf Hitler's use of art to rally support, to instruct the German people on who to be, and to fuel their hatred against those he created as enemies. However, the exhibitions were not solely propaganda, as Hitler genuinely sought to purify Germany of what he considered to be destructive forces. He saw modern art as a decline indicative of society's decline, and he wished to stop this decline by forcing art to adhere to what he perceived as principles it had contained at its zenith. I intend to explore the development of Nazi art policy to show that the methods Hitler used to remove the degenerate elements in German culture, instead of being a cure, only further confirmed the decadence of their cultural position.

Before World War I, the German art world was in tune with the avant-garde. It supported the avant-garde through the 1920's with important exhibitions so that when Alfred Barr of New York's Museum of Modern Art visited in 1931, he was amazed at the innovative contemporary works already on display in Germany's museums.¹ The Nationalgalerie in Berlin had the most representative collection of contemporary art, though many local museums also showed works by German Expressionists. However, while there was an encouraging atmosphere for contemporary artists, there was also an opposition present. As early as 1914, there were passionate debates between conservatives and modern artists. In Prussia, these became political enough that the Parliament passed a resolution against the degeneration of art, though the resolution was little enforced as the question of degenerate art remained in the realm of opinion.²

Between World War I and World War II, Max Nordau's *Degeneration* of 1892 became popular reading in Germany. The work denigrated Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Zola, the Pre-Raphaelites, and artists of a romantic nature as examples of social deterioration. In Nordau's eyes, nineteenth century realism was the culmination of tradition in the arts. The avant-garde came to be seen as on the same level with the insane, being labeled antisocial for their hyper-individualism and their attempts to explore emotions. They were the unhealthy in art, as opposed to the tradition of empirical realism, and so the terms of "degenerate" and "healthy" came to be used to describe art.

A group of art philosophers built on Nordau's theme of the deterioration in modern art. Hans Guenther, in his *Race and Style*, declared that the Hellenistic image of beauty is purely Nordic. His book connected the style of an artist with that artist's race, art becoming a representation of man and his race. The consequence was that nineteenth century naturalism, which would become Hitler's favorite genre, became associated with the Nordic, while styles like Impressionism were de-Nordic because they accepted ugliness as reality.³ Guenther defined the task of the Nordic race, the epitome of pure health in his eyes, as protecting itself from the degeneration of society indicated by the work of the avant-garde. The illness indexed by the avant-garde was also associated with Jewishness, as nineteenth century German psychiatry believed the Jew to be more susceptible to insanity and inherently degenerate.⁴ Similar things were written by Ferdinand Clauss, and these ideas were later picked up by Hitler, who, in 1935, would state that the artist should never depict dirt for dirt's sake, or depict "cretins as representatives of manly strengths."⁵ Instead, Hitler believed German artists should glorify the racial structures of their people.⁶

In 1928, Paul Schultze-Naumburg published his book *Art and Race*, in which figures painted by Impressionists and Expressionists were juxtaposed to photos of the diseased and deformed. Here, Guenther's connection between race and style became hereditary determinism; every being tried to continue the lineage of its kind and it used art to this end. What the artist portrayed was his conquering ethnic specimen. The art of "inferior" races deviated from the naturalism of Nordic art, just as that inferior race has itself deviated from the healthy Nordic race, similar to Nordau's idea of degeneration. These thoughts culminated in Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century* in which he characterized German Expressionism as infantile and claimed that it was Nordics who built German cathedrals, Greek sculptures, and Italian Renaissance masterpieces. One third of Rosenberg's text was devoted to art's importance in society, and his synthesis of Guenther, Clauss, and Schultze-Naumburg was popular, though he would later find out at the Nuremberg trials that even the high officials in the Reich had not read his texts very closely.⁷ Nonetheless, in 1933, soon after Hitler had been made chancellor, Rosenberg was made "Cus-

todian of the Entire Intellectual and Spiritual Training and Education of the Party and All Coordinate Associations.”⁸ Hitler’s support of Rosenberg stemmed from the importance he placed on art to create a new mythology. This new mythology was partially a means by which a totalitarian government could control the spirit of a people. But it was also sincerely believed that the decaying elements in culture were causing a cultural decline, and these elements had to be exorcised.

Soon after Hitler became chancellor in 1933, he passed a law that legalized the removal of all government employees who did not obey the National Socialist ideas.⁹ This meant that many museum and gallery employees were fired and replaced by those aligned with the party. The new organization Reichskulturkammer would regulate all non-government culture, with all artists being required to join and no Jews or Communists being allowed to join. Already, the famous persona in the Bauhaus had left and Wilhelm Frick, as Minister of the Interior and Education, had turned the institution into a German craft organization under Schultze-Naumburg’s control. In addition, films by Eisenstein, Brecht, and Pabst were banned.¹⁰ Frick had also begun to clear works by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Emil Nolde, Franz Marc and others from the Schloss Museum in Berlin under the reasoning that they were Judeo-Bolshevik. Due to the conflict between the avant-garde and German nationalistic realism, the work of the avant-garde, with its complexity and inability to be readily understood, came to be seen as intellectual, elitist, and foreign by a nation demoralized by the effects of World War I. This was compounded by many artists’ involvement in socialism during the Weimar era being communicated in their art so that more abstract works came to be identified with socialism and internationalism as opposed to nationalism.

In the 1920s, following the influence of Nordau and others, the German Art Association was founded to combat “corruption in art” and “promote pure German art,” which did not include the progressive elements of the avant-garde.¹¹ Similarly, in 1927, the Combat League for German Culture was founded to fight for creativity that was thought to have been tainted by foreign influence and was no longer able to attend to the demands of daily life. The seeds for the Munich exhibits were being set. The ideology of what would be acceptable had been arrived at through the writings of Nordau, Guenther, Clauss, Schultze-Naumburg, and Rosenberg. As Hitler became dictator in late 1933, it would be his taste combined with the developed ideology that would decide what was to be permitted. The false art was said to have been shaken off; from now on, there was to be no unfinished works, no pacifist works, no works depicting inferior races, the non-heroic, the Communist, or the Jew.¹² Art was to be used to give German culture a sense of strength, and, in particular, to help rebuild the notion of the German warrior. But to be clear, the attack on modernism was not just a device to gain the support of the German people who had

shown distrust in the new styles. This was certainly a consideration, but there was also the real belief that art reflected, and even determined, the moral life and value of the nation and its people.¹³ If the "corruption" was allowed to exist, it was believed it would infect the essence of what it meant to be German. The Nazis had perceived that the modern world was pathological; it was not healthy for the individual. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler had already written it was the business of the state to prevent people from being driven to madness by removing from culture "what is bad or unsuitable and continue building on the sound spot that has been laid bare."¹⁴

The period between 1933-1937 would be seen by Hitler as a four year grace period for artists, dealers, and those working in the arts to reform themselves to meet National Socialist standards of decency. However, the methods that the Nazis planned to use to reform had already been experimented with during the last years of ideological consolidation. In 1930, the director of the Zwickau Museum was fined for "pursuing an artistic policy affronting the healthy folk feeling of Germany."¹⁵ The Nationalgalerie was criticized for buying a van Gogh instead of German works. These protests were not connected with the Nazi movement, but after 1933 the Reichskulturkammer would use the resentment shown by these protests to their advantage. A director of another museum was fired for purchasing modern works, such as a Chagall. The works were paraded around the town on a truck with the picture of the director and how much he had paid for the work written on the side of the truck. Many of the avant-garde chose to leave, and those who stayed were often not allowed to work and were subject to periodical surprise inspections by the Gestapo. They were not included in the production of a manifesto that Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's second in command, oversaw in 1933. The manifesto expressed what artists expected from their new government, but, as it was written mostly by non-avant-garde artists who were angry that the art world had passed them by, it was an expression of party policy, stating that: one, all cosmopolitan and Bolshevik art should be removed, but first shown to the public who should be informed about its acquisition, and then the art should be burned. Two, all museum directors who wasted public money on "un-German" art should be fired. And three, there should be no Marxist or Bolshevik connections in the arts.¹⁶ It became a time when opportunist artists who would kowtow to party policy could gain recognition and become successful while those who would not were in serious danger.

In the period between 1933 and 1937, the Nazi organizations in the arts began to consolidate, become organized, and gather energy. It was a four-year period of tightening the clamps that would end with Hitler's opening of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich, his temple of art. It was also to be the year of the Degenerate Art Exhibition, though this exhibition was to be the last and final exhibition of a type that had been maturing since 1933 with the

help of the Combat League of German Culture.

The Degenerate Art Exhibition that opened on July 19, 1937 in Munich had begun to be planned only three weeks before. On the last day of June, Goebbels had authorized Adolf Ziegler, a painter of realist nudes and a member of the jury for the Great German Exhibition, to select and secure for an exhibition works of German degenerate art created since 1910. Ziegler and his crew would acquire 15,997 works of art by 1,400 artists that were now deemed unacceptable and un-German.¹⁷ 650 of these works would appear in the Degenerate Art Exhibition, including works by Georges Braque, Marc Chagall, Robert Delauney, Andre Derain, James Ensor, Paul Gauguin, Vincent van Gogh, Wassily Kaninsky, Fernand Leger, El Lissitzky, Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, Georges Rouault, and Maurice de Vlaminck.¹⁸ Though Ziegler and his crew were supposed to pick post-1910 German works, many works predated 1910 or were by artists outside of Germany; however, this was authorized after the fact by Goebbels.

Over the four months that it was on display in Munich, two million visitors passed through the Degenerate Art exhibition, with another million visiting it during its following three year tour of Germany and Austria. This was five times as many visitors as would see the Great German Art Exhibition.¹⁹ Like previous exhibitions of degenerate art, the Munich exhibition presented paintings without their frames, works being arranged in as cluttered a fashion as possible. Pictures were hung as close to each other as possible, and stacked up to the ceiling. Next to each work was the title of the piece and its artist, with many works being misattributed. This information was handwritten, along with the year the work was bought and the price it was acquired for. There was no mention that these prices were in the post-war inflated mark, when one US dollar equaled 4.2 billion marks.²⁰ The astronomical prices of the works were meant to enrage the public who was already suspicious of the avant-garde. There were also quotes on the wall from Hitler and others:

One thing is certain, under no circumstances will we allow the representatives of the decadence that lies behind us suddenly to emerge as the standard bearers of the future.²¹

We shall now wage inexorable war to eliminate the last elements of our cultural decay.²²

All the artistic and cultural blather of Cubists, Futurists, Dadaists, and the like is neither sound in racial terms nor tolerable in national terms. It can be best regarded as the expression of a world view that freely admits that the dissolution of all existing ideas, all nations, and all races, their mixing and adulteration, is the loftiest goal of their intellectual creators and cliques of leaders.²³

These passages were meant to help guide the visitor through the exhibition. Along with these quotes, some pieces were accompanied by short descriptions, for example:

This horror hung as a war memorial in the cathedral of Lubeck.
An insult to German womanhood.
The Ideal-cretin and whore.
Deliberate sabotage of national defense.
An insult to the German heroes of the Great War.
Nature as seen by a sick Mind.
Decadence exploited for literary and commercial purposes.²⁴

And over one doorway it was written "They had four years." This short statement refers to the grace period given by Hitler for those in the cultural community to adjust to the Nazi way of thinking while Hitler put together his cultural machine. From this point on, that which had not been proven as healthy would be eliminated. With the demonstration of the Degenerate Art exhibition and the Great German Art Exhibition, there was no room for an alternative view. Already, Goebbels had forbade art criticism:

I granted German critics four years after our assumption of power to adapt themselves to National Socialist principles... Since the year 1936 has passed without any satisfactory improvement in art criticism, I am herewith forbidding, from this day on, the conduct of art criticism as it has been practiced to date... The art critic will be replaced by the art editor... In the future only those art editors will be allowed to report on art who approach the task with an undefiled heart and National socialist convictions.²⁵

To practice art criticism was to be critical of the art which was presented. And as only healthy art was to be presented, there would be no place for the art critic. What is more, to criticize the art that was presented was to be critical of the work that presented the ideals Hitler had set for the nation; therefore, to be critical of art was, by extension, to be critical of Hitler. Goebbels would continue to justify his ban on criticism through 1944, declaring that the ancients had disregarded art critics and had judged works for themselves.²⁶ However, the ban on criticism can also be seen as an attempt to mask the shallowness of a heavily censored art meant for mass consumption.

The Great German Art Exhibition was meant to underscore the official art's triumph over degenerate works as well as to demonstrate what the Haus der Deutschen Kunst would house. The building was to be the first of a new German artistic tradition, housing contemporary works to help further shape

cultural policy. The exhibition opening was celebrated as a national holiday, German Art Day.²⁷ Hitler gave a speech on the contrast between modern ideals and German ideals with such passion that even his entourage were taken aback. He forbade artists to use anything but the forms seen in nature in their paintings. "We will, from now on, lead an unrelenting war of purification, an unrelenting war of extermination, against the elements which have displaced our art."²⁸ It was with these words that the audience made their way into the museum for the first time.

