

ON “ MANNERISM ” OR LOGOS STABBED

By JOICHIRO KAWAMURA*

I. Enigmatic Painting

The reddish bare land gently undulates dotted with the warm, rather dull green of orchards, descending to a hilly town covered by the monochromatic bluish grey of buildings. Now suppose a graceful boy stood in the middle of the hill where you can command a view of the whole town with the stream of the Tajo at a long distance to the left. The boy spreads his arms holding out a bird's-eye-view of the town which is seen lying easily far below his feet. Well, if we are to draw a bird's-eye-view picture of the whole landscape on a canvas, it will be a rare invention for us to depict in the foreground the pale, melancholic boy and the bird's-eye-view he holds out with his effeminate hands as one of the “things” constituent of the whole landscape. In the bird's-eye-view held by the boy-in-the-picture, still another bird's-eye-view of the same landscape including the boy holding out a fourth bird's-eye-view is to be drawn. In that last (not final) bird's-eye-view, another, that is a fifth, bird's-eye-view of the town is to be drawn, where, in its turn, the boy with his sixth view is to be depicted. Thus one picture of the town repeats itself endlessly. This painting, like two mirrors placed face to face reflecting and infinitely multiplying their transparent images, implies an obscure Existence (*or* Non-Existence) that encloses the entire town of Toledo and takes it away beyond the blue heavens. It would be neither a caprice nor a mere play of wit to point out that such a diffusion (*and* convergence) through infinite concurrences of the finite things into zero (*or* all) is one of the capital themes in the field of the mathematical sciences. In every field have we just stepped into a labyrinthian world again in search of our Minotaur.

El Greco, a Greek in Spain, who drew this enigmatic picture entitled ‘View and Plan of Toledo’ (c. 1608, now in Museo del Greco, Toledo) was called a madman by his contemporaries. It is said that the boy depicted to the right in the foreground quite disproportionately large is Jorge, the painter's son who was fascinated by his father and was a mirror, as it were, upheld to El Greco. It is quite natural that the bird's-eye-view of Toledo held by the boy should actually be left blank only showing a slight stretch of stain. It would be quite blasphemous even for Theotocopoulos (which is his autonym, meaning a child of God, while El Greco is his popular name) to lock the infinite in the finite. This enigmatic and endless composition of “map-in-map” bears those uneasy looks of infinite series which infinitely approach to the extremity without ever reaching it.

Why does Greco's painting in question, which is nothing but a design of those looks, attract us so much now? It might be because it reminds us of the form of our existence

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which has been violently disclosed by so-called anti-literature, now the most reflective of the contemporary consciousness. M^{me} Sarraute makes clear the position of the anti-roman when she says in 'From Dostoevsky to Kafka' that the Proustian type of psychological novel is already obsolete, trying to go down to the bottom of bottoms of consciousness, the harbour of authentic impressions:

Now we have learned a lesson from repeated disappointments and clearly apprehended that after all we have no bottom of bottoms.

(*L'Ere du Soupçon*)

Going right down to the bottom to see what there is, we find nothing but a bottom, and going down farther with an idea there must be "something" authentic, we find nothing but an endless series of bottom after bottom.

This 'mad' painter, who would not even step out of his studio, saying "the daylight will disturb my inner light", had not established, it is said, his so-called "Greco-style" until he finished 'The Burial of Count Orgaz' (1586-8), a matchless masterpiece in the history of Mannerism. The work seems somewhat deviate from logic as it is divided between the splendidly described realistic world of a group of people surrounding the dead count with his noble but *mondain* face and the illusionary world of the Heaven depicted in the upper half. The basic tone of this solemn and elegant world of "illogical logic" is black, accented with the "masses" of silver, rose and red, playing a grand mass of colours. El Greco's beauty or mannerist beauty is one of the most triumphant flowers growing in the soil of illogicality and dissonance. The picture represents, indeed, "magniloquence of disharmony" of Mannerism. What attracts us in El Greco today, however, is rather another style of his which was to come after 'The Burial of Count Orgaz'—a new style characterized by floods of grey. His "blue period", which, as it were, so early foreran that of Picasso, and his "grey period", which seems as if his pallet had known nothing but black and white, were very symbolic of the age which was to give birth to Velázquez, a painter of dusk. And we jump over the history of Mannerism to face with the modern age as soon as we define this evolution as "a retreat from colours."

