

far the underlying poetic subject and its message have come apart. In an attempt to overcome the gap, Brecht affected the diction of the oppressed. But the doctrine he advocated needs the language of the intellectual. The homeliness and simplicity of his tone is thus a fiction. It betrays itself both by signs of exaggeration and by stylized regression to archaic or provincial forms of expression. It can often be importunate, and ears which have not let themselves be deprived of their native sensitivity cannot help hearing that they are talked into something. It is a usurpation and almost contempt for victims to speak like this, as if the author were one of them. All roles may be played except that of the worker. The gravest charge against commitment is that even right intentions go wrong when they are noticed, and still more so when they then try to conceal themselves. Something of this remains in Brecht's later plays in the linguistic gesture of wisdom, the fiction of the old peasant sated with epic experience as the poetic subject. No one in any country of the world is any longer capable of the earthy experience of South German muzhiks: the ponderous delivery has become a propaganda device to make us believe that the good life is where the Red Army is in control. Since there is nothing to give substance to this humanity, which we have to take on trust as realized, Brecht's tone degenerates into an echo of archaic social relations, gone beyond recall. The late Brecht was not so distant from official humanism. A journalistically minded Westerner could well praise *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* as a hymn to motherhood, and who is not touched when the splendid girl is finally held up as an example to the querulous lady beset with migraine? Baudelaire, who dedicated his work to the coinage of the motto *l'art pour l'art*, would have been less suited to such catharsis. Even the grandeur and virtuosity of such poems as *The Legend of the Origin of the Book of Tao Te Ch'ing on Lao-Tzu's Journey into Exile* are marred by the theatricality of total plain-spokenness. What his classical predecessors once denounced as the idiocy of rural life, Brecht, like some existential ontologist, treats as ancient truth. His whole oeuvre is a Sisyphean labor to reconcile his highly cultivated and subtle taste with the crudely heteronomous demands which he desperately imposed on himself.

The Problem of Suffering

I have no wish to soften the saying that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric; it expresses in negative form the impulse which inspires committed literature. The question asked by a character in Sartre's play *Morts Sans Sépulture*,²⁸ "Is there any meaning in life when men exist who beat people until the bones break in their bodies?", is also the question whether any man now has a right to exist; whether intellectual regression is not inherent in the concept of committed literature because of the regression of society. But Enzensberger's retort also remains true, that literature must resist this verdict, in other words, be such that its mere existence after Auschwitz is not a surrender to cynicism. Its own situation is one of paradox, not merely the problem of how to react to it. The abundance of real suffering tolerates no forgetting; Pascal's theological saying. *On ne doit plus dormir*,²⁹ must be secularized. Yet this suffering, what Hegel called consciousness of adversity, also demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it; it is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. The most important artists of the age have realized this.

The uncompromising radicalism of their works, the very features defamed as formalism, give them a terrifying power, absent from helpless poems to the victims of our time. But even Schönberg's *Survivor of Warsaw* remains trapped in the aporia³⁰ to which it, autonomous figuration of heteronomy³¹ raised to the intensity of hell, totally surrenders. There is something

²⁸Play: *The Victors* (but literally, *Deaths without burial*)

²⁹One should not sleep anymore.

³⁰A perplexing difficulty.

³¹Subjection to the rule of another being or power; subject to external law. Opposite of *autonomy*