The 600 works that had been chosen for the opening were organized into categories such as landscape, portraiture, nudes, and heroic military themes, with many works also focusing on German folk themes of family, peasant life, and motherhood. So-called art editors, having replaced art critics, reported in the press that "Sketchiness has been rigorously eliminated" and that the only paintings accepted were those "that are fully executed examples of their kind, and give no cause to ask what the artist might have meant to convey."²⁹

The exhibition was straightforward, accessible to the point that it had clear messages without any room for interpretation. Such a message was conveyed by the many depictions of the well toned and forward looking Nordic nude, that, according to one report, "emanates delight in the healthy human body."³⁰ These pieces were instructional, embodying proper morality and behavior by symbolizing a standard of beauty and utilizing a classical vocabulary to avoid seeming sexual. They offered a moral standard around which Hitler hoped to unite a nation. This morality was represented in the bodies of the larger than life nudes that were smooth, and frozen so that they could be worshipped but not desired, like the Greece form.³¹ In this way, beauty helped one maintain control of one's passions. And by depicting the nude in a static state like that of the Greek form, the works expressed unchanging values to those in search of values in post-war, modern Germany. The great statues represented a link to Greco-Roman antiquity, echoing the tradition set forth by Rosenberg, a tradition of which the German people, hungry for national pride, could be proud.³² The works suggested the greatness of those in the empire, while towering over the individual viewer, making him feel small and powerless against the empire.³³

However, while the hushed whispers of the crowd generally admired the works for their realistic depiction of what was good and beautiful, the exhibition drew relatively low attendance, while the Degenerate Art exhibition drew record breaking crowds. Part of this may have been the aura of illicitness that the exhibition had.³⁴ No children were allowed and often times the doors had to be closed to prevent overcrowding. And by drawing on the average German's distrust of the avant-garde, the exhibition gave the people what they wanted, an enemy to voice a unified hatred towards. The fact that the avant-garde was continually equated with Judeo-Bolshevik ideas and that the Ger-

man public was voicing disapproval of the avant-garde helped consolidate the racism that Hitler was brewing. So not only was Hitler rewriting art history without the avant-garde, but he was also taking energy that was opposing the avant-garde and channeling it into his own racial-political agenda. The German people were uniting as what was acceptable and unacceptable was becoming clearer. The two exhibits served to take the ideas and theories of Nordau, Schultze-Naumburg, and Rosenberg, and make them into concrete realities that were understandable to all.

As should be apparent, a discussion of art under the Third Reich is impossible without discussing Hitler's attitude towards art. As the dominant personality of Nazi Germany, he imposed his ideas of art upon the nation. The two exhibitions discussed exemplify these ideas. He was deeply concerned with art, having made his living as a painter and having applied several times to art school. He saw art as a reflection of German culture, but also having the ability to determine the morality of a culture. It was his belief that German art was decaying, and because of the importance he placed upon it, he wished to remove this decadence and replace it with art that contained the same elements contained in classical works and nineteenth century naturalist works, believing these to be the highest points in culture. In doing so, he was attempting to counter the decay. He had realized that the modern world did not help the individual, but instead of seeing art as a reflection of the modern world's disregard for the individual, he saw art as a catalyst for the destructive elements of the modern world. He saw modern art as unnatural and as degenerating progressively, and he desired to save his culture from death. But in doing so, he was fighting death, which would be the ultimate unnatural feat. Hitler distinguished German ideas from modern ideas, and wished to prop up traditional forms of expression that related traditional values so that they would resist time. He wished to fight time, and this is itself a sign of decadence: to continue to use methods after they have ceased to be innovative. Instead of encouraging new methods to blossom, he wished for artists to recycle old methods as they grew stale. The Degenerate Art exhibition was a removal of the new, a removal of progress; the Great German Art Exhibition was a return to the old, an attempt to fight nature's law of death and to prolong the life of Hitler's idea of German culture.

After the Degenerate Art Exhibition in Munich, Hitler legalized the confiscation of degenerate art from state collections. This meant that the government did not have to compensate the collections for the work that was taken. This law was passed in August, after the Degenerate Art exhibition had been received by the public who agreed with its condemnations.³⁵ Hitler had waited to make sure the people agreed with the Nazi Party's actions before he claimed responsibility for them publicly. The exhibition having received the public's support, it became time to remove all the degenerate art from muse-

ums. Goebbels and Ziegler wanted this task to fall under their responsibility, though they received competition from Hermann Goering. By 1936, Goering had attained the posts of head of the Luftwaffe, director of the Four Year Plan, and simultaneously was the Prime Minister of Prussia. He was a greedy collector, particularly of the baroque, and his character is exemplified by his use of his collection; he used Rubens's *Diana at the Stag Hunt* as the cover for his movie screen.³⁶ It had been Goering who had ordered the close of the Bauhaus in 1933 and he had been using his power in the Nazi Party to gain power in the cultural administration. The dispute was settled by Hitler, who gave Goebbels charge of the degenerate art dealings, and instructed all party ministers to act more cooperatively.³⁷ This conflict was common as Hitler would often assign several departments jurisdiction over the same task, fostering a competitive atmosphere that not only ensured that tasks were completed, but that they were completed efficiently and often with more zeal than necessary.

The following year saw an even more merciless attitude towards unacceptable art, with little regard for what the outside world thought. There were two main reasons for this: the clearance of non-German work out of Germany and personal gain. The purifying of Germany was always said to be the main reason for the Nazis' campaign against what they labeled as degenerate art. However, the desire to rid Germany of these works which were taken from collections without compensation presented a major opportunity for industrious Nazi officials. And it was not just individuals who would profit from the moving of art works, but the party itself.

In 1938, Ziegler's committee to find degenerate art for exhibition was transformed into a disposal commission under the control of Goebbels. It was then Goering's suggestion that Goebbels sell the degenerate works, which were greatly valued outside of Germany.³⁸ Goebbels approved of this idea and appointed three professional art dealers (Karl Haberstock, Karl Meder, and Max Taeuber) to sell the works in the Degenerate Art Exhibition. Soon, art buyers were approaching these dealers, sometimes because of the value of the works the Nazis were selling, but also sometimes motivated by a desire to save these works from those who did not appreciate them and might destroy them. In some ways, the Nazi dealings operated like a ransoming. The works were taken from collections, if not by physical force, than by political force, without compensation. They were then held until it was known that the works were in danger. And finally, the works were sold to those who valued them.

Under Goebbels's authority, the organization of sales was begun even before the proper laws were in place. Goering, in an effort to cooperate with Goebbels, asked that thirteen Impressionist and Post-Impressionist works be placed under his authority. These works included Van Gogh's *Dr. Gachet* and Cezanne's *The Quarry*.³⁹ Through a complex series of legal agreements, these works were sent abroad and were used to obtain foreign currency and works

by old masters that were more suitable to Nazi tastes. Each step of the exchange profited, Goering himself using money he obtained from the deal to purchase tapestries for his home. This personal gain was hidden by the simultaneous buying and selling of works for Hitler, which gave Goering the appearance of disposing of the works in a proper manner for the greater purity of Germany. It is also important to recognize that it was Goering's idea to sell the degenerate works, suggesting that he had plans to gain from their selling all along.

The selling of degenerate art by the Nazi party would last until 1942, with the war making art dealings increasingly difficult. Most of the capital that was accumulated through these sales went into special party accounts that could be used for arms purchases or to buy works aesthetically acceptable by party standards.⁴⁰ The biggest of these sales would be an auction that would take place at the Grand Hotel National in the Swiss town of Lucerne. However, the Nazis' lack of respect for the art worked against them, as they continually sold the work for prices far under the possible market value. For example, the Nationalgalerie sold Beckman's *Southern Coast* for \$20, Kandinsky's *Ruhe*, now owned by the Guggenheim Museum in New York, for \$100, and Kirchner's *Strassenszene*, now owned by MoMA in New York, for \$160.⁴¹ The prices show how eager the Nazi sellers were to get the works out of their possession. In November of 1941, the Degenerate Art Exhibition, which had been touring Germany and Austria, came to its thirteenth and last venue. At this time, only eight paintings, one sculpture, and thirty-two graphic works remained of the original exhibition.⁴² The rest of the 650 works had been sold for foreign currency and replaced by confiscated works. Of the works for which Goebbels was responsible, 300 paintings and 3,000 graphic works were sold between 1938 and 1941.⁴³ The attitude the Nazi sellers had towards modern art is without doubt disrespectful, but they also paid it a compliment. The hurried pace with which they sought to get rid of the work suggests a fear of the art; their need to get rid of the art acknowledges that the art is powerful, and if their measures are an indication of their fear, then they must have thought the work to be among the most powerful in history.

But the exportation of undesirable works was only half of the task set forth by Hitler. The other half was the building of a national collection of pure German work that would make all other collections pale in comparison. Hitler dreamed of making his hometown of Linz the "German Budapest."⁴⁴ In 1941, just as the Linz project began with 497 paintings, Washington's National Gallery opened with 475. Fifty years later, the Washington National Gallery had 3,000 works of art. By 1945, Linz had acquired (through the looting of foreign territories and the confiscation Jewish families' possessions) 8,000 works, not including those of other affiliated agencies on which it could call at any time.⁴⁵ That is an acquisition rate of five or six major works, such as by Vermeer, Durer,

Holbein, Grunewald, Rembrandt, and Rubens, a day. Museums, like the one at Linz, were to demonstrate the greatness of Germany with monumental architecture containing the world's finest cultural artifacts which traced German history in culture and made it seem the center of humanity and the model society.⁴⁶ The German public could go to these museums and understand where they came from and who they were supposed to be according to the ideology set forth by German art philosophers. The works they contained were to represent the ideal, the perfect Germany at its purist and healthiest, without being infested by degenerate or decadent elements.

Yet the behavior that was exhibited in the acquisition of these works ironically falls short of the healthy behavior that they were supposed to foster. Though authorities were careful to administer a net of laws that legalized any actions that they would undertake, the uncompensated acquisition of valuable works of art meets any definition of looting or plundering, an activity that would be hard to incorporate as a part of a healthy society. And the behavior of high officials, such as Goering, who took works for themselves for personal gain in secrecy and against regulations would suggest a degree of decadence in the official chain of command. Officers at most levels taking works for themselves that were expressly meant for other uses suggests a problem with the leadership structure. This is supported by the leaders' fierce competitiveness, flaunting of power, and disregard for regulations. These activities suggest an individual greediness that is also evident in the Nazi Party as a whole, attempting to occupy as much territory and acquire as much wealth as possible, using brutal and criminal tactics. And the violence of the military can also be seen in the methods commandos and Gestapo soldiers used to acquire works of art as well as to dispose of them. On March 20, 1939, in an effort to dispose of works that officials believed would not be worth trying to sell, 1,004 paintings and sculptures and 3,825 graphic works were burned in a bonfire in the courtyard of the Berlin Fire Department's headquarters.⁴⁷

I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that Hitler feared the power degenerate art held over society, and that he felt compelled to rid Germany of this decay in order to defend its purity. However, he did not seek to understand the model of health that was the goal of the purification. This model of health was outdated and did not emerge from the contemporary situation. The attempt to stop what Hitler perceived as a decay of German culture is a decadent act, as it is an act meant to go against nature's progress by regressing. These behaviors exhibited by Hitler, as leader of the Nazi party, as well as the actions of the officials under him, suggest that the action they saw as the purification of Germany was as degenerate as any work of art of which they sought to rid themselves.

Notes

- 1 Alfred Barr, "Art in the Third Reich: Preview, 1933," *Magazine of Art*, 38 (October, 1945): 211-230.
- 2 Lynn H. Nicholas, *The Rape of Europa* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 7.
- 3 Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art Under a Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 38.
- 4 Stephanie Barron, "Degenerate Art:" *The Fate of the Avant-Garde in Nazi Germany* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991), 11.
- 5 *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler*, ed. Norman Baynes (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), 578.
- 6 Sherree Owens Zalampas, *Adolf Hitler: A Psychological Interpretation of His Views on Architecture, Art, and Music* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1990), 86.
- 7 Lehmann-Haupt, 43.
- 8 Nicholas, 10.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 10 Zalampas, 54.
- 11 Barron, 11.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 13 Zalampas, 54.
- 14 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971), 261.
- 15 Nicholas, 9.
- 16 Barron, 13.
- 17 Zalampas, 90.
- 18 Nicholas, 23.
- 19 Barron, 9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 21 Hitler at a rally in Nuremberg, 1933.
- 22 Hitler at the opening of the Haus der Deutschen Kunst, 1937.
- 23 Hitler at a conference in Nuremberg, 1934.
- 24 Commentary on wall of *Entartete Kunst*. Barron, 49-80.
- 25 Nicholas, 16.
- 26 Zalampas, 70.
- 27 Barron, 18.
- 28 Nicholas, 20.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Barron, 30.
- 32 Zalampas, 73.
- 33 Fredrick Redlich, *Hitler: Diagnosis of a Destructive Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 122.
- 34 Barron, 84.
- 35 Jonathan Petropoulos, *Art as Politics in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: The

University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 60.

