



# Eichborn.

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The majority of those who are alive today, crossing the arena exhilarated or deafened by their own noise, should not forget that there is a vast audience watching them from the gallery. The dead can give no orders, they can't sue us to assert their sleeping rights; it is our word alone that counts. But their silence asks: "We played for on the flute, we sang laments – did your hear nothing?" Our sense of humanity should be strong enough, and our imagination vivid enough, for us to answer: "Because the pace of our games is faster than yours, we nearly forgot the more reflective rules of your game. But you are right, we need to be told: you can only gain your own history for yourself if you speak to those who have gone before, and take account of those who are to follow."

Arno Borst

I

Return of the Butterfly

We have come a long way from the Stoic philosophy that promised moral dignity to the people of the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> In a world of mere use-values, absolute dedication to a cause that demands renunciation and brings no reward is bound to look like a poor investment. Festivities, art, and even waste are measured by their use-value, and it is puzzling for us to read that medieval peasants were willing to ruin themselves "because, no matter how poor they were, they had no choice but to offer their bride a cape of red cloth on their wedding day."<sup>2</sup> The end of the century that invented the industrial-scale production of corpses witnessed the triumph of a belief that immortal bodies can be created. For the time being, the scalpel is still needed to ensure eternal youth. We believe happiness is at our disposal; we want to be artists, incarnate divinities, or divine devils who can take the places left vacant by the gods of whom (according to Theodor Adorno) all that has survived is their envy.

"Because the instantaneous sensation means more to us than the sustained imaginative pursuit, we fall into that typically Romantic predicament which Wordsworth, in 1800, called a 'degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation'."<sup>3</sup> We may have rid ourselves of the Devil, but who could doubt that he has bequeathed us the spirit of banality as the legacy of his unreality?<sup>4</sup>

In one of his scrapbooks, Lichtenberg notes that for most people, a lack of belief in one thing is based on blind faith in another.<sup>5</sup> "Big bang" is our term for the story of creation; the angels' capacity for bilocation has been passed on to electrons in an expanding universe; the heavenly hosts of light waves take two million years to travel to the nearest galactic cloud in Andromeda; the Great Attractor has risen up to become the god who suffers no other gods beside him; Maxwell's demon has visited Sacred Entropy upon us, and there are demonic quanta in a negative state producing holes in nothingness. The myths we have eliminated are returning to haunt us from the celestial realms of scientific rationality.<sup>6</sup> Since this sphere is as inaccessible to the layman as the supralunary one formerly was to mortals, we have come to depend on popularisations. As we can no longer distinguish between mystifications of things unimaginable and utter nonsense, we have lost our sense of what is inconceivable.

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<sup>1</sup> See the important work on this by Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (London, 1946), which he finished shortly before his death in New York in 1945. On the revival of Stoic ideas in the seventeenth century, see pp. 218-219.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Duby, *Saint Bernard, l'art cistercien* (Paris, 1979), pp. 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, 3rd ed. (London, 1985), p. 41.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Borges, „A Comment on August 23, 1944,“ in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York, 1999), pp. 210-211.

<sup>5</sup> Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, vol. 1, p. 508 (L 670).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Histoire de lynx* (Paris, 1991), pp. 10-11.

Redeemed from faith, we damn and deify.<sup>7</sup> It would be hard to idolize something more unreal than the present age, except perhaps the stillbirths of permanent innovation. We scorn the salon painters of the nineteenth century in exactly the same way that the twenty-first will mock our own colossal trumpery, whose spiritual kinship with totalitarian kitsch escapes us only because we behave like Clever Hans in the fairy tale.<sup>8</sup> Fear of committing misjudgments has never saved anyone from misjudgment; on the contrary, it appears to prove incontrovertibly that we are denying our own reasons for wanting to be deceived.

To believe that the present age must be immune to error since all the information there could possibly be simply rains down whenever we press a button is to fall victim to a double illusion. First, no one can absorb more information than the short span of life permits, and second, the quantity and the effortless ease of reception mean stupidities multiply incomparably faster than the fruits of thought that are hidden deep in the jumble of information.<sup>9</sup>

We are prisoners of a technological universe in which the progressive impoverishment of the natural world runs parallel with an ever poorer cultural world. Blind to the magnificence of the world of animals and plants – inexplicable in terms of use-value – we are inclined not to imitate nature’s artfulness, but to transfer her merciless dictates to the realm of culture – thereby indulging in what Panofsky refers to as “insectolatry.”<sup>10</sup>

The superstitious notion that genius can be weighed in gold could only have deployed its fatal power through the divorce between art and science, mind and nature, head and hand. In today’s art market of yesterday’s latest styles, it recalls the era of the tulip fraud. According to a saying of Valéry’s, “Nothing leads more certainly to perfect barbarity, than an exclusive attachment to the pure spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

Pure abstraction reflects the real abstraction of bucks, the “toads” of Marseus’s painting, and the fate of the painter Mark Rothko illustrates the kind of snakes you have to swallow when the only standard of evaluation you use is the cash of the “rich bastards” against whom you think you are painting.