painful in Schnberg's compositions—not what arouses anger in Germany, the fact that they prevent people from repressing from memory what they at all costs want to repress. It is rather the way in which, by turning suffering into images, despite all their hard implacability, they wound our shame before the victims. For these are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of a world which destroyed them. The so-called artistic representation of the sheer physical pain of people beaten to the ground by rifle butts contains, however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it. The moral of this art, not to forget for a single instant, slithers into the abyss of its opposite. The esthetic principle of stylization, and even the solemn prayer of the chorus, make an unthinkable fate appear to have had some meaning; it is transfigured, something of its horror is removed. This alone does an injustice to the victims; yet no art which tried to evade them could stand upright before justice. Even the sound of despair pays its tribute to a hideous affirmation. Works of less than the highest rank are even willingly absorbed, as contributions to clearing up the past. When genocide becomes part of the cultural heritage in the themes of committed literature, it becomes easier to continue to play along with the culture which gave birth to murder. There is one nearly invariable characteristic of such literature. It is that it implies, purposely or not, that even in the so-called extreme situations, indeed in them most of all, humanity flourishes. Sometimes this develops into a dismal metaphysic which does its best to work up atrocities into "limiting situation" which it then accepts to the extent that they reveal authenticity in men. In such a homely existential atmosphere, the distinction between executioners and victims becomes bluffed; both, after all, are equally suspended above the possibility of nothingness, which of course is generally not quite so uncomfortable for the executioners.

Kafka, Beckett and Contemporary Experimentalism

Today, the adherents of a philosophy which has since degenerated into a mere ideological sport, fulminate in pre-1933 fashion against artistic distortion, deformation and perversion of life, as though authors, by faithfully reflecting atrocity, were responsible for what they revolt against. The best exemplification of this attitude, still prevalent among the silent majority in Germany, is the following story about Picasso. An officer of the Nazi occupation forces visited the painter in his studio and, pointing to *Guernica*, asked: "Did you do that?". Picasso reputedly answered, "No, you did." Autonomous works of art too, like this painting, firmly negate empirical reality, destroy the destroyer, that which merely exists and by merely existing endlessly reiterates guilt. It is none other than Sartre who has seen the connection between the autonomy of a work and an intention which is not conferred upon it but is its own gesture towards reality. "The work of art," he has written, "*does not have* an end; there we agree with Kant. But the reason is that it *is* an end. The Kantian formula does not account for the appeal which resounds at the basis of each painting, each statue, each book."³² It only remains to add there is no straightforward relationship between this appeal and the thematic commitment of a work. The uncalculating autonomy of works which avoid popularization and adaptation to the market involuntarily becomes an attack on them. The attack is not abstract, not a fixed attitude of all works of art to the world which will not forgive them for not bending totally to it. The distance these works maintain from empirical reality is in itself partly mediated by that reality. The imagination of the artist is not a creation *ex nihilo*³³; only dilettanti and esthetes believe it to be so. Works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of that reality, which reject intellectual creations and throw them back on themselves. There is no material content, no formal category of an artistic creation, however mysteriously changed and unknown to itself, which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free.

³²What is Literature?, p. 34

³³Out of nothing

It is this which constitutes the true relation of art to reality, whose elements are regrouped by its formal laws. Even the avant-garde abstraction which provokes the indignation of philistines, and which has nothing in common with conceptual or logical abstraction, is a reflex response to the abstraction of the law which objectively dominates society. This could be shown in Beckett's works. These enjoy what is today the only humanly respectable fame: everyone shudders at them, and yet no one can persuade himself that these eccentric plays and novels are not about what everyone knows but no one will admit. Philosophical apologists may laud his works as sketches for an anthropology. But they deal with a highly concrete historical reality: the abdication of the subject. Beckett's *Ecce Homo*³⁴ is what human beings have become. As though with eyes drained of tears, they stare silently out of his sentences. The spell they cast, which also binds them, is lifted by being reflected in them. However, the minimal promise of happiness they contain, which refuses to be traded for comfort, cannot be had for a price less than total dislocation, to the point of worldlessness. Here every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art—that polemical alienation which Brecht as a theorist invented, and as an artist practiced less and less as he bound himself more tightly to the role of a friend of mankind. This paradox, which might be charged with sophistry, can be supported without much philosophy by the simplest experience: Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays, or the truly monstrous novel *The Unnameable*, have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomime. Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. By dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance. The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand. He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed has lost forever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away.