36 Nicholas, 40.

37 Ibid., 62.

38 Petropoulos, 77.

39 Nicholas, 23.

40 Redlich, 123.

41 Nicholas, 25.

42 Barron, 95.

43 Petropoulos, 82.

44 Nicholas, 41.

45 Ibid., 49.

46 Redlich, 122.

47 Nicholas, 25.

From Diagnoses to Decadence: A Brief History of Hysteria

Kristen Oelrich

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most doctors and physicians attributed the disease of hysteria almost exclusively to the female sex. This linkage between women and hysteria is a tradition thousands of years old. Women were, and often still are, seen stereotypically as more vulnerable both mentally and physically to hysteria. The term hysteria is derived from the Greek *hystera* meaning womb. Hysteria's medical definition was taken to mean literally, "wandering womb," as doctors attributed the effects of hysteria to the womb wandering throughout the female body. Hysteria, or "wandering womb" was often diagnosed in women who were experiencing trouble talking or breathing. What today we would call "having a lump in one's throat" was at one time thought to be the woman's uterus trapped near her vocal cords, thereby inhibiting vocal communication.¹

Many female patients who were diagnosed as hysterics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were unwilling to conform to the conventions of marriage, tended to be interested in community and suffrage movements, and were seen as more independent and assertive than "normal" women.² Our contemporary notion of independent women was diagnosed as hysteria by most doctors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today, knowledge of hysteria is heavily influenced by key figures who studied the malady at the end of nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The major focus of this paper will be on these figures and how they have contributed to the study of hysteria through scientific, psychological, sociological, and literary discourse. Hysteria as a malady will be looked at as a psychological component contributing to what figures like Max Nordau have called the decadent or degenerate personality.³ Nordau has also argued that the increased presence or awareness of hysteria within a community or group is indicative of mounting societal decadence. I would like to argue that in the twentieth century *fin-de-siecle*, hysteria, although no longer employed as a diagnostic term, was and still is manifest – in fact rampant – within American society. This *fin-de-siecle* hysteria of the twentieth century has ties to Gustave Le Bon's theories of the crowd and these connections will be demonstrated. Although expressed under the guise of new names, hysteria has not disappeared from a contemporary society if that society is at all within the clutches of decadence.

Before any discussion of contemporary modes of hysteria can take place, a historical framework of hysteria in terms of its nineteenth century forerunners must be discussed. This contextualization is necessary in order to understand how the connective tissue of hysteria continues from the modern to the post-modern and beyond. A key figure in hysteria's discourse is Max Nordau, who lays out what he believes are the major traits of hysteria in *Degeneration*. They include: extreme emotionalism, a highly impressionable psyche, morbid mobility of mind, excessive excitability of imagination, irresistible desire to imitate, tendency to fabricate stories (which the hysteric actually believes), desire to make a spectacle of him or herself, and intense fear or hatred of being ignored.

Nordau argues that hysteria is both a by-product of and heavily influenced by degeneracy, which he defines as a mental condition or malady of unhealthy impulses. The hysteric, Nordau argues, seeks to replicate or imitate what the degenerate has already achieved and delights in their extravagances. In the following passage, Nordau speaks of his contagion theory, likening hysteria's communicability to the spread of disease:

Under the influence of an obsession, a degenerate mind promulgates some doctrine of order – realism, pornography, mysticism, symbolism, diabolism. He does this with vehement penetrating eloquence, with eagerness and fiery heedlessness. Other degenerate, hysterical, neurasthenical minds flock around him, receive from his lips the doctrine, and live thenceforth only to propagate it.⁴

Moreover, Nordau likens the art of the Impressionists as “visual derangements” of degenerate or hysterical artists. Nordau writes,

The curious style of certain recent painters – ‘impressionists’ – becomes at once intelligible to us if we keep in view the researches of the Charcot school into the visual derangements in degeneration and hysteria. The painters who assure us that they are sincere, and reproduce nature as they see it speak the truth. The degenerate artist who suffers from *nystagmus*, or trembling of the eyeball, will, in fact, perceive the phenomenon of nature trembling, restless, devoid of firm outline...⁵

Here Nordau clearly links the *fin-de-siecle* style of impressionist art to a particular manifestation of hysteria within the body of the impressionist artists. Sigmund Freud will later study this very notion of hysterical symptoms somatically inserting themselves into bodies, manipulating and changing them. As for the Impressionists, if, as Nordau writes, “[Their] pictures fail to produce a comic effect, it is only because the attentive beholder reads them in the desper-

ate effort to reproduce fully an impression incapable of reproduction by the expedients of the painter's art as devised by men of normal vision."⁶ Here Nordau suggests that degenerate art, as he calls Impressionism, can only be understood by those who are themselves degenerate. He seems to be suggesting the familiar stereotype of all artists as mentally decadent, hysterical creatures.⁷

While Max Nordau is certainly influential on the study of hysteria, the scientific, medicinal, and psychological study of hysteria in the nineteenth century was led by two primary figures. These are Jean-Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud. I intend to place the work of these scholars within their contemporary framework of decadent literature (the Goncourt Brothers) and social thought in an effort to show that the hysteria they were treating was not found solely within the medical field.

A key figure in the nineteenth century definition and diagnosis of hysteria was Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot began his study of medicine at the University of Paris when he was nineteen and eventually wrote a persuasive thesis on rheumatism in 1853. At the age of 37, Charcot was made physician to the Salpêtrière hospital that had become a renowned institution via Charcot's predecessor Pinel. It was at Salpêtrière that Charcot was to make his greatest contributions to neurology and neuropathology. Salpêtrière hospital itself housed mainly "insane" and potentially incurable women patients suffering from various ailments, primarily neurotics and epileptics.⁸ During the eight years that Charcot worked as chief of the medical services at Salpêtrière, his most famous work was produced in advancing the study of multiple sclerosis.

After ten years of service at Salpêtrière, Charcot was offered a professorship of pathological anatomy at the University of Paris, which he held until 1882 he then became professor of diseases of the nervous system at the same university.⁹ With this change to a new professorship in a new department, Charcot's academic focus changed from neuralgic-based studies to studies of hysteria, neurosis and hypnotism. This shift in focus, although a logical outcome of Charcot's career, had much to do with changes made in the physical placement of patients. Sections of Salpêtrière that were normally delegated to patients became too run down to use, thereby forcing the administrative staff to move the patients elsewhere. The epileptics as well as the hysterics were separated from the insane and placed together in their own ward the, *quartier des épileptiques*.¹⁰

Due to this movement of patients, something quite astounding occurred. The hysterics began to mimic the epileptic fits that they were increasingly exposed to, given their new proximity to them. Although Charcot did not recognize this hysterical manifestation of mimicry at first, he eventually came to understand that what he originally attributed as characteristics of the hysterical fit, were only visually *learned* appropriations of reaction and not neces-

sarily connected to hysteria itself. Charcot's hysterics were highly impressionable, and simply imitating the epileptics in the room, identifying with them. Along with such seizures, which Charcot termed "hystero-epilepsy" he also observed other outward or physiognomic expressions of hysteria. These expressions conform to the topographical model of hysteria. They include: narrowing of the field of vision, increased skin sensitivity, fainting episodes, rigidity of muscles, and distinct bodily positions, which Charcot often sketched or had photographed.¹¹ Internal symptoms of hysteria that Charcot recognized included spontaneous pains in the mammary glands and ovaries, and migraines. Independence, rebelliousness, assertiveness and imagination were also traits Charcot noted. These characteristics combined to form what he called the "stigmata" of hysteria. Charcot was thus able to define hysteria as a "specific neurosis that manifests itself by periodic attacks and permanent stigmata."¹²

Charcot's hysterical patients would "perform" these stigmata for him while he gave his famous Tuesday lectures at Salpêtrière. Unfortunately, it did not occur to Charcot until much later in his life that his patients might have been performing because they were conditioned to do so by his assistants and staff. Such patient conditioning created great controversy around Charcot's theories and interpretations, especially when they involved use of hypnosis.¹³

With this later realization, Charcot's work became instrumental in grounding hysteria as a neurosis formed in part out of a previous psychic trauma. For this reason, he advised that hysterics be removed from psychopathogenic environments, because their exposure to traumatic events would be very great there.¹⁴ Charcot's work on hysteria was enormously influential on Sigmund Freud, who in fact was a student at the Tuesday lectures. When Charcot stated "in the manner of suggestion, what is done can be undone," one can almost see Freud's ears perk up. This would later be a major grounding point for his own theories on hysteria.

It is important to note that Charcot was a serious supporter of the view that hysteria was not only to be found in the female sex. Although Salpêtrière was a hospital for women (most of Charcot's patients were female) this did not prevent him from acknowledging the presence of hysteria in males. During and after Charcot's life, many practicing doctors and physicians did not recognize male hysteria because they strictly abided by the definition of hysteria as "wandering uterus." Thus doctors tended to follow the logic that males, in their obvious lack of a uterus, could not possibly be proper hysterics. However, many doctors did regard male manifestations of hysteria as hypochondriasis or, later, "Battle Fatigue."¹⁵ Max Nordau equated male hysteria with degeneration.

What is most captivating in Charcot's work is the photographs of his

patients. Charcot was often to be found sketching his patient's physiognomic features and bodily positions when they were having hysterical episodes, and he frequently had professional photographers photograph his hysterical patients. All this was done in an effort to compile a visual reference library for himself and his students.

Furthermore, Didi-Huberman, in his book, *Invention de l'hystérie: Charcot et l'Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, explains that the "stylized sculptural positions" of the women in the photographs "mimic the emotions of terror, disgust, lust, and surprise."¹⁶ The long exposure times necessary for photographs at this time furthers the argument that these "hysterics" are essentially posing. The patients seem to be deliberately deceiving their doctors by striking poses, although it could be argued that the patients are merely responding to the prompting of the photographer. Whichever the case, due to their wide circulation these photographs played a major role in shaping the "ideals" of hysteria for patients, society, and those in the medical field.¹⁷

For example, a famous painting by André Brouillet depicts Charcot giving one of his Tuesday Lectures and Charcot's star patient, Blanche Wittman, giving a hysterical "performance" to the all-male crowd of Charcot's neurology department at Salpêtrière in 1887. It has often been noted that on the wall of the lecture hall, behind the crowd of men, hangs a drawing of a hysteric's body convulsing with seizures. The drawing is the only representation of a hysterical fit in the room, and only the women (Blanche Wittman and her nurses) are able to see it. Charcot looks off to the left, perhaps answering a student's question, while the man holding Blanche inconspicuously glances at her bared chest. It has been noted that the true subject of this painting may in fact be the powers of suggestion that representations of hysteria may have had on the female patients at Salpêtrière. Blanche herself would have seen the drawing as she entered the room—before she entered her hysterical fit. Her posture clearly echoes the drawing and suggests that she may only be mimicking it in order to please the crowd and Dr. Charcot. The painting may also depict the sexual curiosity the male doctors had in the female patients, which could be seductive to them.

In order to compile a history of historical images of hysteria Charcot collaborated with the artist Paul Richer to publish *Les Démoniques das l'art* in 1887.¹⁸ In this work they declared their desire to show "the place that the external form of hysterical neurosis took in art at the time when [hysteria] was not considered an illness but rather a perversion of the soul, due to the presence of demons and their agitations."¹⁹ In the preface to the book the "great hysterical neurosis" is called the "illness of the century."

Although Charcot played a major role in freeing hysteria from its previous interpretation as an exclusively female disease, his downfall, as Elaine

Showalter notes, was his inattentiveness to what his hysterical patients were actually saying.²⁰ In Charcot's practice, the patient (particularly the female patient) was silenced, her body put on display but her voice not heard.²¹ Charcot's privileging of the visual over the auditory²² is clear. It seems Charcot preferred to treat his patients as objects rather than subjects who might contribute to their own treatment.²³

Freud furthered the field of hysteria greatly, beginning with his collaboration with Josef Breuer titled *Preliminary Communication* (1892). This essay eventually became part of their larger collaborative publication *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). It was at first met unfavorably in German medical circles, but later came to be regarded as a major catalyst of psychoanalysis.

In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer detail the symptoms of hysteria as they occurred in their individual practices. Their list of symptoms is clearly similar to those of Charcot.

