

NOTES ON THE ARTISTIC EGO



“But eternity which arches over and high above the temporal, tranquil as the starry vault, and God in heaven who in the bliss of that sublime tranquillity holds in survey, without the least sense of dizziness at such a height, these countless multitudes of men and knows each single individual by name – He, the great Examiner, says that only one attains the goal. That means, every one can and every one should be this *one* – but only one attains the goal.”¹ – Søren Kierkegaard

I. The Messianic

The modern artistic ego is, in essence, messianic – that is, “modern” in the sense that since the Renaissance artists have sought to distance themselves from the apparatus of the purely determinant work of art, and “messianic” in the sense that the timeless or untimely work of art almost always calls from within this process of exiting being (escaping finitude). This messianic ego is, therefore, not the same as the Freudian “ego”, nor could it ever be, given that Freud’s work is not universal and timeless (nor futural). More importantly, Freud’s work cannot and should not be applied retrospectively or retroactively (despite attempts to do so by Freud and his followers). It is and was historically grounded, despite claims otherwise, and it is for this same reason that it cannot, nor even tries to, access the universal.

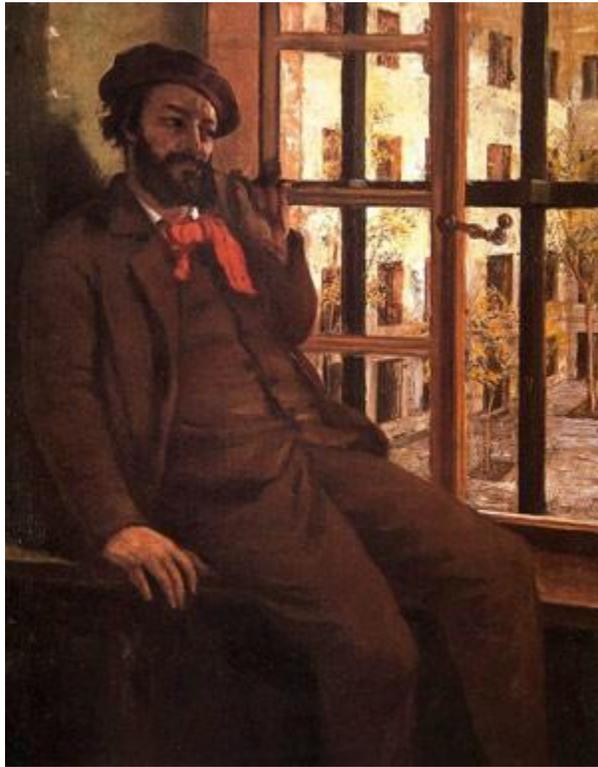
The predilections of the messianic subject are quite different from the predilections of the merely egotistical subject. The modern artistic ego, in fact, seems always already inclined to vanquish, *avant la lettre*, the object subject of the Freudian inquest altogether. At the least, it attempts to destabilize the self-centered apostrophe that is the Freudian ego, a generally solitary (solipsistic) and isolated self, existing primarily as vapor, or that form of subject which we might trace back to Descartes and to the rapt inwardness of an essentially autistic subject caught in purely anti-contingent spaces and times denoting the bizarre conundrum of pure interiority or ultra-privileged reflection upon reflection (self as *mise-en-abîme*).² If Lacan re-loaded this problem via the mirror stage, it is for the same reason that Lacanian analysis leads quite simply, if analysis succeeds, to re-naturalizing the subject. Yet the issue for the messianic is “anteriority”, versus “interiority”, while it is also Kierkegaard’s point (in all of his various and caustic works defending the ground of the individual) that the path to the former (anteriority) is by way of the latter (interiority).³

While this may seem to save the Cartesian ego for Art itself, as rite of passage, it is also necessary to trace out the differences that belie the modern artistic ego as messianic, these differences constituting a non-system of forces and factors that mark the work of art as a form of delivering, in physical form (in the artwork), the first-born affect of the One (the *one* of Kierkegaard’s “That Individual”, a work published posthumously in 1859, and a moniker that he suggested serve as the inscription/epitaph on his tombstone).

What is obvious is that for the artistic ego to be messianic, for it to announce and prepare the path of the One, there is the necessity for a strange disconnect to be present in the biography of the artist, which, in turn, must be neutralized en route to the work of art per se (two must become one); or, that the anterior subject(ivity) announced in the work of art must somehow present a figure of an “archaic” subject(ivity) putatively superior to all subsequent forms of individuality and/or mere artistic license. In such an untimely tale, then, the figure of the artistic genius must fall on his/her sword in the cause of this campaign. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard saw strenuous individuality as the preliminary sign of unavoidable martyrdom.