Yet the greater the aspiration, the greater is the possibility of foundering and failure. The loss of tension evident in works of painting and music which, have moved away from objective representation and intelligible or coherent meaning has in many ways spread to the literature known in a repellent jargon as "texts." Such works drift to the brink of indifference, degenerate insensibly into mere hobbies, into idle repetition of formulas now abandoned in other art forms, into trivial patterns. It is this development which often gives substance to crude calls for commitment. Formal structures which challenge the lying positivism of meaning can easily slide into a different sort of vacuity, positivistic arrangements, empty juggling with elements. They fall within the very sphere from they seek to escape. The extreme case is literature which undialectically confuses itself with science and vainly tries to fuse with cybernetics. Extremes meet; what cuts the last thread of communication becomes the prey of communication theory. No firm criterion can draw the line between a determinate negation of meaning and a bad positivism of meaninglessness, as an assiduous³⁵ soldiering on just for the sake of it. Least of all can such a line be based on, an appeal to the human, and a curse on mechanization. Works of art which by their existence take the side of the victims of a rationality that subjugates nature are even in their protest constitutively implicated in the process of rationalization itself. Were they to try to disown it, they would become both esthetically and socially powerless: mere clay. The organizing, unifying principle of, each and every work of art is borrowed from that very rationality whose claim to totality it seeks to defy.

³⁴Behold the man.

³⁵Unremitting, persistent, constant.

French and German Cultural Traditions

In the history of French and German consciousness, the problem of commitment has been posed in opposite ways. In France, esthetics have been dominated, openly or covertly, by the principle of *l'art pour l'art*, academic and reactionary tendencies.³⁶ This explains the revolt against it. Even extreme avant-garde works have a touch of decorative allure in France. It is for this reason that the call to existence and commitment sounded revolutionary there. In Germany, the situation is the other way round. The liberation of art from any external end, although it was a German who first raised it purely and incorruptibly into a criterion of taste, has always been suspect to a tradition which has deep roots in German idealism. The first famous document of this tradition is that senior masters' bible of intellectual history, Schiller's *Treatise on the Theatre as a Moral Institution*. Such suspicion is not so much due to the elevation of mind to an Absolute that is coupled with it—an attitude that swaggered its way to hubris in German philosophy. It is rather provoked by the side that any work of art free of an ulterior goal shows to society. For this art is a reminder of that sensuous pleasure in which even—indeed especially—the most extreme dissonance, by sublimation and negation, partakes. German speculative philosophy granted that a work of art contains within itself the sources of its transcendence, and that its own sum is always more than it—but only therefore to demand a certificate of good behavior from it. According to this latent tradition, a work of art should have no being for itself, since otherwise it would—as Plato's embryonic state socialism classically stigmatized it—be a source of effeminacy and an obstacle to action for its' own sake, the German original sin. Killjoys, ascetics, moralists of the sort who are always invoking names like Luther and Bismarck, have no time for esthetic autonomy; there is also an undercurrent of servile heteronomy in the pathos of the categorical imperative, which is indeed on the one hand reason itself, but on the other a brute datum to be blindly obeyed. Fifty years ago Stefan George and his school were still being attacked as Frenchifying esthetes.