II. Polonius and Hamlet

Today we have, for example, Dubuffet. He once said, "I like painting at the limit of no longer being painting." Who will call mad today the monochrome world of Dubuffet which seems just a mere stretch of mud? We have, for another example, Beckett, who wrote 'Act without Words' and 'Breath' which needs no more than thirty seconds to play, where neither actor nor actress appears on the stage, let alone words. This is nothing but 'The Retreat from the Word' in the phrase of G. Steiner entitling one of his essays collected in *Language and Silence*. The phrase is, it might be needless to say, meant to be a criticism of the modern world. A man who suddenly appears in the desert repeats his meaningless acts manipulated by a whistle. A pitcher with a label that reads "water" comes down from above and halts just above his head. Some small and large boxes come down to the ground. To reach the pitcher, he tries to mount the top of the boxes piling

up them in various ways, but the pitcher is pulled up as soon as he scarcely touches it. This is an extremity of theatre or one step before "the theatre which has retreated from theatre." If it is called "theatre", it is only because we might find in this play a thin thread which connects the play with the theatrical convention of pantomime. Although the label says "water", no one is sure if there is really any water. Although one does not know if one's existential thirst could be quenched, one does desperately struggle to know the way to get it. Boxes topple down, the man falls down, and the audience laugh. The man repiles the boxes in another way. These repetitions, with small variations, of trial and error symbolize the way what is called reason has followed ever since the Creation. This is, as it were, a negative Sisyphus or a simply grey endless-film going round and round from which the positive image of Camus' reticent and weather-beaten Sisyphus has been erased away just because of its mere romantic heroism. There may be some who laugh at but none who applaud the "act without words" of the embarrassed man hurrying after his rock, which he has just carried up to the top, rolling down the hillside to the bottom of the ravine.

There seems some definite reason why many major plays of our age look just like a comedy. Is there any correspondence between that characteristic of the contemporary drama and the El Greco world of grey and blue? And again, is there any correspondence between that characteristic and the monochromatic world of blue and brown of Dubuffet who topographizes everything—human beings as well as still life or landscape?

If a piece of pantomime is a piece of monochrome and if the monologue of *Krap's Last Tape* is also a grey monochrome as well as "a retreat from the theatre", a *rondo* of chattering which does nothing but repeat *clichés* is also an easily discernible disguise of monochrome. While M^{me} Sarraute's characters continue their "*sous-conversations*", Ionesco's *Bald Soprano* opens and closes with the same dialogues, indicating the quotidian prattle is to repeat itself endlessly behind the fallen curtain, nay, this side of the curtain as well. The most grandiose and obscure philosophy or the most heated public discussion on the stage of parliamentary democracy is, after all, nothing more than a vicious circle of verbalism, lost labour on the part of *homo sapiens*, that is, *homo verbosus*. We can see that the theatre of Ionesco too obviously reveals how literally grotesque is the modern age that desperately tries to fill up that blank with the bubble of our babble, which has been left by the loss of the self as the authentic lord, when we consider that "grotesque" was derived from "*grotta*" (cave), in which the most habitual are put aside from our notice because of their habituality and because outside the *grotta* they look mad or ridiculous in the light of daytime.

Words, words, words—it would be needless to say this is a reply of Hamlet to Polonius. Polonius plays, as it were, Ionesco's Mrs. Smith or Mr. Martin. It might be said that the Lord Chamberlain is an allegory of *homo verbosus*, just like similar characters in modern drama. He never gives up his prattle which, Heidegger warns, is nothing but *Verfallen* into the moment. To this common sense incarnate, the noble prince seems "mad, / Mad I call it; for, to define true madness, / What isn't but to be nothing else but mad?" No answer could be more suitable than Hamlet's "Words, words, words" to the question of the old man who can't give up his verbal *permanent mobile*, "What do you read, my lord?" (It seems as if Polonius had anticipated Lucky of *Waiting for Godot*.) The reply to the old man by the "noble son" means nothing but a counterattack on the sane by the mad. Hamlet jeers at man as well as at himself, saying

What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! . . . in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god!