Neuralgias and anaesthesias of various kinds, many of which persisted for years, contractures and paralyses, hysterical attacks and epileptoid convulsions, which every observer regarded as true epilepsy, petit mal and disorders in the nature of tic, chronic vomiting and anorexia, carried to the pitch of rejection of all nourishment, various forms of disturbance of vision, constantly recurrent visual hallucinations, etc.²⁴

Freud believed early on that hysteria or "hysterical conversion" manifested itself through repression of a traumatic event, which was then later "released" in the form of a somatic malady. His later work insisted that instead of traumatic events, it was often an unacknowledged or repressed sexual wish that led to the hysterical symptom(s). A major difference between Charcot and Freud is that the latter focused on the patient's voice, and treated him or her as a subject. While Charcot privileged visual modalities of hysteria (photographs), Freud and Breuer employed a more aural, analytical and etiological approach.²⁵

A paramount case in the treatment of hysteria involved the patient Breuer called Anna O. This patient, whom Breuer treated over the course of approximately one year, exhibited many of the "token" hysterical symptoms mentioned above. In her case, however, Breuer ingeniously used hypnotism as a therapeutic method. It was through hypnotism that he was able to discern that Anna O exhibited two separate states of consciousness, her *primary condition* and her *second condition*. During the primary stage, Anna O was essentially "normal" with respect to emotions and psychological disposition. It was when Anna O was in the second state that such hysterical symptoms as paralysis of the limbs, (psychological) inability to eat or drink, and inability to speak in her native language appeared.

Breuer attributed the presence of Anna O's hysteria to amnesia, that is repression of past events. These highly traumatic events were tied directly to specific hysterical symptoms. It was only through hypnotism that Anna O would discuss the past traumas. When she was able to "remember" their details,

Each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when [I] had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words.²⁶

Working from Breuer's therapeutic model, Freud attempted to treat his patients exhibiting hysterical symptoms with a similar hypnotic method. He was not as successful primarily because he had difficulty using hypnotism and his patients were less responsive to it.²⁷

This led Freud to explore other means of treatment, primarily a more cathartic mode, namely the "talking cure."²⁸ Freud first employed this type of *psychoanalytic* treatment in the case of Frau Emmy von N, and later in his more famous case, Dora. In these cases, and others, Freud allowed the patients, via free association to arrive at the basis of their neurosis. Freud and Breuer argued that their psychotherapeutic method works because

It brings to an end the operative force of the idea which was not abreacted in the first instance, by allowing its strangulated affect to find a way out through speech; and it subjects it to associative correction by introducing it into normal consciousness (under light hypnosis) or by removing it through the physician's suggestion, as is done in somnambulism accompanied by amnesia.²⁹

Frustrations involving sexuality, gender identifications, gender roles, and traumatic events, that could not be released or voiced (abreacted) because of societal or psychological constraints, manifested themselves internally and surfaced once again in the form of neurosis (hysteria, in this case). Freud understood what was psychologically occurring but he did not take into account the influence of gender roles and societal "norms" on the external production of hysteria.³⁰

This is particularly evident in Dora's case, Freud's most complex clinical report on hysteria. Dora, an eighteen-year-old woman, began to exhibit hysterical symptoms when she realized she was playing a token role in a dramatic and twisted affair involving her father and close family friends, Herr K and Frau K. Dora relayed to Freud her dreams, traumas, and family conflicts

with the hope of "curing" her hysteria. Interpreting these, Freud decided Dora's hysteria was a manifestation of her unconscious desire for her father and Herr K. He did not seem to take into account the limitations imposed on Dora by her place in society and her sex, and how these too may have contributed to her hysteria.³¹ Dora's defiant stance in her rejection of Freud, her father and Herr K, signal that she was not content to "be put in her place" and play the role of the meek woman.³²

Freud's most important contribution to what Breuer had begun was his recognition that hysteria (and later other neuroses) normally appeared as a result of a disruption or traumatic event associated with a sexual experience in childhood. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud writes, "sexuality seems to play a principal part in the pathogenesis of hysteria as a source of psychical traumas and as a motive to defense—that is, for repressing ideas from consciousness."³³

Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899-1900) signaled an important shift in his approach to psychoanalytical thinking. During the writing of this book, he became increasingly interested in his own psyche. Analyzing his own dreams, Freud was able to take his theory of hysteria, linked to sexuality, to an important new level. He realized that his various hysterical patients had not always been literally seduced by their loved ones; rather, they *wished* to have been on an unconscious level.³⁴ Freud eventually concluded that the root of neurosis was the child's wish to kill one parent and marry the other.³⁵

Freud discerned that it was the unconscious mind that was the key to hysteria. The unconscious displayed itself in preconscious form during hypnosis, free association, or through the therapist's suggestion. He realized that the repression of frustrations into the unconscious led to hysteria. What occurs in a hysterical episode is essentially a reliving, or hallucination, of a previous event.³⁶ In order to treat hysteria, Freud used a combination of Breuer's method of treatment, his own methods, and Weir Mitchell's famous "rest cure." Thus, out of a synthesis of these primary treatments, Freud arrived at the incredibly innovative form of treatment that was to become the basis for psychoanalysis. Freud's method did not, however, fully address the root or initial cause of the hysteria, which is why his work is often criticized today.

Freud's idea that talking about repressed events or memories hidden in the unconscious could alleviate symptoms of hysteria acting upon the *body* was a truly monumental, revolutionary idea. Never before was such a strong link made between the mind and the effects it could have on the body.³⁷ Because this newfound psycho/soma link, hysteria became, for many decadent writers, a primary signifier of mounting decadence or the decay of their own psyche.

What Charcot, Freud, and Breuer describe as hysteria directly conforms to the makeup of what one can term the decadent personality. It was and

still is traditionally associated with the psychological makeup of artists. Many of the literary and artistic masters of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries exhibited "token" hysterical traits. Those with decadent personalities (traditionally male literary and artistic figures) often have within their psyche elements of hysteria. Famous examples are Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde. These men are often seen as "tormented by their time," but women, exhibiting similar traits of the decadent personality, are viewed as hysterics. As we well know, Baudelaire and Wilde were not universally admired during their lives. But they were not placed within the confines of a mental institution or thought of as incurably "mad." This splitting, in which male symptoms are regarded as inherently "positive" and female symptoms as inherently "negative," clearly shows strict stereotyping of male in contrast to female roles.

The brothers Edmund and Jules Goncourt represented many such decadent personalities in their work, and at times exhibited hysterical attributes themselves.³⁸ Much of their writing, including a jointly written account of their daily lives from 1851-1896,³⁹ is preoccupied with illness and degeneration.⁴⁰ Jules, the more "highly strung and delicate" of the two brothers, suffered from a nervous breakdown before dying in June of 1879. He was described during his life as volatile, quick-witted, mischievous and spoiled. Edmund, the older of the two, was slow, serious, poetic, eccentric, and phlegmatic.⁴¹ Robert Baldick, the translator of their *Journal*, describes the men:

This astonishing partnership owed its cohesion and duration—for the Goncourts lived and worked together for over twenty years with never more than a few hours apart—not only to the brothers' affection and regard for each other but also to their fear, suspicion, and dislike of the outside world. They were sick men, tortured by their stomachs, their livers, and their nerves; sick men with high ideals, living in a world where everything and everyone wounded their delicate sensibilities or outraged their sense of values.⁴²

It becomes apparent from this passage that the Goncourts themselves disdained the modern way of life (which made them "nervous") as did the patients in previously mentioned cases of female hysteria or "nervousness." The other component of their ailments were their problematic family and sexual lives, which they often recall in the *Journal*. These events clearly contributed to their mental illness. More particularly, the Goncourts often write of their disdain and disgust for women—a theme prevalent in almost all decadent literature.⁴³

In 1870, in a discussion with Zola, the brothers stated that "the originality of their work rested on nervous maladies," presumably in themselves and in others.⁴⁴ The brothers saw their "hysteria" as a necessary component

of the creative decadent personality. Elements of the brothers' neurosis were very similar to those exhibited by Freud and Charcot's hysterics. The difference is that the brothers were viewed as romantically decadent and not hysterical because they were men. But modern stereotypes are only partially to blame. The brothers themselves repeatedly stated that the nervousness and hypersensitivity they saw in themselves and their contemporaries was a form of superiority.⁴⁵ They believed this superiority was connected with stylistic innovation and highly artistic personality characteristics—what many critics saw as decadent attributes.

The Goncourt Brothers characters in the journal (either real or imagined) also exhibited traits which, had they visited Charcot or Freud, would certainly have caused them to be diagnosed as hysterics. For example, in *Germinie Lacerteux*, the Goncourt's rewrite the story of their trusted maid, who after her death was found to have been stealing from them, engaging in outrageous sexual acts, and drinking heavily. Abhorred by the idea that a woman so close to them could be so "evil," they decided to use her story as a model for a degenerate, hysterical individual in their novel. Interestingly, the parallels Freud's work in that the brothers, in their introduction call it a clinical "study" rather than a "sentimental or vulgar love story."⁴⁶

What occurs in Freud, Charcot, Nordau, and the Goncourt brothers is a stereotyping of the female figure. Moreover, these men, like many decadent figures, connect women with weakness, and in extreme cases, repulsion. It is precisely this image of women (and its effects on the female psyche of the nineteenth century) that provides the catalyst for hysteria's popularity. Any deviation from the "ideal" woman was thought of as "madness." For men, most "would-be hysterics" were seen as struggling, sensitive, "artistic types" because they did not conform to the stereotypical roles of men in their society. The Goncourt Brothers helped to enforce this new, primarily male stereotype as an aspect of the "decadent personality."

The hype that Charcot – and to a lesser extent Freud – created around hysteria led to the idealization and popularization of the malady. Hysteria became the topic of theater, musical, cabaret, and dance events in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The malady itself was very fashionable and idealized – theater critics like Helene Zimmern described some of the most famous French actresses as hysterical women who had found an appropriate outlet for their histrionic personalities.⁴⁷ Although idealized for some, hysteria became the *mal du siècle* for the more conservative person, a sign of artistic degeneration.⁴⁸

However, the hysteric does not simply fade away as the mid-twentieth century advances. Ilza Veith's *Hysteria: the History of a Disease* (1965)⁴⁹ notes the "nearly total disappearance" of hysteria, failing to see the new forms of hysteria developing. In fact hysteria is still visible in our world, although, it

is not always recognized as such. Hysteria has had many names, including Borderline Personality Disorder,⁵⁰ Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, and Multiple Personality Disorder, among others. Elaine Showalter in her recent, highly controversial book, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*, goes so far as to label recovered memory, satanic ritual abuse, alien abduction and Gulf War syndrome as contemporary hysterias.⁵¹ Georges Guillain, a French medical historian of hysteria, sums up this change in terminology nicely when he writes, "In reality, the patients have not changed...but the terminology applied to them has."⁵²

Hysteria, as Showalter argues, "is more contagious than in the past." These words speak directly to Nordau's theory of social contagion. What both are arguing is hysteria's underlying connection to the "crowd" – how teeming masses of people contribute to and promote hysteria.⁵³ The notion of the crowd is traditionally linked to modernity, because the development of modern cities and urban growth gives rise to the crowd. The work of Gustav Le Bon is especially useful in this context because his notion of the crowd functions to promote awareness of psychological diseases, specifically Multiple Personality Disorder and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome – "the new hysterias."

Le Bon's use of the term "crowd," according to Robert E. Park, assigns a "purely theoretical meaning to the word" and emphasizes its psychological aspects. Le Bon does not see the crowd as a "simple aggregate, but much more a collective entity whose unity is based on the special kind of mutual dependence among the individuals who compose it."⁵⁴ It is clear from this definition that Le Bon is not conforming to the usual use of the term "crowd," which is concerned more with the use of physical space than psychology. Park further explains:

Crowd used in this sense differs from the normal meaning of the word in that the usual spatial aspect is ignored. A number of individuals gathered in a square constitutes a crowd in Le Bon's sense only when it possesses a certain psychological nature. On the other hand, an *entire nation* can be a crowd in the psychological sense, without any visible gathering of people. Thus it is the psychological conditions rather than the spatial relationships of individuals which form the essential content of the concept 'crowd.'⁵⁵ (emphasis mine)

Given this understanding of the crowd, it seems that the United States readily fits the definition. Assuming this, Le Bon's psychological politics of the crowd seem applicable to late twentieth-century equivalents of nineteenth-century hysteria. In particular I would like to demonstrate how the crowd, with the help of contemporary media, promotes "hysterical" maladies.

One of the most famous cases of Multiple Personality Disorder (or MPD,)⁵⁶ is the case of psychiatrist Cornelia C. Wilbur's patient, "Sybil." The case was published in book form in 1973 and later made into a film. The author describes it as an example of "grand hysteric," a term used by Charcot in Paris. Because of the case's wide exposure in the United States, psychiatrist Frank W. Putnam says it became "a template against which other patients could be compared and understood."⁵⁷ In addition to serving as a template for psychiatrists, the Sybil case also became one for would-be patients to compare themselves with. What occurred here, broadly speaking, is that the case was presented to the crowd, who consumed it and adopted it as a newfound, newly diagnosable psychological disorder.