Convinced that “interesting painting” expresses not what you see, but rather what you think, the Abstract Expressionist Rothko did his utmost to mystify himself in his giant murals. Commissioned to paint the walls of an expensive restaurant, he resolved to “ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch” among the “richest bastards in New York,” using his paintings to make them feel “they are trapped in a room where all the doors and windows are blocked up, so that all they can do is butt their heads forever against the wall.” But a trial meal at the Four Seasons showed him that the bastards had not the slightest intention of looking up from the expensive delicacies on their plates to spare a single thought for his last judgment on them in paint.

Furious, he returned his cash advance and signed a contract with some other bastards: “the greatest contract ever signed by a living artist.” One million dollars was the price for the reserve side of self-mystification: the humiliation of self-betrayal. Feeling he had sold his soul, Rothko took his own life a year after signing the contract.<sup>12</sup>

Where there is nothing greater than the ego, art must inevitably be mistaken for life. By what standard could a work be judged, in a community of artists that combines a belief in the “healthy truth that I am here” with the hard view of

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Odo Marquard’s introduction to the article *Malum* in *Historisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 5, pp. 654-655.

<sup>8</sup> He leaves all the thinking to his mother and is always getting everything wrong by applying the advice appropriate in the previous situation to a new one. See *The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Mrs. Edgar Lucas (London, 1909), pp. 217-222.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Stanislaw Lem, „Zu Tode informiert,“ *Der Spiegel* 11 (1996).

<sup>10</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Harmondsworth, 1970).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy*, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> All quotations are from Jack Flam, „The Agonies of Success,“ *New York Review of Books* 40, no. 20 (2 December 1983), pp. 36-39 (review of James E. B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography*).

the contemporary age that even the “greatest genius” can never leap beyond the boundaries of its epoch?<sup>13</sup> Those who bow down to such dogmas must be permitted every liberty. Freed from all restraint, each is at once his own tyrant and the slave of his own time.

It is not from a loss of the center that the fine arts are suffering, but from a fixation of the center. Only the ephemeral half of Baudelaire’s definition of *modernité* has been left over;<sup>14</sup> and a hemiplegic modernity is not modernity. Cut off from the immutable, it has lost its spirit. Without a grammar, it can never be decided whether someone stands above grammar or below it.<sup>15</sup> Those who have never mastered any rules are incapable of transforming them. The disorder of a lack of rules is identical with rigidity. Whether figurative or abstract painter, video artist or performance artist, every producer is condemned by the absolutization of innovation to a lifetime of peddling the same old trick. If he goes about hawking two, then even that will become his trademark. “Corporate identity” is the slogan for self-marketing. The arbitrariness of a powerful man such as Rolin could be resisted with skillful trickery; the stock exchange only reacts to butterflies that set off tornadoes.

After the victory of representation over what was represented, painting swallowed its object and went on to display itself alone. Since its rules were now formulated at only one level, its repertoire was soon exhausted; and Marcel Duchamp, the first to recognize this, set up the ready-made over its grave. The great pessimist could never have dreamed that his “inexorable negations,” imitated on a mass scale on the ghost train of art, would turn into their own opposites.<sup>16</sup> The healthy truth of “I am here” took out a subscription to shock. In the boundless dungeon to which art has willingly consigned itself, the interpreters have ever since been kings. Their interest in promulgating the art of artlessness is clear: since not everything that is artless can be art, they alone have authority.<sup>17</sup>

Painting began with the visibility of the invisible, and ended with the invisibility of the visible. “Without a program or commentary, the eye is no longer satisfied; it has abdicated as an organ of enlightenment.”<sup>18</sup> The fine arts have become the servants of the servile ear.

The way in which theory has entwined itself around art reminds one of the method of manufacturing Emmentaler cheese on the principle: first take the holes, and then put the cheese round them. No matter whether the theoretical dough swelling up around the holes has been mixed in the dull cauldron of political correctness or in the sublime crucible of metaphysics – unless form and content interfuse, there can be no question of art.

Nothing living can absolutize itself in the flowing stream of time without drowning in it as a corpse of illusion. But we might at any rate take the trouble to learn from history.<sup>19</sup> We have lost our belief in progress, but we still pay

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<sup>13</sup> Extracts from Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Munich, 1912) and *Aufsätze von 1923 bis 1943*, in Walter Hess, *Dokumente zum Verständnis der modernen Malerei* (Hamburg, 1956), p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> „*La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternité et l’immuable.*” (“Le peintre de la vie moderne,” in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claud Pichois [Paris, 1976], vol. 2, p. 695.) “What is transitory, fleeting, and contingent can never emerge without separating itself from what is immutable and eternal.” Baudelaire’s requirement that modernity should become *antiquité* not in opposition to other epochs, but in the specific ways appropriate to each period, cannot be fulfilled when one half of it has been scotomized. The absolutization of novelty breaks novelty’s promise; instead of *becoming* antiquity, this type of modernity wants to *be* antiquity.