The messianic artistic self, today, is so very closely aligned with the egotistical artistic self that the two are often simply conflated as variations on a theme – one being an enhanced version of the other; one (the former) being an amplification of the other (the latter), or one (the latter) being a deflation of the other (the former). The messianic, however, is not the egotistical, even if the artist performs the rite of passage through mere subjectivity in an entirely egotistical manner. Courbet comes to mind, especially regarding his dire, but successful attempts to attract attention in Paris by painting against the grain of conventional genres (Art waging war against art), or despite his intentional

maneuvers to upbraid those who defended the same tastes and preconceptions (artist waging war against the philistines and Pharisees). It is the “Realist” Courbet who we might question in attempting to discern the prime motivations of the artist working to upturn the proverbial apple cart, while it is but a mere one hundred years later



that we find the apparent high-egotistical mannerisms of modern art and the full bloom of the heroic artist charting a blazing path toward the future, if not, in rare instances, toward the *future anterior*, or “time immemorial”.

The lessons along this path, from the birth of modern art in the 19th century to the full manifestations of the contagion in modern art per se, include the disruption that occurred in the Romantic era, when the artist as individual (something more closely aligned to Kierkegaard’s project given the timeframe) strategically positioned himself or herself with and against (at once) the impending destruction of the numinous (the noumenal), a process realized by advancing secularization and the technological ravages of the Industrial Revolution. It is but a short leap to Walter Benjamin in the 1920s, and to the inter-war years, where we find this same process reduced to the somewhat misleading problem of the “loss of aura” in the reproducibility of the artwork, while it is by way of Immanuel Kant, his immediate legacy (so-called post-Kantianism), and *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics (that is, art and art theory c.1900) that we find the primary coordinates of this shift in the deliberations and arguments regarding the autonomy of art; that is to say, then and there appears a clash between Art itself (Art’s utterly unique and singular focus toward and for its own purposes and ends) and the

Enemy (Art’s repeated instrumentalization as ideological something in service to “cultural production”).

This issue of autonomy is presented in modern aesthetics as a type of singularity (a form and a force in art that produces an autonomous, strenuous position for art, if not a formal and rigorous singularity for the very objects of art), a process of both reduction and expansion (a torsion) that delivers Art over to forces that remain nonetheless bracketed (de-natured) insofar as the reduction is carried off in the service of an austere linguistic model (e.g., phenomenology or, later, structuralism and semiology). As such, Art is placed in the somewhat rarified realm of Modern Art as exemplary practice (discourse) toward the arrival and annunciation of the revolutionary “here-and-now” (“*hic et nunc*”). This annunciation is made apropos of all former values assigned art over the ages, and it is this presentiment toward a version of the Kierkegaardian “one” that permeates all modern artworks, inclusive of those anti-modernist movements and moments which sought to undermine this very gesture, because it was, after all, an *empty gesture* (as the numinous was in the process, anyway, of being vacated/renounced). The back-and-forth, warring process of seizing this ground or of denouncing this ground is, in retrospect, a matter of the annunciation privileging but one version of time, the preternatural present, whereas the messianic, in fact, privileges not time (the “Now”) but its cessation (the “End”). As Aquinas pointed out in his *Summa*, the “Now” is not the Eternal. It is this end, therefore, that must be assigned the principal place in all artworks that speak its annunciation – for it is not a literal ending, but a type of end that opens something altogether untimely. If anything, it was the radically contingent positions of modern art (its utopian agenda) that produced the spectacle of the diachronic, stylistic circus that ensued, plus the oftentimes far more strenuous anti-modernisms that to this day seem to speak more evocatively of the messianic than the modernist works they implicitly and explicitly critique and/or ridicule. From Huysmans to Proust to Duchamp we might trace the early manifestations of anti-modernist resistance to the totalizing, pseudo-revolutionary specificity of the “Now”.

If the modernist movement and its dialectically disposed counter-movements (anti-modernisms) are at all instructive of this process of discerning the messianic beyond the egotistical, it is due to the excessive and grandiloquent pronouncements over the course of the 20th century of “the Next”, “the New”, and “the End”. This strenuous reproduction of the same empty agenda, again and again, in movement after movement, produced the extended

circumstances of modern art in itself, a trajectory that arguably fell to pieces by mid-century, when the heroic and the messianic were displaced by the quotidian and the everyday (the very mark and anti-modern quiddity of so-called contemporary art).

Yet it is not the history of this process (the birth of the modern) that warrants examination, but the inward processes of its formal putsch. If this formalism is to be conflated with the formalist agendas proceeding from Kant (and Malevich read Kant), we are necessarily caught in the universal and anti-contingent zone that seems to have inaugurated the plethora of styles and genres leading up to the present moment when, arguably, the messianic “interiority” of Art calls once again. Forms of formalism abound, but it is the ur-form of Formalism (as formulated by Kant as *a priori* principles antecedent to all contingent expression and all empirical experience) that performs formalism as utterly radical something else. Formalism is the messianic.