The idea of MPD was popularized to such an extent by the media that doctors suddenly began "looking" for MPD diagnoses whether or not they existed. This same situation occurred when Charcot's Tuesday lectures and photographs of hysterics popularized hysteria to the extent that women showed up daily at Salp tri re whether by force or free will. Both occurrences can be understood through the contagion/crowd theory, which also explains what occurred on a more local level at Salp tri re with hysterical imitation of epileptic fits. Troubled by the situation with MPD, psychiatrist David Ross found that "A group knowledge of MPD begins to circulate among the patients and, like a contagion of sorts, it multiplies."⁵⁸

MPD symptoms include depression, history of sexual abuse (real or imagined), desire for independence, and the presence of multiple personalities which themselves exhibit variant personality traits – all very similar to what Charcot and Freud diagnosed as hysteria. It is worth noting that even the individual personalities of MPD are directly parallel with the characteristics of the decadent personality. For example, "bad" MPD personalities are often highly narcissistic, degenerate, sexually "deviant" and rebellious to mention a few traits. These could very well be used to describe decadent or femme fatal characters, such as Salome, Dessentes, or the characters created by the Goncourt Brothers.

Nordau connects modern society's "consequence of fatigue" with the increase in such psychological conditions as hysteria.⁵⁹ This same situation occurs in contemporary society when psychiatrists diagnose what was once called hysteria as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (or CFS).⁶⁰ CFS symptoms include rashes, abdominal pain, extreme fatigue, inability to function in daily life, headaches, dizziness, blurred vision, light sensitivity and facial numbness – any combination of these Freud, Breuer or Charcot would have called hysteria. Nordau says,

Hysteria and degeneration have always existed; but they formerly showed themselves sporadically, and had no importance in the life of the whole community. It was only the vast fatigue which was experienced by the

generation on which the multitude of discoveries and innovations burst abruptly, imposing upon it organic exigencies greatly surpassing its strength, which created favorable conditions under which these maladies could gain ground enormously, and become a danger to civilization.⁶¹

...degenerates, hysterics and neurathenics are not capable of adaptation. That which inexorably destroys them is that they do not know how to come to terms with reality.⁶²

CFS was popularized through the American media in much the same way as MPD. A particular outbreak of CFS in 1984 in Lake Tahoe, Nevada helped to inform the nation at large about the disease. Soon magazines, newspapers, television programs and self-help books were all discussing this new disease, America was hooked.⁶³ The major problem for doctors and academics is determining whether the diagnoses of CFS is correct.

MPD and CFS were able to become the “new hysterias” of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries because their sufferers are predominantly women. Thus they fit the stereotype well. Their diagnoses are based on symptoms that clearly conform to traditional hysteria, and they were easily promoted like hysterics, through the crowd. But does this mean that these new maladies *are* hysteria? Or does the presence of these diseases signal a larger issue, that of societal decadence?

This immanent decadence, continues, it seems, to the present day, as the many hysterical manifestations beyond those of CFS or MPD indicate. Indeed, the two have many other names. Perhaps the most predominant example is the AIDS epidemic and the “hysteria” that surrounds it. Other noteworthy examples include the hysteria surrounding the millennium change (“Y2K”) and the death of Princess Diana.⁶⁴ All of these “hysterical” phenomena clearly signal that hysteria is still alive and well, at least in the Western world. Our age tends to label group expressions as hysterical—as in “mass hysteria”—a cultural diagnosis of groups rather than a psychological diagnosis of individuals.

Hysterical representations have in fact appeared in the work of multimedia artist Beth B at the Hayward Gallery, in London.⁶⁵ Her work, *Hysteria 2000*, references the discourse surrounding nineteenth century representations of hysteria as an illness affecting particularly women. Beth B’s work often incorporates images and sculptures of the various tools that were used to treat the so-called female malady. Her work, she says, offers “a number of entry points into the particular critiques...these critiques focus both on the adequacy and the role of representation itself in the face of medicine and the treatment of women.”⁶⁶

Beth B uses images and sound bites of the stereotypical hysterical

woman that is portrayed in Hollywood film and American television. In *Hysteria 2000*, several video screens show modern women adopting the poses of hysterical attacks first published in Charcot and Richter's *Etude Clinique sur la Grand Hysterie ou Hystero-Epilepsie*. However, most of the installation is contained in a room behind the video screens. The only access to this room is through one of two padded doorways cut into a padded wall – an obvious reference to the insane asylum aesthetic. Small windows in each of the doors allow you to peek into the room before you enter.

Stepping through the doors you realize that the room was only a façade made of one wall. Inside the “room,” paper and wax female figures rotate, suspended from the ceiling. As the catalog notes, at the far end of the room a video projection “inner-cuts three elements: interviews with women, shown from the neck down, speaking about their bodies; talking heads of men quoting doctor’s clinical analyses from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries; and close-up images of women’s faces in expressions of hysterical paroxysm.”⁶⁷ This visual bombardment reflects on hysteria’s influence on contemporary society and women’s thoughts about their bodies. Juxtaposing older representations with late twentieth century representations of hysteria, Beth B comments on the fact that soon even modern ideas of how women should be – how they should behave, and how they are medically treated – might one day look just as absurd as nineteenth century medical treatments for hysteria do to us now.

The historical progression of hysteria is succinctly summarized by Dr. Philip Slavney of Johns Hopkins. Hysteria, he says, “was regarded as a disease – an affliction of the body that troubles the mind.”⁶⁸ This is later reversed, and with the influence of Freud and Breuer, hysteria “was believed by many physicians to be an affliction of the mind that was expressed through a disturbance of the body.”⁶⁹ In our present day, hysteria “has come to imply behavior that produces the *appearance* of a disease,” although, as Showalter adds, “the patient is unconscious of the motives for feeling sick.”⁷⁰ While some speculate that hysteria reached its height at Salpêtrière under Charcot, the best may be yet to come – under a different name. It would seem, given the history examined here, that if hysteria is as widespread as it seems to be, then we are indeed in the midst of another decadent era. If this is so, it may afford opportunities for a better understanding of the context of innovative artistic expression in our own period.

Notes

1 The “proper” medical term for this was *globus hystericus*.

- 2 Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 145.
- 3 Indeed, hysteria as an aspect of the decadent personality is a parallel that has been discussed in connection with literary figures such as the Brothers Goncourt, Walter Pater, Huysmans, and Baudelaire.
- 4 Max Simon Nordau, *Degeneration* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 536. Although Nordau's contagion theory was developed in 1895, the idea still seems to resonate in and pertain to contemporary society, and as noted, will be discussed later.
- 5 Nordau, 27.
- 6 Ibid, 27.
- 7 For more on this subject see Nordau's *Degeneration* especially the section "Decadents and Aesthetes" (book III section III).
- 8 Ilza Veith *Hysteria and the History of a Disease* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 229.
- 9 Veith 230.
- 10 Charcot, J.M., *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière, policlinique du 19 mars, 1889* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1889), 424.
- 11 These body positions were often mimicked epileptic fits and were rarely seen in hysteria outside of Salpêtrière.
- 12 Veith 232.
- 13 At the time of Charcot's practice, hypnotism was viewed as a form of "quack science" akin to mesmerism. Hypnotism as a means of treatment was not seen by many as a viable, reliable, or real form of medical treatment. Most opposition was given by the "Nancy School," a group of investigators who often challenged Charcot's practice at Salpêtrière.
- 14 Charcot devised two main methods for the treatment of hysteria. The first addressed the psychic trauma itself (by removing the patient from its source) while assuring the patients that their hysteria was curable. The second method involved making the patients exercise their affected body parts, and making them more mobile, with the hope of restoring their vitality. These treatments are paralleled by what we now call physical therapy and psychological intervention.
- 15 This was a condition that appeared primarily after World War I and was characterized in males as post-traumatic neurosis. This form of "male hysteria" was regarded as developing out of a specific event (unlike its female counterpart) and as a curable neurosis.
- 16 Mark S. Micale *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and its Interpretations*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 96.
- 17 Micale 97.
- 18 Charcot also worked on four issues of *Iconographies de la Salpêtrière* between 1876 and 1888. See Paul Verhaeghe's *Does the Woman Exist? From Freud's Hysteric to Lacan's Feminine* (New York: Other Press, 1999), 8.
- 19 J.M. Charcot and Paul Richer, *Les Démoniques de l'art*, Amsterdam, 1972, reprinted Paris in 1887, p. v. (quoted in spec. bodies, 176).
- 20 Elaine Showalter *The Female Malady, Women, Madness, and English Culture*,

- 1830-1980 (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 154.
- 21 This is apparent in medical and psychiatric records where patients before Freud were objects and not subjects.
- 22 In other words, Charcot rarely listened to what his patients had to say. He preferred to look for signs of hysteria and neurosis on/in the patient's external and internal physical body. Freud notes that Charcot was often in search of a mental lesion in his patients' brains. He thought it was the main cause of hysteria. Charcot rarely found such lesions.
- 23 This idea is further elaborated in Verhaeghe 7-8.
- 24 Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (New York: Avon, 1966, [1893]), 38.
- 25 Micalé 97.
- 26 Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, 40-41.
- 26 Freud speculated that the reason for this lack of response may be because the majority of his patients unlike Anna O, were not suffering from "pure" hysteria, but rather hysteria combined with various other neuroses.
- 28 Bertha von Pappenheim called this "chimney sweeping."
- 29 Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, 52. "For we found to our great surprise at first that *each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked and in arousing its accompanying affect, and when the patient had described that event in the greatest possible detail and had put the affect into words.* Recollection without affect almost invariably produces no result" (40-41). Freud eventually encountered transference, another important psychoanalytical term.
- 30 For clarification, I do not mean to suggest that society alone (patriarchal or otherwise) created hysteria. Rather, society must have, on some level, contributed to it, since cultural practices play a major role in establishing what is acceptable/non-acceptable behavior.
- 31 This point is often discussed in connection with feminist readings of Freud, such as those by Juliet Mitchell and Julia Kristeva.
- 32 This is not to say that Freud was incorrect in his interpretation, but it does suggest that he may have overlooked an important catalyst of Dora's hysteria, namely the "rules" of the society she lived in and how they "determined" the social impropriety of her actions. Freud's wrote *Studies on Hysteria*: "In the first group are those cases in which the patients have not reacted to a psychical trauma because the nature of the trauma excluded a reaction, as in the case of the apparently irreparable loss of a loved person or because *social circumstances* made a reaction impossible or because it was a question of things which the patient wished to forget, and therefore intentionally *repressed* from his [her] conscious thought and inhibited and suppressed" (44, my italics). While he acknowledges the importance of the social circumstances of the neuroses, how they affect his patients as women is left unaddressed.
- 33 Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, preface to first edition, xx.
- 34 George Frederick Drinka, M.D. *The Birth of Neurosis, Myth, Malady and the Victorians* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1984), 324.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 324.

- 36 Freud and Breuer, 37.
- 37 Such a psycho/soma relationship is a key link to the larger issue of this paper, that is, decadence.
- 38 The Goncourt Brothers often stated that they were hysterical, they just did not understand why.
- 39 Edmund continued to write the *Journal* after Jules' death in 1870. See Robert Baldick, ed. *Pages from the Goncourt Journal* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984.)
- 40 David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 46.
- 41 Robert Baldick, ed. *Pages from the Goncourt Journal* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984)
- 42 *Ibid.* vi.
- 43 Edmund details his first sexual experience with a hideous creature "with a rhomboidal torso fitted with two little arms and two little legs, which, in bed, made her look like a crab on its back." In his initial sexual experience, Jules contracted syphilis that eventually caused his death twenty years later. Throughout their lives, both men displayed disgust for relations with women: "one week of love disgusts us for three months." (Robert Baldick, ed. *Pages from the Goncourt Journal*, vi).
- 44 Weir, 46.
- 45 Weir, 48.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 5i.
- 47 Elaine Showalter 101.
- 48 Elaine Showalter 83.
- 49 Veith, 274.
- 50 Christopher Bollas' *Hysteria* traces the history of hysteria through Freud and recognizes hysteria under its new name, borderline personality disorder.
- 51 See Elaine Showalter *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997)
- 52 Quoted in Showalter, 17.
- 53 I am using the term "crowd" in an abstract sense, meaning the general masses as influenced by various media—print, television, films, etc.
- 54 Robert E. Park, *The Crowd and the Public and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 11.
- 55 Park, 12.
- 56 MPD was renamed "Dissociative Identity Disorder" in the DSM-IV, 1994. However, much of the discourse about this disorder, which I want to focus on here, was written before 1994, which is why I will use the older term MPD.
- 57 Showalter, 165.
- 58 Showalter 168. Originally in Mark Pendergrast, *Victory of Memory: Incest Accusations and Shattered Lives* (Hinesburg, Vt.: Upper Access, 1995), 170-1.
- 59 Nordau, 36.
- 60 I do not mean here to dismiss CFS and MPD as "fictional maladies." I recognize and respect their reality, but they have to be connected to the larger tradition of

hysteria.