<sup>15</sup> On this point, see Albus, „ABC prominenter Ideen,” p. 146.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Platschek, *Von Dada zur Smart Art* (Frankfurt, 1989), p. 130, and *Engel bringt das Gewünschte* (Frankfurt, 1987), pp. 67-82.

<sup>17</sup> On this point, see the study of the art scene by Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York, 1975). It was impossible to dismiss Wolfe’s acute observations of this status-oriented world as philistine or reactionary, and in consequence *The Painted Word* was silently ignored.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Chapeaurouge, *Das Auge*, p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> On 3 November 1933, Heidegger, as the rector of the University of Freiburg, told his students: „Let not theorems and ideas be the rules of your being; the Führer himself and he alone is German reality and its law, today and for the

tribute to its puppet, “the spirit of the times.” We would never dream of mistaking totality for truth any longer, but the negative side of this sophism is still the deadliest heirloom of Hegelian philosophy.<sup>20</sup> In reversed conditions, world history is once again to become the Last Judgment, and no one in thrownness shall ever come up out of the stream of time.

Faced with the Gorgon’s head of progress, it has become impossible for art to progress. Just as the lame weaver dreams he is weaving, the blind painter dreams the blue of blue. If it is not with fear that he guards his creative dream against knowledge, then it is with force. When Soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin announced in 1961 that the cosmos was black, Jean Tinguely, who happened to have heard this ancient discovery being confirmed on the radio, was indiscreet enough to pass it on to Yves Klein. “A moment’s silence, and then Yves Klein grabs Tinguely by his shirt and punches him full in the face with his fist.”<sup>21</sup>

Those who run with the pack dream it is the avantgarde.<sup>22</sup> Contradictions can do no harm to dreams; dreams live on them. The illusoriness of the art world can be measured by the fact that the contradiction that defeated Rothko has long since been absorbed; those who show society its own ugliness at the same time think it completely natural to court its favors and strive for recognition from it. In the hell of use-values, the consumption of horror is booming.

In contrast to his imitators, Duchamp knew the distinction between fame and celebrity.<sup>23</sup> Asked whether he realized he was one of the most famous artists in the world, he answered,

I don’t know anything about that. In the first place, ordinary people have never heard of me, although most of them know Dalí or Picasso or even Matisse. Secondly, I think when someone is famous it is impossible for him to realize it. Being famous is like being dead: I don’t think the dead realize they are dead. And thirdly, if I was famous, it is not something I would be very proud of; it would be a clownish kind of fame due to the sensation that was caused by Nu descendant un escalier. Although of course I expect that when that kind of vileness continues for more than fifty years, there must be something more to it than just scandal.<sup>24</sup>

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future.“ Cf. Alfred Grosser, *10 Leçons sur le nazisme* (Paris, 1976, 1984), p. 95. Precisely because it is a matter of distinguishing between politics and art, artists cannot share the misjudgments of those whom they would rightly be accused of serving.

<sup>20</sup> On this point, see Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, pp. 342-360.

<sup>21</sup> *Süddeutsche Zeitung* magazine, 20 October 1995: interview with Jean-Christoph Ammann, director of the Museum of Modern Art in Frankfurt. Ammann, spilling the beans of the museum world, tells the story of the thick-as-a-fist black eye with enthusiasm for this brave defense of an artistic concept. To ignorant observers who thought they could splash paint around in exactly the same way, he responded: “Very good, congratulations. Perhaps you can even do it better, but was it originally your idea?” On “the fear of knowledge,” see Wind, *Art an Anarchy*, pp. 47-62, and Wuttke, *Aby M. Warburgs Methode*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> On this point, see Hans Magnus Enzensberger, „Aporien der Avantgarde,“ in *Einzelheiten* (Frankfurt, 1962), pp. 290-315. The rigidity of the present age can be seen in the fact that in the nearly forty years since the publication of „Aporien der Avantgarde,“ not only has no one in Germany pursued Enzensberger’s analysis further, but, in addition, if anyone were to take notice of it on the art scene today they would still be outraged by it. “Reality is always anachronous,” writes Borges (“Two Books,” in *Selected Non-Fictions*, p. 209), and due to the information jumble mentioned above, it is more so today than ever.

<sup>23</sup> The use of words such as “celebrity” and “prominence” illustrates the blindness that identifies life with work, and in its exclusive focus on the present moment regards fame as equivalent to success. The inappropriateness of such words in qualitative contexts becomes clear when one looks at the significance they can acquire in inhuman conditions. See Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man*, trans. Stuart Woolf (London, 1962), pp. 72-73, and *The Drowned and the Saved*, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York, 1988), pp. 88-104.