II. The Self as Other

Kierkegaard’s proto-existential philosophy of individuality establishes a certain ground for the subsequent encounter with the numinous, an encounter that Art seems to formalize in the work of art. This ground, troubled from Nietzsche to Heidegger to Sartre, is a crossroads (a nexus or crossing of vectors) that signals the difficult choices the individual makes en route to that somewhat mysterious encounter with Self as Other. But it is not the existentialist plight that requires exploration in determining what this Self as Other might suggest; whereas it is the possibility of becoming entrapped in that very middle ground that might prefigure the anxieties and the neuroses visited upon the empirical ego (the mere “I”). It is for this reason that Levinas’ entire career might be seen as an attempt to counter the bankrupt ethos of Being perpetrated by Heidegger.

To reduce the modern, “Freudian” ego to something empirical is to indicate that such was more or less the outcome, though psychoanalysis is not (and never was) empirical or scientific. As empirical (or pseudo-empirical), the ego takes up its place alongside other seemingly objective facts of modern science, to be studied and mapped, while it becomes aligned as well with the physiological-psychological model of the human being as an amalgam of psychic facts and fictions, a battleground of real and imagined conditions, forces, and fields – this latter paradigm the very image of the pre-modern, pagan *psyche*, and effectively the model adopted by Jung. (Freud’s attempt to “psychoanalyze” Michelangelo’s *Moses* is an apt simile for the arrogant, retrospective gaze of psychoanalysis.) This apparent field of forces (while never fully demonstrable and given to endless readings, mis-readings, and re-readings) is that very territoriality divulged by Kierkegaard as the interior dialogue that constitutes/engenders a subject. While this same dialogue is reputedly the origin of philosophy (pre-Socratic philosophy originating in endophasia), one encounters in the work of art the subject transfigured and a second subject inferred. It is not the artifact or work of art per se that matters; while it is the convergence of the ego and the messianic that confers on the artwork the mark of this encounter. The messianic is the universal not-I.

Endophasia is by definition an internalizing dialogue with self or with an imagined other (not-I); this other may take the form of almost anyone and anything (and it opens the space of the Imaginary itself). In its most prescient instantiation endophasia produces philosophy as dialectic, the putative origin of rationality. This dialectic is what has haunted Western rationality for two millennia. As is well known, and primarily by way of Hegel, dialectical operations produce syntheses, which then produce further oppositions and further dialectical “progress” toward final resolution in Absolute Knowing (Hegel’s version of “the End”).⁴ It is this goal of Absolute Knowing that is realized a-temporally in Art. While the teleological thrust of Hegel’s phenomenology and science of Spirit predicted the eventual arrival of such in historical time, it is more likely and more productive to see that same event in singular works of Art and/or Spirit. This is the synchronic path (and also the mark of the eschaton). Non-linearity and redemptive time are linked in this “outside of time”. Here is the key to the same, insofar as in the processes and excavations of works of art, inclusive of biographical and archival research, what becomes evident is that the artist out of necessity becomes the work of art. The messianic “ends” the quotidian and restores it to an entirely different register or time. (In the case of Art, this destruction and restoration of the quotidian is transferred to the work of art itself).

This is not to say, however, that the biography of the artist sheds much light on what has come to pass – the artwork

itself. Biography is, instead, almost always a red herring. (Why one must mislead or put the dogs on trial is a question for another day and/or another “hunt”.) At the worst, biography destroys the very idea and concept that resides in the artwork as singular object of Art (in Hegelese, *in/for* itself). This autonomous “anti-nature” within art exceeds the work of art and formally neutralizes the biographical detail of its coming into being. This “anti-nature” is what in fact “ends” philosophy as well – as it is the dialogic nature of philosophy that precludes its ever arriving at the singular, except insofar as Hegel’s Absolute Knowing might, in fact, truly arrive and negate the very necessity of philosophy (and art). If momentary insurrections of this order are merely rehearsals, one can only wonder what might bring on Hegel’s pleroma. It is much more likely that pleroma is an entirely inward, ultra-anterior event negating all normative definitions of Being.

III. Absolute Knowing

If the work of art is (embodies) Absolute Knowing, it is obvious that all works of art cannot be evaluated in this light. It is paramount to heresy to suggest today that there is Art and there is art. Such a claim flies in the face of all the efforts to naturalize (and neutralize) art; to make it perform various tasks appropriate to the leveling processes that contemporary art requires to distinguish itself from modernism and take its place in the ultra-contingent maelstrom of signifying agency given to the particularization of the arts as an overt form of discourse (critique) or mere commerce (aesthetic pleasure). If this is the outcome of modernism, it is so because modernism did, without quite trying, neutralize the very universalizing discourse it attempted to embody. The art-critical and art-historical evidence suggests that this failure has more to do with the strident anti-historical and anti-idealist strains of modernity than with anything else, least of all the formalist and abstract agendas that led modern art to the very brink of apotheosis, to fail for entirely other reasons at the threshold of Absolute Knowing. This failure might be said to fall at the feet of the idols of modernity – the humanist idols and the negation (decoupling) of primordial but necessary knots (metaphysical knots that ironically denote insurmountable contingent conditions). Negation, after all, is an art in and of itself.