61 Ibid, 537.

62 Ibid, 540.

63 For more information see Showalter's *Hystories, Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*.

64 Princess Diana died in Salpêtrière hospital, the very place where modern hysteria was popularized under Charcot.

65 Beth B's work appeared along with many artists in the show entitled "Spectacular Bodies: the Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now" Hayward Gallery, London, England. October 2000-January 2001.

66 Quoted in Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace *Spectacular Bodies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 177.

67 Kemp and Wallace, 183.

68 Showalter 14. Originally in Phillip R. Slavney, *Prescriptives on "Hysteria"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 1-2.

69 Showalter, 14

70 Ibid, 14.

Recasting the Art History Survey: Ethics and Truth in the Classroom Community

Michael Schwartz

“One of the greatest of these [non-democratic] restrictive mechanisms is the present-day school, because it does not develop people but channels them.”¹

- Joseph Beuys,
“Not Just a Few Are Called, But Everyone”

Introduction

Over the past decade or so there has been much talk about recasting the traditional art history survey.² Most of the criticisms have been directed at course structure and content: the limits of formal and stylistic analysis; the dearth of social and political contextualization; the injustices of neocolonialist and patriarchal frameworks; the one-sidedly monumental approach to the historical past; the uncritical celebration of Modernism; and so on.³ The great merit of the symposium panel organized by Susan Glasser is that it has finally opens up focused discussion about the scene of teaching.⁴ For even if we alter *what* we teach – changing the canon, shifting our analytic frameworks – this does not in itself effect *how* we organize classroom practice. Whether one expounds on open form in Rembrandt or sexual politics in Bonheur, the lecture format foregrounds and consecrates the teacher’s institutional authority and singular claim to truth.

This paper will address how we might facilitate a more genuine community of autonomous thinkers in the art-historical classroom. Its argument is divided into five sections. The first is on the strategic importance of establishing sites of community in modernity. The second is on the heterogeneity of classroom obligations. The third examines tensions between nurturing a communal ethic and speaking the truth of art. The fourth moves us towards inventing a classroom community, offering a number of re-arrangements of pedagogical practice so to facilitate student construction of course content. The fifth and longest, which complements and fills out the earlier sections of the study, contends that the themes of the survey course should directly engage issues at stake within our own visual culture so that art history can

make a distinctive contribution to a critical hermeneutics of modernity. As will become clear, the bulk of my remarks are philosophical; I strongly believe that we need to reflect upon the social, political, and ethical stakes of what we do in the classroom. This essay addresses then not only how we might wake up students in the art history survey and revitalize the curriculum, but why do so at all.

Community and Modernity

First I would like to offer a very schematic account of what I mean by community and how higher education contributes to blocking its formation.

Loosely following Hegel's account in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we can say that there are three basic modalities of "self-consciousness," three modes of self-formation that emerge in our everyday practices. All of these involve the desire for self-integrity: that a prior and internalized sense of self correspond to or harmonize with the sense of self emergent and embodied in an ongoing practice.⁵

The first mode of striving for self-integrity is *consumption*. This is when one appropriates what is other than oneself for oneself; one effaces the difference between the prior internalized sense of self and the surrounding otherness. The character of consumption is that the negation or annihilation of external otherness immediately clears the space for the appearance of more otherness, setting up another moment of potential consumption, and so on. Consumption, in the very broad and embracing sense I am using the term, is a mode of self-emergence that readily fuels further consuming. Although consumption is essential for sustaining life, it cannot achieve certainty of self.

A second mode of self-consciousness is *work*. Like consumption it negates the otherness outside oneself, but does so by self-externalization. We come to see a "mirroring" of who we are in the product of our labor. Work is important in achieving self-integrity, but it has significant limitations. First of all, much work these days is "alienated"; although we produce something through our labor, we are often unable to experience the product as self-expressive.⁶ Second, even when work is successfully expressive, the reality transformed by one's efforts is not another human self, hence it is a relatively weak echo of who one is. And yet work matters for our identities. In our daily lives we regularly experience varying degrees of satisfaction with our labors, from dreading tedious bureaucratic paperwork to reveling in expressive acts of writing conference papers and making art.

A third mode of self-consciousness is *recognition*. And this requires another self-consciousness. Recognition is actualized only in interaction with other human beings *qua* persons. In the Hegelian scheme, it is the

mode of self-consciousness that best realizes integrity of self.

There are two extremes of recognitional interactions. One is the master/slave scenario where there is a maximally uneven distribution of power amongst the participants; the other is where unequal power relations are minimized in the realization of a communal spirit.⁷ Hegel makes clear in the *Phenomenology* that the master/slave interaction is ineffective at achieving the integrity of self of both parties. What he does not thematize in the *Phenomenology*, and would do so only in subsequent texts, is that as unequal power among the participants is diminished, there is an increase in the likelihood of achieving mutual respect and the integrity of all involved.⁸ Minimization of domination is a regulative ideal necessary to the formation of community⁹ – community embodied in mutually respectful and recognitional styles of interacting with others. Community is not the donation of a prior rational spirit, but a temporary and local human achievement, realized through historically specific practices, and always requiring struggle, inventiveness, and a smattering of luck.

Let me interject at this point that I see this sketch of self-consciousness as not only pointing towards facets of our historical essence in the West, and perhaps the fundamental ethical promise of our times,¹⁰ but also as gesturing towards some of the woes of our modernity.

Our daily jobs demand lots of work that is mostly alienated, while our institutions tend to close down and colonize public spheres that might otherwise entertain communal interaction. What predominates in our culture are practices of consumption – consuming activities that nourish life in ever more pleasurable and refined ways, but also acts that consume prepackaged subjectivities: body regimes of dieting and exercising; fashion styles that “make a statement”; commodities that once in our possession “reflect” who we are. Because our lives typically lack sufficiently expressive work as well as recognitional interactions that are consistent and regular, we seek self-integrity in the ubiquitous circuits of consumption. Hence the spectacle of modern life, where we purchase not so much the commodity for its use-value, but for how it will make us look to others, what kind of identity it will bestow upon us.¹¹ Of course as a subjectivity that is consumed for the eyes of others, rather than a sense of self that emerges in an ongoing interaction, this form of identity is skin deep and fails to achieve integrity of self; instead, it readily perpetuates further acts and cycles of consuming an identity.¹² Much of the disquiet in our lives, I am suggesting, has to do with the desire to achieve communal self-integrity in a culture governed by all-consuming practices.

Schooling contributes to the problem. From kindergarten onwards the teacher-student relation is a modern form of what Foucault brilliantly diagnosed as pastoral power, where the teacher is responsible for the “souls” of her students.¹³ No doubt this is necessary for the early years of education.

But the same basic relation of teacher-student remains in tact at all levels of schooling. By the time of college and graduate school, students are adults, eligible to vote and to go to war to die, but they remain positioned as subordinate to the teacher. The university professor is defined in our culture as a specialist, an expert in field of study, hence the possessor of certain truths. Lateral interactions amongst the students are rendered to a minimum; students mostly enter into competitive relations and on occasion help each other with assignments. But the primary relation is that between professor and student, exemplified in the standard classroom arrangement of students sitting side by side facing not each other but the teacher, who stands at the front of the room pronouncing the truth of the matter at hand.

We like to convince ourselves that the humanities and social sciences are requisite for students becoming citizens, but traditional classroom formats forestall students engaging in practices of mutual recognition. Pastoral power is directed towards normalizing thought. This derails the development of what Kant called *Mündigkeit*, the maturity to think for oneself without final appeal to an external authority.¹⁴ By interacting with each other in practices of respectful deliberation, students become more active learners and less slavish to authority. They become autonomous thinkers not so much by going to the library and writing a paper to satisfy the teacher's expectations (which positions the teacher as the master who authorizes the truth of the student's thought), but primarily by interacting with each other in open formats of dialogue.¹⁵ Yet our educational procedures and assumptions – the primacy of lecturing, our deep seeded positivistic and monological views of truth, the necessity of “careful” grading – do much to counter students becoming a community of mature, autonomous thinkers.

Classroom Obligations

Having outlined the plight of community in modernity and how college schooling contributes to this malaise, I want now to reflect on the phenomenology of teaching, especially as regards obligations in the classroom. This sections intends to point out how we teachers tend to conflate the pedagogical obligation to educate students with the administrative imperative to normalize and discipline a variegated student body.¹⁶

In being a teacher, one inevitably endeavors to be a *good* teacher, to teach well. That is to say, the good of teaching is embodied in its practice. But what counts as this good is not a fixed end, but an open field of possible outcomes. For there are many ways of succeeding at teaching, and some of these are never known in advance. Nevertheless, we can surmise that these outcomes all directly or indirectly involve the education of students, so that the good of teaching always has in the end an obligation to others. The

student-as-Other "calls" us to teach well; as a teacher one is always already obligated by the future well-being of his or her students.

Not only is the good of teaching a flexible end, but the Good itself is heterogenous. For in teaching in the classroom, one is not only obligated to the students, but also to many people not immediately present: administrators (to uphold the University's reputation); departmental colleagues (coverage of topics requisite for subsequent courses in the Art major); colleagues in art history (respecting the current state of scholarship); family (keeping the job to bring home a paycheck); and so on. The practice of teaching is always interwoven into other practices, be they administrative, collegial, professional, or familial.¹⁷ So, for example, when giving a midterm examination, a teacher is obliged by students' rights to learn, but also by administrative imperatives for proper grading, collegial pleas for skill development, and more. How one structures the examination is a "response" to these heterogenous demands.¹⁸

I have been speaking of the practice of teaching, but there is also the practice of being a student. Although teacher and student practices require each other, there are facets of being a student that exceed what might count for a teacher as properly educational. A good example is the growing obsession with getting good grades, whether this is to please Mom and Dad, impress a girlfriend, or enhance the chance of obtaining a high paying job. There is noticeable tension between the overlapping horizons of teacher and student, where the good of teaching to educate students is incommensurable with the good of being a student as this is increasingly dominated by the pressures of economic security. Rather than denigrating how students are now oriented, we need to except these circumstances and invent new ways of teaching well.

My own experience is that as long as grades loom large on the horizon, students will orient themselves towards academic "success." I have therefore attempted to downplay grades, creating seminars that are A/ F (a pass/fail format), evaluation based upon completing very demanding course work with sustained effort. This helps free up students to redefine themselves as learners rather than focus on what grade they will get. Occasionally someone figures out how to abuse the situation and steal an A; but I have not found that to be a sufficient reason to curb these experiments. The problem rests not with the students but with ourselves; for the most difficult thing to do is to stop playing the judge, to stop confusing one's administrative obligation to normalize the student body (and satisfy managerial imperatives to quantify student performance) with one's educational obligation to open up qualitatively distinctive paths of learning for the diversity of the students in our classrooms. There is far greater freedom in how one teaches than we permit ourselves to believe.

Communal Ethics and Telling the Truth

So far I have noted that our current classroom formats prohibit the modeling of community. I have also indicated that the activity of teaching involves a heterogeneity of obligations, most of which are non-educational. Now, even if we are successful at inventing classroom formats that foreground educational imperatives, the establishment of community is not without its difficulties. And this has to do with a certain tension between the regulative ideal of equal power among all participants in lieu of the obligation to speak the truth of art.

As discussed above, students cannot and do not readily become autonomous thinkers and doers when they are performing within a predominantly authoritarian situation. Passive learning is ineffective in nurturing ways of thinking and seeing that are conducive to becoming a "good citizen." Classroom dynamics need to de-emphasize the teacher's institutional authority as expert, and in its place sustain an atmosphere of rational dialogue and exchange where the students among themselves become active constructors of the course work. This approach empowers students, respects cultural, racial, and gender differences, and develops a sense of good will. It opens the way towards establishing community in the classroom.

But the necessary rationale of the art history survey is to speak the truth of art. And in this regard the teacher's greater experience with art-historical matters is simply requisite for guiding discussion and modeling learning. Striving to establish a classroom community must de-emphasize the teacher as authority, yet the pursuit of truth can lead one to exercise that institutional role. These two trajectories are in a constant state of tension. Nor is some final resolution possible; we instead must constantly devise ad hoc strategies to negotiate these poles.¹⁹ We must intuit when it is proper to interject key information, redirect the flow of a conversation, correct blatant falsehoods, or (what we academic find hardest of all) just keep our mouths shut.

Towards the Classroom Community

To begin incorporating these educational ideals into classroom practice, we need to delimit lecturing; its purpose should be restricted to modeling art-historical skills and offering pertinent information not found in reading assignments. The vast majority of class time is to involve active student participation. Depending on the number of students in the course this can take a variety of forms. For the 25 or so students in my classes, I initially use the Socratic method for exercising the rudiments of visual explication (having them read beforehand Meyer Schapiro's landmark essay "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art").²⁰ During the first two or three class meetings, we explore the differences among: (1) analytic descriptions of an artwork; (2) syn-

thesis of such descriptions into an interpretation; and (3) modifying an interpretation through historical contextualization. We start by practicing basic description according to the general contours of Schapiro's essay. Fairly quickly the students get a sense that three moments of the investigation are not so neatly divisible but are conjoined in the hermeneutic circle of understanding; that what seems like a simple description is not neutral and unbiased, but presupposes an interpretive direction as well as unexamined assumptions about the work's context.