<sup>24</sup> Platschek, *Smart Art*, p. 130. Moved, and without bothering to look for the bottle rack in the cellar, the Muse left the building, ensuring that – until she is rediscovered – the art of painting will remain hidden in the creations of writers and philosophers. See below.

The interviewer asked what this “something more” might be. “It. The thing that has no name.” Descending a staircase, the naked Muse says a moving farewell to painting ...

The god of the arts, like Nicholas of Cusa’s, has no name, and could never be accommodated in a church. As painting began to disregard the need to reconcile what is perceptible with what is intelligible, the scholars and writers who were not afraid to think against the grain of their times continued to exercise the art of the opposing statement. A love of detail and a grasp of structure have remained alive in their works. If they had not freed themselves from their contemporary age, they would not have been able to perceive the visibility of the invisible and contemporaries: outsiders and heretics.

Dürer remarks that a good painter is “inwardly full of figures, and even if he could live forever, he would always be able to pour forth, from those inner ideas of which Plato writes, something new in his work.”<sup>25</sup> It was not painters, but Goethe, the scientific poet, and D’Arcy Thompson, an artistic polyhistor of Baroque stature, who beheld the ideas of creation. The one succeeded through pure contemplation in drawing the metamorphosis of plants into the web of words; the other managed to decipher the geometric language of the book of nature, so that his webs of coordinates, modeled on Dürer’s *Geometry and Treatise on Proportion*, captured the transformations of fish and crustaceans, the metamorphosis of the crocodile’s skeleton, the pelvic bones of dinosaurs and bird fossils, and the skulls of extinct rhinoceroses, right down to their most recent memento mori.<sup>26</sup>

The short book by the much admired poet and much smiled-at naturalist was published in 1790, and the long one by the mathematician, physicist, and classical scholar, whose bel canto style was thought embarrassing and whose hypotheses were not understood in his time, was published in 1917. The latter developed the science of which the first had been the godfather: morphology.

If you wish the Whole to refresh your heart,  
You must glimpse the Whole in its smallest part.<sup>27</sup>

How far Goethe was from his contemporaries’ habits of thought can be seen from the misunderstood depiction of drawing by the botanist Pierre-Jean-François Turpin looks like a vegetabilic anticipation of Bovary’s cap.<sup>28</sup>

It was only in the twentieth century that the full implications of Goethe’s research for comparative morphology were recognized. D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson’s *On Growth and Form* is now regarded as the “the finest work of literature in all the annals of science that have been recorded in the English tongue,” and its bel canto singer – who agreed with Jean-Henri Fabre, “that wise student and pupil of the ant and the bee,” that numbers are la clef de voûte de l’Univers, and like him did not believe in God but saw him – became one of the forerunners of catastrophe theory and chaos research.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> „... inwendig voller Figur, und obs möglich wär, dass er ewiglich lebte, so hätt er aus den innern Ideen, davon Plato schreibt, allbeg etwas Neus durch das Werk auszugießen.“ Dürer, *Schriften und Briefe*, p. 119.

<sup>26</sup> See the illustration on p. 377.

<sup>27</sup> „Willst du dich am Ganzen erquicken, / So musst du das Ganze im Kleinsten erblicken.“ (Goethe, *Werkausgabe letzter Hand*, vol. 2, p. 228).

<sup>28</sup> See the illustration on p. 378.

<sup>29</sup> The first quotation (the words of Peter Medawar) is in the introduction to the abridged edition of D’Arcy Weatworth Thompson, *On Growth and Form*, ed. J. Tyler Bonner (Cambridge, 1961), pp. ix-x; the second is from Thompson, *On*

The waves of the sea, the little ripples on the shore, the sweeping curve of the sandy bay between the headlands, the outline of the hills, the shape of the clouds, all these are so many riddles of form, so many problems of morphology, and all of them the physicist can more or less easily read and adequately solve: solving them by reference to their antecedent phenomena, in the material system of mechanical forces to which they belong, and to which we interpret them as being due. They have also, doubtless, their immanent teleological significance; but it is on another plane of thought from the physicist's that we contemplate their intrinsic harmony and perfection, and "see that they are good."<sup>30</sup>

.....?????, between the old way and the new, becomes pointless for one who can distinguish different levels and who has grasped that the whole is not only more than the sum of its parts, but always something very different from the parts, although it does not appear in them differently; as the harmony and balance of their interplay.<sup>31</sup>

Completely "engrossed by the peculiar beauty which is manifested in apparent fitness or 'adaption' – the flower for the bee, the berry for the bird," Thompson, as a critical teleologist, was convinced it was too easy to assume that "fortuitous variation" and the "survival of the fittest" would provide "a sufficient basis on which to rest, with the all-powerful help of natural selection, a theory of definite and progressive evolution."<sup>32</sup>

