

Traces du sacré: Humanism and the 'Man of Sorrows' in postwar European art

See 'L'Homme douloureux', *Traces du Sacré*,

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Homo homini lupus: 'Man is a wolf towards men' The mid-twentieth century saw European civilisation devour itself, ruining the material and spiritual fabric of great cities and the promise of scientific progress. Millions of human bodies were physically destroyed by men and their weaponry: a result of the harnessing of the most advanced technologies to the most regressive ideologies. While the German emigré pastor, Paul Tillich, could propose 'a theology of the end of culture' in 1948, Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, 1989, uncompromisingly linked technological progress with destruction.¹ Yet paradoxically, never was the discourse of humanism, the invocation of Man so passionate, so insistent as during the period of war and its aftermath. The period from late 1944 to the mid-1970s, a period of reconstruction and economic growth, maintained in Western Europe thanks to the unstable consensus of the Cold War, was one characterised by a humanist discourse on both sides of the Iron Curtain, despite continuing tragedies and atrocities provoked by new political configurations, including decolonialisation.

L'homme douloureux: the Man of Sorrows. This trope at the heart of Christian religion rests upon an essential paradox: God made Man, man made God. A trope signifying both pathos and the power of redemption; an eschatology linking political power to earthly toil and heavenly rewards. After 1945, the period of reconstruction saw the building of new churches and cathedrals: reconciliation was symbolised, for example, by the ruins of the old Coventry Cathedral retained in dialogue with its new building, and by the exchange of objects and commemorative rituals linking it not only to Dresden but to Hiroshima.² Yet with nineteenth-century scientific progress, Darwinism and the philosophical pronouncement of the Death of God, the challenge to Christianity was formidable. Communist ideology incorporated within its own dialectical premises the constructs of redemption, (revolutionary) toil and individual sacrifice. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy popularised in Europe, from Paris to Warsaw, would challenge not only the Church but the credos of communism, and displace the notion of redemption with a deeply humanistic absurd. Emmanuel Mounier's *Introduction aux existentialismes*, 1946, explained the cultural and philosophical specificities around other existential figures such as Kierkegaard or Karl Jaspers. And always existentialisms countered humanisms, from Merleau-Ponty's *Humanisme et Terreur*, 1947, contemporary with Jean Fautrier's painting *L'Homme qui est malheureux* (following his 'Hostage' series), to the international congress of humanism in 1949 or Louis Althusser's bitter clashes with Communist Roger Garaudy over humanism and 'antihumanism' in the 1960s, while writing on the tortured figures of Leonardo Cremonini.³

The drama of postwar humanism was sited in the body: a body whose interior traumas spoke from surfaces wounded and scarred, eliciting an empathic and spiritual as well a visual response. Challenging the biomorphic and maternal forms of Henry Moore's sculptures (his *Reclining figure* outside Paris's UNESCO building, 1958) the post-second-world war body in art became a place where, as Jean-Paul Sartre said, 'the man of Altamira' encountered the 'martyrs of Buchenwald'.⁴ An alarming continuity of primitive drives is posited in this metaphor, created to describe the emaciated sculptures of Alberto Giacometti. Yet it was Germaine Richier's brutalised bronze surfaces (whose plant imprints bore menacing intimations of regression), that first gave public expression the the new post-war body. Exhibiting in London in 1947, she had a profound impact upon a generation of British

sculptors.⁵ Eduardo Paolozzi, Reg Butler, Lynn Chadwick and Kenneth Armitage created spiky, charred and blackened human forms at the Venice Biennale of 1952, where critic Herbert Read spoke of ‘excoriated flesh, frustrated sex, the geometry of fear’.⁶ The ‘brutalist’ mode extended to Eastern Europe: see Alina Spocznikow’s, *Exhumed*, 1955, a remnant of a man evoking not just Pompei but the ravaged lands of Poland scarred with human *charniers*: With Spocznikow as with Richier, questions of gender challenge the dominant and universalising discourse of ‘man’ as does the implicit misogyny of Fautrier’s *La Juive*, 1943 or Dubuffet’s *Corps de Dames* series of 1950,

Francis Bacon’s triptych: *Three figures at the base of a Crucifixion*, 1946, raised questions for all his later *oeuvre*. In orange limbo, monstrous remnants of humanity were presented in predella formats evoking the plundered altarpieces of the Western *musée imaginaire*. There was no Crucifixion, no Christ above these fleshy obscenities whose abjection demonstrated the absence of God. They offered a striking contrast to Graham Sutherland’s Grunewald-inspired contemporary Christs twisted with pain, and crowned with thorns.⁷ Bacon’s later triptychs with their black grounds – like those of Georg Baselitz – are haunted by the black skies of the crucifixion: the moment of the eclipse, of despair. In *Study for Crouching Nude*, 1952, cage-like bars (repeated around the figures of his *Screaming Popes*) contain reminiscences of Muybridge and filmed animal studies, establishing a proximity with the characters of Samuel Beckett.