After two or three sessions, when the class has developed rudimentary proficiency at description, I have the students section off into small groups. The task of each group is to come up with interpretations of the artwork under study. I leave the room during the discussions, which are very lively. After 20 to 30 minutes I return and sit off to the side and do my best to "hide." The groups then present their findings to each other by sending a representative up in front of the class and next to the projected slide. The students listen to each other, taking notes on what the other groups have come up with. After each representative has gone there opens a general discussion amongst the students so to evaluate the various descriptions and interpretations. I continue to remain off to the side, staying as silent and neutral as possible, interjecting only when discussion gets completely stuck, usually by asking a question. When the student exchanges exhaust, I am left with a number of options: using the student's own language to summarize the results of the discussion (without smoothing over divergences in viewpoints); adding information that supplements or complements what has already been said; raising additional issues based upon what directions the students have been going; pointing out relative strengths and weaknesses in approaches; or saying nothing at all (and thereby divesting my authority). A variant of this procedure is to have students prepare their interpretations as a homework assignment; this allows the class to leap more rapidly into discussion.

Fewer artworks are shown during class meetings than with the standard lecture format; but students achieve a far greater depth and complexity of understanding. Moreover, students are held responsible for all works reproduced in the art-history textbook; during exams they are expected to apply their skills and knowledge to artworks not discussed in class. Paper assignments further exercise skills in description and interpretation.

After a number of successive class sessions of students doing most of the interpretive work, their sense of community grows, but what happens from time to time is that they lapse into older, less rigorous habits of thought. Feelings of empowerment and solidarity tend to displace the rigors of thought and analysis. It becomes necessary on such occasions for the instructor to interject more strongly than usual, reminding the students about the tasks of description and interpretation, which has the inevitable consequence of re-

iterating the teacher's authority and disrupting the communal spirit. This is an instance of the abiding tension between facilitating the formation of student community and guiding rigorous approaches to the study of works of art.

Art History as Critical Hermeneutic of Modernity

1. Spectacular Conditions

Let us say that a particular art history survey class is working well, that the students have formed a community of interpreters, and that they have forged considerable skill at visual analysis. What then is the critical social significance of a course in art history as opposed to literature, philosophy, or general cultural studies?

It is a truism of contemporary thought that we live in a society bombarded with images; in the extreme Baudrillardian version, the world has become an imagistic simulacrum. Because of its longstanding investigation of images, art history would seem to be the established academic discipline best prepared to reflect historically on the emergence and shape of the spectacle. Refigured more broadly as the study of visual culture, courses in art history would empower students to cope with the mediascape in which they live. And yet this laudable project of reform, which many people are developing in their classrooms, commonly fails to advance an actual critical engagement with images.

When art history is pressed into service as an intervention into cultural politics, the images shown in the classroom are typically deployed as foils for introducing a prior discursive agenda about identity, gender, sexuality, postcolonialism, multiculturalism, and so on — hence without regard for an image's historical specificity *qua* image. The “logocentricity” of traditional art-historical methods, like iconography, has been maintained in postmodern approaches, sometimes with the stated intent of advancing the linguistic turn proper to the human sciences.²¹ This is not to say that study of the differing historical modes of pictorial signification is not an important topic. On the contrary. For exemplary studies in this regard — which are sensitive to (1) the non-linguistic character of pictorial semiosis; (2) the figurative mechanisms of pictorial sense; and (3) the historical institutions of signification — see Mark Roskill's recent work on landscape and portraiture. These new interpretive frameworks are most welcome for the revitalization and renewal of the discipline; for they have broadened the kinds of questions we ask of the visual past. But such frameworks regularly do not take into account the ontological specificity of images. It remains therefore to be seen how art history, even when broadened into a history of images, might singularly contribute to and extend a critical hermeneutics of modernity.

In this final section of the essay, I would like to mark out in the very broadest of contours how a *historical ontology of images* can disclose changing patterns of *pictorial mimesis* and thereby reshape a survey of world visual cultures with the practical intent of illuminating and empowering student reflection upon their place in the modern spectacle. In a paper focused on aesthetic education, I cannot even begin to argue adequately for what is peculiar to the ontology of images nor flesh out the specific mechanisms of pictorial mimesis. My aim is to sketch what such a project might look like, and how it might move art history in the direction of what Foucault called a "history of the present."²²

2. Towards an Ontology of Pictures

No prominent Continental thinker of the twentieth-century was more profoundly engaged with the ontology of the visible than Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In his last publication, "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty offered some terse but remarkable observations about painting:

Thus there appears a 'visible' to the second power, a carnal essence or icon of the first. It is not a faded copy, a *trompe l'oeil*, or another *thing*. The animals painted on the walls of Lascaux are not there in the same way as are the fissures and limestone formations. Nor are they *elsewhere*. Pushed forward here, held back there, supported by the wall's mass they use so adroitly, they radiate about the wall without ever breaking their elusive moorings. I would be hard pressed to say *where* the painting is I am looking at. For I do not look at it as one looks at a thing, fixing it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it.²³

This passage adumbrates an original theory of pictoriality. I would like to offer a brief interpretive gloss that foregrounds certain Heideggerian themes.

For Merleau-Ponty, the pictorial is constituted out of yet remains embedded within the visible. As a local infolding of the visible upon itself – generating a virtual space enveloped by lived space – a picture is a doubling of the visible, a "'visible' to the second power." Because of this doubling, one does not simply look *at* a picture, as one would at a tree, but one sees *with* the image or *according* to it. In the very act of beholding, a picture reflexively guides and informs us how and what to see.

In seeing with a picture, one's "gaze" (*regard*) dwells as if in "the halos of Being" (*les nimbes de l'Être*), a formulation that directs us to the thought of Heidegger. Earlier in "Eye and Mind," Merleau-Ponty had referred to that "actual Being" of our intersubjective insertion in the world that is a "primordial historicity."²⁴ Although not a pronounced theme of the essay, it would seem that, for Merleau-Ponty, Being is historical – that the "halos of

Being” have an affinity with Heideggerian *Seinsgeschichte*.²⁵ But whereas Heidegger praised poetry and philosophy as the highest ways of attuning to such ontological sendings, Merleau-Ponty looked to nonlinguistic media:

Now art, especially painting, draws upon this fabric of brute meaning [*sens brut*] which [scientific] operationalism would prefer to ignore. Art and only art does so in full innocence. From the writer and the philosopher, in contrast, we want opinions and advice. We will not allow them to hold the world suspended. We want them to take a stand; they cannot waive the responsibilities of humans who speak... Only the painter is entitled to look at everything without being obliged to appraise what he sees... What is this fundamental of painting, perhaps of all culture?²⁶

In contrast to the later Heidegger’s stress on language, Merleau-Ponty sees the pictorial image as opening up privileged access to a concentrated gathering and local intensification of Being. Images shines forth in halo-like radiance, instructing us in the visible (and invisible) contours of a primordial historicity, and as such open and focus the ontological makeup of a historical world.²⁷

Pictures “draw upon the fabric of brute meaning [*sens brut*]” by folding this very fabric, constituting a visible to the second power. But what more precisely can be said about the visible? It must be stressed that for Merleau-Ponty vision is not in the first instance an act of a disembodied subject, a mind or consciousness that transcends the world, but is always already “practical,” always already inextricably intertwined with one’s motility and implacement in the world. Said otherwise, a picture is an “unmediated” gathering and reflection of Being because both picture and beholder are chiasmatic facets of the world’s Flesh, entailing that an image always has an irreducibly embodied “meaning” (*sens*).²⁸ By these lights, contemporary art history appears not only “logocentric” but overly intellectualist in its presupposing the ontological primacy of the spectatorial stance (expressed in methodological metaphors like that of the “period eye”) and its correlative neglect of the primordial insertion of images into specific environments of existential comportment.

3. Pictorial Mimesis

According to the view I am propounding, one is always already in the world, and it is within the world that one encounters a picture; this picture itself opens up another “world” – an image-world – that is enveloped by and located within the world of beholding. And since a beholder always already assumes a fundamentally “practical” relationship to and motile engagement with this

image-world, the picture opens up an imaginary world *within and in relation* to the lived environment in which one dwells.²⁹

This construal alters what it means for a style to be *mimetic*. Pictorial mimesis is most often thought of in terms of the spectatorial stance, that a mode of depiction looks “realistic” or “naturalistic” because it somehow captures or corresponds to the way the world appears to the theoretic gaze. But mimesis is most basically the exercise of taking up ways of being in the world, the process of becoming other. Human practices are not “wired in” but require miming the comportments of other people, with this propensity for “othering” most intensive during childhood and continuing throughout one’s life.³⁰

An image is mimetic, then, to the extent that it effectively styles a way of being in the world. Unlike sculptural figures, picture-worlds withdraw from existential space while still enveloped within and by that space; they open up another space amidst and in relation to the space of our existence, what we might call a *space of the imaginary*. (By way of contrast, sculpture more directly inserts itself into existential space, which does not mean that it can have no mimetic force.) When the imaginary space of a picture is relatively shallow and the figures non-volumetric, the image-world is “otherworldly”; but when the virtual space is comparatively deep and the figures more volumetric, the image-world is more “thisworldly.” In the latter case we are more likely to assume an empathetic posture and identity with the certain figures (who they are, what they do), incorporating this imaginary self-understanding into our everyday being in the world.³¹

Renaissance paintings, then, are more imitative than medieval icons less on account of some purportedly new perceptualist “realism” and more in line with an epochal leap in the mimetic capacity of pictures. To give just one example, dorsal figures emerged in paintings of the fourteenth and fifteenth century. Because the spatial orientation of such figures parallels that of a beholder confronting the painting, one imaginatively takes up the action of such dorsal characters within the virtual space of the historical narrative. This instructs us how to conduct ourselves in the everyday world, a moral lesson directed to our bodily being and underwritten by the sacred authority of the religious tale.³²

Earlier medieval pictures in the Italian tradition do not have dorsal figures, and in general are less forcibly mimetic. Such images typically iconicize narrative actions and present holy figures in an “otherworldly” manner with the effect that in the last instant such figures exemplify what we *cannot* become. That is to say, we may all strive to imitate the life of Christ, but a Vita icon of St. Francis presents the saint in his temporal and spatial transcendence, locating his example beyond our mortal grasp. Such images project limit-ideals of earthly existence; and, further, even as we emulate the saintly virtues, it is left unspecified how to do so in the world, what would be a proper course of

action to take. Renaissance painting marked a epochal shift in the history of Western images by laying out more specifically how one ought to conduct oneself.

Inheriting the modes of representation proper to postmedieval visual culture, modernity transformed and intensified pictorial mimesis. Along with a quantitative explosion and dispersion of pictorial imagery, one of the most significant changes has been the emergence of moving pictures, which with regard to the mimetic imaginary provide a temporally more precise and intensive manner of modeling comportments.³³ I would suggest that there is a parallel development in the history of pictorial mimesis. Medieval images offer limits-ideal of proper conduct yet present few precise models for how one is to emulate the saintly life in actual worldly practice. In contrast, postmedieval pictures model specific actions; they are more intensely mimetic and more akin to disciplining behavior. Moreover, this latter modality of picturing has been intensified and transformed in modernity through the advent of moving images which model temporally the minutiae of bodily activity. With practices of mutual recognition never quite living up to the diffuse but pervasive promise of community, we compensate by readily "buying into" the imaginary senses of self embodied in the images of the mediascape. So, even from this all too brief account, I hope it is fair to say that our understanding of the stakes and contours of the mimetic imaginary in contemporary visual culture has been enhanced through our reformulation of art history as a critical hermeneutic of our times.

No doubt I have under argued for what an historical ontology of images might look like; and the historical scheme of medieval, postmedieval, and modern visual cultures to which I refer is barely a sketch. But my intent in this final section of the paper has only been to indicate ways the art history survey might be wrought to focus genuine critical reflection upon the spectacle of modernity. (Another crucial theme, beyond the purview of this discussion, is the autonimization of art in modernity, and art's consequent internalization of and resistance to spectacular culture.) The introduction of such themes into classroom discussion can readily promote the community of student-interpreters to re-think their ways within the sight lines of contemporary existence. For it has been my experience that rather than making the survey class more abstract and obscure, themes like pictorial mimesis help bring discussion to bear more directly and concretely on the students' own everyday experiences and life frustrations.

In this essay I have been advancing that we transform the art history survey into a community of student interpreters. This entails foregrounding educational imperatives above administrative and professional obligations. I have gone further and advocated that this is may not be enough, that art

history must itself be rethought in order to introduce approaches that might better lead students towards critical engagement with their own visual culture. Reformatting the survey in such ways is therefore not only an act of pedagogical reform but a political move as well; it requires that we teachers, even as we introduce themes of study like sexual politics and pictorial mimesis, must give up our institutional role as the final jury and judge in matters of art-historical truth and openly celebrate the creativity and autonomy of student thought. This is not easy to do; for we have been deeply socialized into imposing our authority. But the well-being of our students demands that we try.