As the translator of Aristotle and author of a Glossary of Greek Birds and a Glossary of Greek Fishes, an aviary and aquarium of every bird and fish mentioned in classical Greek literature, Thompson succeeded in fusing modern science with antiquity. He is a good example of the way in which the question of the avant-garde, in no matter which of the liberal arts, can only be answered from a distance. It is no accident that from posterity's point of view, those who are able to discern the tradition's inventiveness and who are aware of what they owe to it are so often regarded as modern.<sup>33</sup>

In the introductory chapter of *On Growth and Form*, the modern traditionalist or traditional modernist recalls the ancient Hebrew view that "God made 'every plant of the field before it was in the earth, and every herb of the field before it grew,' " and, with the generosity of spirit deriving from his classical education, concludes that this is a common and at the same time noble view, as "it brings with it a glimpse of a great vision, and it lies deep as the love of nature in the hearts of men."<sup>34</sup>

Just as not all art is art, not all science is science. Distinctions are drawn between soft and hard, pure and applied. It is with the latter that the blame lies for the fall from grace implicit in the divorce between mind and nature. One of the greatest verbal artists of the twentieth century believed that the hallmark of the reduction of science to mere use-values can be seen in the ephemerality of the various illusions generated by flickering screens all over the world – that

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*Growth and Form: The Complete Revised Edition* (Cambridge, 1942; rptd. New York, 1992), p. 1097. It was Medawar who described Thompson's style as "*bel canto*."

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, *Growth and Form*, p. 10. Lichtenberg anticipates this topic in a brief mental sketch: "When considering the surfaces of bodies, the following should not be forgotten: the process of melting, the grinding of glass until it is dull, the way that oil suppresses the waves of the sea, and color changes and color as such." (*Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Wolfgang Promies [Munich, 1971]: „Sudelbücher II,“ J 1802.)

<sup>31</sup> See *Growth and Form*, p. 10, footnote. A good example of the phenomenon of two irreconcilable theories proving to be equally valid because they belong to different levels has recently been provided by the neurophysiology of the process of vision. The dispute between Helmholtz and Hering (red, green, and blue versus red-green, yellow-blue, black-white) was a wild-goose chase. Helmholtz had grasped the cone principle of vision, and Hering the antagonistic measuring processes at the subsequent levels of the optic nerve. See David H. Hubel, *Eye, Brain, and Vision*, pp. 170-174. The dispute over inherited and acquired characteristics has also been resolved by neurobiology; v. loc. cit.

<sup>32</sup> *Growth and Form*, pp. 3 and 8.

<sup>33</sup> See the article „Modern, die Moderne“ in *Historisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 6, pp. 54-55.

<sup>34</sup> *Growth and Form*, p. 4.

everything in nature can be reduced to “bits”; that immortal bodies can be cloned out of nothing in the laboratory; and that humanity is about to solve the enigma of life. The more genuine scientific knowledge one has, said the novel-writing lepidopterist, the greater one’s sense of mystery becomes. If we did not respect the solitude of the Russian émigré, who dismissed every attempt at classification, we might imagine him in the company of D’Arcy Thompson and his Cusanian/Bouellian predecessors – discussing together the sharp-sightedness of the animal that wears a coat of petit-gris, or the Cinderella shades of the miraculous spiral of color.<sup>35</sup>

“Of how it is that the soul informs the body, physical science teaches me nothing; and that living matter influences and is influenced by mind is a mystery without a clue,” Thompson wrote in 1917.<sup>36</sup> Trying to explain life using chemistry is to clarify *obscurum per obscurius*, as one of his talented successors, the mathematician René Thom, wrote.<sup>37</sup> The topologist established the canon of form-creating elementary catastrophes, seven in number: the fold, the cusp (from *cuspidis*, a point or spike), the swallow’s tail, the elliptical umbilicus (from the Latin word for navel), the hyperbolic umbilicus, the butterfly, and the parabolic umbilicus. “Catastrophe means ?????, over-turning.” Since morphogenesis appears to be the result of a conflict – between different centers of attraction, or between different areas of the same center – it was this “overturning” that gave the topological art of opposites its name. The hypothesis of a philosophy 2,500 years old, which reemerged in *On Growth and Form*, received its brilliant confirmation in Thom’s *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis*: that of the pre-Socratic philosophers Anaximander and Heraclitus. The mathematician and philosopher of nature translates *logos* as “form.” According to his lucid interpretation of the obscurities of Heraclitus, the unity and stability of objects are owed to their formal structure.

