

When you read the manifesto of these temperamental young Italian painters (for first of all we must have a manifesto!) you have the feeling that the psychology of the war in Tripoli is becoming easier to understand. For until now one might have thought, what on earth could the Italians want in Africa while their Sicilian peasants are still using flails to thresh the wheat by hand, their public health and census officials are befuddled, and they have their own Africas that are darker and more extensive than Tripoli, right at home? But now you are inclined to think that maybe after all they were struck by some Norman wanderlust, some adventurous devil-may-care attitude to leave everything behind, to start everything anew, someplace totally different... For to and behold, this is what the Futurist Manifesto declares: all museums must be blown up. Here are the primitives of the future.

The walls of the three exhibition rooms of the firm of Bernheim-Jeune are currently covered by a whirl of cut-up body parts in a swirl of toppling smokestacks, ragged clothes torn into shreds, and dismantled engine components. As for the viewers... why, the viewers look at each other and do not dare to laugh out loud. (Ah, here in Hungary the audiences would be more demonstrative.) For this is no simple matter. Our fathers and grandfathers have used up the right to laugh at a work of art that they did not understand and believed to be peculiar. Bach was forgotten, Mozart had to starve, Wagner was greeted with catcalls, Cézanne was ignored till the day he died, and Philippe is still not purchased, even after his death. But the sins of our fathers and elders consisted not so much in their laughing off works of genius, as in depriving us of our sense of security, our right to spontaneous laughter, and in giving rise to a rampant snobbery that would have its genius as fresh as its oysters, and in the shade of which even the most blatant mediocrity is allowed its one or two hours of fame.

I do not believe that the Futurists intend to do harm. And if one manages to remain unfazed by the first impression, which may be compared to stepping onto a heaving garbage dump of color and line, then he will encounter in more than one picture the fragments of energetic and appealing forms that signal talent. And anyway, I like those who know what they want. And the Futurists certainly know what they want; what is more, they have written about it in their manifestos with a wit and clarity that merits a thoughtful response.

And we must admit one thing. What they are doing is indeed new. It is without precedent and kin in the history of art. (Although I doubt that they should be ashamed of any kinship.) Their "art" has emerged without any transition, fully fledged from their theoretical foreheads. (A peculiar sign of the times, this reversal of the order of things, where theories precede the actual art movement...) The theory they have propounded with such dialectical acumen is as follows. Objects seen as immovable are in fact empty abstractions. They correspond neither to reality nor to the state of our soul. Within and without us all is in motion. Every single line is only a vector of forces that must be uncovered by the painter, by breaking apart the forms of seemingly still objects. The other great principle is that things that are simultaneously present together in the psyche must be painted together in the same composition. What we see is not as important as the associations that make up our true inner experience.

Thus the theory, in a nutshell. As for the paintings themselves... Well, say the subject of one picture is a woman on a balcony, seen from the interior of the room. If Monet or Renoir or any other painter before now had painted this, only the woman would be

visible within the doorframe and as much of the sky and rooftops as could be fitted within that doorframe. But Boccioni paints a *fiacre* into the woman's hairdo, inside which are seated two palazzos of four stories each. In place of her right shoulder we see a confusion of legs and feet, and over her left shoulder street lamps are floating in empty space.

The picture is undeniably novel. But listen to the official commentary. "We wish to paint the ensemble of impressions the woman on the balcony experienced while looking at the street. The noisy helter-skelter of the street, the receding line of buildings, the sweeping torrent of people and animals. In her mind these things are broken down into their elements which mix and meld together. The viewer should stand in the middle of the picture and the painting should be a synthesis of what we see and what we remember." The title of the painting is—naturally—*The City Enters the Room*.