Notes

- ¹ Joseph Beuys, "Not Just a Few Are Called, But Everyone," in *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992), p.892.
- ² For example, see *The Art Journal* 54 (Fall 1995), the entire issue of which is on "Rethinking the Introductory Art History Survey."
- ³ These themes reflect art history's ongoing self-reflexive "crisis." For a sampling of such concerns, see the theoretical and methodological essays thematically organized in each issue of *The Art Bulletin* between December 1994 and September 1997.
- ⁴ An earlier and shorter version of this essay was presented in a panel session titled "Wake Up!: Prompting Student Input in Art History Survey Courses" at the Southeastern College Art Conference held in Richmond, VA, October 1997.
- ⁵ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), pp.104ff. I borrow the felicitous term "integrity" from Charles Taylor, *Hegel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975), pp.148ff. "Integrity" is an interpretive rendering in English of Hegel's phrase *Gewißenheit seiner selbst* (certainty of self). In the necessarily schematic presentation that follows, I shall be eliding contemporary distinctions among and debates about self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect as they pertain to integrity of self and practices of mutual recognition.
- ⁶ Here I am invoking Marx's critical re-assessment of Hegel's notion of labor. Whereas in his account of the master/slave relationship Hegel stresses that the slave recognizes himself in his labor even as his work is done on behalf of the master, Marx emphasizes that modern work under the conditions of capital and wage labor is "estranged" and "alienated"; see Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International, 1964), pp.106-119.
- ⁷ This is a Foucaultian manner of restating certain conditions of mutual recognition. On the power embodied in interactions, see Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power" in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1983), pp.219-222; and on freedom as "maximized" in the minimization of unequal power distribution among the interacting agents, cf. idem, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), pp.281-301, especially pp.298-299. In my estimation, a crucial text for Foucault on these matters is Heidegger's discussion of the two poles of solicitude (*Fürsorge*) in *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp.158-159.

⁸ On mutual recognition in the Hegelian corpus, see now Robert R. Williams, *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁹ Cf. Thomas McCarthy's interpretation of Habermas's theory of communicative as a refiguring of Kantian regulative ideals as operative ideals embodied in dialogic practices of argumentation, in his *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1991), pp.1-3 and passim.

¹⁰ What I am calling the "fundamental ethical promise of our times" is simply the achievement of self-integrity via regular practices of mutual recognition. Following implications in Habermas's reading of Hegel, J. M. Bernstein has developed a similar account under the notion of modernity's "causality of fate"; see his *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), and idem, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State UP, 1992), p.284, n.46. See also the important discussion of honor, dignity, and the modern problemization of recognition in Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1991), pp.46-52.

¹¹ For analysis of the spectacle, see Guy DeBord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994). On spectacular consumption as oriented towards styling how one looks to the other, see Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp.11-12. And on the current mass media packaging of "rebel" identities, see Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland, eds., *Commodify Your Dissent: Salvos from "The Baffler"* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1997).

¹² Another way to put this is that the possession of commodities sustains identity more in line with "having" rather than "being" a self.

¹³ On the emergence in modernity of procedures of normalization, which includes the re-structuring of education, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979); and on pastoral power and its incorporation into modern governmentality, see idem, "Politics and Reason," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), pp.57-85.

¹⁴ See Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?," in *On History*, ed. Lewis White Beck, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp.3-10. For a reworking of the themes of Kant's text, see Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, pp.303-319.

- ¹⁵ Two of the most prominent proponents of dialogue for the constitution of ethical/political life are Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas. For good critical discussion of their respective theories, see Hans Herbert Kögler, *The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics after Gadamer and Foucault*, trans. Paul Hendrickson (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1996).
- ¹⁶ The discussion in this section of practices, obligations, and the Good draws upon: (i) Martin Heidegger's existential analytic of Dasein; (ii) Emmanuel Levinas's meditations on the ethical relation of asymmetrical obligation to the Other; and (iii) Stephen David Ross's views on the heterogeneity of the Good as these have been developed in the recent work of Jason Wirth.
- ¹⁷ On practical holism, see Hubert Dreyfus, "Holism and Hermeneutics," *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1980): 3-23.
- ¹⁸ Cf. Derrida's quasi-Levinasian remarks: "If I conduct myself particularly well with regard to someone, I know that it is to the detriment of an other; of one nation to the detriment of another nation, of one family to the detriment of another family, of my friends to the detriment of other friends or non-friends, etc. This is the infinitude that inscribes itself within responsibility; otherwise there would be no ethical problems or decisions" (Jacques Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in Simon Critchley et al., *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe [London and New York: Routledge, 1996], p.86).
- ¹⁹ When this balance is achieved, however fragile the communal atmosphere, the situation is set for nurturing *critical thinking* — a turn of phrase often uncritically used these days. I would recommend that we return to the sense of "critical" in its originary enlightened use that goes back to Kantian critique. Critical thinking in this vein is radical, when thought comes to reflect on its own conditions and procedures, when thinking comes to question itself in the process of learning to think otherwise. Thinking critically is very difficult for all of us. In our age of sound bites and fleeting images, where we passively consume media messages, the ways we think and see are powerfully conditioned (despite our liberalist fantasies to the contrary). It is fundamental to college teaching to produce communal-civic environments where students (and teachers) can freely exercise critical thought and learn to perceive anew. And this, I might add, is best grasped as a collective project. For a Foucaultian proposal on what it might mean to think otherwise, see my "Critical Replemization: Foucault and the Task of Modern Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 91 (1998): 19-29.
- ²⁰ Meyer Schapiro, "On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art: Field and Vehicle in Image-Signs," in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), pp.1-32.
- ²¹ As W. J. T. Mitchell puts it: "Now that art history is awake, at least to the linguistic turn, what will it do? The predictable alternatives are already flooding the learned journals in the form of discoveries that the visual arts are 'sign systems' informed by 'conventions,' that paintings, photographs, sculptural objects, and architectural monuments are fraught with 'textuality' and 'discourse.' A more interesting alternative, however, is suggested by the very resistance of the visual arts to the linguistic turn. If a pictorial turn is indeed

occurring in the human sciences, art history could very well find its theoretical marginality transformed into a position of intellectual centrality, in the form of a challenge to offer an account of its principal theoretical object — visual representation — that will be usable by other disciplines in the human sciences” (*Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994], pp.14-15).

²² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp.30-31.

²³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Gary A. Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1993), p.126.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.123.

²⁵ For inquiry in the history of being, see the essays in Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” p.123.

²⁷ For a start on what a historical ontology of images might look like, see my “Raphael’s Authorship in the *Expulsion of Heliodoros*,” *The Art Bulletin* 79 (September 1997): 469-492.

²⁸ Paul Crowther has argued for the importance of the embodied meaning of artworks in a trilogy of studies; see his *Critical Aesthetics and Postmodernism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); *idem*, *Art and Embodiment: from Aesthetics to Self-Consciousness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); and *idem*, *The Language of Twentieth-Century Art: A Conceptual History* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1997).

²⁹ Hence there is a *twofoldness* in the worldhood of a picture: (1) the picture as a thingly component woven into the world-contexture; and (2) the imaginary world opened up by the picture. Cf. the seminal discussion of twofoldness in Richard Wollheim’s *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), chapter 2. Whereas for Wollheim twofoldness is internal to a picture (via the interplay of surface and virtual space), in the account I am developing twofoldness is relational to the environment in which beholder and picture chiasmatically reside. From this latter perspective, Wollheim’s account appears “worldless” and upholds (despite the invocation of human embodiment at one stage of his argument) the priority of the spectatorial stance.

³⁰ On mimesis as othering, see Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). And on the otherness of oneself, see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Division One, chapter 4.

³¹ Cf. the analyses of abstraction and empathy as the two poles of artistic volition in Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1997).

³² I have begun to make a case for the greater mimesis of Renaissance paintings, paying specific attention to the case of dorsal figures, in “Beholding and its Displacements in Renaissance Painting,” in *Place and Displacement in the Renaissance: Essays from the 25th Annual CEMERS Conference*, ed. Al Vos (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1995), pp.223-254.

³³ In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault maps an epochal shift in the history of social

power: from the premodern exercise of sovereign might over bodies that transgress the law to the modern micromangement and disciplining of docile bodies. The latter regime is normalizing in that the very movements of the body are regulated "from within" and are constantly checked, rechecked, evaluated, and retrained, so to ensure the maximum efficiency of the social body. Although the premodern regime has social norms, there is no exact manner of how to act within the bounds of the law, nor is licit behavior monitored for its efficiency.

Contributors

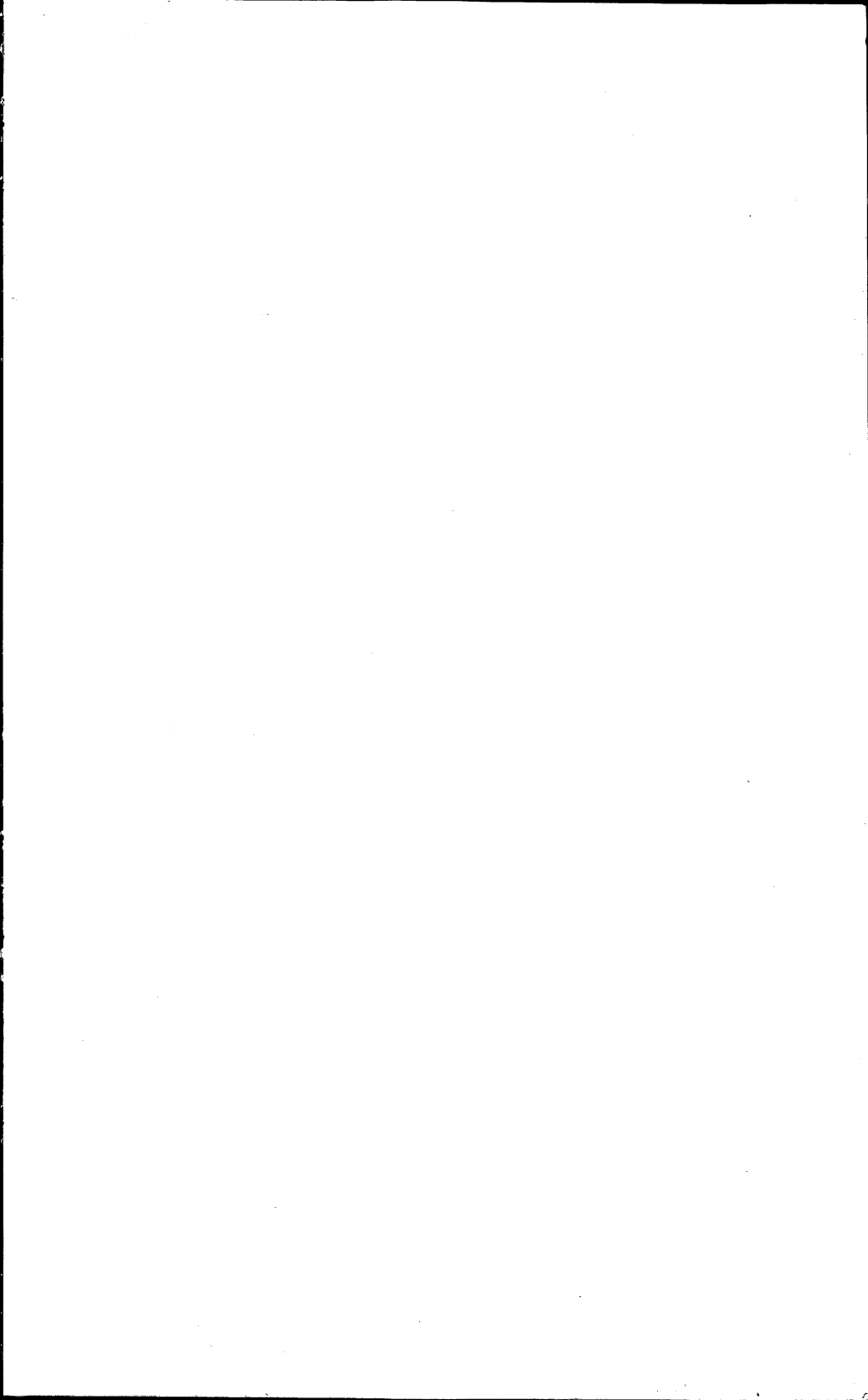
John Hultberg is a New York painter who has written several volumes of memoirs and numerous novels about his experience as an artist.

Sarah Bielski, Mary Cullinane, Kempton Mooney, and Kristen Oelrich are students in the graduate program of the Department of Art at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

Michael Schwartz is an Associate Professor of Art History at Augusta State University.

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Art Department
State University of New York at Stony Brook
Stony Brook, NY 11794-5400

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