There are simulating structures of all natural external forces at the very heart of the genetic endowment of our species, at the unassailable depth of the Heraclitean *logos* of our soul, and ... these structures are ready to go into action whenever necessary. The old idea of Man, the microcosm, mirroring World, the macrocosm, retains all its force: who knows Man, knows the Universe.<sup>38</sup>

The search for perfection and the unattainability of this goal are identical in Thom’s philosophy of overturning. “*La vie n’a pas le temps d’attendre la rigueur*” is an aphorism of Valéry’s quoted in his book.<sup>39</sup> He provides support for the

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<sup>35</sup> *Petit-gris*, literally „small gray,“ means „fell, gray hide,“ the winter fur of the Siberian squirrel, *Sciurus vulgaris varius*. (*Sciurus* means “shading itself with its tail.”) The larger American variety of the shade-tail is the *grand-gris* leitmotiv haunting Nabokov’s *Pnin*. The resourceful literary nutcracker Michael Maar revealed how this “King and supreme cracker of nuts ... leapt out through the foliage of the neighboring novel” *Lolita* into *Pnin* (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 October 1994). Thompson mentions the size of the squirrel’s eye in *Growth and Form* (p. 53). On Cinderella shades, see *Pnin* (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 80. On the *spira mirabilis*, see part one, chapter 5 above, footnote 22. In the seventeenth century, Jakob Bernoulli wrote, “Just as the infinite series submits to a finite sum / And what seems boundless to you yields to a boundary, / So in this humble body is concealed a trace / Of the infinite deity, and what is narrowly bounded becomes boundless.” The fleeting shape of a miraculous spiral of color can be glimpsed in August Strindberg’s *Blue Book*: “The colors of the spectrum only display light in declining degrees of strength on each side of yellow, the strongest, which lies in the middle. The colors of the prism begin with red and close with violet, because the transition from blue, the penultimate in the scale, and red, the first, is violet. Those, therefore, who expect to find a color beyond violet on the outside of the rainbow, and who believe they have even seen it in photographs of the spectrum, are probably waiting in vain, unless they are waiting for red-blue or blue-red! Or black! *Lavender gray*, says Helmholtz.” (Italics added; *Blaubuch*, rptd. From the first German edition of 1908 in *Die Republik*, nos. 61-67, ed. Petra and Uwe Nettelbeck [Salzhausen-Luhmühlen, 1983], p. 349.)

<sup>36</sup> *Growth and Form*, p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> René Thom, *Prédire n’est pas expliquer: entretien avec Emile Noël* (Paris, 1991), p. 102.

<sup>38</sup> René Thom, *Structural Stability and Morphogenesis: An Outline of a General Theory of Models*, trans. D. H. Fowler (Reading, Mass., 1975), pp. 324-325.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 280.

view that it is impossible to exhaust the soul's sense of form by quoting the "dark one": "No matter how far your path might carry you, you could never reach the boundaries of your soul, its form is so deep."<sup>40</sup>

Why did the techné of the old masters live on among the artists of language? Why does the layer technique – which, according to the laws of van Eyck's coloring, the smallest interval and the greatest contrast, allows the maximum of detail to be depicted within suspended time – reappear in the work of Proust, in which the eternal rises up from the depths of the soul through an uneven cobblestone?

Why do the shades of Nabokov's unique universe – quartz pink, oatmeal color, paradise green, lavender blue – crystallize in the convex mirror of his art against the dark foil of life, following the motto of Flemish painting technique: to be as transparent as the greatest possible density allows? Why does van Eyck's "ample-jowled, fluff-haloes" Canon van der Paele come to life again in Nabokov's *Pnin*, painted in minute detail – "the knotty temple, the sad, musing gaze, the folds and furrows of facial flesh, the thin lips, and even the wart on the left cheek" – when not a single contemporary painter, even if he is still capable of depicting a nail and its shadow, is able to create the illusion of skin that breathes?"<sup>41</sup>

Why is "craft" a taboo word in the fine arts, while in literature it has continued to be a requirement that is taken for granted? Cassirer published a succinct answer to this question five years before the world premiere of that total work of art in the field of politics, "The Destruction of Humanity." All life and all creativity, the courteous philosopher writes, is linked to the fundamental phenomenon of polarity – which is not the same as duality. This is seen most clearly in language, which on the one hand strives to achieve individual expression, while on the other it can arise only through an objective, supra-individual medium of forms.