Thus the theory is nowhere near as silly as the painting. What it asserts about the state of the mind is true, after all. However! However, this state of mind is invisible. And to paint what is invisible is, to say the least, a proposal that contradicts itself. And even if it were possible to paint the forms melted down by memory into thoughts—what would that amount to? An illustration suitable for a Freudian psychoanalysis. We want to see not so much the things in our minds as our minds in things, for it is not the things that are important—which is incidentally what the Futurists believe, as well.

Or take the official commentary to another painting. "The sixteen persons sitting in the same omnibus with you seem at various times to be one, ten, four, or three in number. They sit still and nonetheless they change their places. They come and go and jump out on the street; they are submerged in sunlight, only to resume their places by your side as eternal symbols of a universal vibration. How often have we all seen on the face of the man we happened to be talking to a horse trotting far away at the other end of the street? Our bodies sink into the benches we sit on and the benches penetrate into our bodies. The omnibus breaks through the row of buildings and the buildings fall on the omnibus and intermingle with it..."

The above is not excerpted from the diary of a madman but from the catalogue of an exhibition of paintings in Paris, in which we can also find plenty of clever and witty comments as well. As for the painting that depicts the omnibus ride, it would make no sense for me to describe it; you would still not be able to imagine it, dear reader.

Should we respond to the theory with our own theory? And say that, if we were to be consistent in this manner of depicting movement, then we ought to be painting motion pictures? Or should we point out that even if you paint twenty legs on a horse (they are never satisfied with less) then you end up with twenty motionless legs, and that thereby the painting loses that enormous mysterious force of tension that glows in the forms painted by the old masters, making us feel all the vehemence of the sum of potential movements packed into one motionless form—and even though the Futurists have lost this force of tension by breaking up the form, they nonetheless end up painting nothing but immobility?

It is not really worthwhile to elaborate the argument. It would be too easy. What is certain is that the possibility of such an art movement is an exciting and instructive symptom of our age. What they are doing, even though it consumes a considerable amount of talent, is not really art. Nonetheless we must not dismiss them as pathological or foolish. They are numerous and seem to speak each other's language, which is disquieting. And even if we do not understand their pictures, we understand the sensation they are creating. Our nerves are more sensitive to converging life forms. We can feel that these lines are merely the vectors of forces that melt into one another and our minds perceive objects as symbols of dematerialized energies. This is the

some new sensitivity that gave rise to Bergson's philosophy, according to which materiality and immobility are only optical illusions, the stillness of a speeding train seen from another one that is moving on a track parallel with it. Our empirical abstractions freeze into still forms the eternal fountains of energies.

The Futurists would like to melt these fountains by means of their paintbrushes and their intuitive sensations. Instead, they end up shattering them into a multitude of senseless fragments.

Translated by John E. E. E.



FUTURISM: NEW POSSIBILITIES IN ART AND LIFE

Dezso Szabó

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Ah, the anguish of bat-souls! In the company of mammals, the torment of wings that stick out, and among birds, the tragic realization that your vaulted, soaring wings are merely downy paws fluffed out with feathers. Torment of a twofold solitude, mocked by both fates: either a heritage of lies or a cynicism spawned by desperate vanity. Poor and wretched cynicism, revenge of the skunk-man on the merciless grandeur and beauty of life.

Yes, we are witnessing the spasms of the Age of Bats. Our sickness is that of the amorphous times between two monumental epochs. The great epics, the great mythologies have crumbled; occasional pieces of belated debris still drop with a thud inside empty souls. The new epic, tomorrow's mythology is still only a promise.

Christianity, you are a dead mythology, a dead epic, dead and gone. We can still hear the echoing blows of the hammer used by the madmen of this dying-birthing world to slam you down into your grave. In death you are still tragic, for the face of the dead gains meaning from the passions of the living. Your Greek sibling lies smiling in his grave under our fawning eyes, caressing as the sun on a sea stretching becalmed. But those hungering for a new spirit still hate you as if you were alive, and the antiquarian pretends you are still alive. Why have we failed to realize you are dead? That would smooth away the agony frozen on your face, and turn it into a smile, and you could be the eternal bride of every artist's soul.