The embodiment of Absolute Knowing is not the same as art as discourse or art as critique. Absolute Knowing negates self-conscious participation in the same. There is no critique as such, except that the very object is critique in and of its simple existence (by way of simply being). It is for this reason that we can also see that the path of the artist (the biography of the artist) is the path of a type of martyrdom, but without re-loading any Romantic precepts about estrangement, genius, isolation, and/or austerities such that map instead that middle ground outlined above as the proto-existentialist territoriality of the artistic ego. All such things (austerities and/or riches) exist as rites of passage. “Successful Artist” is yet another epitaph.

Thus, we are back again questioning the very premise of the messianic and what it means in terms of the production of art. Suffice to say that it inhabits the work of art, and that all *ad hominem* reductions to “megalomaniac” (Courbet), “tortured genius” (Van Gogh), or “shamanic, magical realist” (Beuys) preclude any understanding whatsoever of the truly universal import of art. It is that universality that requires defending, in the messianic work of art; and it is the universality of strenuous formal and gestural operations that signal the rise to the Absolute (via the paradigmatic). That rise occurs by degrees, and there are works of art that appear to be one thing while actually being (or accessing) another thing (another time and place). The very first examples of this may well be Renaissance portraiture (especially *self-portraiture*) ... For it is axiomatic that archaic sculpture was exactly what it was. Yet, art history almost always lies (speaks half truths), and with Mallarmé we must say “Deny the unsayable, it lies ...”

Apropos of nothing, or apropos of the form of Nothing that is something in Heidegger’s “What is Metaphysics?” (1929), the unsayable (Truth) is not unsayable, and it is Philosophy and Art (especially Poetry) that attempts to say the unsayable.⁵ But to say the unsayable, or to embody the unembodied, there must be a body (or at least a corpse). It is this assimilation of Truth to the sayable (to embodied form) that constitutes Absolute Knowing. And it is the messianic in Art that embodies, or strives to embody, this truth.

GK (DRAFT 04/22/08)

Images – Gustave Courbet, *The Desperate Man*, 1844-1845, oil on canvas; 17 3/4 x 21 5/8 in. (45 x 55 cm.), Private Collection, courtesy of Conseil Investissement Art BNP Paribas (Metropolitan Museum of Art); Gustave Courbet, *Self-Portrait at Sainte-Pélagie*, 1872–1873, oil on canvas; 35 3/4 x 28 3/8 in. (92 x 72 cm), Musée Gustave Courbet,

Ornans (Metropolitan Museum of Art); Albrecht Dürer, *Self-Portrait with Fur-Trimmed Robe*, 1500, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany.

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, “That Individual” (1859), pp. 94-101, trans. Walter Kaufmann, in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Penguin, 1989), pp. 94-95. Kierkegaard’s question “What is an author?”, asked *en passant* in “On His Works” (part of *The Point of View*, published posthumously), is answered emphatically by Michel Foucault in 1969 with the lecture “What is an Author?”. See Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”, trans. Robert Hurley, in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 1998). Foucault’s “absolute indifference to the flesh-and-blood individual and a decidedly aestheticizing perspective with regard to subjectivity” is discussed in Giorgio Agamben’s “The Author as Gesture”, pp. 61-72, in *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007). The full title of Kierkegaard’s “That Individual” is “‘That Individual’: Two ‘Notes’ Concerning My Work as an Author”.

² See Jean-Luc Marion, *On the Ego and on God: Further Cartesian Questions*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

³ Thus, Stéphane Mallarmé’s oft-cited evocation of “au ciel antérieur” in “Les fenêtres”, c. 1863 (trans. Peter Manson):

So, seized by disgust for the man of obdurate soul
sprawled in happiness, where his appetites only
are fed, who persists in searching this filth
to offer it to the woman nursing his little ones,

I flee, and I cling to all cross-panes
where a man can show life the cold shoulder, and, blessed
in their glass, washed by eternal dews,
gilded by the chaste morning of the Infinite

in their mirror I see myself an angel! and I die, I love
– if the windowpane be art, or the mystical –
to be reborn, wearing my dream for a diadem,
in a prior sky where Beauty flourishes!

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). “The power of Spirit is only as great as its expression, its depth only as deep as it dares to spread out and lose itself in its exposition.” “Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward ... dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms. The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change. The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world.” Hegel, “Preface”, *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” (1929), in Kaufmann, *Existentialism*, pp. 242-64.