Today the curmudgeons whom no bombs could demolish have allied themselves with the philistines who rage against the alleged incomprehensibility, of the new art. The underlying impulse of these attack is petty bourgeois hatred of sex, the common ground of Western moralists and ideologists of socialist realism. No moral terror can prevent the side the work of art shows its beholder from giving him pleasure, even if only in the formal fact of temporary freedom from the compulsion of practical goals. Thomas Mann called this quality of art "high spirits," a notion intolerable to people with morals. Brecht himself who was not without ascetic traits—which reappear transmuted in the reserve of any great autonomous art towards consumption—rightly ridiculed culinary art; but he was much too intelligent not to know that pleasure can never be completely ignored in the total esthetic effect, no matter how relentless the work. The primacy of the esthetic, object as pure refiguration does not smuggle consumption or false harmony back by a detour. Although the moment of pleasure, even when it is extirpated³⁷ from the effect of a work, constantly returns to it, the principle that governs autonomous works of art is not the totality of their effects, but their own inherent structure. They are knowledge as nonconceptual objects. This is the source of their greatness. It is not something of which they have to persuade men, because it should be given to them. This is why today autonomous rather than committed works of art should be encouraged in Germany. Committed works all too readily credit themselves with every noble value, and then manipulate them at their ease. Under fascism, too, no atrocity was perpetrated without a moral veneer. Those who trumpet their ethics and humanity in Germany today are merely waiting for a chance to persecute those whom their rules condemn, and to exercise the same inhumanity in practice of which they accuse

³⁶We know very well that pure art and empty art are the same thing and that esthetic purism was a brilliant manoeuvre of the bourgeois of the last century who preferred to see themselves denounced as philistines rather than as exploiters. *What is Literature?*, p. 17.

³⁷To pull or pluck up by the roots; to root up, destroy, or remove root and branch

modern art in theory. In Germany, commitment often means bleating what everyone is already saying or at least secretly wants to hear. The notion of a “message” in art, even when politically radical, already contains an accommodation to the world: the stance of the lecturer conceals a clandestine entente³⁸ with the listeners, who could only be truly rescued from illusions by refusal of it.

The Politics of Autonomous Art

The type of literature that, in accordance with the tenets of commitment but also with the demands of philistine moralism exists for man, betrays him by traducing that which alone could help him, if it did not strike a pose of helping him. But any literature which therefore concludes that it can be a law unto itself, and exist only for itself, degenerates into ideology no less. Art, which even in its opposition to society remains a part of it, must close its eyes and ears against it: it cannot escape the shadow of irrationality. But when it appeals to this unreason, making it a *raison d'être*, it converts its own malediction³⁹ into a theodicy⁴⁰. Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden “it should be otherwise.” When a work is merely itself and no other thing, as in a pure pseudoscientific construction, it becomes bad art—literally pre-artistic. The moment of true volition, however, is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be. As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art, even literary ones, point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life. The mediation is not a compromise between commitment and autonomy, nor a sort of mixture of advanced formal elements with an intellectual content inspired by genuinely or supposedly progressive politics. The content of works of art is never the amount of intellect pumped into them: if anything it is the opposite. Nevertheless, an emphasis on autonomous, works is itself sociopolitical in nature. The feigning of a true politics here and now, the freezing of historical relations which nowhere seem ready to melt, oblige the mind to go where it need not degrade itself. Today, every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of kitsch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics. Sartre himself has expressed this truth in a passage which does credit to his honesty.⁴¹ This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead. An example is Kafka’s allegory of toy guns, in which an idea of nonviolence is fused with a dawning awareness of the approaching paralysis of politics. Paul Klee too belongs to any debate about committed and autonomous art: for his work, *écriture par excellence*,⁴² has roots in literature and would not have been what it was without them—or if it had not consumed them. During the First World War or shortly after, Klee drew cartoons of Kaiser Wilhelm as an inhuman iron eater. Later, in 1920, these became—the development can be shown quite clearly—the *Angelus Novus*, the machine angel, who, though he no longer bears any emblem of caricature or commitment, flies far beyond both. The machine angel’s enigmatic eyes force the onlooker to try to decide whether he is announcing the culmination of disaster or salvation hidden within it. But, as Walter Benjamin, who owned the drawing, said, he is the angel who does not give but takes.

Translated by Francis McDonagh.

³⁸An understanding.

³⁹A curse; the utterance of a curse.

⁴⁰a writing, doctrine, or theory intended to “justify the ways of God to men.”

⁴¹See Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme*, Paris 1946, p. 105.

⁴²writing by excellence