(*Hamlet* II, ii.)

Reason is Logos or the Word—"In the beginning was the Word." Who on earth could deny that things come into "beings" by virtue of words? Things do never take their forms as things unless they are given contours by words—they would be submerged in some primitive state which is simply grey beyond the ability of words to indicate, neither "plane" or "depth" nor "chaos" being the right word for it. Things submerged mean man's cognition or even man himself plunged away beneath the current of nature to be buried in a watery grave. It is true, indeed, in those two senses that the Word is the dwelling-house of the existence, or "die Bedingnis." Heidegger says in his *Das Wort*, "Das Wort be-dingt das Ding zum Ding. Wir möchten dieses Walten des Wortes die Bedingnis nennen." A "word" cuts out a "thing" from a grey stretch of chaos and then we *see* a thing, that is, we impose logos upon existence. The truth of "word" is the exact relation or correspondence of that kind; it is nothing more than that. To adorers of reason the "truth" means no more than this exactitude. The authenticity of a word depends upon the "correspondence" between a sign which indicates and what is indicated. This relation, however, is neither stable nor unchangeable, which could easily be anticipated if the very reality of "word" is reminded—the reality that logos meant to signify *or* emancipate existence is only a fetter meant to enslave existence. Thus "logos" harbours a crisis from the beginning. When Hamlet calls the old man a "fishmonger", the latter takes it literally, while the former means a "pander." This is just an instance, however small, where "the crisis of logos" comes down into the momentary of the *mondain* world and after all the whole action of *Hamlet* is, in a sense, a symbolization or metaphysical version sublimated of this routine farce. (Or perhaps this small farce is an instance where the symbolic action is reduced to the vulgar momentary, thus exciting laughter of the audience. Sublimation and reduction are the same thing in that both mean the same high voltage—up or down.) Polonius took Hamlet's "fishmonger" so literally that he decidedly took the prince for a madman:

He is far gone, far gone. (*Ibid.*)

The counterpart "shadow hero" who is to set off Hamlet on the stage is not so much the royal couple as Polonius. Neither Claudius nor Gertrude does counterpoise Hamlet, since they are put in the position not to "see" but to be "seen" by Hamlet, while we might say Polonius is on the side of "seers" just as Hamlet. However, Hamlet is on the side of the "seen" as well, and hence his tragedy. It is quite natural that the prince cannot start his action (cannot carry out his revenge) at once, who stands divided and perplexed between logos and what is seen or cut out by logos. Modern painters could fill up the gap by making their works by physical actions, for example, out of what their rolling bodies soaked with pigment leave on the canvases spread on the floor. Another "action drawing" of the same kind is pushing the pigment on to the canvas by fingers. It was only when he was on the threshold of death that Hamlet could fill up the chasm. "The rest is silence" is uttered just at the moment when this deep gulf between logos and existence is bridged over. It might be worthy for us to be reminded of Dubuffet's remarks:

..... our culture is based on an enormous confidence in the language—and especially the written language; and belief in its ability to translate and elaborate thought. That appears to me a misapprehension. I have the impression, language is a rough, very rough stenography, a system of algebraic signs very rudimentary, which impairs thought instead of helping it. As an instrument of expression, it seems to deliver only a dead remnant of thought, more or less as clinkers from the fire. As an instrument of elaboration, it seems to overload thought and falsify it.

And he continues:

I have just said, what interests me, in thought, is not the instant of transformation into formal ideas, but the moments preceding that.

(Jean Dubuffet: 'Anticultural Positions' partly transcribed
in W. Sypher: *Loss of the Self*.)

Although we are far from the conclusion now, we might say, at least tentatively, that Mannerism has much to do with those "moments."

(*To be continued.*)