The productive art of the individual (the great artists of language) is never demonstrated by an abandonment of this medium, but is seen in the way in which they discover, behind the merely conventional formula, the form of the original productive energy. But it is in appearance alone that they seem to be the creators of form here ... It is not they who create "language," but language that creates in them and through them ... The individual, like "life," cannot possess itself in any other way than by passing beyond itself into the world of forms, by abandoning itself to it. It is only through the renunciation represented by impersonal form that the individual can gain itself – it must stake its life, in order to gain the realm of the mind.<sup>42</sup>

All true creators of language, from antiquity to the present day, have known that they are weaving the apparel of the godhead. But they do not weave it with their hands."<sup>43</sup> The separation of head and hand is less of a creative problem for them. They do not produce status symbols, and the costly fabric of their texts is incapable of being used as a physical veil for anyone's scruples. The value of their manuscripts in bucks or "toads" only emerges posthumously, and manuscripts are too inconspicuous to decorate the temple of physical abstraction. Why should they let anyone buy up

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<sup>40</sup> Heraclitus (544-483 B.C.) was nicknamed „the dark one“ because of the profundity of his teachings. My version of fragment 45 follows Thom's version; in Freeman the translation reads, "You could not in your going find the ends of the soul, though you travelled the whole way: so deep is its Law (*Logos*)."<sup>41</sup> (Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, p. 27) In fragment 115, Heraclitus says that "the soul has its own Law (*Logos*), which increases itself"; according to Thom, this would refer to the inexhaustible capacity of its form to transform itself.

<sup>41</sup> *Pnin*, p. 129.

<sup>42</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, ed. John Michael Krois (Hamburg, 1995), vol. I, p. 218.

<sup>43</sup> Their manual skills are a different matter. They only need a "lucky hand" in the figurative sense, so that the decline of manual skills in a factory-made world cannot become a creative problem for them.

their thirst for knowledge, what would happen to them if they gave in to the temptation to sign that declaration of the bankruptcy of the imagination that postulates that everything in history could only have happened in precisely the way it did? The past is not fixed and established; every age needs to transform it and reimagine it afresh. “Unlike Orpheus we win our Eurydice by looking back and lose her by looking ahead.”<sup>44</sup> To find the viewpoint from which that of the past that was endowed with gifts for the future can arise once again, distance is required.

“Do not forget: books are the creation of solitude and the children of silence,” Proust warns.<sup>45</sup> Like the velvet-trousered critics and Blixen’s Babette, he was convinced that for anyone devoted to an ideal, the greatest beauty must be perceived as lying in those things that present him with the greatest difficulty, “which is as it happens an instinctive morality to counterbalance our vices and weaknesses.”<sup>46</sup> In the eyes of the asthmatic author of the *Search for Lost Time*, with the long breath of its meandering sentences, the whole art of living lies in “using those persons who cause us suffering as a mere step, crossing which we gain access to their divine form – and thus populate our life joyfully with divinities.”<sup>47</sup>

Techné is a question of the love of wisdom (philosophy); the profession of the artist is one of morality. “Dilettantism has never created anything,” because the dilettante does not wish to counterbalance his vices and weaknesses, but to declare that they are art.<sup>48</sup>

The best school for aesthetics we could possibly visit is still that of Jean Paul Richter, who said – looking backward far into the future – “It follows from the lawless, capricious spirit of the present age, which would egotistically annihilate the world and the universe in order to clear a space merely for free play in the void, and which tears off the bandage of its wounds as a bond, that this age must speak scornfully of the imitation and study of nature.”<sup>49</sup>

There can be no doubt that the twentieth century also had its gifted painters; but no one has overcome the stagnation of painting, and no one has been able to hold back the decline of the profession. Their works can only be mimicked, since “The reflection does not reflect itself.”<sup>50</sup> As long as painting turns its back on nature, it will never be able to regrow. For the time being, we can only exercise our eyes with the aid of the poets and philosophers. A description of morphogenetic fields in perceptual terms is found in Strindberg’s *Blue Book* under the heading “The Cyclamen, Illuminating Great Disorder and Great Coherence.” We follow the playwright as he takes a walk in the woods above the Danube. A carpet of ivy is spread in the temple of Nature, and in its midst the trompe-l’oeil of its pattern suddenly opens up:

The leaves had angled themselves toward the sun, which was barely able to penetrate the tree’s foliage. After I had contemplated the ivy for a while, I noticed a cyclamen in the midst of it. And then I noticed still more, and finally I could see just as many cyclamens as ivy leaves. I had not seen the cyclamen straight away because this species, *europaeum*, has a dark green pattern on the middle of the

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<sup>44</sup> Jean Paul Richter, *Horn of Oberon*, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> Marcel Proust, *Against Sainte-Beuve and Other Essays*, trans. John Sturrock (Harmondsworth, 1988), p. 99. The double meaning in French of *silence* – “stillness, calm” and “quiet, abstaining from speech” – is not clear in translation. Since Proust contrasts the *enfants du silence* with the *enfants de la parole*, it is the absence of speech that is intended here.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>47</sup> Proust, „Le Temps retrouvé,” in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. Pierre Clarac and André Ferré (Paris, 1954), vol. 3, p. 899, footnote.

<sup>48</sup> Proust, *Against Sainte-Beuve*, p. 70.