The same trope – ‘figures at the base of a Crucifixion’ – functioned to give Reg Butler’s winning entry for Britain’s international ‘Unknown Political Prisoner’ competition of 1952 an uncanny power. While the existentialist, brutalist mode of figuration prevailed, Butler’s sculpture offered a stark contrast: there are three ‘Watcher’ figures indeed, and a Golgotha-like rock base, but the Crucifixion itself was displaced by a radar tower aerial, the promise of redemption by an apparatus of electronic surveillance. The maquette – destroyed in an act of iconic vandalism – had been conceived as a full-scale construction: an ultimate monument to the Cold War. Universally read as a denunciation of godless totalitarian states, the ideological conflict dramatised by the competition concealed a vast cultural investment by America’s CIA.⁸ The antipathy aroused by Butler’s entry was, surely, due to the disappearance of the body, for however humiliated, wounded, scarred, the postwar body was insistent in its presence – as a bearer of both memory and meaning. Whereas Bacon’s positing of the absence of Christ was still eschatological, his figures still humanist, Butler’s absence invoking totalitarianism was anti-human.

Humanity is not something man simply has. He must fight for it anew in every generation and he may lose his fight. There have been few periods in history in which a catastrophic defeat was more threatening than in ours. One need only look at the dehumanizing structure of the totalitarian systems in one half of the world, and the dehumanizing consequences of technical mass civilisation in the other half. In addition, the conflict there may lead to the annihilation of humanity...

The theologian Paul Tillich wrote these words in his preface to *Images of Man*, curated by Peter Selz at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1959.⁹ Here postwar humanist tendencies in painting and sculpture – from Bacon and Cobra artists to Pollock, from Giacometti and César to Theodore Roszak demonstrated the assimilation of these tendencies internationally among American collectors and institutions. Tillich’s euphemistic treatment of the Holocaust and totalitarian regimes was symptomatic: explicit references were absent,

too, in John Robinson's *Honest to God*, 1963, which popularised for thousands the complex arguments of an essentially German postwar theology for an agnostic age.

Postwar figurative painting and sculpture was closely accompanied by humanist photography: from the artists' portraits of a Denise Colomb – (Bram Van Velde in his utterly bare studio) to Willy Ronis's face of a miner, his face scarred with pain and soot, the model for André Fougeron's *Pensionné*, in the provocative *Pays des Mines* series of 1950-1. *L'homme douloureux*: within the tropes of socialist realism, where photography played an extensive role, the martyrdom of coal miners also combined religious and revolutionary tropes, from David's *Mort de Saint Pelletier* to Philippe de Champaigne's dead Christ – and an art for a people, residually Catholic, responsive to images of the body in pain or in toil.¹⁰ *The Family of Man* show showed humanist photography on a global scale in New York in 1955.

All would be shattered by Pop and minimalism, the new consumerism, and space-age technologies which spread from America to the Europe it was financially buttressing against the Soviet Union and the Communist threat. In America itself the engagement with and rejection of humanism in the arts can be exemplified in the work of Robert Smithson.

Robert Smithson began his artistic career with strange religious paintings: *Creeping Jesus*, *Jesus Mocked*, *Fallen Christ*, *Christ in limbo* all of 1961. *Green Chimera with stigmata* of the same year brings together two separate *Man of Sorrow* paintings of the right and left hands respectively, bearing stigmata, around a black face and gaping mouth. The hands (three-dimensional mirror images - 'enantiomorphs') express 'divine transcendence forced into the humiliation of bilateral symmetry' - and may be seen to anticipate structural and crystal-based mirrorings in his later conceptual and land art pieces.¹¹ Smithson's 'A refutation of historical humanism', (1966-7) declared 'Like "God", the notion of "life" and "death" are no longer relevant to art'.¹² 'The Pathetic Fallacy in Esthetics' selects Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross* for specific attack: 'Here is the pathetic reduction at its most extreme. Newman's art begins with abstraction but results in an anthropomorphising of space.'¹³ Bruce Nauman's *The True Artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths*, 1967, exactly contemporary, posits the mirror-opposite of its title-as-meaning: his use of irony strikingly at odds with the crude sign-potential of vulgar neon. By 1968, Naumann's video *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* fused Beckett's existentialist absurd with the repetition-compulsion of Minimalism: an uncanny conjunction which continues to tease contemporary curators.¹⁴

The consciousness of 'postmodernism' hit art-world Paris in the early 1970s.¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard's publication of 1979, *La Condition Postmoderne*, augured the era of a new global economy, premised upon the immediate electronic transfers of capital. What price humanism, pathos and the *musée imaginaire* of world culture in this new age? The era was evolving towards artificial intelligence and the virtual; Norbert Wiener's work on cybernetics (a counterpoint to European *misérabilisme* in the 1940s) had spread from its war work context beyond the immediate scientific and communications communities, and was quickly embraced by the art world. Yet Lyotard's exhibition, *Les Immatériaux*, 1985, evolved simultaneously with his first reflections upon the message of Saint Augustine.¹⁶

