

'The colossal development of science, whose prospects are unlimited will permit men in a Communist society to solve those world enigmas which still checkmate their analytical reason. Thus the most important conditions for the genesis and existence of religious prejudices will disappear.

'But the most important factor in ensuring the demise of religion will be the inevitable eradication of its social causes.'

This requires only one short explanation: Communism is, to a Communist, still a future state of society, a stage not yet achieved even in Russia.

D. W. BLACK

HEARD AND SEEN

Picasso: Olé et Vale

IS it possible to write anything about Picasso which has not been written already: or which, though hitherto unsaid, is not boring? To judge by my own reactions: no. If I so much as suspect that an article I am reading is going to discuss him I simply throw it aside. I've had enough of picassology and picassophily, not to say picagiography, to last me a lifetime. All the same, I find myself wanting to record a few retrospective thoughts on the Retrospective—that stupendous display of paintings, from the pre-Blue through to the scarce-dry series of variations on *Las Meninas*, which the Tate set before us last summer. All other impressions apart, I was overcome at the time of my visit with a sense of *fin d'époque*. What *époque*? Why *fin*? If I attempt to answer these questions, and if in doing so I adopt a tone which is not exclusively panegyric, it must be understood at the outset that my role will be that of a tick talking about—and perhaps presuming to criticize—a lion. Our relative magnitudes, his and mine, are as indicated; so also in great measure is the mode of our symbiosis. I have been nourished for many years from his bloodstream, and been carried, more or less helplessly clinging, wherever it has occurred to him to go. Nevertheless for some time past I have occasionally muttered to my neighbour-ticks in the same patch of fur, 'Blood's not quite what it used to be, don't you think? Bit thin. I've more than half a mind to move on.' And sure enough, after one last big suck, I drop off into the car park at Millbank: satiated, awestruck, humbled, elated, conscious of a curious disappointment as well as of the pettish resentment of the parasite towards its host. The great beast, meanwhile, stalks away into the unknown, propelled by muscles still as lithe and lubricated as when, fifty-one years ago, they carried him from Malaga to his first hungry kills in Paris.

Perhaps, for many of us, the Tate exhibition came five years too late. Up till 1955 or so he could have done anything he liked with us. He had

us, as the saying is, on our back foot. The whole tropism of our culture was sweeping us his way: we were hypnotized by a quite genuine and justifiable culture-hero-worship—continually reinforced, let us admit, by his genius for personal publicity. A hint of disillusion was brought, for me at least, by the Clouzot film, marvellous and spectacular though it was. Here for the first time he went too far even for an *aficionado*. When the last incredible metamorphic set-piece had smouldered into darkness and the corybantic guitar had fallen silent, the feeling emerged that, if a painter is free to adopt any imaginable style, transcend, transmute, invert and parody it with all the insouciance of the great Mr Rich, mentioned in *Joseph Andrews*, who at will 'can metamorphose himself into a monkey or a wheelbarrow or whatsoever else best pleases his fancy'—why then no one thing is really more worth while doing than any other; and by a short step from there, nothing is very much worth doing at all. Total mastery of means seemed to involve total devaluation of problem. One turned with relief to the grand meditative introversion of a Braque, or the selfless constructive patience of a Mondrian. These men and others like them seemed to say, 'Here are the pictures *we* have been able to paint. But *you* are welcome to paint others as like or as unlike them as you desire. Our only injunction is that you must become as totally dedicated to your idea as we have been to ours.' This mute and deeply moving message could not but be an encouragement and a point of growth.

Picasso, by contrast, is, as I have said, a beast of prey. He is also a great lover, it is true (*au fond il n'ya que l'amour*, he is quoted as saying). But he kills what he loves. He pounces on a subject, a method, a range of possibilities (usually one which no one else has been sharp enough to notice), rips it to shreds and devours it. When he looks over his shoulder towards his competitors, it is with a black-eyed and mocking glance as who should say, 'Don't you wish you'd been clever enough to hunt this one down? Don't you wish you could have some of it? But I'm afraid by the time I've finished there won't be anything but a few crushed bones, and you won't find *them* very nutritious!' Yet when all is said and done this superbly egotistical performance is defeated by life itself; by the movement of history; by massive and ineluctable changes in the mood and spirit of the times: and not least by an obstinate tendency on the part of other egos, however feeble, to re-assert their autonomy and claim their creative sphere.

Thus speaks the tick from his vantage-point three-sixtenths of an inch above the ground. Let him lie there and shrivel. By the combined exercise of levitation, metempsychosis and divination, let me now put myself in the position of some future historian of the *Zeitgeist*, some still-unborn seer-of-the-wood-for-the-trees, who is looking back on the Picasso phenomenon from the year 2000 and attempting to assess its importance. He finds, in the first place, that everything in the paintings which was done with half an eye to shocking, surprising, disconcerting, or making a fool of, the public has by now tended to evaporate—has indeed long ago been taken over by the ad-men and worn down to meaninglessness. What hard understructure, unconquerably beautiful and of unarguable importance, does he find remaining? First and foremost the invention (or if you prefer it so, the

extrapolation from Cézanne) of Cubism. This achievement alone entitles Picasso (and with him Braque) to the status of a revolutionary giant—a Marx who was also his own Trotsky. In the years between 1906 and 1914 these two extraordinary artists and their coadjutors did nothing less than shatter the translucent sphere of Renaissance space and centralized perspective, which all other painters and their public then inhabited—and re-assemble it as an aggregation of planar crystals each seen serially from its own most typical viewpoint. He will hasten to correlate this with Einstein's theory of relativity and its attendant space-concept: and with Freudian psychology, as being likewise an analysis of the human image in terms of interior structure made manifest. And he will point out that the whole of what we call modern architecture and industrial design grew out of Cubism like some great geometric flower.

By cross-breeding Cubism with the primevally powerful planar imagery of African sculpture Picasso went on to create . . . but we all know what he went on to create, and we don't want to be shepherded yet again, even at the trot, through the phases of synthetic cubism, neo-classicism, metamorphism, surrealism, expressionism and all the rest. The apex, most people would agree, came in 1936-7, when, in the heat of his rage and pity at the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War, his whole fabulous range of discoveries was fused together and consummated in *Guernica*. Nothing before or since reaches quite the same level of gravity and passion—though there have been Kanchenjunga and Nanga Parbats, particularly in the 40's and early 50's. The story ends—at least it ended at the Tate—with a long re-examination of a favourite theme, the relationship of the artist to his subject: and the eventual message is at once heroic, melancholy, self-assertive and absurd. Velasquez's *Las Meninas* is put through an acrobatic sequence of variations in which, if my memory serves me, the painter and his canvas on the left grow continually larger in volume and importance; becoming, in the summative version, a kind of huge composite cairn of stony forms with a prominent Maltese cross where the heart would be: while the Infanta and her *entourage* dissolve into a skein of signs and ciphers. It is a sad, frustrated conclusion. The ego has swallowed up the subject, the creator the creation. The ten-million-volt will-power—necessary driving force, no doubt, for so titanic a volume of achievement—seems to have created an area of devastation and emptiness in its neighbourhood.

But the old wizard has surprised us plenty of times before. Perhaps he will again. I would much rather that he should have the last word.

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