<sup>49</sup> *Horn of Oberon: Jean Paul Richter’s School for Aesthetics*, p. 15.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38. Jean Paul continues: „If we were completely aware of ourselves, the we would be our own creators, unlimited.”

leaf, with a whitish-gray outline around it, so that the dark green on the inside forms the shape of an ivy leaf ... I had often observed in the plant world nature's manner of drawing a sketch before executing it, and I noticed here with the cyclamen that the red color for the flower was already in readiness in the leaf stalk and applied on the palette of the leaf. I therefore wondered whether the white guilloche pattern on the upper side of the leaf might not be the sketch for a new form ... The ivy leaf is a mathematical figure termed cissoid, discovered by Diocles. It is characterized in modern geometry as follows: a curve that constantly follows the perpendicular line drawn between the vertex of a parabola and its tangent. Or thus: a line imitating the contour of an ivy leaf by approaching its asymptote. / The cyclamen leaf, again, forms a caustic figure, which as is well known arises through the refraction of rays in a concave mirror, or by rays falling through a transparent hemisphere, a cone or cylinder. / When one sits on a porch where the rays of sunlight pass through thick foliage, countless ellipses are seen on the floor. These are caused by the fact that the cone of light passing through the gaps in the foliage is transacted by the floor in such a way as to form ellipses. They are therefore conic sections. What is happening, then, under the dense foliage in the forest? It is almost impossible to calculate this, but that need be no obstacle to the notion of conceiving in advance some idea of the play of lines arising in all the conic sections, to which the parabolas and hyperbolas also belong, and which have an intimate connection with the cissoids and the caustic lines.”<sup>51</sup>

In the same way that the cyclamen reflects the ivy in the Blue Book, the mackerel reflects the waves of the sea and teaches us mackerel art: “The mackerel has the breaking of the waves marked out so sharply on its back that a marine painter could copy it and transfer it in perspective to a canvas in order to reproduce the waves.”<sup>52</sup>

The way in which the perfection of a freshly emerged butterfly, with every scale on its wings, is reflected in the mind of a poet and physicist is seen in Lichtenberg's “Comparison of the Painting on a Butterfly's Wing with a Masterpiece of Mosaic Work”:

Our solar system is infinitely small compared with the immensity of immeasurable space, just as the greatest human art dwindles to nothing under even the most favourable comparison with the eternal works of nature. If any of these were to be removed from the larger whole, it would leave a gap no greater than that of a grain of sand purloined from the shore of the ocean; and when we compare the greatest masterpiece of mosaic art with the wing of a butterfly – of which nature forms thousands in a single hour of summer and melts them away again unnoticed and unadmired by us – the mosaic is but worthless child's play, even if only surface is compared with surface.

An unnamed English naturalist had counted 931,808 colored scales on a single square inch of a peacock butterfly cut from its pupa just before metamorphosis, and Lichtenberg compared this with the 868 mosaic stones in the finest neo-Roman painting.

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<sup>51</sup> Strindberg, *Blaubuch*, pp. 369-370.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

Against this, our imbecilic eye needs to use magnifying glasses to perceive the miraculous arrangement hidden within the scales of the butterfly's wings, the colored lines of which thousands regard as being their whole purpose. When the beauty of the final effect is broken down by enlargement, a different beauty emerges again from beneath its cover – the beauty of the individual parts, their form and fibers; and here, too, new beauties would appear yet again if our glasses were capable of drawing back the curtain that veils them.<sup>53</sup>

Painting was able to claim its place as the art of arts only as long as it still encompassed the seven liberal arts within it; as long as the painters, in the contest of the arts, gave their utmost to breathe life into the world. Without their learning, without their counterbalance of morality, a new peacock butterfly can never spread forth its wings from the subverted profession. Look back at painting's multilayered lepidopterous phase. The Lunar Orbiter sent back its images of our blue star from the immeasurable, lifeless reaches of space. If we had fully grasped this star's uniqueness, we would look with different eyes at the fly that has finished its morning wash and is strolling over apple-green waxy skin around a globe with a stalk. Perhaps then we might have regained the intensity of gaze that distinguished a van Eyck or Rogier, Patinir or David, Flegel or Goedaert. We should take up from them – not to do the same as they did, but to have a share in the same: in perfect creation, in the imitation according to creation that is the form of our immortality.

Anita Albus , The Art of Arts  
Die Kunst der Künste

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<sup>53</sup> Lichtenberg, *Schriften und Briefe*, vol. 2, pp. 228 and 230. What the imbecilic eye saw through Lichtenberg's magnifying glass is today known as the Julia constant or Mandelbrot constant. The physicist worked on dendrites, and described their development in his essay *De nova methodo naturam ac motum ????? electrici investigandi* (Göttingen, 1778), in which the fractals that are still known as Lichtenberg figures are illustrated. (I am grateful to the mathematics enthusiast H. M. Enzensberger for the reference ????? Mandelbrot.)