For significantly, the legacy of the *homme douloureux* played an important role within postmodernism. Derrida's *Glas*, 1974, is premised upon mourning.¹⁷ Within *Glas* it is the text of society's outlaw, Jean Genet, which posits the destruction of the enlightenment edifice of Hegel's thought. Moreover it was Antonin Artaud's scribbled and burned body-signs, his violent utterances which provided Derrida with a voice and place whence to speak deconstruction.¹⁸ In

1986, as the millenium beckoned, Jochen Gerz's disappearing Harburg monolith, surrounded by the drab architecture of a shopping centre, sheathed in lead traced with the graffiti of hatred, was a 'conceptual' monument against fascism: a warning about the Holocaust indeed, yet also an appeal to the *deus absconditus*, the hidden god of postwar Germany. Gerz listened to theologian Karl Barth, along with Karl Jaspers while a student in Basel. Postmodern theologians today find in negative theology a bridge to 'deconstruction'.¹⁹ The time of postmodernism, looking towards the future as it thought, was always already tinged with the *traces du sacré*. From a twenty-first century perspective, this period, already receding, contains an uncanny prescience. In Britain today, the obscenity of the Chapman brothers continues the obscenity of Bacon's godless tryptychs: an art which analyses its society.

¹ Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989.

² John Paul Stonard, *Fault lines. Art in Germany 1945-1955*, London, Ridinghouse 2007, contains an extensive discussion of religion and the rebuilding of German churches.

³ See *Pour un nouvel humanisme*, Rencontres internationales de Genève, Neuchâtel, 1949, with contributions by theologian Karl Barth, the Marxist Henri Lefebvre, and the orientalist René Grousset. Louis Althusser 'Marxisme et humanisme' *Cahiers de I.S.E.A.*, June 1964; 'Leonardo Cremonini' *Tendenzen*, 32, Munich, May, 1965 (reworked and republished 1966).

⁴ Sartre, 'The search for the Absolute' *Giacometti*, Pierre Matisse, New York, 1948/'La recherche de l'absolu', *Les Temps Modernes*, 28, January, 1948. See also Wilson 'Paris Post War. In Search of the Absolute', *Paris Post War. Art and Existentialism, 1945-1955*, Tate Gallery, London, 1992, pp. 25-52.

⁵ Wilson, 'Germaine Richier, disquieting matriarch' *Sculpture Journal*, December 2006, pp. 51-70 (include debate on her Assy crucifix).

⁶ Read, 'New Aspects of British Sculpture', XXVI Venice Biennale, 1952

⁷ See *Corps crucifiés*, Musée Picasso, 1992 and James Cahill, *Crucifixions Ancient and Modern: Obscenity and Profane ritual in the art of Francis Bacon, Gilbert and George and Jake and Dinos Chapman*, MA, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2007.

⁸ *The Unknown Political Prisoner*, Tate Gallery, 1953. See Robert Burstow, 'The Limits of Modernist Art as a "Weapon of the Cold War"...' *The Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 20, 1, 1997, pp. 68-80; Axel Lapp, "The Freedom of Sculpture-The Sculpture of Freedom..." *The Sculpture Journal* 2:, 1998, pp. 113-22.

⁹ 'A prefatory note by Paul Tillich' *Images of Man*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1959 p. 9

¹⁰ Wilson, 'La bataille des "humbles"? Communistes et Catholiques autour de l'art sacré', *Mélanges Bruno Foucart*, vol. 2, Paris, Editions Norma, 2008, pp. 3-21

¹¹ Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror Travels. Robert Smithson and History*, New Haven, University Press, 2004, pp. 13-26 and pp. 49-52.

¹² Robert Smithson, 'A refutation of historical humanism', (1966-7, unpublished) in Jack Flam ed., *Robert Smithson, The Collected Writings*, 1996, pp. 336-7.

¹³ Smithson, 'The Pathetic Fallacy in Esthetics' (1966-7, unpublished), *ibid.*, pp

¹⁴ See *Samuel Beckett/Bruce Naumann*, Kunsthalle Vienna, 2000; *Samuel Beckett*, MNAM Centre Pompidou, 2007; *Un teatro sin teatro*, MACBA Barcelona, Centre Culturel Bellem, Lisbon, 2007-8.

¹⁵ See Jean-Clarence Lambert, '1967. L'époque post-moderne est déjà commencé' *Opus International*, 50, 1974, p. 26.

¹⁶ Lyotard, *La Confession d'Augustin*, Paris, Galilée 1998

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida: *Glas*, Paris, Galilée, 1974.

¹⁸ Derrida, Paule Thévenin, *Antonin Artaud, Dessins et Portraits*, Paris, Gallimard, 1986; Derrida, *Artaud le Moma*, Paris, Galilée, 2002.

¹⁹ Negative theology profoundly influenced the art historians Hans Sedlmayer, Otto von Simson and Erwin Panofsky. See also G. Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the language of Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 1995; Oliver Davies and Denys Turner ed., *Silence and the Word. Negative Theology and Incarnation*, Cambridge University Press, 2002.