Around your sepulchre two crude crowds churn the mud under their feet. One is a group of dwarf-size tavern saints complete with marionette-Christ and Mary-marionette, and full of lies, claiming to be part of a living and leavening Christianity, the epic that had swept a former world, the mythology that once gave birth to Europe! The small change jingling in their palms is the price of admission, sweated out by sorry simpletons.

The other group has Homais, the "natural scientists," the "intellectuals," the "moderns." Behold the diminutive natural scientist, Tom Thumb Prometheus, his micrometer caliper measuring the universe, proclaim that "today's modern man is found not in poems or novels, the child must be taught the scientific world-view, etc., etc." Well, Monsieur Homais, I don't really care if scientific nature has no gods, colors, sounds, or infinity, as long as my flesh and blood and body and soul are straining to give birth to a mythology, and inside me sings a world of music embraced by color. Do you think that they can be banished by the laws you have extracted from the highly improbable world external to my own skin? If you cannot save all of me, please do not try to be my Redeemer by

cutting me in half. I was born to be creative and to live as variously as humanly possible. And I would rather be a medieval cock than a capon of modern natural science.

For the last 150 years the problem has been staring us in the face: Christianity is defunct, along with all of its consequences, while the human machine rattles on meaninglessly. The basic psychic functions need a new dogma, a new will, and new passion to create new life...

And anyone attempting the heroic anachronism of living on a grand epic scale is laughed at, like some shadow play for children. The literature of the nineteenth century is full of lugubrious Herculean figures shrunken down into weird jugglers, having realized how risible the simple, grand, and heroic have become.

Dogmas, dogmas are needed for the broken mosaic of humankind! The fiery wind of dogmas to sweep all sterile little egos into one new, fertile medium. Dogmas, to move muscles with great love or great hatred, for only love and hatred are capable of building. Dogmas, to make men once again simple, childlike, and heroic. To sweep away the scholastics with their piddling expertise, trivial artiness, refined souls and intellectual games.

Even a dogma of only one sentence, of socialist origin or whatever, but pregnant with the future, let the juices revive the vast jungle of our ego. Science is just as much a cage as religious morality. Hasn't anyone noticed how unlimited man is?

II.

Christianity died, and in its wake came a century-long dance of death. The scattered fragments of a great unity sickened into individuals, and like the various members of a dissected frog, kept on twitching in the dance of the whole body. For Romanticism with its weeping, wailing, self-dissecting thirst for the infinite was a special edition of Christianity, its post-mortem spasms.

The Romantics, too, professed suffering as one of their bywords. But it was no longer the word originating from Christ's wounds, it no longer was the stuff of dogma, it did not create a new world order. These were negative giants; through them a dying world was torn to shreds. But they were still beautiful in their grandeur. And their marvelous *danse macabre* certainly conjured some thrashing silhouettes and splendid walls into our literature.

III.

The superb madmen of early Romanticism were succeeded by the diminutive, refined souls of the late nineteenth century. They are tiny and strange, as if they had dropped here out Japanese art. They turned literature into an occultism of microscopic secrets.

But signs of slowly sprouting new life began to appear in various scattered phenomena. The first great saint of the future mythology is Auguste Comte. He was the first to introduce a new dogma to restore the unity of our world.

His positivism gave rise to the art of two great Romantics: Victor Hugo and Emile Zola. The chief merit of all three is that they attempted to install the concept of humanity as the radiant centerpiece of the new faith. But Hugo and Zola throughout much of their work are still negative, destructive forces.

The first great constructive force in literature is Walt Whitman. *Leaves of Grass* remains to this day the most perfect, most fertile Futurism.

[...] In Walt Whitman I see the revelation of the future man.

Walt Whitman's message is the following:

Life is not a system, but an ongoing, self-regenerating kaleidoscope of which even the most comprehensive system can capture only a tiny sliver. It is, in all its forms and